Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology

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Essays on Forgiveness

Vol. 8.2 (2021)

BULLETIN OF ECCLESIAL THEOLOGY

Published twice yearly by

THE CENTER FOR PASTOR THEOLOGIANS

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The *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* is published by The Center for Pastor Theologians. The essays contained within the *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* are drawn from the papers presented at the Center's quarterly theological symposia for pastors. Views of the contributors are their own, and not necessarily endorsed by the editorial staff or the Center. For more information regarding the *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* or the Center for Pastor Theologians, please visit www.pastortheologians.com.

ISBN 9798463915894

ISSN 2471-075X

Indexing available in Christian Periodical Index, owned by the Association of Christian Librarians and produced by EBSCOHost.

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EDITORIAL

"*To err is human, to forgive is divine.*" Many of us were taught this adage growing up—from parents, Sunday school teachers, or kindly neighbors. It acts as a proverb, a bit of general wisdom that prepares us for life in a world in which inevitable human erring creates pain and injury, and declares to us that the God who created the world is a God of forgiveness. As with all such proverbs, this phrase contains a measure of simplified truth, shaping our view of experiences that that will in turn form us as we live in a broken world in deep need of forgiveness.

But as is also the case with such sayings, the general truths cannot contain the messy realities. As we inevitably discover, the process of forgiveness is fraught with complexity. This is especially the case in today's world, in which a false understanding of forgiveness has too often been used as a means of avoidance, a weapon against those who have been harmed, and a flattened-out process that isn't truly forgiveness, but simply a strategy for moving on. Too often, this has meant that that which is to be forgiven has not actually been addressed, and those called to forgive remain mired in the pain and hurt of past trespasses.

Both biblical scholarship and the social sciences declare the essetial nature of forgiveness to the life of following Christ. Jesus told us to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. The Scriptures tell us that forgiveness is the way to true life with God and neighbor, that we must move toward a person who has harmed us if we are to move closer to God. Our failure to forgive is a hindrance to our understanding the depth of God's forgiveness of us, and so a barrier to truly experiencing the depth of God's love. At the same time, the social sciences reveal the complexities of the process of forgiveness, allowing us to see that a quick pastoral demand to forgive can bring great harm to a human soul, not allowing a person who has been transgressed against to go through a proper process of forgiveness.

The essays in this volume of the *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* invite us to explore both the essential nature of forgiveness for our life with God and invites us to engage the story of Joseph as a means of sharpening our eschatological imagination. Placing the story of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers in the context of God's promise of the land to Israel, Chang

encourages us to reflect on the relationship between the eschatological promise of eternity with God and our neighbor and the call of the church to forgive one another. Through this, Chang calls us to read Joseph's story as pedagogy in communal forgiveness for Israel, and so through an Eastern, communal lens, and encourages us to reflect more deeply on the function of forgiveness in the building up of the Body of Christ. Next, Gerald Hiestand offers the manuscript of a sermon from I Kings 8, entitled "Forgiven Unto Life." In this sermon, Hiestand takes us into a sermonic reflection on Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the Temple, a prayer whose main theme is forgiveness. Building on this observation, Hiestand offers something of a biblical theology of forgiveness, encouraging us to see that forgiveness is not solely about God's change of attitude toward us, but about our being released from the judicial punishment for sin that we stood under before our salvation through Christ. This claim enables Hiestand to demonstrate the depth of forgiveness for believer and non-believer alike, and the grace of God that brings healing to the nations. Following this sermon, Michael LeFebvre offers a close study of Abraham's binding of Isaac as a foreshadowing of the cross, demonstrating how the ritualistic aspects of Abraham's obedience to the command of God draws out the parallel between the stories more clearly. Through this, LeFebvre demonstrates the "foundational pattern of sacrifice," i.e, the liturgy, that will recur throughout Israel's history and culminate in the sacrifice of Christ at Golgotha. LeFebvre's careful attention to the pattern invites us to see more clearly the heart of God revealed through the forgiveness of sin provided for us by the Lamb who was slain.

Moving to the Reformation, Joseph Sherrard explores Martin Bucer's theology of penance and its connection to forgiveness. Demonstrating that most recent studies of forgiveness focus on the forgiver, Sherrard focuses on the heart of the one being forgiven, and calls pastor theologians to a commitment to the formation of the trespasser. Mining the wisdom of Bucer's *The True Care of Souls*, Sherrard opens up Bucer's pastoral care for those who have sinned against others, and provides a needed model for forming those who have offended against others and need to seek forgiveness. The next essay, written by Jeremy Treat, is a helpful overview of the doctrine of the atonement, with emphasis on the theme of the believer's union with Christ, a theme that is not commonly emphasized in the evangelical church. By connecting atonement with union, Treat is able to explore the fullness of God's forgiveness, and the dynamics of how we experience that forgiveness through the Spirit. In the final essay, Zachary Wager explores the cultural dynamic, rooted in resentment of abuses of power, to refuse to forgive, an attitude that is more and more celebrated in our day and is symbolized by the "cancel culture" prevalent in our society. In order to engage this attitude, Wagner pushes against truncated views of forgiveness that have too often marked the church, and that have been utilized as covers for abuse. Exploring Paul's use of *chorizomai*, Wagner offers a more full-orbed vision of forgiveness as "re-humanization," the dynamic act of forgiveness by which we affirm the humanity of those who have sinned against us, an act of obedience that follows Christ's own re-humanization through the cross of those who sinned against His Father.

As pastors, we have the privilege of being invited to shepherd the pained souls of our congregations. To help guide the people entrusted to our care, we must be able to offer them a clear vision of the God who forgives, and of the Gospel through which his forgiveness has come to us. It is our hope and prayer that these essays can encourage the church to be the community of forgiveness that we are called to be by the grace of God.

Joel Lawrence
Executive Director

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FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINING OF JOSEPH'S STORY

NATHAN CHANG[1]

The story of Joseph in Genesis is undoubtedly one of the most dramatic narratives in the Bible. It stirs the imagination. Anyone can relate to Joseph's painful experience of betrayal by those he was supposed to trust and his emotional movement towards reconciliation. Little wonder, then, this story had been adapted into numerous movies and theatrical plays. But, of course, this story serves more than to entertain readers or to be appreciated. As Gordon Wenham argues, Old Testament narrative books have a didactic purpose.[2] The story, after all, is part of the *Torah*, which means "instruction." Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully elaborates,

> The point of narrative is not merely to assert "this happened, and then this happened." Narratives make another kind of claim altogether: "Look at the world like this." Narratives do more than chronicle; they *configure*.[3]

Imagination, then, plays an essential role in enabling biblical narratives to function as normative to the ever-changing situations of God's people. To put it in another way, those who lack imagination would only be able to see unrelated parts, which in turn would mean they would have a difficult time synthesizing the life of the contemporary church into a very different world articulated in the text. The consequence of this inability would be tragic, because the Word demands to be embodied (Jn 6:63; Eph 4:20–24; 2 Ti 3:16). But before carving out a pathway of configuring Joseph's narrative in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation, two aspects of the textual landscape

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[1] Nathan Chang is Assistant Professor of History at Kansas Christian College in Overland Park, Kansas.

[2] Gordon J. Wenham, *The Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 3.

[3] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 2005), 282. See also *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 94; *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 134; and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 295.

must first be recognized because they vastly shape the contours of this exploration.

First, a position on the sticky question of authorship of the Pentateuch should be made clear. Making a quick survey of this landscape, one would immediately get the impression that one is stepping onto a minefield with two camps making aggressive claims of dire consequences lest they be ignored. On the one side, there are Jewish and Christian traditional views that confess Moses to be the author. They base this claim on scriptural references to his literary activities. If one allows for another author besides Moses, one might be labeled a heretic for questioning Scripture's authority.[4] With the rise of the the Enlightenment Age this warning had lost its effect. Scholars began to construe authorship in the usual modern sense and treated Genesis strictly as an historical problem. Over time, since Julius Wellhausen, theoretical developments of separate JEDP sources grew, demonstrating that Moses could not have penned majority or any of the five books we have today. For over two hundred years these studies became so dominant that if one were to ignore the pieces of evidence presented, one could be labeled naïve or arrogant. So, what is one to do?

Fortunately, another transition began to take place in studies on the Pentateuch. Critical studies were by no means monolithic and grew quite convoluted. The Pentateuch had been broken down into so many pieces and in so many ways that scholars by the 1970s began to question how helpful these fragmentations were for understanding the whole text, not to mention for the life of the church. It was then a rising number of scholars began to call for a recovery to focus on the overall canon as received today. Since then, many scholars responded by taking a more literary approach to analyze Genesis, focusing on *the world of the text*, rather than *the world behind the text*, and thereby putting compositional issues to the side or at least acknowledging them in brackets. Brevard Childs rightly argued that even if many redactions could confidently be highlighted, Mosaic authorship still plays an important role theologically, which had been the point all along.[5] What this means for this imaginative project, in the sense that Vanhoozer set forth, is that the canon we have today is no less authoritative, and Moses' Exodus context still plays an important theological role as an interpretive sinew between Joseph's story and the life of the church.

The second aspect of the landscape to survey before carving out a path is considering the purpose of Genesis. There is not necessarily one obvious answer to this multivalent question and several avenues have been taken.

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[4] The Pentateuch narrates several times God commanding Moses to write down the Torah into a book with Moses obeying that command (Ex 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Nm 33:1-2; Dt 31:9–11); the rest of the Old Testament refers to the book of the Torah as "of Moses" or abbreviating that to "the book of Moses" (Josh 8:31–32; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Ki 14; 2 Ch 25:4; Ez 6:18; Neh 13:1; Da 9:11–13; Mal 4:4); the New Testament likewise refers to the "book of Moses" or assumes his authorship in passing (Mt 19:8; Mk 12:26; Jn 5:45–47; Acts 15:1; Ro 10:5; 1 Co 9:9; 2 Co 3:15).

[5] Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 134–135.

But we seek brevity. So if we assume Mosaic authorship, even if only on a theological level, then it is possible to narrow down Genesis' purpose by adopting Richard Pratt's argument: "Moses wrote the book of Genesis to teach his readers that leaving Egypt and possessing Canaan was God's design for Israel."[6] One could trace this motif throughout the book from the creation narrative all the way to Joseph's story. More specifically for the latter, Pratt expanded his argument: "The interaction among tribal patriarchs in the Joseph story established proper inter-tribal relations in Moses' day and assured Israel of her destiny in Canaan."[7] What we can see here is an eschatological spin to reading the ethics of Joseph's story. The narrative reminds us that there is a future to think about. Therefore, what can be inferred is that forgiveness and reconciliation impact not only the immediate healing of *individuals* involved but also the welfare and harmony of present and future *communities* heading together toward a more glorious world according to God's purposes.

This eschatological imagining, then, can be summarized as such: Joseph's story teaches the church that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential parts of building the kingdom of God that Christ inaugurated and will eventually consummate. This may seem obvious at first glance, but it presents a weighty factor not often considered when discussing the motivation for forgiveness and reconciliation. A vast majority of what had been written on the two topics tend to focus on benefits they offer for the well-being of the individual such as improved mental, emotional, and even physical health. Indeed, these benefits should be explored and by no means dismissed or belittled, especially since it would not be difficult to speculate that Joseph probably epitomized these ameliorations as he wrestled with forgiveness throughout his rise to power. However, reading Moses takes Western readers out of their tendency toward hyper-individualism and invites them to think also about the well-being of the community and consider steps how that might advance or delay God's mission to establish His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The exploration of Joseph's story can be broken down into three subsequent acts.[8] Each of these acts will evaluate the three-part hermeneutical process mentioned above; namely, examine (1) the narrative, (2) the Exodus paradigmatic application, and then (3) the New Exodus typological application.

[6] Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), 281.

[7] Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 281–282.

[8] Outline taken from Waltke, *Genesis*, 493.

I. ACT 1: IMAGINING CONFLICTS: A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY WITH COVENANTAL HOPE (GENESIS 37:2–38:30)

A. CONFLICTS IN THE NARRATIVE

In Act 1 of Joseph's story—the final of the eleven instances of the *Toledoth* in Genesis—readers are immediately drawn into a dramatic scene of broken relationships torn apart by conflicts. In the larger context, Joseph's conflict with his brothers is a perpetuation of acrimonies between Leah and Rebekah. The family conflict continues to escalate among Jacob's children as they see their father loving (*aheb*) Joseph above all. The (in)famous gift of the coat of many colors given to Joseph symbolically cemented the ten brothers' inferior status when it came to their father's love. Lest we ponder incredulously how Jacob could be so blatant with such a fault, let us be reminded that this type of parenting was perpetuated as well since we can see earlier in Genesis that Isaac had shown that same favored love (*aheb*) toward Esau, and Rebekah had loved (*aheb*) Jacob more (Gn 25:28); moreover, Abraham favored Isaac over Ishmael. In this family environment, it is not surprising, then, to see what kind of child Joseph turned out to be. Meir Sternberg remarked, "God's future agent and mouthpiece in Egypt could hardly make a worse impression on his first appearance: spoiled brat, talebearer, braggart."[9] The unabashed love displayed between Joseph and his father was contrasted with the brothers' profound hatred (*sane*) Joseph's immature choices of revealing his dreams of future dominion over the family only served to intensify this bitter feeling within the span of four verses. The narrative mentions two more times that the brothers hated him "even more" (Gn 37:4–5, 8).

This hatred culminated in an opportunity to kill Joseph when the brothers were all alone in the fields with him. The scenario is *déjà vu* to the moment before Cain killed Abel in response to the anger he felt after seeing God favor his younger brother's sacrifice. Will history repeat itself? Given repeated generational sins mentioned above, and readers have seen Simeon and Levi's violent past (Gen 34), there is no earthly reason why it should not. The stakes are high and the consequences severe. God cursed Cain from the ground and cast him off from his presence for his deed. Could the brothers receive the same treatment if they go through with it? Readers surveying the big picture of Genesis from thirty thousand feet above the ground could stay at relative ease because the difference in the ten brothers' scenario from Cain's was that they were successors of a binding covenant given to Abraham. Abraham was promised to be made a great nation, to possess the land of Canaan, and that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gn 12:1–3; 15:1–5; 17:1–8). In the covenantal ritual of cutting the animals in half, only the theophanies in

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[9] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 98.

the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch—symbolic previews of God's presence in the form of smoke descending upon the tabernacle and the pillar of fire—passed through the cut bodies. God took it upon himself, relying on no one else, to ensure that the promises of the covenant would be fulfilled. Because of this covenantal foundation, Joseph himself at the end of the story gives us a theological grid through which to view this whole process of forgiveness and reconciliation: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gn 50:19–20).

Bruce Waltke observed, in retrospect, that God's providence unfolds through series of events happening at just the right time.[10] Joseph arrived at Shechem where Jacob had sent him to report on his brothers, but the brothers happened to move onto Dothan, causing Joseph delay, wandering the field in search of them.[11] Then a man who could help happened to find Joseph. He could help because he happened to overhear where the brothers were heading. As Joseph drew near at the same time the brothers in sight of him were discussing how they would kill him, a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants happened to come along. It occurred to Judah to sell Joseph into slavery, rather than kill him, and Joseph happened to end up in Egypt. Without any supernatural events to intervene in the narrative, Genesis, nonetheless, makes clear through the timing of all these circumstances that conflicts remain under the purview of God's care and sovereignty.

B. Conflicts in the Exodus

Let us pause the narrative to imagine how conflicts examined in Joseph's story are significant to Moses' context in terms of the inevitability of conflicts, assurance of the covenants, and providence. From the time of the Fall, broken relationships of the patriarchs passed down to the Israelites. The Abrahamic covenant implied that there would be no way around conflicts when God told Abraham, "Him who dishonors you I will curse" (Gn 12:3). It is not a matter of if others will dishonor Israel, but when. The very given name of Israel translated "wrestles with God," suggests that this chosen nation would be destined for conflicts. But at the same time, the name could be translated "triumphant with God," reminding them of the unfailing hope they have in the Lord to overcome any conflicts. So, the question is how should inevitable conflicts be understood and subsequently handled? In this case, Joseph's situation with his brothers anecdotally instructed Israel that no conflict exists outside of God's providence to ensure that his covenant would be fulfilled and to encourage the nation to trust in him.

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[10] Waltke, *Genesis*, 492.

[11] It should be highlighted that Shechem is the same place where Simeon and Levi killed all adult males in vengeance for defiling their sister Dinah (Gen 34). The narrative seems to foreshadow that history will not repeat itself. The brothers have moved on from Shechem to Dothan and Joseph shall not suffer the same fate as those killed.

One could imagine the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh being grateful for the protection their father Joseph received through providence!

In reality, however, Israel struggled to trust this assurance throughout Exodus. Arie Leder identified three major escalating conflicts Israel faced in Exodus but examining only two will suffice for our purpose here.[12] The first was the conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh. The victorious master would demonstrate who is worthy of trust. Israel, in this case, was the passive observer in servitude to the oppressive power of their master Pharaoh. Yet the narrative explained that Pharaoh's iron grip was due to God hardening his heart, not allowing any confusion about just who had superior power (Ex 9:16). The conflict was finally resolved at the parting of the Red Sea where God saved his people and conquered his pursuant enemies challenging his authority. The victory confirmed the assertion of Joseph's story identifying who was the true master and reassuring who held absolute power over all things, which resulted in Israel fearing and believing in the LORD (Ex 14:31).

With God and Pharaoh's conflict resolved there arose a second conflict. As Israel developed a new relationship with God it was quickly broken down by complaints lobbed against God's mediator Moses. The people contrasted their situation in the wilderness under their current master with their former one; when confronted with lack of water at Marah and food in the Desert of Sin, they concluded they were better off Egypt (Ex 16:3). In response to Moses' intercession, God did provide food and water. "These provisions, however," Leder commented, "do not resolve the conflict between God and Israel because the real issue is not lack of sustenance but Israel's failure to submit to God's instructions."[13] God committed to strengthen this new relationship by making a new covenant and setting clear expectations at Mount Sinai. God went beyond answering the question of how Israel will survive outside of Egypt to making relational promises that they will be treasured possessions, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation if they maintain the covenant given and therein obey the law—a full summary of God's will (Ex 19:5–6).[14] Building upon the Abrahamic covenant that framed Joseph's story, and emphatically not in separation from it, the Mosaic covenant provided a tangible map to guide Israel's flourishing (Lv 26:1–12; Dt 28:1–14). Thomas Schreiner rightly observed, "The Lord doesn't begin with a demand that Israel observe these commands in order to be his people. Quite the contrary."[15] They already are by grace. The law

[12] Arie C. Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus Narrative Unity and Meaning," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 251–269.

[13] Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus," 258.

[14] O. Palmer Robertson argued, "A law has been written, a will has been decreed; but this law stands outside of man, demanding conformity. 'Law' as it is used in relation to the Mosaic covenant should not be defined simply as a revelation of the will of God. More specifically, law denotes an externalized summation of God's will." *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 173.

[15] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 61. Thus the Mosaic covenant should not be confused with the Adamic

was a gift and evidence of God's commitment to teaching his people how to thrive. Israel learned all the more the basic assurance from Joseph's story that conflicts are under the care and control of God's providence committed to fulfilling the promises of his covenants.

C. Conflicts in the New Exodus

The same lessons of embracing the inevitability of conflicts and the assurances of covenants and providence is passed down to the church in her sojourning mission to build the kingdom of God. In continuity with Israel's history, God's people in the New Testament and beyond are no strangers to conflicts: the twelve disciples bickered and debated who was the greatest among themselves (Lk 22:24), Gentile Christians rose against Jewish Christians over the daily distributions for their widows (Acts 6:1), Paul and Barnabas split over whether to receive Mark back in the ministry (Acts 15:36–41), the Corinthian church threatened to divide (1 Co 1:10), the patriarch of Constantinople and the bishop of Rome excommunicated one another (A.D. 1054), the Edict of Worms officially diverged Roman Catholics and Protestants (A.D. 1521), and the list goes invariably on. Yet Scripture resolutely holds to the fact that God is still sovereign over all these broken relationships. In a period where the hope of the kingdom is partly experienced now, but not yet fully realized, conflicts never constitute the end of the story, but the resilient church sojourns on to fulfill the *missio Dei*. Ken Sande from Peacemaker Ministries commented, "Your view of God will have a profound effect on how much you trust him. If you do not believe that he is both sovereign and good, trust will be an elusive thing."[16]

Like the Israelites in Exodus, trust for the church is not birthed out of blind faith, but out of God's demonstrations of fulfilling his promises. The exile set the stage for extraordinary promises to comfort the people of God, including a renewal of heart, the forgiveness of sins, the ministry of the Holy Spirit—all ending with the refrain: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jr 31:33; Ez 36:26–27). God also promised that they would be united with a king to rule over them all (Ez 37:22). The new covenant, which is said to be an everlasting covenant, was committed to bring about *shalom*.

As to an event to demonstrate God's worthiness of trust, Christ fulfilled all the promises of the new covenant in his life, death, and resurrection. Fulfilling the cultic rituals of the Mosaic covenant, Christ the high priest of a better covenant made a sacrifice at the cross once and for all to accomplish propitiation (Heb 8–10; Ro 3:21–26). Both the cross and the resurrection are to the church very much like what the parting of the Red Sea was to Israel: a constant reminder of God's liberating victory over God's oppressive enemies. They are also reminders of God's goodness as a moral influence. Moreover, N. T. Wright rightfully argues that the resurrection is a signal

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covenant of works.

[16] Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 70.

to the world that God is making all things new as he inaugurates his kingdom.[17] Limited space demands only snapshots and so we need not belabor how all this is broken down with the various atonement theories and views of the resurrection along with the details of the new covenant, because it only needs to be emphasized that understanding how to face conflicts rests in the pattern of God's sovereignty manifested in the promises of the covenants and redemptive events.

II. ACT 2: IMAGINING FORGIVENESS: FORGIVENESS DURING JOSEPH'S RISE IN EGYPT (GENESIS 39:1–41:57)

Returning to Joseph's narrative, one could easily imagine Joseph wrestling with forgiveness as he suffered falling from his status as a favored son to becoming a lowly slave, and later worse, a prisoner, all because of his brothers' betrayal. Yet Act 2 is also a story of ascension from humiliating places to heights undreamed, except he did. Act 2 contains clues that forgiveness was not just extended to his brothers but was also most likely a way of life Joseph adopted. Since the narrative or *the world of the text* does not make forgiveness an obvious theme in this section, Act 2 will be treated more like a tie-in to Act 3. It is only then an examination of the Exodus and the New Exodus will be made after these two Acts are considered together.

Some scholars argue that interpersonal forgiveness is a relatively new concept in history, and therefore if they are right one might conclude that looking for clues of forgiveness in Joseph's story would be anachronistic. Hannah Arendt in the mid-twentieth century credited Jesus as the "discoverer" of the concept of forgiveness we know today, and so argued for its usefulness for social progress from a secular point of view.[18] David Konstan suggested that even Jesus differed from modern forgiveness today. He argued that it was not until Immanuel Kant did "the ideology of forgiveness" move from a general sense of solidarity dealing with assuaging anger to a rich individualistic-interpersonal encounter initiating a reconciliatory exchange.[19] Yet Jon Coutts rightly responded, "It would seem that Konstan underappreciates both the New Testament's influence on and its resonance with contemporary concerns, but his distinction of modern from premodern and ancient emphases is apropos."[20] Arendt and Konstan were looking at a history of forgiveness under the lens of Western Civilization rather than *heilsgeschichte*. The ancient Greeks did not consider forgiveness as a virtue, and therefore from this perspective Jesus with his teachings on forgiveness may indeed be credited as revolutionary to the West, and Kant may have

[17] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission and the Church* (New York: HarperCollins: 2008).

[18] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 236–247.

[19] David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix–xi.

[20] Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 8. See his bibliographic review of studies on forgiveness, 1–14.

indeed intensified hyper-individualistic stress on forgiveness in the modern West.[21] However, under an interpretation of history emphasizing God's saving acts with Jesus Christ as the central figure in redemption, forgiveness cannot be considered a new concept in the first century, because the purpose of Jesus' ministry was not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to *fulfill* them (Mt 5:17). So, though the word "forgiveness" was not used, it should not be too much of a stretch to argue that forgiveness was likely extended in Joseph's story since he eventually did reconcile with his brothers. Forgiveness, after all, paves the way for reconciliation and it also does not require the other party of the conflict to be present. Still, the question remains: was forgiveness extended throughout Act 2? I argue it was. Consider two major clues.

First, one clue to forgiveness was the dedicated amount of *giving* Joseph made to his service to Potiphar, the keeper of the prison, and Pharaoh. In each instance, the narrative begins with a declaration that God was with Joseph along with unique insights into what that entailed. At Potiphar's house, God caused Joseph to be successful in all that he did and he found favor in Potiphar's sight (Gn 39:3–4). In prison, God "showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in sight of the keeper of the prison" (Gn 39:21). In Pharaoh's presence, Joseph explained the nature of interpreting dreams, "It is not me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (Gn 41:16). With every instance Joseph was presented as an agent of God's favor, first receiving it, but then extending it to his earthly masters, which led to appointments of stewardship of their respective domains.

Miroslav Volf, taking Martin Luther's observation of the nature of love, notes that the appropriate imagery for God's love is flow. He commented, "God's love does not suck out the good it finds in the others, as distorted human love does. It 'flows forth and bestows good.'"[22] If a person were to stop the flow, this person would only be a receiver, not a giver, and thereby cease functioning as he or she is designed to be and do, namely to image God, who is the generous giver. "And so," Volf concluded, "the flow of God's gifts shouldn't stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue. Indeed, in addition to making us flourish, giving to others is the very purpose for which God gave us the gifts."[23] Throughout Act 2, Joseph modeled this flow with consistent faithful service without holding a grudge even after different unjust situations. So, if Everett Worthington is right in identifying forgiveness as an "altruistic gift," then it would be likely to say that forgiveness came along that flow as well.[24]

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[21] See Charles Griswold on the ancient Greeks on forgiveness in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–19.

[22] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 49.

[23] Volf, *Free of Charge*, 49.

[24] Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 113–129. He argues, "Forgiving is for giving, not for getting," 27.

Second, we do not have to speculate whether or not forgiveness traveled down the flowing river of God's blessings in Joseph's life, because the narrative stated outright that Joseph did not forget his pain but acknowledged it without any sense of grudges, bitterness, or vengeance. After Joseph was exalted to the highest authority second only to Pharaoh, he was given the daughter of the priest of On (Heliopolis in Greek, home to the cult of Ra the greatest of the Egyptian gods). Nahum Sarna noted, "The high priest of On held the exalted title 'Greatest of Seers.' Joseph thus marries into the elite of Egyptian nobility."[25] These flatteries, however, did not terminate Joseph's commitment to God; on the contrary, faithfulness was evidenced in praising God in the naming of his two sons. The first he called Manasseh—derived from "forget." "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my *hardship* and all my father's house" (Gn 41:51). Several commentators agree that this statement is a hendiadys for "all my trouble associated with my father's household."[26] The second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my *affliction*" (Gn 41:52). From these two names, Joseph did not literally forget his pain. Even after the naming of Manasseh, the "affliction" is still recalled in the naming of Ephraim. Significantly, readers do not see Joseph ignore, excuse, minimize, tolerate, condone, or legally pardon the actions of his brothers.[27]

What are readers to make of Joseph's willingness to forget then? The conflict between Jacob and Esau could set a precedent to understand Joseph's decision. After Jacob stole Esau's blessing, resulting in Esau planning to kill him, Rebekah instructs him to hide and find refuge with her brother Laban. Further, she tells him, "And stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away—until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he *forgets* what you have done to him" (Gn 27:44–45). Jacob was not to come back home until Esau decides not to hold Jacob's action against him. The same kind of connection between forgetfulness and a releasing of penalty is attributed to God as well in other parts of Scripture. God declared to Israel, "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will *not remember* your sins" (Is 43:25). In another place, God is more explicit about the connection between forgiveness and forgetfulness: "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will *forgive* their iniquities, and I will *remember their sins no more*." These connections between turning away anger, releasing penalties, and forgetfulness all give light to understanding

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[25] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 288.

[26] Waltke, *Genesis*, 535; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: 1995), 512; and Sarna, *Genesis*, 289. Hendiadys is an expression of a single idea by two words connected with "and."

[27] See Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, "Forgiveness: What It Takes and What It Gives," in *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*, eds. D. G. Meyers and M. Jeeves (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2003), 140.

Joseph's active willingness to forget. The naming of Manasseh in a time of great personal flourishing and power thus indicated that Joseph too was making a decision not to penalize his brothers, which in turn is an indicator that Joseph forgave his brothers.

If it can be granted that these two clues indicate that Joseph did forgive his brothers, then it is significant to note that the result of forgiveness did not only focus on Joseph's well-being but also the flourishing and harmony of the social order. Psychologically speaking, clinical studies showed that unforgiving people break down social harmony. Charlotte Witvliet observed, "[Unforgiving] people...feel more anxious, depressed, and inferior than forgiving people."[28] There is usually a connection between unforgiveness and hostility; it is not surprising, then, that observations showed that "hostile people often lack social support."[29] Thus with these traits, it is concluded that unforgiving people tend to be less productive in society. Joseph for his part, however, consistently gained favor and built a strong social support. As the naming of Ephraim reminds readers, Joseph was indeed afflicted, yet he was consistently fruitful throughout his time stewarding Potiphar's house, prison, and the nation of Egypt. Forgiveness as a way of life blessed those around Joseph. It would not be surprising if Joseph struggled to forgive in reality, but readers are not privy to his innermost thoughts because at this point, they are only given an idealized portrait of Joseph. He is the bookend of Genesis to give flesh to the bones of the *imago Dei's* cultural mandate (Gn 1:28). He was blessed, then he became fruitful, blessing those whom he served; he multiplied his progeny, but also his productivity; he subdued the problem of famine confronting Egypt and the known world; ultimately, he exercised dominion. What must not be missed is that Joseph's fulfillment of his role as an *imago Dei* includes the social dimension: forgiveness as a way of life made way for a prospering culture, a society of well-being—what the Old Testament calls *shalom*. As Worthington stated, "If we forgive, our entire community might focus less on revenge, avoidance, unforgiveness and past problems and focus more on future possibilities."[30]

III. ACT 3: IMAGINING RECONCILIATION: THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY RECONCILED (GENESIS 42:1–46:27)

A. Reconciliation in the Narrative

In Act 3 the narrative brings the ten brothers back into the story as they travel to Egypt to buy grain. Could Joseph's life of giving that resulted in blessing the world extend to those who had harmed him? The plot thickens. Though Joseph was able to thrive in Egypt and bless the nation because he was able to forgive, forgiveness does not mean that the relationship with

[28] Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 142.

[29] Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 142.

[30] Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 26.

the brothers was no longer toxic, even after a long time. There was still a matter of repairing broken trust. Worthington defined reconciliation as, "[Restoring] trust in a relationship in which trust has been damaged...It is not granted but earned."[31] In recognizing them without the brothers reciprocating that recognition, this was an opportunity for Joseph to create schemes to test them whether they had truly repented.

In the first test, he spoke roughly to them just like they could not speak peacefully to him when they were all together in Canaan (Gn 37:11; 42:7). Several times he accused them of being spies. But John Sailhamer rejected the notion that Joseph was exacting revenge on them because of the narration: "And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them" (Gn 42:9), which advised readers of Joseph's true motivation.[32] The brothers insisted on being honest men, adding that they are twelve brothers with the youngest one still at home with their father, and one is no more—a stunning admission that they did not need to make, but a good start to demonstrate their honesty. Nonetheless, Joseph imprisons them for three days, possibly as symbolic retribution for Joseph being in prison for three years.[33] He demanded that one of them return home to bring back the youngest brother. Yet once again, the narrative clears Joseph of impure motives by having him confess, "I fear God" (42:18). This time he reversed the demand that only one of them stay imprisoned, while the rest return to bring back the youngest to prove their honesty. The seemingly pointless prison time did some good, however, because it caused the brothers to reflect on their sins. Unaware of Joseph's ability to understand their native language, they confessed to one another in front of him that they were guilty of their brother's demise. Reuben recalled the sanction of the Noahic covenant that there would be a reckoning for the life of a man (Gn. 9:5–6). This moved Joseph to turn away in tears. Trust was gaining in increments. Later he returned, had Simeon bound, and gave orders that the rest return home with grain in their sacks. He secretly put their money back into their sacks. Sternberg reconstructed Joseph's train of thought: "To reproduce the past, I will put the life of one of them into the hands of the rest and plant temptation in their bags to equal or exceed the profit they hoped to make by selling me into slavery. Will they now opt for the brother or the money?"[34]

The nine brothers did indeed return to Egypt with Benjamin after working hard to persuade their father to let him go, prompting a second test from Joseph. They brought back the money returned to them and brought more in exchange for more grain. Joseph's steward would not accept the returned money. He reassured them that they did receive payment and explained that the found money in their bags must have been from God.

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[31] Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling,* 170.

[32] John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 216.

[33] Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 290.

[34] Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 293.

They were reunited with Simeon, and they all feasted together with Joseph, who was moved when he saw Benjamin for the first time. But Joseph was not finished. He had one more scheme up his sleeve. The brothers were set up once again with each of their money put back into the mouth of their sacks, and a silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack. Before they could get too far out of town Joseph's steward caught up with them and accused them of stealing a cup. The brothers denied the charge, and confidently offered up terms that if the cup is found that person shall die, and the rest shall be servants. The steward lessened the term to make the guilty person a servant while the rest will be deemed innocent. After searching, the brothers were horrified to discover a shiny silver cup in Benjamin's sack. To come back to Jacob without Benjamin was unthinkable, so they all returned to Joseph together. Joseph acted upset, and Judah spoke up for his brothers. He recounted all their interactions, reminding Joseph of their due diligence in answering all his questions with honesty and honoring his request to bring back Benjamin. He hoped for Joseph's sympathy when he explained that Benjamin's life is tied up with Jacob's, and therefore their father would not survive if Benjamin, like his brother, was lost to him. So, what could Judah offer? The narrative already foreshadowed what Judah would offer when he persuaded his father to let Benjamin go. Unlike Reuben, who failed to convince Jacob by offering the lives of his two sons if he did not bring Benjamin back (Gn 42:37), Judah stressed saving the lives of everybody in the family, including the little ones, by putting his own life on the line (Gn 43:8–9). In Joseph's intimidating presence, Judah made good on that promise by offering himself in substitution for Benjamin to be Joseph's servant. "Judah's impassioned plea," Pierre Berthoud commented, "was the irrefutable demonstration that a significant change had taken place in the mindset and attitude of Jacob's sons...By imagining and enacting such an astute and sly scenario, Joseph had put his brothers to the test and they had passed it for there is no greater expression of love and loyalty than to substitute oneself for another."[35] This was too much for Joseph to bear. He commanded everybody except for the family to leave the room and then revealed his identity to them for the first time as an emotional and beautiful start to reconciliation.

Even amid raw feelings, Joseph theologized what readers are to get out of this reconciliation. He insisted that the brothers who did evil ought not to dwell on their past actions. He believed that it was ultimately God who sent him to Egypt to preserve life. Just like forgiveness, the result of reconciliation reached far beyond the welfare of the two parties in conflict. Joseph asked them—the embryonic nation God had promised Abraham—to join him trusting in God's providence and living off the fat of the land in Goshen for the sake of the remnant.

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[35] Pierre Berthoud, "The Reconciliation of Joseph with His Brothers: Sin, Forgiveness, and Providence," *European Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2008): 8.

B. Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Exodus

Now imagine being one of the first listeners to the reading of Joseph's story on the plains of Moab. Again, we are not concerned with source criticism, but with the theological intent of the canon. If we work with the framework that Genesis was written to convince Israel that leaving Egypt and possessing Canaan was God's design for Israel, then there is a significant connection to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Let us be more specific and imagine being an average Israelite and a member of one of the lesser-known tribes, say Issachar. As the gripping story is told one can imagine the narrative taking on a personal stake. There is an existential relevance to the story, especially when the happy ending of reconciliation led the narrative to list the genealogy of all twelve brothers. One can imagine our representative Israelite's ears perk up when it was read: "The sons of Issachar: Tola, Puvah, Yob, and Shimron" (Gn. 46:13). As he reflects on his family history it may dawn on him that had Joseph reverted from his forgiving way of life by allowing the raw emotions of seeing those responsible for the hardships he had endured get the best of him, the alternative might very well be vengeance. Joseph had the power to do to his brothers what they intended to do to him. He could have killed them or enslaved them, which would have cut off their legacy. Jacob nearing the end of his life would suddenly have in his household ten widows and copious grandchildren without fathers in a patriarchal society. Had that happened would our person be standing there listening to the reading of the Torah? He might even ponder as he looks across the assembly of the congregation: Would any of these brothers and sisters be here? Yet here they are. God had been faithful to his promise to Abraham that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky through Joseph's trust and obedience. Joseph's decisions led to Israel's flourishing. Trusting God with forgiveness and reconciliation suddenly takes on new meaning and importance.

Joseph's story, therefore, served to inspire Israel to continue the forgiving way of life and seek reconciliation wherever necessary for the sake of the nation. In the law this is spelled out in Leviticus 19:17–18: "[17]You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. [18]You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." One might argue v. 17 could be a summary of forgiveness and v. 18 of reconciliation. But what must not be missed is forgiveness and reconciliation were not commanded for personal moral reasons alone, Joseph's story taught Israel that these virtues were vital for the *shalom* needed for their quest to possess Canaan. No forgiveness is too small, no reconciliation insignificant. Every time a decision is made to practice these virtues a contribution is made to the social harmony of the nation. When united under the banner of God's providence and steadfast love they were in a stronger position to reach the promises of the Abrahamic covenant than divided.

C. Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the New Exodus

The story of Joseph can inspire the sojourning church in the same way. Though from the church's perspective, Joseph's acts of forgiveness and reconciliation are even grander than what ancient Israel could ever have imagined because she is able to look back at the whole of redemptive history leading up to Christ. With this broadened perspective, the church could participate in the same exercise in which our representative from Issachar engaged. Rather than speculating the consequences in which vengeance would have led, the church can trace what Joseph's decision meant for redemptive history. To start, God working through Joseph to forgive and reconcile with his brothers, put him in a position to protect and provide for them. More importantly for the narrative that highlighted Judah above the rest, Jacob's fourth son is preserved. Because Judah could continue to raise his progeny, Jacob could prophesy over Judah "the lion cub" that kingship would belong to his tribe (Gn 49:8–12). This prophecy eventually led to its fulfillment in the covenant with David that his line would rule forever (1 Sa 7:8–16). Christ ultimately fulfilled this covenant as he inaugurated the kingdom of God. Since each event builds upon one another, one might say that these sequences in redemptive history were contingent upon Joseph forgiving and reconciling with his brothers. If Joseph enacted vengeance, thus wiping away Judah. What of Jacob's prophecy? What then of David? What then of Christ? Would God create a different trajectory to fulfill his same mission of advancing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven? It is unnecessary speculation because Joseph repeatedly credited God for how everything turned out (Gn 45:5, 7–8; 50:19–20). So then for redemptive history, forgiveness and reconciliation are no light matters. One man's decision to practice these virtues, resting in God's providence, had significant ripple effects for the people of God and for the life of the world. How much more if the people of God did the same together?

IV. CONCLUSION

Joseph's story teaches the church that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential virtues of building the kingdom of God for the flourishing of the world that Christ inaugurated and will eventually consummate. At a crossroads of a person's life, to weigh whether or not to forgive and/or reconcile, there are several factors to consider that many books helpfully list. One more consideration could involve stepping outside of oneself and asking how one's decision will advance the kingdom of God, which to be clear is not relegated to merely the spiritual domain, but all-encompassing and integrative to life. We have seen from Joseph's story that resting in God's sovereignty and care over conflicts allowed Joseph to cultivate a forgiving way of life and take steps to reconcile with his brothers. The ripple effect of Joseph's story of forgiveness and reconciliation had significantly blessed Joseph as an individual, the people of God, and the world. More research could explore how much if any forgiveness and reconciliation advance social progress. But in the end, Witvliet insightfully commented,

> As valuable as research data are, they simply can't serve as our ultimate motivation. (What if the data shows that forgiveness is worse for us?) We don't forgive *because* it benefits us. Those benefits may be a welcome by-product. But our motivation to forgive is rooted in God's call to forgive, our gratitude for God's forgiveness of us, and our desire to imitate Christ—the one who perfectly modeled forgiveness and even now perfects our efforts to practice forgiveness.[36]

Joseph's story teaches that the *imitatio Christi* does not necessarily mean that the church ought to be withdrawn from the world, focusing only on interior spirituality, but rather the opposite, imitate for sake of the world. The church is called to forgiveness and reconciliation for the sake of the kingdom.

[36] Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 144–145.

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FORGIVEN UNTO LIFE: A SERMON ON JUDICIAL FORGIVENESS FROM 1 KINGS 8:33–40 AND COLOSSIANS 2:13–14

GERALD HIESTAND[1]

Editor's note: *The following paper is adapted from a sermon preached at Calvary Memorial Church on September 6, 2020 by Calvary's Senior Pastor and CPT co-founder, Gerald Hiestand. The sermon was part of a year-long sermon series that explored the overarching narrative of Scripture, entitled "All Things New: The Story of the Bible and the Healing of the World." The sermon has been lightly edited for print, and discursive footnotes have been added to provide clarity about the theological paradigms and primary source material that undergirds the logic of the sermon. The reader will observe that most of the notes are drawn from patristic sources, which is in keeping with the author's primary area of theological competency. The aim of this paper is to provide a model for how the work of a pastor and theologian intersects with preaching.*

This morning we continue our sermon series, "All things New: The Story of the Bible and the Healing of the World." For the past month or so, we've been in the age of the Kings (an approximately 600-year period of history between the age of the Judges and the coming Exile). This morning we turn our attention to 1 Kings 8 and Solomon's dedication of the temple. For those who missed last week (or for those who joined us but didn't pay any attention), let's get our bearings. All of chapter 8 is the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new Temple that Solomon has made. And the majority of the chapter is focused on Solomon's dedicatory prayer.

By way of introduction to our theme this morning, let me read for us 1 Kings 8:27–30, which is where Solomon begins his prayer.

> But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of

[1] Gerald Hiestand is the Senior Pastor at Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois.

> your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive [חלס].[2]

"And when you hear, *forgive*." The first time I read that verse, the ending caught me off guard. I was expecting Solomon to say something like, "and when you hear, *answer*"; but he says "forgive." Forgiveness is *the* major theme in Solomon's prayer;[3] and indeed the concept of God's forgiveness is a major theme throughout the Bible. So that's going to be our focus this morning. Our aim this morning is to look at how this moment in Israel's history informs our understanding of God's forgiveness.

What is forgiveness, really? What is Solomon asking for, when he asks God to forgive? More importantly, what are *we* asking for when we ask God to forgive? Our sermon series theme is the healing of the world, and my goal this morning is to show us how God's forgiveness, properly understood, is connected to, is indeed synonymous with, this healing.

So, there are three parts to the sermon. In the first part of the sermon, we're going to see what we can learn about God's forgiveness of Israel from 1 Kings 8:33–40. In the second part of the sermon we're going to use that framework to help us understand St. Paul's articulation of forgiveness as seen in Colossians 2:13–14. And then I'm going to close by offering some reflections about how God's forgiveness intersects the lives of Christians and non-Christians, both of which are present with us this morning.

And then for those of us who have embraced God's forgiveness, we'll celebrate that forgiveness together by taking communion.

So let's get started with 1 Kings 8:33–40.

I. FORGIVENESS IN 1 KINGS 8:33–40

Last week we reflected on the idea of God as a judge; and we saw that he is a gracious and compassionate judge. But even as a gracious and compassionate judge, there comes a point when God steps in and enforces the terms of the covenant. And in 1 Kings 8, Solomon can see the day coming when Israel's sin will reach the limit and God's judgment will finally fall. Solomon is appealing ahead of time for God's forgiveness. Let's look at his prayer, starting with verse 33. "When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you…" Let's pause there. Why would sin lead to defeat? Well, it's because of the covenantal agreement handed down to the people by Moses at Mount Sinai, way back

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[2] חלס is most often translated in 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, as "forgive" or "pardon."

[3] The entire thrust of Solomon's prayer is focused on the theme of forgiveness. Like Moses in Dt 30:1–10, Solomon anticipates the coming apostasy of the people and provides directions on how to repent when such apostasy comes to pass. Both Moses and Solomon base their respective counsel/prayer on the framework of the Torah's promises of blessing for obedience, and cursing for disobedience, with the ultimate curse being banishment from the land. And both Moses and Solomon presume on the gracious, forgiving character of God—even in the midst of the covenant curses.

in Exodus 19. The terms of the Sinai Law stated clearly that obedience to the covenant would lead to national blessing, but disobedience would lead to ever-increasing divine chastisement, ultimately culminating in banishment from the land.[4]

Solomon is acknowledging that Israel will indeed fall short of the covenant obligations and invoke the covenantal curses. But he appeals ahead of time for mercy. "When your people turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive [סלח] the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their ancestors."

Solomon, when he is asking for divine forgiveness, is asking for deliverance from divine punishment. It won't be an accident when Israel winds up in captivity (or blight or famine). Their national calamity will be punitive; it will be divine punishment for failing to uphold their end of the covenantal agreement. Solomon, when he asks for forgiveness, is asking for relief—for mercy—from the legal and judicial consequences of their sin.

This same basic prayer is repeated in verses 35–36. Solomon continues:

> When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive [סלח] the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

The same pattern can be seen: Israel's sin, divine punishment, Israel's repentance, divine forgiveness and removal of the divine punishment. Solomon prays the same thing a third time in verses 37–40, and then again for a fourth time in verses 46–51. Each time Solomon is saying, "When we break covenant, and you enact the covenantal curse, and then we repent, please forgive us and roll back the covenantal curse."

So, here's the pattern of Solomon's prayer all throughout 1 Kings 8: Solomon acknowledges that Israel will break covenant, God will punish, Israel will repent, and then Solomon asks that God forgive and roll back the punishment. And the main thing I want us to see is that when Solomon is asking for God's *forgiveness*, he is asking God to *release Israel from the weight of God's judgment*. He's asking God to take back, to undo, the covenantal punishments of famine, defeat, captivity, mildew and blight. Solomon is not looking for God to merely have benign thoughts about the Israelites, or change his disposition toward them, or re-establish relational harmony; he's asking for God to deliver them from his judicial punishments. Verse 39 captures well the main thrust of Solomon's request, "[Then] hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and *act*..."

Now, in order to clarify the nature of Solomon's request for forgiveness, let me briefly compare two types of forgiveness—relational forgiveness, and

[4] The blessing and cursing of the Law is seen clearly in Deuteronomy 28.

judicial forgiveness. These are similar, but not the same, and it's important we understand the difference.[5]

Relational forgiveness seeks a change of disposition in interpersonal relationships. In relational forgiveness, the consequence of one's sin is the offended person's disposition of anger. If we've offended someone, and we are asking for relational forgiveness, we are asking the offended person to change his or her disposition toward us—typically from anger to non-anger—so as to re-establish normalized relations.[6] This is the main type of forgiveness that is sought in family contexts. Relational forgiveness is great for family relationships, but that's not what Solomon is seeking.

Solomon is seeking God's *judicial forgiveness*. Judicial forgiveness seeks a change of action in legal and contractual agreements. When we are asking for judicial forgiveness, we are asking a court, or a judge, or a king, to relent regarding the legal consequences they have placed upon us because of our covenantal or legal failure. Judicial forgiveness is not concerned with the anger or the disposition of the judge. For instance, when we seek debt forgiveness, we are not concerned about the creditor's disposition; we are concerned about the creditor's actions. We are seeking leniency (e.g., absolution of the debt, more time to make payments, etc.). Judicial forgiveness, then, seeks the removal of the punishment or consequences of one's offense.

Now, many of us tend to think of God's forgiveness primarily in terms of relational forgiveness. From this perspective, we think about God's forgiveness as primarily a change in his disposition toward us—typically from anger to non-anger.[7] But that's not what Solomon is asking for here.

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[5] In my estimation, these two conceptions of forgiveness fork the road for all subsequent atonement theology. Did Jesus go to the cross chiefly to resolve a hostile (even if justified) divine disposition toward humanity? Or did Jesus go to the cross to roll back the punitive curse of death (both physical and spiritual) that had fallen upon humanity? These are not mutually exclusive, but one perspective typically takes precedence over the other. Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* tended toward the former, while Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* tended toward the latter. I find Athanasius more consistent with Solomon's dedicatory prayer. More on this distinction in note 13 below.

[6] This is the primary way that forgiveness is conceived in the public and therapeutic spheres. In 2018, the Center for Pastor Theologians engaged in a year long symposia series on the theme of "Forgiveness and Positive Psychology" funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Notably, the primary thrust of the various studies all related to offenses and forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Considerations regarding family dynamics, interpersonal stress, anxiety from fractured marriage relationships, etc., served as the primary framework for thinking about forgiveness. Our primary reading included Everett L. Worthington, Jr., and Steven J. Sandage, *Forgiveness and Spirituality in Psychotherapy: A Relational Approach* (Washington D. C.: American Psychological Association, 2016); Everett L. Worthington Jr., *Forgiving and Reconciling : Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Downers Grove, Il.: IVP Books, 2003); F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003). Notably, all three texts focus on granting forgiveness to others when relationally offended or hurt. Shultz and Sandage draw an explicit connection between human and divine forgiveness, but notably stay in the realm of relational forgiveness. God extends relational forgiveness to us, so that we can extend relational forgiveness to others (139).

[7] This sort of relational framework is seen in Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Throughout the sermon Edwards conflates judicial

He's asking for judicial forgiveness. The God with whom Israel has to do is the Lord and Judge of the covenant. He is the one who enforces the covenantal obligations. Israel's problem is not God's disposition, but God's punishments. Relational forgiveness won't really solve the problem of Israel's sin and subsequent punishment; Israel is going to need judicial forgiveness.

A while ago I moved some of my funds between two back accounts—or at least I thought I did. Turns out, I didn't. But before I discovered my mistake, I spent the day making purchases against the empty account. As a consequence, the bank charged me $120 worth of overdraft fees. So I called the bank. I acknowledged my sin, and I pleaded for forgiveness. What was I pleading for, when I pled for forgiveness? I wasn't asking the bank to stop being angry at me. Indeed, the banker I spoke to was very kind; she had no personal animus toward me. What I needed was judicial forgiveness, not relational forgiveness. I had broken the terms of our covenant, and now I was looking for covenantal relief. In short, I was asking the bank to "take back" the $120 worth of overdraft fees. The bank, like the Good Lord above, was indeed merciful; I received the bank's forgiveness and the fees were dropped.

Let's tease this out a bit more. What if the banker had been my father? The issue would have been the same. Imagine I called the bank and my father-banker said something like, "Son, I'm angry at you for being so irresponsible and overdrawing your account. I raised you better than that. I'll erase the fees, but I'm not happy about it." Or perhaps he is a patient and understanding father, and says something like, "Son, we all make mistakes. I'm not angry, but rules are the rules and you have to pay the fees." How he *feels* about my fiscal offense is not chiefly relevant to whether or not I have to pay the overdraft fees. He can relationally forgive me all he wants, but if he doesn't roll back the contractual jeopardy, relational forgiveness doesn't solve my problem.

In the same way, Solomon is not primarily concerned with relational forgiveness. He is praying for *judicial* forgiveness. No doubt it matters to Solomon how God feels about Israel. But Solomon knows that when Israel is suffering the punitive and legal effects of her sin—be that blight, drought, defeat, or captivity—they will need more than relational forgiveness. Imagine

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and relational condemnation. The sinner is under God's judicial sentence of hellfire; at the same time, the sinner has deeply offended God, who is "very angry" with him; indeed, quite possibly "a great deal more angry" with him than those he has already cast into hell. God is "full of wrath...dreadfully provoked...and incensed." In one of his most memorable sentences, Edwards warns his congregation, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire." See John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 97. Very few preachers today speak in such dramatic terms, yet the same underlying sentiment often drives contemporary expressions of the gospel. Forgiveness theology (and atonement theology) is then articulated to address the "just and proper" relational condemnation that God has toward the sinner. Basing one's atonement theology solely (or even primarily) on relational forgiveness often results in unbiblical conceptions of atonement theology, wherein God is viewed as an angry potentate who won't be pacified until he's had his pound of flesh.

the Israelites—beset by drought, defeated by their enemies, and hauled off to captivity—crying out to God for forgiveness. God freely and graciously grants it, but leaves them still beset by drought, defeated by their enemies, and languishing in captivity. What good would that do them? No good at all. Solomon is praying for deliverance from the covenantal curse, not merely for divine compassion and benign feelings.

Here's the main principle from 1 Kings 8—when God grants forgiveness to Israel, he removes the judicial consequence, or punishment, that attends Israel's covenantal offense.

1 Kings 8 is such a beautiful chapter because it offers us a picture of our own salvation. The way in which God interacted with the nation of Israel helps us see how God interacts with us. So with 1 Kings 8 as the backdrop, let's look at Colossians 2:13–14. We're going to see the exact same principle at work.

II. FORGIVENESS IN COLOSSIANS 2:13–14

Paul begins in verse 13 by acknowledging the plight of every human being, namely that we enter the world "dead in trespasses" [*νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν*].[8] What does that mean, exactly? Paul is referring to spiritual death. To be spiritually dead means to be cut off from the life of God; it means living your human life without God's divine life. The human life was not created to exist independent of God's own life; so the human life cut off from God's life is really just a dead and dying life.[9]

Humanity's sinful action led to spiritual death, and then our spiritual death led to more sinful actions. Cast off into death, our souls die and our wills turn inward in futile attempts to save ourselves.[10] And that often doesn't look very pretty. It looks like a bunch of people clamoring over each other in a mad rush to get off a sinking ship, only to drown in the sea. Spiritual death is why the world is so full of violence; why our political and cultural landscape is so polarized and totalizing. It's why we don't do the things we should, and why we do the things we shouldn't.

The story of humanity can be summarized succinctly as follows: God created human beings to live by his life, and to extend his life to all of creation.[11] But then we thought we knew better than God and didn't obey

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[8] See the nearly identical Greek expression in Eph 2:1.

[9] The Church Fathers generally maintained a strong connection between spiritual and physical death. Indeed, these are not two separate realities; the latter is merely the consummation of the former. See for example St. Augustine, *Civ*. 13.12 "When, therefore, it is asked what death it was with which God threatened our first parents if they should transgress the commandment they had received from Him, and should fail to preserve their obedience,—whether it was the death of soul, or of body, or of the whole man, or that which is called second death,—we must answer, It is all," (NPNF 5:40). All Augustine quotations taken from NPNF 5, unless otherwise noted. See also *Civ*. 13.2, 14.3; St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. 3.18.7; St. Athanasius, *Inc*. 6.

[10] Luther's memorable *incurvatus in se*.

[11] This anthropological framework has served as the starting assumption for the "All Things New" sermon series. Humanity was made as priests-kings and queens of the world,

him. This resulted in death—the very thing that God warned would happen if we disobeyed him. That's the story of Adam and Eve, told in the opening chapters of Genesis in primordial fashion, and it's the story of every human being since. The Bible makes clear all throughout, and especially in the New Testament, that this state of "death" in which humanity finds itself is the consequence of God's judicial judgment.[12]

This connection between death and God's judgment is made explicit in verse 14 of our passage, where Paul writes that our "deadness in sins" is the result of the "record of debt" and the "legal demands" against us. It is the same basic thing he states in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." Just as Israel's sin led to the judicial punishment of exile, so too our sin has led to the judicial punishment of death. The judgment of God fell upon humanity in Genesis 3, and we've been living in the exile of death ever since. The Bible doesn't merely teach us that human beings *will be* judged one day; rather it teaches us that the entire human race has *already* been judged. The fact that we all die—every one of us—is the great sign that we *right now* live under the judgment of God.[13]

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appointed to serve in the garden sanctuary of Eden. For the priestly function of creation, see G. K. Beale, "Adam as the First Priest in Eden as the Garden Temple," in the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 22.2 (2018), 9–24; for the kingly function of Adam, see Michael LeFebvre, "Adam Reigns in Eden: Genesis and the Origins of Kingship" in *The Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology*, vol. 5.2 (Oct 2018), 25–57. For the "priestly" function of humanity, and its relation to gender, see Phyllis A. Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," in *Harvard Theological Review*, 74.2 (1981), 129–159. For a theological perspective on the gendered nature of humanity's priestly function, see Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 104-14. Per Schmemann, humanity stands with a foot in both heaven and earth, mediating the life of God to the world, and the world to God. The man is the chief representative of God to creation, and the woman is the chief representative of creation to God. The woman stands with the man as he mediates the life of God to the world and works in conjunction with him. And the man stands with the woman as she mediates the life of the world back to God and works in conjunction with her.

[12] Jaroslav Pelikan notes, "Christian faith knows that death is more than the natural termination of temporal existence. It is the wages of sin, and it is the sting of the law." See his *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1961) 108–09. Pelikan rightly goes on to observe that the "legal" and "judicial" aspects of death are vital for understanding Christian soteriology and the doctrine of creation. When death is viewed primarily as a natural termination (such as we see in Origen), one's entire doctrine of creation becomes Platonic and sub-Christian; salvation becomes deliverance from creation, rather than deliverance in the midst of creation. Athanasius gets it right when he states, "For death…gained from that time forth [i.e., since Adam] a legal hold over us, and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God." *Inc.* 6, from Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox), 109. Created for immortality, humanity fell into the judicial judgment of death through disobedience. So too Augustine, "For the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause but the punishment of the first sin." *Civ.* 14.3, trans., Marcus Dods, (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 444.

[13] Theologians have long noted the different soteriological emphases between Anselm's *Cur Deus homo*, and Athanasius' *De incarnatione*. The different emphasis is rightly noted, but the difference is not (as is typically thought) between "forensic/judicial" on the one side (Anselm), and "ontological" on the other (Athanasius). Both Anselm and Athanasius have a

But here's the gospel news. Where there is judicial judgment, there is also judicial forgiveness. And indeed, that's what Paul is saying in verse 13. Notice how Paul, just like Solomon, links together forgiveness and restoration. "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven [χαρισάμενος] us all our trespasses." For Paul (and the rest of the New Testament), to be forgiven by God is to be released from his judicial judgment of death, which means (now listen to this) that to be forgiven is the *same thing* as being made spiritually alive. Just like "getting rid of darkness" and "turning on the lights" are the same thing, so too, when God forgives the spiritually dead sinner, he makes the spiritually dead sinner alive.

So when the New Testament talks about God's forgiveness, it's talking about God's *judicial* forgiveness—about how God is rewinding the judicial punishment of sin—namely our spiritual death. He's giving us new spiritual life by reintroducing us to his own divine life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In sum, to be forgiven in Christ means to be made alive in Christ—to be reintroduced to the life of God.[14]

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category for the "forensic" jeopardy of humanity; (see Athanasius, *Inc.* 6 in the note above.) The fundamental difference relates to the nature of that legal jeopardy—has humanity's legal sin created a relational barrier between God and humanity, or has it created an ontological barrier? Of course, it's not either/or. But for Anselm, humanity's legal sin has primarily created a relational barrier; God's honor has been offended, and atonement must be made. For Anselm, Christ's death is the means by which humanity restores God's honor and is welcomed back into a loving relationship with God. But for Athanasius, humanity's legal sin has resulted in humanity's ontological corruption into death, threatening to unmake God's good creation. Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection are the means by which God restores humanity back to his original intention for humanity (and beyond).

[14] This is why the Church Fathers so frequently conflate regeneration and forgiveness. In the patristic tradition, death is the primary judicial divine punishment for sin. To have one's sins forgiven is to be released from the consequence of one's sin (i.e., death), which is simply another way of saying that one is regenerated (i.e. made spiritually alive). This is especially notable in Augustine, who writes (to note but one example), "'In God', however, he declares are the 'works of him wrought, who cometh to the light,' because he is quite aware that his *justification* results from no merits of his own, but from the grace of God. 'For it is God,' says the apostle, 'who worketh in you both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.' This then is the way in which *spiritual regeneration* is effected in all who come to Christ from their carnal generation...He left it open to no man to settle such a question by human reasoning, lest infants should be deprived of the grace of the *remission of sins*" (emphasis added). *Pec. merit.* 1.62, (NPNF 5:40). For Augustine, justification takes place at baptism and is linked almost synonymously with spiritual regeneration and the remission of sins. All three concepts (regeneration, remission of sin, and justification) are just different ways of speaking about the same basic reality—i.e., being released from the judicial consequence of death. This same basic framework is found in Athanasius, whose soteriology, like Augustine's, is primarily concerned with overcoming the judicial punishment of death. Thus, the themes of regeneration, restoration, new life, and resurrection make frequent appearances in his writings. He seldom mentions forgiveness/remission of sins, not because the concept is unimportant, but because he has already covered the idea through the use of his other soteriological terms. See Gerald Hiestand, "Not 'Just Forgiven': How Athanasius Overcomes the Under-Realised Eschatology of Evangelicalism" in *Expository Times*, 84.1 (2012), 47–66, especially 58.

Now my point in all of this is not to say that God never gets angry. He often gets angry.[15] But his forgiveness isn't about him getting past his anger. It's about him reversing, taking back, his punishment of death. Which is to say, the forgiveness that God provides us in the gospel is judicial forgiveness—release from spiritual and physical death.

III. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CHRISTIANS

So, what does this view of God's forgiveness mean for Christians? This perspective can save us from a truncated view of redemption. When we rightly emphasize forgiveness as the key aspect of the gospel, but then wrongly reduce God's forgiveness to relational forgiveness, we inadvertently reduce his saving activity to a change in divine disposition—as though the only thing, or most important thing, that happens when we become a Christian is that God stops being angry at us about our sin. In that framework, grace hasn't changed us at all. We're just as spiritually dead as we've always been; just as prone to sin, just as prone to anger, just as prone to lust, to envy, idolatry, greed, and gossip as we were before we came to God for forgiveness. The most we can say is, "Well, at least God isn't angry at me about it anymore."

But that's too short-sighted. Reducing the gospel to relational forgiveness completely misses the most significant aspect of the gospel. The gospel isn't "trust in Jesus and God will stop being angry with you"; the gospel is "trust in Jesus and he will redeem you from God's judicial judgment—namely your spiritual death;" Listen, I'm very glad that God through Christ loves me with the tender and gracious love of a father. But I needed more from him than kind thoughts.[16] I needed him to release me from the

[15] Ascribing emotions to God is fraught with difficulty. Clearly the scriptures ascribe emotions to God (*regret* in Gn 6:6, *anger* in Nu 22:2, *joy* in Is 62:5, etc.). But in the Hebrew Scriptures, emotive concepts such as "joy" and "gladness," are understood in relation to their outward expression. Thus, when the Hebrew scriptures ascribe an emotion to someone, the primary concern is not describing what a person *feels internally*, but how a person is *expressing themselves externally*. One *does* one's joy (e.g., clapping, singing, dancing), just as much as one *feels* one's joy. Michael Horton insightfully makes this same basic point about God's wrath; wrath is not only something God feels, but something God does. "Of course, it is grounded in his moral character, but wrath and grace are divine acts. This is why Paul can speak of wrath as 'being revealed' (Ro 1:18)…God expresses his wrath and his grace freely as he pleases, when and where he pleases. In both cases it is an event…" *Justification, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 125–26. I would add that God's emotive state of anger (however we conceive of divine emotions) and his judicial action of wrath are not always connected; just like in human beings (e.g., parents and police officers), it is often the case that those in positions of authority dispense wrathful consequences quite independent of wrathful feelings or personal animus.

[16] I am not persuaded that atonement theology needs to address relational forgiveness. God does indeed get angry at humanity, and relational forgiveness is necessary between God and humanity. But God does not need atonement in order to extend relational forgiveness, any more than you or I require atonement in order to extend relational forgiveness. This observation does not negate the need for atonement, only redirects it toward ontological and *Christus victor* concerns. The curse of sin (ontological corruption into death) and captivity to the Devil's tyranny, are the great soteriological dilemmas that Christ's atoning work must

judicial judgment of death that he had put me under. My human life was made to exist in union with God's own divine life. His breath is what gives me breath. I needed that life, that breath again. And that's what you need, too. The redemptive, regenerating, restorative, life creating, forgiveness of God transforms us from the inside out. The forgiveness of the gospel isn't primarily about God changing his disposition, but about God changing us. Through his forgiveness, we are set free from the judicial judgment of spiritual death and brought back into union with the life-changing power of God's own life.

So, if you've just kind of rolled over in your fight against sin, and have contented yourself by saying, "Well, at least God forgives me"—let me wake you up to so much more. Be reminded that God's forgiveness comes with new life; be reminded that you have been set free from sin and raised up with Christ. Don't forget the life-giving *power* of God's forgiveness.

Or maybe in your truncated notion of God's relational forgiveness, you've gone the opposite direction. You're grieved by your brokenness; you hate your sin. But since you think the only thing you're going to get from God is a change of disposition, you've wrongly thought that any fixing that needs to be done is up to you. *You've* got to figure out how to get rid of the judicial punishment and all its consequences. *You've* got to figure out how to get yourself out of exile, survive the drought, bring yourself back from the dead, and so forth—all on your own. As though the gospel message is, "Confess your sins; God will stop being angry with you; and then try really hard to overcome the judgments of God in your own strength." And so you find yourself unsuccessfully trying to live the Christian life in your own strength.

Give up trying to overcome the judgment of God in your own strength. You can't undo the divine judicial consequences of your sin. But God can, and he does in Christ. The gospel offers you so much more than relational forgiveness. The gospel offers you restorative forgiveness. It offers you an "all things new" kind of forgiveness. So Christian, be happy for your relational forgiveness from God, but set your hope fully on the power of his judicial forgiveness.

IV. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR NON-CHRISTIANS

To my non-Christian friends, let me ask you: are you grieved by the consequences of your sin? Does the plight of your spiritual death weigh heavy upon you? Do you feel something in you rising up and saying, "Yes, I need healing; I need restoration. I've fallen into a pit out of which I can't

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resolve. Jesus did not die to *appease* or *satisfy* God's wrath (i.e., his righteous anger), but to *undo* the dilemma created by God's wrath (i.e., the righteous sentence of death and the defrocking of humanity as God's royal vice-regents). Atonement theology is the story of how Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, rewinds—unmakes, undoes—the wrath of God that had justly fallen upon a disobedient humanity, and restores creation to its proper order. In other words, atonement theology best focuses its attention on judicial forgiveness, not relational forgiveness.

climb. I need help."[17] Do you see that you've created a problem for yourself that you can't fix?[18] Don't despair. The judge who cast you into that pit is gracious and compassionate; he stands ready to help you if you would but repent, and turn to him in faith. Forsake your sin and self-reliance, and call upon him for mercy. He offers his mercy freely as a gift. You don't have to earn it. Paul writes in Romans 6:23. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." God's free forgiveness will roll back the judicial consequences of your sin and begin the sure process of making you into the person he created you to be.

Here's the incredible news of God's free forgiveness—when God forgives, he can fix everything you've ever broken. He is able to wash the blood off your hands that you can't wash away; he can take back the things you've said that you can't unsay; he can undo the things you've done that you can't undo; he can make all things news. Imagine being fully and finally free of all your sin. No more guilt, no more regret, no more exhaustion from trying to fix all the things that you have ruined. He can and will give you true and full and perfect freedom. Not all at once; salvation is a process. But it is a sure and certain process that will ultimately culminate at the renewal of all things, when God fully and finally remakes the world.

Baptism is the great sacrament of the church that marks the beginning of this process, precisely because baptism is a sign of our covenantal and judicial forgiveness. The apostle Peter says that baptism isn't about the removal of dirt from the body, but about an appeal to God for a good conscience. And the apostle Paul tells us that baptism is a sign that we will be raised up with Christ and made completely new—just like Christ was raised up by God into resurrection and new life. Let me encourage you to turn away from your sin, and come to God for the true and full healing that comes only through his Son. Perhaps the Lord is calling you to the baptismal font at our upcoming baptismal service. I would love to talk to you about that.

[17] The unbeliever, prior to conversion, must *feel* the hopeless weight of sin and death—like Augustine, quoting Seneca, who was "tired of living and scared of dying," *Conf.* 4.6.

[18] Athanasius insightfully observes that repentance is not sufficient for solving humanity's plight of death. "Repentance does not call men back from what is their nature—it merely stays them from acts of sin. Now, if there were merely a misdemeanor in question, and not a consequent corruption, repentance were well enough. But if, when transgression had once gained a start, men became involved in that corruption which was their nature, and were deprived of the grace which they had, being in the image of God, what further step was needed?...For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death. And thus he, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding ground against men…" *Inc.* 7, 9. As he succinctly states in *Inc.* 56, "the fruit of Christ's cross is [our] resurrection," Hardy, *Christology*, 62–63, 109.

V. COMMUNION

Now we turn to the table. If baptism is the great sign about how the Christian life begins, communion is the great sign about how the Christian life continues. Communion reminds us of our union (our communion) with Jesus. As Christians, we are invited to "feed on Christ" as a reminder of our continual dependence upon him. Just as the body needs food, the life of the human being needs the life of Jesus. His life is the life that makes us new. His life is the life that redeems us.[19] His life was the life we lost when we fell into sin, and his life is the life we get back when we cry out to God for salvation. As Paul says in Galatians 2, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

And communion also reminds us that or forgiveness has come at a great cost. Paul says in Colossians 2:14–15, that God has released us from his judicial sentence—not by just waving it away—but by absorbing it into himself. That's why we partake of Jesus' *broken* body and *shed* blood. Jesus entered into our death, in order to bring us to his life. God, the Son, defeated our judicial punishment of death by absorbing our death sentence into himself. This was God's plan all along, as he foretold through the prophet Isaiah, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:4–5).

As we hold in our hands the gift of God to the people of God, let's take a moment to reflect on both the great cost of God's forgiveness, as well as the life changing power that God's forgiveness brings.

[19] St. Maximus, in *Amb.* 5.19, captures the "theandric" framework that underlies the Christian concepts of divinization: "[Jesus] completed the plan of salvation on our behalf in a 'theandric' manner, which means that, in a way that was simultaneously divine and human, 'he accomplished both human and divine things.' To put it more clearly, His 'life among us' was such that divine and human energy coincided in a single identity." See Nicholas Constas, trans., ed., *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers, Volume 1, Maximus the Confessor*, Dumbarton Oak Medieval Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 51. Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Augustine all have the same basic soteriological theandric framework. Christ unites both lives in his single person. The life of God is the life that animates the human being, and thus the life of the human being redounds to the glory of God. See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.20.7, also Augustine, *Civ.* 9.15; Athanasius, all of *Inc.*

BET 8.2 (2021) 29-46

CONFESSING CHRIST WITH THE *AQEDAH*

MICHAEL LEFEBVRE[1]

> "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."
>
> Colossians 1:19–20

Perhaps no story in the Old Testament foreshadows the cross as vividly as the offering of Isaac (Gn 22:1–19). The passage is commonly referred to as the *Aqedah,* which means "binding" in Hebrew. This title reminds us that Abraham brought Isaac to the altar and bound him, but that was as far as the offering of Isaac went. An angel intervened and stopped Abraham from completing his son's sacrifice. But centuries later, the Heavenly Father did follow through on such a sacrifice. God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us" on the cross (Rm 8:32).[2]

Parallels between the *Aqedah* and the cross have received considerable attention over the centuries.[3] In this essay, I want to explore ritual dimensions of Abraham's sacrifice that suggest a more explicit expectation of Christ's sacrifice than previously recognized. The *Aqedah* not only foreshadows the cross but anticipates it expressly.

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[1] Michael LeFebvre is the Pastor of Christ Church Reformed Presbyterian in Brownsburg, Indiana.

[2] On allusions to the *Aqedah* in Ro 8:32, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 220–23. On the comparison of the *Aqedah* to the crucifixion more generally, see Abraham Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah* (Genesis 22): What is the Author *Doing* with what he is *Saying*?" *JETS* 55, no. 3 (2012), 492–95.

[3] E.g., Monika Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius: Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017). Leroy A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Levenson, *Death and Resurrection.* James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in Light of the Aqedah* (Analecta Biblica, Investigationes Scientificae in Res Biblicas 94; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

I. PURPOSE OF THE AQEDAH

The *Aqedah* holds a place of importance within the Abraham narratives (Gn 12–25).[4] It occurs at the climax of Abraham's story, just before Sarah's death (Gn 23), Isaac's marriage (Gn 24), and Abraham's own death (Gn 25). The passage is introduced as God's "test" (v. 1) of Abraham—the "final exam" which Abraham passed ("now I know that you fear God"; v. 12). It is also the last record of God speaking to Abraham, and the heavenly voice ended that conversation by confirming the blessing Abram heard when first called by God (cf., Gn 12:1–3 and 22:16–17).[5] The *Aqedah* represents "the climactic event in the life of Abraham."[6] It is hard to overstate the importance of this passage as a window into the faith of Abraham, and of all Israel. Exploring the message of the *Aqedah* is, therefore, a vital priority of Old Testament theology.

It used to be common to read this narrative as a repudiation of human sacrifice in Israel.[7] It is certainly true that Abraham was stopped from sacrificing his son. However, scholars now recognize that "the core of the narrative actually seems to assume the possibility that God could demand human sacrifice. It contains no categorical divine repudiation of the practice as such."[8] Elsewhere, the Pentateuch strictly prohibits human sacrifice (Ex 13:15; Lv 18:21; 20:2–3; Dt 12:31; 18:10), but the *Aqedah* contains no actual proscription of the practice. Denouncing human sacrifice can hardly be its primary message.

More recently, scholars have come to regard the narrative as the origin story for a particular holy site.[9] The main body of the narrative ends with a place naming: "So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided" (v. 15). This has led to the current consensus that the account is an etiology for a particular holy site. Other passages in Genesis serve a similar

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[4] For a survey of the *Aqedah's* interpretation, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On The Legends And Lore Of The Command To Abraham To Offer Isaac As A Sacrifice; The Akedah,* trans. Judah Golding (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1993); A. Andrew Das, *Paul and the Stories of Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 193–224; Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah*," 489–95; Robert J. Daly, "The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *CBQ* 39 (1977), 45–75; Jon Balserak, "Luther, Calvin and Musculus on Abraham's Trial: Exegetical History and the Transformation of Genesis 22," *RRR* 6.3 (2004), 361–73.

[5] Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Shocken Books, 1966), 160–61.

[6] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 160.

[7] Nahum M. Sarna, "Excursus 17: The Meaning of the Akedah," in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis,* JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 392–93; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis,* trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 239–40; Joseph H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text English Translation and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1997), 201; Paul G. Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study of *Mulk* and *mlk*," Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, 1975), 237; cf., Ronald M. Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10, no. 1 (1982): 14.

[8] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 157.

[9] Gunkel, *Genesis,* 237–38.

purpose, such as narratives introducing Beer-lahai-roi (Gn 16:13–14), Zoar (Gn 19:20–22), and Beersheba (Gn 21:31). But the *Aqedah* authorizes the most important sacrificial site in the Abraham narratives, often identified as the place where the temple was later built.[10]

This interpretation is probably closer to the heart of the text's purpose. But there is more detail contained in the narrative than necessary to introduce a place. Indeed, if the purpose of the text is to identify a certain location, it is burdened with numerous extra details "none of [which] prove relevant to the narrative in the end."[11] In fact, the *Aqedah* contains "the longest account of any sacrifice in Genesis,"[12] which seems extravagant if the text's purpose is to mark out the importance of the place.

But there is reason for the extensive sacrificial details in the text. The account appoints both Israel's most holy site and the sacrificial rites to be observed there. In an essay aptly named, "The Akedah: A Paradigm of Sacrifice," Gordon Wenham observes, "It is therefore highly likely that the narrator of Genesis 22 intends to say something about the theology of sacrifice" in this narrative.[13] Adding to Wenham's basic insight, I would note that there are at least ten features of Abraham's sacrifice liturgy that are also found in the Zion liturgies, further substantiating the *Aqedah's* function as the fundamental narrative guide to sacrifice theology for Israel.[14]

This narrative in Genesis presents the foundational pattern for sacrifice and its meaning, as embodied in the example of Israel's founding patriarch. Scholars traditionally open the book of Leviticus to study the nature and meaning of Israel's sacrifices, but the *Aqedah* is even more basic than Leviticus. The *Aqedah* preserves, in narrative form, Israel's earliest sacrifice instruction. The theological lessons presented in Abraham's model are therefore foundational to our understanding of all the later sacrifices of Mosaic tabernacle or the Solomonic temple. Naturally, Abraham's procedures are simpler than the institutionalized rites of the temple. However, parallels in basic forms suggest the correlation is deliberate.

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[10] This identification with Mount Zion will be discussed further, below.

[11] So Sailhamer, "Genesis," 168; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* WBC 2 (Dallas: Work Books, 2015), 109.

[12] Gordon J. Wenham, "The Akedah: A Paradigm of Sacrifice," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom,* ed. David P. Wright, et al (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 95.

[13] Wenham, "The Akedah," 95.

[14] Wenham, "The Akedah." Moberly noticed some of these hints of the temple liturgy, but did not fully develop them: R. W. L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah," *VT* 38, no. 3 (1988): 306–07. According to Michelle Levine, Nahmanides also recognized the prefiguring of temple rites in the *Aqedah:* Michelle J. Levine, *Nahmanides on Genesis: The Art of Biblical Portraiture* (Brown Judaic Studies; Providence, R.I.: 2009), 407–09. Levenson regards the *Aqedah* as an etiology for Passover: Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 11–24.

II. LITURGY OF THE AQEDAH

A. LOCATION

The first ritual detail to note, observed by Abraham and repeated in later Israel's worship, is the appointed location. Abraham was sent to offer his sacrifice "on one of the mountains" located in "the land of Moriah" (v. 2). There is no other reference to this region in the Pentateuch, and there have been various proposals regarding the location of Moriah. Abraham names the place "*yhwh yirʾeh*" ("The LORD will provide"; v. 14), leading some to suggest Jeruel (*yĕrûʾēl;* 2 Ch 20:16), a site thirteen miles south of Jerusalem.[15] However, the traditional identification of the place with Mount Zion remains the most likely solution.[16]

This interpretation (Moriah = Zion) appears as early as the Chronicler, who identified Moriah with the site of the temple's founding. "Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah" (2 Ch 3:1). The Chronicler seems keen to ensure we know Solomon's temple was built on the site of Abraham's sacrifice.[17] The same identification also appears in the Book of Jubilees (18:13), Josephus (*Ant.* 1.8.2.226), and the Talmud (*Ta'an*. 16a).[18]

"Moriah" was likely a pre-Israelite name for Mount Zion and its surrounding region.[19] The book of Genesis frequently identifies important geographic sites by their archaic names. For instance, some scholars believe "Eden" (Gn 2:8, 10–14) was an archaic title for what later became known as Canaan.[20] Genesis refers to the land of Babylon by its archaic name "Shinar" (Gn 11:2; cf., Dn 1:2). Genesis identifies the territory that later became Philistia by its archaic name "Gerar" (Gn 10:19; 20:1; 26:1). The use of Moriah for Mount Zion fits this pattern, and its identity would likely have been recognized by its original audience as its use in 2 Chronicles 3:1 shows.

The location's secondary description in the account further identifies it with Zion. God directed Abraham to the mountain "of which I shall tell you" (v. 2). This reference is more than a promise of traveling guidance. It marks the mountain as a sacred site of divine appointment.[21] The phrase is comparable to Deuteronomy's term of reference: "the place that the LORD your God will choose" (Dt 12:5, 11, 18, 21; 14:23; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15,

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[15] Gunkel, *Genesis,* 239; Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 116–18.

[16] Nahum M. Sarna, "Excursus 16: The Land of Moriah," in *Genesis*, 391–92; Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 116–22.

[17] Isaac Kalimi, "The Land of Moriah, Mount Moriah, and the Site of Solomon's Temple in Biblical Historiography," *HTR* 83, no. 4 (1990): 345–62.

[18] Sarna, *Genesis*, 392.

[19] "As the example of 'Sinai' shows (e.g., Ex 19:2, 11), the same term can designate a region and the most important mountain within it." Hence "land of Moriah" in Gn 22:1 corresponds with "Mount Moriah" in 2 Ch 3:1. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 119.

[20] See discussion and references in, Michael LeFebvre, "Adam Reigns in Eden: Genesis and the Origins of Kingship," *BET* 5, no. 2 (2018): 35–42.

[21] Wenham, "The Akedah," 101.

16; 17:8; 26:2; 31:11). This designation served to legitimate the site as the place chosen by God. Furthermore, the place is called "the mount of the Lord" (v. 14), a designation used once for Mount Sinai (Num 10:33) and otherwise only for Mount Zion (Ps 24:3; Is 2:3; 30:29; Mc 4:2; Zc 8:3).[22] Finally, the altar Abraham builds in verse 9 is identified as "*the* altar" using a definite article.[23] This adds to the sense that Abraham's sacrifice took place at the known altar site of the attending audience.

The location of Abraham's offering is an important part of the narrative's etiological function. By drawing this identification in the story, later generations who gathered at Mount Zion learned that they were participating in the same faith as Abraham as they continued to worship at the same altar where Abraham worshiped.

B. Pilgrimage

A second liturgical detail in the text is its call to pilgrimage. God called Abraham to leave his homestead and journey to the place of sacrifice. "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey...and arose and went to the place of which God had told him" (v. 3).

This is not typical of the Abraham narratives. Every other time Abraham offered sacrifices, he built an altar wherever he was living at the time. When the Lord appeared to Abram in Shechem, he "built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him" (Gen 12:7). Then Abram moved near Bethel, and again "he built an altar to the Lord" after settling near Bethel (Gn 12:8). When he later moved to Hebron, Abram "built an altar to the Lord" after settling there (Gn 13:18). The patriarch's pattern was to settle in a place and to build an altar where he settled. But the *Aqedah* required something different.

This time, Abraham was called to undertake a pilgrimage. He was to leave his settlement and travel a three-day journey (v. 4) to worship at a holy site appointed by God for that purpose. This unusual feature fits with the thesis that the narrative provides liturgical guidance for later Israel. Later generations would relate to Abraham's pilgrimage as they followed the Lord's command for their own annual pilgrimages to Mount Zion.

C. Burnt Offering

Abraham's offering introduces a third liturgical detail. The Lord told Abraham to bring a "burnt offering" (*ʿōlâ;* v. 2). Of all the sacrifices offered by Abraham in Genesis, this is the only time a specific kind of sacrifice is named. Furthermore, the passage names the specific kind of sacrifice offered by Abraham no less than six times (vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 13).[24] The narrative is keen to show that Abraham offered a burnt offering on this altar.

[22] Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 307.

[23] Sarna. *Genesis,* 392.

[24] The only other place in Genesis where whole burnt offerings are specified is at Noah's altar (Gn 8:20).

There were five different kinds of sacrifices used in Israel's worship at the temple (Lv 1:1–5:7), of which the burnt offering was one. The other four offerings (grain offering, peace meal offering, sin offering, and guilt offering) had portions distributed to the attending priest or to the worshiper to eat. The burnt offering was the only sacrifice wholly consumed by God on the altar.

As the one sacrifice wholly burned on the altar, the burnt offering was also the foundation of Israel's sacrificial system. During the daily sacrifices at the temple, a burnt offering was placed first (and last) upon the altar each day (Ex 29:38–42; Nm 28:1–8). It was the offering that inaugurated the day and that marked the altar as, so to speak, "open for business." Other sacrifices would be added on top of the morning burnt offering (e.g., Nm 28:10, 15, 23, 31; 29:6, 11, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 38; 2 Ki 16:15). The burnt offering served as a "carrier" for the rest.

The identification of this specific offering by Abraham adds another point of connection for later Israel. Later worshipers brought their own sacrifices of various types to the temple to lay them on top of the burnt offering laid on the altar by the temple priests at the beginning of each day. Identifying the first ever sacrifice on the altar at Mount Zion as a burnt offering presented by Abraham fits the liturgy of Israel's sacrifices there.

D. Worship

A fourth liturgical detail of note is the purpose Abraham gives for his pilgrimage. "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said…'I and the boy will go over there and worship'" (vv. 4–5). The purpose of this pilgrimage was to "worship" *(hištāḥăwâ)*. The term denotes an act of prostration, bowing to present oneself before an authority. It is a technical term used for an encounter with the Lord.

Strictly speaking, later Israelites could only worship at the temple, and they could only do so at the altar of atonement. They could pray from anywhere at any time (1 Ki 8:22–53). But to encounter God's presence (to "worship"), one had to go to the temple where his name dwelt and approach the altar. Abraham's pilgrimage to the sacred mountain for the purpose of meeting the Lord (worship) set the pattern which later generations would emulate.

E. Provision of Sacrifice Elements

A fifth liturgical note is the source of the sacrifice "animal" and the sacrifice wood. Abraham took his sacrificial "animal" (i.e., Isaac) along with wood from his home (vv. 2–3). Later worshipers were also responsible to bring their sacrifices with them from home (Lv 1:2). It is not clear whether wood was typically brought from home, although it may have been so (cf., Ne 10:34).

F. The Altar

Once at the sacrifice site, several more steps in the liturgy followed in quick succession. "When they came to the place which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood" (v. 9). This order of steps at Abraham's altar approximates those later Hebrews would observe at the temple altar. Abraham constructed "the altar *(hamizbēaḥ)*." The passage uses the definite article *(ha-)*, suggesting either an altar was already there and Abraham restored it, or his altar is "the same" as the one known to later worshipers on that spot.[25] The latter is the most likely intention if we are correct to identify the passage as a Zion etiology. Identifying Abraham's altar with that of later Israel—indeed, regarding Abraham as the original builder of that altar—and preparing it with the wood arranged in order is a sixth liturgical detail that links Abraham's sacrificial pattern with Israel's liturgy.[26]

G. Presenting the Sacrifice

Once the altar was prepared, a seventh detail follows. The sacrifice was bound and presented for slaughter. The term for Isaac's binding *(ʿāqad)* is not the usual word for tying something together *(ʾāsar)*. It is "a technical term for the tying together of the forefoot and the hindfoot of an animal or of the two forefeet or two hindfeet" in preparation for sacrifice.[27]

There is a peculiarity in Abraham's procedure at this point which might initially seem to break with the practice of later Israel. Abraham bound Isaac and placed him upon the altar before completing the slaughter.[28] The instructions preserved in Leviticus call for a sacrifice to be slaughtered "before the Lord," that is, "[at] the entrance of the tent of meeting" (Lv 1:3), and afterward placed on the altar (Lv 1:6–8). However, this variation is likely due to the fact that there was no tent of meeting at Abraham's worship site. The altar was the only platform for presenting his sacrifice "before the Lord" (cf., Ex 17:15–16). Even though Abraham placed his offering on the altar sooner than was typical in Israel's liturgy, his placement was the ritual equivalent of a later worshiper's presentation at the entrance of the tent. Thus, even in this variation in physical practice, Abraham's ritual performance matches that of Israel at the temple.

H. Slaughter

After the offering was presented before the Lord, the next step was to "slaughter *(šāḥat)*" the sacrifice (v. 10). Here we find an eighth detail that corresponds between Abraham's narrative and the Zion liturgies. The

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[25] Samra. *Genesis,* 392.

[26] This identification is comparable to Islam's attribution of the Kaaba as originally built by Abraham.

[27] Samra, *Genesis,* 153; cf., *m. Tamid* 4:1.

[28] Wenham, *Genesis 16-50,* 109.

Aqedah uses the technical term for the ritual killing of a sacrifice animal.[29] In later Israel, an attending priest performed many of the actions related to the sacrifice, but the offerer always killed the sacrifice animal him or herself (Lv 1:5). Hearing the story of Abraham raising the knife, later Hebrews would identify in their performance of the same weighty action.

I. Substitutionary Lamb

At this stage in Abraham's offering, the angel stopped him, and Abraham was provided with a male "lamb" (v. 8), that is a "ram" (v. 13), as his offering. This substitutionary animal introduces a ninth match between Abraham's practice and that of Israel. The male sheep was typical of Israel's offerings and the burnt offering in particular. There were some sacrifices that allowed a female lamb (Lv 4:32; 5:6) or other domestic livestock. But the burnt offering required a male sacrifice, typically a lamb (Lv 1:3, 10).

J. Benediction

A tenth liturgical detail of note is the benediction at the conclusion of the service. Abraham's liturgy ended with the Lord's announcement of blessings upon him. This is comparable to the priest's benediction at the end of Israel's services. After the Lord received Abraham's sacrifice, "[The] angel of the LORD called to Abraham...and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this...I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring...and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed'" (vv. 16–18). The wording of this benediction reflects the blessing God had announced at Abram's initial call (Gn 12:1–3). It is therefore different in its wording than the Aaronic benediction (Nu 6:22–27) presumably typical of the temple services. But the presence of a benediction at the conclusion of Abraham's worship mirrors the same after each temple service (Lv 9:22–24).

In each of these ten points, Abraham's ritual acts anticipate the altar liturgy of later Israel. By presenting the narrative in this manner, later worshipers were able to identify with Abraham and with his faith as they brought sacrifices to the Zion altar. But in each of the ten parallels noted so far, the connection is implicit. There is one more point in Abraham's liturgy (an eleventh ritual detail) where the patriarch's connection to later Israel's worship and the anticipatory character of his sacrifice is made explicit. But first, we need to take a closer look at the concept of human sacrifice around which the *Aqedah* is developed.

III. FIRSTBORN SACRIFICE AND THE AQEDAH

The singular distinctive of the *Aqedah* is the Lord's remarkable call upon Abraham to sacrifice his son, something Israel was elsewhere commanded not even to consider (Ex 13:15; Lv 18:21; 20:2–3; Dt 12:31;

[29] Wenham, *Genesis 16-50,* 109.

18:10). Commentators have often claimed that the *Aqedah* shows the Lord's rejection of human sacrifice. However, a more nuanced reading is in order.

The narrative ascribes these words to the lips of Yahweh: "Abraham!... Take you son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him there as a burnt offering" (vv. 1–2). It is a startling instruction from the mouth of God. And the propriety of that instruction is never questioned nor repudiated in the account. It is true (thankfully!) that the Lord's angel stopped Abraham from completing Isaac's slaughter. But that interruption was not marked by any repudiation of the morality of the Lord's initial command.

It has been popular among commentators to suggest the *Aqedah's* introduction as a "test" (v. 1) neutralizes its calling to firstborn sacrifice. Nahum Sarna proposes, "The narrative as it now stands is almost impatiently insistent upon removing any possibility of misunderstanding that God had really intended Abraham to sacrifice his son. To make sure that the reader has advance knowledge of God's purposes, the story begins with a declaration that 'God put Abraham to the test' (22:1)."[30] However, this interpretation creates a potentially more troubling moral dilemma. It suggests that God was tempting Abraham to do evil (contra Ja 1:13) in the hopes that Abraham would disobey his instruction![31] It is better to recognize God's test as a supreme challenge to make a sacrifice of great cost, rather than a test (i.e., temptation) to see whether Abraham would do something evil. Indeed, if the latter was the case, then Abraham failed the test by his willingness to do as God tempted him!

R. W. L. Moberly notes, "The meaning of this [test] is illuminated when it is appreciated that the two key words, test *(nissâ)* and fear *(yārēʾ)* occur in conjunction in one other context...[when God gave] the ten commandments, to test *(nissâ)* them and so that the fear *(yirʾâ)* of God should be before them...The likely significance [of Abraham's test], I propose, is

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[30] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* 161; *Genesis,* 151. Cf., Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 215; John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 167–68.

[31] As admitted by Martin Luther, who wrote, "Here Scripture states plainly that Abraham was actually tempted by God Himself." Quoted and discussed by Melissa Buck, "God as Tempter: Luther on Genesis 22," *Logia* 24, no. 1 (2015): 23–27. Some early rabbinic interpreters have suggested that Satan incited God to tempt Abraham in a manner analogous to the testing of Job. Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah,*" 491. Miguel De La Torre notes the failure of efforts to avoid this tension, "Although the New Testament maintains that God does not tempt anyone (Ja 1:13), in the Isaac story God is obviously tempting Abraham. Although scholars assert a difference in nuance between tempting (an enticement to deliberately sin against God and/or neighbor) and testing (an enticement to ascertain the depths of one's commitment to God), for the one going through the trial such differences seem to be more aligned with an academic debate based on semantics. If it comes from God, we call it a test; but if it comes from anywhere else (i.e., Satan, demons, other humans, society), we call it temptation. Regardless of the term we choose, for the one going through the anguish of having to decide whether to kill one's child, the command from God must seem capricious and sadistic. Nevertheless, the reader knows, from the start of the story, that God is testing (tempting?) Abraham." De La Torre, *Genesis,* 215.

that Abraham supremely exemplifies the meaning of living by Torah."[32] The introduction of God's command as a test does not indicate the firstborn sacrifice was morally improper, only that it would be a costly sacrifice for Abraham to make as one "living by Torah."

Furthermore, even Abraham did not balk at the command when he received it. On the contrary, he "rose early in the morning" (v. 3) showing his promptness to obey.[33] The narrator even informs us that Abraham fully intended to sacrifice his son as instructed. "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son" (v. 10). His intention is made explicit: he raised the knife "to slaughter his son." The father of faith expected that the heir had to be sacrificed for the atonement of the kingdom, and he never expressed any moral qualms about it being so.[34] The Apostle James even calls Abraham's willingness a mark of his righteousness: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?" (Ja 2:21).

Also important to note: Isaac plays a cooperative role in the story, modeling a willing sacrifice rather than one who finds the notion of surrendering to be sacrificed unthinkable.[35] In English narratives, silence is typically interpreted neutrally. In Hebrew narratives, however, silence is frequently intended to communicate consent (cf., Dt 22:24; Ne 5:8). Isaac's silence as his father bound him is an important part of the story, indicating the heir consented to be sacrificed. Isaiah's Song of the Suffering Servant (Is 53) likely draws from the *Aqedah,*[36] and makes this point of the heir's consent explicit. In that Song, Isaiah interprets the silence of the heir as willingness: "He opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7).[37]

The faith of Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice on behalf of his household, and the willingness of the heir to be that sacrifice, are central to the theology of this foundational sacrifice narrative for Israel. To quote

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[32] Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 304–05. For a survey of God's "tests" in Scripture, see Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 103–04.

[33] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 338–40.

[34] For a survey of various efforts to explain Abraham's lack of hesitation, see David W. Cotter, *Genesis* (*Berit Olam;* Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 155–58. Matthew Rowley argues that Abraham's lack of hesitation potentially sets a dangerous precedent for the worst kind of "blind faith." Matthew Rowley, "Irrational Violence? Reconsidering the Logic of Obedience in Genesis 22," *Themelios* 40, no. 1 (2015), 78–89.

[35] Das, *Stories of Israel,* 106–07; Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition"; Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 314; Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* 158–59.

[36] Geza Vermes. *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*. Studia Post-Biblica, 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 203; Roy A. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant'," *JBL* 84, no. 4 (1965): 381–88.

[37] 4 Maccabees 13:12 also interprets Isaac's silence as willingness: "he offered himself to be a sacrifice for the sake of righteousness."

Nahum Sarna, "For all these reasons, the claim that the Akedah is a protest against human sacrifice cannot be sustained."[38]

Within the ancient Near Eastern context—and within the Old Testament itself—the giving of a father's firstborn son (or a king's firstborn son) was regarded as the ultimate sacrifice to propitiate heaven on behalf of a household (or a kingdom).[39] The ancient literature is filled with examples of kings who offered a firstborn to placate heaven and secure blessings on the kingdom.[40] Archaeologists have identified evidence of regular human sacrifices in Canaan, both of households and communities.[41] In the Bible, 2 Kings 3:27 reports the horrible effectiveness of the practice, when a Moabite king sacrificed his heir in order to ward off Israel's attack. "Then [the king of Moab] took his oldest son who was to reign in his place and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel. And they withdrew from him and returned to their own land." The nature of this "great wrath" that fell upon Israel and blocked their attack is not clear, but the sacrifice of the king's heir is here presented as a horrible rite with great power.[42]

Human sacrifice was widely practiced outside of Israel. Within Israel, God strictly prohibited human sacrifice. The households of Israel were never, ever to present their children as human sacrifices. God's Law strictly prohibited human sacrifice. But this was not because the concept was rejected in every respect. On the contrary, the *Aqedah* shows that the entire Hebrew sacrificial system was founded on the premise that Israel offered animals in expectation of one human heir who would, alone, be the true sacrifice for the nation. Other human sacrifices were prohibited because no other sacrifice could accomplish what that true heir would.

Among God's people, any time an innocent person is *unwillingly* put to death, it is immoral (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17). But the *willing* offer of one's life as a sacrifice on behalf of others, *when there is just cause,* can be a supreme act of moral good (Jn 15:13). The nobility of martyrdom (Ph 2:17; Rv 12:11) and of the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11, 15, 17) is rooted in the propriety of humans willingly sacrificing their lives *in certain, carefully defined circumstances*. The Old Testament restricted Israel from providing firstborn atonement, not because the principle was

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[38] Sarna, "Meaning of the Akedah," 393.

[39] Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 3–17.

[40] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 239–40; Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 305; Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 18-24.

[41] William C. Graham and Herbert G. May, *Culture and Conscience: An Archaeological Study of the New Religious Past in Ancient Palestine,* University of Chicago Publications in Religious Education, Handbooks of Ethics and Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 77–79; Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archeological Background of The Hebrew-Christian Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 148; Emmanuel Anati, *Palestine Before the Hebrews: A History, From the Earliest Arrival of Man to the Conquest of Canaan* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), 427.

[42] Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigenia, Ignatius,* 18–19.

universally invalid but because the Lord himself would provide the one, right firstborn sacrifice in due time.

The foundation for the expectation was laid in the duties of every household in Israel. In Exodus 22:29–30, God required that the firstborn son of every household be offered to him in "the same [way]" as firstborn livestock were offered. "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same *(kēn)* with your oxen and with your sheep." Some scholars believe that this law, which has no qualifications attached to it, indicates Israel actually practiced firstborn sacrifice at one time.[43] There is no evidence to support this assertion; nevertheless, the equivalent duty of sacrifice for firstborn sons and livestock is here stated. Other passages affirm the payment of a redemption price in lieu of actual slaughter in the case of human firstborn (Ex 13:15). Thus, Israel never practiced the firstborn sacrifice as their neighbors did (Je 19:5–6); nevertheless, the fundamental principle remained in place. An innocent and willing firstborn must ultimately die for the propitiation of the people.

The following citation from the Prophet Micah illustrates the continuing recognition of this principle even late in Israel's history. Micah lists a series of sacrifices from least valuable to most valuable, with the firstborn son's sacrifice as the greatest appeal to heaven: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mi 6:6–7). The answer to Micah's question is that the Lord wants his people to avoid sin in the first place, rather than sinning and giving sacrifices (Mi 6:8). But in making this point, Micah affirms that the sacrifice of the firstborn remains (in principle) the highest form of appeal to heaven.[44]

A survey of the topic of human sacrifice in the Bible reveals this remarkable discovery. The reason God forbade the practice in Israel was not because of its absolute impropriety. It is true that nearly every form of human sacrifice is immoral. But under some circumstances, self-sacrifice is morally commendable. Indeed, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). The reason God forbade human sacrifice in Israel was to wait for the right sacrificial heir who, in the words of the *Aqedah,* would secure heaven's blessings for "all the nations of the earth" (v. 18).

IV. THE CONFESSION OF THE AQEDAH

When Abraham raised his knife to offer his firstborn heir on behalf of his house, the Angel of the Lord stopped him. The Lord provided a

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[43] Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 3–5. Pethsy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius,* 13–29. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Mark E. Biddle, trans.; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 239. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* 157–59.

[44] Levenson, *Death and Resurrection,* 10-11.

ram in the son's stead.[45] "And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead *(taḥat)* of his son" (v. 13). By that term "instead" *(taḥat)*, the sheep is identified as a stand-in, filling the place rightly appointed for Abraham's heir. The sheep was never intended as the true sacrifice (Heb 10:4), but as a placeholder for the real human heir actually required.

After introducing the sheep sacrifice on the mount of the Lord as a substitute for the real sacrifice needed, the narrator breaks the fourth wall to give a word of ritual instruction to the listening audience. "So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord, it [or, he] shall be provided'" (v. 14). Commentators have generally focused attention on the first half of that verse, where Abraham gave a name to that holy place. But the most important phrase in this verse is its second half, where a widely known saying ("the everyday expression")[46] of the narrator's time is said to be interpreted by the story just finished: "On the mount of the Lord, it [or, he] shall be provided." The story of the *Aqedah* was rehearsed to explain the meaning of that expectation which the author's audience still knew and recited regularly.

There are two possible readings of the saying defined by the *Aqedah:* "In the mountain of Yahweh it (or, he) is (or, shall be) seen";[47] "In the mountain of Yahweh it (or, he) is (or, shall be) provided." The first reading leads to the conclusion that Yahweh himself is what will be "seen" at this worship site. Bill Arnold explains this interpretation, "Abraham's name for the place... added new depth to the everyday expression, 'On Yahweh's mount, He is revealed,' in that it personalized the revelation of God as provision for one's profoundest needs."[48] This reading is based on comparison to passages like Leviticus 9:3–4 which links the offering of sacrifices with the appearance of the Lord to his people, "Say to the people of Israel, '...Sacrifice before the Lord...for today the Lord will appear to you" (cf., Ex 43–46).[49]

Indeed, Yahweh revealed himself to his people at the place of worship. However, the whole purpose of worship is to encounter God. There was no need to present such an elaborate narrative—much less a narrative complicated by themes of human sacrifice—in order to teach that lesson.[50] The passage actually seems to require a different reading of what the offerer

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[45] Marvin Pope argues from the word *āhar* (v. 13) that "Abraham raised his eyes and saw the ram the instant it was snagged," thus indicating its divine provision as Isaac's substitute. Marvin H. Pope, "Enigmatic Bible Passages: The Timing of the Snagging of the Ram, Genesis 22:13," *Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 114–17.

[46] Arnold, *Genesis,* 208.

[47] Or, "the place where Yahweh always 'sees' and so provides for his people." Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 307.

[48] Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 208. Also, Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 114. This is also the rendering given in the LXX: "In the mountain the Lord is seen."

[49] Sailhamer, "Genesis," 169; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* 111.

[50] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 236.

is to expect at this place of worship. The saying at the end of the story points to the hope of a greater Isaac who will one day be provided in that place, fulfilling the sacrifice for which the lamb is a temporary placeholder.

There is another liturgical detail at the heart of the narrative which I previously bypassed. During the pilgrimage to Moriah, Abraham engaged in a catechetical conversation with his son. The focus of that conversation was on the sacrifice they were going to Moriah to perform. The son asked his father a question, "My father!...Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" To this, Abraham provided the right theological answer, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (vv. 7–8).[51]

Once we appreciate the liturgical shape of the passage as a whole, we realize that this conversation is part of that liturgical pattern. The question and answer discussion of father and son on the way to the sacrificial mount guides the kind of conversation which later Israelites were to undertake in preparation for their sacrifices. Consider, as a comparison, the scripted conversation in Exodus 13:8–16.

In that Exodus passage, Moses instructed fathers to engage their families in conversation about the meaning of the Passover around its celebration. "You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'...And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt...'" Moses was concerned that each generation train the next in the meaning of the rituals they observed. Such catechetical conversations were an important means for conveying the faith. Brevard Childs writes, "Because this rite [of the Passover] is to become a permanent institution within Israel, later generations must need to know its significance. How does Israel transmit its faith to the next generation? The writer poses the questions in terms of a child's query...This response is not simply a report, but above all a confession to the ongoing participation of Israel in the decisive act of redemption from Egypt."[52]

The Pentateuch contains other examples of ritual sayings and acts incorporated into its narratives.[53] The conversation of Abraham and Isaac on their way to Moriah belongs to that category. Abraham models the worshiper's instruction that the Lord will one day provide the real lamb that the people require. It is that line of instruction in the midst of the narrative which the final saying in verse 14 expands upon at the end of the sacrifice narrative. "As it is said to this day"—that is, as fathers continue to recite to their households even in the narrator's present time—"On the mount of Yahweh, he (that is, the true firstborn sacrifice) will be provided."

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[51] Several commentators identify this conversation (vv. 7–8) as the organizational center point of the story. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* 100, 109, 114–15; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis,* Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 186; Terence E. Fretheim, "Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 496.

[52] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary,* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 200.

[53] E.g., Gn 32:23–33; Ex 4:25; Dt 10:8.

Many commentators recognize the connection between Abraham's statement in verse 8, "God will provide *(yîrʾeh)* for himself the lamb," and the narrator's conclusion in verse 14, "The Lord will provide *(yîrʾeh)*'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided *(yērāʾeh)*.'"[54] But it is only when we recognize the liturgical character of the entire narrative that the significance of that expectation emerges. In the saying at the end of the story, the narrator urges his audience to continue catechizing each generation as Abraham did his son. And one day, the Lord will provide that true sacrifice the people waited for. Every animal sacrifice offered on the altar at Mount Zion was to serve as a stand-in for that true sacrifice until he came, and each generation was to use the story of the *Aqedah* to instruct the next in that hope.

The author of Genesis affirms that this expectation was, indeed, being taught up to his day. Whether "this day" means the day of Moses (and thus reflecting the continuance of that saying to the time of the tabernacle in the wilderness), or the day of Ezra (and thus reflecting its use to the opposite end of Old Testament history),[55] or some point of time in between,[56] the narrator attests that the lesson of the *Aqedah* continued to be professed centuries after Abraham. To quote the words of a nineteenth century commentator, "He who provided the ram caught in the thicket will provide the really atoning victim of which the ram was a type. In this event we can imagine Abraham seeing the day of that preëminent seed who should in the fulness of time actually take away sin by the sacrifice of himself. *In the mount of the Lord he will be seen.* This proverb remained as a monument of this transaction in the time of the sacred writer."[57]

If this reading of the *Aqedah* confession is correct, the Old Testament saints possessed a much clearer expectation of a suffering messiah who would atone for the world than generally recognized.

V. CONFIRMING THE CONFESSION

This interpretation comports with various possible allusions to the *Aqedah* elsewhere in Scripture. The author of Genesis had already prepared

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[54] Sarna, *Genesis,* 154; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 400–01; Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom,* 346; Sailhamer, "Genesis," 168.

[55] Ezra 7:6, 10, 25.

[56] Source critics generally identify the core of the *Aqedah* narrative to E, dated to the period of the northern kingdom of Israel.

[57] James G. Murphy, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis with a New Translation* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1873), 341. Wenham further notes, "In post-biblical Judaism, it was sometimes affirmed that the temple sacrifices were accepted because of the merits of Isaac. His obedience was recalled each time an animal was sacrificed, so that the atoning value of sacrifice really depended on Isaac's willingness to suffer, not the death of the animal." Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* 117. However, late Judaism's treatment of Isaac's near-sacrifice as the actual source of atonement behind animal sacrifices was probably a response to other religions (including Christianity). Sarna, "Excursus 18: The Akedah in Jewish Tradition," *Genesis,* 394.

for the suffering of the promised offspring in the opening chapters of the book. In Genesis 3:15, commonly called the "protoevangelium," God promised that "the seed" of the woman would one day suffer for his people. Addressing the serpent, God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gn 3:15). This early promise of a suffering offspring is consistent with Abraham's expectation in the *Aqedah* as developed in this essay.[58]

Further support for this interpretation of the *Aqedah* can be found in Psalm 40:6–8. This Psalm is ascribed as "a psalm of David." In verses 6–8, David states, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." In the New Testament, Hebrews 10:5–7 places these words on Jesus' lips as Israel's true sacrifice. Commentators often treat that New Testament interpretation of the Psalm as a retrojection of the cross into the Psalm contrary to its original meaning.[59] However, if my interpretation of the *Aqedah* is correct, perhaps David really did understand from "the scroll of the book" that someone in the kingly line would personally become the sacrifice required.[60] Perhaps the Old Testament worshipers knew all along that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb 10:4) and that the firstborn heir was the one expected in those offerings.

Another Old Testament passage that is consistent with this reading of the *Aqedah* is the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the suffering servant (Is 53:1–12).[61] Isaiah somehow understood that the sheep slain at the altar served as a stand-in for a human "lamb" who would actually atone for the transgressions of his people. This insight may not have been new for Isaiah, but may have been the received understanding of the *Aqedah* in his day. Notably, the result of the Suffering Servant's sacrifice echoes the blessing promised in the *Aqedah*. Abraham's blessing was expressly tied to the offering of the firstborn: "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring..." (Gn 22:16–17). Isaiah's song ponders a similar blessing with a multiplication of the righteous due to the Suffering Servant's sacrifice. "When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days...Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see...many to be accounted righteous" (Is 53:10–11). It is possible that Isaiah's vision derives from the ongoing recitation of the *Aqedah* confession in his day.

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[58] On the theological and literary links between Gn 3:15 and Gn 22:17–18, see Jared M. August, "The Messianic Hope of Genesis: The *Protoevangelium* and Patriarchal Promises," *Themelios* 42, no. 1 (2017): 46–62.

[59] E.g., Karen H. Jobes, "The Function of Paronomasia in Hebrews 10:5-7," *TrinJ* 13NS (1992): 181–91.

[60] Cf., Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46.

[61] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* 117.

In the New Testament there are numerous allusions to the *Aqedah*.[62] When Jesus first appeared in the wilderness of Judea, John the Baptist cried out, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). This declaration seems to draw from the promise rehearsed in the *Aqedah* confession. Israel was there taught that "the Lord will provide" the sacrifice to fulfill the animal stand-in and bring blessing "[to] all nations of the earth" (Gn 22:18). John recognized Jesus as being "the Lamb *(provided) of God*, who takes away the sin *of the world,*" just as promised in the *Aqedah*. John the Baptist's cry may indicate his understanding of the *Aqedah* confession as fulfilled in Jesus.

Clearly, not everyone in New Testament times retained this expectation of a suffering messiah. Somehow in the generations before Jesus, the Jewish authorities generally lost interest in a messiah who would die for the nation.[63] But the Apostles came to recognize that it was "necessary" according to the Scriptures "that the Christ should suffer" (Lk 24:26). The New Testament writers found the necessity of a suffering messiah somewhere in the Old Testament Scriptures. In this essay, I have asserted that the *Aqedah* might be one of those explicit announcements of this necessity. And it is an announcement provided in one of the most critical texts for the theology of Old Testament sacrifice: the narrative etiology of Mount Zion and its sacrifice liturgy.

Critical scholars have generally viewed the Apostles' "discovery" of the cross in the Hebrew Scriptures as apologetic assertions rather than serious interpretations. J. Gordon McConville sums up the skeptical consensus, "Modern Old Testament scholarship has been largely informed by the belief that traditional Christian messianic interpretations of Old Testament passages have been exegetically indefensible."[64] In this essay, I would like to argue the reverse. Genesis 22:14 preserves a ritual confession that was likely recited with every animal sacrifice on Mount Zion through much if not all of Old Testament history. That confession, passed from generation to generation, drew every Israelite into solidarity with the faith of Abraham, sharing in his expectation of a suffering Christ. God would one day provide a firstborn heir whose willing sacrifice would secure the blessings which the Zion sacrifices foreshadowed.

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[62] Daly, "Significance of the Sacrifice," 65–74; James L. Mays, "'Now I Know': An Exposition of Genesis 22:1–19 and Matthew 26:36–46," *Theology Today* 58, no. 4 (2002): 519–25; Scott W. Hahn, "Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah: Diaqh/kh in Galatians 3:15–18, "CBQ 67 (2005), 79–100. In fact, Hans Joachim Schoeps has argued, "'The Binding of Isaac'…served as Paul's model when he undertook to develop…his doctrine of salvation through Christ's death on the cross." Hans Joachim Schoeps, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Paul's Theology," JBL 65, no. 4 (1946): 386–7. For pre-Christian treatment of the Aqedah, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Qumran Literature," *Biblica* 83, no. 2 (2002): 211–29.

[63] For inter-testamental expectations of atonement through a human sacrifice, see Jarvis J. Williams, *Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul's Theology of Atonement: Did Martyr Theology Shape Paul's Conception of Jesus' Death?* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

[64] J. Gordon McConville, "Messianic Interpretation of the Old Testament in Modern Context," in Phillip F. Satterthwaite, et al, eds., *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 2.

"Therefore it is said to this day,
'On the mount of Yahweh, he shall be provided.'"

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STRANGE MEDICINE: RETRIEVING MARTIN BUCER'S UNDERSTANDING OF PENANCE

JOSEPH H. SHERRARD[1]

Forgiveness is one of the central acts of the Christian life. That centrality consists in both the act that God has done in Christ and also in who the Christian community is in light of that act as we bear witness to it. Jesus' gathered momentum and attracted conflict in response to the seemingly simple claim, "Your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Christian identity pivots upon willingness to admit need of forgiveness: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Moreover, in the Lord's Prayer Jesus states that our own appropriation of the forgiveness extended to us stands in relation to our ability to forgive others: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). While the Christian life is more than forgiveness, the biblical witness testifies to us that it cannot be less.

The significance of forgiveness in the Christian life also means that it is vulnerable to distortion, misunderstanding, and even corruption. Forgiveness is detached from other doctrines within theology, scriptural witness to forgiveness is decontextualized from the full counsel of the Word of God, and pastoral wisdom about forgiveness devolves into platitudes or even become cover for abuse. Because of this importance and vulnerability, forgiveness is a truth and an act that requires care and consideration within the local church. Sitting at the convergence of the biblical text, the tradition of the church's doctrine, the practice of forgiveness within the local congregation, and the complexities of the persons who receive and give grace in relationship to one another, the pastor-theologian should call upon all the resources at his or her disposal in order to steward this mystery well.

Thankfully, the pastor-theologian has a growing number of resources for this task. Recent years have seen the arrival of a number of significant studies on forgiveness, including L. Gregory Jones' *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis,2 Miroslav Volf's Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*,[3] and Shults and

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1 Joseph H. Sherrard is Associate Pastor of Discipleship, Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, Signal Mountain, Tennessee.

2 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

3 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2919).

Sandage's *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation*.[4] These studies, which have called for more attention to the theological, cultural and psychological aspects of forgiveness, provide insight for pastors to shepherd disciples into deeper faithfulness and formation for forgiveness.

And yet there is a significant lacuna in these studies. As each study explores the dynamics of forgiveness, there is an almost exclusive focus upon the forgiver. In each of the titles listed above, the preponderance of the argument is devoted to providing a framework and resources to enable an offended, sinned-against party to forgive the offending sinner. In this emphasis, little attention is given to the one seeking forgiveness and their formation. This lacuna exists in part because of an important distinction in most contemporary explorations of the topic between forgiveness and reconciliation. The former refers to the offended's decision and intention to extend forgiveness to the offender. The latter refers to the acknowledgement of sin by the offender and the attempt of a restored relationship between offender and offended. Forgiveness is an act that is commanded at all times as a part of Christian witness, but reconciliation is contingent upon both the offender and the offended, and perhaps receives less attention because of that contingency.

Given the need to protect those who have been hurt and also the contingent nature of reconciliation in comparison to forgiveness, it is understandable why attention is focused upon the forgiver. But within the local church, the pastor-theologian bears a responsibility not only to the formation of a forgiving people but also the formation of offenders who ask for and receive forgiveness. Attention has rightly been given to the importance of virtues such as humility and empathy in forgivers.[5] But how should pastors consider their shepherding and discipleship responsibilities to offenders?

In answer to this question, we will turn to a less contemporary and perhaps unlikely source from the Great Tradition. In 1538, Martin Bucer wrote a book of pastoral instruction for the care of God's people in the church entitled *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. The volume is remarkable for many reasons, not least for the typology of the spiritual states of men and women in the church and the responsibility of pastor to each. But what is most noteworthy and germane to our purposes is the extended attention Bucer gives to the care and formation of what contemporary theology would call 'offenders.' Bucer's thoughts can provide wisdom for pastors and the local church, as it seeks to become a place where those who give forgiveness and those who ask for forgiveness can live together in greater peace and flourishing.

[4] F. LerRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

[5] Shults and Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness*, 58.

I. CONCERNING THE TRUE CARE OF SOULS

Martin Bucer's *Concerning the True Care of Souls*[6] is rightly considered a classic of pastoral theology from the Reformation tradition. Though it is a relatively small work, Bucer gives his readers an ecclesiology, an account of the ascended Christ's reign extended through ordained ministers, and a description of the various ministries of the local church. The rest of the work is an extended meditation on the metaphor of a pastor as a shepherd to the various sheep who make up the Body of Christ. Those sheep may be, alternately, lost, stray, hurt and wounded, weak, and finally healthy and strong. Each type of sheep requires different care from the pastor, and Bucer gives guidance concerning each case.

The greatest amount of attention by far is given to those sheep that Bucer describes as "hurt and wounded." But what Bucer means by this is perhaps counterintuitive to modern ears. These sheep are not those who have been sinned *against*, but precisely those sheep who have *sinned*. "They are those who remain in the church and communion of Christ, but fall into open and notorious sins and abuses, such as abandoning their confession of Christ, denying the truth of Christ, and in other ways blaspheming against God, his holy word and all the things of God; disobedience and sin against superiors; any harm done to their neighbors' property, person or honour by word or by deed; all immorality and intemperance."[7] This penultimate part of the description—"any harm done to their neighbor's property, person or honour"—places the 'hurt and wounded' in the category of that we have earlier named as "offenders."

Bucer begins his chapter on the care of hurt and wounded sheep with an exhortation to the entire church community generally and the ordained leadership specifically to be diligent in this task. "In the first place it is the responsibility of all Christians, for Christ must after all live and do his work in every Christian, but the ones who are principally to devote themselves to this work are those who have been specially appointed to provide care of souls and medicine for sins."[8] This places the task of caring for offending members squarely within the responsibility of the local church. This naked statement is perhaps unremarkable; most local congregations would aspire to tend to their members with this kind of attention. But what is significant about Bucer's argument is the kind of medicine that the believes should be given to those who are hurt and wounded.

Bucer describes the nature of that medicine as his argument proceeds: "This medicine is nothing else than getting the one who has sinned to recognize his sin sufficiently to cause and move him to a position of true acknowledgement regret and sorrow for his sin; and in this way going on to comfort him again and strengthen his hope of grace, so that he may be

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[6] Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

[7] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 98–99.

[8] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 99.

enthusiastic and desirous of true reformation."[9] What Bucer is describing here is more than verbal acknowledgment of sin and hurt. This "medicine" reaches past external behavior to the emotional and moral formation of the offender. "The sinner has not been won back until he has been moved and brought to the point of saying: 'I have sinned, I desire grace, I want to reform,' and is really struck down and humiliated because of his sin; but also comforted again in Christ and has become entirely eager and passionate about putting everything right."[10] Bucer's language here is attuned to the moral formation of offenders and the kinds of dispositions that pastoral care seeks to nurture in these men and women.

The attentive reader has already discerned that Bucer believes that a crucial aspect of pastoral work is the formation of offenders in a way that mirrors the attention modern theologians and psychologists to forgiveness in those who have been sinned against. Where Shults and Sandage have rightly drawn attention to the need to cultivate humility and empathy in Christians as a way of forming a community who forgives, Bucer makes a complementary argument about how those who ought to *seek* forgiveness should be formed. In order to better understand Bucer's argument, we must answer two questions: How does Bucer propose the church cultivate the proper virtues in offenders, and what virtues does Bucer identify as important in offenders?

The answer to the first of these questions brings us to the aspect of Bucer's work that throws his thought into stark relief in comparison to other Reformed theologians. Bucer advocates for the practice of *penance* within the local congregation as a way of forming and cultivate. Penance, understood broadly, is a series of acts that accompany repentance for sin that is considered particularly grievous. What makes penance different than simple repentance is that these acts are prescribed by ecclesial authorities as means to the end of reconciliation with the greater church body. During the Reformation era penance was a disputed topic, and many Reformed figures believed that it was a practice that should be dispensed with completely. Penance was at the very least a source of confusion about the efficacy of the completed work of Christ for the Christian and at most it was idolatrous or abusive. But in contrast to many of his contemporaries Bucer sought to reclaim what he understood to be important and valuable essentials to the practice that should be preserved in spite of the dangers associated with its use in the church. Bucer sees penance as mandated within the testimony of Scripture: "[Penance] was commanded and required by Christ, and not just a human ordinance."[11]

Bucer's case for penance follows both biblical and historical lines. On the one hand, Bucer understands Paul's instruction at various places in his letters to be indicative of penance. Central to his argument is Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew 16:19: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom

[9] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 101.

[10] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 102.

[11] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 108.

of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Additionally, he cites 1 Timothy 5:20, 2 Corinthians 2:6–8, 2 Corinthians 12:20–21, and 1 Corinthians 5:2 (alongside various Old Testament narrative texts) as examples of penitential church discipline meant to restore offending sinners in a way that was more than simply punitive but was also formative. On the other hand, Bucer understands penance to be an apostolic practice found in the early patristics Tertullian, Cyprian and Ambrose. Ambrose's example is particularly significant; his refusal to welcome the Roman Emperor Theodosius to the Eucharist after Theodosius ordered the slaughter of a rebellious province until he had completed penance is noted at length in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*.[12] For Bucer, penance is a biblical practice that was practiced from the beginning of the apostolic church.

So how then should the church practice penance and thus cultivate particular virtues in its members? Bucer acknowledges at the outset that, as with practices such as baptism or the Lord's Supper, there are specific biblical prescriptions beyond the written command to perform these acts: "Similarly, concerning this present matter of penance all we have is that carers of souls are to forgive the sins of all those who are sorry and promise to mend their ways."[13] We are not given a description of penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, though we do see gestures toward public confession and withholding the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, Bucer believes it is possible for the Christian community to practice penance as it understands the end to which the practice works.

That end is described by Bucer to be authentic, heartfelt repentance. He describes this telos as "true sorrow and commitment to reformation"[14] and describes the ideal repentant sinner as "one who is truly sorrow for his sins and committed with all his heart to mending his ways."[15] The accompanying characteristics of the authentic penitent will include "lamenting, weeping, praying, pleading, confessing, and repenting."[16] Bucer is sensitive to how repentance can be counterfeited. True repentance should be accompanied by sorrow and a resolve to live differently. "He does not consider that it would be enough simply to abstain from his misdeed and say, 'I will never do it again.'"[17] Penance, properly practiced, is intended to reinforce the dynamics of repentance as it moves the offender away from the attractions of sin and toward the goodness of godly character. Bucer sums up the end of penance in this way:

> [To] introduce the person to a deeper, but believing contemplation of his evil and what it means in terms of serious offense to God's goodness and his own undoing, in order that he might become the

[12] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 106–107.
[13] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 114.
[14] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.
[15] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.
[16] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 120.
[17] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

> more avid for the grace of God and the more hostile to sins, submit himself the more heartily and entirely to God, and love him more ardently, the more he recognizes that he has bene forgiven; and that he might crucify and put to death in himself all evil and lusts and desires, and awaken and ignite all zeal for the will and pleasure of God.[18]

Bucer is attentive to the potential abuses of penance by the church. He lists three ways in which this practice can be misused. First, it can be used so severely that it causes people to leave the church and its attempts to facilitate true repentance. In this case, Bucer recommends moderation and restraint: "Better weak penance and meagre reformation, than none at all."[19] Second, Bucer warns that penance can still be used in a way that fails to bring about heartfelt repentance. In this situation it is done "in such a way that people may well accept the outward discipline and carry it out, without a heartfelt repentance and amendment of life."[20] Penance must be administered out of a deep well of pastoral wisdom. He points to the ancient fathers who "took into account the people who had sinned and their particular situation; they considered and weighed up the individual's circumstances and strength of Christian life, and also the circumstances of the whole church, and then prescribed the period and level of penance in order that both those who had sinned and the whole church were helped."[21] Third, Bucer recognizes that penance can be given in such a way that it leads to deep discouragement and self-condemnation. Because of the real danger "that the penitents sink into too great sadness and despair,"[22] penance must always be performed with a view to the grace given to sinners in Jesus Christ. "True repentance must result from faith in Christ, and therefore there must remain the hope of grace."[23]

II. PENANCE AS FORMATION

Bucer is clearly aware of the possible dangers and abuses of penance. But in contrast to contemporary Reformers, he believes that it should continue to be practiced because of the benefit it extends to the individual Christian and to the church community. As opposed to punitive understandings of church discipline in response to grievous sins, Bucer argues for penance to be used formationally as a way of cultivating certain virtues in Christians.

So what are those virtues that Bucer believes penance cultivates? While there is no explicit presentation of the specific character that penance works toward within Christians, we can deduce from *Concerning the True Care of Souls* what those virtues might be. To begin with, we can find common cause with Shults and Sandage's description of *humility* as a crucial virtue

[18] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

[19] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 124.

[20] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 124.

[21] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 126.

[22] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

[23] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

for "forgivers." "Humiliation"[24] is a part of the formational process that Bucer speaks of often within his discussion of penance. His description may sound harsh to our modern ears, but Bucer uses the word only to illustrate the process of bringing an offender to self-awareness about the seriousness of his or her actions. Humility—understood as the end to which the process of "humiliation" works—is marked by self-knowledge about the effects of sin and its impact upon the Christian community. This kind of self-knowledge serves as a deterrence, forming the Christian to be more circumspect and aware of future behavior.

A second virtue that Bucer believes penance cultivates can be called (for lack of a better term) *sincerity*. One of the guiding concerns of these reflections on penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls* is the abiding presence of unrepentant offenders within the Church community, who utilize the language of apology and grace, but have either no intention of amending their behavior or are not engaged in a process of being formed to live otherwise. Bucer twice makes reference to those who might simply say, "I am sorry, I won't do it again,"[25] or "I will never do it again,"[26] but who are not actively being formed in such a way as to live differently. Penance is a process that is meant to provide that needed formation. This integrity of speech and alignment of exterior action and inner disposition is a significant virtue that Bucer believes penance can foster.

For Bucer penance, far from being a harmful accretion upon repentance, is an ecclesial practice that builds up the body of Christ. In contrast to distortions of the practice that tie it to justification, penance properly understood is a formational act that heals sheep who wound themselves and others by their sinful behavior. "Penance is not satisfaction for past sins, but a medicine against present and future sins, because it is intended to purge and purify the remaining lusts and sinful desires and thus to protect against future transgressions."[27] Who would disagree that the end that Bucer is pursuing should be pursued in the local church?

III. PRACTICING PENANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

What would be involved in an attempt to retrieve penance within the local church today? We can only admit that there are numerous challenges facing most North American churches with even the foundational principles of church discipline. This unavoidable reality presents even greater challenges to the kind of practice that Bucer describes in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. But if we were nonetheless to suggest how we might reclaim this practice in the local church, the following things would need to be taken into consideration.

Nomenclature. A major stumbling block with this practice in evangelical and Protestant churches is simply the word *penance*. Due to the distortion

[24] See, for example, Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 122.

[25] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

[26] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

[27] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 131.

of the practice in the Middle Ages, early Reformers (Bucer excepted) dispensed with the practice because in their minds it was intrinsically linked with a Roman Catholic conception of salvation that connected forgiveness and merit. While the North American church is some distance from that context, that same link with merited salvation exists in the minds of many Christians. Another term that preserves the good of Bucer's suggestion while steering Christians away from the fears of its abuse is needed. *Reconciliation* is a preferred term within the current literature on forgiveness, and if it can be used more expansively, including not only the restoration of relationship between forgiver and offender but in such a way that includes the process of formation and care for each, it could serve as an excellent stand-in for the term penance. But regardless of what term is used to describe this more intentional practice of formation and discipleship for these members, pastors must use care in how they introduce and describe this practice.

Preventative Medicine. One of Bucer's favorite metaphors for the practice of penance is that of medicine. Penance is, as we have already seen, "a medicine against present and future sins, because it is intended to purge and purify the remaining lusts and sinful desires and thus to protect against future transgressions."[28] If penance is in a sense a kind of "preventative medicine" against even more grievous and damaging sin in the life of a local church, it is helpful to consider how it is one part of a larger set of postures and practices in the local church that would create a culture in which the practice could flourish.

To attempt the practice of penance without understanding how it fits within the wider culture and context of the local church will likely guarantee either its failure or its abuse. To avoid this, pastors might focus on a number of things. First, the twin virtues of penance—humility and sincerity—must be pursued outside of the practice of penance. Humility is of course a virtue that is notoriously easy to counterfeit and only achieved if pursued intentionally. And sincerity, too, is an end that is particularly difficulty to measure. But pastors can intentionally create a culture where these two virtues are prized by modeling each in their relationship with staff, leadership, and the wider congregation. And we can be assured that our organizations cannot flourish unless we do possess them, and that in pursuing them we are seeking something that is essential to our churches.

Second, we might reconsider how church practices could be reoriented so that they coordinate better with the ongoing practice of penance. The regular celebration of the Lord's Supper is a practice that is described in connection to reconciliation and penance in Scripture. Current literature on forgiveness already makes this connection,[29] and Bucer also connects the restoration of alienated sinners to being welcomed to the Lord's Table. But pastors can also provide teaching and worship leadership that emphasizes the horizontal elements of the Lord's Supper. While pastors inherit com-

[28] Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 131.

[29] See Shults and Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness* 213–216; Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 175–182.

mitments and traditions related to the Lord's Supper, there is often an unexplored heritage of practices and theological imagination that remains untapped and can deepen and enrich the meaning and implications of the Lord's Table.[30]

And there remains even more room for the imaginative integration of this practice into the life of the local church. Stories of reconciliation and repentance can be shared within the wider congregation as appropriate. Smaller groups within the congregation can be invited to intentional practices of reconciliation as a way of introducing the principles on a smaller scale. Studies of forgiveness and penance—a topic that is relevant and meaningful to every Christian in multiple ways—can be provided in various contexts. But whatever the approach, what remains important is that it is understood that penance is one part of a larger culture of "preventative medicine" that identifies and applies healing measures to sin within the life of the local church.

Pastoral Wisdom. Finally, pastors must bring to the practice of penance pastoral wisdom for the practice of caring for wounded and wounding sinners. Bucer is attentive to these needs in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, noting how the same practice of penance applied to different kinds of men and women can lead to diverging outcomes. The care that each member of Christ's both receives must be neither too heavy nor too light, but instead fitted correctly to the needs of each person. The practice of penance will draw pastors more deeply into the personal practice of soul care for members of the Body of Christ.

This will require the pastor to practice Jesus' command to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16, ESV). Pastors must be alert to how narcissists can abuse or manipulate the process, feigning deep woundedness while remaining unrepentant. On the other hand, pastors must also remain open to the hardest heart being changed by God's surprising grace. Leadership must be alert to how the power dynamics related to age, gender, and race within the local congregation leave this practice open to abuse. Conversely, pastors must also not flinch from the task calling to present each person mature in Christ.

This is a practice that plunges the pastor deep into the complexities and ambiguities of broken men and women in the Body of Christ. In order to care for these sheep in Christ's flock, pastors will need to call on the resources of psychology, theology, and spiritual direction. But in so doing, the pastor is more alive to his or her calling to care for the flock God has given to be tended.

This is a word that is particularly pointed for popular evangelical ecclesiology. In many churches today, the pastor is positioned in a way that fundamentally alienates him or her from their role as a shepherd of the flock. Instead, the pastor is primarily a charismatic teacher who leads from the pulpit (platform, stage, etc.), giving winsome content and perhaps dynamic

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30 See, in particular, J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdamns, 2018).

leadership. The call to be a shepherd according to the vision that we have articulated here is quite different. It is a vocation that can only take place when ministering in close proximity to the congregation.

CONCLUSION

The deepening reflection on the practice of forgiveness within the Christian community by theologians and psychologists has been a positive development of recent years. But the tendency to focus on the formation of forgiving parties in forgiveness rather than offenders is disproportionate to the needs of the Christian community. By retrieving Martin Bucer's reflections on penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, the Church can be further formed to care for its members by cultivating the needed virtues for forgiving and also seeking forgiveness.

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ATONEMENT AND UNION WITH CHRIST

JEREMY TREAT[1]

The doctrine of atonement ought to bring renewal to the mind, transformation for life, and reconciliation in the church. Unfortunately, however, there is often a gap between one's understanding of Christ's atoning work and their daily life as a follower of Jesus. How does the covenant-keeping life of Christ speak to one's search for identity? What does the cross have to say to a cancer diagnosis? Does the resurrection have anything to do with the plight of homelessness in urban centers throughout the world?

For many Christians, the doctrine of atonement simply does not influence day-to-day life. Perhaps this is because theology in general is often perceived as an academic discipline removed from life in the "real world." Maybe the gaps exists because people reduce the gospel to a ticket to heaven that impacts eternity but has nothing to say about today. It is also possible that the atonement is not applied to the Christian life because people have sought to fill that gap with simply imitating Christ's life as an example. Whatever the reason, the profound and multifaceted atonement theology of the church has too often been left in the books and left out of life.

May it not be! Theology is for all of life, infusing the church with a deeper understanding of the gospel in order to live faithfully as followers of Jesus. The good news impacts all of eternity but it also speaks to all of life, here and now. And while Christ is an example to be imitated, he is first and foremost a savior to be trusted. The doctrine of atonement is essential for following Jesus and indispensable for the flourishing of the church.[2]

How, then, does the doctrine of atonement apply to the Christian life? While there are many ways to answer this question, I will argue that the key is union with Christ. As the Apostle Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). To live in light of the atonement, we must learn the crucial connection

[1] Jeremy Treat is the Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Reality LA in Los Angeles, California.

[2] Of course, asking how the doctrine of atonement impacts the Christian life already assumes a partial answer. Apart from the atonement, there is no Christian life. As oxygen is to breathing, atonement is intrinsic to Christian living. Atonement does not merely impact life; it is the basis for new life.

between Christ's work *for* us and Christ's work *in* us. The atoning work of Christ is applied and experienced through union with Christ by the Spirit.[3]

I. ATONEMENT ACCOMPLISHED AND APPLIED

The doctrine of atonement is the result of faith seeking understanding of the way in which Christ, through all of his work but primarily his death, has dealt with sin and its effects to reconcile sinners and renew creation.[4] For the purposes of this essay, however, we must begin with the distinction between atonement accomplished and atonement applied.[5]

The Father sent the Son with a mission to save sinners and establish the kingdom of God. When Jesus cried out "it is finished" from the cross (Jn 19:30), he made clear that he accomplished the mission for which he was sent. It is imperative, therefore, to understand and appreciate the *finished* nature of Christ's atoning work (Heb 9:12, 24–26; 10:14). Jesus did not start a work that needed to be completed at another time. He did not mostly accomplish a work that needed to be fine-tuned at a further point. What he came to do, he did. And he did it perfectly and definitively. By dying sacrificially in place of sinners Jesus fully accomplished all that is necessary for the salvation of souls, the renewal of the cosmos, and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God.

Why, then, if Christ's work is fully accomplished, is there still so much sin, suffering, and evil in the world? The answer is that while the finished work of Christ has been *accomplished*, it has not been fully *applied*. In between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God, the Spirit must apply the finished work of Christ in and through his people. Christ's atoning work is not a partial accomplishment that needs to be finished, but rather a full accomplishment that must be applied.

The distinction between atonement accomplished and applied is pivotal for John Calvin in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*. After book II, where Calvin lays out all that Christ has accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection, he begins book III by saying, "As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for

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[3] Applying the atonement to the Christian life through union with Christ is not exclusive to other approaches that address the same problem. For example, one might argue that atonement can be applied to the Christian life by talking about the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. Through his death on the cross, Jesus reconciles sinners to God and to one another (Eph 2:11–17). But union with Christ is complementary, not contradictory, to this approach. As Paul says in 2 Co 5:19, God was reconciling the world to himself "in Christ," which means that vertical and horizontal reconciliation are not given to us separate *from* or in addition *to* Christ, but rather *in* Christ.

[4] For a more thorough understanding of my approach to the doctrine of atonement, see Jeremy Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

[5] I am drawing from John Murray's language in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us."[6] Could there be more appalling words to apply to Christ's glorious work than "useless and of no value"? But Calvin is right. Apart from union with Christ, sinners are left in utter dismay with no hope for the future. What is the solution, according to Calvin? "Christ effectually unites us to himself."[7]

The atoning work of Christ has already been accomplished—it is finished. But the finished work of Christ must be applied, and this happens through union with Christ by the Spirit.

II. UNION WITH CHRIST

Apart from Christ, we have nothing. In Christ, we have everything. Our whole existence, therefore, hinges on union with Christ.[8] But what does "union with Christ" mean? At the most basic level, union with Christ refers to the idea that Christians are in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and Christ is in Christians (Col 1:27). Constantine Campbell offers a more thorough definition, asserting that "union with Christ" is a meta theme encompassing the biblical ideas of participation, incorporation, representation, and union.[9] The mysterious nature of union with Christ,[10] however, is precisely why the New Testament often uses analogies to discuss the oneness of Christ and his people:

Jesus is the head; the church is the body (Col 1:18).
Jesus is the groom; the church is the bride (Eph 5:31-32).
Jesus is the vine; the church is the branches (John 15:1-11).
Jesus is the cornerstone; the church is the building blocks (Eph 2:19-22).

Jesus' message to his disciples captures the essence of union with Christ in a concise but profound way: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4).

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[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 3.1.1.

[7] John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[8] This is in reference to God's saving grace in Christ. His common grace, of course, is over all (Ps 145:9).

[9] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 29. Campbell develops a theology of union by working through the various prepositions related to union with Christ: ἐν Χριστῷ, σὺν Χριστῷ, διὰ Χριστοῦ.

[10] My use of the word "mysterious" here is grounded in the biblical concept of mystery. In Eph 5:31–32 the apostle Paul refers to the union of husband and wife and then says, "[T]his mystery refers to Christ and the church." According to John Murray, the biblical understanding of mystery "is not the blurred confusion of rapturous ecstasy. It is faith solidly founded on the revelation deposited for us in the Scripture and it is faith actively receiving that revelation by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. But it is also faith that stirs the deepest springs of emotion in the raptures of holy love and joy." Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 173.

III. ATONEMENT APPLIED THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST

How, then, does union with Christ relate to the atonement? In short, all the benefits of the atonement are received in union with Christ by the Spirit. One of the most beautiful and potent portrayals of union with Christ in Scripture is Ephesians 1:3–11, which is one sentence in the original Greek and includes up to eleven references to believers being united to Christ.

The thesis statement of the passage is that "in Christ" God's people have been blessed with "every spiritual blessing" (Eph 1:3). The apostle Paul then goes on to praise God for the array of these blessings that the believer has in Christ: election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, revelation, and so on. Furthermore, union with Christ is not merely a dynamic between the individual and Christ. In fact, according to Ephesians, the entire story of the world will come to a head *in Christ*, the savior who is not only reconciling sinners to God but is also uniting heaven and earth (Eph 1:9–10).

Once again, it all depends on whether or not one is in Christ.

Apart from Christ, we are…

Guilty in sin (Ro 5:16)
Covered in shame (Je 17:13)
Deserving of God's judgement (Ro 1:18)
Under the sway of the devil (Eph 2:2)
Enemies of God (Ja 4:4)
Separated from God (Is 59:2)
Enslaved to sin (Jn 8:34)
Dead in transgressions (Eph 2:1)

In Christ, we are…

Forgiven of sin (Eph 1:7)
Cleansed of shame (Heb 12:2)
Declared righteous (Ro 4:5)
Victorious over the devil (Ro 16:20)
Adopted into God's family (Jn 1:12)
Reconciled to God (2 Co 5:18-19)
Free from the slavery of sin (Ro 6:18)
Risen with eternal life (Ro 8:11)

Everything hinges on union with Christ.[11]

One of the most important implications of union with Christ is that it prevents Christians from seeking the benefits of atonement apart from Jesus who is the source of atonement. The greatest gift of God's grace is

[11] While union with Christ is of utmost importance, I am not presenting union with Christ as a framework for atonement and I differ from those who say union with Christ is "central" to soteriology. Rather, I concur with Campbell who describes union with Christ as the essential ingredient that binds all other elements together." *Paul and Union with Christ,* 30; Employing a different metaphor, but making a similar point, Mark Garcia says, "Union with Christ is the connective tissue binding the varied aspects of Christ as atoning sacrifice to the varied ways in which we have need of him and benefit from what has been done in him." "Union with Christ," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 783.

his own Son. The blessings of salvation do not come separate from Christ, nor are they in addition to Christ. The immeasurable riches of God's grace are given in Christ. As Calvin says, in union with Christ believers are made "participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself."[12]

The doctrine of union with Christ puts the emphasis on Christ himself while also acknowledging all the benefits that come through him. As the English Puritan Rowland Stedman said, "If we will have life from the Son, we must have the Son; that is, we must be made one with him."[13] The benefits of Christ's atoning work are not received from a distance but through Christ dwelling in the hearts of his people by the Spirit. This holds together the person and work of Christ—"Christ and him crucified" (1 Co 2:2)—as it applies the grace of the gospel to our lives.

Romans 8:32 displays the doctrine of union with Christ in a nutshell: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" First, God's greatest gift is that he has given his only Son. Second, he has also given "all things." But third, and most important for our current discussion, he has given all things "with him," that is, in Christ. The work of Christ for us is received through the person of Christ in us. As Mark Garcia says, "The 'in Christ' reality, effected by the Holy Spirit, renders the Word of God's work in Christ good news to those who are otherwise 'far off' and in abject need of reconciliation and redemption."[14]

IV. THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN UNION WITH THE SON

We have seen, thus far, that the accomplishments of Christ's atoning work are applied to sinners through union with Christ by the Spirit. Having spent much time discussing the role of the Son, I will now clarify the role of the Spirit.

The Spirit is at work in every stage of Christ's atoning work. Throughout his perfect life and ministry, Jesus was led and impowered by the Spirit (Lk 4:1). Christ shed his blood and offered himself "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14) to secure our redemption." He was resurrected from the dead by the power of the Spirit (Ro 8:11). But while the Spirit is at work in accomplishing atonement, he is also—and especially—at work in applying Christ's atoning work. This corresponds with the broad trinitarian pattern in the Scriptures: atonement is planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit.

The role of the Spirit in applying the finished work of Christ is especially evident in the way the story of the gospel unfolds throughout the New Testament. After conquering death through death, the Nazarene

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[12] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24.

[13] Rowland Stedman, *The Mystical Union of Believers with Christ, or A Treatise Wherein That Great Mystery and Priviledge of the Saints Union with the Son of God Is Opened* (London: W. R. for Thomas Parkhurst, at the Golden-Bible on London-Bridge, under the gate, 1668), Wing / 335:13.

[14] Garcia, "Union with Christ," 781.

carpenter walked out of the tomb and then ascended to the right hand of the Father. Sitting on a throne in heaven was a sign not only of Christ's finished work but also of his continual reign. How, though, does Christ reign from heaven? He reigns through the Spirit. Jesus poured out the Spirit on his disciples in order to apply his finished work, bringing about the renewal that would one day reach to the ends of the earth. Without Pentecost, atonement means nothing.

In the *Institutes,* Calvin's emphasis on union with Christ is coupled with the indispensable role of the Spirit. Calvin says, "[Christ] unites himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him."[15] The Spirit unites us to Christ whose finished work is then applied, not in a transactional exchange but in a covenantal union (1 Jn 4:13; Ro 8:9–10). J. Todd Billings is right to say that union with Christ "has a trinitarian cast, as believers are united to Christ by the Spirit, who enables them to cry out to God as 'Abba! Father!' (Ro 8:14–17)."[16]

V. DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST

Union with Christ is not a static reality based solely on the person of Christ. It is a dynamic reality involving Christ's person and work. Believers are united with Christ in his death and resurrection (e.g., Php 3:10; 2 Co 4:9; 2 Ti 2:11–12). The Apostle Paul says, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Ro 6:5). Union with Christ, therefore, means that not only are believers one with Christ but also that they participate in his death and resurrection. Believers today are pulled into the historical events of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Followers of Jesus, therefore, do not simply imitate Christ's suffering. We share in his suffering (Php 3:10). In a similar sense, the risen Christ does not merely bestow new life. We share in his life (Php 3:10). Mark Garcia says, "It is not enough that we died to sin like Christ; we have died to sin in and with Christ (Col 2:9–3:4). Union with Christ is thus indispensable for the realism of the Gospel in its lived expression: we have died with Christ, we live in him."[17] By faith in Jesus, Christians are not merely following a pattern but rather participating in a reality—a covenantal union with the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Union with Christ teaches that the atonement is not only about Christ's work *for us* but also Christ's work *with us*. In more technical terms, a biblical understanding of atonement must give attention to the themes of

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[15] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

[16] J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 10.

[17] Garcia, "Union with Christ," 784.

substitution *and* representation.[18] Scripture clearly speaks of Christ dying as our substitute:

> "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pt 3:18).
>
> "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:21). [19]

However, while Scripture affirms that Christ died in our place *instead of us* (substitution), it also declares that Christ died in our place *with us* (representation).[20] And Christ's representative work applies to the full scope of his ministry. We have been "crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20), "buried... with him" (Ro 6:4), "raised with Christ" (Co 3:1), and "seated...with him in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6).

The idea of representation is on display in the classic battle between David and Goliath. David fought as a representative of Israel. If David won, Israel won. If David lost, Israel lost. So, when David defeated his giant foe, Israel shared in the triumph of their representative victor. And yet, David points forward to his descendent, Christ. Jesus is the greater David who fought—as our representative—against the enemy of Satan. Though Christ is the one who wins the battle, his people share in his victory because he fought in their place as a representative.[21]

It is not enough, therefore, to say that Christ died outside Jerusalem two millennia ago so that redemption could be applied to people here and now. There is a deeper reality at work. When Christ died on the cross, we

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[18] In his survey of modern theologies of atonement, Kevin Vanhoozer identifies a trajectory that focuses on representation instead of substitution and locates the atonement primarily in Christ's incarnation and life, not his death. Within this trajectory he discusses Edward Irving ("Representative Flesh"), J. McLeod Campbell ("Representative Reprentance"), and T. F. Torrance ("Representative Mediation"). Kevin Vanhoozer, "Atonement," in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly Kapic and Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 180–85.

[19] For a review of criticisms regarding substitution and a defense of substitution in Scripture, see Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

[20] At this point, one may wonder what to make of the apparent contradiction between representation and substitution. If substitution, by definition, means exclusive place-taking, how then can Christ also be a representative who includes us in his work? On the one hand, we must affirm what Scripture teaches, and it clearly teaches that Christ is both our substitute and our representative. On the other hand, while the concepts may seem contradictory, they are not. As Simon Gathercole says, "representation necessarily involves an element of substitution." Gathercole, 20; Take, for example, a volleyball player who is a substitute in the middle of a game. By substituting for the other player, she takes her place on the floor. And yet, while she has taken her teammate's place on the floor, she still represents her teammate with her play. Substitution and representation are both at play and are not in contradiction. See also Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ,* 351.

[21] For a similar interpretation of the David and Goliath story in 1 Samuel 17, see Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the NT," in *Luther's Works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (trans. Charles M. Jacobs; rev. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 358.

died with him (2 Co 5:15). When Christ was raised from the dead, we were raised with him (Col 3:1).[22] We are "co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Ro 8:17). Robert C. Tannehill says, "If the believer dies and rises with Christ, as Paul claims, Christ's death and resurrection are not merely events which produce benefits for the believer, but also are events in which the believer himself partakes. The believer's new life is based upon his personal participation in these saving events."[23] We participate in—without contributing to—Christ's death and resurrection. We bring nothing to Christ's atoning work except for our transgression that makes it necessary.

Representation, however, is not merely about individuals participating in Christ's death and resurrection. The idea of representation in Scripture is communal and corporate. In fact, Romans 5:12–21 places all of humanity under one of two representatives: Adam or Christ. As Herman Ridderbos says, "Christ and Adam stand over against one another as the great representatives of the two aeon, that of life and that of death."[24] Adam represents humanity enslaved to sin and under condemnation. Christ represents humanity set free and made righteous by grace.

How can one man represent the many? Josh McNall appeals to Irenaeus's understanding of recapitulation in order to claim that Christ's identity as the Last Adam and the True Israel is what enables him to represent humanity in his atoning work.[25] The Son of God became man so that he could re-live the story of Adam and Israel, being perfectly faithful where humanity was unfaithful. Joshua Jipp adds that kings in ancient cultures functioned as representatives of the people. Christ is king and his people participate in his kingship.[26]

Union with Christ helps shape the doctrine of atonement in such a way that Christ is seen as substitute *and* representative. One need not choose between the two. As Jeannine Michele Graham concludes, "Jesus as Representative Substitute is seen both as exclusive place-taker in the sense of acting in place of sinful humanity while in another nuanced sense also as inclusive place-taker by acting on their behalf in a way that includes them."[27]

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[22] In this sense, John Murray's point is especially insightful: Union with Christ "is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application." Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 165. While it is helpful to make the distinction between atonement accomplished and applied, representation helps hold them together in such a way that they are distinct but without division.

[23] Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 1.

[24] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 57.

[25] Joshua M. McNall, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 41.

[26] Joshua Jipp, *Christ Is King: Paul's Royal Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

[27] Jeannine Michele Graham, "Substitution and Representation," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 766.

VI. ATONEMENT EXPERIENCED

To the categories of atonement accomplished and atonement applied, we add atonement experienced. Although the Spirit applies the finished work of Christ to the believer upon their conversion, it is still possible for believers not to feel or experience certain blessings that are truly theirs in salvation. For example, though a believer is already forgiven in Christ, they may still choose to wallow in guilt. The Spirit, however, not only applies the finished work of Christ, he also empowers believers to experience the benefits of the gospel in ever-deepening ways throughout their lives.

Perhaps a story can help illustrate the importance of experiencing what is already ours in Christ. There was once a woman in Tel Aviv who had a very old mattress. Her daughter, Anat, decided to surprise her mother by getting her a brand new mattress and disposing of the old one. What Anat did not realize, however, is that her mother had been storing her life savings inside of her old mattress, and at this point, she had saved up to $1,000,000. By the time Anat and her mother realized what had happened, the mattress was buried in a landfill and never to be found again.[28] Anat's mother had been sleeping on riches for much of her life and yet was never able to truly experience the benefits.

Far too many Christians today are sleeping on the immeasurable riches of God's grace and therefore not experiencing the reality of what Christ accomplished for them in his atoning work. And unlike Anat's mother, these riches are not beneath them but rather in them. The good news of the gospel is that all of the benefits of Christ's atoning work are *already* ours because the Spirit has united us to the Son. The Spirit then also takes what we know to be true in our heads and helps us to experience it in our hearts and in our lives.

Paul speaks of such an experience of the gospel in his prayer in Eph 3:14–21. He prays for the saints in Ephesus "to know the love of Christ" (v. 19). Of course, since he is writing this letter to "the saints who are in Ephesus" (Eph 1:1), they are already intellectually aware of the love of Christ. Paul, therefore, is praying not merely for a cognitive knowledge of God's love but for an experiential knowledge of God's love. Just as it is possible to know *about* someone without knowing them, Paul wants Christians to know and experience God in a personal way.

Furthermore, Paul prays "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17), a reference to union with Christ. However, Paul has already made it clear in the book of Ephesians that they are already in union with Christ (Eph 1:3–14). So, in Eph 3:17, he is not referring to an initial awareness of union at salvation, nor is he speaking merely of an intellectual knowledge of union. Paul is praying that they would experience what they know is truth of them—Christ really is dwelling in their hearts. With greater intimacy than husband and wife and a more vital connection

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[28] Maev Kennedy, "Daughter Throws Away Mattress Stuffed with Mother's $1M Life Savings," June 10, 2009, The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/10/million-dollar-mattress-thrown-away>.

than a head and a body, God desires not only for his people to *be* in union with Christ but to *experience* union with him.

Jonathan Edwards expounds upon this twofold understanding of knowledge in one of his sermons.[29] On the one hand, there is a type of knowledge that engages the rational faculty and aims at intellectual understanding. On the other hand, there is a knowledge that engages the senses and ultimately the heart. For example, according to Edwards, "There is a difference between having an *opinion*, that God is holy and gracious, and having a *sense* of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace."[30] Edwards gives a more down-to-earth example by explaining how there are two different ways to know that honey tastes good. One way is to research the properties of honey and have a scientific understanding of how they would engage with the taste buds of a person's tongue. But another way to "know" the taste of honey would be to simply taste it. Edwards uses this analogy to make the point that it is far different to have an intellectual understanding of the excellence of a thing than it is to have a sensible experience of "the loveliness of a thing."[31]

The goal of the doctrine of atonement is not merely that believers would understand what they have in Christ but that they would taste it. Because atonement has been accomplished and applied, it can truly be experienced in the Christian life. Once again, this is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit leads the believer into a deeper awareness and experience of what he or she already has in Christ. The Spirit opens our eyes to the glorious riches that are ours because of Christ's atoning work.

To experience the atonement, however, does not only involve feelings. Take for example, the experience of reconciliation. Through Christ's atoning work on the cross, sinners are reconciled to God and to one another. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down and there is now a new humanity, bound together not by DNA but by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:14–16). This reconciliation—both the vertical and horizontal—is a gift of God's grace. It cannot be earned. Therefore, the people of God are not called to attain unity but to "maintain the unity of the church" (Eph 4:3). As Kevin Vanhoozer says, "The church does not have to achieve reconciliation so much as display and exhibit the reconciliation already achieved through the death of Christ."[32] In other words, we do not accomplish reconciliation. We receive it, maintain it, and display it to a world divided by sin. The Spirit leads the church into experiencing their true identity as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pt 2:9).

We have shown how union with Christ fills the gap between atonement theology and the Christian life. But what does this look like in practice? We

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[29] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in *WJE*, 17:405–24.

[30] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in *WJE*, 17:414.

[31] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in *WJE*, 17:414. To be clear, Edwards (nor myself) intends to pit intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge against one another. The two are both essential and mutually reinforcing.

[32] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 435.

will now explore three truths that undergird much of the Christian's daily life: We share in Christ's identity, Christ's suffering, and Christ's mission.

VII. SHARING IN CHRIST'S IDENTITY

The most important question a person will ever answer is "Who is Jesus?" The second most important question, however, is inseparable from the first: "Who am I?" When it comes to identity, Jesus laid a foundation for his followers and union with Christ is at the bottom of it.

For Christians, it is not only that Jesus gives a new identity. Jesus invites us to share in *his* identity through union by the Spirit.

Jesus is the beloved Son of God (Mt 4:17).
In him, we are children of God (Jn 1:12).

Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 8:12).
In him, we are the light of the world (Mt 5:14).

Jesus is a royal priest (Heb 7:15-17).
In him, we are a royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9).

The Heidelberg Catechism, written by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, asserts that Jesus is called the Christ because he is anointed as prophet, priest, and king. The catechism, however, moves from the identity of Jesus to the identity of his followers. In explaining why believers are called "Christians," it demonstrates how those who are "in Christ" participate in Christ's threefold office:

> Because by faith I am a member of Christ, and thus a partaker of His anointing; in order that I also may confess His name; may present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him; and may with free conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter, in eternity, reign with Him over all creatures.[33]

Union with Christ is the fountainhead for Christian identity. And this identity is shaped by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus is recognized as the messiah, he goes on to redefine his identity as a king who will be crucified and resurrected (the three passion predictions are Mark 8:31–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34). But what readers often miss is that each time Jesus foretells his crucifixion, he immediately follows it up by teaching his disciples how they too will live cruciform lives (Mark 8:34–37; 9:33–37; 10:35–45). To be in union with their crucified and resurrected Lord, the disciples must deny themselves, be servants of all, and use their influence for the good of others.

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[33] *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 31, 32. See also, Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 178. See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phil- lipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:375–499.

Identity is deeply connected to growth and change, but not in the way most people think. Most religions say that change is about becoming what you are not. If you are not pure, become pure. If you are selfish, become selfless. But Christianity says something different: *be who you already truly are in Christ*. Because our identity is given to us by faith, when God declares us righteous in Christ, we must learn who we are and then live out of that identity. In Christ you are pure, so live purely. In Christ you are light, so let your light shine. Because of grace, my identity is built not on what I do for God but on what he has done for me. Christian growth is not a matter of changing into something you are not but is about becoming who you truly are "in Christ."

VIII. SHARING IN CHRIST'S SUFFERING

A true test of theology is whether it helps the church learn to suffer well. How can the doctrine of atonement paired with union with Christ speak to a cancer diagnosis, a broken marriage, or chronic physical pain? At one level, the doctrine of atonement teaches that Christ has accomplished all that is necessary for our full healing and that one day we will be delivered from all suffering. But in between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God, suffering clearly plays a role in God's sovereign purposes. Union with Christ teaches at least three key truths about suffering in this life.

First, the Christian never suffers alone. When Christians suffer, we share in the suffering of Christ (Php 3:10). It is not enough to say that Christ modeled suffering for us. We do not merely suffer like him. We suffer *with* him (Ro 8:17). As Campbell says, "suffering is to be viewed as *participatio Christi* and not as an *imitatio Christi* only."[34] Furthermore, the Christian never suffers alone because our union with Christ includes a union with his body, the church. Followers of Jesus are called to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and "weep with those who weep" (Ro 12:15). This call to suffering together is exemplified in a beautiful way at the end of the book of Hebrews: "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body" (Heb 13:3). One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is the isolation and loneliness that often comes with it. But because of union with Christ, the Christian never suffers alone.

Second, the Christian never suffers without purpose. The Apostle Paul compares the suffering of humanity and creation to "the pains of childbirth" (Ro 8:22). It is hard to imagine a better analogy than labor pains to prove the point that pain can have purpose. And while we cannot always know God's purpose in the moment (or season) of suffering, God has made clear his plan for eternity: the redemption of his people as part of his renewal of heaven and earth. From this perspective, Paul can affirm, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Co 4:17). Notice that he does not

[34] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 381.

merely say that affliction will be followed by glory. He says our affliction is "preparing for us" an eternal glory. The Greek word used for "preparing" (κατεργάζεται) literally means "to bring about" or "to cause."[35] In other words, our affliction is producing for us something of eternal glory. And if one doubts this in their own life, they need only look to the cross of Christ. The crucifixion is the greatest proof that God is working out his purposes in and through suffering. Because our suffering is with Christ, our suffering is never without purpose.

Third, the Christian never suffers without hope. Romans 8:17 says, "[W]e suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." And for this reason, Christians can face suffering with courage. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). We share in Christ's suffering and in his victory. And while the power of his kingdom is hidden beneath the cross in this age, we can also look forward to the full revealing of his glory in the age to come.

Charles Williams, a member of the Inklings, told a story from the early church of how union with Christ gives hope even amidst the worst suffering imaginable.

> Her name was Felicitas; she was a Carthaginian; she lay in prison; there she bore a child. In her pain she screamed. The jailers asked her how, if she shrieked at *that*, she expected to endure death by the beasts. She said, 'Now *I* suffer what *I* suffer; then another will be in me who will suffer for me, as I shall suffer for him.[36]

IX. SHARING IN CHRIST'S MISSION

After Jesus suffered on the cross and rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. But while Christ's atoning work is finished, his mission continues. In Acts 1:1 Luke refers to all of Jesus' earthly ministry (including his life, death, and resurrection) as "all that Jesus began to do". Reigning from his throne in heaven, the mission of Jesus continues. Now, however, Christ's mission advances through the Spirit-empowered church. As Daniel L. Migliore says, "The missionary activity of the church should be understood as participation in the mission of Jesus Christ."[37]

Jesus saves. We do not. And yet, we participate in his saving work as heralds of the gospel and witnesses to a better kingdom. Furthermore, just as Jesus was "mighty in deed and word" (Lk 24:19), we too are called to share in Christ's mission in both word and deed. And one key aspect of Christ's mission that we share in (and that requires our deeds) is justice.

Jesus came as the promised messiah who would "bring forth justice to the nations" (Is 42:1) and who particularly focused his mission on the poor,

[35] "κατεργάζομαι," BDAG, 531.

[36] Charles Williams, *Descent of the Dove* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 28.

[37] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 266.

the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Lk 4:18). And yet, through his atoning work and union by the Spirit, Jesus draws us into his work of justice.

> Christ has brought peace (Eph 2:14).
> In Christ, we are peacemakers (Mt 5:9).
>
> Christ has achieved reconciliation (Ro 5:11).
> In Christ, we are ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Co 5:20).
>
> Christ has established his kingdom (Mk 1:15).
> In Christ, we witness to his kingdom (Acts 1:8).

To speak of sharing in Christ's mission of justice requires nuance, however, lest we confuse whose mission it is. J. Todd Billings explains:

> In ourselves, we are not the source of this good—our actions of justice are not the good news of the gospel. Rather, our actions that display love of God and neighbor reflect the gift of new life received in Christ through the Spirit...This new life in union with Christ displays itself in a life of justice.[38]

The mission belongs to Jesus. But through union with Christ, we are able to share in his mission.

X. A GREATER UNION

We have seen that union with Christ is the key to bringing one's understanding of Christ's atoning work to bear on the Christian life. All that Christ has accomplished for us in his atonement is applied through union with Christ by the Spirit. Furthermore, Christ not only died and rose *for* us, we also died and rose *with* him. Christ's work for us must be coupled with Christ's person in us. I will close by zooming out and showing how this nexus between atonement and union with Christ points toward a higher aim (union with God) within a broader story (the union of heaven and earth).

Union with Christ points to the even greater reality of participation in the life of the triune God. As Rankin Wilbourne says, "Union with Christ is the doorway to communion with God."[39] While many Protestants are skeptical of Eastern views of *theosis*, the bible clearly talks about how

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[38] Billings, *Union with Christ*, 108; Billings applies this to contemporary trends in a powerful way: "If we accept the claim that justice must ultimately be christologically defined as it is pursued in union with Christ, the liberal Protestant program of reducing the gospel to our acts of justice will not do. Neither will it do to fall into an evangelical reduction of justice to an optional add-on for Christians who want extra credit after properly performing 'essential' Christian duties that relate to the life of the soul." Billings, *Union with Christ*, 115.

[39] Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 85.

Christians have a union or oneness with God (1 Co 6:17) and will be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4).[40]

Athanasius represents the early church's thinking about communion with God. He makes the following claim about Christ: "He became man that we might become God."[41] Athanasius does not imply that humanity ceases to be human or that a distinction between the creator and creatures is obliterated. Rather, he is referring to communion with the persons of the Trinity as the apex of salvation. Norman Russell explains how, for Athanasius, *theosis* must be understood along with the many facets of biblical redemption such as adoption, renewal, salvation, sanctification, transcendence, and illumination. Russell says that, according to Athanasius,

> Deification is certainly liberation from death and corruption, but it is also adoptions as sons, the renewal of our nature by participation in the divine nature, a sharing in the bond of love of the Father and the Son, and finally entry into the kingdom of heaven in the likeness of Christ.[42]

An emphasis on union with God is not confined to the early church or Eastern Orthodoxy. The Reformer, John Calvin, says, "we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow."[43] Jonathan Edwards, says, "The ultimate end of creation, then, is union in love between God and loving creatures."[44]

Even union with God, however, comes within the broader context of the story of the union of heaven and earth. Traditionally, the doctrine of atonement addresses how God has reconciled sinners to himself through Christ's death on the cross. Christ's work deals with sin in such a way that brings about at-one-ment between God and sinners. I would like to uphold the centrality of that approach but also expand it to include more. The atoning work of Christ reconciles God and sinners *and* brings about the union of heaven and earth. As Colossians 1:19–20 says, "For in him

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[40] Robert Letham explains why some Christians have often been suspicious of theosis: "Reformed commentators have frequently considered theosis to entail the pagan notion of apotheosis, humanity being elevated to divine status, undergoing ontological change. Such an idea would carry with it an inevitable blurring of the Creator-creature distinction, foundational to the whole of biblical revelation." Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 91.

[41] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 54.

[42] Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 178.

[43] Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1996), 371. Of course, there are differences in Calvin's view and that of Eastern Orthodoxy or the early church. See J. Todd Billings, "United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification," *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (2005): 315–34.

[44] Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* in *WJE*, 8:533.

all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

The renewing effects of Christ's atoning death reach as far as the effects of sin to which it is a response. Sin not only separated God and humanity. It also rent asunder heaven (the dwelling place of God) and earth (the dwelling place of humanity). Throughout the Old Testament, the temple was the place where heaven and earth would meet through the provision of sacrifices of atonement. When Jesus died on the cross, however, the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that because of Christ's atoning death, heaven was breaking in and God would now dwell with his people (although not yet in a fully realized way). Only when Christ returns will heaven and earth come together, visualized in the book of Revelation as the heavenly city descending upon earth in grace, with the declaration, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man" (Rev 21:3). The atonement brings about the union of God and sinners within the story of the union of heaven and earth.

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COMMUNITY AND EMBRACE: REDEMPTIVE FORGIVENESS AND PAUL'S USE OF *CHARIZOMAI*

ZACHARY C. WAGNER[1]

It is a quasi-universal maxim of Western culture that, when sinned against, one ought to forgive others rather than hold grudges against them. Whether or not people would say that they *do* forgive those who wrong them, most would say that they *should*. This cultural value is due in no small part to the influence of Judaism and Christianity in the Western world. However, an interesting development in very recent years has been the collective resentment that has boiled over in our culture related to abuses of power, racial injustice, and violence against women. Sins of racist, homophobic, or misogynistic speech and behavior now seem especially likely to solicit not only condemnation but ongoing resentment. Interestingly, even when people apologize for past comments or actions, it is not uncommon to see willful refusals to absolve and forgive the offender. Indeed, this *refusal to extend forgiveness* is often valorized.[2] Public examples of this pattern range from outrage over a celebrity's past tweets all the way to the dramatic confirmation hearings for now Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh. It is our moral duty, some would argue, to *not* forgive and forget. Forgiveness, it would seem, makes a mockery of the need for justice and accountability in our society. If things are going to be set right, we should *not* forgive. Miroslav Volf gives voice to this perspective, "Our cool sense of justice sends the message: the perpetrator *deserves* unforgiveness; it would be unjust to forgive." This perspective seems to have become mainstream through the closely related phenomenon known as "cancel culture," where

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[1] Zachary C. Wagner is an MSt candidate in New Testament at the University of Oxford. He also serves as the Editorial Director of the Center for Pastor Theologians.

[2] For example see this article viciously critiquing comedian Louis CK's apology statement following allegations of sexual misconduct (https://mashable.com/2017/11/10/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct-apology-reaction-awful/). We should acknowledge in this case that there are further complicated dynamics of celebrity, status, power, and wealth. Still, the assumption seems to be that an infraction of this sort *should* result in a full loss of social standing. See also Kevin Hart's withdrawal from his Oscar-hosting duties after homophobic tweets were uncovered from years previous (https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/oscars/8492982/kevin-hart-oscar-hosting-controversy-timeline). One could also note the controversy surrounding Milwaukee Brewers' relief pitcher Josh Hader's tweets from 2011 and 2012, which did not surface until 2018 (https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/allstar/2018/07/18/josh-hader-twitter-all-star-game/794751002/).

"canceling" someone means effectively removing him or her from the public consciousness.

These cultural developments have complicated conversations around forgiveness for Christians. The church's own recent scandals of sexual abuse (notoriously in both the Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist traditions) have tainted her witness. The call to victims of sin, abuse, and mistreatment to simply "forgive and forget" rings hollow. Some wonder whether the New Testament teaching is naïve or under-nuanced in this regard. Or worse, perhaps the biblical teaching on forgiveness is itself immoral, failing to take into account the power dynamics at play in our world and enabling abusers to "get away with" abusive behavior. Or worse still, Christian forgiveness is a mechanism whereby oppressors avoid accountability for their actions. Given these recent conversations and controversies, it is becoming less clear when we should forgive, whether we should forgive, and what it means to forgive.

Many of these questions about the Christian teaching on forgiveness arise, I believe, out of a truncated understanding of the concept itself. In this article I will argue for a more holistic view. I will begin by briefly describing two common but insufficient conceptions of forgiveness before pivoting to a survey of Paul's use of forgiveness language. I will then seek to integrate the biblical, psychological, and theological conversations into a more holistic view of forgiveness that may better equip us to be people of redemption in a cultural increasingly characterized by resentment.

I. TRUNCATED VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS

The first common concept of forgiveness is what Leron Shults and Steven Sandage call *forensic forgiveness*, "a transaction in which one party agrees not to exact what the law requires."[3] This could include refusing to press charges in a legal matter or simply "releasing" an offender from the punishment of resentment, revenge, or disassociation. Such a transaction is usually what Westerners (and perhaps Christians in particular) have in mind when they think about what forgiveness is. The assumption is that forgiveness implies pardoning, dropping legal charges, or declining to exact punishment. We should be quick to affirm that there is a significant forensic component to the biblical concept of forgiveness. This is also naturally borne out in the use of the term in the English language—for example, forgiving a debt or forgiving a prison sentence. For Christians, it will be natural to think of God's forgiveness involving being spared the wages of sin: death and hell. However, just because there is a forensic component to forgiveness does not mean that it constitutes the sum total of the biblical concept.

A second cultural concept of forgiveness, most common in psychological and psychotherapeutic discussions, is what Shults and Sandage call *therapeutic forgiveness*, a process of internal change that takes place over time as a person moves slowly from resentment to empathy. This type of forgiveness involves "reducing one's motivation for avoidance and

[3] Steven J. Sandage & F. Leron Shults, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

revenge and increasing one's motivation for goodwill toward a specific offender."[4] In this conception, it has become common for psychotherapists and counselors to seek to cultivate forgiveness with their clients because of the positive physical and mental health benefits associated with it (and the negative health outcomes associated with resentment and unforgiveness). In short, forgiveness is good for you. Unforgiveness is bad for you. This view of forgiveness is also reflected in the popular notion that bitterness and resentment are poisonous to our hearts and bodies. Psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated this to be true. Forgiveness is the process of release, draining this poison from our mind and body, so we can live full and joyful lives. Again, we should readily affirm that there is indeed a therapeutic element to forgiveness, but this—even combined with forensic forgiveness—does not contain the sum total of the biblical view.

To summarize, *forensic forgiveness* approaches the concept in technical terms: what is the transaction of forgiveness. *Therapeutic forgiveness* approaches the concept in motivational and pragmatic terms: why should we forgive. But what more can be said from a distinctly Christian perspective? How can theology be brought into conversation with these judicial and psychological conceptions?

II. EXTENDING GRACE: FORGIVENESS LANGUAGE IN PAUL

There is much to be said about the New Testament teaching on forgiveness, especially that of Jesus himself in the synoptic tradition. However, there are also interesting insights to be gleaned from the Apostle Paul's contribution on this topic. Still, the first thing that we should note about Paul's use of forgiveness language is how little he uses it at all. This may at first seem surprising. Many interpreters of Paul, particularly since the Protestant Reformation, have viewed the apostle's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the law to be at the very center of his theology. Assuming the forensic concept noted above, the question of forgiveness is closely related (even identical!) with the question of how sinners are justified before God. However, we find forgiveness language is, as remarked by Krister Stendahl, "spectacularly absent"[5] in Paul, particularly when compared to justification language. The most common verb in the New Testament for forgiveness, *aphiemi*, appears only once in Paul with the sense of "to forgive"—and that in a quotations from the LXX.[6] Paul is more likely to use *charizomai*,[7] "to extend grace" or "to show oneself gracious by forgiving

[4] This is Steven Sandage's definition of "therapeutic forgiveness." Sandage & Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 23.

[5] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentile and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 23.

[6] Rom 4:7. The corresponding nominal form, ἄφεσις, appears only in parallel passages Eph 1:7 and Col 1:14. Again, this is in stark contrast to the synoptic tradition, for example, where it appears 47x in Matthew alone.

[7] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 327.

wrongdoing,"[8] but this term also appears relatively infrequently, 10x with the sense of "to forgive." Paul's preference for *charizomai* may not be surprising, given the centrality of grace (*charis*) in his soteriology and ecclesiology. While we may note other terms in Paul that relate to forgiveness,[9] for the purposes of this article, I will focus on the use of *charizomai*.

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul exhorts his readers to "extend grace" (*charizasthai*) to a person in the congregation who has sinned against Paul, and by extension the entire community. We should first note that forgiveness here does include a forensic forbearance that spares the offender ongoing punishment (2:6). However, the act of forgiveness goes *beyond* a forensic remission of penalty. Parallel to Paul's call for forgiveness is the call to *reaffirm love* for the offender (2:8), further explicating what Paul understands this extension of grace to entail. We should also note Paul's communal emphasis in this passage. Both the offense itself and the forgiveness and grace extended are described using corporate terms. In 2:5 he writes, "if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but…to all of you." Similarly, in 2:10 he writes, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive." Paul's expectation is that Christian communities be characterized by grace, forbearance, and an affirmation of love even after offenses have been suffered. Paul does not, however, make explicit in 2 Corinthians *why* Christians ought to forgive. For this, we must look to two of his other letters.

Paul's most well-known uses of *charizomai* appear in Ephesians and Colossians. There is a logical flow in Colossians that follows from God's extension of grace to us to our extension of grace to others. The verb *charizomai* first appears in Colossians in 2:13: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven (*charisamenos*) us all our trespasses." Both the second and third uses of *charizomai* appear in 3:13, which reads, "Bear with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgive (*charizomenoi*) each other; just as the Lord has forgiven (*echarisato*), so you must also [forgive]." In Ephesians, the same logical flow from God's forgiveness of us to our forgiveness of others is present. In his opening blessing, Paul writes that in Christ we have "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness (*aphesin*) of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph 1:7). Then, just as in Colossians, Paul includes in his closing exhortations the charge to "be kind to one another, forgiving (*charizomenoi*) each other, as God in Christ also has forgiven (*echarisato*) you" (Eph 4:32).

For our purposes, there are two observations to note. 1) Forgiveness is not only a forensic transaction, but also a communal process, involving a mutual extending of grace to one another, and 2) the imperative to extend grace (i.e. forgive) one another is grounded in the reality of the grace God in

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[8] BDAG, 1078.

[9] L. Morris, "Forgiveness" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* Gerald F. Hawthorn, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, eds., (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 311. For a longer discussion on the semantic range of these different Greek terms see F. Leron Shults discussion in *Faces of Forgiveness,* 134.

Christ has extended to us. While there is overlap between the conceptuality of justification and forgiveness from God, the forgiveness Christians ought to extend one another is not merely transactional but relational. As Sandage and Shults write, "Paul's understanding of forgiveness is not primarily a decision marked on a legal or financial balance sheet; it is the real presence of divine grace that heals human relations."[10] This will prove helpful for us to keep in mind when considering forgiveness in our own cultural and pastoral context.

III. FORGIVENESS AS RE-HUMANIZATION

Psychological researchers have identified common mental barriers that make forgiveness difficult. One common barrier occurs when the victim "totalize[s] the offender in terms of the offense (e.g. the offender is a liar, a cheat, a thief, a murderer) in such a way that the offender is infrahumanized (i.e. seen as comparatively less human) or dehumanized (e.g. demonized, viewed as a monster)."[11] To counter this tendency, a strategy employed by psychotherapists for cultivating therapeutic forgiveness includes encouraging them to think empathetically about their offenders.[12] To activate empathy, clients try to "[focus] on the human qualities of the person who hurt them."[13] In essence, the client is being reminded (and reminding themselves) that the person who harmed them is human.

What makes affirming the humanity of our offenders so difficult is that our own humanity has been denied in some way by the offense. It seems that we withhold forgiveness precisely because we wish (perhaps subconsciously) to deny personhood to the one who has denied it to us. There is often another subconscious motivation at play. Our totalization of the offense and de-humanization of the offender dulls the edge of the pain we feel. For instance, it may be easier for victims of sexual assault to cope with their trauma if they dismiss the agency and humanity of their assailant. If the perpetrator was less than human, then they are perhaps less blameworthy. Perhaps the offender was simply a "pervert" who could not help himself. Or perhaps he was not in his right mind. The victim does not have to grapple with the terrible reality that a truly human moral agent has harmed them so grievously. In this case, the dehumanization of the offender is not borne out of a willful or petty refusal to forgive. It is a coping mechanism—a learned survival skill—whereby the victim does not have to face the magnitude of the betrayal caused by sin.

How then can we as Christians begin to rehumanize those who sin against us? One key to cultivating our willingness to forgive is the

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[10] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 138.

[11] C. V. O. Witvliet and L. M. Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," in D. Dunn, ed., *Positive Psychology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 132.

[12] One research tested practice for forgiveness: 1) Emphasize humanity, 2) see the offense as evidence of needed growth, 3) desire good and change for the offender. Noted in Witvliet & Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," 131–152.

[13] Witvliet and Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," 143.

acknowledgement that we too have caused harm, if not to the perpetrator directly, then certainly to others. We should forgive because we too need forgiveness—oftentimes from the very person whom we are hesitant to forgive. As difficult as it may be, we must here resist the urge to compare the severity of offense, using the relative "insignificance" of our own sin to justify our unforgiveness of the sins of others. We can acknowledge the severity of the harm we have experienced, while also acknowledging the reality of the harm that we have caused to others. This is what Miroslav Volf calls the "common undifferentiated sinfulness that requires a balanced reciprocal confession of sin."[14] This mutual acknowledgement of our universal need to be forgiven is the foundation for our forgiveness of others. A therapeutic view of forgiveness, while valid as far as it goes, falls short of a robust explanation as to *why* we should forgive. It is not enough to simply say that forgiveness is good for your mental and physical health. The fact is that bitterness, resentment, and fantasizing about revenge can be satisfying and cathartic emotional experiences. But from a Christian perspective this will not do. We should forgive, not just because it is good for our health, but because we too are sinners in need of forgiveness.

As Christians, we believe that our universal need for forgiveness extends not only to our relationships with others, but most fundamentally to our relationship with our Creator. In forgiving us, God has affirmed our personhood, our humanity. Indeed, to affirm the humanity of someone else is to affirm their right, most fundamentally, to existence. This is precisely what God has done for us in Christ. He does not deny our personhood, fractured and compromised as it has been and would continue to be apart from redemption. His extension of grace and the gift of eternal life amounts to his affirmation of our dignity and his willing our continued and abiding existence. This does not amount to a denial of the blameworthiness of our sin—quite the opposite, in fact. In Christ's death, God affirms our humanity both by exacting the just punishment our sin deserves and by willing our continued existence through the gift of eternal life. This is redemptive forgiveness.

This desire to have our existence affirmed and blessed is a universal human experience. This inter-personal affirmation of personhood is precisely why exclusively forensic conceptions of forgiveness are insufficient. As Shults provocatively writes, "the deleterious effects of the dominance of legal metaphors in the Christian doctrine of salvation have nowhere been felt more deeply than in the understanding and practice of forgiveness."[15] He writes later, "The legal 'salvation' of a judicial verdict releases me from a punishment, but it does not cure my ontological anxiety."[16] Our desire to be forgiven is a desire to be existentially affirmed, not merely judicially cleared. And our desire to have our personhood acknowledged and our future

[14] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Revised and Updated (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 119.

[15] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 103.

[16] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 215.

guaranteed, in Christ, has been granted. The moral imperative associated with this extension of grace is that we should extend this same grace to others. Echoing the Apostle Paul's logic, Shults writes, "Being forgiven means receiving new being. It means finding one's very nature wholly renewed and open to a whole and healing future. Forgiving others donates the possibility of new being."[17] In psychological terms, inter-subjectivity enables forgiveness when we begin to view the other person as a center of consciousness equivalent to ourselves—affording him or her the status that God has granted us in Christ. This is precisely what Paul is calling believers to in Ephesians and Colossians: because God has willed your continued existence at the cross, you should do likewise to those who sin against you.

IV. COMMUNITY AND EMBRACE

Christians should aspire to a view of forgiveness that is communal and redemptive. Forgiveness is not simply a canceling of forensic debt of sin. Nor is it simply an internal attitude change within the person sinned against. Forgiveness is also an acted-out, communal reality. Expanding further on the concept of ontological anxiety mentioned above, Shults writes, "We find it difficult to suppress our hope for a future in which the particularity of our being will not be annihilated. We hope to belong in a peaceful and joyful pattern of harmonious relations with others. Redemptive forgiveness as sharing in divine grace opens up that future."[18] Our extension of grace to others is the mechanism by which we can start to build the community of God's New Creation in the present, a world characterized reconciliation, rather than resentment. As Miroslav Volf writes, "Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace."[19]

Psychologists are often quick to note the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation.[20] Theologians have been hesitant to separate these, I believe, with good reason. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, one can, in theory, forgive an offender without being restored to relationship with him or her. This is because therapeutic forgiveness emphasizes the interior, subjective reality, the decrease of avoidance and negative emotion. As outlined by Sandage and Shults, therapeutic forgiveness need not imply relational reconciliation. Psychotherapists and scientists are helpfully identifying the need for restoration of trust in relationship for true reconciliation to occur, which of course involves something beyond a decrease of negative emotions toward the offender. From this frame of reference, forgiveness does not necessarily require reconciliation. Indeed, there are times where, in a fallen world, it cannot.

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[17] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 211.

[18] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 207.

[19] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 126.

[20] E. L. Worthington, et al., "Forgiveness and Reconciliation within the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality" in J. D. Aten, K. A. O'Grady, & E. L. Worthington, Jr., eds., *The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality for Clinicians: Using Research in Your Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 276.

However, from a Christian theological perspective, the process of forgiveness involves "much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact; *peace is communion between former enemies*. Beyond offering forgiveness, Christ's passion aims at restoring such communion."[21] Indeed, Christian forgiveness blurs the lines between forgiveness and reconciliation drawn out in a social scientific perspective. The Christian will recognize that without an offer of reconciliation to relationship, forgiveness is incomplete—precisely because of the communal aspirations Christian forgiveness implies. We should be quick to note that in many cases, an "incomplete" forgiveness may be the best we can attain this side of the *parousia*. Still, Christian forgiveness leans forward in hope toward reconciliation.

Any unforgiveness that Christians harbor is a barrier between them and the final reconciliation of all things in Christ. We should recognize that even the vindication of a legal decision in our favor will not in itself solve the estrangement that has befallen human relationships because of brokenness and sin. Volf writes elsewhere:

> [E]ven after the question of 'right and wrong' has been settled by the judgment of grace, it is still necessary to move through the door of mutual embrace to enter the world of perfect love. And through that door the inhabitants of the world to come will move enabled by the indwelling Christ, who spread out his arms on the cross to embrace all wrongdoers. When former enemies have embraced and been embraced as belonging to the same community of love in the fellowship of the Triune God, then and *only* then will they have stepped into a world in which each enjoys all and therefore all take part in the dance of love.[22]

Christian hope looks to a time and a place where all relationships will be reconciled. And, in Christ, the future reconciliation and healed community has already begun. In hope, we imagine a future redeemed version of the offender, because this is the future that God has "imagined" (and made so) for us in Christ. We should endeavor to have our disposition toward the offender match the divine disposition towards us.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to draw out what I see as two emphases in Paul's use of charizomai, namely that forgiveness is 1) communal and 2) a moral imperative deriving from our acceptance by God in Christ. I have also sought to demonstrate that forgiveness entails more than the withholding of punishment or the diminishment of negative emotions. For, as Shults writes, "When forgiveness is confined to a formal juridical declaration, it does not immediately touch the material agony of shame and anger that

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[21] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 127.

[22] Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 181.

crush real human life in community."[23] As I noted in the introduction, it has become increasingly difficult in our culture to even understand how forgiveness is possible. Here the forensic definition of forgiveness holds sway. If forgiveness only means withholding legal punishment, this seems to be exactly what our culture does not currently want to accept. Should we shield abusers from judicial and legal repercussions in the name of Christian forgiveness? By no means.

Here we should pause and note the importance of being on guard against common abuses of the call to forgiveness. When pastors and church leaders encourage congregants to forgive those who sin against them, it can easily be heard and understood as a call to simply "forgive, forget, and get over it"—and *definitely* do not take legal action. This can lead to an alarming situation in which a congregant may feel that she is acting in a sub-Christian way if she reports her husband's domestic abuse to the police. However, there is nothing especially "spiritual" or even "Christian" about ignoring abuse. The Apostle Paul exhorts his readers in Ephesians to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them" (Eph 5:11). We should remind ourselves and others that sweeping sin under the rug is not what is implied in Christian forgiveness.

The abused wife can cultivate redemptive forgiveness in her heart while also taking appropriate steps to ensure her own physical safety and that of her children. And her pastor should encourage her to do both. Indeed, pastors should be ambassadors for redemptive forgiveness *and* for the appropriate administration of justice according to the law. *This is no contradiction.* And the feeling that it is a contradiction is bound up in our narrow, forensic view of forgiveness. Indeed, as long as forgiveness is defined in strictly judicial terms, it will be difficult to understand how we can forgive someone and insist that they receive just consequence for abusive or illegal behavior. Until we take appropriate steps to correct our view of forgiveness, our churches will remain vulnerable to the abuses of power that all too often accompany a sub-Christian view of forgiveness and justice. We should also note that this view of forgiveness has been itself been used as a weapon of spiritual abuse in the hands of pastors who refuse to be held to account for their own abusive behavior. This is why cultivating a more nuanced and biblical view of forgiveness is of the utmost importance for the health and safety of our congregations. Seeking to understand for ourselves and teach God's people the differences between forensic, therapeutic, and redemptive forgiveness will equip us with appropriate categories for navigating these complex issues.

As pastors, we should emphasize along with counselors and psychotherapists that unforgiveness is stressful and unhealthy. We should also note that the therapeutic mental and physical health benefits of forgiving have been well documented. However, we should also exhort our congregations to a deeper, redemptive forgiveness that is truly only made possible in Christ, who has affirmed our humanity and enfolded us into his redeemed

[23] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 125.

community by extending grace to us. And just as our transformation and redemption in Christ is a lifelong process, we can give ourselves grace to grow in our capacity to extend grace to those who have wronged us. We cannot forgive by trying harder; this capacity too is cultivated by the Spirit and given to us by grace.[24] Transformation into the community of our future hope is a long-term group project. As N. T. Wright writes, "Christian living in the present consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship God and reflect his glory into the world."[25] This is the fully-reconciled community that the eucharist prefigures, a community of life-affirming embrace where the brokenness of ourselves and our relationships has been enfolded into God's own life by the grace extended to us in Christ. Indeed, "[i]t is the way of those forgiven by Christ to forgive freely the wrongs people do to them."[26]

[24] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 169.

[25] N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters,* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012) 67.

[26] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness*, 312.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Michael J. Naughton. *Getting Work Right: Labor and Leisure in a Fragmented World*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2019. 171 pages. $24.95.

Michael Naughton, director of the center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, has given a thought-provoking gift to the church today. In a society driven by productivity and profits, he's presented a powerful defense of what would have been known by all Christians just a generation or two ago: that we are finite creatures who have been given a divine calling (or vocation).

Naughton's main thesis could be boiled down to this: if we get work wrong, we cannot get rest right; and if we get rest wrong, we cannot get work right. He begins by discussing our condition as fallen individuals who often fall into one of two ditches: viewing work as a career (and thus leisure in terms of its utility), or viewing work as a mere job (and thus leisure as mere amusement). Both fall short of the bible's understanding of work as a divine calling.

Instead, Naughton explains how the "logic of gift" helps the Christian find his bearings by reminding him of his creaturely-ness. We've all been given a vocation, which contains both personal and communal (especially ecclesial) dimensions. Apart from these dimensions and from consciously re-framing our job in terms of a divine calling, work will become either a slave-driving idol or a meaningless series of unfulfilling tasks.

From there Naughton begins to positively construct a theology of vocation, specifically looking at business and labor. He argues in Part 2 that business is a secondary institution (behind the family and the church), meaning that it is significant in supporting the primary institutions and the common good. In chapter 5 he introduces the concept of subsidiarity, an idea that he never precisely defines, but generally explains as recognizing that each worker has something to give others (79). This principle rightly applied, he argues, enables for business institutions and individual workers to both do good work.

Lest the goodness of work be limited merely to the process and not to the product, chapter 6 explains the somewhat thorny issue of, "what makes a good good?" He teaches through some light Thomistic ethics, including discussing formal and material cooperation between workers and institutions, in a helpful way without being either too abstract or too situation-specific. He concludes this part with a final chapter discussing wealth. Money is not an evil, nor is profit. Indeed, both are necessary for this world and for good business to function. However, neither money nor profits can take over as the primary goal for either the business or the individual worker. Wealth is good when it is created through hard work and shared appropriately.

Finally, Naughton concludes with a single chapter on rest, leisure, and sabbath. He balances all the previous language of work, calling, industry, and business with the reminder that we were all created for more than work, a

concept which sabbath observance emphasizes weekly. Sabbath keeps us free from the tyranny of work: indeed, its power lies in its potential for keeping us free, Naughton argues (147). If we get Sunday wrong, we'll get the rest of the week wrong, because we were meant to be recipients of divine grace and communion, neither of which can be secured through work.

Having written my dissertation on sabbath, I eagerly jumped at the chance to review this book. Naughton is easy to read, but heavy-laden with wisdom; you can tell that this is the product of years of thinking and teaching on the subject. Some sections I had to stop and meditate upon prior to proceeding to the next chapter; many times I found myself personally challenged about how I was operating and viewing the world. While his Roman Catholic background was evident a few times throughout the book (e.g., his discussion of holy orders as divine vocation (40) or his talk of confession prior to Lord's Day observance (161)), most of the book would be equally welcome in a Protestant setting. He weaves together practical examples from the business world, personal anecdotes of lessons he's learned over the years, and helpful quotes from authors who have written on this topic (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Josef Peiper, John Paul II, and even the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel).

While not as exegetically argued as I had hoped, if you're looking for a readable, yet personally stimulating introduction into a theology of work and rest (including vocation, ethics, and sabbath), then Naughton's book is a wonderful choice.

Jon English Lee
Morningview Baptist Church
Montgomery, AL

N.T. Wright, *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World.* New York: HarperOne, 2020. Pp. vii-198. $27.99, hardback.

N.T. Wright's latest book outlines seven themes, or "signposts," that point to the reality of God, and that only find fulfillment and clarity in Jesus Christ.

The book, *Broken Signposts*, draws upon work done earlier by Wright in *Simply Christian* (2006), and in his recently published Gifford Lectures, *History and Eschatology* (2019). In this work, Wright focuses on seven themes: Justice, Love, Spirituality, Beauty, Freedom, Truth, and Power, and connects each one with the portrait of Jesus found in John's Gospel. The result is a beautifully written, rhetorically persuasive, and devotionally rich work of biblical and theological apologetics.

Wright himself might not categorize the book as an "apologetic" work in any technical sense. But it does make a case for God, and especially for

Jesus, as the One who makes sense of all our deepest human longings. In some ways, this kind of book is N.T. Wright at his pastoral best. The work is clearly held up by many years of deep biblical scholarship, and one does learn a lot about how to properly read John's Gospel, but it is the captivating vision of God articulated in these pages that make for the real benefit for the reader. The work also encourages an inspiring confidence in God's truth, and in Jesus as the One who reveals that truth most fully. The book would work well as a series of sermons, with one sermon focused on each signpost/theme. Such a series would encourage believers to take seriously the universal impulses one feels in living a human life, to recognize how these longings are only ever broken in our fallen world, but also to see Jesus as the one who embodies the truth to which each signposts points. I recommend the book both for personal devotional reading, and for study by church leaders in order to teach the contents.

The basic argument of the book is that all people either feel, hope for, have some instinct for, or think important the seven signposts Wright has identified. These are universal impulses that tell us something about what it means to be human. One doesn't have to be particularly religious. One doesn't have to be western or eastern, modern or post-modern to recognize these things. We all seem to naturally have some interest in them. However, Wright argues, we can never get them quite right. Love turns selfish, Justice is denied, beauty is defaced, freedom is taken, truth is skewed, and power is abused, and so on. The Bible seems to affirm and refer to all of these in one way or other. Perhaps surprisingly, the Gospel of John tackles many of these themes with reference to Jesus himself. Wright finds, in a close reading of John, the deeper truth about all of these themes, and points to Jesus as God's answer to how we should think about them. Indeed, Wright calls them "signposts" because they point to something beyond themselves. Left to ourselves, we can never find what exactly they point to, or how to get them just right. But God, in and through Jesus Christ, has revealed the true meaning of Justice, Love, Power, and the rest. These "echoes of a voice" are from the Lord and point to Christ and the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is important here. For Wright, Jesus doesn't only, or merely, reveal the truth about these signposts. Jesus also sends His Spirit to indwell His disciples so that they can begin to rightly embody these things, in the power of the Spirit. This shows that the new creation has already begun, that God is at work in the church and world, and all Christians are called to live out this true, renewed, human vocation of bearing God's image in the world. When one finds the answer to these longings and hopes in Jesus, and when one receives the life-giving, image-renewing power of the Spirit, one can begin to work for the Kingdom of God, coming on earth as in heaven. This is the true human vocation, according to Wright.

Wright could have written a book just on the signposts, and pointed to Jesus in some general way as the theological answer to our problem (never getting these things right). But the book is made even more persuasive (and beautiful) by frequent engagement with John's Gospel. Not only does every chapter engage some part of the story of Jesus in John, the book includes

short interlude chapters wherein Wright gives some further guidance on how to read and understand the fourth Gospel. At first, one might be skeptical that each of these themes is genuinely or truly addressed in John's Gospel. Perhaps it seems like Wright is trying to force them into his reading of the text? Does John really intend to speak to our current questions about these things? Wright has argued persuasively that they are indeed there in the text. Perhaps not in the exact form that a contemporary person would ask. But the essential ideas are truly present enough to draw the sincere reader toward a better understanding of each theme. Just when one thinks he's going to force the issue, and try to make John or Jesus say something they never intended, one will be surprised at how well it all works. And new depth is given to our reading in the process. In many ways, Wright models for us how to bring contemporary questions to the biblical text, and find fresh insight in the teaching and work of Jesus.

Wright believes that the Christ event is what makes sense of the world. If that is so, then we ought to find the answer for all human and earthly longings, struggles, and questions in that event. In this book, Wright has pointed us to the gospel as the place to discern what we ought to think and feel about justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth, and power. As he writes,

> "The story of Jesus thus offers a new framework for understanding the world—the framework of victory over corruption and death itself and the launching of the new creation. The old questions were the right ones to ask. They indicate a deep human sense that the world is not, after all, as it was meant to be. That intuition is correct. That is why the signposts appear broken. John tells us what the creator God has done, is doing, and will do, through his Son and his Spirit, to put things right. The signposts, duly straightened out, will then provide us with the template for our Spirit-led mission, sent into the world as the Father had sent the Son" (192).

This work is one that all evangelicals, indeed, all Christians can appreciate. Even if someone thinks Wright is wrong about Paul, or Justification, or the Atonement (or whatever), readers will likely not find anything in this book to dispute. It is solidly biblical, philosophical, and practical. A beautiful gift for anyone needing encouragement that Jesus is always the way, the truth, and the life – no matter when or where we may live, nor the challenges we face in our present cultures.

Jonathan Huggins
Berry College
Rome, Georgia

James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2011. xix + 202 pp. $21.60.

I begin with a confession. Every year, usually sometime in April, as Lent turns toward Good Friday, pastors search for an analogy for what Fleming Rutledge calls the "godlessness of the cross"—a haunting phrase that reminds us that before it became a religious symbol, the cross was a state-sponsored symbol of terror, a mode of execution wildly unbefitting our typical conceptions of God. Every year, I lapse habitually (and simplistically) to the electric chair. Surely that will get the point across. How wrong I have been. Enter James Cone: "In the United States, the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree" (p. 93). How had I missed this? How had I never thought of this? How embarrassing.

I am not alone, it seems: "White theologians do not normally turn to the black experience to learn about theology" (p. 64). This myopia is, on the one hand, a failure of experience and solidarity. More still, it is a failure of memory: if anything surprises, Cone writes, it is "how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynching has receded from the nation's collective memory" (p. 165, quoting Fitzhugh Brundage). Most striking, though, it is a failure of theological imagination. Even in the lynching era, virtually all white theologians, along with many black preachers, "[failed] to see the parallels between the cross and the lynching tree" (p. 94). With lynching unavoidably in public view, many failed to see.

The Cross and the Lynching Tree, the mature fruit of the long-time Union Seminary professor and leading liberation theologian James Cone, forces readers to look, and so, perhaps, to see. In doing so, it redresses not an imbalance but a heresy, an injustice: "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy" (p. xv). And, I would add, no genuine understanding of the cross. Along these lines, the trajectory of the book is elegant. It traces a path from *un*seeing to seeing, exposing those who have *not* looked (chapter 2), telling the stories of those with the courage to look (chapters 3-5), and so forcing the reader to look in the process.

In chapter 2, Cone explores the failure of America's leading white theologian of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, to address matters of racial injustice in any sustained way. Niebuhr's own theological and ethical proclivities—a robust theology of the cross, a realist approach to ethics, a grounding of theology in the facts of human experience—should have sensitized him to the connection of cross and lynching tree, and so to a more robust call for justice for subjugated blacks (pp. 33-38). How did he miss this? For Cone, this is partly the moderating influence of Niebuhr's notion of "proximate justice" (p. 71; cf. 48-49), but more fundamentally, Niebuhr simply did not live, talk, rub shoulders with black people (pp.

40-58)—a failure of experience that led to a "cool rationality" on matters of race, but not a "madness in the soul" (p. 56).

Chapters 3-5 then turn consciously and deeply, by way of correction, to black experience in America in order to "learn about theology"—that is, "to teach America about Jesus's cross" (p. 64). Chapter 3 is an extended reflection on the centrality of the cross in the life and ministry of Martin Luther King Jr. The cross challenges and subverts norms (p. 70), comforts and affirms (pp. 85-86), offers the way of vicarious suffering (pp. 86-89), and establishes hope (p. 91). King's crucicentrism is not a detached dogmatic account of the cross, but born out of the crucible of his own suffering. Most importantly, it shows an awareness of the lynching tree—the "real cross bearers in his American context"—which makes all the difference (pp. 70 and 73).

Chapter 4 turns to black artists, poets, novelists, and the like. It is these figures, argues Cone, who make explicit the connection of cross and lynching tree. What detached theology obscures, the lived reality of artists reveals: "It takes a powerful imagination, grounded in historical experience, to uncover the great mysteries of black life" (pp. 94-95). And that is just what well-known figures like W. E. B. Du Bois (pp. 101-08) and Langston Hughes (pp. 113-17) had and did, along with lesser-known figures like Countee Cullen, Walter Everette Hawkins, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Allen, Robert Hayden, James Andrews, Claude McKay, Lorraine Hansberry, the list goes on. In song, poetry, novel, photography, and other forms, black artists of the lynching era confronted their audiences with the devastating reality: "The South is crucifying Christ again," and this time "he's dark of hue" (p. 96, quoting Cullen).

The book culminates, then, with chapter 5, in which Cone highlights the sometimes-subtle, sometimes-public, always-prophetic role of black women in the black struggle for justice. The pioneer of this struggle is Ida Wells (pp. 126-33), and its central insight given poetic form in Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit" (pp. 134-38), as famously performed in 1939 by Billie Holliday. The last couplet of the first verse ("Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees") weaves together, in haunting fashion, cross, lynching tree, and Eden's forbidden fruit—humanity's grasping after the latter leading to the evils of the former. In this chapter, powerful themes of anguish and hope, doubt and trust, faith and despair, the problem of suffering, and the hypocrisy of white Christianity rise painfully to the service, testified to by the witness of black women, "the oppressed of the oppressed" (p. 121).

What, then, can be said about this powerful, personal, aching book? This is liberation theology at its most beautiful and best—a *theologia crucis* rooted in a sustained conversation between Scripture and praxis. Using the social location of black Americans—particularly black *suffering*, made visible in the icon of the lynching tree—Cone bears witness for white America to the gospel of the cross, a gospel it claimed but betrayed. Refusing to ignore black experience in this country, Cone invites the lynching tree to illuminate the meaning of the cross, and allows the cross to speak all its

"terrible beauty" over the tragedy of the lynching tree (pp. xviii, 162). This is the inescapable, relentless, and tragically correct thesis of the book: the cross and lynching tree mutually interpret one another (see, e.g., pp. xix, 63, 92-93, 160-63, 166), as the cover of the book so subtly (and beautifully) suggests. This point needs to be driven home. It is the *lynching tree* that interprets the cross: *skandalon kai mōria*, Paul might say (1 Corinthians 1:23). Scandal and folly to us, perhaps, but also, paradoxically, "the power and wisdom of God" (v. 24).

If it is the lynching tree that interprets the cross, then it is also the *lynched* who truly understand—who see—the cross: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (vv. 27-28). *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is, at bottom, a black midrash on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31—a poignant and painful commentary on the heart of Paul's gospel. To put it bluntly, Abel Meeropol saw, and Reinhold Niebuhr did not. Fired in the crucible of suffering—the chief icon of which is the lynching tree—my black sisters and brothers simply understand the cross more deeply than I do, and so see the gospel more clearly as well. When it comes to the cross, there is a hermeneutical "advantage" to suffering; to truly see the cross, suffering seems a prerequisite. This will stay with me long after the details of the book have faded from memory.

There is one final, still more challenging, step to Cone's argument. It is not just that the lynching tree interprets the cross, nor that the lynched alone see. It is that those who suffer *most* see with greatest clarity. To follow the logic and trajectory of the book, it is not enough to say that Meeropol saw and Niebuhr did not. One also feels compelled to say that Meeropol saw more clearly than King himself. In Cone's narrative arc, a fog lifts on the gospel as the fog of suffering descends. In this sense, the book paradoxically gets harder and more hopeful to read as it goes along, for insight deepens as suffering intensifies. This raises a host of questions about suffering, but the ones I can't shake are these: in our (laudable) rush to alleviate suffering, do we remove the sufferer from a position of hermeneutical privilege—a place from which one most clearly sees? Is the avoidance of suffering—itself a "privilege"—actually a deep handicap? Most directly: in the present, this penultimate time in which we live, is suffering *good* or is it not? This is unresolved in Cone (compare, e.g., pp. 92, 147-48 and 150), but this is not a criticism. I suspect it's unresolved in Scripture as well.

In giving us this book, and in "giv[ing] voice to black victims" (p. 21), James Cone has given us a gift—the chance to see the cross anew, painful as it is to look. If the white church in America today, co-opted by seemingly every vision *but* the cross, is to regain *something* of its Christian witness, I suspect the first step is to listen to the voice of the lynched church, wherever she is found, beckoning us to the cross. If we listen, perhaps God will relent, and in his mercy use the black church to teach the white church what it is to be orthodox again—to believe *and* live the cross. The last word, then, belongs not to me, but to Howard Thurman, as quoted by Cone, "By

some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight, the slave undertook the redemption of the religion that the master had profaned in his midst" (pp. 133-34). In this country, God, let it be so.

Benj Petroelje
14th Street Christian Reformed Church
Holland, Michigan

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 268pp. $29.95.

Whitehead and Perry are not attempting to answer the question if America was a "Christian nation." Their focus is on the ways such a belief, a Christian nationalism, influences the lives and practices of people who hold them. That is, their focus is less on the originating intention and more on the regulating perception of modern-day Christian nationalism in America. With all the attention on the origin debate, "there have been no attempts to systematically and empirically examine Christian nationalism and its influence in American social, cultural, and political life" (p. 5). Although historians, theologians, and political scientists have explored this topic, these authors address the topic from the social sciences (Whitehead is an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and Perry is an assistant professor of sociology and religion at the University of Oklahoma). Using large-scale data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey (a synthesis of data well beyond the training of this reviewer to assess), the authors offer a unique and helpful set of spectacles to see and understand the inner-workings of Christian nationalism.

In the introduction, the authors define Christian nationalism as "a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life" (p. 10). The authors are quick to note, however, that the "Christianity" of Christian nationalism is "of a particular sort... something more than religion" (p. 10). In fact, the authors make an important (and surprising) claim in this regard: religious commitment and Christian nationalism appear to foster distinct moral worldviews that differ in critical ways" (p. 13). In short, Christian nationalism is a syncretism of "Christianity" and "nationalism" that distorts or even lacks what is clearly Christian. This allows the authors to offer insights into what seems paradoxical to many: (1) why so many conservative Christians vote for and continue to support Donald Trump despite his many overt moral failings, (2) why so many Americans advocate so vehemently for xenophobic policies, such as a border wall with Mexico, (3) why so many Americans seem so unwilling to acknowledge the injustices that ethnic and racial minorities experience,

and (4) why so many Americans continue to hold attitudes suggesting women are unfit for politics, or that healthy families require that women stay home. The common denominator is Christian nationalism.

In chapter one, the authors offer a taxonomy of modern-day Christian nationalism. The taxonomy involves four responses to Christian nationalism and the percentage of Americans who hold such positions: ambassadors (19.8%), accommodators (32.1%), resisters (26.6%), and rejecters (21.5%). The authors offer statistical analyses of each response. Rejecters, for example, are hardly anti-religion, with one-third affiliating with the Christian tradition. Resisters share key demographics with rejecters, with the exceptions of being slightly less educated and more religiously committed. What distinguishes resisters from rejecters is that resisters may disagree that prayer should be instituted in public schools but are undecided about the display of religious symbols in public places. Accommodators mirror resisters in that they show comparable levels of indecision but lean toward accepting it. Accommodators are older than rejecters and resisters, with ambassadors being the oldest yet – and the least educated. Ambassadors believe the United States "has a special relationship with God, and thus, the federal government should formally declare the United States a Christian nation and advocate for Christian values" (p. 36). Interestingly, the evidence points to a slow and stable decline in support for Christian nationalism.

In chapters two through four, the authors explain a virtue of Christian nationalism in each of the chapters: power, boundaries, and order. In short, these are the symptoms—or vices—of Christian nationalism. A couple key aspects are worthy of note. First, the authors make a significant claim: "evangelicalism is not synonymous with Christian nationalism" (p. 58). In fact, in many ways Christian nationalism is often diametrically opposed to biblical Christianity and its ethics. Second, the authors argue that Christian nationalism is in reality "Christianity co-opted in the service of ethno-national power and separation" (p. 145). It is "political at its core" (p. 148).

In the conclusion, the authors address the significance of their findings and its implications for bringing more precision to our public discourse on religion and politics. One example is the obsession in recent years by journalists and political commentators over why "white evangelicals" voted for Trump. The authors offer this explanation: "In reality...it is not just being evangelical or even being a white evangelical that truly matters. Rather, it is the degree to which Americans [perceive] current political conflicts through the lens of Christian nationalism" (p. 153). As the authors explain, Christian nationalism "co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism" (p. 153). In this way, political wants and desires are made transcendent – something the Bible would call idolatry!

In *Taking America Back for God*, Whitehead and Perry offer a helpful diagnostic of the engine of American nationalism, revealing both the fuel and force of the movement in but clearly also beyond the church. One of the most helpful insights was the distinction between evangelicalism—and a robustly biblical Christianity and ethic—and Christian nationalism.

While many evangelicals hold to some form of Christian nationalism, it is clearly not innate to evangelicalism, and in many ways is diametrically opposed to it. Although this reviewer was not convinced all the diagnostic results could be determined from the data, the general analysis is both informational and practical.

A few years ago, I removed the American flag from our church's sanctuary, with the approval of the pastor-elders. We still had a flag in the front of our building; we simply removed the one flag in the sanctuary where we gather for corporate worship. This had nothing to do with my appreciation or celebration of our country; I am a grateful and committed citizen of the United States. The reasons were both biblical and pastoral: (1) our church was an embassy of the Kingdom, not a service of the state, and (2) our congregation needed to "keep their allegiance pure" and "nurture commitment" to their international and eschatological identity and purpose. They needed one hour each week where they thought of *the* Kingdom and not this kingdom. We had already stopped celebrating America on the Sunday near the Fourth of July and had slowly removed all the civil/secular "holy days" (holidays) that church's commonly practice, so I thought the flag would not be missed. I was wrong. Not only did several people complain, thinking our devotion was to "God and country," but one family resigned their membership and left our church! *Taking America Back for God* helps diagnose this impulse within my congregation. And it encourages me as a pastor to address this issue in two ways.

First, every local church needs to understand that the Bible does teach about a Christian nation, and it is "the Church." As the apostle Peter clearly teaches us, the church is "a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9). Since this designation belongs to the gathering of the King and his Kingdom, no other king or country can make such a claim, and no Christian should believe or act otherwise.

Second, in a political moment when Americans, and especially evangelical Christians, are exhorted to "Make America Great Again," Christians and the church need to be exhorted quite differently: "Make the Kingdom Great Again." The church needs to be reminded in word and deed that our primarily allegiance is to King and Kingdom (see Psalm 2!). For too long the church and Christianity has been co-opted by national and political forces that seek power and persuasion in ways that are at best misguided and at worse idolatrous. Sadly, churches like mine may need to "take back for God" the church and political allegiance, not only in election seasons but even on Sunday mornings.

Edward W. Klink III
Hope Evangelical Free Church
Roscoe, Illinois