

## Participating in the Ministry of the Cross: A Three-Dimensional, Relational View of Atonement

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### Abstract

This paper correlates the objective, subjective, and classic/cosmic dimensions of atonement with (1) Christ's threefold ministry as high priest, apostle/prophet, and king and (2) Christ's self-identification as the way, the truth, and the life in relation to the Father (cf. John 14:6). Rather than presenting a novel atonement theory, this paper innovatively integrates and synthesizes various dimensions of atonement and relates them to the life and ministry of the church today. This paper argues that in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father, the church participates in the priestly confession of sin (the way of objective atonement), the embodied apostolic and prophetic expression of divine love (the truth of subjective atonement), and the royal redemptive victory over sin and death (the life of classic/cosmic atonement) for the sake of the world and to the glory of God.

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*"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10 NRSV).*

### Introduction

While overly Christocentric and crucicentric approaches have characterized evangelical atonement theologies,<sup>1</sup> this paper aims to clarify the ministry of Christ on the cross with an integrated view of the objective, subjective, and classic/cosmic dimensions of this ministry so that the church can approach participation in Christ's life and ministry in more theologically appropriate ways—that is, more

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven M. Studebaker, *The Spirit of Atonement: Pentecostal Contributions and Challenges to the Christian Traditions*, Systematic Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology, (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 1–2, 19, 56, 200; cf. Clark H. Pinnock, "Salvation by Resurrection," *Ex Auditu: An International Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9 (1993): 1.

faithfully. Put differently, this paper seeks to view the cross of Christ from a Trinitarian theological perspective that sees the ministry of the cross as the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in united harmony rather than a conflict and resolution of relations within the Trinity. Since the church consists of the ambassadors of Christ who share in his ministry of reconciliation of the world to God (not God to the world; cf. 2 Cor 5:11–21; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20), then the ministry of the cross should coherently fit within this broader salvation activity and theology rather than being the exception. Therefore, rather than presenting a novel atonement theory, this paper innovatively integrates and synthesizes various dimensions of atonement in a three-dimensional, relational view, especially regarding the ministry of the cross. This view helps inform the life and ministry of the church in the midst of present hardship yet in light of Christ's victory. It argues that in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father, the church participates in the priestly confession of sin (the way of objective atonement), the embodied apostolic and prophetic expression of divine love (the truth of subjective atonement), and the royal redemptive victory over sin and death (the life of classic/cosmic atonement) for the sake of the world and to the glory of God.

This paper begins by defining atonement relationally (rather than forensically or transactionally) and considering an appropriate method for constructing and considering a coherent and practical theology of atonement. The need for a relational orientation according to a coherent Trinitarian theology is highlighted in this section. Next the objective, subjective, and classic/cosmic dimensions of atonement are considered respectively in relation to the high priestly, apostolic and prophetic, and royal aspects of Christ's ministry as well as Jesus' self-identification as the way, the truth, and the life in relation to the Father (cf. John 14:6). After establishing the need for the life and ministry of the church to participate in the life and ministry of Christ, each correlation above is discussed in terms of Christ's ministry of reconciliation, including the ministry of the cross, and the church's life and ministry in union with Christ. The paper concludes with some brief comments regarding the notion of a substitutionary dimension of Christ's life and ministry with suggestions for further study.

### **The Task of Integration for Atonement: A Methodology for the Cross**

Rather than an appeasement of a vengeful God or a satisfaction of needs within God, Christian atonement is relational reparation or reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> As James

2 More relational views of atonement with God are not a modern or even a Christian notion. See, for example, the Qumran community (or *Yahad*) view of humility and the work of God's Spirit in atonement in 1QS3.4–9. See Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 129. This view is not unlike the later Christian theology of *theosis*. Cf. Michael P. Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name: The God of Sinai in Our Midst* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 215–17.

Beilby and Paul Eddy note, the English word *atonement* “refers to a reconciled state of ‘at-one-ness’ between parties that were formerly alienated in some manner.”<sup>3</sup> Or, as Colin Gunton says, atonement is “the reconciliation between God and the world which is the heart of Christian teaching.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Steven Studebaker says, “atonement is the fundamental work of redemption,” and the fundamental meaning of atonement is *reconciliation*.<sup>5</sup> In other words, redemption is ultimately aimed at reconciliation, which is the telos of the overarching scope of atonement.

In *The Spirit of Atonement*, Studebaker articulates a Pentecostal theology of atonement, which places the death and resurrection of Christ within the broader, ongoing work of the Spirit in creation and redemption.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, since “Pentecost is a critical revelatory telos and participatory nexus in the broader story of redemption. . . . Pentecost, not the cross, is the *telos* of redemption.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Studebaker concludes that further consideration is warranted regarding “the nature of death both for Christ and the Christian and the Holy Spirit’s place in it.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, as noted above, this paper will focus on Christ’s ministry of the cross, which includes his death, and explore the ways the church may participate in this part of the ministry of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father. This does not constitute a comprehensive study of the nature of death according to Christ, but it may contribute towards this significant theological task by recognizing certain salient points.

Integrating the various dimensions of atonement theology is one of the key tasks in articulating and implementing the ministry of the cross of Christ. As Paul Fiddes notes: “no theory of atonement can be entirely subjective or objective, but there will be a shifting balance between the two elements in different understandings of atonement. . . . [T]he question to be asked [of a given view of atonement] is how well it integrates the two elements.”<sup>9</sup> I agree that a well-balanced integration is necessary, but as noted above, I think that more than just the objective and subjective dimensions of atonement should be balanced and integrated.

There have been many approaches to integration within theologies of atonement, which Joshua McNall situates on a continuum ranging between the extremes

3 James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 9; cf. Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 20.

4 Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

5 Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, ix, 8. Cf. Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 3–4; Eleonore Stump, *Atonement*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7.

6 See Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, esp. ch. 2, “Pentecost,” 17–39.

7 Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 17–18.

8 Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 202.

9 Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 26. Gunton argues that no one image, metaphor, or interpretation of the cross encapsulates its fullness (see *Actuality of Atonement*).

of reductionism and relativism.<sup>10</sup> In his view, reductionism produces a “defensive hierarchy [that] reduces the multifaced nature of the atonement by elevating a single model as somehow most important.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, relativism produces a “disconnected plurality” in which various views are all deemed important yet there is a failure to “relate . . . different models of atonement in *particular* ways.”<sup>12</sup> McNall aims to reintegrate views of atonement in an ordered yet not rigid manner so that when they are viewed as parts of a whole, they faithfully and truly image Christ and inspire worship.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, he discusses and arranges four of the most famous models in relation to one another such that the feet of Christ are represented by recapitulation, the heart by penal substitution, the head by Christus Victor, and the hands by moral influence.<sup>14</sup>

As viewers of the Christoform mosaic of atonement (according to McNall’s configuration or any other), we must also acknowledge that the position from which we view it will affect our perception.<sup>15</sup> That is, our perspective can skew the image even if the pieces are ordered correctly. At this point the metaphor breaks down to some degree since a mosaic is basically two-dimensional and the love of God revealed in Christ is infinitely multi-dimensional (cf. Eph 3:18). Yet a proper orientation (or posture) is still required to begin to see the manifest love of God in and through Christ, including his work on the cross.<sup>16</sup> As Andrew Purves says: “Theology is an expression of our baptismal identity in and of our belonging to God.”<sup>17</sup> And as such it must be relational (which includes both experience and thoughtful reflection), rather than an attempt to speak about God “at some kind of distance, remotely, neutrally.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, a faithful theology of atonement must be based on and in one’s relationship with God and should rightly keep the

10 See Joshua M. McNall, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ’s Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 19–21, 310.

11 McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 20.

12 McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 20; emphasis original. He says Joel Green’s kaleidoscopic view of atonement (in Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 157–85) helpfully moves away from polemical reductionism, but is too relativistic.

13 McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 21–22, 25, 309–10. Similarly, Purves says atonement is “surely a mystery to be adored and received rather than a theological problem to be picked apart, analyzed and solved.” Andrew Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations with John McLeod Campbell, H. R. Mackintosh and T. F. Torrance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 13.

14 His rationale for selecting these models is not that they are the only viable ones, but simply because they are well-known, well-attested, and therefore presumably possible to integrate in some manner (cf. McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 19). More specific, sustained attention to the reasons for selecting particular models would be helpful in a monograph-length treatment.

15 It is a mark of postmodern methodology to have “greater recognition of the situated nature of the theologian.” Dan R. Stiver, “Theological Method,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 179.

16 This is not to say that there cannot be a multiplicity of perspectives for we each see in part and know in part (cf. 1 Cor 13:9–12).

17 Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 18.

18 Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 18.

relationship of the Father and Son in the Spirit as a central focal point. In this way we can begin to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19; cf. 2 Cor 5:16).<sup>19</sup>

The need for a relational perspective of atonement is determined by the relationship of the Father and the Son, for if we approach the Father in and through the Son (cf. John 14:6), then a non-relational orientation to the theology of atonement would be our own work rather than a faithful way to speak of the work of Christ in the Spirit. Purves argues that the result of “the relationship between Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Son, and the Father . . . is the atonement, for in the incarnate Son the relation between God and humankind is savingly established.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than a forensic, legal, economic, or abstract undertaking, “the atonement is presented as a kinetic, relational and personal event entirely worked out through the relationship between the Father and the incarnate Son.”<sup>21</sup> It is this relationship that, in my view, stands at the centre of atonement—the reconciliation of humanity to God—and therefore also the life and ministry of the church. This might seem to veer towards the reductionism of a defensive hierarchy. However, since God is the Creator of all else, the relationally communing being of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit surely stands at the centre of all creation and permeates all else (cf. Col 1:15–20).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the multidimensional aspects and effects of the Trinitarian Father-Son in the Spirit relationship should be considered in both ordering and orienting a theologically coherent and practically participatory view of atonement.

As a “view” of atonement, one of the aims of this paper is to regard the ministry of the cross of Christ from a particular relational orientation: a Trinitarian theological perspective.<sup>23</sup> As Purves says, “the actual practice of God in human history” should inform “a Trinitarian practice through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> From a relational perspective, the ways that the life and ministry of the church participate in the life and ministry of Christ become more clear. Purves argues that ministry is “a participation in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, on earth, in heaven, and as the one who will come again.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Stephen Seamands argues that the ministry of the church “is the ministry of Jesus Christ, the

19 Cf. Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 21.

20 Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 9, 253–54.

21 Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 11. Similarly, Studebaker says that atonement is organic, relational, participatory, personal, transformational, and Trinitarian, not forensic or extrinsic. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 40, 50, 54.

22 Cf. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 55.

23 Other less relational perspectives on atonement might include cultic/forensic, legal/juridical, or economic/transactional. Not all these views are theologically compatible.

24 Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xxi; cf. Andrew Purves, “The Trinitarian Basis for a Christian Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 222–39.

25 Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, xvi.

Son, *to* the Father, *through* the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world.”<sup>26</sup> As a crucial aspect of the life and ministry of Christ, the ministry of reconciliation (atonement)—including the ministry of the cross—is not an aspect of the active being of Christ from which the church is excluded.<sup>27</sup>

The operational outworking of a given view of atonement is important because the work of Christ is never mere theory or abstraction.<sup>28</sup> The work of Christ is not just actions done to us or for us, but actions in which we now participate in union with Christ. As Purves says, the life and ministry of the church happens “in union with Christ, who is both God’s word of address to us and the fitting human response to God.”<sup>29</sup> In order to form a cohesively ordered image of Christ, each dimension of Christ’s ministry of the cross must not only be integrated in some way on a theoretical level (the way we view it), it must also be operationally actualized in the life and ministry of church in some way (the way we participate in it).<sup>30</sup> Rather than remaining disconnected from daily life in Christ, theological theory should inform the praxis of the church.

### Objective, Subjective, and Cosmic Dimensions of Atonement and the Ministry of Christ

McNall argues that it is important to recognize the particular *functions* of each interpretation of Christ’s work within “God’s masterpiece of redemption.”<sup>31</sup> Zooming out from individual theories, Beilby and Eddy categorize various atonement images and theories from throughout church history into three broad paradigms: objective, subjective, and classic/dramatic.<sup>32</sup> Objective theories include satisfaction (Anselm), penal substitution (Calvin), and moral government (Grotius). Subjective theories include moral influence (Abelard) and moral example (Socinus). And classic theories include recapitulation and ransom theories (e.g., Irenaeus and Athanasius) and *Christus Victor* (Aulén). But rather than assigning particular models or theories certain roles (as McNall does), taking these paradigms as overarching categorical dimensions for ordering and orienting a balanced, integrated, coherent, and practical view of atonement is more helpful. Not all the *theories* in each categorical dimension will be compatible with others, but each *dimension* is vital to a properly balanced, theologically coherent, and practically applicable

26 Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 9–10, 15, 20; emphasis original.

27 “Christ’s being and action are one reality” (Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 9).

28 Cf. Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 18.

29 Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, xx.

30 This claim is in line with the “practical turn” Stiver identifies in postmodern theology which “makes theology a practical and not simply a speculative, theoretical discipline.” Stiver, “Theological Method,” 183.

31 McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 311.

32 See Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 11–21.

view of atonement. Beilby and Eddy also orient these paradigmatic categories according to particular focal points or trajectories. Objective theories are oriented primarily towards God the Father, often viewed as addressing a necessary demand of or need in God.<sup>33</sup> Subjective theories are aimed at humans and creation, emphasizing human needs and the changes inspired or effected in us by atonement.<sup>34</sup> Finally, classic or dramatic theories are mainly directed at Satan or sin, usually highlighting divine conflict against and victory over the powers of evil under which humanity was enslaved.<sup>35</sup>

Although this third dimension has been called *classic* (because of its early forms of articulation in the “recapitulation” and “ransom” theories)<sup>36</sup> or *dramatic* (because of “the active and victorious intervention of God in rescuing and saving us”),<sup>37</sup> I suggest that *cosmic* may be a more fitting term since it carries spiritual connotations and is etymologically rooted in the Greek word κόσμος, which is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to a realm of conflict in which we live amidst hardships yet over which Christ is victorious. For example, Jesus tells his disciples (before his death), “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world [τῷ κόσμῳ] you face persecution; but take courage, I have overcome the world [τὸν κόσμον]!”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the cosmic dimension of atonement describes not only Jesus’ victory over sin but places it within the broader context of his life and ministry while recognizing the paradoxical presence of peace in the midst of persecution, suffering, and even death. These three dimensions of atonement theologies—objective, subjective, and cosmic—can also be described as the various trajectories of Jesus’ ministry to the Father, for humanity and creation, and over against sin and Satan, which are all carried out in and through the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, these three theological dimensions and ministerial trajectories can be aligned with three key facets of the ministry of Christ, also known as the *triplex munus* or threefold office of Christ: priest, prophet, and king.<sup>39</sup> According to T. F. Torrance, the priestly office of Christ corresponds to his passive obedience in the cultic-forensic aspects of redemption.<sup>40</sup> The prophetic office corresponds to the ontological or incarnational aspect of redemption in the assumption of

33 Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 14.

34 Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 18.

35 Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 12.

36 Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement*, 12–13.

37 T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 53.

38 Also note that *this* refers to the fact that the disciples will be scattered and leave Jesus alone, yet he is not alone because the Father is with him (see John 16:32).

39 Cf. Torrance, *Atonement*, 58–59. Torrance also suggests some ways that Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic theologies have emphasized various dimensions (55).

40 Torrance, *Atonement*, 50–60.



humanity.<sup>41</sup> And the kingly office corresponds to Jesus' active obedience in the dramatic aspects of redemption.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, I think the offices or facets of Christ's ministry may be helpfully correlated to the foci/trajectories identified by Beilby and Eddy above. However, it is important to note that any such categories and their correlations should not be too rigidly compartmentalized as if Christ were constantly switching between different modes of operation or as if any one dimension could be carried out without the others. Instead, speaking of the trajectories and offices of Christ's ministry is a way of focusing on certain dimensions of a unified whole with the goal of integrated balance in view.

Altering Torrance's correlations to some extent, I suggest that Christ's high priestly ministry on the cross enacts the perfect human confession of sin to the Father, constituting a key objective dimension of atonement. As a key subjective dimension of atonement, Christ's apostolic and prophetic ministry comprises the incarnate expression of divine presence, love, and forgiveness, calling us to reconciliation, which is embodied in its most naked and raw form on the cross. And as an aspect of the cosmic dimension of atonement, the royal messianic ministry of Christ ransoms and redeems humans from evil, sin, and death into freedom and life in Christ through his body and blood, broken and poured out on the cross. These descriptions focus on Christ's ministry of the cross, but these ministerial dimensions are not limited to the cross; for example, the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost should also be considered for a more comprehensive description.

Therefore, none of these descriptions should be viewed as full or definitive. For instance, Christ's high priestly ministry should not be limited to the confession of human sin on the cross; other aspects of the life and ministry of Christ should be considered as well, such as the cleansing of the temple (cf. Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–16). And noting the combination of the apostolic and prophetic offices above, none of these should be viewed as fully separable from the others: Christ (the Messiah) is king, apostle, prophet, and high priest. And he fulfills all these offices or ministries as fully God, fully human through the power of the Spirit (hypostatic union).<sup>43</sup> Each of these areas of ministry and dimensions of atonement will be discussed further below, but for now *Table 1* sums up and compares my correlations alongside Torrance's:

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41 Torrance, *Atonement*, 50–60.

42 Torrance strictly matches these offices with particular Hebrew words (*kipper* to priest, *goel* to prophet, and *paddah* to king). However, in my view, these lexical pairings too rigidly constrain the semantic range of the Hebrew terms, even though they may have some heuristic value. Cf. Torrance, *Atonement*, 50–60.

43 Robert Jenson thinks many Western Christians have become “secret Nestorians” who think of Christ's two natures too discretely or separately so that the oneness of the person of Christ is lost. Robert W. Jenson, “How Does Jesus Make a Difference?” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 185.



Table 1: *The Ministry of Christ*

Torrance’s Reformed <i>Triplex Munus</i> View			Three-Dimensional, Relational View		
Office or Ministry	Dimension of <i>Redemption</i>	Focal Point or Trajectory	Office or Ministry	Dimension of <i>Reconciliation</i>	Focal Point or Trajectory
Priest	<i>Cultic-forensic</i>	<i>Passive obedience</i>	High Priest	<i>Perfect human confession</i>	<i>Objective The Father</i>
Prophet	<i>Ontological or incarnational</i>	<i>Assumption of humanity</i>	Apostle/ Prophet	<i>Incarnate expression of God’s love</i>	<i>Subjective Humanity/ Creation</i>
King	<i>Dramatic</i>	<i>Active obedience</i>	Royal Saviour	<i>Liberating redemption</i>	<i>Cosmic Sin/Satan</i>

Much like the two-sided balance between objective and subjective theories that Fiddes calls for, Torrance’s schema emphasizes two trajectories: humanward (in the prophetic, incarnational assumption of humanity) and Godward (in the priestly passive and kingly active obedience of Christ). The kingly active trajectory touches on the sinward trajectory or cosmic dimension that I have named, but it is primarily described in relation to the will of the Father. This is not necessarily inaccurate, but it may influence an imbalance, particularly regarding the agency of the Persons of the Trinity. Torrance’s view is firmly rooted in Reformed tradition and accordingly sees both the passive and active obedience of Christ as imputed to us rather than inferred or infused.<sup>44</sup> However, I find the notion of Christ’s passive obedience problematic since, as Studebaker says, Jesus’ “death on the cross was not a passive act.”<sup>45</sup> And Studebaker also brings much-needed attention to the agency of the Spirit in creation, redemption, and incarnation.<sup>46</sup> Note also that Torrance’s Reformed view describes each office as an aspect of *redemption*, while my three-dimensional, relational view considers dimensions of *reconciliation*, which

44 See T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 90; cf. Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 74. The problem here is that “[i]mputed righteousness does not change anything in believers in Christ” (Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 58). I view the righteousness of God as an essential to the new nature of human beings who are new creations in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

45 Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 69; cf. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 74.

46 See Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 40.

is a more broad and explicitly relational concept that, in terms of our relationship with God, includes redemption.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Ministry of the Cross in the Life and Ministry of Christ and the Church**

For followers of Christ, the necessity of participating in Christ's ministry of the cross is made explicit by Jesus himself in the synoptic Gospels: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23; cf. Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34). Note that, in Luke's version, this is a daily, ongoing undertaking, and it begins before the crucifixion itself. Thus, Jesus' ministry of the cross is not limited to literal crucifixion, but rather is part of the lifestyle of self-sacrificial submission to the will of God that involves crucifixion and resurrection. While death and resurrection are literal events in the life of Christ, they are also metaphorical in terms of Christ followers' repeated, ongoing submission to the Father in Christ through the power of the Spirit. We endure "deaths" every day, and we enter into new life in Christ. While the cross may signify suffering in general at the point that Jesus gives this call in the Gospel narratives, it takes on particular, definitive Christological meaning after the historical events of the death and resurrection of Christ, with implications for the church as the body of Christ. Therefore, the call of Christ to enter into the ministry of the cross is an invitation to have suffering and death transformed from meaningless oppression to Christ-centred fellowship, which always has the hope of joy and glory set before it (cf. Col 1:27; Heb 12:2).<sup>48</sup>

As stated earlier, the ministry of Christ, including the ministry of the cross, does not involve appeasing a vengeful God or satisfying an otherwise lacking need in God (for blood or anything else).<sup>49</sup> Instead, the ministry of the cross is a costly part of the ministry of reconciliation. In 2 Cor 5:16–21, Paul explicitly describes Christ's ministry of reconciliation in which we now participate:

47 Torrance provides attention to atonement as justification, reconciliation, and redemption in separate chapters (*Atonement*, 97–200). While I agree with his description of reconciliation as atonement in the "fullest personal sense" (137), as the "pure act of God's love" (145), and as "the full outworking of the hypostatic union" (149), I disagree with the forensic, juridical, and transactional basis he posits for this reconciliation. Note also that Torrance ends his discussion of redemption with explicit attention to reconciliation (198–200). I argue that the relational nature of atonement as reconciliation is both the origin and telos (cf. Rev 1:8, 17–18; 21:6; 22:13; Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 8).

48 As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "By His passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive passion" (Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori, 1994), §1505).

49 A full treatment of the notion of Christ (the Son) appeasing or satisfying God (the Father) is not within the scope of the paper. For a view of Christ's crucifixion that addresses such penal views and does not involve satisfaction of a retributive notion of justice see Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, ch. 4, "Crucifixion," 56–76.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

It is important to note that God (the Father) is not being reconciled *to us* through Christ (as a retributive notion of atonement would suggest); instead, Paul repeatedly stresses that we and the world have been reconciled *to God* through Christ (cf. Col 1:20). Put differently, the reconciliation with God is necessary because of a problem in humans, not a deficit within God. Reconciliation with God happens through Christ because there is no other way for us to be freed from sin, begin to understand God's love, and be able to repent and approach God appropriately in order for relational reconciliation to happen, for communion to be restored. As Robert Jenson says, "humankind is in fact alienated from God and . . . the work of the incarnation . . . is to reconcile us to him. . . . [I]n Scripture it is never God who is reconciled to us; it is always God who reconciles us to himself."<sup>50</sup> This properly oriented view of reconciliation places the ministry of the cross within the ministry of the incarnation according to the relationship of the Father and Son in the Spirit. That is, through Christ we come to relate to the Father according to the way the Son has always communed with the Father in the Spirit—not through punitive legal transactions or economic exchanges, but in the eternal communion of love and life.<sup>51</sup> As Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Therefore, each dimension and its ministerial correlation will be discussed as an aspect of Christ's self-identification and his invitation to commune with the Father in him through the Spirit.

### *The Way: Objective Atonement & Christ Our High Priest as Perfect Confession*

Christ is not the instrumental mechanism of the Father's forgiveness, as some

50 Jenson, "How Does Jesus Make a Difference?" 203.

51 McLeod Campbell insists that we stand before God not on legal terms, but on the filial terms of restored relationship. John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement and Its Relation to Remission of Sins and Eternal Life*, ed. James B. Torrance (Cambridge: MacMillan, 1856; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 145.

objectively imbalanced or misoriented views claim.<sup>52</sup> Rather, as our high priest, Christ on the cross is and embodies the perfect human confession of sin to the Father. As John McLeod Campbell says, the Son takes the form of the “perfect confession of our sins” to the Father.<sup>53</sup> This is an essential yet at times neglected aspect of the objective dimension of atonement directed toward the Father. Torrance similarly describes both Christ’s high priesthood and apostleship as confession and witness:

In this particular passage [Heb 3:1–6] the work of Christ as Apostle and High Priest, both in the sense of “the Son over the House,” is described in terms of confession, *homologia*, a word which occurs in three other passages (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). In each case it sets forth primarily the confession made by the High Priest as he enters within the veil. It is the confession of our sin before God and the confession of God’s righteous judgement upon our sin. As Apostle Christ bears witness for God, that He is Holy. As High Priest He acknowledges that witness and says Amen to it. Again as Apostle of God He confesses the mercy and grace of God, His will to pardon and reconcile. As High Priest He intercedes for [humans], and confesses them before the face of God.<sup>54</sup>

The apostolic dimension will be addressed later, but for now Christ’s high priestly confession of sin should be understood as undertaken on our behalf by Christ so that we can subsequently participate in his perfect confession to the Father. As Studebaker says, “Christ’s priestly service . . . is not retributive, but restorative.”<sup>55</sup> Hebrews later says Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2). Hence, a crucial aspect of the faith that Christ pioneers or leads us into is perfect confession and true repentance.

While this aspect of Christ’s high priestly ministry is directed towards the Father, that does not mean that the Father—or the relationship of the Son and the Father—would be lacking something without such a confession. In terms of

52 See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 67–98; cf. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 57–58. Along with T. F. Torrance, here I follow C. H. Dodd’s interpretation of the ἵλασμός and ἱλάσσομαι word group in the NT (e.g., Heb 2:17; 1 John 4:17) as merciful purification, cleansing, or expiation rather than propitiation as Leon Morris argues. See C. H. Dodd, “*hilaskesthai*, its Cognates, Derivatives, and Synonyms in the Septuagint,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1931): 352–60; Leon Morris, “The Use of *hilaskesthai*, etc. in Biblical Greek,” *Expository Times* 62 (1951): 227–33.

53 McLeod Campbell, *Nature of the Atonement*, 118.

54 T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 12. However, as noted above, I disagree with Torrance regarding some aspects of Christ’s high priesthood.

55 Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 71.

God's eternal being, he does not need human confession any more than he needs human existence. However, our communing relationship with him, which he deeply desires, cannot rightly, properly, and fully be restored without an appropriate confession of sin: confession is a necessity of relational reconciliation. Pretending sin did not happen is not righteous or appropriate, so confession involves agreement with the Father's righteous judgement on sin: it must be overcome and removed. Thus, confessing sin and thereby entering into restored relationship takes sin seriously yet does not allow the relationship to be conditioned by it.

Significantly, God's forgiveness is not predicated upon confession—either Christ's or ours in Christ.<sup>56</sup> But it is, somewhat paradoxically, only through a proper understanding of our sin that we can more fully understand, experience, and live in the forgiveness of the Father. When Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34),<sup>57</sup> surely the Father's knowledge or memory is not what Jesus is calling into question, as if God is unable to see something Jesus can or as if he needs reminding. Rather, the statement is a type of dramatic irony that *reveals to us* that we do not truly know what we are doing: we do not even recognize much less properly understand sin, even as it involves the torture and murder of the Son of God. Mercifully, the more fully we understand what we are being forgiven for (sin), the more fully we appreciate God's forgiveness and the more fully we are reconciled to him. Therefore, the end result of a proper confession of sin is the worship of God in communion with God.

In terms of our participation in the cruciform confession of sin, the proper effect is never shame nor is it perpetual guilt and remorse. Instead, we move through appropriate guilt and remorse through Christ, who absorbs sin and enables our repentance not only to a state of but also to an experience of restored connection to the Father.<sup>58</sup> As a "holy priesthood" (1 Pet 2:4–5), we may also (along with the Father, in a sense) receive others' confessions (cf. Jas 5:16). This is a serious responsibility to be carried out in sacred confidentiality as we trust in the Father's forgiveness and healing. The other effect of confession is that when we more deeply understand the evil, alienating devastation of sin, we are more powerfully motivated by love not to cause more damage. Moreover, we will also take the alienating damage of sin in the lives of others and the world at large more seriously. By confessing sin in Christ, we participate in his death which frees us from continuing to live in sin (cf. Rom 6:1–4). Thus, Christ's high priestly

56 Cf. McLeod Campbell, *Nature of the Atonement*, 45.

57 Although this verse has a dubious textual origin (being absent from a variety of important early witnesses), Metzger believes that it was retained and later included because of its authentic origin as words of Christ. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 1994), 154.

58 Cf. McLeod Campbell, *Nature of the Atonement*, 118.

confession of sin is both liberating and restorative, while empowering and entrusting us with the ministry of reconciliation, including the cross.

*The Truth: Subjective Atonement & Christ Our Apostle and Prophet as Incarnate Expression*

As the Word made flesh (cf. John 1:14), Jesus is the incarnate expression of divine presence, love, and forgiveness, inviting us to reconciliation. The apostolic and prophetic ministry of the incarnate Son is embodied in its most naked and raw form on the cross. Michael Gorman puts it well: “Christ’s death for us both *demonstrates* and *defines* divine love. This divine love is the love of the Father who sends in love, the Son who dies in love, and the Spirit who produces the fruit of love in those hearts he inhabits.”<sup>59</sup> Once again, this incarnate message of love is the message of the Father’s love to humanity, not the message of the Son’s love for us which also changes the heart of the Father.<sup>60</sup> As Seamands says, “Jesus was merely revealing what has always been.”<sup>61</sup> Or in Gorman’s words: “the cross is the demonstration of God’s love and of the Son’s love, both of which become real by the action of their one Spirit.”<sup>62</sup> And as McLeod Campbell says, “the atonement must be the form of the manifestation of the forgiving love of God, not its cause.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the death of Christ is not instrumental in terms of conditioning the Father’s love for us or his stance towards us; rather, it is part of God’s incarnate expression of love.

However, in keeping with the theme of the revelation of divine identity in apostolic and prophetic ministry, Christ’s death is instrumental in our understanding of God’s love, for we would not be able to properly understand the Father’s love without the Son’s death. Referring to Matt 11:27, Purves says that “the ontological relation between the Father and Son in being and act [is] the sole ground of revelation and salvation.”<sup>64</sup> The Apostle John says, “We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). And again, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). Divine self-revelation in the midst of sin takes its most extreme form on the cross, and it addresses a human need: we cannot come to know God through our own devices. Instead, it is always the gracious

59 Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 73; emphasis original; see also his discussion of avoiding patricianism (8).

60 Purves paraphrases key problematic points in Calvin’s writing thus: “for Christ’s sake the Father has a change of heart, looking on us now with complete acceptance and love.” Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 121; cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (2 vols. London: James Clarke, 1962), 2.16.16; 3.2.24. In my view, positing a change of disposition within the Father but not the Son is not coherent Trinitarian theology.

61 Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, 60.

62 Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 74. Cf. John 5:19; 10:30; 17; Matt 11:27; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3.

63 McLeod Campbell, *Nature of the Atonement*, 45.

64 Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 22.

act of divine self-revelation through which we come to rightly know God.<sup>65</sup> It might be objected that such a brutal crucifixion is not necessary for us to know God's love.<sup>66</sup> Yet this reasoning—which is myopic at best and arrogant or ignorant at worst—fails to account for the depth of our need and the severity of our brokenness. Even among human relationships, it becomes clear to us who really loves us when we are suffering: we know those who suffer *with* us and *for* us truly love us the most. Therefore, God with us in suffering and death demonstrates that God's love is not removed and distant, but personal and intimate.

Similar to the confession of sin, there is a sort of paradoxical relationship between our brokenness and God's self-revelation of his character and love. Michael Knowles says that "divine revelation comes not because of [our] fidelity, but rather in light of its absence."<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, the "shocking good news" is that "unconstrainable divine mercy meets, but is not caused by, human need."<sup>68</sup> Thus, the message of divine love and grace embodied and proclaimed by Christ is the natural expression of the "exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3) that meets us in our profoundly broken need, but is not caused by our need since it is fundamentally God being God with us (cf. Matt 1:23). "Moreover," says Knowles, "given that it is God's nature to be merciful and forgiving, and to demonstrate saving compassion to those who are oppressed and broken, human failure provides the necessary backdrop for such qualities to emerge."<sup>69</sup> This is a truly redeeming characteristic of Christ's apostolic and prophetic ministry: the revelation of divine mercy, forgiveness, and saving compassion is not in spite of our failures but because of them. Again, God's mercy is not caused by human failure, but mercy is revealed most starkly in the midst of failure. Surely the murder of the Son of God is the rock bottom of human failure; yet in this ignorant atrocity God's love and mercy are revealed in their fullness through Christ on the cross.

As with the high priesthood of Christ, the apostolic and prophetic ministry of Christ inspires worship. As Knowles says, "it is precisely God's revelation of his gracious character that gives rise to worship."<sup>70</sup> And in terms of our participation in the apostolic and prophetic ministry of Christ, it seems obvious that in accordance with apostolic and prophetic ministry, the evangelism, preaching, teaching, and pastoring of the church are clear callings, all of which should reveal Christ and edify others with the love of God (cf. Eph 4:11–13). But before we participate in the expression of God's love, we must first experience and know God's love.

65 Cf. Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 34.

66 See Torrance's objections to a student's paper describing "the death of Christ simply as a demonstration of the love of God" (quoted in McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 187).

67 Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 46.

68 Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 46.

69 Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 46.

70 Knowles, *Unfolding Mystery*, 46.



Seamands calls “joyful intimacy” the “foundation of Trinitarian ministry.”<sup>71</sup> Essentially, this means that we must not only acknowledge the Son’s incarnate expression of the Father’s love, we must experience and abide in it as Jesus did such that “the Father’s love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit [who] communicates the Father’s approval and delight.”<sup>72</sup> It should not be surprising that we must first be filled with the love of God before we are able to share it with others.

But what of the ministry of the *cross*? One apparent aspect is that we must be willing to suffer and die with Christ in the midst of rejection and persecution. The most extreme outworking of this in the life and ministry of the church is literal martyrdom, which is the most uncompromising participatory witness of the love of God in Christ through the Spirit. Most modern Western Christians will not face this extreme, but we all face death. Therefore, it is the lived expression of hope in resurrection life throughout all seasons and stages of life<sup>73</sup> that gives voice to the church’s perennial chorus of the apostolic and prophetic ministry of the cross: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”<sup>74</sup>

*The Life: Cosmic Atonement & Christ Our King as Victorious Redemption*

The royal messianic ministry of Christ ransoms and redeems humans from evil, sin, and death into freedom and life in Christ through his body and blood, broken and poured out on the cross and resurrected from the grave. According to the Apostle John: “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). And the hymn in Rev 5:9–10 links the death of Christ, the Lamb, with the priesthood and reign of the saints:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God  
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they will reign on earth.

Thus, the pioneering high priestly and revelatory apostolic/prophetic ministries of Christ are intrinsically linked with and inseparable from his ministry of royal redemption and salvation.

It is especially important to accurately orient the cosmic focal point or trajectory of the royal dimension of Christ’s ministry for a well-balanced integrated

71 Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, 53–74.

72 Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, 64.

73 From a pastoral standpoint, it must be noted that hope in Christ does not exclude grief and mourning.

74 This is called the “Memorial Acclamation” in some liturgical contexts. Cf. Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 363.

view of atonement. In the Gospel of John, when Pilate asks what Jesus has done, Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish religious leaders. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). The origin and location of Christ’s royal authority is crucial as is the implication that the fundamental battleground for freeing humans from sin and death is not this world but rather the spiritual realm. The church is likewise involved in the same cosmic struggle: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).<sup>75</sup> Thus, the church participates in Christ the king’s cosmic victory not through bloodshed and violence, but through the shed blood of Christ which restores us to life.

This cosmic spiritual orientation helps make proper sense of much of the seemingly transactional or economic language in reference to atonement—specifically, *ransom* and *redemption*. The cosmic dimension of atonement is described as primarily directed towards sin or Satan, not the Father as if he were holding humans hostage. So any way that Jesus’ death “pays” for our freedom is not a transaction between the Father and Son, but rather a way of dealing with death itself. Note that this is not really a deal *with* death, but a way of *dealing with* death. Cosmic theories are often charged with imagining a dualistic conflict between God and the devil, which God eventually wins but at extreme lengths through the death of Christ.<sup>76</sup> While we may understandably balk at the extremity of Christ’s death, I suggest the severity of the event is not due to the nearly insurmountable magnitude of the power of demonic forces, but rather the depth of human suffering and brokenness and the revelation of God’s love in such a context (as discussed in the previous section).<sup>77</sup> And as Paul says, to those who are being saved, the cross of Christ is the power of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 24). Thus, the victory of Christ, the Prince of Peace (cf. Isa 9:6), in death as an expression of love for us is both more *powerful* and *relationally integrated* than a violent annihilation of evil.<sup>78</sup>

Another objection to some cosmic theories is that if God “tricks” the devil, then God is pictured as intentionally deceitful in some way.<sup>79</sup> However, this objection gives too much credit to the cosmic forces of evil. As John says: “The light

75 Here I assume the reality of evil spiritual beings, such as demons and/or Satan, as well as spiritual beings who serve God, such as angels.

76 See, for example, McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 16, 195–210.

77 Cf. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 68.

78 For a description of “divine Aikido” or “the way of peace” in “nonresistant combat,” see Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (2 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 2:767. Athanasius notes the need to unite Jews and Gentiles in Christ (*Incarnation of the Word*, §25; NPNF 2/4:49).

79 See McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 17, 195–210.

shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend or overcome it” (John 1:5).<sup>80</sup> Thus, God does not devise a scheme to deceive the cosmic powers of darkness; instead, God is God and cannot be either comprehended or overcome by evil.<sup>81</sup> This is also dignifying to humans since, as beings made in the image of God, we have the capacity to recognize God through the grace of God. Although demons might seem to recognize the identity of Christ in the Gospel narratives (e.g., Mark 1:21–28),<sup>82</sup> in the ancient context the attempts to name Jesus are actually confrontations since to know and use someone’s name was thought to give one power over them.<sup>83</sup> There are multiple levels of dramatic irony here;<sup>84</sup> and in each case, Jesus silences the demons, thereby demonstrating his power as well as their incomprehension and comparative impotence.

Regardless of one’s view on the spiritual reality of demonic forces, Satan, and so forth, the reality of evil, sin, suffering, and death in the world cannot be ignored. The royal ministry of Christ on the cross as “King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38) is God’s most direct and personal attention to this matter. However, Kathryn Tanner argues that *Christus Victor* is not a model of atonement because it fails to address the “mechanism of the atonement,” that is, *how* Christ defeats sin and evil.<sup>85</sup> As I have argued, the defeat of sin and evil is important, but it is only one aspect of a balanced view of atonement, which is better understood as the reconciliation of humans to God. Salvation comes through Christ’s presence with humanity in suffering and death which leads to resurrection life. Thus, the crucifixion is not fundamentally a mechanism of the defeat of sin and death so much as it is part of the divine assumption of humanity. Once again, the relational aspect is vital and the need is properly located in humanity, not God. Answering the question, “Why the Cross, of all deaths?” Athanasius says that “no other way than this was good for us.”<sup>86</sup> And as Hebrews says, “since the children share in blood and flesh, he [Christ] also in like manner shared in these same things, in order that through death he could destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and could set free these who through fear of death were subject to slavery throughout all their lives” (Heb 2:14–15). Thus, the destruction of death through the death of Christ is inextricably linked to not only our freedom from fear and death, but also

80 The Greek word καταλαμβάνω may refer to either *overcoming* or *comprehending*. Given the poetic context, a multivalent interpretation/translation is most fitting. Cf. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

81 Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 244.

82 Cf. McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 17.

83 See William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. F. F. Bruce, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 74.

84 Cf. Lane, *Gospel of Mark*, 40.

85 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 253.

86 Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, §25 (NPNF 2/4:49–50).

to God's presence with us as he shares in these sufferings. It is not the power of evil that makes it so, but the nature of God with us (as discussed above). As Henri Nouwen says, "cure without care is as dehumanizing as a gift given with a cold heart."<sup>87</sup> And he later says that "[c]ure without care makes us into rulers, controllers, [and] manipulators."<sup>88</sup> Therefore, in participating in the royal salvation of the ministry of the cross, we are not merely victors over sin in Christ, we are "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37), which includes trusting God and reaching out with God's love to one another in the midst of suffering and death.

The ministry of the cross must also be placed in the wider context of the incarnation of Christ and the eternal being of God. Jesus delivered people from demons, healed bodies, and even raised one from the dead throughout the course of his ministry before the crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, the cross and resurrection—which are not properly divisible—are rightly viewed as pivotal historical and spiritual events, but not as mechanisms for change within God. Hence, the cross and resurrection do not give God power over sin and death; rather, through the cross and resurrection, God gives us power over sin and death in union with Christ. Moreover, there is an eschatological horizon of hope that can be seen from the vantage point of the cross, for at Christ's return not only will death be defeated, it will be no more, and all that was stolen, killed, and destroyed will be restored in abundant life (cf. John 10:10). Thus, the restoration of life—which is God's way of exacting "retribution" on death itself—is the outworking of God's justice in the cosmos.<sup>89</sup>

Accordingly, the way Jesus ransoms or redeems us from captivity to sin is much like the way the Israelites are redeemed from slavery in Egypt.<sup>90</sup> Rather than the Pharaoh being paid off by God, the people of God leave Egypt with the wealth of the nation heaped upon them (cf. Exod 12:33–36). Thus, the "transaction" of redemption or ransom is decidedly one-sided rather than dualistic: not only can death not hold the life of Christ, but our lives are snatched away from the grave as well. It is important to keep in mind that the way God ransoms and redeems, loves and gives, and so forth, is categorically different than the world's ways (cf. Isa 55:8–9; John 14:27).

The church participates in the cosmic and royal dimensions of the ministry of the cross as royal ambassadors of reconciliation in the world (cf. 2 Cor 5:20) and as coheirs with Christ in the kingdom of God (cf. Rom 8:17). And although this

87 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1998), 32.

88 Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 36.

89 Cf. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 67. The presence of Christ with us in suffering and death as well as the hope of eschatological resurrection life respond to the concern that evil still persists.

90 Cf. Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (Pasadena: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015), 244–48.

may involve a war-like struggle at present in that we continue to sin and suffer dehumanizing hardships and death, as noted above, we do not war against flesh and blood (cf. Eph 6:12). However, in Christ we may help to save, heal, and reconcile flesh and blood humans, as Jesus did in his life and ministry. This is not a triumphalistic prosperity gospel, yet it does recognize the power of God in the midst of present suffering while emphasizing the need to trust that God is, in fact, the supreme, uncontestable creator and ruler of the universe.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, once again, worship of God, who provides hope, is an essential response to the royal cosmic dimension of the ministry of the cross.

## Conclusion

It has been a methodological assertion in this paper that in order to speak faithfully about God, we must first know God; we must encounter him relationally. And more than speaking faithfully about God, it is the task of the church to introduce the world to God, to participate in offering a relational encounter with God.<sup>92</sup> Toward this end, this paper sets forth a three-dimensional and relational view of the atonement. John 14:6 is helpful in summing up this view: Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In his high priestly confession, Jesus is the way for us to approach the Father, rather than remaining alienated, distant, and afraid in sin. In his apostolic and prophetic incarnate expression of divine love, Jesus is the truth of the revelation of the Father and his love so that we may no longer be deceived, confused, and ignorant in sin. And in the royal salvific redemption of Christ, we abide in the freedom of eternal life in submission to God, rather than being subject to sin’s slavery, suffering, and death. The way, truth, and life of Christ are not in conflict with one another, but rather constitute a succinct summary of his inseparably united identity and action in the world. This paper innovatively integrates and synthesizes the objective, subjective, and cosmic dimensions of atonement while relationally orienting them according to a coherent Trinitarian theology which emphasizes the creative love of God, who chooses to meet human needs and, more fundamentally, meet humans in their needs.

This paper has not attempted to address all angles or objections to the various views under consideration; instead, it has focused on some of the ways the life and ministry of the church participate in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, especially the ministry of the cross. Considering the resurrection and Pentecost, for

91 See David Courey, *What has Wittenberg to Do with Azusa? Luther’s Theology of the Cross and Pentecostal Triumphalism* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 256.

92 H. R. Mackintosh observes that most people do not believe in Christ because of an “irrefutable argument,” but because of an “irresistible impression,” usually on the conscience. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God* (London: SCM, 1929; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 56; cf. Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement*, 245.

example, would help move towards a more comprehensive view. And further attention to the notions of incorporation, (vicarious) representation, or substitution in regard to atonement is warranted to determine whether and to what extent the church might participate in the life and ministry of Christ.<sup>93</sup> As a brief concluding comment, we do not become Jesus, but we do become one with him (cf. John 14:20; 1 Cor 6:17). We do not participate in Christ's life and ministry as if we were Jesus himself, but we do participate in Christ's ministry in him through the Spirit.<sup>94</sup> Hence, the mystery of divine-human relations remains an important dimension to keep in mind. Nonetheless, in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father, the church participates in the confession of sin, the embodied expression of divine love, and the redemptive victory over sin and death for the sake of the world and to the glory of God.

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93 For a well-nuanced discussion of what might be *penal* and/or *substitutionary* about Christ's death, see McNall, *Mosaic of Atonement*, 99–107. Much like I have argued, Studebaker says Jesus' life was "substitutionary for the sake of participation" (Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, 69–72, 72 quoted). See also Leanne Van Dyk, "How Does Jesus Make a Difference?" in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 215–18.

94 Cf. Studebaker, *Spirit of Atonement*, esp. 17–39.