O Sweet Exchange: The Cross of Christ in the Drama of Reconciliation[1]

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Christ for Us: Jesus' Death and Atonement Theories

Christ, the Apostle Paul proclaimed, died "for us." The life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the Nicene Creed affirms, was "for us and for our salvation." How, though, is Jesus' death "for us" and how is it "for our salvation"? Surprisingly, concerning a question that would seem central to the Christian gospel, Paul offered relatively little by way of an exact answer. And the Nicene Creed, the doctrinal standard of the church catholic, says no more than that Christ was "crucified" and "died." The brevity of both scriptural witness and creedal tradition on the precise meaning of the vicarious function ("for us") and saving purpose ("for our salvation") of Jesus' death has left the question open for debate. Only when we get to the Protestant confessions of the Reformation era do we find definitive statements on the specific meaning of Jesus' death.[2]

Down the centuries, Christian tradition has gone beyond Scripture and creed to fill in the details by formulating various ways to explain the vicarious function and saving purpose of Jesus' death—atonement theories, we call them. These theories include Irenaeus's "recapitulation" theory (2nd C.); Gregory's "ransom" theory (4th C.); Anselm's "satisfaction" theory (11th C.); Abelard's "moral influence" theory (12th C.); and Calvin's "penal substitution" theory (16th C.).[3] Such theories make sense of Jesus' death within a framework of assumptions that explain the cross as the necessary and sufficient link between us and our salvation: God-in-Christ has done

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[1] This essay draws together and carries forward some elements from my book, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). My thanks to two anonymous reviewers of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[2] Concerning the creedal tradition and confessional statements on Jesus' death, see *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 95-108.

[3] For an excellent study of the various atonement theories, see Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

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through the cross what we needed for our salvation but could not do for ourselves. All atonement theories agree on that general statement, even as they diverge on the details. Each theory offers something of value, even though we must carefully scrutinize it to see whether it utilizes assumptions that obscure more than clarify the cross.[4]

In this article I will focus on penal substitution, by far the most popular atonement theory among Protestant Christians today and the stuff of many a Sunday sermon.[5] The logic of penal substitution might be presented in chiastic ("X") form:

> Sin violates God's law and offends God's person, such that human sinners become objects of God's wrath.
>
> > God's law decrees that death is the penalty for sin, such that death for sin is necessary to satisfy God's justice and propitiate God's wrath.
> >
> > > If God and humans are to be reconciled, therefore, the wrath of God must be propitiated and the law of retribution must be satisfied in such a way that saves humans from death—and thus the penalty of death for sin must be paid by a substitute for sinners.
> >
> > God's love sends Jesus to pay the penalty for sin (penal) by dying in place of sinners on the cross (substitution) in order to satisfy God's retribution and thereby propitiate God's wrath.
>
> Now that the penalty of death for sin has been paid by the substitution of Christ for sinners, the law of retribution has been satisfied and the wrath of God has been propitiated—and thus God and humans can be reconciled.

The logic of this theory is driven by the assumed necessity that God

[4] Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, helpfully distinguishes between what is helpful and what is problematic in each theory, while Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), show how various atonement theories effectively obscure "the scandal of the cross."

[5] Perhaps the best exposition of the penal substitution view is John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986). For an extended defense of penal substitution, see Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007).

must satisfy retributive justice, in order to propitiate God's wrath, as the prerequisite of reconciliation.[6]

As an abstract theory, penal substitution is surely logical, given its assumptions. Those assumptions, however, tend to obscure more than clarify. First, consider the purposes of God. God's motivation for sending his Son, the gospel says, is not God's need to propitiate his wrath but God's love for the world: on account of this love, God sent the Son not to judge the world but to save it through the Son (John 3:16-17). The penal substitution theory does affirm that God saves sinners on account of love, but it puts God's wrath between God's love and saving sinners, necessitating Jesus' death to propitiate God in order that they might be saved. By framing God's purpose this way, the primary emphasis of penal substitution remains on God's wrath. Likewise, consider the cross of Christ. Jesus' death demonstrates, Paul writes, not that God must exact retribution for sin but that God loves even sinners: on account of God's love for us while we were still sinners, Christ died in order to rescue us from sin and reconcile us to God (Rom. 5:6-11). The penal substitution theory does affirm that Jesus' death demonstrates God's love, but it frames the work of God's love to save sinners by the necessity of God's law to require retribution. By framing Christ's act of atoning grace in this fashion, the legal logic overshadows the heart of the gospel—the love of God in the death of Jesus for sinners' salvation.[7]

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[6] This is especially so in the classic presentations of penal substitution by Charles Hodge in the 19th C. and J.I. Packer in the 20th C. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1940), 488-517, and J.I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," in J.I. Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J.I. Packer* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998), Vol. I, 85-123. For a critical assessment of Hodge's view, see Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 103-19, and Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 140-50. On satisfaction of justice and propitiation of wrath as the twin pillars of penal substitution, see my *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 85-90.

[7] These brief critical observations on penal substitution raise further questions that cannot be addressed here. For a thorough examination and careful critique of penal substitution on biblical-theological grounds from an orthodox perspective, see *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 83-327, and my article, "Entrusting Ourselves to the One Who Judges Justly: Proclaiming the Cross in a World of Insecurity," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 42, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 17-25. For a constructive effort to redress the shortcomings of penal substitution, see I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (London: Paternoster Press, 2007).

My aim here is to recover a perspective from which the church can, with conviction and clarity, proclaim the cross of Christ as the love of God for the reconciliation of sinners. To that end, I seek to retrieve two motifs by which orthodox theologians of the early church sought to explicate Jesus' death "for us and for our salvation." These motifs, each of which contrasts with the penal substitution theory, have continuing value for interpreting and proclaiming the gospel of God and sinners reconciled in Christ. I will use them to exposit a pair of passages, one from the Gospel of Luke and the other from an epistle of Paul.

Retrieving Ancient Motifs for Interpreting Jesus' Death

Christ Takes Our Place: Divine-Human "Exchange"

The first motif is the notion of the "exchange" of God-in-Christ and humanity through the Incarnation for our salvation. The germ of this motif is already evident in the apostolic writings of the New Testament. So Paul: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9),[8] and Peter: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the unrighteous for the righteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). By the Incarnation, Christ voluntarily takes the place of humanity in the "poverty" of our natural condition and sinful situation, and does so on our behalf—the "rich" one for the "poor" many, the righteous one for the unrighteous many—so that by his solidarity and suffering with us, through his life, death, and resurrection, he might rescue us from sin and reconcile us to God. These apostolic formulations have a three-part structure: Christ identifies as one with us by taking on ("assuming") the mortal conditions of human existence (solidarity); he acts on our behalf by taking on ("assuming") the moral liabilities of human sin (exchange); and he rescues us from sin and reconciles us to God (redemption).[9]

This motif is prominent in a famous passage from the 2nd-C.

[8] All Scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV.

[9] See *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 340-42. Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), proposed the term "interchange" to characterize this phenomenon. I concur with Hooker that "interchange" is more suitable than "exchange," but I use the latter expression here because it is used in translating the tradition that I want to retrieve.

document known as the Epistle to Diognetus:

> Accordingly, when our iniquity had come to its full height, and it was clear beyond all mistaking that retribution in the form of punishment and death must be looked for, the hour arrived in which God had determined to make known from then onwards His loving-kindness and His power. How surpassing is the love and tenderness of God! In that hour, instead of hating us and rejecting us and remembering our wickedness against us, He showed how long-suffering he is. He bore with us, and in pity He took our sins upon Himself and gave His own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy for the wicked, the Sinless for sinners, the Just for the unjust, the Incorrupt for the corrupt, the Immortal for the mortal. . . . O sweet exchange! O unsearchable working! O benefits unhoped for![10]

This ancient motif of Christ "for us" contrasts in two significant respects with the modern theory of penal substitution. First, God designs the Incarnation, by which the exchange of Christ and humanity for our salvation is accomplished, not in order to satisfy the law of retribution for sin but in spite of it: we *did* deserve punishment for our sins and we *should* have expected retribution from God—*but* God-in-Christ has acted to transcend retribution for the sake of our redemption, saving us from punishment by rescuing us from sin. Second, God's motivation to forego punishment of sinners by forbearance of our sin in Christ is nothing other than God's "surpassing love"—indeed, God's retribution-transcending act of redemption in Christ through the cross is the distinctive disclosure of God's patience with and fidelity toward humanity.

The exchange of God-in-Christ and humanity resounds throughout the writings of the early church on the meaning of the Incarnation as God's work for our redemption, which was called the "economy" or "plan" of salvation (cf. Eph. 1:10, 3:9). This motif was given succinct expression by Irenaeus: the Son of God did "become what we are, that He might bring us

[10] Epistle to Diognetus, ch. 9, in *Early Christian Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 147-48.

to be even what He is Himself."[11] Irenaeus's formulation was echoed by later writers. Athanasius (4th C.): "For he was incarnate that we might be made god."[12] Gregory of Nazianzus (4th C.): "Man and God blended . . . . They became a single whole . . . in order that I might be made God to the same extent that he was made man."[13] Cyril of Alexandria (5th C.): "he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his."[14] And Maximus the Confessor (7th C.):

> By his gracious condescension God became man and is called man for the sake of man and by exchanging his condition for ours revealed the power that elevates man to God through his love for God and brings God down to man because of his love for man. By this blessed inversion, man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization.[15]

When these ancient writers speak of us being "made god by divinization," they do not mean that we become literally divine any more than the doctrine of Incarnation means that God became simply human. Rather, they are stating in succinct terms the idea of *theosis*. The notion is that through the redemptive work of the Incarnation, by which God-in-Christ took on ("assumed") our human nature, we are restored and completed in our human nature according to the likeness of God in Christ so that we "may become participants in the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

This motif of redemptive solidarity by divine-human exchange through the Incarnation, although long neglected in Western Christianity, has remained central in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Bishop Kallistos Ware writes:

> The Christian message of salvation can best be summed up in terms of *sharing*, of solidarity and identification. . . . Christ's

[11] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, in Phillip Schaff, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 526.
[12] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 107.
[13] Gregory of Nazianzus, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), Oration 29.19, 86.
[14] Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 59.
[15] Maximus the Confessor, Ambiguum 7.2, in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 60.

> Incarnation is already an act of salvation. By taking up our broken humanity into himself, Christ restores it. . . . The Incarnation, it was said, is an act of identification and sharing. God saves us by identifying himself with us. . . . The Cross signifies, in the most stark and uncompromising manner, that this act of sharing is carried to the utmost limits. . . . "The unassumed is unhealed": but Christ our healer has assumed into himself everything, even death. . . . Christ's suffering and death have, then, an objective value: he has done for us something we should be altogether incapable of doing without him. At the same time, we should not say that Christ has suffered "instead of us," but rather that he has suffered *on our behalf*. . . . Christ offers us, not a way *round* suffering, but a way *through* it; not substitution, but saving companionship.[16]

It is thus not only by the cross, nor even by the cross and resurrection, but by way of the Incarnation as a whole—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—that we are saved: through the Incarnation, God-in-Christ identifies with us in the limits of our humanity and takes upon (or "assumes" into) himself the consequences of our sin through his suffering in life and death on the cross in order to redeem us from sin and restore us to life through his resurrection.[17]

God Becomes Human: Divine "Dilemma"

The second motif is the notion of the divine "dilemma." Why would God become human in the first place? Why would God design such an "economy" of salvation? The notion of the divine dilemma was first articulated as an apologetic answer to these questions.

Athanasius, in his classic treatise *On the Incarnation* (4th C.), put forth the most famous explanation of this dilemma.[18] Although God had

[16] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way,* rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 73, 78-79, 82 (original emphasis), qu,oting Gregory of Nazianzus ("The unassumed is the unhealed").

[17] For further explication and elaboration of the idea of divine-human exchange in Christ, see *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 339-59.

[18] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chaps. 2-10. Athanasius' account is echoed by Cyril, *On the Unity of Christ*, 125-26.

created the human being in his own image for the purpose of enjoying communion with God, the human being had by free choice turned from God and fallen into sin, making himself liable to corruption and death. God could not abandon the human being to descend into oblivion even by his own disobedience; for then the work of God's Word would end in vain, which would be unworthy of God, who is true to his Word and faithful to his creation. Neither could God simply overlook the sin of his creatures; for then God would appear lax concerning his own law, which also would be unworthy of God, who is holy and just. What, then, was God, who is good, to do? How could God act to save his creation in a manner consistent with his character? God thus designed a "working" or "economy" both worthy of God and sufficient to save. God willed that the Word by whom the world was made should become human in order that, by the incarnate Word's righteous obedience on behalf of all humanity, God might rescue humanity from sin and death and restore humanity to righteousness and life, and so complete God's original purpose. Athanasius' account incorporates the motif of divine-human exchange: the Word of God became human in order that humans might be restored to God.[19]

Like the first motif, this one also contrasts with the modern penal substitution theory. Athanasius' classic explication affirms that God designs the economy of the Incarnation not to satisfy the demand of punishment for sin but to provide an *alternative* to punishment through Christ's life, death, and resurrection as a means of redemption. At the same time, Athanasius does not consider God-in-Christ's work of redemption by divine-human exchange as an alternative to *justice*. Indeed, God designs the exchange as a means of doing justice towards human disobedience in a manner consistent with God's character and faithfulness. God's justice works through the redemptive economy of Christ's Incarnation to put things aright. By means of the exchange, God works to reconcile humanity to God by renewing the divine image in humanity and restoring humanity to its proper place in the created order. In Athanasius's account, not only does God's justice not consist essentially in retributive punishment, it serves a restorative function.

[19] For further exposition of Athanasius' account, see *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 362-66, and Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 169-93.

The Obedience of Christ in the Economy of Salvation

Before proceeding, we must not misconstrue the economy of salvation by means of divine-human exchange through the Incarnation. Especially when looking through the lens of the penal substitution theory, our mental vision tends to focus solely on Jesus' death as the sum total of God's salvation: Jesus' death saves sinners because Jesus "pays the penalty" for our sin by dying "in our place" on the cross. This way of seeing things overlooks the fact that, when explicating the economy of salvation, early Christian writers place their emphasis, not on Jesus' death by itself but on Jesus' *obedience* throughout the Incarnation, in life and death.

In Athanasius's account, "the works of the body" performed by Christ in obedience to God serve an essential function in the renewal of the human being according to the "image of God."[20] Likewise, in Cyril's account, Christ's self-emptying assumption of the natural limitations of the human condition underwrites both the soterial and exemplary functions of the Incarnation.[21] Christ's obedience, even as far as the extremity of death, is not only the undoing of human disobedience before God but also the model for human obedience to God. Cyril writes:

> The Word of God the Father . . . appeared to us in our likeness bringing help to our human condition in myriad ways . . . for us to have the beneficial knowledge of how far the limits of obedience should extend, by what wonderful ways it comes, how great is its reward, and what form it has. This was the reason Christ became our model in all these things. . . . [22]

According to both Athanasius and Cyril, the economy of salvation through the divine-human exchange of the Incarnation unifies God's salvation and human ethics: Jesus' obedience is both the means of reconciliation of humanity to God and renewal of human nature (salvation), and the normative example for human conduct (ethics). In this regard, Athanasius and Cyril were consciously following the lead of the Apostle Paul.

In Romans 5:12-21, Paul recapitulates the history of humanity from

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[20] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chaps. 11-19.

[21] Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 101-106.

[22] Ibid., 102.

Adam to Christ, contrasting the old era of humanity "in Adam" and the new era of humanity "in Christ." We might represent his account as follows:

OLD ERA ("IN ADAM")	NEW ERA ("IN CHRIST")
• Creation of the human being ("first Adam") • Sin by Adam, death through sin • Condemnation and death to all because all sin • Sin rules in death ("Dominion of sin")	• Incarnation of Christ ("second Adam") • Obedience of Christ on behalf of all • Justification and life to all by Christ's obedience • Righteousness rules in life ("Dominion of grace")

Paul compacts all of this into consecutive, parallel formulas (Rom. 5:18-19):

> Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all,
> so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.
> For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,
> so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

He juxtaposes Adam's disobedience resulting in condemnation and death "for all," and Christ's obedience resulting in justification and life "for all." According to the penal substitution theory, we would have expected Paul to juxtapose human disobedience and Christ's death—Christ's death "pays the penalty" for all sinners. However, in speaking here of "one man's act of righteousness" Paul has more in mind than the cross; indeed, he does not specifically mention Christ's death. In Paul's view, it is not Christ's death by itself that saves us from sin. It is by Christ's complete obedience *in life and death*, his obedience "to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8), an obedience of one on behalf of all, that many are made righteous "in Christ."[23] And it is Christ's self-emptying service and humble obedience, not only his suffering and death, that has been rewarded by God with resurrection and exaltation, and that will be recognized by all creation in the confession of Christ as Lord (Phil. 2:6-11). Whereas penal substitution sees an exchange between humanity's

[23] Richard Hays, "Made New by One Man's Obedience: Romans 5:12-21," in ed. Mark D. Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 96-102.

sin and Christ's death as the means of atonement, Paul sees redemption as achieved by an exchange of disobedience/death for obedience/life: Adam's disobedience is exchanged for Christ's obedience, with the result that death by sin "in Adam" is exchanged for life by righteousness "in Christ."[24]

Retrieving these two ancient motifs— the divine dilemma resolved by the Incarnation, and the divine-human exchange through the Incarnation—can serve the contemporary church in two ways: by giving us a window onto the work of God-in-Christ "for us and for our salvation" that better reflects the gospel than does the penal substitution view, and by helping us to proclaim the gospel more effectively to a world needing reconciliation to God. I will now use these two motifs as a pair of lenses to bring into focus God-in-Christ's work of reconciliation on account of God's steadfast love, as seen in two Scripture texts: Jesus' parable of "the lost son" (Luke 15:11-32) and Paul's "message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:16-21).[25]

The Drama of Reconciliation: Father and Son

The parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-32) is perhaps the best known and most loved of Jesus' parables. We readily see Jesus' point in telling the story: the father presents a picture of God, who compassionately seeks to reconcile sinners and restore the lost; so great is God's love that God, and all heaven, rejoices when even one lost sinner returns to the family of God (15:7, 10). This parable is so familiar that we might be tempted to take the father and his forgiveness for granted—and fail to see what the father has done for his son and what love has cost him. To gain the full measure of this love, let us retrace the drama, observing parallels with the motifs of dilemma and exchange.[26]

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[24] See also *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 289-91.

[25] The Revised Common Lectionary pairs these passages for the fourth Sunday of Lent during Year C.

[26] My parsing of the drama in this parable has been helpfully informed by Werner Mischke, *The Father's Love: A Story Told by Jesus Christ, Luke 15:11-32* (Scottsdale, AZ: Mission ONE, 2012) and by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 156-65. I assume that the reader is generally familiar with the parable and thus I do not cite it in total. For our present purposes, I restrict our attention to the relationship between the father and the younger son.

The Son's Demand (Luke 15:11-12a)

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'" What is the younger son demanding of his father? Why is his demand offensive? He is asking for his part of the inheritance—he wants what he has coming to him, and he wants it now rather than later. This may seem a bold and brash thing for a young man to ask of his father, but he is asking only for what is his, after all, which seems fair. Except he's not asking for what is his now but for what is supposed to be his in the future—what will be rightfully his only once his father has died. The son is thus asking his father in effect to declare himself dead so that his property can be distributed. Moreover, while claiming what his father owes him, he is neglecting what he owes his father. As the younger son, he has the customary obligation to care for his father until his father dies; by taking now what would belong to him only after his father's death, he is abandoning his obligations. The son's demand dishonors his father—and thus disobeys God (Exod. 20:12). The son presents a picture of humanity that has dishonored God by disobedience.

What is a father to do in the face of such an insulting, presumptuous demand? Certainly, he has no obligation to say yes, and perhaps even has an obligation to say no. At the very least, conventional wisdom would say, the father should give that rude boy the rod to teach him who's who and what's what (Prov. 13:24)! We might even go further: Because the son is in effect asking his father to declare himself dead so he can have his property while abandoning his obligations, perhaps the father should do likewise and declare the son dead to him, deny him his inheritance, and abandon his obligations to the son. Perhaps the father, to defend his honor, should declare that his son is no longer worthy of the family name and simply throw him out of the house.

The Father's Dilemma (Luke 15:12b)

Far from refusing or rejecting him, the father accedes to his son's demand. Why? The demand presents a dilemma for the father. We might imagine his internal conversation: *"On the one hand, if I declare that my dishonorable son is no longer a son to me, then I'm saying that I'm no longer a father to him. I would deny my obligations as a father and so prove false to myself. I can't do that! On the other hand, if I don't defend my honor against my son's*

offense, then I'm taking that dishonor upon myself. If I don't disown my son for dishonoring me, then I risk dishonoring myself. To remain true to myself as a father, I must remain loyal to my son. But to remain loyal to him, I must be willing to bear the burden of his dishonor. Can I do that?"

The father thus faces a dilemma similar to the one God faces in Athanasius's account: What is a good father to do? The choice is about what kind of father he is to be. The father's commitment to his son despite all reflects what the poets and prophets of Israel called *hesed*, the steadfast loyalty characterizing God's love for his people. *Hesed* is God's characteristic disposition to remain true to himself and faithful to his promises despite his people's disloyalty and disobedience. *Hesed* is thus God's moral resolve to bear the burden of keeping faith with an unfaithful people. By choosing to keep true to both himself and his son, the father displays God's steadfast love for his people.

The choice to be a faithful father toward an unfaithful son is very risky and, potentially, very costly. To divide the estate and allow the land to be liquidated more than puts the family farm at risk of failure; it puts the family name in jeopardy of dishonor. In a culture in which land is allotted by family and belonging to the people means belonging to the land, to lose the ancestral allotment is to risk disgrace.

By acceding to his son's demand yet remaining loyal as a father, the father takes a great burden upon himself. If the son's venture with the father's property does not go well, the greater blame for the son's sins will fall on the father, not the son. While the son might be forgiven the impudence of youth, the father in the wisdom of age has no excuse—he knows what is at stake. The father, in order to remain steadfast toward his son, not only endures dishonor from him but chooses to risk disgrace on his behalf. Here we see the scandal of the story, embedded at the beginning: the father, on account of his steadfast love, is willing to suffer shame for his son's sake. This parallels the scandal of grace displayed at the cross: God-in-Christ willingly suffers shame in order to demonstrate love by dying for the undeserving—the weak, ungodly, sinners (Rom. 5:6-8).

The Son's Descent (Luke 15:13-16)

As we expect, things do not go well with the son. Having denied his obligations to his father and dissolved the bonds of loyalty to his family, he

leaves home and lives for himself. He pursues what pleases him as far as he can, but his excursion into excess leaves him empty. He worships his wants with all his heart, but his idolatry of indulgence leaves him indigent. Having aspired to be the master of his life, he is now reduced to being a slave to his stomach. From dishonoring his father and denying his obligations, he descends into disgrace, defiling himself by pursuing a life worthy of the pigs he feeds, and degrading himself by envying the pigs their food. He now sits in a pit of shame he has dug for himself. Here the son pictures the plight of humanity ensnared by its own sin and needing a savior (Rom. 1:18-32).

What is the father's part in all this? The father lets his son go. This, too, is a deliberate choice—and it has its costs. The father could try to mitigate the foreseeable results of the son's foolishness. He could put the inheritance into a trust fund so the son can't spend it all, or he could send a servant to follow the son and keep an eye on him. But he doesn't. He allows his son the freedom to fail. He lets him live as he chooses and suffer the consequences.

However, the consequences are costly not only to the son. Although out on his own, he is never simply an independent agent acting only for himself. In a culture in which identity is inextricable from family, the honorable act of one member accrues to the honor of the whole family and the disgracefulness of one disgraces all. By continuing to claim his son as his own, the father therefore implicitly chooses to own the consequences of his son's choices; the sins of the son will exact a price on the father's honor. Here we see the full depth of the father's love: by remaining steadfast in loyalty, the father willingly assumes liability for his son's liberty. Here too we see foreshadowed the father's exchange with his son: in order to remain steadfastly faithful to him to the full extent of the son's unfaithfulness, the father must be willing to descend as deep in love as the son descends in dishonor. He must be willing, that is, to take his son's place in the pit of shame.

The Son's Return and the Father's Embrace (Luke 15:17-20)

The son realizes at last both the depth of his disgrace and the desperation of his situation. Although he has dug the pit into which he has fallen, he cannot help himself out of it and reclaim his place in his father's house. He can leave the pig pen behind, but the stench of shame will still cling to him. So he aims at something lower—to be taken back as a servant rather than a son—and

heads for home. While he has lost his claim to be recognized by his father as a son, the father remains free to reclaim him and restore him to his place in the family. For the father to do so, however, he must first remove the shame from his son—he must do for him what his son cannot do for himself. The father takes decisive action to do just that: as soon as he sees his son, he runs to him and embraces him. Before the great feast, the fatted calf, the sandals, the ring, even the fine robe—before all these things, we see what the father's steadfast love will cost him.

The son's return and the father's embrace take place not within the walled courts of the family home but out in the open space of the town square. Long before the son reaches home, his father runs to meet him. Evidently, the father has been watching and waiting for him. The neighbors have likely been watching and wondering about the father, and they probably have a firm opinion about what he should do to the son: shame him and shun him! No doubt they are ready to do their part to pronounce judgment on this disreputable son.

If the father is to restore his son to honor, he must first rescue him from the judgment of the neighbors. If and when his son returns, the father must be the first to reach him—before the neighbors hurl their taunts (and possibly their stones) at him. By embracing and thus owning his son in view of the neighbors, the father personally shields him from public shaming. In doing so, taking the part of one disgraced, the father puts himself in the position of disgrace. The neighbors' accusing cries—"Shame on him!"—directed toward the son are now redirected toward the father—"Shame on you!" By wrapping his son with himself, the father takes the disgrace upon himself, absorbing the shame of the son's sins into his own body and bearing the burden of shame for him. Here we see fulfilled the father's exchange with his son: the father takes the place of the one disgraced, taking his son's shame upon himself by taking his dishonored son into his arms.

The Son's Restoration by the Father's Grace (Luke 15:21-24)

The father now reconciles his son to himself and restores him to honor. After the son confesses his sin and unworthiness, but before he can offer to be a servant, the father reclaims him as his son and returns him to his place in the family. The robe and the ring signify that he is a full member of the father's

house—a son, not a servant. The feast with the fatted calf announces to all, family and neighbors, that the one once dishonored is now to be honored and made worthy of the family name.

The drama of father and son exhibits both the father's dilemma in dealing with his disobedient son and the father's exchange with him in the act of reconciliation. The father cannot disown him without becoming an unfaithful father; at the same time, he cannot overlook his son's disobedience without becoming an unjust father. On account of his steadfast love for his son, and to maintain his own integrity, he takes his son's place in disgrace so that, by his act of grace, he might rescue his son from shame and restore him to his place of honor. Thus the parable replicates the three-fold drama of the divine economy: remaining steadfast in love for his son to the full depth of his son's depravity (solidarity), and taking his son's place of dishonor by bearing the burden of his sin and shame (exchange), the father rescues his son from sin and shame and reconciles his son to himself, restoring him to the place of honor by his act of grace (redemption).[27]

The Drama of Reconciliation: God and Humanity

Having seen the father's love through the lenses of dilemma and exchange, we can now see that the reconciliation of father and son in the parable is a microcosm of the reconciliation of God and humanity as proclaimed by Paul's message. The drama of the father's steadfast love, costly choices, and reconciling actions presents a picture in miniature of what Paul means when he says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . . ; in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . . ." (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Humanity's Disobedience and God's Dilemma

Let us now return to the beginning of the whole story. God has created human beings with the purpose that he is to be their God and they are to be his people. To this end, God has given his children the obligations proper to God's people. Humans are to worship only God their creator, steward the land God has provided, and love their "brothers and sisters." At the same

[27] For further discussion of this parable as a counter-theme to retributive justice, see *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 382-86.

time, God has granted them the freedom to choose whether they will honor God or refuse their obligations. In fact, from the start we have refused our obligations as God's children and lived for ourselves: we have made other gods, plundered and spoiled the land, and murdered our kin. We have disobeyed and dishonored God—and disgraced ourselves. Seeking to be our own masters, we have only become slaves to sin.

God thus faces a dilemma like that faced by the father in the parable: What to do with disobedient and dishonorable children? Like the father, God makes two characteristic choices. First, God allows his children to go their own way; he gives them up to sin, letting them make their choices and suffer the consequences (Isa. 64:5-7; Ps. 81:11-12; Rom. 1:24-32). Second, God resolves to remain steadfast toward them, to love them always, no matter what: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness (*hesed*) to you" (Jer. 31:3); "I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:4; cf. Isa. 49:14-15; Jer. 31:20; Hos. 11:8-9). These deliberate choices, characteristic of God's loyal love, are costly to God: God grants his children the freedom to be unfaithful but commits himself to the burden of keeping faith with them.

Although God lets us go our own way, God never lets go of us in his heart; although giving us up to our sins, God never gives up on us, persisting in steadfastness, pursuing us with love even when we wander far away. Again and again God compassionately sends prophets to convict us of sin and call us back to faithfulness (cf. Jeremiah), graciously offers us a covenant of loyalty, and remains loyal to his covenant promises despite our repeated disloyalty (cf. Hosea). Finally, in fulfillment of those promises, God sends his own Son to bring his wayward children—his lost sheep—back into the fold of fidelity.

Christ's Exchange and Humanity's Reconciliation

In Christ, God, ever faithful, loves us to the very end, even to the shameful end of our worst sins—all the way to death, even death on a cross (Rom. 5:6-8; Phil. 2:6-8). The cross is God's compassionate and costly embrace of disobedient and disgraced humanity. As the father embraces his disobedient and disgraced son in open view, so God embraces his disobedient and disgraced children through the public display of the cross. As the father's act of love in reconciling his son to himself is costly to the father, so God's act

of love in reconciling humanity in Christ through the cross is costly to God. Embracing us in Christ through the cross, God takes our disgrace, removes it from us, and takes it upon himself in Christ. This is the scandal of the cross: by his death on our behalf, Christ voluntarily took our part, absorbing the shame of our sins into his body and bearing the burden of our shame; Christ became shame for us. Just as the father defended his son from the neighbors' accusations, taking their curses upon himself, so also Christ defended us from sin's accusation, taking it—the "curse" of sin—upon himself: Christ on the cross became accursed for us (Gal. 3:13).[28]

There is more. Because Christ bore the shame of our sins in his body on the cross, our shame was buried with his crucified body in the grave; and because God honored Christ for his faithfulness by raising him with a glorified body (Phil. 2:9-11), our shame was left behind in the grave. Whereas our sin and shame were crucified and buried with Christ, we have been raised to life and honor in him; through baptism, in which we participate in his death and resurrection, we have been rescued from death under the dominion of sin and restored to righteousness in the dominion of grace (Rom. 6:1-14).

Paul compacts all this into a single formula of divine-human exchange: "For our sake, [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Peter expresses this exchange motif in a similar formula: "[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). To draw the parallel with the parable, we might rephrase these formulas in terms of honor/shame: for our sake, God was willing that Christ, who was without shame, might bear our shame in his body and become shame for us, so that in him we might be freed from shame and become honorable unto God. On account of God's steadfast love and loyalty toward us, God was willing that Christ (at the cross) take our position of disgrace and descend into the pit of destruction we had dug by our own sins, in order that through him (by the resurrection) we might be rescued from our sinful and shameful

[28] Whereas Paul depicts Christ as taking the place of the accused, the penal substitution theory puts God into the position of the accuser and thus effectively separates God from Christ in the work of reconciliation. See Douglas M. Jones, *Dismissing Jesus: How We Evade the Way of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 157-71.

situation, and be restored to a position of righteousness and honor with God.

Here, then, is the good news of God and sinners reconciled in Christ: God, steadfast in love and loyalty toward a sinful and shameful humanity, has welcomed us home in Christ. We who were once dishonored have now been clothed in honor by Christ. Because he bore the disgrace of our sins on the cross and took it to the grave, we can leave it behind—it is dead and buried. Having been freed from slavery to sin through his death and resurrection, we may live for righteousness in the risen Christ, fulfilling our obligations as God's children and honoring God as our Father (Rom. 8:1-4). In Christ we are God's people made new—"a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), commissioned to "the ministry of reconciliation" in the name of Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Recapitulation

The ancient motifs of divine dilemma and divine-human exchange enable us to reframe the drama of reconciliation in Jesus' parable of the lost son and Paul's message of the cross, and to revision God-in-Christ's work of reconciliation, with two benefits for the contemporary church. First, as an alternative to the popular penal substitution theory, these motifs present a way of narrating the cross of Christ and proclaiming its saving power that keeps God's steadfast love in focus, and holds together the entire Incarnation—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—as a single economy of salvation. Second, it helps us to see the climax in the drama of reconciliation—the father's embrace of his dishonorable son, Jesus' death on behalf of disgraced humanity—not as God's satisfaction of the legal requirement of retributive punishment but as God's provision of a redemptive alternative to retribution. Recognizing that God-in-Christ's gracious alternative to retribution is not an alternative to justice enables us to revision God's justice through the cross as transcending retribution for the sake of redemption (cf. Rom. 3:21-26) and, accordingly, motivates a restorative vision for our own justice-doing.[29]

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[29] See *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, and Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).