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COVENANT ATONEMENT AS A WESLEYAN INTEGRATING MOTIF

R. Larry Shelton

In spite of the fact that Christian theology has found legitimate expression of the biblical emphasis on the atonement through a variety of theories, the Western Catholic and Protestant churches have tended to favor some form of a forensic penal view of the work of Christ. This has resulted in the replacement of the biblical interpersonal covenant understanding of a sacrifice as an obedient gift of love with an abstract forensic definition of a sacrifice as a justice-based penalty. This has tended to minimize the biblical portrayal of God’s nature of holy love which brings new vitality to the divine-human relationship. The biblical view of reconciliation as a restoration of regenerative interpersonal fellowship with God, or covenant renewal, is the theological foundation of the New Testament emphasis on salvation as wholeness in love, not merely as payment for sins in order to gain heaven. Particularly since the rise of Fundamentalism in the late 19th and early 20th century has the penal view risen to nearly exclusive prominence, so much so that Bill Hybels, pastor of one of the largest churches in America can say, “The penal substitutionary view of the atonement that Christ died as the penalty for our sins is the evangelical position on this issue.”

The Wesleyan theological tradition has increasingly been influenced by numerous Reformed concepts. An example of this shift is the exclusive emphasis on the penal substitutionary atonement theory developed by John Calvin that has become nearly universal among popular evangelical Christians, both Reformed and Wesleyan. Such views tend to interpret the work of Christ only as a punishment which assuages God’s wrath against humanity, thus releasing it from its death sentence for the treachery of Adam and his race. The thesis of this paper is that the use of a biblical covenant interpersonal understanding of Christ’s work of salvation as covenant renewal and restoration of the divine image is a more satisfactory hermeneutic for understanding the atonement,

1 Daniel Brunner, Report of Willow Creek Seminar program to George Fox Evangelical Seminary faculty, 2001.
particularly from a Wesleyan perspective, than are any of the other historical theories taken in isolation. Wesley himself thought in terms compatible with covenant ideas, although he did not develop that perspective as the integrating motif of his theology. This author believes that the use of covenant interpersonal categories allows the constructive development of a Wesleyan theological perspective that overcomes the weaknesses of the Reformed penal substitution theory, the eclectic quasi-Anselmian atonement views of Wesley’s satisfaction emphasis, as well as those in the Grotian governmental tradition. Furthermore, the pastoral problems of legalism, obsession with guilt, and spiritual disillusionment associated with the penal views call for different ways of presenting the atonement.

I. Influences on Wesleyan Atonement Theology

Wesley’s associates tended to gravitate toward the Grotian governmental view. However, Wesley himself tended to become somewhat more eclectic in his approach, moving in the direction of a more Anselmian satisfaction position that views Christ’s work as a payment of human indebtedness rather than as a penalty. It may be argued, however, that the divine requirement that moral indebtedness must be paid for by the death of an innocent God-Man amounts to the same thing as penalty. The first concern faced by Wesley and others who sought to adapt some form of the penal view to an understanding of Christ’s work of salvation was how to maintain the balance between divine initiative and human accountability in salvation. While the penal views focused almost exclusively on the objective work of propitiating God’s wrath so that the sinner might be released from the guilt and punishment of sin, a full biblical understanding of salvation should include an emphasis on both sanctification and growth in grace. Furthermore, the penal views focused on Christ’s role in being the substitute recipient of humanity’s capital punishment for its treachery in its disobedience of God’s clear commands in the Garden. This penal emphasis that deals only with the consequences of sin often results in what Dallas Willard calls “sin management,” rather than growth in grace. A Wesleyan view of atonement must ask the questions, “Can God do nothing with sin but forgive it? Can God not break its power as well?” The biblical and theological resolution of this concern rests

squarely in one’s interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement of Christ.

A number of Wesleyan theologians have expressed concern over whether Wesley’s modified Anselmian view of penal satisfaction is, in fact, adequate to support the soteriology he proclaims. While his associate, John Fletcher, held a more Reformed penal substitutionary view, many other Wesleyan theologians since the 18th century have sought other alternatives because of the Trinitarian and Christological implications of the penal view. H. Ray Dunning has argued convincingly that Wesley fought a continual battle against the implications of his atonement view. Other Wesleyans were drawn to some version of the Governmental view or the Christus Victor idea of Christ’s cosmic victory over the spiritual forces of Satan, thus liberating humanity from its enslavement. However, these governmental views have tended to reflect some form of the penal interpretation of the atonement, since the payment of a judicial penalty is necessary for the restoration of cosmic governmental order. Furthermore, a sobering number of Christians have chosen rather to abandon the idea of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the reconciliation between a lost humanity and a saving God. The tendency has been to reject not only the penal theories of atonement as some form of divine

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3 John Fletcher, Checks to Antinomianism (New York: Soule and Mason, 1819).
7 Ibid. Richard S. Taylor has attempted to revive a classical penal substitutionary position for Wesleyans in his book, God’s Integrity and the Cross (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1999). Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Kingswood Press, 1994), 108; Maddox argues that the Governmental concept is more moral influence in reverse, than it is forensic. Punishment is a deterrent that maintains moral order. However, it still requires punishment in order to normalize justice, and hence is forensic.
child or domestic abuse, but to identify the penal theory with the violence associated with Christ’s death, and abandon the entire concept of the atonement altogether, as Bishop Joseph Sprague and others, such as radical feminists Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, have done. Other non-Wesleyans in the pacifist tradition have attempted to develop, with problematic degrees of success, a non-violent concept of the atonement in an attempt to maintain its orthodox foundation in the death of Christ, but avoid the elements of violence that are associated with it. One of the more successful of these attempts is the Incarnational Theory developed by Robin Collins. He emphasizes Christ’s incarnational identification with humanity rather than his substitutionary absorption of the penalty for sin.

The use of the forensic imagery of the law courts as a template for organizing the biblical data on atonement and salvation seems like a legitimate motif. And it is certainly true that somehow through the cross of Christ, God puts us in the right in relationship to himself. Whether this “putting right” through Christ’s death can be most faithfully presented through Western Roman, or “Latin,” forensic models of civil and penitential law or through the interpersonal categories of covenant Law is the critical issue. Furthermore, making the theological and pastoral leap from the idea

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8 Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30; Green and Baker cite a significant list of articles and books by theologians who raise this issue, such as Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique (New York: Pilgrim, 1989). Green and Baker present a wide-ranging call for the recovery of appropriate models of the atonement that avoid the penal substitutionary liabilities.


of the penal death of Christ to spiritual formation and the sanctification process in the Christian disciple has also required an effort that has often been considered too great. This tendency to find the theological foundation for salvation in the various penal interpretations of the atonement is, I believe, in part responsible for the present sterility of holiness preaching in Wesleyan pulpits in America. It is not immediately apparent to the person in the pew (or the pulpit) that the death of Christ functioning to appease the divine wrath of God translates readily into living the Christlike life of love and peace and unconditional forgiveness. Instead, I believe the New Testament teaches that through Christ’s redemptive participation in every distorted and chaotic consequence that sin has brought to bear upon creation, humanity’s experience has been redeemed and transformed through its identification with Christ in his work of sacrificial covenant restoration of the image of God in the community of faith (Phil 2:1-11). In order to clarify the problems for Wesley’s theology that may be created by reliance upon the forensic penal approaches to interpreting the Atonement and to suggest valuable resources for spiritual formation, a brief critical analysis of key atonement models is in order.\(^\text{13}\)

### A. Classical Christian Models

**Recapitulation—Irenaeus**

Writing scarcely a hundred years after the Apostolic Age, Irenaeus established the earliest framework for Christian theology through the exposition of the central ideas of the Christian faith. He understands Christ’s work as identifying with and restoring humanity’s relationship to God in Christ. In Latin, the term *recapitulatio* literally means “reheading,” or “providing a new head,” in the sense of providing a new source or origin.\(^\text{14}\) Through his identification with humanity in his incarnation, Christ recapitulated, or “summed up in himself,” all of humanity, so that what humanity had lost in Adam (the image of God) could be recovered in himself.\(^\text{15}\) He says:

\[^{13}\text{Again, a much more comprehensive analysis is included in the author’s unpublished manuscript, Divine Expectations, which is available by request.}\]

\[^{14}\text{Roger Olson, The Story of Christian Theology (Downers' Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 74.}\]

\[^{15}\text{Olson, Story of Christian Theology, 74.}\]
He entered into our death so that as he was raised from death, we would be alive in him (Rom. 6; Eph. 2:5). He was identified with us in our death resulting from sin in order that we might become identified with him in his resurrection to new life. In other words, he became like us that we might become like him.\(^{16}\)

In restoring humanity to the image of God, Christ recovers our destiny of the vision of God and communion with him.\(^{17}\) Irenaeus says the entire redemptive work is accomplished by the Word through the humanity of Christ as his instrument, for it could not be accomplished by any power other than God himself. The obedience of Christ is thus not a human offering made to God from the human side, because from beginning to end God Himself is the effective agent who, through the Word of God incarnate, enters into the world and human experience, in order to reconcile it to himself. Atonement and incarnation are inseparably linked, as are the Father and Son, in this process.\(^{18}\) There is much here that can enrich the foundations for Wesley’s soteriology.

**Christus Victor—Gustaf Aulén**

Another prominent view of atonement that has more recently been attractive to some and which has its roots in ancient orthodox tradition is the dramatic, or classic, *Christus Victor* theory of Gustaf Aulén. Modifying the Latin ransom motif, he sees Christ in cosmic combat with the powers of darkness. Aulén sees the atonement not as a legal transaction or juristic sentence, as in the Latin and Swiss/German Reformed and Lutheran traditions, nor does he see Christ merely as an inspiring example of love, as in the Abelardian/Eastern Orthodox traditions. Instead, Christ is the cosmic champion who overcomes the evil forces that hold humanity in bondage. Christ has met the cosmic forces of evil on their own ground, in history where they were entrenched, in order to break

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\(^{18}\) Aulén, “Christus,” 33; see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 21.10; 22.4.
their power. Through his work we may sing, “In all this we are more than conquerors…” (Romans 8:37, KJV). In Christ, God “having disarmed the powers and authorities… made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15 NASV). Church of the Nazarene theologian William M. Greathouse calls this theory “one of the most influential treatments of the atonement to appear in our time.” He says further, “Aulén has done the church a service in rescuing the dramatic view of Christ’s work and restoring it to its rightful place as a New Testament representation of the atonement.”

B. Forensic Models

The forensic models of the atonement grew out of the Latin theology of Tertullian, Cyprian and others who developed the theology of the penitential system of the transfer of merits that the Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin objected to so strenuously. It was from the categories of Roman law that Western theology, which boasted more than its share of lawyers, drew the conceptual categories of the sacrament of penance and the ideas of justice viewed in terms of punishment, merit, satisfaction, and absolution. Roman legal theory and practice provided the vocabulary of the Latin penitential system. Even though Christ alone, not the believer, presented those merits in the Protestant understanding, the satisfaction of a divine legal accounting process still underlies the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement of Christ in the Protestant tradition. The idea of Merit is associated with the performance of that which is commanded, the observance of Law. The idea that superfluous merit can be transferred from one person to another comes in Cyprian, and the way is now prepared for the Latin theory of atonement (penal theory).

Satisfaction—Anselm

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21 Aulén, Christus, 78, 81-100. See Gunton, The Actuality of the Atonement, 84-87.
22 Driver, Understanding the Atonement, 82.
Working from this medieval understanding of “satisfaction,” Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) developed the first substantially different approach to the doctrine of the atonement after the first millennium of Christianity’s existence. God is presented as a feudal overlord with humanity as his vassals arranged in a socially stratified hierarchical system. Anselm saw the atonement as a restoration of God’s offended honor by the meritorious and supererogatory obedience offered by Christ on behalf of humanity. The obedience of Christ’s life had merit to make amends for the infinite dishonor brought upon God’s name by sinful humanity.\(^{23}\) Anselm defined sin in terms of a debt toward God, who is not free to leave sin unpunished because His justice requires its punishment. Humanity owes a satisfaction to restore God’s honor, but because of the greatness of the offense against God, there is no human ability to repay a debt that is greater than all humanity’s ability to satisfy. Furthermore, Anselm said that for God to forgive sins out of compassion without satisfaction or punishment is impossible:

> It is not fitting for God to pass over anything in his kingdom undercharged . . . It is therefore, not proper for God thus to pass over sin unpunished.\(^{24}\)

That honor, then, that has been taken away from God must be repaid, or punishment must follow in order for God to be just to himself.\(^{25}\) Anselm’s attempt to present Christ’s sacrifice as payment of a debt, rather than a penalty, so that the death penalty would not be unleashed on humanity is unsuccessful in differentiating debt from penalty. Someone dies either way. It is difficult to see how his medieval audience familiar with the Code of Chivalry would see that the payment of a ruinous debt instead of death in a duel with an aggrieved knight was not a penalty, even though it might not be physically violent. Anselm insisted that the sin that had dishonored God must either be punished or satisfaction paid. The dishonor perpetrated upon God must be restored by the compensation of Christ’s obedience, which is propitiatory and meritorious. The issue is still one of taking the punishment of the guilty onto the person of

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\(^{25}\)Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, I, 12, 206.
the innocent, which raises moral issues of rightness in itself, and establishes an imputational foundation for atonement that carries over into the issues of righteousness, justification, and sanctification in Reformed theology.

Using the Roman legal ideas of satisfaction derived from Tertullian, Cyprian, and the legal ideas of the penitential system that clearly have their basis in Roman juristic categories of justice, Anselm develops them into their fullest Scholastic forms. He attempts to preserve the unity between Christ and the Father by showing that Christ’s satisfaction is a freely given act of obedience, rather than a penalty that is coerced. However, it is difficult to see how he avoids presenting the atonement as a legal, transactional event based on a *quid pro quo* exchange of merits, in which the life of the Son of God is of such value that it outweighs the accumulated debt of human sin.

In the focus on the objectivity of the honor of God, Anselm thus minimizes the subjectivity of the restoring of relationships between humanity and God. His view tends to equate salvation with the remission of a debt, and overlooks the sense of participation in the experience of Christ and insufficiently emphasizes the love of God in forgiveness by treating it as a rational cause rather than a relationship.

Anselm thus allows the issues of legal satisfaction to overshadow the truth that the love of God is objective and “persists in spite of all that sin can do, and has for its end nothing less than the reconciliation of sinful men with God in the harmony of a restored mutual love,” says Vincent Taylor. Instead, his rationalist approach deduces the rational necessity of the death of Christ, since logical necessity requires that God be reconciled with creation. It is a law-based theory, but the law is expressed in terms of the Latin forensic penitential system infused with the feudal perspective of power and hierarchy, rather than the biblical covenant understanding of law based in the relationship between the covenant community and God. This Western view of law has continued even after the Reformation, and as Driver says, “Protestantism has often preceded more in the spirit of Western law than in the gracious

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29 Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, 300.
spirit of biblical covenant, which is revealed most fully in the saving work of Christ.”

Even with these shortcomings, Anselm’s satisfaction theory became immensely popular in the later medieval period, and with some modifications became the main theory advanced by the Protestant Reformers in the form of the penal substitution theory of atonement. With the rejection of rationalistic Scholasticism by the Reformers and their emphasis on salvation by faith alone, another articulation of the atonement was called for.

**Penal Substitution—John Calvin**

Apparently, the Western European legal tradition and Latin theological orientation of the Protestant theologians was so deeply rooted that they were unable to reconceive theology in any alternative way to the forensic understanding. The conception of merits of righteousness offsetting the demerits of sin in humankind made it necessary for the Reformers, and particularly the later Protestant orthodoxy, to formulate their conceptions of salvation around the economic idea of a substitutionary payment of penalties for transgressions against God based on the merits of Christ. Since justice is served only when the accounts balance, the doctrine of limited atonement was submitted to allow justice to quantify the amount of merit needed in order to balance the celestial books by using the merits contributed by the death of Christ. The other alternative to a particular atonement doctrine was universalism, since Christ’s merits were infinite, and therefore, all of humanity’s penalties would be paid.

This seems radically out of step with the Old Testament system of sacrifice offered as a gift of obedience to make atonement to maintain the covenant community in relationship to God. The OT sacrifices were not construed as payments of penalty for sin, since an animal sacrifice was certainly not the equivalent in value of a

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32 McDonald, *The Atonement*, 192-93, and “Appendix.”

transgression against the God of the covenant. Furthermore, it does not appear that the forensic tradition has based its interpretations of legal metaphors on the Hebrew covenant relationship foundations that were central to Paul’s theology, but on the penitential system of forensic accountability that found its fullest expressions in the Latin medieval system of penitential merits. This minimizes the interpersonal covenant accountability that was present in the Hebrew covenant law version of forensic expression found in the OT, the rabbinic tradition, and the theology of Paul.

**Governmental Theory—Hugo Grotius**

In response to the penal substitutionary views of atonement, effective criticisms were made that shook the very foundation of the penal views. Critics pointed out that satisfaction and pardon are incompatible. Furthermore, the critics said, Christ’s suffering does not meet the demand of satisfaction, because sinners deserve eternal death, and Christ did not suffer eternal death, but temporal death. Anselm would have rejected the latter critique, because even temporal death for the divine Son of God more than compensates for the eternal death of all humanity. In the face of the increasingly effective attack on the penal theory by the Socinians, Hugo Grotius altered the penal theory by defining justice as a need for orderly government in a moral universe, rather than as the internal need for God to administer retributive penalties upon the offending parties. The governmental view reflects an Arminian concern to understand the atonement in a way that does not necessitate a limited atonement, as in the penal substitutionary model of Calvin, nor require a penitential maintenance of spiritual graces, as in the Anselmian version. However, this view maintains the necessity of a previous satisfaction of God’s wrath as a prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins. For Grotius, Christ’s suffering is penal, but voluntary, and the example of Christ’s passion deters sinners from continuing in a path which disrupts moral order by the moral influence of fear. This view amounts to a moral influence theory in reverse.

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The Arminian and Wesleyan theologians tended to follow Grotius’ governmental theory with some changes. The Arminian Curcellaeus emphasized the idea of sacrifice rather than satisfaction of wrath through punishment, thus describing the priestly work of Christ as propitiatory, but not penal. He says, ‘Christ did not therefore . . . make satisfaction by suffering all the punishments which we had deserved for our sins.’ This modified the strict governmental approach and emphasized the priestly work of Christ as propitiatory, but in the sense of a sacrificial gift.37

Modified Penal Satisfaction—John Wesley

In Wesley’s view, Christ is the Second Adam who represents all mankind, makes himself an offering for sin, bears the iniquities of the human race, and makes satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. His Notes on the New Testament also show that Wesley understood Christ’s death as a punishment due to us because of our sins.38 Death is the penalty of the old covenant (more or less) on all mankind. Wesley speaks of Christ purchasing humanity’s redemption and that his life and death involve a “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction” for the sins of all humanity. Furthermore, says Collins, Wesley interprets the hilasterion language in Romans 3:25 as “propitiation,” rather than “expiation,” and he took issue with William Law for the latter’s use of “expiation” and claim that God does not have wrath or anger toward humanity that must be appeased.39

Although Wesley did not equate divine anger with human wrath or vengeance, he did see God’s anger as being motivated by love for the sinner and as a foil that enables humanity more fully to appreciate God’s love.40 And while Wesley did believe that humanity has contracted a debt to God that it is unable to pay, he rejected the implication that satisfaction was made to the divine law, because he objected to the personification of law as a “person

Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ, Against Faustus Socinus, tr. Frank H. Foster (Andover: W.F. Draper, 1889).
39 Collins, Scripture Way, 81-83; he cites Wesley’s use of the language of the Book of Common Prayer in his liturgical and preaching resources in n. 64 and 65 on p. 81.
40 Collins, Scripture Way, 84, 85.
injured and to be satisfied.” Christ is the Second Adam who represents all mankind, makes himself an offering for sin, bears the iniquities of the human race, and makes satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. The complete and ongoing nature of Christ’s work is emphasized in Wesley’s emphasis on the totality of salvation in Christ’s roles as Prophet, Priest, and King.

None of the penal models presented by Anselm, the Reformers, or the Governmental model provide adequate basis in the Atonement for the transformation of the image of God and growth in sanctification and holiness in this life. The concern of a forensic model is the removal of guilt, not the transformation of relationship and restoration of moral likeness to God. A. S. Wood is in agreement with William R. Cannon and Albert Outler in noting that while Wesley held a penal view of atonement, he did not set the atonement inside a legal framework “in which God is made subject to an eternal, unalterable order of justice.” This is what makes Wesley’s view problematic, for the penal theories by definition set the atonement within a legal framework of “unalterable justice.” It is logically difficult to make the penal explanation work without the “unalterable justice” concept in place.

Anselm’s satisfaction model, as well, though it uses the medieval Code of Honor as its background, is built upon the Catholic penitential system that is inherently forensic and Latin. That is why the satisfaction and substitutionary implications are incompatible with the biblical covenant understanding of the Law as the interpersonal, loving, framework of God’s boundaries of covenant fellowship, reconciliation, and accountability. The Western abstract forensic justice views of the law, as has been shown, tend to obscure how God’s wrath toward sin is based on his loving desire to protect the covenant community and to prevent his creatures from violating the divine expectations in the covenant Law. The forensic tradition with its substitutionary understanding of sacrifice, invariably expresses the outcome of Christ’s saving sacrifice in imputational

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41 Collins, *Scripture Way*, 85; he cites Wesley’s “The Principles of a Methodist,” see n. 83. In this section on “The Atonement,” Collins has usefully cited numerous relevant quotations on the topic from Wesley’s works.


terms. This leads them, Wesley thinks, to ignore attention to holiness, which involves conformity to the law of God.\textsuperscript{44} It is at this point that the substitutionary and transference understanding of the sacrifice of Christ falls short of Wesley’s soteriological goals. A covenant-based understanding of the sacrifice of Christ as sacrificial identification with humanity in absorbing the effects of the deadly results of sin avoids the liability of the imputational penal models which depict Christ as obeying the law as a substitute for humanity and imputing his own merits to them for their salvation. This provides a strong basis for a view of salvation that understands Christ’s work as a sacrificial atonement of covenant renewal in which the entire Trinity participates, and which involves the believer in a vital incarnational union with Christ and the restoration of the divine image that is foundational for holiness and is grounded in the theology of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{45} This restored covenant relationship is righteousness. The imputation-impartation debate becomes irrelevant when the biblical model of salvation as renewed covenant relationship is restored and the Western Latin penitential forensic model is seen appropriately as a Western cultural contextualization. It tends to divorce salvation from the interpersonal relational ideas of the covenant community and replace them with Roman forensic language which evolves through the penitential system into an economic penitential and merit-based understanding of salvation \textit{a la} Tertullian, Cyprian, Anselm, and Aquinas.\textsuperscript{46}

An atonement theology that is consistent with Wesley’s biblical emphases on both justification and sanctification of heart and life by faith would provide a more adequate basis for these benefits of the work of Christ.

\section*{II. The Biblical Concept of Atonement}

\textsuperscript{44} Maddox, \textit{Responsible Grace}, 104, see fn. 63; Maddox notes that Wesley rejected the imputation of Christ’s active righteousness or obedience to believers because it discouraged the seeking of holiness. He speaks to this in his sermon on “The Lord Our Righteousness,” \textit{Works}, I:449-65.

\textsuperscript{45} This conclusion is thoroughly documented in the author’s book manuscript, \textit{Divine Expectations: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission}. Documentation and manuscript are available upon request.

\textsuperscript{46} Aulén, 84-87.
Perhaps the most central theological integrating motif of Scripture is the concept of covenant.\textsuperscript{47} Barth, for example, views the divine covenant with humanity to be the “internal basis of creation.”\textsuperscript{48} While specific covenants such as those with Moses, Abraham, and David are presented, it is in the generic context of covenant interpersonal relationships that God’s fellowship with Israel is most clearly defined.\textsuperscript{49} Israel’s obedience to the ancestral covenant obligations enabled them to avoid the sense of arbitrariness often found elsewhere, and every breach of the covenant expectations was a personal offense against God.\textsuperscript{50} The covenant Law formula served in the OT to give authenticity to the expectations God placed on Israel to enable them to maintain the covenant relationships. Although the etymology of berith, or “covenant,” is not thoroughly clear and its usage is controversial, as seen in numerous scholarly discussions, the frequency of its usage indicates its importance in Old Testament theology.\textsuperscript{51} Davidson notes that the term berith occurs nearly 300 times in the Old Testament.

\textsuperscript{49} Dwight Van Winkle, “Christianity and Zionism,” Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre, Vol. 2 (1984), 38-46. The Wesleyan tradition has consistently interpreted the covenantal language in conditional and interpersonal rather than in juristic and unconditional terms. As Van Winkle’s exegesis shows, the covenant with Abraham and Moses in Gen. 15 and 17 and in Lev. 18:24-28 is conditioned upon Israel’s obedient response to its conditions. In Exod. 19:5, the declaration is “if (emphasis mine) you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Obedience is the condition of covenant maintenance (see Van Winkle, “Christianity and Zionism,” 42-43); Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen, A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 151.
\textsuperscript{51} The discussion grows out of the thesis that the concept of covenant does not reflect the traditional connotation of pact or mutual agreement, but rather an obligation imposed upon one party by another. Primary contributions to this discussion are: Ernst Kutsch, Verheissung und Gesetz (Beilage zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 131; Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973); M. Weinfeld, “Berit-Covenant vs. Obligation,” Biblica, 56 (1975), pp. 120-128; James Barr, “Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant,” Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. by H. Donnor, R. Hanhart, and R. Smend (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 23-38.
Testament in addition to many allusions to the concept of covenant. The phrase “cutting a covenant” apparently refers to the preparation of the animal sacrifice with which the parties of the covenant formalize and give expression to a set of existing arrangements and relationships. It provides a particularly apt metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. The Mosaic Covenant in Exod. 19-24 and the covenant in Josh. 24 are examples. Particularly at Sinai, the covenant metaphor is used to describe a divinely initiated agreement that is ratified by Israel’s response (Exod. 24:4-8), and conditioned upon Israel’s obedience. Indeed, the conditionality of covenantal fellowship with God is explicitly stated in Lev. 18:24-28; Deut. 4:25-26; Jer. 4:1-2; and Ezek. 33:23-29. These sacrifices were not performed as a result of any penalty, which had been applied, but rather they were used as the expression of an oath, which validated the promises and guarantees of the substance of the covenant. In the ancient world, the ratification or solemnization of a covenant was accomplished by the ceremonial sacrificing of an animal. In Jer. 34:18-20, the prophet describes such a ceremony:

The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the term of the covenant they made before me, I will treat them like the calf they cut in two and then walked between the pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives.

Eichrodt says: “There is emphatic indication that the covenant cannot be actualized except by the complete self commitment of man to God in personal trust. Hence the obedient performance of the rite of circumcision takes on the character of an act of faith.”

Faith in God’s grace and obedience to God's command are moral

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issues. Thus, faith-obedience is required for Israel to fulfill its covenant obligations.  

In the canonical narrative of the Sinai covenant, God promised to continue the divine assistance and faithfulness, while Israel's behavior was subjected to specific standards. Although it was Yahweh's covenant and the conditions were his, it took on the aspect of mutuality only when the people responded by accepting the terms and promising to be obedient. God thus forbade that behavior which abolished the relationship created in His covenant with the elect nation. Every breach of this Law was a personal offense against this God whose concern and love had been so explicitly expressed. The covenant was both initiated and maintained by obedience to its stipulations, and the expression of this obedience and covenant communion with Yahweh was mediated through the ritual of the sacrificial system.   

Because of this specifically defined relationship, the fear of arbitrariness in God was excluded from Israel, and in this atmosphere of covenant security, Israel found its strength. This mutuality resulted in a deep sense of personal experience in Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Indeed, from Israel's perspective, the ancestral covenant grounded Israel's future in God's unconditional commitment to them, not in their resolve to be faithful. John Bright notes, "The Genesis picture of a personal relationship between the individual and his God, supported by promise and sealed by covenant, is most authentic." Thus, the canonical understanding of the church ultimately has seen only in Jesus Christ the resolution of this tension of covenant faithfulness as he embodies both God's perfect grace and humanity's perfect agreement in the obedience of faith.  

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56 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 92-97.  
60 Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 1:75. 
Covenant as Relationship

For the purposes of the present discussion, the concept of “covenant” will be used in the sense of an interpersonal relationship of commitment between God and persons. The concept of covenant is not a document, but a relationship reflected in a document(s). The reality of a covenant relationship predated the actual formulation of a specific covenant, such as the one God made with Abraham, and the general concept of covenant relationship pervades the Old Testament. The reality of covenant relationship is observed even where the word “covenant” does not appear in the biblical text, such as with Adam and Eve, or with Job, or in the Prophets. The important role given by God to humans in the world, created in the image of God, is indicative of this covenant-type of relationship. Karl Barth extends the covenant idea to cover “Adam, the Patriarchs, Abraham and the people of Israel.” He understands the covenant with humanity to be the “the internal basis of creation.”

From the very beginning, humanity has stood in covenant relationship with God because of the divine origin and the endowment of the divine image. With the inbreathing of divine life into humanity, God reveals the depths to which he has identified with the life of the creation. God’s very self has been breathed into humanity. In spite of their sin, they are called upon to be co-creators with God, stewards of Creation with responsibility and accountability for care-giving (Gen. 3:22-24; 9:6).

It is on the foundation of this general covenant relationship and what it reveals about God that the Old Testament faith is built, and it is this foundation that gives authenticity to the specific covenants, such as those with Abraham and David. The Law, or Torah, is the moral pattern of behavioral expectations that God gives to guide Israel in maintaining the “divine expectations” of the covenant. The most extensive treatment of covenants is in Deuteronomy. Particularly in chapters 26:16-30:20, the book discusses various rituals and affirmations which accompanied the ratification of covenants in Israel. The particular concern for this study is to demonstrate how the image of covenant, which forms a distinctive context for understanding the biblical doctrine of the atonement in the Bible, is a theological integrating motif that will be useful in communicating the gospel to the contemporary 21st century culture.

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The important issue, then, is how God’s judgment against sin can be averted and a loving covenant relationship restored. Sacrifice, repentance, or some other means such as prayer, expiates sin and removes the cause of judgment because the covenant has already been renewed by the penitence and obedience of the worshipper. This removal of sin and the corresponding repentance and obedience of the person as expressed in the sacrifice results in the removal of the wrath of God. God is no longer wrathful because his intention was to maintain the covenant fellowship in the first place. Whatever makes possible the restoration of that fellowship with God, whether it be sacrifice, prayer, or the destruction of the guilty party, reconciles humanity and God. This restoration of covenant fellowship is the key to spiritual restoration in the OT. Thus, the personal repentance of the sinner resulted in the personal forgiveness of God and the restoration of the relationship of covenant love between God and the penitent. The offering of a sacrifice is simply the overt expression, or seal, of the worshipper’s repentance and renewed commitment to the covenant relationship.

Through the sacrificial ritual, then, the penitent expressed repentance and submission to the will of God. By conformity to the ritual prescribed by God’s grace, the sinner acted in such a way as to show personal surrender to God, and because this obedient action indicated repentance and confession for the sin, the broken covenant fellowship was restored. Obedience to the Law thus expressed love for Yahweh who had established the covenant community. But it was the personal repentance of the sinner and the personal forgiveness of Yahweh that restored the broken relationship. The basic element in the restoration of this relationship was love of Yahweh as it was expressed practically in a personal surrender to the Law (Deut. 6:4f) and the corresponding divine grace. Hartley notes, “Because it is disobedience of a law given by God, a sin places a person’s relationship with Yahweh in jeopardy. If a sin is committed against another, it, of course, damages the relationship between the parties involved. Any sin is detrimental to the community’s welfare and solidarity.”

Thus just as transgression threatened to disrupt the present order, love upheld it because love was the essence of fellowship with God, which was the purpose of the covenant order. “Here love,” says Eichrodt, “the miracle of free affection, is seen to be the basis of the whole

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63 Hartley, Leviticus, lxxi.
64 Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 1:256.
relationship of God to man, and it calls for personal surrender as the living heart of any obedience to law..."65 How does this all work for reconciliation and forgiveness?

While the case for “expiation” cannot be fully presented in this setting, the most consistent theological meaning of “atonement” seems to be an expiation that restores a right relationship to God through grace, as Hartley, Birch, Brueggemann and others affirm.66 At issue is whether there is a need to bribe or appease God in order to induce Him to forgive the sinner. The key to this interpretation is in the nature and meaning of the sacrifice in the OT cultic ritual. The Priestly theology presents God as the one who provides the sacrificial system and takes the initiative in reconciliation through the covenant formula at Sinai. The text does not say that God needs to be reconciled. It is the sinners who need to be!67 Through identification with the sacrifice in laying on of a hand and presenting it to the priest, the offerer changed in his attitude to God from disobedience to obedience and repentance. The animal is thus not a substitute penalty for the sinner, but the representative of him.68

The meaning of the laying of the offerer’s hand (or hands), semikah, on the sacrificial animal’s head has been interpreted in two main ways. One approach is to see the laying on of hands as an expression of the transference of sins to the animal in something of a concrete way. The other sees it as an expression of the involvement of the offerer in the atonement that is accomplished by the sacrifice by identification of the offerer’s life (nephesh) with the

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65 Ibid.
68 Hartmut Gese, *Essays in Biblical Theology* Translated by Keith Crim (Minneapolis, 1981), 105,106. The laying on of hands is thus not seen as a transfer of sins to the animal (as in the scapegoat in Lev. 16:21f.), but as an identification, or “inclusive substitution,” of the offerer’s life with that of the animal. It is the life of the animal, not its death that is offered to God (Lev. 17:11), and it is the life of Christ acting obediently on behalf of humanity that is offered to God.
animal. A very prevalent interpretation of the laying of hands on the animal views the act as a transference of the sins of the offerer to the sacrificial animal, thus making the animal a substitute bearer of one's sins. This transference theory takes the passage in Lev. 16:21-22 (the scapegoat passage), as the primary proof-text for its position, although the other sacrifices also mention the laying on of hands (Lev. 1-7). The understanding is that in the laying on of both hands, Aaron the priest facilitates the literal transfer of the sins of the nation upon the goat as a substitute for the people. The problems with this explanation are: (1) the animal that is slaughtered as a sacrifice at the Day of Atonement is not the one upon whose head the hands are laid; (2) the transferal of sins at the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16-17) is a separate procedure than the laying on of one hand (semikah) in the rest of Leviticus, and confession of sins while laying on the hand is not a part of the individual sin offering ritual in Leviticus 4-7; and, (3) atonement is not made by the killing of the animal, but by the fulfilling of the entire cultic ritual performed by the priest in the Tent or Temple (Lev. 16:6-19).

This laying on of the hand is instead described by Hartmut Gese and Otfried Hofius as an act of identification of the offerer with the sacrificial animal in the normal sacrificial activities of Israel. This has significant implications in how the NT references to Jesus' sacrificial death are interpreted, whether as an act of penal punishment for humanity's sins, or as an act of sacrificial identification with humanity. Those who by Christ's identification with them are able to re-identify with God through faith-identification with Christ are restored to the divine image in covenant renewal. This also has significant implications for understanding the work of sanctification as identification with the person of Christ through the Spirit in the Wesleyan theological interpretation.

This explanation shows that the laying on of the hand (semikah) effects the identification of the life (nephesh) of the sinner with the animal's nephesh, which then is taken into the sanctuary where it comes into contact with that which is holy. Rowley notes that this

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69 Hartley, *Leviticus*. Hartley’s development of this ritual brings out a critical issue. The laying on of one hand, as in Lev. 1-7 indicates the identification with the offering, while the laying on of two hands, as in the priest’s laying hand on the scapegoat in Lev. 16, indicates the transference of a substance or virtue, such as sin. The penal interpretation tends to universalize the second meaning and interpret all instances of the laying on hand(s) as indicating transference.

identification with the animal symbolizes that in its death, the offerer also dies spiritually, for the death of the victim denotes the offerer’s death to sin, or to anything that stood between himself and the surrender of himself to God in thankfulness and humility. Furthermore, the atonement is accomplished not only by the animal’s death, but by the commitment of its life representing the sacred life of the offerer. This seems to be the most consistent interpretation of Lev. 17:11, “For the life (nephesh) of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for your souls (nephesh-plural) on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life (nephesh).” Thus, by identifying with the animal, the collective lives of the nation are symbolically offered up and incorporated into the holy so that they now have community with God. The ceremony of sprinkling the blood on the altar and on the people consecrates them both and renews the covenant binding together of God and Israel. Sins are not simply wiped away nor is capital punishment inflicted to pay for them. Instead, in an identification symbolized by the laying on of a hand, the nephesh is dedicated to the sanctuary and consecrated to the holy. Gese says, “In the inclusive substitution by means of atoning sacrifice, this ritual brings Israel into contact with God.”

The sacrifice becomes the sinner in self-offering to God in repentance as a response to God’s invitation. This forgiveness is thus not a positional righteousness in which God looks at humanity through the sacrifice, but it results in the actual righting of the interpersonal relationship between God and humanity. The real sacrifice the offerer brings is himself as the true self-offering, and the animal is accepted by God as the token of his reception of the offerer who has identified himself with it, and thus forgives the sinner of his or her offenses. The significance of this understanding of sacrifice and covenant renewal is seen in its application to the NT presentation of the cross as God’s story of incarnational loving redemption in Christ.

**Atonement**

In the covenant relationship, the alienation resulting from violations of its expectations has the character of sin. As an obstruction to the covenant community, these sins had to be atoned

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for by the exercise of repentance and faith obedience as reflected in the obedient offering of sacrifice. For those sins covered by sacrifice, the person who has violated the covenant obligations must avoid God’s wrath by a proper use of the sacrifice. However, the issue of the translation of kipper as “propitiation” or “expiation” is of major importance in understanding the atonement. What occurs in the process of avoiding wrath is the essence of atonement, or kipper. Much controversy surrounds the meaning of kipper. It can mean “make expiation,” “wipe away,” “forgive,” “appease,” or “propitiate,” as well as a number of other nuances. The term kipper has several nuances of meaning. Its Akkadian roots render it as “wipe off, smear,” with reference to buildings, people, and other objects purified by magical rites. The Old Testament usage can convey a similar idea of ritual purification of worship-related objects. More common, however, is the idea that an act that “expiates” removes pollution and counteracts sin. The idea is that God had purified or removed the sin so that the person finds forgiveness (Ps. 65:4; 78:38; Ezek. 16:63). In other words, “expiation” describes the action of the removal of sin and the effects of sin on the person or nation. It purges the impurity released by a sin, and removes the sinner’s guilt by granting forgiveness.

The debate over the proper translation of kipper relates primarily to whether atonement means “expiation,” “propitiation,” or both. “Propitiation” suggests that God, who is angered by sin, requires that something be done to neutralize, or appease, that anger before forgiveness can be offered the sinner. Whether the offended character of God must be appeased, as in the pagan cultus, or simply that His desire to restore normalized relationships must be addressed is also an issue in defining the usage of “propitiation.” The question to be answered here is whether the sacrifices are intended to appease God (propitiate) or to remove sin (expiate). The issue depends upon the contextual usage of the term. Hartley notes that “expiation” focuses on the removal of the sin that has obstructed the expression of God’s love, and this is usually done through sacrifice. C.H. Dodd notes that the biblical writer portrays God as the one who initiates forgiveness rather than as a capricious and vindictive deity who must be bribed back into a good mood by sacrificial gifts. Thus,

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73 Hartley, Leviticus, 64, 65.
expiation better represents the nature of the sacrifice that removes or annuls the sin so that God can forgive with integrity because the cause of his anger has been removed.\textsuperscript{75}

Furthermore, Birch, Brueggemann and others emphasize that the object of the verb \textit{kipper} is sin, never God. The action of expiation affects the forgiveness of sin, not the appeasement of God. By definition, the expiation of sin does not involve a penalty. The focus is on the saving aspects of the ritual.\textsuperscript{76} Bernhard Anderson agrees that the “expiation” translation reflects that the obstacle to right relationship with God is in the sin of the sinner and God initiates a way to restore that relationship through grace.\textsuperscript{77} The concept of appeasement of God’s anger to precipitate forgiveness is inconsistent with the Priestly theology, which presents God as the one who provides the sacrificial system according to the formula given at Sinai. God is the one who forgives (2 Chron. 30:18) and the subject of the verb “to forgive” (Ezek. 16:63; Deut. 21:8; Ps. 78:38). He is the one who provides forgiveness at the calling of Isaiah (Isa. 6, 7). It is God who takes the initiative to cancel the consequences of sin, and this is also Anderson’s interpretation of Isaiah 53:10, in which the Servant’s sacrifice is a sin offering which restores the covenant relationship with God.\textsuperscript{78}

Furthermore, the problem with interpreting \textit{kipper} as “propitiation” in its biblical usage is that it is very difficult to show from the text that because God is first reconciled to sinful humanity, therefore humanity may then be reconciled to God (Lev. 6:30; 16:20; Matt. 5:24; Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:20). In fact, the opposite is true. It is sinful humanity that must be propitiated and reconciled. It was not God who violated the covenant in the first place. In fact, God initiated the procedure for atonement and reconciliation. The action of God is always to restore the covenant relationship. It is sinful humanity who must be turned back toward God, to be propitiated. “Expiation,” the removal of the sin that alienates from the covenant relationship, is what the sacrificial system is intended to accomplish, so long as the sinner accompanies the sacrifice with the spirit of repentance, humility, and an attitude of obedience toward God. The

\textsuperscript{75} C. H. Dodd, \textit{The Bible and the Greeks} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 88-93.
\textsuperscript{76} Birch, \textit{et al.}, \textit{TIOT}, 159, 160.
\textsuperscript{77} Anderson, \textit{Contours of Old Testament Theology}, 120.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 121.
sacrificial acts were not effective unless they were accomplished by true repentance.79

Note that the Bible does not say God is reconciled. *It is the sinners who are!* Brueggemann also emphasizes that the restoration of relationship, as seen in Lev. 16, is the point of the sacrificial ritual. He writes, “The astonishing claim of these texts, and of the vehicle to which they witness, is that *Yahweh has granted to Israel a reliable, authorized device whereby Israel can be restored to full relationship to Yahweh.*”80

Not only must atonement involve something that changes the sinner’s relationship with God (propitiation), but something must also change the sinner’s attitude toward sin (expiation). Thus, the personal repentance of the sinner resulted in the personal forgiveness of God and the restoration of the relationship of covenant love between God and the penitent. It is imperative to understand that the sacrifice was in no way a means of placating God. God does not break his part of the covenant relationship, even when Israel is sinful. Israel may take itself out of the covenant blessings by its disobedience, but God does not change his covenant love. It is God who takes the initiative in providing an invitation and a means to restore the covenant relationship. Even though the sacrifice was made to obtain forgiveness of sins, one must remember that the real sacrifice of self-surrender and repentance had to be made by the sinner. In offering the sacrifice and identifying with it by laying on of the hand, the sinner changed in his attitude toward God. He turned back to God and repented. “The gift-sacrifice which we bring to God is ourselves,” as Snaith phrases it.81 In response to the offerer’s repentance and self-offering, God accepted the animal sacrifice as a token of his reception of the offerer who had identified himself with it and forgave the sinner of his offenses. In this forgiveness God did not merely look upon the sinner as if he had offered himself, but he looked upon him as a true self-offering. It was not merely the sacrifice that changed God’s attitude toward humanity, because God had already extended the invitation, but it changed humanity’s attitude toward God wherein the atonement took place. This forgiveness did not result in a positional righteousness in which God looked at humanity through the

80 Brueggemann, *TOT*, 666.
sacrifice, but it resulted in an actual righting of interpersonal relationships between humanity and God. The symbol was the animal; the reality was the changed relationship between God and humanity.

The acts of external sacrifice thus were not effective unless they were accompanied by a penitence that resulted from true conversion. The sacrifice is not the payment of a penalty in order to placate God. It is an act of renewal of the covenant relationship as an act of obedient response to God’s command to do so. It is an obedient and faithful response to God’s directions. The restoration of the covenant is the purpose of OT sacrifices—they are a tangible act of recommitment to the terms of the covenant. They are not just a sin offering, but praise, thanks, remembrance, etc. And the blood is not magic, but is symbolic of the giving of life, which validates the covenant—it is not a penalty, but a validation of the terms of the covenant of redemption. The blood serves as a synecdoche for covenant obedience to the radical point of death, as in Christ. The word “blood” stands for the entire work of atonement, not just the death of Christ itself. And Christ’s death is not just a continuation of the OT sacrifices, but an actual acting out of the perfect pattern of covenant obedience. Faith enables the believer to participate in Christ’s obedience as his/her own, and to share in his renewal of Yahweh’s covenant with humanity.

Since this kind of covenant love was the essence of fellowship with God, the covenant relationship was normalized and the purpose of the covenant order was restored as the believer obeyed. Entrance into the covenant was by faith in God and obedience to divine law as sealed by circumcision (Gen. 17:11, 12). Maintenance of the covenant was thus contingent upon faith, love, and moral obedience to its stipulations, including repentance for sin through its sacrificial provisions.

The atonement of Jesus Christ, as it is interpreted according to the biblical model of covenant sacrifice, therefore, involves a profound understanding of his Incarnation in becoming fully human to the point of taking upon himself all the experience of the fallen human race, even the perception of the death resulting from sin. He thus takes upon himself the identification of humanity and becomes its sacrificial offering to God. In this identification with humanity through his divine love and grace, Christ as the Second Adam is able...

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Ibid., 2:445; 1:256.
to act for humanity and in participation with it in its destiny of
death, sharing its sufferings (I Pet. 3:13-22). However, since he
participates in humanity’s death, humanity also participates in his
resurrection (Rom 6; I Pet. 1 and 3). As the God-Man, he represents
humanity in leading it back to repentance, obedience, and
reconciliation with God, and through his sacrificial obedience to
God’s will (of which he is a part), humanity thus reflects the
covenant obedience God desires and is brought back into covenant
fellowship with God through its faith-union with Christ. Through its
participation by faith in Christ’s own covenant self-sacrifice,
humanity is restored to its covenant relationship with God and is
reconciled and restored to the divine image through the Holy Spirit’s
regenerating presence and activity. It is this Spirit-energized,
covenant-based foundation for Christ’s atonement that results in
growth in grace and Christlikeness consistent with Wesley’s vision of
holiness of heart and life, while avoiding the spiritual and
psychological problems associated with the unresolved guilt and
legalism of the penal model. And it is a concept that can be utilized
as the redemptive narrative that communicates the redemptive
interpersonal story of Christ to a postmodern community that is
unfamiliar with and resistant to the traditional penalty-based
understanding of salvation.

**Identification vs. Transference**

The sacrificial rituals functioned to restore the vitality of the
covenant communion. The renewing of covenant relationship was
effected through obedience to the Law’s commands to effect the
atoning nature of the rituals. Birch, Brueggemann and others point
out:

> Thus, in the offering the worshipers submit *themselves* to
> God. The sacrifice is thus a *tangible sign of faith*, a concrete
> way in which one offers the self to God. 84

> In offering the sacrifice and in identifying oneself with it, the
> sinner changed his attitude toward God. As the offerer turned back
to God and repented, it was himself that was the gift-sacrifice to
> God. 85 In response to human repentance and self-offering, God

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84 Birch, *et al.*, *TIOT*, 160.
85 Snaith, *Mercy and Sacrifice*, 118.
accepted the animal sacrifice as a token of his reception of the offerer who had identified with it and forgave the sinner of the offenses. In this forgiveness God did not merely look upon the sinner as if he had offered himself, but He looked upon him as a true self-offering. This is the critical distinction between the transference and the identification understandings of the laying on of hands. Because of the commitment of the offerer’s life to what is holy, God did not simply consider the offering as if it were the offerer; it really was the offerer. The reality of ritual identification is not simply a fictional “let’s pretend” action, but a genuinely realistic portrayal of the relational reality that was represented by the identification between the subject (offerer) and the object (offering). It was not simply the sacrifice that changed God’s attitude toward the sinner, but it changed the sinner’s attitude toward God as well. This forgiveness did not result in a positional righteousness in which God looked at humanity through the sacrifice, but it resulted in an actual righting of interpersonal relationships between humanity and God. The symbol was the animal; the reality was the changed relationship between humanity and God. The offering really made things right with God, because presenting the offering in an attitude of obedience and repentance was what God had commanded in the covenant expectations in the first place. The sin offering resulted in forgiveness, because that is how God told Israel to express its repentance. Covenant renewal and salvation is about restoring health, or shalom, to the relationship between God and Israel.

So, the biblical sacrifice is a gift given to God by a sinner who by that gift expresses obedience to the Creator God of the covenant, and who desires intimate interpersonal spiritual fellowship, and who seeks the forgiveness which restores that covenant fellowship with God for which humanity was created.

Conclusion

The covenant story is thus the framework in which all biblical metaphors of salvation function. The story of covenant relationship is God’s love story of faithfulness to His promises and

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86 Limited space prevents inclusion of the author’s analysis of “Righeousness and Justification.” These, too, are interpersonal concepts in Paul’s usage, based on the covenant background of the terms as relational, rather than simply forensic. See documentation in manuscript in progress, Divine Expectations: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission, by this author.
presentation of divine expectations for us human creatures. All in all, however, the concept of covenant reflects a relationship that is interpersonal rather than an objective, impersonal statement of law. So, the biblical sacrifice is a gift given to God by the sinner who by that gift expresses obedience to the covenant Creator God, and who desires intimate interpersonal spiritual fellowship with God through renewed inclusion in the covenant community. The significance of this understanding of sacrifice as a gift is seen in its application to the NT presentation of the cross. This interpersonal, love-based understanding of atonement is more readily interpreted and communicated to a relationship-oriented and experience-based postmodern culture than are the more traditional models. It should also be more useful in communicating interculturally in missiological settings such as in indigenous cross-cultural contexts that are not steeped in Western rationalistic modernity. In some non-Western contexts evangelism has suffered from the perception that Christ’s death as interpreted by the penal model is seen as the foundation of a violent religion. Indeed, a Native American Christian recently told me of many examples in which the hellfire and brimstone penal substitutionary message had been interpreted in the indigenous culture in the United States as spiritual abuse.

The Covenant Atonement motif thus interprets the atonement of Christ in biblical covenant terms that reflect the loving interpersonal nature of the divine-human relationship. It seeks to provide exegetical, theological, and historical resources that enable Christians to communicate the work of Christ to the postmodern culture with more relevance than the traditional guilt-based forensic penal substitutionary terminology. The biblical Covenant concept more effectively serves as a hermeneutical bridge to the 21st century mind than the other traditional atonement theories which use metaphors from cultural situations that reflect more legal, medieval, transactional, and abstract impersonal models for atonement. It is also more consistent with a Wesleyan understanding of salvation as interpersonal relationship and renewal in God’s image rather than as an imputational penal view that infers an election by divine decree that is economically wed to a limited atonement view that Wesley completely rejected. And, finally, the Covenant view employs a central covenant metaphor that is inductively derived from scripture and that tends to be understood in virtually all known cultures.

John Wesley taught a gospel that was centered on love and modeled after the loving example of Christ’s sacrificial life. His
concern for a message of full salvation that involves the incarnational transformation of life through the atonement of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is better served by the biblical model of covenant and incarnational relationship based in the gracious love of God than in the penal transactional models that address primarily the neutralization of guilt but not the transformation of the self. The core of the Wesleyan message is the incarnational love that transforms the person, refocuses the will, and reorients the self in love toward God and others. It calls for the realization of salvation in the here and now, not only in the age to come. To my mind, no metaphor, biblical or otherwise, more effectively incarnates that message and grounds it in the love of God than the covenant model of God’s relationship to Creation.

In conclusion, Wesleyan theology can be strengthened in its presentation of full salvation by integrating the incarnational relationship idea of covenant and atonement as covenant-renewal, which is shown to be a central biblical motif, with its understanding of the transforming work of grace through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.