BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL: SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

RECONCILIATION AND THE LACK THEREOF:
ATONEMENT, ECCLESIOLOGY, AND THE UNITY OF GOD:

SUBMITTED TO DAVID HOGG, Ph.D.
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ABSTRACT

This essay endeavors to demonstrate the theological and exegetical legitimacy of viewing the atonement as the act in which the one God fulfills his creative purposes by bringing his uniqueness and simplicity to bear on our sinful, divisive condition through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in order to save a people to robust unity with himself, each other, and the entire creation. Given Adam Johnson's thesis regarding God's triune being-in-act,[1] the fullness of the divine perfections, and the unity and diversity of Christ's saving work, I draw upon the theology of Karl Barth[2] and pertinent biblical data to frame a theory of the atonement based on the unity of God. Although the lack of ecclesiological unity is the impetus for my study, I choose primarily to emphasize the synthesis of God's unity and the doctrine of reconciliation. That is, I focus on the theological explanations within the atonement of *why* the church is to be unified. However, after framing a unity-based theory of the atonement, I conclude this study by casting a vision for the ecclesiological implications of such a theory.

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[1] Adam Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics.* (eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G.W. Bromiley; 5 vols in 14 parts; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). Henceforth all references to the *Dogmatics* will be in the following form: "CD I/1, 1."

INTRODUCTION: RECONCILIATION AND THE LACK THEREOF

The impetus for this study is a seemingly unanswered prayer. "[I pray] that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me."[3] Ever since Jesus of Nazareth uttered these words, his followers have done what appears to be an increasingly-worse job of *being one*. Although claiming to follow the same Lord, Christians around the world are divided – having often judged it more important to be *correct* than to be *one*.[4]

As a presupposition to my argument, I posit a link between the lack of ecclesiological reconciliation and the doctrine of reconciliation.[5] There appears to be a connection between atonement theology and church unity, or the lack thereof.[6] As Schmiechen claims, "the high level of confusion, disagreement, and at times, outright warfare between factions within a denomination suggests that multiple Christologies do not easily coexist. The reason for this is that theories of the atonement do in fact inspire particular forms of the church."[7] In search of the theological resources to address the problem of church unity through the nexus of ecclesiology and atonement theology, I turn to the doctrine of God and the divine attribute of unity.[8]

In this essay, I endeavor to demonstrate the theological and exegetical legitimacy of viewing the atonement as the act in which the one God fulfills his creative purposes by bringing his uniqueness and simplicity to bear on our sinful, divisive condition through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in order to save a people to robust unity with himself, each other, and the entire creation. Given Adam Johnson's thesis regarding God's triune being-in-act,[9] the fullness of the divine perfections, and the unity and diversity

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[3] John 17:21; NET.

[4] In fact, it could be argued that the *modus operandi* throughout church history has been to pursue unity in orthodoxy through division. This cost of unity in the pursuit of orthodoxy is periodically lamented by Roger E. Olson in *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999).

[5] Throughout this paper I use "doctrine of reconciliation," "doctrine of the atonement," and the various permutations thereof interchangeably. Blocher notes that "'atonement' (*at-one-ment*) has been, since the sixteenth century, the main English word for that which ensures right or happy relations with the Deity and removes obstacles to that end" Henri A.G. Blocher, "Atonement" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 72.

For helpful overviews of atonement theology in addition to Blocher's article noted above, consider: Mark D. Baker, ed., *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Walter A. Elwell, "Atonement, Extent of" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 114-116; L.L. Morris, "Atonement" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 113-114; L.L. Morris, "Atonement, Theories of" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 116-119; Andrew Sung Park, *Triune Atonement: Christ's Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009); Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of the Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Derek Tidball, David Hillborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

[6] McKnight suggests this link when he questions: "Could it be that we are not reconciled more in this world – among Christians, within the USA, and between countries – because we have shaped our atonement theories to keep our group the same and others out? I believe the answer to that question is unambiguously yes." Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 5.

[7] Schmiechen, 354.

[8] Throughout this paper, I use "divine attribute" and "divine perfection" interchangeably.

[9] Put simply, God's "being-in-act" means that we cannot know *who God is* [being] apart from *what God does* [act], and vice versa. On this topic, Johnson notes: "This bond between God's being and his act is so

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of Christ's saving work, I draw upon the theology of Karl Barth[10] and the witness of Scripture to frame a theory of the atonement based on the unity of God. Although the lack of ecclesiological unity is the impetus for my study, I choose primarily to emphasize the synthesis of God's unity and the atonement – focusing on the theological explanations within the atonement of *why* the church is to be unified. However, after framing a unity-based atonement theory, I conclude by casting a vision for the ecclesiological implications of such.

DIVINE PERFECTIONS AND ATONEMENT THEORIES

Adam Johnson's synthesis of Karl Barth's thought on theology proper and the doctrine of reconciliation provides the ideological framework for the task at hand. After lamenting the considerable paucity of "sustained theological reflection on the role of the doctrine of God as a whole…within the doctrine of the atonement,"[11] Johnson proposes and defends the following thesis:

> Barth's understanding of God's triune being-in-act in the fullness of the divine perfections, brought to bear upon our sinful condition in the fulfillment of his covenantal purposes through the person and work of Jesus Christ, provides the proper theological framework for developing the doctrine of the atonement, and contains within itself the basis and the impetus for a theological explanation of the unity and diversity of Christ's atoning work.[12]

The "key" to unlocking the unity and diversity of the atonement is the *subject* of the act: the triune God in the fullness of his divine perfections. The corollary to this is that "every theory of the atonement necessarily relies on one or more divine perfections in its construal of our sin and Christ's saving work."[13] What is more, this corollary can be reversed: atonement theories can be built from the ground up, so to speak, upon the foundation of the divine perfections, with Scripture as our guide. Johnson rightly claims that "the Church is bound by the biblical witness to God's self-revealing work of salvation to understand the doctrine of reconciliation in light of each of the divine perfections."[14]

Although my goal is to understand the atonement in light of *unity*, this exploration of the doctrine is *not* designed to be the one atonement theory to explain all others.[15]

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intimate that they are, in fact, identical. Barth writes: 'God's essence and work are not twofold but one. God's work is His essence in its relation to the reality which is distinct from him' (CD I/1, 371). […] God's essence is his life, and…his work toward us is the event in which he shares his life and therefore his essence with us." Therefore, God's being and act unite as he "shares with us his own proper life in the event of his working in, with and among us, in the event of creation, revelation, reconciliation, and redemption" (Adam Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 33-4).

[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics.* (eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G.W. Bromiley; 5 vols in 14 parts; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). Henceforth all references to the *Dogmatics* will be in the following form: "CD I/1, 1."

[11] Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 9.

[12] Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 10.

[13] Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 199.

[14] Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 126.

[15] Because the same perichoretic unity-in-diversity of God's triunity also characterizes his perfections, it is only legitimate to talk about a single divine perfection if we operate in the same manner as when speaking of any one person of the Trinity despite the *perichoresis*. The doctrine of appropriations, which allows us to attribute particular words and/or deeds to Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, can also be applied to the divine

Nevertheless, my burden is to show that unity is not just a secondary characteristic or result of the atonement, but an essential part of Christ's saving work.[16]

A UNITY-BASED THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

The following framework will determine the contours of my proposed atonement theory: (1) *the doctrine of God*, emphasizing a particular divine perfection; (2) *the nature of sin* as "that which opposes God and his will;" (3) *the person and work of Christ*, explaining his life, death, and resurrection as the victorious intersection of God over sin; and (4) *salvation* as "that for which Christ saves us" in fulfillment of the creative and covenantal purposes of God.[17]

God is One: Unity Defined

Barth boldly claims that "all the perfections of the divine being taken together, can be summed up in this one conception. If we understand it rightly, we can express all that God is by saying that God is One."[18] However, understanding this divine perfection *rightly* is crucial, for Barth always cautions against the abstraction or absolutizing of the divine attributes.[19] God defines his perfections, not vice versa.

It does no good, then, to begin this theological venture by postulating various absolute definitions of oneness. "We must say that God is the absolute One," Barth warns, "but we cannot say that the absolutely one is God."[20] Similarly, "when the unity of God is turned into the divinity of unity there can only result what are actually caricatures of God."[21] Indeed, at

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perfections, allowing us "to temporarily and provisionally attribute specific divine perfections, as it were, to theories of the atonement, so as to bring to our attention the truly incomprehensible richness of Christ's saving work." Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 117.

However, when speaking of any member of the Trinity, the doctrine of appropriations must always be held in tension with the rule *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* (the external operations of the Trinity are undivided). God accomplishes all of his acts as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, albeit in a full, diverse, and differentiated way proper to each person of the Godhead. The parallel is also true when speaking of the divine perfections, which are "fully and equally present and active in Christ's reconciling work." Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 79-80; 117.

[16] The closest extant study to my approach in this paper is quite possibly Constantine Scouteris, "People of God - its Unity and its Glory: Discussion of John 17:17-24 in Light of Patristic Thought," *GOTR* 30 (1985): 399-420 or T. F. Torrance's, "The Atonement and the Oneness of the Church," *SJT* 7 (1954): 245-269. However, in my own study, most other discussions of the atonement only mention unity or oneness quite briefly. For example, Barth speaks of unity between Jews and Gentiles and within the Church as "indirect view[s] of the singleness and uniqueness of God." He later notes that "all this is, after all, only the indirect conception which serves as a basis for confession of the one God" (CD II/1, 454-5). Acknowledging the truth of Barth's statements, I nevertheless endeavor to show that viewing the atonement through the lens of God's oneness makes human unity even more important.

[17] Adam Johnson proposes this framework in *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, forthcoming), 31-4.

[18] CD II/1, 442. Furthermore, God is "the only being who is really one. His unity is His freedom, His aseity, His deity." CD II/1, 447.

[19] "The relation between subject and predicate is an irreversible one when it is a matter of God's perfections," which "are determined and also circumscribed wholly and completely by his deity." CD II/1, 448.

[20] CD II/1, 448.

[21] CD II/1, 450

the core of the disunity from which humanity must be saved is a misunderstanding of what true unity is – what Barth calls the "religious glorification of the number 'one.'"[22]

With this caution in mind, to define the divine perfection of unity we look to God himself, who is truly and completely One, as opposed to everything in the universe which is not God. This oneness, however, has two dimensions: external uniqueness (*singularitas*) and internal simplicity (*simplicitas*). God is one – unique in his simplicity and simple in his uniqueness.

Uniqueness

The triune God in the fullness of the divine perfections is unique in that he is utterly without equal. This uniqueness is proper to the divine essence – not contingent upon creation, for God would still be unique even if nothing else apart from him existed. Because he *alone* is the self-existent one, Barth explains, "everything else is what it is by him, and therefore [is unique] only dependently, in a contingent and figurative sense, and therefore not in a way that competes with God."[23] Barth rightly inveighs:

> A being which was not unique, and not this unique being, would not be God. For this reason any so-called or would-be God which has a second god alongside it is bound to be a false god or no god. The very moment we conceive of a second person or thing of the same kind as God, even if it possesses only one attribute of the divine being, we cease to think of God as God. […] To be one and unique is true only of him in the sense proper to him.[24]

This foundational tenet of the Christian faith is antithetical to the claims of idolatry and polytheism. God's external uniqueness casts all false gods into nothingness and renders all other forms of uniqueness relative. He alone is God alone.

Simplicity

The internal complement to God's external uniqueness is his simplicity. For God to be *simple* does not mean that he is uncomplicated or easily-understood. Rather, in Barth's terms, "in all that he is and does, he is wholly and undividedly himself," and "at no time or place is he composed out of what is distinct from himself […] at no time or place, then, is he divided or divisible."[26] To prevent the import of our own abstractions of simplicity as homogenous, dull, and *simplistic* in the pejorative sense, Barth clarifies that what it means for God to be simple must be considered in light of the Trinity, the fullness of the divine perfections, and God's being-in-act.[27]

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[22] CD II/1, 448. See discussion below: "Sin: Unity Perverted."

[23] CD II/1, 443.

[24] CD II/1, 442-3. To quote Tertullian: "God, if he is not one, is not." "*Deus, si non unus est, non est.*" Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, I,3; quoted by Barth, CD II/1, 443

[26] CD II/1, 445.

[27] "[God] is One even in the distinctions of the divine persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is One even in the wealth of his distinguishable perfections. In specific things that he is and does, He never exists in such a way as to be apart from other things that he also always is and does. But in all other things he also is and does these specific things. And as he is and does these specific things, he also is and does all other things." CD II/1, 445.

The simple unity of God cannot refer to simplistic homogeneity, for God has eternally existed in the *otherness* contained within the Trinity. At the intersection of divine unity and otherness is this *perichoresis*, or mutual interpenetration, of the divine persons – enabling the Godhead to be one even in the distinctions of the Three, each person of the Trinity comprehended in terms of its relation to the other two.[28] In the same manner, the Trinitarian pattern of the divine perfections means that God is still able to be one despite possessing innumerable attributes. And finally, because God never separates who he is from what he does, he is united in being and act. This diverse and relational unity must inform our notions of what divine simplicity entails.

Externally and internally, then, God is one in his uniqueness and simplicity – unequaled and undivided.

Creation: Unity Shared

At creation, God shares his unity in both aspects, extending the same kind of unity which is appropriate to the Godhead outward to that which is not God.[29] This extension has important implications for the created order, for as Barth notes, "recognition of the unity of God is the human response to the summons and action of this incomparable and undivided being."[30] However, this epistemic recognition was eternally designed to coincide with an ontic reality.[31] The proper creaturely response to God has always entailed knowing and being, recognizing and doing – taking into account both the external and internal dimensions of God's unity. The proper epistemic and ontic responses to God's oneness can both be seen in the Great *Shema* of Deut 6:4-5.

First, God demands that his external uniqueness be recognized. This is the sense in which God's oneness is referred to at Deut 6:4 – "Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH is one!" This introductory distillation of the covenant principles demands Israel's loyalty to YHWH alone, above all other false gods and idols.[32] As elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are urged toward covenantal faithfulness on the basis of YHWH's intrinsic uniqueness and his unique relationship with them.[33] This reflects God's creative purposes as a microcosm (respective to Israel) of the universally appropriate creaturely response to divine uniqueness.

Second, God desires to share his internal simplicity with humanity.[34] Humanity was to be simple (undivided) in its relationship with itself, the rest of creation, and with God. This is also in the *Shema*. According to McConville, the syntax of Deut 6:4, with *ekhad* ("one") in the final climactic position, suggests that "'oneness' is in some sense part of YHWH's nature. The nuance shifts therefore from 'uniqueness' to 'unity', or integrity. YHWH is one and

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[28] See McKnight, 16; CD II/1, 445.

[29] Barth maintains that this act does not imply "a commixture or [ontological] identification of God with the world, or…a kind of outgoing of God from himself." CD II/1, 446.

[30] CD II/1, 450.

[31] I am grateful to Adam Johnson for making me aware of this important clarification. Indeed, immediately after the previous quote, Barth unites the epistemic and ontic characteristics of the creaturely response: "It [the recognition of God's unity] is the [epistemic] recognition of his promise under which man is placed. It is [ontic] obedience to his command, which is given man and accepted by him." CD II/1, 450.

[32] J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos 5; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 139.

[33] Deut 4:39-40; 5. See McConville, 139.

[34] This creative, relational initiative is completely appropriate to the divine essence, which has always contained *otherness* within its threefold repetition as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

indivisible."[35] On the basis of this divine oneness, Israel was to love God in complete devotion, as the very next verse commands: "You must love YHWH your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deut 6:5).[36] Projected onto creation at large, the *Shema* calls humanity to undivided devotion to the God who is One.

Sin: Unity Perverted

With God's unique and simple oneness in mind, sin is divisive schism which perverts the divine aspects of unity, both externally and internally.[37] First, sin ignores and profanes God's unique unity through idolatry.[38] Although God's unity should lead to faithful worship, humans worship instead the false gods of self and created things – whether wood or wealth.[39]

Second, sin twists God's robust, simple unity into schism, the demonization of otherness, and the construction of false unities. We humans are no longer simple beings, for the schism has infected our very selves. As Scouteris observes, "through sin, man became a stranger to his communion with God, a stranger to his fellowship with the human 'other,' and even a stranger to himself. Sin, as a decomposition and separation, effects both the disorganization and the disruption of the human person itself."[40]

Sin implants within humanity the desire to rebel against the one God and fragment into countless factions – false unities which deny the appropriate value of diversity and otherness. Instead of welcoming the *other*, we are far more likely to crucify her – losing sight of God's uniqueness and making a mockery of his simplicity.

Fall: Distance and Exile

When sin enters the created order, God responds with distance until true unity can be achieved. Just as God's righteousness takes the appropriate *redemptive mode* of wrath when confronted with sin as unrighteousness,[41] God's unity takes the redemptive mode of exile or separation in the presence of sin as schism or false unity. This strong reaction is possible because it is appropriate for the Trinity to "stretch" in its dynamic *perichoresis*.[42] Because

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[35] McConville, 141.

[36] McConville, 142.

[37] Scouteris, 407-9. Bringing the doctrine of God and the divine perfections to bear on the doctrine of the atonement provides the theological resources for addressing the unity and diversity of the reconciliation of God with humanity and humanity with God (a summary of Johnson's thesis in *God's Being in Reconciliation*). Necessarily, then, this approach also provides the resources for understanding the complex characteristics of sin as that which opposes God and his creative purposes.

[38] "By the free acceptance of sin, the innate connection between man and God was destroyed. And so man, instead of loving God and being his servant, in a world of which he was designed to be prophet, priest, and king, became an alien and a stranger. In fact, sin consists in the limitation of man to his individuality." Scouteris, 410.

[39] This leads to an endless cycle of desperate attempts to satiate human cravings and desires. "Sin abolishes man as a person. It is a decomposition of his very being, it makes him live this divided and disorganized life for himself, and thus it deprives him of the possibility of living in fellowship with others and with God." Scouteris, 411.

[40] Scouteris, 410.

[41] As argued by Jeremy J. Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God's Life* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010). I am indebted to him for the phrase "redemptive mode."

[42] See Johnson's discussion of Barth's thought on triune separation without rupture or division (*God's Being in Reconciliation*, 75-7). The concepts of triune otherness, distance, separation, and stretching prove crucial to the atonement at several different junctures. For example, "a god who does not exist in threefold

God cannot tolerate a false, schismatic unity with his creation and his people, it is appropriate for God to distance himself from the perversions of sin.

Consider Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden and the creation itself is cursed as God "pushes it away," so to speak, from his *shalom* and presence. While God's omnipresence and immanence are not diminished, there is a distancing within the curse as well as banishment. According to Walton, "the biggest problem of the Fall was…the loss of access to the presence of God."[43] Furthermore, Walton claims that "the overwhelming loss was not paradise; it was God. Throughout all the rest of the Old Testament one never hears talk of regaining the comfort of Eden, but regaining access to God's presence was paramount."[44]

Nevertheless, God remains merciful in his reaction to schismatic sin, for he patiently refuses to respond with the full and permanent exile it deserves. The redemptive *missio Dei* explains why God first responds with distance. To drag hastily his divisive creatures back into full fellowship with himself would create a disastrous false unity. God partially and temporarily separates himself from his sin-stained creation for the greater goal of achieving true *at-one-ment* with it in the end.

Despite the schismatic perversion of his oneness, he calls Abraham and the nation of Israel back to unity with himself through covenant. He endeavors to pull them – and through them as a priestly nation, the world – back from the partial exile into covenantal fellowship and oneness. In a repetition of God's creative purposes, he seeks to be recognized in his uniqueness by the people of Israel and to share his simplicity with them in faith and faithfulness through Torah and covenant.

However, the faithless Israelites repeatedly eschew the loving faithfulness of their God. As promised, God distances their schismatic sin from his perfect unity once more through the exile of the nation.[45] Nevertheless, even on the brink of exile he promises to make a new covenant with them – to remain faithful to them in, through, and beyond their exile.[46] Through the True Israelite, Jesus the Messiah, he will bring them back from exile and restore them to proper oneness with himself.

Christ: Unity Stretched

In light of the oneness of God, the nature of sin, and pitiful state of humanity left in exile, the saving work of Christ is that of re-unification, reconciliation, and *at-one-ment*, both internal and external. Through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the triune God meets humanity in its partial exile, sentences himself to the utmost exile in their stead at the cross, and brings the Son and all who are united with him in faith back from the far country of exile into full union with the Trinity.

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otherness cannot take upon himself human nature without losing himself or drink the cup of his own wrath without destroying himself," Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 75.

[43] John H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 231.

[44] Walton, 231.

[45] Consider, for example, the curses for covenantal unfaithfulness found in Deut 27:14-26; 28:15-68, culminating with the threat of exile.

[46] Cf. Jer 31.

At the incarnation, the Trinity stretches to meet us, through the Son, in our state of partial exile.[47] "God became what we are so that we might become what He is."[48] As the one God enters our midst as Jesus Christ, he pushes us to the side in our perverted attempts to exile others and create false unities. He closes the gap which had been created through banishment, identifying with humanity in order to liberate it.[49]

Although alone worthy to exile and banish, he takes on himself our sin-stained human nature. In Barth's words, "because our evil case otherwise meant our inevitable destruction, God willed to make it His own in Jesus Christ. What we are He Himself willed to become, in order to take and transform it from within, to make of it something new, the being of man reconciled with Himself."[50] Without succumbing to sin's siren call, he is fully affected by it, bringing this nature into the life of God and thereby intensifying the divine reaction against it into an ultimate tension.[51] The one ultimately worthy _to_ exile is now also the one ultimately worthy _of_ exile.

At the cross, the Trinity stretches to the utmost, as the Son of God, worthy to mete out the sentence of exile, instead _goes into exile_ – into the far country of the grave – bearing the consequences of the perversions of God's unity for the sake of humanity's salvation.[52] According to Barth, "in the place of all men [Christ] has himself wrestled with that which separates them from him. He has himself borne the consequence of this separation to bear it away."[53] At the death of Christ, the Trinity has stretched to its limit, and yet humanity is left in a state of partial exile as before.[54]

However, the exiled Son of God is vindicated as the Savior of the world and brought back from the far country of death. Through this movement of the Son into the utmost exile and back again, sin itself as the perversion of God's unity is offered up to destruction.[55] And crucially, all humanity who is united to him by grace through faith – everyone who is therefore _in Christ_ – gets caught up with the Son in his return to the simple and unique

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[47] At the incarnation, the Trinity stretches, through the election of God to become Jesus of Nazareth. According to Barth, God's being-in-act takes the eternal shape of this election. From eternity God has chosen to become the person Jesus in the Son, and he has ordered his acts of self-revelation so that this is the center. We therefore look to Christ and Christ alone to witness and experience the fullness of the Godhead and the divine perfections. See Johnson, _God's Being in Reconciliation_, 35-40.

[48] Irenaeus and Athanasius; quoted by McKnight, 54.

[49] "Incarnation means identification for the sake of liberation." McKnight, 55.

[50] CD IV/1, 242.

[51] CD IV/1, 237-8.

[52] This stretching of the Trinity is not foreign to the divine essence, but rather appropriate to it. As Volf notes, "the very nature of the triune God is reflected on the cross of Christ. Inversely, the cross of Christ is etched in the heart of the triune God; Christ's passion is God's passion" (127). Even more to the point: "at the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in. Read as the culmination of the larger narrative of God's dealing with humanity, the cross says that despite its manifest enmity toward God humanity belongs to God; God will not be God without humanity" (126). Miroslav Volf, _Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation_ (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 126-7.

[53] CD IV/1, 247.

[54] Without presuming to know the exact limit to which the Trinity can stretch, it seems crucial to deny an ontological division within the Trinity at the cross in violation of God's simplicity. I again appeal to Johnson's discussion of Barth's thought on triune separation without division (_God's Being in Reconciliation_, 75-7), redirecting his focus on the incarnation toward the crucifixion. Similarly, McCall draws upon Trinitarian theology and the doctrine of divine simplicity to refute the view (perhaps best exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann) that "the cross of Christ represents a rupture within the Trinity" (15). See Thomas H. McCall, _Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters_ (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 13-47.

[55] "In the suffering and death of Jesus Christ it has come to pass that in his own person he has made an end of us as sinners and therefore of sin itself by going to death as the One who took our place as sinners. In his person he has delivered up us sinners and sin itself to destruction." CD IV/1, 253.

perichoretic unity of the triune God.[56] As the nexus of redemption and re-creation, the resurrection is crucial – for the focus of the atonement is not merely to sentence sin with its proper exile, but to fulfill God's creative purposes for unity and participation in the divine life.[57]

Salvation: Unity Restored

Salvation is therefore this unmerited entrance, through and in the Son, into the unified Trinitarian life of the Godhead. [62] Internally and externally, unity is restored. [63] The people of God are set free from their perverse desires to divide and create false unities. Instead, they are placed in right, unified relationship with themselves, each other, creation, and God, who is eternally recognized and worshipped as God *alone*. The only hope for human unity is not an artificially constructed consensus, but grace-mediating and unifying faith in Jesus the Messiah.[64] Christ's prayer to the Father in John 17 is not a polite request that Christians might one day learn to get along better. It is a bold request that their unity might flow from the perichoretic unity by which the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father.[65] In fulfillment of his creative purposes, God saves those who are in Christ through faith, and this salvation entails a robust unity between creatures and Creator.[66]

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[56] Cf. 1 Cor 15:20-22.

[57] "Atonement is both the elimination of the problem and the enablement of a new life." McKnight, 71. See 1 Cor 15:12-19 for Paul's take on the necessity of the resurrection.

[62] "The atonement begins in the *perichoresis* of God, that eternal communion of interpersonal love, and that *perichoresis* becomes incarnate in the Son of God, the *Logos*, Christ Jesus, who assumes…what we are…in order to draw us into that *perichoresis*." McKnight, 60. As Gunton notes, "for Barth, salvation is the fulfillment of a covenant, an eternal covenant, according to which God purposes to bring the human race into reconciled relation with himself. Salvation is the reconciliation between God and the human creation whom he loves in Christ." Colin Gunton, "Salvation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

[63] "If there is unity, it is because the re-creation of the human person is realized in Christ," for "in the person of Christ all distinctions and divisions are abolished." Scouteris, 407.

[64] The importance of this grace-mediating faith and its relevance to the unity of God's people should not be overlooked. As Barth notes:

> There is no simplicity in the Church except for the simplicity of faith in this God who is trustworthy. There is no simplicity except for that of straightforward trust in the power of the mystery now revealed of the incarnation of the Word and the divine trinity. The simplicity of this straightforward trust will show itself to be the required and necessary simplicity, the true divine simplicity of the Christian, by the fact that it does not deviate a hair's breadth from its committal to the name of Jesus Christ. CD II/1, 461.

[65] Cf. John 17:21. According to Köstenberger, here Christ's "vision of a unified community, transcending mere institutional unity, encompasses present as well as future believers." Adreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 498. In this prayer, McKnight notes that "nothing less than human participation in the *perichoresis* is in view." Furthermore, "round and round goes John's Gospel: as the Father is in the Son, as the Son is in the Father, so the Son is in us and we are in the Son. And, if we are in the Son, we are in the Father, and if we are in the Son and the Father, then we are designed for mutual interiority to the degree that humans can participate in God." McKnight, 17. In Scouteris' words, "the oneness of the people of God is not understood as an autonomous and enclosed reality but as a continuous and dynamic share of the divine fullness and oneness […] the divine oneness transforms human multiplicity into a harmonious agreement." Scouteris, 402.

[66] The eternal life to which humanity is saved is a relational knowledge of and union with God. Cf. John 17:3, 20-23.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

If this theory of the atonement has theological and exegetical merit, then the church is obligated to respond to the truths therein – for a divided and divisive church denies in praxis the gospel it proclaims.[67] According to God's creative purposes, this unity-based theory of the atonement demands that God's unique unity be recognized, and that his simple unity be demonstrated.

God's uniqueness demands exclusive worship and the rejection of idolatry. Although physical idols may not be as universally common today as they once were, invisible idols are as prevalent as ever – especially within the context of Western materialism, where money, influence, and power are the modern-day Baals which the church must eschew to worship God with heart, soul, and strength.

God's simplicity requires unity: with ourselves, each other, all of creation, and God himself. Christians must reject false unities in favor of true ones – ever watchful of the temptation to demonize otherness, divide, and create false unities in paltry imitation of divine distancing and exile. Because God exercised redemptive separation *in order that* true unity might be achieved through Christ, only the gravest *divisive* offences in doctrine and praxis, and not mere differences of opinion, should merit Christian separation. Ecumenism and catholicity are to be embraced, not feared – for the most dangerous heretics are those who cause divisions in opposition to the unifying *missio Dei*.[68] Christians must prefer true, robust unity to false, forced homogeneity. Since the saving work of Christ is that of re-unification and *at-one-ment* with God, each other, our very selves, and creation, pursuing supposed righteousness and doctrinal purity at the expense of unity – especially the unity of the church – is therefore a shameful undoing of the work of God in Christ to reconcile all things to himself.[70]

Nevertheless, this pursuit of robust unity is rarely easy. As Volf notes, "as God does not abandon the godless to their evil but gives the divine self for them in order to receive them into divine communion through atonement, so also should we – whoever our enemies and whoever we may be."[71] Therefore, our demonstrations of simple unity should not only prompt us to encourage unity where it already occurs, but to engage areas of division as ambassadors for unity, reaching out to both victims and divisive aggressors when it comes to schism and discord – extending the oneness of God to the darkest, divided corners of his creation.[72]

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[67] Köstenberger, 499, n. 78. Similarly: "Unless [Christians] are unified, how can they expect to give authentic, credible testimony to the Father, who is united with the Son and the Spirit in revealing himself and his salvation in Christ?" Köstenberger, 499.

To this end, it is helpful to revisit the prayer of Jesus: "[I pray] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*" (John 17:21; emphasis added). Here are the desired end (the unity of the church), the theological means (invitation through Christ into the divine *perichoresis* of God's oneness), and the desired missional effect (global belief in the redemptive *missio Dei* as accomplished in the Messiah).

[68] Cf. Rom 16:17.

[70] Consider Ephesians 4:4-6,3: because "there is *one* body and *one* Spirit," *one* hope, "*one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of *all*, who is over *all* and through *all* and in *all*," we must seek to be one as God is one – "making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (emphasis added). In light of these things, Thielman rightly concludes that, if we "are unified with one another in [our] willingness to confess these truths, then [we] should be willing to engage in the practical attitudes and actions that foster the unity of the church for which Christ died." Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 261.

[71] Volf, 23.

[72] See 2 Cor 5:18-20.

CONCLUSION

It is theologically and exegetically legitimate to view the atonement as the act in which the one God fulfills his creative purposes by bringing his incomparable uniqueness and undivided simplicity to bear on our sinful, divisive condition through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in order to save a people to robust unity with himself, each other, and the entire creation.

The global church of Jesus Christ therefore has the responsibility and privilege of bringing these unifying atonement realities to bear on the here and now. If our proclamation, our gospel, be true, then we must honor the unique unity of God by eschewing all forms of idolatry as we worship him alone. We must also demonstrate the simple unity of God by valuing otherness, transcending our differences, and pursuing true, robust unity in fulfillment of the *missio Dei*. Then, and only then, will the high priestly prayer of the one who faced exile in our stead be answered: "[I pray] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."[73]

Amen.

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[73] John 17:21.

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