

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

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

SUBMITTED TO CARL B. SMITH, Ph.D.
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
BEST 4910 - SENIOR SEMINAR

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DECEMBER 10, 2012

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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.” (John 17:21 NET). Ever since Jesus of Nazareth first uttered these words, his followers have done what appears to be an increasingly-worse job of *being one*. A simple count of the various denominations and sects within Christianity at large – starting with the three prominent branches of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism – reveals the troubling truth that, although claiming to follow the same Lord, Christians around the world are often divided. In fact, it could be argued that the *modus operandi* throughout church history has been to pursue unity in orthodoxy through division.¹ When dissenting voices arise, the group decides which option is “orthodox,” banishes the “heretics” (who often then form their own camp), and proceeds as the “pure” and “united” bride of Christ. Whether in 1054, 1517, or 2012, followers of Jesus the Messiah have often judged it more important to be *correct* than to be *one*.²

As a presupposition to my argument, I posit a link between the lack of ecclesiological reconciliation and the doctrine of reconciliation.³ That is, there appears to be a connection

¹ 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).

² It is important to note that, although others have done so, I am not concerned in this essay with challenging the legitimacy of the Great Schism (1054), the Protestant Reformation (1517), or the most recent “church split” (regardless of significance) to date in 2012. I am instead merely lamenting the historical penchant the church has shown for endless division.

³ 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

between atonement theology and church unity, or the lack thereof. 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.”⁴ Schmiechen likewise claims that “the high level of confusion, disagreement, and at times, outright warfare between factions within a denomination suggests that multiple Christologies [and atonement theories] do not easily coexist. The reason for this is that theories of the atonement do in fact inspire particular forms of the church.”⁵ 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 (henceforth “divine perfection”) of unity.

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,⁶ the fullness of the divine perfections, and the unity and diversity

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).

⁴ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 5.

⁵ Schmiechen, 354.

⁶ 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

of Christ's saving work, I draw upon the theology of Karl Barth⁷ and three of the most pertinent biblical passages⁸ 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.

DIVINE PERFECTIONS AND ATONEMENT THEORIES

This essay depends largely on Adam Johnson's synthesis of Karl Barth's thought on theology proper and the doctrine of reconciliation. 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,"⁹ 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.¹⁰

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).

⁷ 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."

⁸ Deut 6:4-5; John 7:20-26; Eph 4:1-6.

⁹ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 9.

¹⁰ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 10.

That is, 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.”¹¹ 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.

Indeed, “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,” and “we must strive to integrate each and every divine perfection into our account of Christ’s reconciling work.”¹² I endeavor to bring this thesis, this method, and this impetus for further study to bear on the links between the divine perfection of *unity* and the doctrine of reconciliation.

However, I proceed with humility. This theory is not designed to be the one atonement theory to explain all others, but rather a theological exploration of the atonement through the lens of a divine perfection which is often neglected. The burden of this paper is to show that unity is not just a secondary characteristic or result of the atonement, but that it is an essential part of Christ’s saving work.¹³

Furthermore, in speaking of God’s unity, we must not forget the inter-relatedness of this particular divine perfection with all others, for the “Trinitarian pattern” of the divine

¹¹ Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation*, 199.

¹² Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation*, 126.

¹³ 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.

perfections necessitates that we place each perfection in its proper context. That is, it is impossible to separate the perfections of God's essence from the Trinity (the three-fold repetition of the divine essence) and therefore from each other. The same unity in diversity which characterizes God's triunity also characterizes his perfections. They share a perichoretic¹⁴ relationship in that, "because each perfection is the perfection of the one essence of God and fully expresses the nature of that one essence, it necessarily includes within it the multiplicity of the other divine perfections in which the one divine essence consists."¹⁵

Because of this, it is crucial to realize that "any human and therefore finite and limited account of reconciliation will emphasize certain aspects of God's intervention while omitting or minimizing others so as to offer a concrete testimony to Christ's saving work."¹⁶ 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 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."¹⁷ 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). That is, God accomplishes all of his acts as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, albeit in a full, diverse, and differentiated way

¹⁴ Perichoretic: characterized by the same mutual interdependence or interpenetration of the Trinitarian *perichoresis*. See McKnight, 16.

¹⁵ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 102.

¹⁶ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 116.

¹⁷ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 117.

proper to each person of the Godhead.¹⁸ The parallel is also true when speaking of the divine perfections, which are “fully and equally present and active in Christ’s reconciling work.”¹⁹

Therefore, when speaking of God as “One” below, we must also remember that God is holy, merciful, just, patient, etc. Because it is impossible to say everything at once about the divine perfections and the atonement, however, it is necessary to begin somewhere. I therefore proceed to bring the divine perfection of God’s unity to bear on the doctrine of reconciliation, primarily viewing this nexus through the theological lens of Karl Barth, given both his influence and the reliance of Johnson’s thesis on Barthian thought.²⁰ Exegetically, I focus on Deut 6:4-5, John 17:20-26, and Eph 4:1-6. However, when it is necessary and beneficial to do so, I will draw upon other historical figures and biblical passages to bolster my argument. The intended result is a framework for future, thorough study in this particular area of atonement theology.

A UNITY-BASED THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

At the risk of oversimplification, it is nevertheless reasonable to conclude that almost all theories of the atonement share the same basic elements. For the sake of expediency, I have chosen to adopt the following four-part framework advocated by Johnson. All theories of the atonement address: (1) *the doctrine of God*, emphasizing a particular divine perfection or set of divine perfections, (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

¹⁸ Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation*, 79-80.

¹⁹ Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation*, 117.

²⁰ See Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation*, 14-21.

fulfillment of the creative and covenantal purposes of God.²¹ That is, we begin with (1) *theology proper* and an emphasis on a particular divine perfection (in this case, God’s unity or oneness), which then influences our (2) *hamartiology*, (3) *Christology*, and (4) *soteriology*, respectively.

God is One: Unity Defined

Barth makes the bold statement 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” (CD II/1, 442). However, understanding this divine perfection *rightly* is crucial. Barth always cautions against the abstraction or absolutizing of the divine attributes, for “the relation between subject and predicate is an irreversible one when it is a matter of God’s perfections” (CD II/1, 448). That is, whether we are speaking of God’s unity, patience, justice, or honor, we must look to God and nowhere else to define what we mean by those perfections. “We have to accept, then, that these concepts [the divine perfections] are determined and also circumscribed wholly and completely by his deity” (CD II/1, 448). God defines his perfections, not vice versa.

It does no good, then, to begin this theological venture by postulating various speculative definitions of oneness, for we are not concerned with an abstract ideal but with a *divine* perfection. “Necessarily, then, we must say that God is the absolute One, but we cannot say that the absolutely one is God” (CD II/1, 448). Scouteris reinforces this admonition: “In the life of the superessential and life-giving Trinity, unity appears not as an additional or compound category, but as an absolutely radical reality which is beyond conjunctions and divisions. The number ‘One’ as an arithmetical category is insufficient to

²¹ Adam Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, forthcoming), 31-4.

describe the divine unity.”²² As a final word of caution against this abstraction or absolutizing of the divine perfection at hand, Barth warns that “when the unity of God is turned into the divinity of unity there can only result what are actually caricatures of God” (CD II/1, 450). That is, when unity is divorced from God’s essence, we can worship anything and everything as long as the idols fulfill our “religious glorification of the number ‘one’” (CD II/1, 448). Indeed, at the core of the disunity from which humanity must be saved is a misunderstanding of what true unity is.²³ With this caution in mind, to define the divine perfection of unity we look to God himself.

God’s unity, most succinctly, means that God is One. And since this unity is divine, it is absolute. That is, God is truly and completely One, as opposed to everything in the universe which is not God. This oneness, however, has both an external and an internal dimension. Externally, God’s oneness refers to his uniqueness (*singularitas*). Internally, it refers to his simplicity (*simplicitas*). When we speak of God’s absolute unity, therefore, we are referring to his uniqueness and simplicity, which exist in perfect and simultaneous union. In other words, 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. “God alone is God. He is the only one of his kind” (CD II/1, 442). Uniqueness is proper to the divine essence, and not contingent upon creation. That is, God would still be unique even if nothing else apart from him existed, “for it is only in him that everything (including uniqueness) is essential, original, proper, and for this reason also creative” (CD II/1, 443). Because he *alone* is the self-existent one, “everything else is what it is by him, and

²² Scouteris, 405, n. 11.

²³ See discussion below: “Sin: Unity Perverted.”

therefore [is unique] only dependently, in a contingent and figurative sense, and therefore not in a way that competes with God” (CD II/1, 443). This uniqueness gets to the heart of the divine essence, and also plays an apologetic role:

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. (CD II/1, 442-3).

Tertullian, emphasizing the same apologetic importance of God’s unity, states: “*Deus, si non unus est, non est*” (God, if he is not one, is not).²⁴ This foundational tenet of the Christian faith is antithetical to the claims of idolatry and polytheism. That is, God’s oneness in this external sense is so absolute that it 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, but rather that “in all that he is and does, he is wholly and undividedly himself” (CD II/1, 445). This means that “at no time or place is he composed out of what is distinct from himself” and also that “at no time or place, then, is he divided or divisible” (CD II/1, 445). It is crucial to remember at this point, however, that we must not import our own abstractions of what simplicity entails as we try to describe exactly how *God* is simple. Otherwise we may very well end up painting a mere caricature of God’s unity as homogenous, flat, and dull – as *simplistic* in the pejorative sense.

This is simply not true, for:

He 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

²⁴ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, I,3; quoted by Barth in CD II/1, 443.

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).

According to Barth, then, 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.

The divine perfection of simple unity cannot refer to simplistic homogeneity, for God has eternally existed in the *otherness* contained within the Trinity. God's simplicity is robust and diverse. At the intersection of divine unity and otherness is this *perichoresis*, "the mutual interdependence, or further yet, the mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity,"²⁵ enabling the Godhead to be One "even in the distinctions of the divine persons" (CD II/1, 445). The relationships within the triune Godhead are so completely intertwined that each person of the Trinity can only be known in terms of its relation to the other two. 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, we must remember that God never separates who he is from what he does. That is, his being and his act are always inseparable, and they too have a perichoretic relationship to each other. This diverse and relational unity within the Trinity, the divine perfections, and God's being-in-act must inform our notions of what simplicity entails when we are speaking of God.

Externally and internally, then, God is One in his uniqueness and simplicity. In fact, in these respects God is "the only being who is really one. His unity is his freedom, his aseity, his deity" (CD II/1, 447). He is God alone, unequalled and unrivaled. He is also One in the midst of the *otherness* and *perichoresis* which have eternally characterized his triune being-in-act in the fullness of the divine perfections. We would therefore be very much mistaken to

²⁵ McKnight, 16.

claim that God is One in a homogenous, static, and simplistic way. On the contrary, His is a diverse and robust unity in both its uniqueness and simplicity.

Creation: Unity Shared

At creation, God shares his unity in both of these senses (uniqueness and simplicity).

Although 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), it does extend the same kind of unity which is appropriate to the Godhead outward to that which is not God. As Scouteris notes, in this act “God abolishes the infinite distance between uncreated and created.”²⁶ This extension or sharing of God’s unity has important implications for the created order, for “recognition of the unity of God is the human response to the summons and action of this incomparable and undivided being” (CD II/1, 450). However, this epistemic recognition was eternally designed to coincide with an ontic reality.²⁷ That is, the proper creaturely response to God has always entailed knowing/recognizing and being/doing. This is analogously true of faith, which is not meant to be a merely epistemic and intellectual recognition of God, but also an ontic response of faithfulness to him as well. In other words, appropriate faith in the faithful God leads to faithfulness. And just as this creaturely faith is contingent upon its divine object, creaturely oneness “is made possible only through the divine oneness” and “only because the triune God is the fullness of unity.”²⁸

From the beginning of time, “the primordial vocation of created beings was unity with the creator. And although the created, according to its nature, is outside God, its call and

²⁶ Scouteris, 408.

²⁷ 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).

²⁸ Scouteris, 402, 5.

ultimate destiny was to be in union with him and to share his goodness.”²⁹ According to God’s creative purposes, I argue that the human response must, epistemically and ontically, take 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. He alone is to be worshipped by his creation, above all other false gods and idols. This is the sense in which God’s oneness is referred to in the *Shema* of Deut 6:4 – “Listen, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” As “the paranetic introduction to the [Deuteronomic] law code,” this verse has “at its heart the primary command to be loyal to Yahweh alone.”³⁰ As in Deut 4:1-40, the Israelites are urged toward covenantal faithfulness on the basis of Yahweh’s intrinsic uniqueness and his unique relationship with them as a people.³¹ As McConville notes:

The covenant makes the relationship between Yahweh and Israel exclusive. The immediate consequence of the declaration of oneness is the command: ‘Love the LORD your God’ (5). This is the language of covenant loyalty. Set against the history of Israel in its land it prohibits the pragmatic worship of several gods at once, or any kind of syncretism. But it is not a simple numerical point; it declares that Yahweh alone is worthy of covenant love.³²

As in the Decalogue discourse,³³ Deut 6:4 urges Israel toward covenantal faithfulness in obedience of all Yahweh’s commands on the basis of his unique oneness.³⁴ This reflects

²⁹ Scouteris, 408.

³⁰ J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos 5; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 139.

³¹ “Today realize and carefully consider that the LORD is God in heaven above and on earth below – there is no other! Keep his statutes and commandments that I am setting forth today so that it may go well with you and your descendants and that you may enjoy longevity in the land that the LORD your God is about to give you as a permanent possession” (Deut 4:39-40).

³² McConville, 141.

³³ Deut 5.

³⁴ McConville, 139.

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. 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. Humanity was to be simple (that is, undivided) in its relationship with itself, the rest of creation, and with God. We see this also in the *Shema*. First, the syntax of Deut 6:4, with *ekhad* ("one") in the final climactic position, suggests that "'oneness' is in some sense part of Yahweh's nature. The nuance shifts therefore from 'uniqueness' to 'unity', or integrity. Yahweh is one and indivisible."³⁵ On the basis of this divine oneness, Israel was to love and worship God in complete devotion, as the very next verse commands: "You must love the Lord your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deut 6:5). The force of these three terms in combination "is to require a devotion that is single-minded and complete."³⁶ Projected onto creation at large, then, the *Shema* calls humanity to undivided devotion to the God who is One.

In addition to being unique and simple, God's oneness is also peaceful. That is, it is characterized by *shalom*. However, just as it is inappropriate to assume that *shalom* ("peace") is merely the absence of conflict, it is also inappropriate to assume that God desires creation to be unified by becoming homogenous and static. On the contrary, the eternal God thrives in the otherness inherent to the Trinity. As stated above, his unity is diverse and robust. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that he desires to share the same robust and diverse unity with his creation as it functions in perfect *shalom*, peace and fullness.

³⁵ McConville, 141.

³⁶ McConville, 142.

However, a quick observation of the created order reveals that reality does not currently correspond to this idyllic notion of *shalom* unity throughout the universe. What has gone wrong?

Sin: Unity Perverted

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.³⁷ Necessarily, then, this approach also provides the resources for understanding the complex characteristics of sin as that which opposes God and his creative purposes.

The sin and sins of man form the disruptive factor within creation which makes necessary the atonement, the new peace with God, the restoration of the covenant with a view to the glory of God and the redemption and salvation of man as the work of God's free mercy. Sin, therefore, is the obstacle which has to be removed in the reconciliation of the world with God as its conversion to him. But it is also the source, which has to be blocked in the atonement, of the destruction which threatens man, which already engulfs him and drags him down. (CD IV/1, 252-3).

As McKnight rightly notes, sin is “*hyperrelational*, or ‘multi’-relational. It is active corruption in all directions. It is, in the oft-misused expression of Calvinism, total depravity – that is, comprehensive corruption.”³⁸ An account of sin is necessary to any and all atonement theories which focus on Christ's life, death, and resurrection, for without it there is no reason for atonement to be made.

As stated above, God is One. He is unique, unrivaled and unequalled. He is also simple, undivided, and indivisible. With God's robust oneness in mind, sin is “a rupture and a breaking off of the original unity established by God.”³⁹ Sin is divisive schism, for although

³⁷ A brief summary of Johnson's thesis in *God's Being in Reconciliation*.

³⁸ McKnight, 22.

³⁹ Scouteris, 407.

“the primordial vocation was for unity...sin introduces division.”⁴⁰ As “a continuous decomposition, disorganization and dissolution of the unity created by God,”⁴¹ sin thoroughly perverts the divine aspects of unity, both externally and internally.

First, sin ignores and profanes God’s unique unity. “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.”⁴² Of all the idols ever worshipped instead of the one triune God, the *self* has pride of place. In a horrific distortion of God’s unity, which should lead to faithful worship, we worship instead the false god of self, leading to an endless cycle of desperate attempts to satiate our own cravings and desires. The result is that “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.”⁴³

Second, sin twists God’s robust, simple unity, intended to be shared with creation in *shalom*, into schism, the demonization of otherness, and the construction of false unities. We are no longer simple beings, for the schism has infected our very selves. “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

⁴⁰ Scouteris, 409. For a cursory survey of the many biblical passages relevant to this type of sinful schism/strife/division, see Gen 3:1-24; Ps 55:9; Prov 6:14, 19; 10:12; 13:10; 15:18; 16:28; 17:1, 14, 19; 20:3; 22:10; 23:29; 26:21; 28:25; 29:22; 30:22; Hab 1:3; Matt 12:25; John 10:12; Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10, 13; 3:3 Titus 3:10; and Jude 19.

⁴¹ Scouteris, 409.

⁴² Scouteris, 410.

⁴³ Scouteris, 411.

the disorganization and the disruption of the human person itself.”⁴⁴ And much like the perversion of God’s uniqueness noted above, the perversion of simplicity also leads to idolatry.

Consider, for example, the prideful and idolatrous disobedience which was manifested at Babel (see Gen 11:1-9). Despite having the resource of linguistic commonality (Gen 11:1) with which to maintain a robust unity to glorify God as they filled the earth and subdued it (cf. Gen 1:28), humanity attempted to construct a false unity to glorify themselves (Gen 11:4) and remain in one location. The ensuing divine dispersal and confusion of languages revealed God’s intolerance of and humanity’s penchant toward false unity. The schismatic nature of sin creates a natural human desire for simplicity. Commenting on this, Barth notes that “it is very understandable that, complex as he is and suffering from his own complexity as he does, man would like to be different, i.e. simple” (CD II/1, 449). However, when we misunderstand and absolutize simplicity, this desire and our attempts to fulfill it become unrighteous. We consistently find ourselves unable to satiate our idolatrous cravings for simplicity in this complex, disorganized, and sin-stained world.

Sin drives against the grain of the universe, implanting within humanity the desire to rebel against the One God and fragment into countless factions. We have lost the appropriate valuing of diversity and otherness, which have always been eternally fitting in creation because of the perichoretic identity of the triune creator. Thanks to sin, “the ideal of ‘my existence for the other, and the other’s existence for me,’ is understood as being an illusion, or rather as the condition for the exercise of a lie.”⁴⁵ Instead of welcoming the *other*, we are far more likely to crucify her. We gather like-minded people around us to construct our own “unified” kingdoms, to build up thick walls between “us” inside and “them” outside.

⁴⁴ Scouteris, 410.

⁴⁵ Scouteris, 410.

Constantly concerned with why our sect is “unique” above all others, we lose sight of God’s uniqueness and we make a mockery of his simplicity.

Fall: Distance and Exile

At the nexus of the these first two aspects of the atonement theory at hand, theology proper and hamartiology, lies an important issue: if God is One, what is his response to these perversions of the robust unity he desires to share with his creation? I answer this by appealing to a parallel account of God’s reaction to sin when the divine perfection of righteousness is in view. Just as God’s righteousness takes the appropriate *redemptive mode* of wrath when confronted with sin as unrighteousness,⁴⁶ I argue that God’s unity takes the appropriate character of exile or separation in the presence of sin as either schism or false unity.

In the face of these aforementioned abominations, God’s unity takes on the righteous character of distance and separation (though not division), through banishment and exile. Again, this strong reaction is possible because there has always been otherness and distance within the Trinity itself. That is, it is completely appropriate and possible for the Trinity to “stretch” in its dynamic *perichoresis*.⁴⁷ It is all the more appropriate, then, for God to distance himself from the perversions of sin. God cannot tolerate a false, schismatic unity with his creation and his people.

When sin enters the created order, infecting and affecting it on every level, God responds with distance until true unity can be achieved. We see this first in Genesis 3, when

⁴⁶ 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.”

⁴⁷ 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 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).

Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden and the creation itself is cursed. The former incident can be seen as a microcosm of the latter. That is, I posit that the curse of the entire creation happens because God “pushes it away,” so to speak, from his *shalom* and presence. This “pushing away” is only a metaphor, to be sure, for God’s omnipresence is not diminished and he remains immanent. However, there appears to be a definite distancing present within the curse as well as the banishment, creating difficulties in labor, childbirth, and relation to the rest of the created order. Indeed, according to Walton, “the biggest problem of the Fall was...the loss of access to the presence of God.”⁴⁸ He continues, making the bold claim 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.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, God remains merciful in his righteous, strong reaction to schismatic sin, for he patiently refuses to sentence human sin with the full and permanent exile it deserves. The redemptive *missio Dei* explains why God first responds with distance. To hastily drag his divisive creatures back into full fellowship with him 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. This explains why, despite the schismatic perversion of his oneness, he calls Abraham and the nation of Israel back to unity with himself through the covenants. That is, he endeavors to pull them – and through them as a priestly nation, the world – back from the partial exile into covenantal fellowship and unity with himself. Israel is to return to him from the exile of their sin through faith, faithfulness, and holiness. This is a repetition of God’s creative purposes. He seeks to be recognized in his

⁴⁸ John H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 231.

⁴⁹ Walton, 231.

uniqueness by the people of Israel and to share his simplicity with them through Torah and the covenants.

However, the unfaithfulness of the Israelites proves hardhearted, and they repeatedly eschew the loving faithfulness of their God. In a righteous (and promised⁵⁰) response, God righteously distances their schismatic sin from his perfect unity once more through the exile of the nation. Nevertheless, even on the brink of exile he promises to make a new covenant with them.⁵¹ No matter how unfaithful they prove, no matter how much they pervert his unity, the One God is always consistent to his own faithful character. He will remain merciful to them even in their exile. And one day, through the True Israelite, the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, he will bring them back from exile and restore them into proper fellowship with himself. He will be their God, and they will be his people.⁵²

Christ: Unity Stretched

It seems impossible to overemphasize the importance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for apart from his person and work, we know not God. This means we have no hope of reconciliation with him in light of our sinful condition which profanes his uniqueness and perverts his simplicity. In light of the oneness of God, the heinous nature of sin, and pitiful state of humanity left in exile, the saving work of Christ is that of re-unification, of reconciliation, and of *at-one-ment*, both internal and external. In brief, 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

⁵⁰ Consider, for example, the curses for covenantal unfaithfulness found in Deut 27:14-26; 28:15-68, culminating with the threat of exile.

⁵¹ Cf. Jer 31.

⁵² Allusion to Jer 31:33.

Son and all who are united with him in faith back from the far country of death and exile back into full union with the Godhead.

Incarnation

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. In other words, from eternity God has chosen to become the person Jesus in the Son.

Furthermore, he has ordered his acts of self-revelation so that this is the center. That is, we look to Christ and Christ alone to witness and experience the fullness of the Godhead and the divine perfections.⁵³ He is the living Word, without whom it would be impossible for us to know God.

Within a unity-based atonement framework, the incarnation takes on distinctive importance, for it is in this specific act that God assumes human flesh, meeting us in our state of partial exile. "God became what we are so that we might become what He is."⁵⁴ Scouteris, describing the monumental importance of this act, states:

In the Old Israel, the relationship between God and the people was a sort of subject-object relationship. God was acting behind the veil of human history. He was speaking from outside; his word was an external claim [...]. Thus, the unity of the Old Israel was a result of submission to the one voice of God which came as an external law, commandment or prophetic assurance. In the New Israel the oneness of the people is the result of a *symbiosis* and *enoikesis*, of the dwelling of God among men (Jn 1.14) The fundamental difference between Old and New Israel lies in the radical change from a subject-object relationship to one of participation or communion. This means that in the New Israel God no longer acts in human history as an external factor, but enters himself into the scene of human history, and becomes the central person in it.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 35-40.

⁵⁴ Irenaeus and Athanasius, quoted by McKnight, 54

⁵⁵ Scouteris, 403.

In this “radical change,” God closes the gap which had been righteously created through banishment. As McKnight puts it, “incarnation means identification for the sake of liberation.”⁵⁶ The One God enters our midst as Jesus Christ and pushes us to the side in our perverted attempts to exile others and create our false unities. This means that “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*.”⁵⁷

He alone is worthy to exile and banish. However, he also takes on himself our sin-stained human nature. “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” (CD IV/1, 242). 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. Barth captures this tension well:

He is the unrighteous amongst those who can no longer be so because He was and is for them. He is the burdened amongst those who have been freed from their burden by Him. He is the condemned amongst those who are pardoned because the sentence which destroys them is directed against Him. He who is in the one person the electing God and the one elect man is as the rejecting God, the God who judges sin in the flesh, in His own person the one rejected man, the Lamb which bears the sin of the world... (CD IV/1, 237).

That is, when the Son comes down to assume human flesh, he also brings human flesh into the Godhead, creating an ultimate tension. “Our sin is no longer our own. It is his sin, the sin of Jesus Christ. God – he himself as the obedient Son of the Father – has made it his own” (CD IV/1, 238). The one ultimately worthy *to* exile is now also the one ultimately worthy *of* exile.

⁵⁶ McKnight, 55.

⁵⁷ McKnight, 60.

Death

At the cross, then, the Trinity stretches to the utmost. The sense of this can be felt in Jesus' cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). However, 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."⁵⁸ That is, God has chosen to order his self-revelation and interaction with creation (his act) in such a way that it has a center – Jesus Christ. However, as Moltmann puts it, "at the centre of Christian faith is the history of Christ. At the centre of the history of Christ is his passion and his death on the cross."⁵⁹ At the cross, the *One* God subjects himself to the full exile in place of the schismatic sinners.

The Son of God, worthy to mete out the sentence of exile, instead *goes* into exile, into the far country of death and the grave, bearing the righteous consequences of the perversions of God's unity for the sake of humanity's salvation. Volf claims that "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."⁶⁰ According to Barth, "in the place of all men he [Christ] has himself wrestled with that which separates them from him. He has himself borne the consequence of this separation to bear it away" (CD IV/1, 247). At the death of

⁵⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 127.

⁵⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 151. Quoted by McKnight, 61.

⁶⁰ Volf, 126.

Christ, the Trinity has stretched to its limit,⁶¹ and yet humanity is left in a state of partial exile as before. The unifying work of the atonement is left utterly incomplete without the resurrection.

Resurrection

The full exile of the Son of God is followed by his ultimate vindication as the Savior of the world. He is raised up from the grave 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: "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).

And gloriously, 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 *perichoretic* unity of the triune God.⁶² The importance of this grace-mediating faith and its relevance to the unity of God's people should not be overlooked:

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).

Apart from union with Christ, then, humanity is left in its sorry state. For "if 'in' Adam we sin and die, so 'in' Christ we become righteous [and unified] and live. In other

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² Cf. 1 Cor 15:20-22.

words, it is all about ‘with and to whom’ we are united.”⁶³ The only hope for human unity, then, is not an artificially constructed consensus, but “recapitulation in the unique person of the incarnate Logos,”⁶⁴ Jesus the Messiah. “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.”⁶⁵

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is crucial, for “atonement is both the elimination of the problem and the enablement of a new life.”⁶⁶ That is, the focus of the atonement is not merely to sentence sin with its proper exile, but to fulfill God’s creative purposes for fellowship and unity. Redemption and (re-)creation meet in the resurrection, for the Son has been brought back from the full exile, and those who are “in Christ” are invited back into participation in the divine life. This new, divine life available to humans in Christ is “ecclesial: resurrection creates a new community for all.”⁶⁷

Salvation: Unity Restored

Salvation, then, is this unmerited entrance, through and in the Son, into the unified Trinitarian life of the Godhead. 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.”⁶⁸ Internally and externally, unity is restored. The people

⁶³ McKnight, 59.

⁶⁴ Scouteris, 407.

⁶⁵ Scouteris, 407.

⁶⁶ McKnight, 71. See 1 Cor 15:12-19 for Paul’s take on the necessity of the resurrection.

⁶⁷ McKnight, 71.

⁶⁸ Colin Gunton, “Salvation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

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*.

These themes come together in Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-26, where his "vision of a unified community, transcending mere institutional unity, encompasses present as well as future believers."⁶⁹ In this prayer, "nothing less than human participation in the *perichoresis* is in view."⁷⁰ This is because "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."⁷¹ That is, when Jesus prays to the Father that his followers might be one, it is not a polite request that Christians might one day learn to get along better and arrive at some sort of a consensus. 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 (cf. John 17:21).

In this prayer, I believe we are given a behind the scenes look at how the atonement works and what exactly salvation entails. The eternal life we are saved to is a relational knowledge of (cf. John 17:3) and union with God (cf. 17:20-23). Reflecting the somewhat convoluted argument of the passage, McKnight notes: "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."⁷² In fulfillment of his creative purposes, God saves those who are in Christ through

⁶⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 498.

⁷⁰ McKnight, 17.

⁷¹ Scouteris, 402.

⁷² McKnight, 17.

faith, and this salvation entails the robust unity we were always meant to share with the creator.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

In light of the previous framework for studying the nexus of divine unity and the atonement, it is appropriate now to consider its ecclesiological relevance. To this end, it is helpful to revisit the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21 – “[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*” (emphasis added). Here we find 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). After all, “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?”⁷³

The burden of this paper has been to show that *church unity is not just a secondary addition to the gospel message, but an integral part of the gospel itself*. If the theory of the atonement I propose 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.⁷⁴ 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.

In recognition of God’s uniqueness, we must cast down our idols and worship him alone. As the *Shema* urges, complete and total devotion is the only appropriate response to the one true God. Although physical idols may not be as universally common today as they

⁷³ Köstenberger, 499.

⁷⁴ Köstenberger, 499, n. 78.

once were, invisible idols are as prevalent as ever, especially within the context of Western materialism, where money, possessions, influence, and power are the modern-day Baal. Is the church, especially the affluent segments of the North American church, willing to eschew these idols in order to worship the one true God with heart, soul, and strength?

In demonstration of God's simplicity, we must seek unity with ourselves, each other, all of creation, and God himself. In doing so, we must reject false unities in favor of true ones. At this point, however, I must note that there seems to be an appropriate place for distance within the life of the church, in light of the redemptive mode of God's unity in the presence of sin as he distances himself from it. However, we must be extremely careful when presuming to exercise this righteous act of distancing ourselves, for at least two reasons.

First, the idolatrous desires of our own hearts tend toward a false, absolutized unity which demonizes otherness. The fundamentalist doctrine of "biblical separation" is too often claimed when the real problem is not heresy, but rather diversity, which is not a problem at all given the inherent otherness within the Trinity. Second, God exercised this redemptive separation *in order that* true unity might be achieved through Christ, not to keep himself pure and unstained from a creation he wanted nothing to do with. In other words, if God did not completely separate himself from a truly sinful creation in order that he might one day have robust unity with it once more, what right do we have to completely separate ourselves from our brothers and sisters in Christ for what often amounts to mere differences of opinion?

In light of God's oneness and his redemptive, unifying mission, we must watch out for and avoid the most dangerous heretics: those who cause divisions in opposition to the unifying *missio Dei* (cf. Rom 16:17). That is, Christians should only separate from one another for the gravest *divisive* offences in doctrine and praxis. Even then, this separation should only be partial and temporary. Every effort should then be made to achieve true unity within the church. Ecumenism and catholicity are to be embraced, not feared. We must prefer

true, robust unity to false, forced homogeneity. Within the atonement framework of this essay, sin is divisive schism and the saving work of Christ is that of re-unification and at-one-ment with God, each other, our very selves, and creation. To claim the pursuit of righteousness and doctrinal purity at the expense of the unity, especially the unity of the church, is therefore a shameful undoing of the work of God in Jesus Christ to reconcile all things to himself.⁷⁵

Instead, we must seek to be one as God is One, heeding the exhortations of the apostle Paul to “live worthily of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3). “The theological basis on which this way of life must be built” is provided in the next three verses:⁷⁶ “There is *one* body and *one* Spirit, just as you too were called to the *one* hope of your calling, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of *all*, who is over *all* and through *all* and in *all*” (Eph 4:4-6, emphasis added). In light of these things, 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.”⁷⁷

Nevertheless, this pursuit of robust unity is rarely easy. “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.”⁷⁸ That is, our demonstrations of simple unity should not only prompt us to encourage unity where it already occurs, but to engage areas of division and strife as

⁷⁵ Col 1:20.

⁷⁶ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 261.

⁷⁷ Thielman, 261.

⁷⁸ Volf, 23.

ambassadors for unity, as it were, reaching out to both the victims and the aggressors when it comes to schism and discord. We are called to show humility, gentleness, and patience to even the most divisive and argumentative types of people, extending the oneness of God to even the darkest, divided corners of his creation. As we actively seek reconciliation and unity, even when it is costly to do so, might we as the people of God be able to exclaim with Paul that:

all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's trespasses against them, and he has given us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His plea through us. We plead with you on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor 5:18-20).

CONCLUSION

After noting the apparent connection between the lack of reconciliation within the church and the ways in which we speak of the doctrine of reconciliation, I turned to Johnson's synthesis of Karl Barth's thought on the doctrine of God and the divine perfections with the doctrine of reconciliation. The link he posits between theology proper and the atonement provides the theological resources for the full appreciation of the unity and diversity of the atonement as the act in which the triune God fulfills his creative and covenantal purposes by bringing his full being-in-act to bear on our sinful condition.⁷⁹ I then proceeded to frame a theory of the atonement with the unity of God as its foundation, before considering the ecclesiological implications of such a theory.

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

⁷⁹ Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 51.

resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in order to save a people to robust unity with himself, each other, and the entire creation.

At creation, God shares his unity with creation, resulting in appropriate epistemic and ontic creaturely responses. According to God's creative purposes, therefore, his robust unity was to be recognized, shared, and demonstrated. The entrance of sin into the cosmos, however, perverted these aspects of unity, both internally and externally. In the face of these abominations, God's unity takes on the redemptive mode of distancing and separation (though not division) through banishment and exile. God cannot tolerate a false, schismatic unity with his creation and his people, and he responds with distance until true unity can be achieved.

However, God mercifully and patiently refuses to sentence human sin with the full and permanent exile it deserves. He calls the nation of Israel back from the partial exile into full fellowship with himself through the covenants and Torah. However, their hardhearted divisiveness leads them to eschew repeatedly the loving faithfulness of their God. In a righteous response, God distances their schismatic sin from his perfect unity once more through the exile of the nation. Nevertheless, God is still merciful to them in the Diaspora, and he fulfills his creative and covenantal purposes through the True Israelite, the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah.

Christ's saving work, then, is that of re-unification, of reconciliation, and of *at-one-ment*. At the incarnation, the Trinity stretches as the Son assumes human flesh and meets humanity in its state of partial exile. At the cross, the Trinity stretches to the utmost as the Son of God, worthy to mete out the sentence of exile, instead subjects himself to the full exile in place of schismatic sinners for the sake of their salvation, bearing the righteous consequences of the perversions of God's unity by going into the far country of death and the grave. At the resurrection, the full exile of the Son of God is followed by the ultimate

vindication of him as the Savior of the world as he is raised up from the grave and brought back from the far country of death.

Through this movement of the Son into the exile and back again, he offers up sin itself, as the perversion of God's unity, to destruction. Salvation, then, is the unmerited entrance, through and in the Son, into the simple and unique *perichoretic* unity of the triune God. Internally and externally, unity is restored. 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.

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” (John 17:21).

Amen and amen.

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