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# *The Atonement in Paul*

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When we consider the meaning of the atonement in Paul, we are asking how the earliest and one of the most important scriptural witnesses understood the central moment in God's rescue and recovery of humanity through Christ's death — clearly a great deal is at stake. Neither is the question easy: both the uncertainties of history and the entrenchments, and even prejudices, of theology and denomination tend to be at work in the discussion. Even more unsettling perhaps is the emergence of such 'party splits' in the NT itself — the realization that different groups within the early church (many with their manifestos represented in the NT) conceived of God's act in Christ's death differently, and at times in significant conflict with one another. Needless to say, Paul himself seems to have been at the centre of some of the hottest of these disputes.

I will sketch some of the contours of these party splits and conflicts in what follows, focusing particularly on Paul's insights as they emerged within them — hence, his views tend to be expressed in 'a specifically targeted' fashion. Things will be set out in four stages: first, what I take to be something of a misrepresentation of Paul's views in commercial or business terms — an ever-present temptation! — will be described; secondly, this view will be criticized as fundamentally inappropriate, at least (mercifully) as a description of God's relationship with us; thirdly, an alternative way of reading the important 'justification texts' in Romans and Galatians (that lie behind the business model described in section one) will be suggested, in an attempt to give the critic of Christian commerce some sort of defence at this point against its advocates (and it is here that the original setting of Paul's views in conflict must be particularly borne in mind); and, fourthly, Paul's own rather more radical, even cosmic, perspective will be briefly described (a view certain other early church members found so 'over the top'). Putting it simply, Paul is more interested in a shift of realities, than a shift of moral capital (although this is not the way he is often presented to us) — small wonder some of his colleagues cavilled.

## **A contractual model of the atonement in Paul**

We are often told that the key to Paul is 'justification by faith'. The emphasis within this interpretation is on the Christian's appropriation — or grasp — of salvation or justification in the gospel by an act of faith (that must also continue over time). This single, simple act is contrasted with much more

elaborate appropriations, particularly 'legalism', where one must be entirely righteous (or at least 51% righteous) to be saved (and this was supposedly the basic approach of the Judaism of Paul's time). God considers, and perhaps even makes, those who believe righteous, hence the rubric 'justification' (the noun, adjective, and verb all have the same Greek root, *dik-*; something obscured by English's mixture of French and Anglo-Saxon roots<sup>1</sup>). This seems like a generous arrangement. However, it is important to note that it is still an arrangement or contract. Outside the contract's conditions, there is only a fearful expectation of wrath and punishment from God. One must appropriate the offer of salvation in the contract to be saved and justified — through faith, of course. Fundamentally, salvation is a commercial arrangement; a deal.

A contractual model necessarily produces an objective but essentially punitive view of Christ's death. Here sacrificial metaphors are drawn upon (in dependence on texts like Rom. 3:25, 4:25, and 8:3), although more commercial ransom and purchase metaphors are also appropriate (and the two sets of terms mutually interpret one another). Hence we tend to see metaphors drawn from law, commerce and ancient sacrifice mingle (sometimes a little awkwardly!). Christ's death is held to function as a definitive payment, or even ransom, exhausting God's wrath and (entirely just) punishment of transgressions, that is, God's legitimate penalizing of us for failing to keep an original contract. It is this generous acceptance of our punishment that allows us to receive salvation for a mere act of belief. Thus, Christ's death allows a transfer of terms, or contracts, so to speak: a very stringent, just contract — kept by him — is replaced by one that is far easier to keep. Consequently, the canons of justice are not violated, but neither (hopefully) do the unjust or 'ungodly' actually perish. Of course, this generous arrangement is only made possible by Christ's vicarious, substitutionary, *penal* death: he accepts our penalty for contract-violation, and so we escape its conditions (gratefully) to a more lenient arrangement.

There is a long tradition of dissent from this view of salvation, and specifically from its view of the atonement. Many scholars have watered down its cruder aspects, notably the anger of God, which seems distinctly unforgiving and rather pagan — God here seems more like the irritable Zeus than the God who does not spare his only Son.... Surely in the Christian understanding mercy triumphs over justice? Is God really that worried about breach of contract? The sacrificial function of Christ has consequently been redefined in exemplary, expiatory, participatory (and even triumphal<sup>2</sup>)

- 1 See E. P. Sanders's lucid discussion in *Paul*, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp 45-47.
- 2 Some scholars (notably Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor*, tr. A. G. Hebert, SPCK, London 1950) have suggested that a triumphal view of the atonement is more appropriate to the NT and its ancient context. In its cruder form, found in some Church Fathers, Christ's death functions as a ransom payment to the Devil, hence the view is a variation of the propitiatory perspective already discussed. If this idea is dropped, however, the actual mechanism of the atonement becomes more obscure. Consequently, without wanting to minimise the importance of the victory of Easter that Aulén re-emphasizes, the perspective does not contribute greatly to our discussion: the cross was a victory, but how was that victory actually achieved?

directions.<sup>3</sup> These are all undoubtedly an improvement, although one wonders if they have grasped the fundamental problem with the model, and thereby avoided it — that is, its fundamentally commercial quality.

The exemplary view dispenses with any objective effect or action in Christ's death, and understands the Cross to speak purely of God's love for humanity; a love that will stop at nothing. Certainly here all notion of contract has been abandoned, and there is undoubtedly an element of truth in this view — God's love for humanity will stop at nothing — but if the death of the Son accomplishes nothing (besides this revelation) one wonders how it actually accomplishes it. A meaningless or trivial death cannot reveal love: it reveals nothing — except perhaps foolishness. If I drive my car at high speed into a brick wall, loudly proclaiming my love for all humanity, my surviving family would probably wonder how I had left my senses, not how extraordinarily loving my gesture was. Clearly, the mere fact of death does not demonstrate love innately. *It reveals love only if it is objectively vicarious*, that is, if it achieves something; if it has a saving context. We appreciate those who gave their lives on D-Day. These costly deaths are comprehensible as a loving act of self-sacrifice. Hence, unless a death is necessary or effective, it cannot really speak of love. Consequently, this redefinition seems to lead us automatically out of itself to another view in which Christ's death actually achieves something.

An expiatory model removes the offending punitive dimension of Christ's sacrifice. Instead of placating God's just anger at transgressions (a propitiatory view), Christ's death wipes or cleanses the sins themselves. Hence hygienic metaphors in terms of cleansing an unclean or dirty object replace those drawn from the placating of an aggrieved or angered party (a redefinition easier for sacrificial than for ransom and purchase terms). God, and especially the attribute of punitive wrath and anger, recedes into the background in this model, and the focus is on the sins or transgressions themselves, which are wiped away or expunged, rather as I mop my dog's offending dirty footprints off our white kitchen floor.

Again this seems to be a forward step, but one must ask for a little more detail: how exactly are the sins wiped away or cleansed? Here a recent school of NT scholarship has an appropriate answer.<sup>4</sup> The sins or transgressions are identified with the sacrifice in a sort of transfer (whether the sacrificial animal in the OT, or Christ in the NT), so that when the sacrifice dies, the sins die with the sacrifice, having received their appropriate end of annihilation. Moreover, Christ's sacrifice can be seen as an appropriate expansion on those of the temple cult, because of its final and universal atoning efficacy (OT sacrifices, amongst other limitations, could not atone for 'sins with a high hand', nor were they conclusive). His sacrifice is a particularly effective cleansing agent,

3 For an elegant overview see B. S. Childs, 'Reconciliation with God', ch. V in his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, SCM, London 1992, pp 485-529, esp. pp 503-8.

4 Centred in the University of Tübingen, and largely following the insights of OT scholar H. Gese. This debate is not particularly accessible to the English-speaking world, but a good summary is given by Childs, *op cit*.

one might say: a detergent that can deal with simply anything! (another unwarranted intrusion of commercial metaphors?). The puzzling tension between the attitudes of God and Christ in the contractual model is also thereby overcome: God provides the sacrifice, which is Christ, so the two are clearly working in unity.

Here it is interesting to note, however, that the model has started to move away from a notion of cleansing or wiping, to one of identification or participation. One may still speak at a broad metaphorical level of such a sacrifice cleansing one's sins, but in fact they are not merely wiped away, as my mop cleans the kitchen floor. They are transferred to a sacrificial animal (or person), who dies and thereby extinguishes them. We should probably therefore speak of a participatory-expiatory model.

This is clearly a far more appropriate understanding of the atonement. However, a basic question remains. Is this model of the atonement still placed within a broadly contractual framework, so that it must be appropriated by something like an act of belief? If so, inescapable theological tensions linger. It may still provide us with important insights into the atonement, but that must be within another, non-commercial, framework.

### Evaluating the contractual model

The contractual model is often presented as the 'Reformational' model, that is, as the insight that inspired Luther and that captures the heart of the Reformational programme. It is encapsulated, we are told, in the famous slogan *sola fides*. This claim, however, is not necessarily correct. While it is possible to find support for the model in Reformational (and even in Luther's) writings, the slogan *sola fides* is arguably better understood in the context of *sola gratia*. That is, it has also been suggested that grace — the *unconditional gift* of God's salvation through the vicarious actions of the Son — was at the heart of the Reformation (although perhaps this is an insight emphasized more in certain parts of the Calvinist tradition) — and, of course, both these insights claim to be *sola scriptura*! In short, claims of a Reformation pedigree (which are also distinctly inflammatory in an ecumenical context) are neither historically simple nor completely persuasive. Can we really claim to have understood the Reformation entirely? They are probably best left to one side.

The contractual model of salvation has a fundamental problem, namely, its understanding of God's action and love in commercial terms as conditional upon an act of consent, in this case a human decision.<sup>5</sup> In essence, this view presents a divine love with strings attached — as 'commercial love' or favour usually is! If a person does not take the necessary step, God's love is, quite simply, not forthcoming. On the supposedly Pauline presentation then,

5 A definitive presentation of this model and its problems is J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant and Contract, a study of the theological background of worship in seventeenth-century Scotland', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 23 (1970), pp 51-76; idem, 'The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 26 (1973), pp 295-311.

if you do not take the initial step of faith or belief, God will not save you (conversely, if you do take that step, God is bound to save you; God has no choice in the matter beyond this point either, being similarly bound by the terms of the contract). Consequently, underlying the God of love is a God of commercial justice, and unless the God of love is appropriated or 'accessed' correctly, the God of justice is all that remains (done with our faith VISA card). In reality, the God of justice surrounds and informs the God of love here (indeed, the love is construed through the model so as not to violate the justice), in the sense that the banking system is undergirded by appropriate acts of parliament and repayment schedules. The justice of God is clearly the fundamental attribute.

This does not seem like a particularly unfair position initially (indeed, formally it isn't), and it also appeals to our own moral and cultural proclivities. We live by, and believe in, the rule of law and the principle of consent — our society is unimaginable without it. Moreover, we desperately want to say to people 'you ought to believe and be saved', that is, to appeal to them to make a rational and moral decision, and to continue to exhort them to make it — and, indeed, to censure them if they slip away or refuse (thereby also explaining the potential embarrassment of the many damned — it is their own choice!). And centuries of political, legal, intellectual and moral culture support this view. We automatically think of people as autonomous, rational and legitimately limited only by their own say so. It is entirely natural to think that God also operates in this fashion. But this is, fundamentally, a European cultural projection, and one is entitled to ask if its view of God and of the person is accurate. Is God and God's relationship with us best construed as something of a European bridge party?

Against this view, certain figures and writings within the Reformation (and of course at other times in the history of the church) suggested that God's action is unconditional, while people are not fundamentally moral, rational, or responsive (although this second position is not *a priori*: it follows from the experience of the first). God's action in Christ precedes any human act or decision, thereby demonstrating an extraordinary depth of commitment on the part of God (and an equally extraordinary lack of the same on the part of humanity). It is, precisely and fundamentally, a love that exceeds justice, that breaks into an unjust situation and regenerates it, a love that is fundamentally foreign — and even irrational — to us, but that thereby demonstrates the extraordinary difference between the nature of God and of humanity. God's love has no strings attached: it is a love that reaches out to the unlovely.

Clearly, then, any presentation of salvation in contractual or commercial terms is, on this view, essentially an incorrect and even radically distorted view of God and God's action in Christ. It replaces a God of fundamentally unconditional love with one of conditional love and fundamental justice. These two Gods are not the same, and neither are these two gospels. Moreover, any view that merely tinkers with the component parts of the contractual view, while ignoring the basic criterion of conditionality, fails to

avoid this criticism. The commercial and legal metaphors for God must be driven out with sticks and staves! Hence many of the adjustments to the notion of sacrifice in the atonement (especially the participatory-expiatory view) fall short of eliminating the basic problem — there is no point eliminating the angry God of the atonement, if the same figure still appears when you make your decision for Christ, and again at the eschaton.

We are left at this point with two options. Either Paul had a much worse grasp of God and the gospel than previously we had thought — a position never without its champions! — or Paul understood all this clearly, but has been misrepresented by a tradition that has misunderstood him. I think that the latter is the case, but that leaves us with two further tasks: firstly, we must show how this view of Paul has misread or misunderstood large parts of his writings (because this perspective can lay claim to a considerable section of argument and terminology, mainly in Romans, chapters 1-4, and Galatians, chapters 2-3), that is, we must show how these chapters can be read non-commercially; and then, secondly, we must show what (and where) Paul's true view of God and God's action in Christ is.

### **An alternative reading of Paul's justification texts**

The advocate of a contractual reading of Paul can always object to my criticisms that I have ignored many of his most important discussions on the subject, and that these do in fact evidence a commercial view of salvation in which the simple act of faith (the generous contract) opposes a system based on works (the harsh contract) and God justifies the ungodly through a sacrifice (allowing the shift of the contractor — after signing! — from the latter to the former). These passages are found, we are told, primarily in Rom. 1:16-4:25 and Gal. 2:15-4:7, and at the very least suggest a 'double crater' view of Paul (that is, two basic models of salvation<sup>6</sup>). For any rejection of this view in the context of Paul to be plausible, therefore, an alternative reading of these passages must be given that shows they are not describing Paul's thoughts on salvation and the atonement, but address different matters (or that they are not as commercial as people think). Clearly, any such account must be able to explain his extensive use of righteousness and faith language, that is, the language of law and of decision (along with the more occasional intrusion of sacrificial and commercial terms in relation to Christ's death).

Admittedly, there *is* a rather commercial discussion of the atonement going on in these passages, but it is not, I think, Paul's view. Paul here is, I would suggest, attempting to correct or to reshape the views on salvation and the atonement of his opponents, so that his churches of Gentile Christians do not feel compelled to abandon either Paul's gospel or their own law-free existence. Unfortunately, there is not the space to argue this rather complicated case fully here, but we can reconstruct its outline briefly, and hopefully this will give at least some indication of how to respond to commercial claims about Paul based on these texts.

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6 See especially the impression given by Sanders' *Paul*, pp 44-76, where the two models jostle for supremacy.

Although when attempting to reconstruct and to prove the case we proceed in the opposite direction, it is probably clearer to begin with the probable preaching of Paul's opponents, and then to attempt to explain Paul's cleverly argued response within Romans and Galatians in its light. Paul's opponents in Romans and Galatians (letters that I would place close together, although the reading does not depend on this) are often dubbed, not altogether happily, 'Judaizers'. They seem to have been zealous Jewish Christians who regarded Paul as apostate, and sought to convert his Gentile Christian congregations to a full observance of the Mosaic *torah*. They wanted his Gentile converts to become fully-fledged (traditional) Jews as well. It is important to note that they are Christians of a sort (although Paul clearly doesn't think so), and not Jews *per se*. This means we must be cautious when extrapolating from their arguments to those of Judaism in the first century: as Christians, certain arguments were open to them to use in Paul's Gentile churches, while other approaches were closed off. Moreover, it is clearly unwise to judge a large and very diverse group in terms of a handful of well-known, but not necessarily very representative, members — is everyone in Australia like Dame Edna Everidge or Clive James?: Is everyone in the British Labour party like Tony Benn?

One approach severely curtailed was to appeal to Paul's converts to observe the law simply as an appropriate response to God's covenant of salvation with Israel (as E. P. Sanders suggests most Jews of the time reasoned<sup>7</sup>). While undoubtedly an effective strategy for those already Jewish, this appeal would have carried little weight for Paul's Gentiles who were already saved (so they thought) but pagan in their background. This sort of appeal would almost certainly have been rather ineffective — it would be like appealing to the English rugby team to play well in view of the long Welsh tradition of rugby excellence! Hence, to make Paul's Christians law-observant — which seems to have been the opponents' main objective — probably required a slightly different, and stronger, approach. Consequently the Judaizers seem to have suggested that salvation had not yet taken place for Christians. It would occur on judgement day, when God would judge everyone in accordance with their works (compare Paul's statements in Rom. 2:6-8,16). In this scenario (as they presented it) both knowledge of, and obedience to, the Jewish *torah* would clearly be of immense benefit, since the *torah* would guide people into good works. This suggestion seems to have been supported by a discussion of Israel's patriarchal traditions, particularly the life of Abraham and his various 'tests' of righteousness. Abraham was (they argued) justified by works; his acceptance of his initial call and then the covenantal promises, his belief, his acceptance of circumcision, and, ultimately, the offering of his son, were all proofs of his supreme virtue and righteousness (see Jas. 2:20-24; Heb. 11:8-12,17-19; and Philo, *De Abrahamo, passim*). Jesus also seems to have been presented in a similar light, that is, as someone justified or vindicated, by the resurrection, because of his steadfast fidelity. In short, both Abraham and Jesus, the Judaizers would have argued,

7 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1977, *passim*.



were vindicated or saved because of their works and righteousness. It would have been a short step to suggesting that Christians should follow their example and do likewise; steadfastly believing in and faithful to God, as well as circumcised and law-observant! (after-all, Jesus was a Jew).

What, one may ask, was the function of Christ's death, in such a scheme? Did the Judaizers even have a theology of the atonement (besides the standard Jewish reliance on the temple cultus)? Reading between the lines, the Judaizers seem to have interpreted Jesus's death in terms of a martyrological tradition within Judaism at the time, and specifically in terms of Abraham's (near) sacrifice of Isaac, recounted in Gen. 22. Thus, Jesus's death was probably accorded atoning efficacy by them, for sins and transgressions.

To what degree this displaced the Jerusalem temple's atoning function, however, is very hard to say. Such a view could be held merely to complement the temple, atoning for those sins the temple could not atone for (like sins 'committed with a high hand'); to compensate for any apparent deficiency in the temple (because of temporary cessation, corruption, or incorrect observance: see the criticisms from Qumran); or to displace the temple's atonement completely (see John 4:19-24; Acts 7:2-53). Probably all these views were suggested at different times in the early Church. However, the conservatism of the Judaizers suggests that they must have reserved some significant role for the temple (indeed, their most probable point of origin was Jerusalem), although it need not necessarily have been an atoning one. What is important, however, is that, in accordance with the Jewish martyrological tradition, their understanding of Jesus's atonement would have probably included a punitive or penal dimension (see 2 Macc. 6-7). Moreover, they seem to have emphasized a typological connection between Christ and Isaac. The patriarchal story of Abraham (which, as we have seen, they also emphasized), would thereby point to Christ's death very directly, while Christ's actions would fulfill this important strand in Jewish theology, as both figures demonstrated their righteousness supremely in *sacrificial* situations. This was, of course, when martyrs did demonstrate their supreme virtue: in the face of death.

It is not hard to imagine the impact preaching of this nature would have had on Paul's Gentile converts. A presentation of Jesus in terms of Abraham, himself justified by circumcision, works, fidelity, and, ultimately, sacrifice, and thereby — *and only thereby* — procuring salvation for the nations as promised in Gen. 12:2-3, 15:4-5, 18-21, and 17:2-22, must have been extremely persuasive. Paul, however, (and no doubt drawing on all his Pharisaic education and experience) sought to rebut this scenario extensively in Galatians and Romans (with the latter being a rather more knowledgeable, collected, and systematic attempt). He made a number of points against it, not all of which need detain us here. Two, however, should be emphasized.

First, as is well known, Paul tried to detach faith or fidelity from (other!) works, both in the life of Abraham and in Jesus, arguing, against the claim that all the law was to be observed, *that faith alone* was scripturally evidenced

and necessary. This was a cheeky claim in Abraham's case, the father of the Jewish nation, who was, as we have said, widely regarded by Jews as the epitome of law-observance, and certainly seems to have done other righteous things as well. But it was at least superficially plausible, thanks to the early placement in the story of Gen. 15:6 (and many Christians — although seldom Jews — have continued to find Paul's exegesis convincing!). The first time Abraham received his promises of greatness, all he did was believe.

Paul also created a link between this picture of the patriarch and the 'work' of Jesus by quoting (and repeatedly alluding to) Hab. 2:4, which spoke of 'the righteous one' and his fidelity that led to life. The martyrs were frequently called 'righteous ones', hence 'the righteous one' was an appropriate title for the definitive martyr. Jesus too, it would seem, was also someone who did one thing right: he was faithful to God, unto death. Thus, both Abraham and Jesus are presented by Paul as primarily characterized by fidelity, and this is something one can glean some support for from the Scriptures. Note, this is also not a completely illegitimate inference from the Jewish martyrological tradition, with its strong emphasis on fidelity to God up to, and if necessary including, death, but most Jewish martyrs would have been expected to have been law-observant: indeed, many died to avoid breaking the law!

Paul isolates this quality of fidelity, suggesting that it alone was what counted, and that further law-observance (on the part of Abraham, Jesus, and — more importantly — Paul's Gentile converts) is therefore not necessary. Hence, *sola fides* is an accurate summation of Paul's argument at this point — as long as it includes a reference to Jesus's faithfulness (an important part of Paul's argument that follows), and also carries the sense of faithfulness to God under extreme duress, up to the possibility of death (see Rom. 4:17-22). These last connotations are not, of course, traditional Protestant emphases. Indeed, when viewed as the condition for salvation, such 'belief' is beginning to look for many (myself included) distinctly out of reach.

In sum, Paul's emphasis on faith should be understood primarily as a counter-argument to the claim of the Judaizers that full law-observance is necessary for salvation. It is a negative rather than a positive position, that he may well redefine later given the opportunity (and faith terminology does in fact disappear in Romans in chs. 5-8, after 5:1-2). All his converts have to do in order to be like Abraham and Jesus is believe — and to go on believing in the resurrection through thick and thin. All the rest — including circumcision — is commentary. This is not to say that Paul thinks faith, in both senses of belief and fidelity, is unimportant: clearly he does affirm it. But it is to say that we should not necessarily look for its proper definition and role within his polemics against the Judaizers. Here he is making the best of a bad situation, on the strength of Gen. 15:6 and Hab. 2:4.

Secondly, Paul also wished to combat the Judaizers' claim that salvation is future, and will only be revealed on the day of judgement (in an intimidating assessment of works). Clearly he wants to say that it has already taken place in the Christ event, and that Christians have nothing to fear (the old-fashioned theme of 'assurance').

Here Paul takes the atonement theology of the Judaizers and deploys it against them. The Judaizers conceded that Jesus's death functioned like the sacrifice of Isaac, revealing the glory of God now (as it did then on Mount Moriah; later the temple mount), and demonstrating God's faithful desire to save humanity in the offering up of the only Son for their sins, as the initial incident demonstrated Abraham's faithfulness to God, in his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Paul introduces this cluster of motifs repeatedly in Romans (in 1:16-17; 3:21-26; 4:25; 5:6-11; 8:3-4, 14-17, 31-32), emphasizing throughout how the sending and offering of God's only son reveals and demonstrates God's great love for humanity. In view of this definitive demonstration of God's love — a love that will go to extreme lengths — he argues, Christians can rest assured in salvation in the face of the coming judgement. They need not fear a verdict of damnation in a fiery future assize, as the Judaizers suggest (and perhaps one can hear a few Christians breathing more easily at this point as well). The God that has gone to such extreme lengths to save us will not change his mind: he has been proved as trustworthy as Abraham was. Moreover, clearly any punitive dimension in Jesus's sacrifice is correspondingly excluded by the unity between God and Jesus, likened to Abraham and Isaac, that Paul repeatedly stresses. Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, and God, for Paul, is equally committed. Note, Paul probably does not disagree with the Judaizers' theology of the atonement — although he might regard it as incomplete.<sup>8</sup> But here he is teasing out an inconsistency in their understanding of salvation, playing off the present revelation of God's love in the cross against the possible future revelation of God's anger.<sup>9</sup>

It will be clear by now that certain important assumptions underly my suggested 'counter-reading' of Romans 3-4 and Galatians 2-3: a martyrological reading of faith as faithfulness (Gk *pistis*), and in relation to Jesus as well as to the patriarch Abraham and to the Christian; the presence behind Paul's atonement passages of the story of 'the binding of Isaac', and its later Jewish embellishments; and an emphasis on opponents in the background of Romans as well as Galatians.<sup>10</sup> It would be fair to say that none of these assumptions are supported by a consensus of NT scholars. Nevertheless I

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8 It is worth noting that Paul also redefines these sacrificial metaphors in chs. 6 and 8 in a suitably radical sense. In 8:3 Christ's death does not just atone for transgressions (*peri hamartias*; see 3:25, 4:25; and the possible origin of the phrase in Lev. 17:11) but kills sin itself, thereby eliminating the agonies of ch. 7 (and the cause as also revealed by ch. 5). Hence, while not eliminating Christ's atonement for transgressions, Paul does not emphasize this: he seems more interested in the radical death of sinful being itself (so chs. 6-7), and the resulting possibility of an eschatological new creation (so ch. 8).

9 This tension is sharper if a punitive dimension is lacking in the sacrificial metaphor (and Paul does not leave much room for this in Romans and Galatians). If the Judaizers presented a penal view they are less vulnerable to such a criticism, but Paul would probably counter that they are also further from the gospel's revelation of God's unconditional love. Did Abraham offer up Isaac to assuage his *own* anger?! This application of the metaphor (a metaphor the Judaizers endorse) would be incoherent.

10 For this reading of *pistis* see R. Hays, 'ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake?', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, (1991), pp 714-29; and George Howard, 'Faith

suspect that they can all be strongly argued, while their utility is clear. They suggest that a contractual reading of Paul, that sees his basic theology of salvation and the atonement in these discussions, *homogenizes* and *universalizes* a very specific, and very Jewish, argument about when salvation takes place, and if, fundamentally, it will be assessed in terms of works. If my suggested reinterpretation is plausible, however, although we can see the views of Paul's opponents on the atonement in these passages (which Paul, along with much of the early church, no doubt partially shares), we must really look elsewhere for a clear expression of Paul's own understanding, notably to chapters 5-8 of Romans, and to the compact statements elsewhere in his writings that echo these thoughts.

### An unconditional model of the atonement in Paul

In view of the foregoing, Paul's understanding of the atonement is perhaps not best approached, at least initially, in sacrificial terms (although these can inform it, as they should also be informed by it). It is a radical, eschatological understanding, and its clearest exposition in his letters is probably in the *next* section of Romans, that is, chapters 5-8 (especially 6:1-11 in the context of 7:7-25; and 8:1-17), although compressed allusions to it can be found elsewhere in his writings (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:17,21; Gal. 2:20; 3:26-28; 4:4-6; 6:14-15; Phil. 3:8-11; and 1 Thess. 4:14). This interpretation was probably formulated initially by the Christian community at Antioch, 'where the disciples were first called Christians' (so Acts 11:26), and ratified in a more definitive sense at a conference later in Jerusalem (so Gal. 2:1-10) — although not all seem to have accepted the good news!

For Paul in these texts the death of Christ is nothing less than a new creative act of God (hence 'eschatological'), in which the entire present fallen order is extinguished in his death on the cross, and the way thereby cleared for a new creation, also in him, following in the wake of his resurrection to new life. The individual Christian is caught up into this momentous series of events, and passes through them, by means of the Spirit. In a sense, the Spirit immerses the Christian in this process (the factor that gives reality to baptism, and to the eucharist: see Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 10:16-17). In another metaphor, the Spirit marries the Christian to Christ so that 'the two become one flesh' (see Rom. 7:1-4; 1 Cor. 6:15-18; and, more controversially, Eph. 5:25-

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of Christ', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, pp 758-60; for the presupposition of the binding of Isaac see N. A. Dahl, 'The Atonement — An Adequate Reward for the Akedah?', in *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black*, eds E. Earle Ellis and Max Wilcox, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1969, pp 15-29; Robert Hayward, 'The Present State of Research into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 32 (1981), pp 127-50; and A. F. Segal, 'He Who Did Not Spare His Own Son... Jesus, Paul and the Akedah', in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare*, eds J. C. Hurd and G. P. Richardson, Wilfred Laurier Press, Waterloo 1984, pp 169-84; and on the presence of opponents in the background of Romans, see P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen & Zürich 1989, pp 10-15; idem, 'The Purpose of Romans', in *The Romans Debate* (rev. and expanded edn), K. P. Donfried ed., T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1991, pp 231-42, especially 239-40.

32). Paul's ubiquitous — and very important — catch-phrase 'in Christ' (or its equivalent) refers to this new existence that is governed and shaped by the Easter events, and the prevalence of the phrase in his writings (allowing for various more trivial occurrences), along with its frequent strategic placement, testifies to the importance Paul attached to this basic conception (note particularly its serial function in the conclusions to the arguments of Rom. chs 6-8: 6:11,23; [7:6b]; 8:1,11,39; also 9:1 and 12:5).

This is indeed a model of atonement: God is acting through Christ (and the Spirit) to recreate and rebirth a new, righteous creation in relation to himself. Admittedly, this model does not always draw on the classic metaphors of the atonement like blood and sacrifice (although see Rom. 8:3, 32; and possibly 2 Cor. 5:21). But it does speak directly to the effect of Christ's death, and how God has made humanity and creation 'at one' with himself.

Four features of Paul's understanding are worth emphasizing in more detail. First, it is fundamentally an eschatological, and hence also creative, perspective: the longed-for new era has dawned, in which God comes to creation and to humanity (and to Israel) to rescue, redeem, and heal. But that era recapitulates the extraordinary creativity of the first (and 're-runs' its narrative in Gen. 1-2). A new person, and new humanity, has been made. Note, this is not to subordinate the second creation to the first: in Paul the second clearly prefigured the first cosmically, and also vastly exceeds it (see Rom. 5:14b-21; 8:28-30; 1 Cor. 2:7). To speak of eschatology is therefore basically to say that something dynamic and quite concrete or real has happened; also something fresh, creative, and new — and it has been initiated by a powerful act of God. Secondly, it is (as a direct consequence of the foregoing) a radical understanding, in that it cuts to the root (the *radix*) of sin in the sinful being of humanity and the present cosmic order, which is full of oppressive evil powers that have a foothold in that corrupt being (notably sin and death; they plague the flesh — Gk *sarx*). This sinful being, the flesh, is executed in the cross, and the evil powers disarmed, thereby creating the possibility of a new, righteous, being. Once again, this is quite concrete: the being of the Christian has been changed in Christ. Thirdly, although it is seldom explicitly stated or explicated (although see Rom. 8:3-17; and perhaps 9:5; also 1 Cor. 12:4-6), a trinitarian dynamic is operative at the heart of the process: the Father sends the Son, whose death and resurrection is the focal point of atonement, salvation, and the new creation. But the Son is sustained and resurrected by the Spirit, who in turn incorporates, sustains, and resurrects the Church within the Son (the entry-point into the process for the Christian: see Rom. 8:9,14-17,26-27,32). Without each person and their activity the entire model breaks down. Moreover there is clearly a functional and ontological equality between the Father and the Son in Paul's view, since Jesus is delivered up to death by his father in the way that Abraham offered up Isaac: Jesus's sonship seems quite literal for Paul here. (Paul does not abandon his commitment to monotheism either, but one may legitimately ask if his monotheism is being redefined: see 1 Cor. 8:6.) Fourthly and finally, the model is clearly utterly unconditional: no human act can initiate or effect

the eschatological irruption of God — or the Father's sending of the only Son. People are simply caught up in the irresistible purposes and creativity of God, as Paul himself was outside Damascus (see Rom. 8:28-30; 9:11,16; 11:6,29,32-36; 1 Cor. 1:18-31; 2:5-16; 15:8-10; Gal. 1:15-16). This moment involves belief, but it would seem to be a belief *born* of the Spirit, along with righteousness, holiness, obedience, liberation, as well as *fidelity* to the gospel (see Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 3:5; possibly Gal. 3:2-5; 5:5; 1 Thess. 1:2-10, esp. v 5; 2:13). That is, ongoing belief in the gospel, and loyalty to God as revealed in Christ under extreme pressure, are *consequences* of salvation, rather than its catalyst. They show that the Spirit is forming the character of Christ in us, that salvation has begun.

These four features should also be balanced by two caveats. First, the process is clearly incomplete — or merely 'inaugurated'. It has not run its complete course to a resurrected Church and cosmos; nevertheless, Paul is equally adamant that the process has begun, particularly emphasizing the presence and activity of the Spirit (so Rom. 5:5; 8:1ff; 2 Cor. 5:5). But perhaps Paul's most significant theological development beyond the point of the model's inception is, secondly, his re-balancing of its two dynamics of crucifixion and resurrection (which relates to the preceding point). Initially (and understandably) he seems to have erred on the side of triumphalism, coming dangerously close to the idea that Christians are sinless. Their death in Christ is regarded as largely accomplished, and they live in a resurrected condition as part of the new order (possibly with all their existing social relations, including betrothals and marriages, 'on hold'). Problems at Corinth, and with his own 'weakness', not to mention virulent opposition, however, seem to have led Paul to push the resurrected dimension more firmly into the future, and to re-emphasize an ongoing identification with the crucifixion, and its attendant notions of rejection, suffering, and powerlessness (see 1 Cor. 4:7-13; 15:12-19 for hints of triumphalism at Corinth; counter-balanced by Paul's arguments there and also 2 Cor. 4:7-18; 11:23-33; 12:7-10; Gal. 5:11; 6:12-16; and Phil. 3:7-14). The writings of the mature Paul reflect this renewed balance, where a *theologia crucis* guards the churches from the naive and excessive triumphalism implicit in the notion of the new creation. The main reality into which Christians are brought by the Spirit now is the reality of the cross — the resurrection is powerfully anticipated, and in a sense guaranteed (!), but it is also essentially future.

In sum, Paul's understanding of the atonement, which was probably birthed in the context of the early, and rather *avant garde*, Christian mission at Antioch, is eschatological and creative, radical, implicitly trinitarian, and unconditional. However, it is also only inaugurated, and is characterized primarily in this present, incomplete state by the dynamic of the cross, rather than by the resurrection. In a sense, we have Paul's opponents to thank for some of these insights. Critically, Paul's distinctive perspective tends to be stated in contrast to Adam, suggesting immediately its radical, creative, and universal, tenor; and with respect to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, suggesting the intimacy of the Father-Son relationship into which Christians are led.

Hence, while Paul does not utterly reject the views of his opponents on the atonement, which are sacrificial and martyrological, his own perspective is a significant step beyond them. Ironically, much of the Church has also failed to keep in step with him, preferring the limited, rather commercial, and even punitive, views of his opponents — perhaps frightened, like them, of Paul's unconditional, eschatological cross and its implications.

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### **Bryan Green**

Before he died in March of this year at the age of ninety-two, Canon Bryan Green had prepared extensive autobiographical notes under the title 'The Evolution of a Parson Evangelist'. The Bryan Green Society plans to publish his memoirs, together with other addresses, articles and discussion pieces under the title *Bryan Green: Parson - Evangelist*, available in November from Paul Mindelsohn, Bryan Green Society Ltd, c/o/ Pound Barn, Chaddesley Corbett, Kidderminster, DY10 4QL, to whom all enquiries should be addressed.