

AAR-Wesleyan Studies Group/Open and Relational Theologies Consultation Session
 Relational Atonement: Covenant Renewal as a Wesleyan Integrating Motif

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Introduction

The present atonement debate among evangelicals tends to radiate from the hegemony of the penal substitutionary model within the more Reformed evangelical heritage. Many Wesleyans have also accepted this view, although I contend it presents several theological difficulties for a consistent and biblical Wesleyan theology. In response to the intensive discussion over the nature of the atonement of Jesus Christ,¹ I would like to propose an embracing integrative motif of covenant renewal for a biblical concept of atonement.

While many in the Protestant tradition have attempted to maintain a balance among the various biblical metaphors to describe the work of Christ, a very large segment of Christians have bought into an exclusively penal understanding of sin management. Scholars such as Dallas Willard, Joel Green and Mark Baker, Scot McKnight, Mark Heim, and others have raised numerous concerns about this problem.² Given the diversity of biblical and historical perspectives on the atonement of Christ, which McKnight characterizes as a “set of golf clubs,”³ then not only must we ask if an exclusive emphasis on penal substitution can adequately express the profound nature of what occurs in the atonement of Jesus Christ. We must also ask how those who emphasize its exclusively objective, imputational, forensic declaration of acquittal of the consequences of sin can explain how this view addresses the seriousness of the existential reality of sin itself? Can God do nothing with sin but forgive it? Can he not break its power as well? The Wesleys’ message, “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free...his blood avails for me,” is as relevant now as it has ever been. As long as the work of the atonement does not address the power of sin itself, Christians who depend upon Christ’s work to save them may suffer from an insurmountable moral paralysis in this life. Is this situation consistent with the central emphasis of Jesus’ preaching in the New Testament—that the kingdom of God is now here? It would seem also that such a truncated gospel is inconsistent with Paul’s emphasis in Romans 8 and elsewhere on the power of the Spirit in the life of faith.⁴

¹ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007). McKnight challenges the exclusive use of penal substitution as the meaning of Christ’s atonement in evangelical theology. He calls for an inclusion of other atonement views as specialized “golf clubs,” which are embraced within a broader embracing concept of identification for incorporation.

² McKnight, *Community*; S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downer’s Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

³ McKnight, *Community*, 38, 99.

⁴ Michael Lodahl and Thomas J. Oord, *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2005); R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant* (Tyrone, GA.: Paternoster Press, 2006), 3-5; Todd Hunter, “Foreword,” *Cross and Covenant* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), xiii-xvi.

Wesleyans, including John Wesley himself, have seen some of these difficulties and have sought alternatives to his own somewhat modified(non-imputational) Anselmian view⁵ in the Grotian governmental approach,⁶ the Abelardian moral influence perspective, and the Girardian scapegoating interpretations.⁷ Wesley saw a covenantal relationship as the “human response to the Holy Spirit’s activity.”⁸ Since the problem of sin attacks and erodes the covenant relationship God intended to have with humanity, the issue of atonement must address how that covenant relationship may be renewed. A biblical example of the function of covenant renewal could assist in clarifying the meaning and importance of interpersonal relationships in Christian community and mission.

The concept of interpersonal covenant relationship and covenant renewal is arguably the foundational theological integrating motif of Scripture and Christian biblical theology and is effective as a theological foundation for a constructive Wesleyan soteriology. The core concept for Wesley’s soteriology, says William Cannon, was “free love, undeserved mercy, and fatherly affection.”⁹ The thesis of this paper is that the use of a biblical covenant interpersonal understanding of Christ’s work of salvation as covenant renewal and restoration of the divine image is a more satisfactory hermeneutic for understanding the atonement, particularly from a Wesleyan perspective, than are any of the other historical atonement theories taken in isolation. Wesley himself thought in terms compatible with covenant ideas, although he did not develop that perspective as the integrating motif of his theology. The use of covenant interpersonal categories allows the constructive development of a Wesleyan theological perspective that overcomes the weaknesses of the penal substitution theory, the eclectic quasi-Anselmian penalty-satisfaction atonement views of Wesley’s satisfaction emphasis, and the reverse moral influence ideas of the governmental tradition. Mildred Wynkoop and other Wesleyans have long emphasized the centrality of love and empathetic interpersonal relationships for an effective pastoral application of sanctification.¹⁰ More recently, advances in relational anthropology have had a compelling effect on the necessity of a relational understanding of theology among Wesleyans, as well as others. Mark Mann’s recently published dissertation, *Perfecting Grace: Holiness, Human Being and the Sciences*, and Oord and Lodahl’s *Relational Holiness* provide

⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 20, “The Righteousness of Faith,” *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1, Sermons I, ed. By Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 458-62; H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 333-334; see also John Rutherford Renshaw, “The Atonement in the Theology of John and Charles Wesley,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1965.

⁶ See footnotes on Wesleyan Governmental theologians below.

⁷ See Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*; S. Mark Heim, “Saved by What Shouldn’t Happen: The Anti-Sacrificial Meaning of the Cross,” in *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 211-224; Rene’ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁸ Outler, “The Righteousness of Faith,” fn. 2, 203.

⁹ William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1946), 66.

¹⁰ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *Theology of Love* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972); R. Larry Shelton, “Sanctification in Romans Chapter 6, unpublished Th.M. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1967.

recent scholarly and pastoral treatments of salvation and holiness understood in relational categories.¹¹

Furthermore, a covenant renewal understanding of the atonement may provide a more effective context for communication of the meaning of atonement across the ecumenical spectrum. For example, Lutheran theologian Marit Trelstad notes that many feminist and womanist theologies challenge the role of the cross in the atonement since they view it as legitimizing passive suffering and thus disproportionately affecting women and marginalized persons.¹² A Wesleyan attitude will seek dialogue, not condemnation, with those who have these reservations.¹³ Whether or not one agrees with these concerns, Trelstad rightly encourages continued dialogue when she says, “an understanding of atonement grounded in covenant may adequately answer the critiques brought by feminist and womanist theologians.... All in all, the theological focus on covenant highlights the graceful, continued offer of relationship which God extends to the world and this is a useful foundation for evaluating contemporary and historic atonement theory.”¹⁴

Furthermore, the Wesleyan views of atonement have sought to maintain a view of Christ’s righteousness as imparted in some way to the believer, in contrast to the imputational and substitutionary Anselmian, Reformed, and Lutheran “alien righteousness” nuances.¹⁵ These imputational interpretations have been useful in a variety of historical cultural contexts, but have not adequately addressed the theological foundations of sanctification, union with Christ, sacramental identification with Christ, or the problematic nature of the forensic metaphors for an effective contemporary Wesleyan theology of holiness. It is the focus of this paper to present a biblical, inductive, theologically-consistent, interpersonal-relational, and Trinitarian view of Christ’s atoning work as a sacrificial act of incarnational identification with humanity that accomplishes covenant renewal with God. This review will follow the lines of my recent book, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission*.¹⁶

¹¹ Thomas J. Oord and Michael Lodahl, *Relational Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2005); Mark Mann, *Perfecting Grace: Holiness, Human Being and the Sciences* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2008).

¹² Marit Trelstad, “Preface,” *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), xiv. See Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 91.

¹³ See John Wesley, “On Having a Catholic Spirit,” *Works*, II, 2:81-95; see especially the editor’s note, 79-80; also see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press/Kingswood Books, 1998), 170-221.

¹⁴ Marit Trelstad, Paper Proposal for 2008 AAR Chicago. “Atonement through Covenant: A Feminist, Process Approach.” She discussed these ideas with me in a telephone conversation, June 19, 2008. See Marit Trelstad, “Introduction: The Cross in Context,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1-16; also, see Trelstad, “Lavish Love: A Covenantal Ontology,” *Cross Examinations*, 109-24.

¹⁵ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, see footnote #63, 307.

It is clear that the biblical canon presents God consistently as a personal being who interacts interpersonally on behalf of those beings created in the divine image. In the Old Testament, God initiates a series of events leading to the salvation of the chosen people. Likewise, in the New Testament, “Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18-19 NAU). In Scripture, the subject of reconciliation is always God and the object is humanity. It is humanity that needs to be reconciled because it moved away from covenant relationship with God, not vice-versa. Thus, in the redemptive activity of Christ, God reveals personhood in historical and experiential ways. Therefore, while salvation history presents a rich and diverse description of God’s saving activity, the primary and continual theme of the interpersonal covenant relationship underlies the canonical treatment of the atonement. Covenant relationship is the goal for which God created humanity in the divine image (Gen. 1:27-28). The key question for all atonement theories, then, is how has this alienation from God occurred and what can be done to bring reconciliation to this estrangement and restore the divine/human covenant relationship and image. Michael Lodahl says, “These ideas about relationship are no better illustrated than in the Bible’s stories of the covenants...that God initiates.... To say that God is a covenantal God is to suggest a divine interest in our cooperation, a divine commitment to partnership...(God) invites our participation, our cooperation, in the tasks of creation and redemption.”¹⁷ The restoration of broken or distorted covenant relationship between God and humankind, then, is the bottom line of what atonement is about.¹⁸

I. The Atonement as Covenant Relationship

Interpersonal Covenant

The biblical narrative presents the connection between God and creation in relational covenant community terms, as Lodahl,¹⁹ McKenzie²⁰ and others note. This is sometimes depicted in such covenantal relationship terms as “divine commitment and human response.”²¹ This “I-Thou” character distinguishes the covenantal relationship from the strictly forensic or

¹⁶ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission*. (Paternoster Press, 2006). This study presents a much more extensive historical, exegetical, and theological analysis of atonement and application of the covenant-renewal function of Christ’s work to the mission of the church. Text from s publication used by permission of publishers.

¹⁷ Michel Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 91.

¹⁸ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 504. It is about, Brevard Childs says “the restoring of a right relationship with God which has been disrupted through sin”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 21.

commercial nature of other contractual instruments. While Yahweh does particularize covenant applications to Abraham, David, and other contexts, this present discussion is based on the generic formulae of covenant relationships as descriptions of the divine-human and human-human communities in Israel. It is in Yahweh's covenant promises and obligations that Israel finds its identity. It is called to respond obediently to the divine expectations of moral behavior. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this covenant emphasis rests on repentance and the obedient response of faith as seen, for example, in the sacrificial cultus of the Priestly theology in Leviticus.

The covenant provided the pattern to organize the community around the Law, and in this sense it constituted the society which Yahweh had elected. It likewise provided for the institutions of the sacred shrine, cult, and covenant Law that expressed Israel's religion.²² The covenant structure is of fundamental importance for salvation history. Thus, in Israel, all law, whether related to everyday nonreligious issues or sacral observances, has its foundation in the covenantal relationship with God as expressed in the Mosaic Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. It was the most significant and concise statement of Israel's covenant obligations to Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures.²³ E. P. Sanders points out that those who choose to deny God's right to command them choose to remove themselves from the covenant. Participation in the covenant community was a privilege of divine grace, and although it carried obligations and sanctions, it was characterized by divine love and faithfulness. Sanders challenges the perception that intertestamental Judaism had become a purely legalistic salvation by works system in describing the spirituality of this period as "covenantal nomism."²⁴ As Dennis Bratscher points out, the Old Testament concept of *torah* has not been adequately interpreted in Christian theology: "The Old Testament concept of *torah* cannot adequately be understood forensically. Rather, *torah* is primarily a relational concept, providing the community of faith an anchor point in God's grace from which it can live out, in changing historical circumstances, its identity as the people of God."²⁵ The covenant context of relationship formed the basis for covenant Law and it was maintained by obedience to its divine expectations as a response to divine grace.²⁶ This interpersonal character raised Semitic law to a completely new

²¹ Ibid., 37; also see David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," *Interpretation* 18 (1964):419-31.

²² I. Howard Marshall, "Reconciliation: Its Centrality and Relevance," in *Aspects of the Atonement* (London: Paternoster Press, 2007), 127; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2000), 149-51.

²³ Patrick D. Miller Jr., "The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law," *Interpretation* 3 (July 1989), 234; R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 119-20. Cited by Scott Ables, "The Decalogue: Is It Preeminent within Israelite Law?" Unpublished paper, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2008. In fact, the Torah functions as a synecdoche for the moral mind of God.

²⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 82-94. See Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 37-50.

²⁵ Dennis Bratscher, "Torah as Holiness: Old Testament 'Law' as Response to Divine Grace," Wesleyan Theological Society presentation, 2001.

²⁶ Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 42. These writers emphasize the relational and covenantal

level. Although the etymology of *berith* is not thoroughly clear and its usage is controversial, as seen be discussions of Weinfeld, Barr, Kutsch and others, the frequency of its usage indicates its importance in Old Testament theology.²⁷

All in all, however, the concept of covenant reflects a relationship which is interpersonal rather than an objective, impersonal statement of law.²⁸ It provides a particularly apt metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel.²⁹ Particularly at Sinai, the covenant metaphor is used to describe a divinely initiated agreement which is ratified by Israel's response (Exodus 24:4-8), and conditioned upon Israel's obedience. Indeed, the conditionality of covenantal fellowship with God is explicitly stated in Leviticus 18:24-28; Deuteronomy 4:25-26; Jeremiah 4:1-2; and Ezekiel 33:23-29.³⁰ These sacrifices were not performed to fulfill any penalty that had been applied, but rather they were used as oaths that validated the promises and guarantees of the substance of the covenant (Jeremiah 34:18-20). Sinai gave expression to the relationship between Yahweh and Israel that had begun with Abraham. Eichrodt says: "There is emphatic indication that the covenant cannot be actualized except by the complete self commitment of man (sic) to God in personal trust. Hence the obedient performance of the rite of circumcision takes on the character of an act of faith."³¹ Thus, obedience is required for Israel to fulfill its covenant obligations.³²

character of God throughout their thorough analysis of Old Testament theology.

²⁷ The discussion grows out of the thesis that the concept of covenant does not reflect the traditional connotation of pact or mutual agreement, but rather an obligation imposed upon one party by another. Primary contributions to this discussion are: Ernst Kutsch, *Verheissung und Gesetz (Beihaft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft)*, 131; Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973); M. Weinfeld, "Berit-Covenant vs. Obligation," *Biblica*, 56 (1975) pp. 120-128; James Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. by H. Donner, R. Hanhart, and R. Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 23-38.

²⁸Mendenhall, "Covenant;" also see G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955). Also, see Klaus Balzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

²⁹ William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1984), pp. 16-17; see also, D.J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Atlanta: John Know Press, 1972), p. 19; also, D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).

³⁰Dwight Van Winkle, "Christianity and Zionism," *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre*, Vol. 2, 1984, 38-46. The Wesleyan tradition has consistently interpreted the covenantal language in conditional and interpersonal rather than in juristic and unconditional terms. As Van Winkle's exegesis shows, the covenant with Abraham and Moses in Genesis 15 and 17 and in Leviticus 18:24-28 is conditioned upon Israel's obedient response to its conditions. In Exodus 19:5, the declaration is "...if (emphasis mine) you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Obedience is the condition of covenant maintenance (see Van Winkle, 42-43).

³¹Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 2:228.

³² The sin offering sacrifices are not equal in value to the offenses for which they are offered. They are tokens of obedience, not *ex opere operato* bribes, as one finds in the surrounding pagan culture. Furthermore, the sin offerings, which were the only type of sacrifices which could be construed as being penal in nature, were efficacious only for inadvertent sins, not the removal of sins which violated the Ten Commandments. For these,

Every breach of this Law was a personal offense against this God whose concern and love had been so explicitly expressed.³³ As long as Israel was obedient to the Decalogue and observed the standards of the sacrificial system, God would continue to assist and deliver the community. The covenant was both initiated and maintained by obedience to its stipulations, and the expression of this obedience and covenant communion with Yahweh was mediated through the ritual of the sacrificial system.³⁴ Because of this specifically-defined relationship, the fear of arbitrariness in God was excluded from Israel, and in this atmosphere of covenant security, Israel found its strength.³⁵ The sacrificial system, however, did not reflect the pagan concept of magical power residing in the sacrificial victim. Instead, the covenant sacrifice resulted in a personal and moral commitment to God and a personal union with Yahweh.³⁶ While pagan rituals had to be continually repeated in order to maintain the cycle of nature or appease their gods, in the Israelite covenant, the sacrifice was not repeated in order to maintain a magical nature cycle, but to commemorate the establishment of the relationship and to express faithfulness to it.³⁷ When this covenant was transgressed, Israel was alienated from God and the covenant sanctions became operative. Only through repentance and obedience could Israel be forgiven and restored to covenantal fellowship.³⁸

In the New Testament, the frequency of explicit references to the covenant is diminished. The word *diatheke* is used some thirty times in the sense of “covenant.” In Galatians 3:16, Paul relates the covenant of Abraham to Christ, and the Letter to the Hebrews also compares the new covenant in Christ to the old under the Law (Hebrews 7:1-22 and Chapter 8). Thus, while the New Testament retains the idea of a covenant relation to God, it proclaims a new covenant that functions through the agency of Christ rather than through the sacrificial ritual. The universal invitation of Christ’s covenant establishes a covenant relationship with all who will accept it in faith. This reflects Paul’s concept of the “body of Christ” as a community of believers. In the relationship of covenant faith, the community participates in the Christ event that brings in the

only a penitent spirit and the grace of God could bring forgiveness and restoration. The sacrifice is not a payment of penalty to placate God. It is an act of renewal of the covenant relationship as an act of obedience to God’s command to do so. It is an obedient response to God’s directions.

³³Eichrodt, *Theology of OT*, 1:75.

³⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 92-97.

³⁵Eichrodt, *Theology of OT*, 1:38, 154, 157.

³⁶Ibid., 1:43, 44. Lev. 5:5; 16:21; 26:40-42 (*yadah*). Also, numerous references show the necessity of obedience (*shamah*) for covenant maintenance, ie. Ex. 23:21, 22.

³⁷ See for more background on covenant concept: Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985).

³⁸Thompson, op. cit., pp. 792-793; for further development of the personal elements of the covenant relationship and the personal elements in the problem of sin, see the chapter by the author: R. L. Shelton, “Initial Salvation,” *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, vol. 1, ed. By Charles Carter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1983), 473-516. Also, extended treatment of this covenant renewal theme of atonement is developed in R. L. Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006).

New Age of God's salvation (Romans 6:4). As Rob Wall notes, "This is the great indicative of the Church's redemption: those who depend upon God's dependable work are reconciled with God and each other; it can 'now' experience a Christ-like life, characterized by freedom from sin, from death, from legalism, and from all that alienates humanity from God's love (Romans 5-8)."³⁹ In making explicit this covenant that was implicit in Creation, God profoundly demonstrates relationship with all creation.

Eucharist

The sacramental celebration of the Eucharist expresses in a lasting and personal way the relationship between Christ and the Church in a new and creative way. The Last Supper anticipates Jesus' death as the historical event upon which the covenant relationship with God is based. The faithfulness of Christ to God is expressed vividly on the Cross, while God's righteousness which creates salvation is revealed in history (Romans 3:21-26).⁴⁰ The "new commandment" (John 13:34) of love "as I have loved you" becomes the stipulated condition which binds Jesus and the Church. The participation of the community of faith in the Eucharist as a common act of worship and witness recalls the foundation of the covenant community (1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:23-26).⁴¹ The cup of faith takes the place of the sacrificial oath in confirming the new covenant relationship. In place of these prescriptions, the Church understands faith as the condition of entering into the covenant relationship with God based on God's work in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 3:25ff, etc.) to abolish the curse of the Law through the Cross. Christ's person and work are thus God's offer and the Eucharist and life of obedient faith are the Church's response.

Sin and Restoration

If we understand the interaction between Yahweh and humankind as a covenantal interpersonal relationship, and not exclusively a forensic one, then the category of "sin" involves some sort of disruption of the integrity of that interpersonal covenant relationship. Wright and Fuller call it "a betrayal of trust."⁴² This dysfunctionality of relationship, then, needs to be restored and healed. The work of atonement necessary to bring that interpersonal covenantal restoration, then, is what was involved in the cultic rituals of the Levitical sacrificial cultus, as well as in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, our primary concern is to describe how Christ's work functions to accomplish this restoration of covenant relationship and how a covenantal and sacrificial understanding of his work contributes to a Wesleyan and an interpersonal understanding of the atonement.

Because of disobedience to the covenant stipulations, in short, because of sin, both Israel and the Church, indeed all humanity (Romans 1:18-3:20), finds itself in need of a means of restoration to God's fellowship. As the basis of reconciliation, the atonement provides the means

³⁹Robert W. Wall, "Community (NT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, ed. By David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Co, 1992), 1103-1110.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Mendenhall, op. cit., 722-723; Thompson, op. cit., p. 792; D. F. Estes, "Covenants (NT)," ISBE, Vol. I, ed. By G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 723,793.

⁴²G. Ernest Wright and Reginald Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 93.

by which this can occur with the result of covenant renewal. God's people are rescued from evil "through the suffering of Israel's representative," says N.T. Wright, "and the result of it all is that the covenant is renewed."⁴³

Further, since sin is essentially relational as a violation of covenantal expectations, the overcoming of the curse of sin must involve personal and relational means. Much controversy surrounds the meaning of *kipper*. The term can mean "make expiation," "wipe away," "forgive," "appease," or "propitiate," as well as a number of other nuances. The debate over *kipper* relates primarily to whether atonement means "expiation," "propitiation," or both. "Propitiation" suggests that God, who is angered by sin, requires that something be done to neutralize that anger before forgiveness can be offered the sinner. Whether the offended character of God must be appeased, as in the pagan cultus, or simply that his desire to restore normalized relationships must be addressed is also an issue in defining the usage of "propitiation." Hartley notes that "expiation" focuses on the removal of the sin that has obstructed the expression of God's love, and this is usually done through sacrifice.⁴⁴ The penalty of death upon the sinner does not have to be exacted when the penitent person obeys God and thus functions in a righteous relationship to God, however (Romans 2:10; 4:1-17). Milgrom says that repentance can have an expiatory function.⁴⁵

Sacrifice, or some other means such as prayer, expiates sin and *removes the cause of judgment because the covenant has already been renewed by the penitence and obedience of the worshipper*. God is thus propitiated because the *divine intention was to maintain the covenant fellowship in the first place*. Whatever makes possible the restoration of that fellowship with God, whether it be sacrifice, prayer, or the destruction of the guilty party, reconciles humanity and God. Paul notes in Romans 5:6-11, that the atonement saves from God's wrath:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (NIV).

In any case, God's forgiveness at all levels was conditioned upon the repentance of the sinner and this involved a contrite confession of sin (Leviticus 5:5). The sacrificial acts were not effective unless they were accompanied by true repentance.⁴⁶ Thus, in the Mosaic Covenant, the sacrificial ritual is the means of restoring right covenantal relationship (*sedaqah*) with God after it has been compromised by disobedience.⁴⁷

⁴³ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 93.

⁴⁴ John E. Hartley, "Expiate; Expiation," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 246-247; C. L. Mitton, "Atonement," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 310.

⁴⁵ J. Milgrom, "The Priestly Doctrine of Repentance," *Revue Biblique*, 82 (1975), 198-99.

⁴⁶ H. H. Rowley, *The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1950), 87.

⁴⁷ T.H.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Newton Centre, Massachusetts, 1966), 51, 52.

Sacrificial imagery

Not only must atonement involve something that changes God's attitude toward the sinner (propitiation) but something must also change the sinner's attitude toward sin (expiation). Thus, the personal repentance of the sinner resulted in the personal forgiveness of God and the restoration of the relationship of covenant love between God and the penitent. The offering of a sacrifice is simply the overt expression, or seal, of the worshipper's repentance and renewed commitment to the covenant relationship.

It is clear, then, that in the OT the expiation of the sacrificial atonement was not a mechanistic removal of sin apart from forgiveness for sin. God's forgiveness was conditioned upon the sinner's, or Israel's, repentance (Leviticus 5:5). Only when the breach caused by unconfessed and unforgiven sin was healed could the relationship with God be restored. Since sin had broken the relationship, it could not remain operative in the sinner's life if the covenant fellowship was to be restored.⁴⁸ Through the sacrificial ritual, the penitent expressed his/her penitence and submission to the will of God. By conformity to the ritual prescribed by God's grace, the sinner acted in such a way as to show his/her personal surrender to God and because this obedient action indicated repentance and confession for the sin, the broken covenant fellowship was restored. Obedience to the Law thus expressed love for God who had established the covenant community. Entrance into the covenant was by faith in God and obedience to his law as sealed by circumcision (Genesis 17:11, 12). Maintenance of the covenant was thus contingent upon faith and moral obedience to its stipulations, including repentance for sin through its sacrificial provisions.⁴⁹ Thus, with election comes responsibility.

For example, in cases of non-premeditated inadvertent sins, the sinner was instructed in the Torah to express sacramentally this repentance through the sacrificial liturgy, in which the worshipper identified with the sacrificial animal by the laying on of one hand (Lev. 1-7, 16). In the Hebrew culture, the laying of one hand upon the sacrificial animal was understood as *identification* with it, rather than as a *transference* of sin onto it.⁵⁰ Hartmut Gese refers to this identification with the sacrifice as "inclusive substitution" rather than the "exclusive substitution" terminology normally associated with the penal substitution concepts.⁵¹ The concepts of identification and participation in the life of the sacrifice do not exclude the idea of exchange, but, indeed, intensify it as relational and interpersonal bond. The sacrifice is about empathetic participation in the life of the victim.

This covenant imagery of identification, rather than substitution, is also reflected in the NT incarnational imagery and in the Greek understanding of *hilasterion* as "mercy seat." The

⁴⁸Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 15-17.

⁴⁹Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 43-44; see Ronald Youngblood, *The Heart of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 44, 53-53. Ex. 24:7; Deut. 11:26-28; Micah 6:8.

⁵⁰ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 53-57. Also, John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus*, vol.4, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Dallas: Word, 1992), 20.

⁵¹ Hartmut Gese, *Essays on Biblical Theology*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 104-6; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 53.

Romans 3:25 reference to Christ as the *hilasterion* is appropriately translated as “mercy seat,” rather than either *propitiation* or *expiation*, according to Dan P. Bailey’s Cambridge dissertation research. The anarthrous usage of the word in this specific context identifies Christ with the function of the literal place of atonement, the “mercy seat,” and it follows this usage in other relevant languages. Christ is thus a sacrifice and the one who effects the atonement, although he is not simply a penalty payment.⁵² Through his baptism, cross, and resurrection, Christ offers himself as a sacrifice on behalf of humanity as the Second Adam (Rom. 4-5), and thus renews the covenantal relationship between humanity and the Trinity. As Bell notes, it is Christ’s participation in human experience that illuminates the meaning of the Old Testament identification of the sinner with the sacrifice, and not vice versa.⁵³ And as Paul Fiddes suggests, in this participation, “God the Father also participates directly in human estrangement.”⁵⁴ This is the redemptive exchange made possible by the incarnation. Christ is still the sacrifice “without blemish” because he is ethically without sin, although cosmically identified with sinners in the humanness of the incarnation. The believer’s righteousness consists of his or her being in the right covenant relationship with God, and therefore, is not an attribute of the believer that can be isolated from God. But through the work of the Holy Spirit, the believer is linked with Christ through faith in the saving initiative of God’s righteousness (1 Cor. 6:11).

Forensic imagery

Paul’s use of the *dik-* family of words deserves far more mention than we can make of it here. We need to consider, however, that we cannot adequately interpret Paul without considering his background in Jewish Law. He cannot be fairly represented if we interpret every legal metaphor he uses through Latin abstract civil jurisprudence lenses. His justification and righteousness concepts were as relational as they were forensic.⁵⁵ He would have understood the difference between the civil laws and sanctions built into the harsh Roman system and the Torah covenantal expectations that were based in a holy, loving, and just God. I’m not sure we have been so discerning in Western theology. For example, there is nothing in the Hebrew Scripture that remotely resembles the penitential system, because one has an interpersonal foundation and the other an abstract legal basis.

The background of this family of words is based on a proper relationship to a norm of some kind. That may be civil law, or it may be covenant expectations, or it may be weights and measures. To correct incorrect relationships to the appropriate norm is to justify that relationship. Thus, the condition of correctly relating to the norm is righteousness. Paul is here using language that serves to bridge cultural diversity. But his forensic language never leaves its roots in Yahweh’s expectations of Israel to maintain its interpersonal covenant obedience to the person of

⁵² Daniel P. Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25” (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 2001), 172-73, 216.

⁵³ Richard H. Bell, “Sacrifice and Christology in Paul,” *Journal of Theological Studies* vol. 53, (1, 2002), 14-17.

⁵⁴ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 108.

⁵⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 36-37; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544; J.A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 208-09.

God. It is a loss of this relational usage of “justification” in much of contemporary Christianity that has ultimately led to (a) the reductionist distortion of the justice aspects of the cross, and (b) to an exclusive reliance upon one form of penal substitutionary theology as the only valid foundation for atonement. The bottom line here is that what Christ accomplished on the cross made possible the restoration of covenant renewal with God and the restoration of the divine image in some way. In this sense, Paul’s justification teaching accomplishes its goal and establishes a criterion for faith against which we might become “rightwised” to God through him.⁵⁶ Paul Fiddes shows that “justification” should be understood as “accepted by God,” not just as “declared not guilty.” Being accepted means that a relationship has been established, and not simply that condemnation has been erased.⁵⁷

Reconciliation

This is arguably Paul’s most important salvation metaphor for this relational discussion.⁵⁸ Reconciliation occurs not because God’s justice is satisfied by retributive punishment, but because of a correction of humanity’s covenant relationship to God through faith-obedience which thus removes the barrier to reconciliation and provides a foundation for the reality of sanctification (Romans 6:5-14). Martin argues that it is the key motif of Paul’s salvation theology, and Stuhlmacher even sees it as the “leading theme” of Scripture.⁵⁹ And peace with God and others results from this basic reconciliation of the God-human relationship through the work of Christ.⁶⁰

II. Christ’s Covenant Atonement

In discussing how a covenant relationship functions, Henry Blackaby writes, “A covenant is a sacred pledge based on trust between two parties. The trusting relationship between the two parties becomes the most important factor, the basis from which everything else flows.”⁶¹ In the NT, the atonement of Christ functions to initiate and maintain God’s new covenant with all humanity. The covenant (*diatheke*) expresses primarily the idea of forgiveness in connection with the work of Christ. Because of Christ, a relationship between God and humanity has

⁵⁶ Additional work by the author on the *dikaiois* concepts: R.L. Shelton, “Initial Salvation,” in *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, I, ed. by Charles W. Carter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1983), 491-96; R.L. Shelton, “Justification by Faith in the Pauline Corpus,” in *An Inquiry into Salvation from a Biblical Theological Perspective I*, Wesleyan Theological Perspectives series (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1981), 104-114.

⁵⁷ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 86-87.

⁵⁸ See Martin, *Reconciliation*; Marshall, “Reconciliation: Its Centrality and Relevance,” 98-138; Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*. Martin criticizes the lack of emphasis on reconciliation in such standard works as *Anchor Bible* and in many evangelical publications (100-102).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-47; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture Towards a Hermeneutic of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 90-91.

⁶⁰ Marshall, “Reconciliation,” 114.

⁶¹ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God Together: God’s Plan to Touch Your World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 53.

become possible in a way previously impossible. While Christ's death may seem analogous to the OT sacrifices, it is not entirely so. Not only his death, but his life are revelations of God's love which work to reconcile an alienated humanity back to himself (John 3:16, 17; Romans 5:8; 8:32). Christ's sacrifice of death and resurrection delivers humanity from sin and establishes a new covenant with God,⁶² just as the Mosaic Covenant established a New Israel. The writer of Hebrews speaks of a "better covenant" (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6). The OT sacrifices are limited in their usefulness to atone for the involuntary sins of transgressors. Christ's Incarnation is efficacious for all sin and for all people, regardless of their previous affiliation with God. His death is sacrificial, but not identical with the definition and function of the OT system. What the Law could not do in overcoming sin, God has done in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 8:3-4).⁶³ There is, of course, a continuity of structure between the "old" and "new" covenant. The "new" covenant in Christ is "new" because it lasts, not because it is different in function.

While it is clear that Christ establishes this new covenant as a context in which forgiveness and reconciliation may occur, it is less clear *how* what Christ does can cancel the effects of sin and reconcile humanity to God. A number of metaphors convey pictorially the means of atonement.⁶⁴ These metaphors include the ideas of sacrifice, ransom, redemption, reconciliation, justification, adoption and regeneration. The common element in these concepts is the concern to release the sinner from the alienating consequences of sin and restore the penitent to fellowship with God through forgiveness. In interpreting these metaphors, it is important to remember that we *must understand them all* against the background of the covenant with its personal and relational implications. Once in a covenant, the parties are irrevocably committed to fulfilling either its promises or its curses, and it is therefore bilateral in obligating both parties to its stipulations. As noted earlier, Barr and others caution against any facile attempt to render "covenant" as a unilateral sort of obligation.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Abrahamic covenant is at least implicitly conditional and the Mosaic covenant is explicitly conditional and stresses Israel's responsibility. Note Exodus 19:5, "...if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples...." Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel stressed the conditionality of the covenant promises (Jeremiah 4:1-2; Ezekiel 33:23-29). In the NT, Paul certainly sees the covenant promises as conditioned upon obedience. After recounting Israel's being "broken off" from the olive tree because of their unbelief (Romans 11:17-20), he declares that only if they do not continue in their unbelief will they again be grafted in (Romans 11:23). The community of the covenant is those who believe in Christ as "children of the promise" (Romans 9:8).⁶⁶

⁶²Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: The Epworth Press, 1953), 51-52; 170.

⁶³ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 103 (see 90-109).

⁶⁴Mitton, "Atonement," 312.

⁶⁵Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," 23-38.

⁶⁶ Van Winkle, "Christianity and Zionism," 44.

The sacrificial metaphors in particular should receive attention from Wesleyan-Arminians. Since the atoning work of Christ is frequently described with sacrificial terminology, it is tempting to understand terms such as “cross,” “blood,” “sacrifices,” “lamb” as referring exclusively to Christ as a sin offering. Furthermore, the sacrificial victim in the sin offering is often popularly understood as having a vicarious penalty inflicted upon it. In fact, it is not clearly established that the sacrificial victim in the OT absorbed the penalty deserved by the sinner. Indeed, the penal emphasis is missing from the Yom Kipper legislation. Instead, the victim reflected the covenant-renewing repentance of the one who offered the sacrifice, and served as a validation of the community’s sincerity. On Yom Kippur, the sin offering for the nation involved two animals—the sacrifice and the scapegoat. The first animal was slain on the altar, and then the Priest laid his two hands on the second animal, indicating transference, and the sins of the nation were transferred to it, and it was then led into the wilderness, but not killed (Lev. 16). Also, Christ is spoken of as a “paschal lamb” by Paul (1 Corinthians 5:7) and the “Lamb of God” by John (John 1:29, 36), and Jesus chooses the Passover Feast of deliverance from Egypt (John 18, 19) to reveal himself as Messiah, he is understood to be a sacrifice, but not exclusively a sin offering. Thus, the paschal lamb of Passover indicates celebration over deliverance from bondage rather than an appeasement for sin.

It is also problematic that dogmatic treatments of atonement often omit the insights of the Gospels in favor of Pauline constructs. Robert Traina says:

“If Paul’s references to the death and resurrection of Jesus are divorced from his history in the Gospels, they are invariably misunderstood...the entire life of Jesus was sacrificial...if the crucifixion were the end of the story, there would be no atonement. The possibility of atonement includes the resurrection, and indeed all that follows from it in terms of the on-going ministry and role of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁷

While the Gospels do show the awareness of the lostness of sinners, the overwhelming message is not the announcement of the wrath of God, but the good news of the Kingdom. The judgment of God on sinners is a part of the eschatological work of the Son of Man (Luke 17:20-37), but any link of a penal death of Christ with the avoidance of God’s wrath is absent. Christ does suffer at the hands of evil persons, and repentance and forgiveness will be preached in his name to all the nations (Luke 24:7). Furthermore, while God’s wrath is presented in the gospels, it is often focused on the religiously self-righteous (Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7), or those who do not obey Christ, who is the source of life (Jn. 3:36). Indeed, taking up one’s cross in discipleship is a

⁶⁷ Robert A. Traina, email conversation, April, 2007. He also notes the Parable of the Wicked Tenants which appears in each of the Synoptics at the beginning of Passion week (Matt. 23:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18). After the fraudulent and violent actions of the Wicked Tenants, they finally murder the Vineyard Owner’s Son. There is nothing in the parable that suggests the father’s need to punish the son in order to restore his rightful position as owner of the vineyard. The Wicked Tenants themselves kill the son. It is they who face the wrath of the father. Since the context obviously shows Jesus identifying with the parable, this raises the question whether Jesus was in fact murdered by these wicked people, or if God intentionally sends him to die at the hands of this mob as a way of propitiating his wrath at the impenitent wrongdoers. This kind of question also needs to be applied intertextually to the Pauline materials, as well.

key focus on the meaning of the word (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mar. 8:34; Lk. 9:23; 14:27). Acts portrays the cross as the act of “godless men” (Acts 2:23; 5:30; 10:39), but Jesus death is seen as connected to forgiveness, not as the recipient of God’s wrath. Indeed, in the Gospels God honors and loves Jesus, and there is no talk of Christ’s work to appease God’s wrath. It is those who will not believe in the Son upon whom the wrath of God is focused, in Jesus’ words, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Even as the concept of divine wrath does not seem to be the controlling factor in necessitating the atonement in the Gospels, it is also carefully defined in the Epistles as being different from the pagan concept of the anger and hostility of their gods. God’s wrath is the result of the sinner’s receiving back the consequences of his/her evil deeds (Romans 2; Eph. 5:5,6; Col. 3:5,6). It is important to see that while divine wrath is a real threat to evil, God’s redeeming love is certainly as strong as the desire to pour out vindictive judgments on the whole of humanity.

Furthermore, the significance of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8), is that the atonement of Christ is not just the single act of the cross, but is the “righteousness of God,” the eternal, saving activity of God himself in the entire Incarnation experience of Jesus Christ. The death of Christ is the “eternal, suffering love of God for man,”⁶⁸ which may not indicate his absorption of his own penalty as much as it indicates the extent to which he will go to restore a covenant that he did not break and to participate in and deliver helpless humanity from bondage that it brought upon itself.

These sacrificial descriptions imply that Christ’s Incarnation was a sacrifice to God that fully and eternally achieved what the OT ritual did only in figure and, by contrast, through necessity of repetition. In addition, it must be remembered that the sacrifice in the OT was effective in restoring the covenant relationship and recognizing God as merciful only when it was accompanied by the repentance and obedience of the one on whose behalf it was offered.⁶⁹

As the vicarious sacrifice, Christ also functioned as a representative of all sinners. In his baptism at the hands of the Baptist, he identifies with Israel and the whole of humanity in giving himself to God. Cullmann says in this regard, “...Jesus is baptized in view of his death, which effects forgiveness of sins for all men. For this reason Jesus must unite himself in solidarity with his whole people, and go down himself to Jordan, that “all righteousness might be fulfilled.”⁷⁰ Christ thus becomes the ultimate statement of humanity’s obedience and confession of faith. His atonement is vicarious not simply in that he became a sacrifice so that we would not have to be sacrifices, but it is vicarious in that by his life, death and resurrection he modeled to us how we

⁶⁸Mitton, “Atonement,” 312.

⁶⁹ The sacrificial acts were not effective unless they were accompanied by true repentance. Thus, in the Mosaic covenant the obedient performance of the sacrificial ritual is the means of restoring right relationship (*tседаqah*) with God after it has been compromised by disobedience. H. H. Rowley, *The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1950), 87–88.

⁷³Hartley, *Leviticus*, 20; Jakob Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968). R. Larry Shelton, “Sanctification in Romans Chapter 6,” (Th.M. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1968), 15–17. Oscar Cullmann, , *Baptism in the New Testament* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1950), 18.

were to be “living sacrifices” (Romans 12:1-2). It is only as our repentance and obedience are complete so that we are united with Christ by faith to participate in the sacrifice of his total life (Romans 6:1-10) that sin is expiated. In the OT, the Torah described the sacrificial ritual whereby repentance was to be expressed, according to God’s prescription. In the NT, the proper sacrificial attitude is exemplified by participation in Christ’s life and death as we take up our own crosses. Instead of a sacrificial ritual we have a sacrificial example. This example does not simply inspire the sinner to moral renewal, but requires that the sinner also express repentance for sin and personal surrender to God by identifying in faith with the dying and rising experience of Christ as expressed in baptism (Romans 6:1-10). Thus, by obedient union by faith in the events of Christ’s sacrificial life and death, the believer is graciously enabled to conform to the covenant expectations. This is justification, since the believer is now brought into a relationship of interpersonal righteousness in the covenant union.

In fact, Christ is as an example of faith and obedience in Romans 3:23-26:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (NIV)

As a “sacrifice of atonement,” Christ is the revelation of the mercy of God who offers the sacrifice. It is not clear here that Christ is struggling to appease an angry Father. To the contrary, God has taken the initiative in justifying the sinner, and has thus provided the ultimate paradigm of Christ as the witness of divine grace expressed in saving action.

Thus, a sacrificial understanding of the atonement in the context of the covenant relationship emphasizes the need for participatory involvement in the “fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil.3:10). Christ’s work benefits me only as I experience it in faith-union with him.⁷¹ When the objective work of Christ in atonement is divorced from the subjective need for the appropriation of his work by faith, as in some penal substitutionary emphases, the vicarious implications of Christ’s dying “for many” (Mark 10:45) give way to a substitutionary emphasis. Christ’s work thus becomes an external and transactional satisfaction of penalty that tends to separate the believer from responsibility for moral and spiritual growth, quite differently than the cross-bearing emphasized in the gospels.⁷² The logical outcome of such an imputational and transactional models is either universalism, in which all are saved by Christ’s death, or limited atonement, in which a finite number are saved since their penalties are equivalent to the merits of Christ’s atoning death. This kind of monergism is avoided with the Wesleyan-Arminian emphasis that stresses both the objective work of Christ before God and the subjective work of Christ in the believer that leads him/her to an appropriate faith response. Christ’s sacrifice

⁷¹ Larry Shelton, *Sanctification in Romans Chapter 6*, unpublished Th.M. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1968. This study analyzes the servant and baptism metaphors in Romans 6 in order to show the interpersonal aspects of union with Christ in faith and the ethical expectations growing out of this faith-union.

⁷²George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1974), 428.

initiates and seals a new covenant interpersonal relationship with God for all who will identify with it in faith-obedience and be united with Christ and empowered by the Spirit. By placing himself among humanity as a part of it, Christ, as the perfect expression of humanity in obedience to God, took upon himself our weakness and rebellion and accomplished a reconciliation with God for us. God “made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASV).⁷³

The OT prescriptions of covenant expectations were made clear so that the believer would have measurable standards to judge his/her behavior. In the NT, Christ is the Incarnation of God’s will and the example of covenant expectations. Ritual obedience to the Law could not make the believer like Christ. Only union with him in faith could make the believer righteous in relationship to the divine expectations. In this new covenant, the believer is asked to be his/her own sacrifice by a faith-union (Romans 6:4-11) with the perfect expression of covenant obedience, the sacrifice of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Christ is not only a sin offering which expresses our repentance, he is the entire covenant who also expresses our thanksgiving and worship and pattern for covenant life. Because Christ speaks for us and perfectly expresses our repentance and obedience, we are restored to covenant fellowship. Christ, therefore, as our *hilasterion*, or “mercy seat,”⁷⁴ establishes us in righteous relationship to God “that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This results not only in the removal of guilt, but in the restoration of the moral image of God in the believer. Thus, Christ breaks the barrier between humanity and God (Ephesians 2:14) not just by changing the attitude of God, but by expressing a change in humanity as well.

The kind of obedience God desires is the kind Christ showed when he obeyed to the point of death. Thus, Peter makes clear that he understands what Christ did in his life and death to be the perfect example of obedience to God, in order that by identifying with his example of perfect obedience, we might “die to sin and live to righteousness” also in a relationship of acceptable covenant obedience. The writer of Hebrews also expresses a similar emphasis on this prototype-like example in calling Christ the “pioneer of our salvation” (Hebrews 2:10; 12:2).⁷⁵

It is difficult to see how the relational/interpersonal problem of sin is to be overcome by exclusively juridical means as is suggested by the penal theories. Because of its biblical predominance and relational emphasis that expresses expectations to which a penitent may respond, the covenant understanding of atonement avoids the difficulties of other theories and is consistent with the Wesleyan emphasis on internal moral transformation and subjective holiness of life. Through its emphasis on union with Christ in obedient faith, the covenant paradigm of God’s grace in the story of redemption also opens up a valuable resource for spirituality by understanding righteousness and holiness in relational/interpersonal interpretations of salvation. And through obedience in following Christ’s model, the believer is enabled by the gracious work

⁷³ Shelton, “Initial Salvation,” *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*. 488-89, 506.

⁷⁴ Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat,” 172-73, 216.

⁷⁵On the issue of salvation in Hebrews, see Wayne McCown, “Such A Great Salvation,” *An Inquiry into Biblical Soteriology*, ed. By John Hartley and Larry Shelton (Anderson, Ind.: Warner Press, 1980).

of the Holy Spirit to be restored in the moral image of God through the empowerment and transformation of character resulting from walking in the Spirit (Rom 8:1-17).⁷⁶

III. A Brief Survey of Wesley's Atonement Views

John Wesley: Modified Penal Satisfaction Theory

John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, approached atonement in a way that retained a penal theory but also included a basis for spiritual growth. He saw the need for a moral government of the universe being consistent with the character of God, and it provided the distinction between Deism and Christianity.⁷⁷ However, he also seemed to reflect Anselm's idea that since sin is a violation of God's honor, it deserves infinite punishment. Christ is the Second Adam who represents all humankind, makes himself an offering for sin, bears the iniquities of the human race, and makes satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. His *Notes on the New Testament* show that he understood Christ's death as a punishment due to us because of our sins.⁷⁸ Since there had been no ecumenically approved doctrine developed on the atonement, Wesley took a somewhat eclectic approach that drew from the metaphors of several perspectives on the issue and preached the sufficiency of Christ in his evangelistic appeals.⁷⁹ Yet his understanding of the atonement differed substantially from both the Anselmic and Calvinistic penal views. Wesley saw Christ's work as universal in extent and conditional upon faith. Furthermore, he did not systematically develop an atonement theory, although he followed many of Anselm's ideas. He was much concerned with the practical and evangelistic applications of the doctrine. In a letter to Mary Bishop, February 7, 1778, he wrote, "Our reason is here quickly bewildered. If we attempt to expatiate in this field, we 'find no end, in wandering mazes lost.' But the question is (the only question with me; I regard nothing else), What saith the Scripture?"⁸⁰

His thrust in his sermon, "Salvation by Faith," emphasizes that the faith through which we are saved involves "a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us."⁸¹ His emphasis on the believer's response of faith and the life of sanctification

⁷⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁷ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 80; Collins here cites Wesley, *Letters*, Telford ed., 6:297-298; Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 332.

⁷⁸ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: the Epworth Press, reprinted 1966), 837. (Heb. 9:8) and 879 (1Pet. 2:24). Collins, has convincingly shown that Wesley's view of Christ's work was certainly grounded in the penal tradition, although further distinction between the penal satisfaction and penal substitutionary emphases would be helpful.

⁷⁹ Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 333; see n. 4 and 5.

⁸⁰ John Wesley, *Wesley's Works, Letters*, Vol. XIII, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 34.

⁸¹ John Wesley, "Salvation By Faith," *The Works of John Wesley, Sermons*, Vol. 1, ed. By Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 121. See also the sermons "The Righteousness of Faith," and "The Lord Our Righteousness" in the same volume. For a very useful treatment of Wesley's doctrine of salvation, see Kenneth Collins, "A Hermeneutical Model for the Wesleyan Ordo Salutis," *The Wesleyan Theological Journal*, v. 19, No. 2, fall, 1984.

and the universal nature of Christ's work differ greatly from any consistent form of a penal substitution theory as developed by Reformed and Lutheran theology.⁸² In these views, death is the penalty of the old covenant (more or less) on all humankind. Wesley speaks of Christ's purchasing humanity's redemption and of his life and death involving a "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction" for the sins of all humanity. Furthermore, says Collins, Wesley interprets the *hilasterion* (mercy seat) language in Romans 3:25 as "propitiation," rather than "expiation," and he took issue with William Law for the latter's use of "expiation" and claim that God does not have wrath or anger toward humanity that must be appeased.⁸³

Although Wesley did not equate divine anger with human wrath or vengeance, he did see God's anger as being motivated by love for the sinner and as a foil that enables humanity to appreciate God's love.⁸⁴ He wrote to Miss Bishop:

But it is certain, had God never been angry, he could never have been reconciled. So that in affirming this, Mr. Law strikes at the very root of the atonement, and finds a shorter method of converting Deists than Mr. Leslie's! Although, therefore, I do not term God, as Mr. Law supposes, "a wrathful Being," which conveys a wrong idea; yet I firmly believe he was angry with all mankind, and that he was reconciled to them by the death of his Son. And I know he was angry with me, till I believed in the Son of his love; and yet this is no impeachment to his mercy. But he is just, as well as merciful⁸⁵

And while Wesley did believe that humanity has contracted a debt to God that it is unable to pay, he rejected the implication that satisfaction was made to the divine law, because he objected to the personification of law as a "person injured and to be satisfied."⁸⁶ A true penal substitution view understands law as an impersonal cosmic structure, and not a relational personification. This abstract, impersonal concept of law is the essence of how Western Christianity redefined Torah and covenant expectation in relationship to Yahweh. Such an abstract, civil forensic concept will not bear the weight of a covenantal understanding of atonement. Christ as the

⁸²A. S. Wood attempts to show that Wesley held a penal substitutionary view while not setting the atonement inside a legal framework "in which God is made subject to be an eternal, unalterable order of justice." Such a position is inherently contradictory by definition. The penal theory is based on an unalterable order of justice. Wesley's view is eclectic and more governmental than penal. It involves elements of Anselmic, penal, and governmental views and he does not consistently develop his views theoretically. He stresses why the death of Christ was needed to achieve the salvation of humanity, not how the atonement functions. See A. S. Wood, *The Burning Heart* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 237-38; also, William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 209-211; and Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 273, 276, 287-88.

⁸³ Collins, *Scripture Way*, 81-83; he cites Wesley's use of the language of the Book of Common Prayer in his liturgical and preaching resources, 81, fn. 64-65.

⁸⁴ Collins, *Scripture Way*, 84, 85.

⁸⁵ Wesley, *Wesley's Works, Letters*, Vol. XIII, 34, 35.

⁸⁶ Collins, *Scripture Way*, 85; he cites Wesley's "The Principles of a Methodist," see n. 83. In this section on "The Atonement," Collins has usefully cited numerous relevant quotations on the topic from Wesley's works.

Second Adam who represents all humankind, makes himself an offering for sin, bears the iniquities of the human race, and makes satisfaction for the sins of the whole world are categories alien to Western Latin jurisprudence. Furthermore, Wesley emphasizes the complete and ongoing nature of Christ's work in his stress on the totality of salvation in Christ's roles as Prophet, Priest, and King.⁸⁷

Furthermore, Wesley's stress on the resurrection of Christ was an integral part of his salvation theology. He says that Christian faith is "Not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us."⁸⁸ His Covenant Service formed a relational and sacramental foundation for his communal understanding of salvation as life in Christ, and the renewal of covenant with God was an underlying concept of his spiritual practices.

IV. The Covenant Model of Atonement and Wesleyan Theology

Since the role of the sacrifice in Israel's worship cultus was to express obedience to the Torah expectations and thus prevent, or repair, a break in covenant relationship with Yahweh, then Christ as the ultimate and final sacrifice of love identifies with humanity in his incarnation and baptism. In his obedience, Christ fully experiences the human alienation from God by his "inclusive substitution," similarly to the ritual identification with the sacrifice of the obedient offerer. And like that sacrificial animal, Christ is not merely functioning *as if* he were the offerer, *he is the offerer*. And as the norm of a righteous covenant relationship was realized by the obedient and faithful actions of the offerer, so the humanity that is identified with Christ's sacrifice in faith is fulfilling the covenant expectations by that relationship.⁸⁹ He includes humanity in his death in order to include us in his resurrection to eternal life and to the covenant renewal of humanity's love relationship with the Creator (Rom. 6:5-11). Thus, rather than simply being a substitution, Christ's work involves participation and identification with humanity, including those who respond in faith in his work as the Second Adam to restore us to life and the renewal of the *imago dei* (Rom. 4-8) through our renewed covenant interpersonal relationship in the Holy Spirit. Thus, covenant renewal and salvation is about restoring health, or *shalom*, to the relationship between God and Israel and God and the universal believing community. This has profound implications for restoration of the image of God and sanctification.

⁸⁷ For an extensive analysis of Wesley's concept of "Prophet, Priest, and King" as an atonement model, see John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 74, 165; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 110-114; Collins, *Scripture Way*, 44-45.; Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 367-390; Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 95-113.

⁸⁸ Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 167; Outler, *Works*, 1:121. See Collins' footnotes for extensive documentation of this issue.

⁸⁹ Gese, *Essays on Biblical Theology*, 104-06; see additional discussion in Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 53-75; see also the covenant renewal emphases in: Bruce Birch, Walter Breuggeman, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 160; Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Newton Centre, MA: Charles T. Branford Co., 1966), 51-52.

Mark Mann shows major aspects of the *imago Dei* as rationality, creativity, and the capacity for relationship. This relational view of “image” provides not only a model for love, but for the incarnational incorporation into Christ and a restoration of covenant community resulting in “relational holiness,” as Lodahl and Oord emphasize.⁹⁰ Christ’s loving work is thus interpersonal, sacramental, moral, and restorative as humanity cooperates with divine grace. For many or all of the above reasons, many scholars in the Wesleyan-Arminian, Friends, Brethren, Anabaptist, and other traditions have tended to avoid the limited atonement and universalism alternatives that too often accompany a strict penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Even though John Wesley, Richard Watson, and other more recent Wesleyan scholars such as Richard Taylor and Kenneth Collins have affirmed versions of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement,⁹¹ numerous nineteenth and twentieth century Wesleyan theologians, as noted above, have raised serious questions about it, and have tended to espouse other theories such as the Christus Victor or governmental theories.⁹²

The exclusively penal substitution view with its imputational models of righteousness, sin, justification, etc., has been associated with a troubling tendency toward a truncated view of salvation as sin or guilt management.⁹³ Maddox and Outler show that Wesley, after 1756, came to reject the imputation view of Christ’s righteousness to believers in the substitutionary penalty view of Calvin, since it undercut the place for “*responsible* Christian growth in response to God’s *grace*.”⁹⁴ Wesley stated even earlier, “We do not find it expressly affirmed in Scripture, that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to any; although we do find that ‘faith is imputed’ to us ‘for righteousness.’”⁹⁵ A significant pastoral problem that troubled Wesley and remains with the present cultural interpretations of penal substitution is that they do not simply understand the

⁹⁰ Mann, *Perfecting Grace*, 165, see fn. 14 on Southgate’s emphasis on image as the capacity for authentic relationship ;Lodahl and Oord, *Relational Holiness*.

⁹¹ Kenneth Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 80-86; Richard S. Taylor, *God’s Integrity and the Cross* (Nappanee, IN.: Francis Asbury Press, 1999). Taylor apparently intends to answer Wesleyan theologians who have raised critical questions regarding the penal theories. However, his approach is based on a primarily rational rather than an exegetical basis, and he tends to interpret sacrifice as forensic penalty rather than in the biblical sense of an obedient gift of worship. He also attempts to tie a doctrine of sanctification to penal substitution, which requires an interesting exegetical linking of substitutionary dying with Spirit-baptism, all the while neglecting to mention the resurrection at all in his treatment of atonement.

⁹² John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1984), 2:186; see 123, 168. Miley also quotes Raymond and others for support; see Miner Raymond, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Phillips and Hurt, 1880), 2:257-258. Wilbur F. Tillett, *Personal Salvation* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1930), 98-109. H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1952), 2:221-275.

⁹³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 36-37.

⁹⁴ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press/Kingswood Books, 1994), 103-104; see Maddox, notes #61-64, 306-07; also, see Outler, *John Wesley*, 273, 276, 287-88.

⁹⁵ John Wesley, “Late Conversations—Monday, June 25th, 1744,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 277.

righteousness of Christ as imputed, but they view it as *only* imputed. This is not limited to non-Wesleyan traditions, but is found in the broader Wesleyan context today, as well.⁹⁶

In view of the diversity of perspectives on the atonement among Wesley and the Wesleyan theologians, past and future, and the relevance of these views to biblical and Wesleyan soteriology, an overarching integrating motif is needed for a constructive contextualizing of Wesleyan theology into the world of thought of the 21st century. Such a methodology is preeminently Wesleyan in view of the soteriological primacy of his “evangelical pragmatism.”⁹⁷ Indeed, the spirit of Wesley himself calls for a pragmatic examination of the soils of culture to determine how most effectively to communicate the work of Christ. While some of the theological models for the atonement give very useful insights into various aspects of God’s magnificent work of redemption in Christ, some of them also insert concepts alien to the biblical realities that they are attempting to explain. The cultural baggage of some of these theories may reflect the characteristics of certain historical periods and worldviews more substantially than they reflect the biblical message of redemption. The biblical concept of covenant renewal and the interpersonal emphasis on covenant is a central motif in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament view of Christ as sacrifice. The interpersonal and relational perspectives of covenant love in salvation and spiritual formation that is both individual and corporate in the Wesleyan tradition should be seriously considered as the most useful hermeneutical and theological integrating motif for constructive Wesleyan theology today.

A covenant-based understanding of the sacrifice of Christ as *identification* and *participation* with humanity in absorbing the effects of the deadly results of sin avoids the liability of the imputational penal models that depict Christ as obeying the law as a substitute for humanity and through a moral fiction imputing his merits to them for salvation. A covenant matrix that demonstrates the relationships between the Trinity and human beings, the community involvement of the entire Trinity in the atonement, the interpersonal union aspects of Christ’s Incarnation, his sacrificial work on the Cross, and the implications of his Resurrection to new life provides an interpersonal and integrating context for a theology of atonement. This would avoid many of the liabilities contained in the atomistic use of the respective individual theories as the exclusive heuristic approaches for salvation theology.

It is clear that the Wesleyan/holiness tradition reflects diversity in the atonement theories to which its various representatives have subscribed. While the penal substitution and governmental models, in particular, have been very influential in Wesleyan theology, theologians need to evaluate them for contemporary usefulness. One must question not only the accuracy with which they reflect the reality of atonement that is relationally based in the biblical covenant concept, but how relevant they are to a culture that is reluctant to understand justice exclusively

⁹⁶ This concern also figured into his disagreements with the Moravians and the Quaker Quietism. Reliance upon imputed perfection or righteousness tends to diminish the motivation for spiritual formation. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 104, fn. 61, 64, 65; see John Wesley, Sermon 20, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” *The Works of John Wesley*, I, 462-463.

⁹⁷ Clarence Bence, “John Wesley’s Ecclesiology,” in *The Church: An Inquiry into Ecclesiology from a Wesleyan Theological Perspective*, IV, ed. Daniel N. Berg and Melvin E. Dieter (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1984), 307.

as punishment. Prevailing cultural expectations today require justice to be rehabilitative, and world governmental systems are too often corrupt, fragmented, and lurid expressions of systemic evil to be moral examples.

It seems that an appropriate theological methodology for Wesleyans would involve openness to truth, creative approaches to the proclamation of the gospel, a contextualizing of biblical realities, an effective intercultural and missional appeal, and an inductive attitude that resists the intrusion of alien categories into biblical revelation, be they scholastic, postmodern, or otherwise. A fresh examination of the usefulness of the biblical covenant model may well reveal a satisfactory context for describing God's work in culturally relevant language. The biblical concept of covenant describes an interpersonal relationship and the biblical metaphors for salvation, such as husband—wife and father—son, are profoundly personal. This understanding of the reconciling love of a personal God appeals strongly to an alienated society that sees no future but despair.

Christ's sacrificial act of submissive obedience to God in the face of the sin of self-righteous humanity, and as that humanity, is the supreme historical revelation of God's self-giving love (2 Cor.5:18-19). As a vicarious expression of repentance for all humanity who will participate in Christ's life and death by faith, Christ enables a grieving God to believe in us again. The love that goes to such lengths to win back a "crooked and perverse generation" creates hope anew for a world that is lacking in integrity, trust and community. To be in Christ requires death to the bondage of sin by participating through faith-obedience in the dying and rising with Christ, which leads to an ethically new life as the Holy Spirit creates an interpersonal bond between Christ and the believer. The covenant renewal motif makes room for an incarnational identification and participation of Christ in the experience of humanity, since the God-Man actually participates in human brokenness and suffering, including the existential pain of our sense of being forsaken by God and the fear of going alone into the dark night of death. Christ not only has been there, but he continues to be there for the community of faith in resurrection covenant relationship with the God who reconciles humanity into divine fellowship through faith-union with the Redeemer through the ministry of the Lord, the Life Giver (Rom. 6).

Dunning, Maddox, and Collins all note the centrality of the Christological view of the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King in Wesley's atonement theology. These aspects of Christ's ministry show his prophetic work in bringing the knowledge of God, his priestly work in mediating the reconciliation between God and humanity by identification with and representation of both parties to the covenant, and his kingly work of reigning within the believer to bring victory over the "principalities and powers."⁹⁸

The Christus Victor model with its view of Christ's work as a divine conquest of evil provides some elements that enhance the clarity of the covenant theory of atonement. As the Savior over evil powers, God makes good the covenant promises of protection by this assault upon the kingdom of sin. Since Christ's work breaks the reign of sin over human nature, humanity can now in faith by union with Christ be set free from the enslavement of sin and

⁹⁸ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), ch. 11 and 12; Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 95-113; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 109-114.

restored to the moral image of covenant fellowship with God. As John Deschner points out, this military victory over sin and evil gives support to the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification as believers participate in the spirit of the victorious as well as the suffering Christ.⁹⁹

The covenant focus, since it is biblical, provides a balance that prevents an overemphasis on either mere sentimentality or on the rigid deterministic categories that obscure both the seeking love of God and the reality of his actual work in the believer. The covenant view of the participation of the believer by faith-union with Jesus Christ in the work of sacrifice (Romans 6:1-14) retains both the subjective and objective, the expiatory and the propitiatory emphases, as well as the necessity and centrality of the Resurrection. Thus, the covenant understanding of the atonement as interpersonal participation by faith in Christ's incarnate life, death, and resurrection opens new vistas for a Trinitarian, life-focused, and community-centered understanding of atonement.¹⁰⁰

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

In conclusion, it strengthens Wesleyan theology by its presentation of full salvation through integrating the relational ideas of covenant and atonement as covenant-renewal. This is a central biblical motif, with its understanding of the transforming work of grace made possible through the atoning work of Jesus Christ and implemented through the post-resurrection ministry of the Holy Spirit. With apologies to Scot McKnight, this would make a lovely Wesleyan golf bag.

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⁹⁹ John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 116.

¹⁰⁰ See Shelton, op.cit., *Sanctification in Romans Chapter 6*. Also, note the covenant relationship emphasis in Shelton, "Initial Salvation," and "Justification in the Pauline corpus." While other theories such as satisfaction, penal substitution and governmental are metaphors that describe the reality of the atonement and arise from extra-biblical cultural analogies, the covenant model is a metaphorical description of the atonement that arises from within the text of Scripture and from within the Hebrew-Christian culture. It also functions transculturally, since it reflects a universally understood concept of interpersonal covenant relationships.