

**Atonement Through Covenant: A Process, Feminist Approach**

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I open with a quote from the short story “Babette’s Feast” by Karen Von Blixen (aka Isak Dinesen):

[Humans], my friends . . . [are] frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble. . . . But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace . . . makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!<sup>1</sup>

In theology, atonement is defined as reconciliation with God and amelioration of sin or wrongdoing. Historical atonement models have been based on various foundations including the incarnation, the crucifixion of Christ, and God’s love as moral example. This paper grounds atonement in the concept of the covenantal nature and love of God. Atonement is most often discussed in terms of the cross but there are problems with this approach from both feminist and process theologies. I argue that process theology suggests a different approach – that atonement is rooted in the nature of God, in both the primordial and consequent natures of God. Thus, this atonement theory begins in the doctrine of God rather than the cross event. Atonement and

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<sup>1</sup> Isak Dinesen (pseudo. Karen Von Blixen), *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 52. Inclusive language changes are mine.

reconciliation with God are not achieved solely through penal substitution, moral influence, or a cosmic battle of good and evil but rather through God's nature and will to love.

God's unswerving steadfastness is best illustrated by the covenant tradition in the Bible – of God continuously offering God's self in relationships, promising to accompany humanity over and over again. In this paper, I am using the word covenant to refer to both this biblical theme and, simultaneously, to describe the fundamental relativity to God that process theology assumes. Covenant theology is no new emphasis in Protestant theology – it is predominantly developed by the Reformed tradition – but what is new here is, first, how the concept of covenant is theologically appropriated and, second, that a process theological perspective assumes that our very being is internally, fundamentally shaped by our relations and thus humanity's covenant with God is the very root and calling of every moment of our existence. This paper builds on a previous proposal of mine developing a covenantal ontology. An emphasis on covenant, rooted in the nature of God, as the foundation for atonement has potential to address feminist critiques of traditional atonement models because atonement is accomplished through God's perpetual relationship with creation rather than through substitutionary suffering. And this atoning relationship does more than correct wrongdoing. It offers a vision of wholeness and beauty; it provides possibilities for all becoming. Additionally, God's continuous atonement with the world offers a contextual vision of love and justice to each moment of becoming and in this way illustrates the simultaneous presence and goal of the Reign or Kingdom of God to which Jesus witnessed. Mercy and truth meet together in the graceful movement of God's offer of love to the earth and God's enfolding of creation back into God's self.

### **The Problems of Traditional Atonement Models for Feminist and Process Theologies**

Over the past two decades, womanist and feminist theologies have offered sustained, insightful critiques concerning traditional models of atonement and these have shifted the theological conversation of atonement in irreversible ways. The role of the cross in atonement, in particular, is contested. Of course, there is great variety within women's theological approaches to the cross. Luther's theology of the cross has been appreciated by some Lutheran feminist and mujerista theologians since it depicts God as the one who struggles alongside the oppressed. On the other hand, some feminist, womanist, Asian, and Asian-American feminist theologians have insightfully critiqued soteriologies and atonement models centered on the cross, because the

cross symbol has been used to legitimize passive suffering and this has disproportionately affected women; the weight of these cross is shouldered particularly by those most vulnerable. For these theologians, the cross cannot enact salvation if it simultaneously reinforces the oppression and suffering of women.

Process theology, assuming a relational, dipolar nature of God, also has inherent issues with traditional models of atonement which espouse the necessary death and resurrection of Jesus. Because process theology does not affirm an omnipotent God, at least not in terms of coercive or all-determinative power, it is not possible to affirm that Jesus' death was the one, necessary plan of God to reconcile the world to Godself. One can affirm that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self" (2 Corinthians 5:19) but not the foreordination of the cross event. Jesus' death is necessarily seen as one possibility that humans ultimately chose from a range of possibilities.

### **Process Theology : Atonement Rooted in the Nature of God**

This question was offered by an NPR radio host to his guest, a local expert on spiders:

"I've had this question for years - I don't see any other bugs in my basement – what are the spiders eating?"

"Other spiders" replied the expert.

"You mean it is spiders all the way down?"

"It's spiders all the way down."

People in the room may take issue with the expert's statement but I use it today only by means of analogy. I am proposing today that we view the subject of atonement through a common assumption of relational theologies: that reality itself is "relationship all the way down." We may suspect that we can fall out of relationship or that being in relationship is based on acceptance or choice but in process theology this is not so. Harkening back to the quote from "Babette's Feast," Divine grace is neither finite nor contingent. Humankind and all of creation are forever in relation to God and God is forever in relationship with the world. This relationship provides the foundation for who we are and who God is – in continuous, interrelated development. Christian existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel also viewed relationships with

God and other humans as providing the fundamental basis for reality. Reality, he held, is best described as “being-in-society” (as opposed to Jean Paul Sartre’s “being-in-itself”).

Additionally, he writes that love, grounded in God, is “the essential ontological datum.”<sup>2</sup>

For both Marcel and Process theology, the term ontology does not connote belief in a static, essential being but rather being as it perpetually develops in relationship. “Ontology” is evoked here in terms of existentialist and process understandings of being—that one is shaped and created through action and relationship—rather than having an essential, static core that defines one’s self. And if God is the fundamental relationship from which we live, move, and have our being, then this covenant shapes our being and existence. With Marcel, as with process theology, all ontology or being, is rooted in our relationships with God and each other. It is relationship all the way down.

An emphasis on God’s relationality and the priority of God’s grace is hardly the exclusive stomping ground of process thought. Karl Barth wrote that God’s “primal decision” is an act of free love, “God’s eternal election of grace” through Christ.<sup>3</sup> God’s freedom, for Barth, is witnessed to by God’s sovereign *choice* to elect, to extend grace and love to creation – to move, through Christ, to humanity. In a process worldview, however, where there is no posited beginning or end of time, this relationship is simply the way things have been, are, and will be.

The relatedness of God, in process thought, is described by Alfred North Whitehead in terms of the primordial and consequent natures, God’s dipolarity. In his book *Process and Reality*, Whitehead defines the love of God in terms of God’s constant commitment and offering of creative possibility to the world. God’s action and love toward creation always precedes humanity’s response and it is neither controlling nor dependent on the moral worthiness of people. Correspondingly, there is freedom in each moment to respond and offer creativity back to God. The relationship between God and humanity is one of cooperative creativity. God is constantly giving and receiving from the world, regardless of its decisions. God always responds to the world’s developing condition with perfect attunement, offering us new possibilities that address and potentially improve our current situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Glasgow: University Press, 1949), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God’s Being is in Becoming*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976) 2.

Each movement of God's nature, primordial and consequent, performs an atoning function, enacting God's grace as well as God's justice. In reference to the atoning function of the primordial aim, one can state that human relationship with God is reconciled and restored simply because God creates, loves, and redeems creation. Atonement here is primarily understood as the means by which the human-divine relation is reconciled, rather than the means by which human sins are ameliorated. One is assured a relationship with God simply because of who God is and who we are in relation to God. While human analogies are invariably faulty, this idea of atonement may be illustrated by a parental or friend analogy. Why do I love my son? Because of met requirements? Because he does good actions? No – it is simply because he is my son – it is because of his relationship to me. This is where it starts – the relationship itself precedes any Hallmark feelings I may have for him. Likewise God loves us simply because of who we are in relation to God and this relationship shapes who we are ontologically, literally making our existence and future possible.

God's consequent nature has another atoning function. Yes, it too reveals God's presence and patience to accompany us no matter what. But Whitehead and Marjorie Suchocki also talks about God's judgment in this movement of God's nature because, as God feels what the world has become, God reconciles human sinfulness with God's nature. When God receives and feels the actions of the world, God feels these in light of what God envisions as the best possibility that could have been; the felt discrepancy between the two is a form of judgment. Love, fully offered again and again, regardless of our attempts to reject or kill it, carries with it a form of graceful judgment that is stronger, ultimately, than all our acts of retribution or forensic adjudications of right and wrong.

A process atonement model begins in the doctrine of God and the model of a God who continuously, and invariably, reconciles the world to Godself in every moment of time. And because God offers the best possible vision for each moment and because God is abidingly present, God can be said to be loving: both present and encouraging, empowering the best that is possible for the beloved. God is trustworthy, not capricious, in God's perpetual offer of love. It is a part of the very nature of God to love, to be in relation with others. There is no "opting out" for God or for us. Our own *experience* of reconciliation with God, however, takes many forms from penitence, to satisfaction of justice, empowerment, healing of relationship, or liberation

from the grips of sin or evil. Thus the wide variety of atonement models offered in the history of Christian theology may reflect our own experience of God's persistent atoning action.

### ***Covenant Theology***

How does this all develop a covenant theology? Well, Jürgen Moltmann has offered that the term "covenant theology" can describe two main theological approaches.<sup>4</sup> The first uses covenant as the interpretive lens through which all biblical texts are interpreted. The second claims that the concept of covenant is the loci from which all theological categories proceed. This second approach is utilized in this paper.

By examining the history of the covenant concept in Protestant theology, one witnesses a persistent strand of theological emphasis which can provide a meeting ground for many disparate theologies. Covenant or Federal Theology has been a key emphasis within Reformed theology since the beginning, particularly within the Zürich theologians, Bullinger and Zwingli, who centered Christian life around the concept of covenant.<sup>5</sup> Later, covenant would become a key locus for Reformed systematic theology. Wesleyan theology has also emphasized the centrality of the concept of covenant, particularly for pietism and liturgical practices, such as John Wesley's Covenant Service. Following this tradition, Wesleyan theologian R. Larry Shelton argues in his 2006 book *Cross and Covenant* that covenant is a grounding theological concept for atonement, albeit for different reasons than I am advancing here.

Reformed Covenant theologies follow a couple primary trajectories. There has been a tradition in covenant theology, represented well by 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed traditions in England,<sup>6</sup> in which covenant theology refers to multiple, successive covenants forged between God and humanity in the Bible. They refer, for example, to covenants forged with Adam and Eve, with Israel through Moses, as well as covenants through Abraham, David and Jesus. Most covenant theologies, however, unify these multiple covenants under two or three major categories. All

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<sup>4</sup> Personal Correspondence, October 22, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," (*De verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde theologie*). Grand Rapids: "Democrat" Drukkers, 1891; An English translation by S. Voorwinde and W. Van Gemenen, *The Covenant in Reformed Theology*. Philadelphia: Published privately by K. M. Campbell, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Found in the writing of Thomas Blake, John Ball and Francis Roberts as well as the work of the Westminster Assembly such as the Westminster Confession.

biblical covenants are seen under the categories of the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Many simply have explicated God's covenant of grace and covenant of works. Essentially, one can simply state that the covenant of works is the pre-lapsarian covenant with Adam and Eve, specifying the rules by which the covenant of God is maintained: "do this and live." But, after the fall, humans are unable to maintain the commands of God so God offers a covenant of grace. Karl Barth, however, collapsed all discussion of covenant into a single covenant of grace. In Barth's work, God's covenant with humanity is viewed strictly through the lens of Christology and God's sovereign decision to love precedes all human work. Most Reformed and perhaps Wesleyan theologians would still offer that the very concept of covenant implies both grace and mutually kept promises or obligations.

Engaging this historical conversation, I offer that there are two forms of covenant but these are different from those offered by traditional Reformed theology. These are rooted in scripture, in every day experience of relationships and, frankly, in a Lutheran sensibility which distrusts the words obligation and good works fundamentally. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I too "collapse" all discussion of covenant into a covenant of grace but for different reasons than Barth.

The first form of covenant describes any form of relationship which is offered gratis, irrespective of merit, worth, or acceptance. These are relationships which are offered preceding and in spite of any response we may have to them. We do not get to control who loves us. This does not mean, however, that we are powerless in our response to them. In terms of God's covenant nature, God offers relationship to the world without ceasing, regardless of its condition. There are certainly times in the Bible when God offers covenants centuries prior to God's gift of the Law (as Paul emphasizes). And Jesus, in the Last Supper, offers a new covenant to those who he knows are moments away from betrayal. In these instances, covenant does not seem to be dependent on worthiness, mutual promises or obligations. In fact, in the case of Abraham and in the case of Jesus, the covenant is simply declared. I am your God and you are my people. This is the new covenant offered to you. The living out of this relationship follows the declaration of covenant.

The second form of covenant relationship entails a chosen contractual agreement wherein two parties agree to a relationship of mutual obligation and expectation. This form of covenant is also represented well in the Bible. Between God and God's people and person to person or

tribe to tribe. In everyday life, such covenants are exemplified in many ways such as marriage or long-term partnership or even one's job position may take such a form. The line between these two forms of covenant is not solid or clear as this second form may take on qualities of the first. But I would argue that the "given" or "gratis" form of covenant is in no way dependent on actions by, obligation or expectation of the beloved. In Larry Shelton's 2006 book entitled *Cross and Covenant*, he claims that biblical meanings of covenant are multiple and context-driven. The meaning of covenant can vary significantly dependent on context.

In examining the nature of God in process theology, I am clearly emphasizing a form of atonement built into the very nature of existence, preferencing the first definition of covenant in defining God's relationship with humanity. In a process model, one could add that conscious choice of a relationship with God in response to the givenness of God's love, like that described in the second form of covenant, enhances one's experience and one's incorporation of God's vision in one's life. But, in a Whiteheadian model consciousness and choice are not always present in every moment of becoming (they are "higher levels" of experience) whereas the aim that God gives to the world is always felt in the form of possibilities for becoming. Therefore, it is right to prioritize the first form of covenant as this is the predominant shaping relationship in which we live, move and have our being.

All in all, an understanding of atonement grounded in covenant may adequately answer the critiques brought by feminist and womanist theologians since redemptive or substitutionary suffering is not the ultimate locus of salvation or reconciliation with God. Instead, a covenantal model of atonement develops the feminist and process understanding that relationality is fundamental to our reality. Moreover, the vision or aim of God, perpetually offered to the world, is not controlling but one that is offered in the form of unmerited, persuasive and responsive love – a love interested in the creative becoming of the other. The works of Gabriel Marcel and many process and feminist theologians have emphasized that relationships of love transform and heal who we are in our whole being. Therefore, a covenantal atonement holds promise for providing a holistic understanding of atonement that reaches beyond amelioration of sin. Atonement becomes a perpetual experience of the nearness and vision of God, a presence in which our lives are shaped and empowered.

The writers of the Synoptic Gospels recount that the reign of God, envisioning and enacting the restored covenant between God and God's people, was the focus of Jesus' life and

this tenet provides a central focus for Christian theological reflection and faith.<sup>3</sup> An inviolable covenantal relationship of love and acceptance, of God's promising again and again to accompany humankind, is the very meaning of grace. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, God's offer of a covenant relationship leads to a broader vision of salvation and atonement that includes restoration, peace, and justice for all creation. This is the kingdom or reign of God of which Jesus preached. It is a present reality, at hand, in the form of God's vision of wholeness offered to each moment of existence. God persists in renewing the covenant, offering an inviolable relationship, and this continues to be extended, even today, despite the crosses and persecutions we inflict on ourselves and others.