

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 25

*Series editor: D. A. Carson*

# God the peacemaker

HOW ATONEMENT BRINGS SHALOM

*Graham A. Cole*



APOLLOS

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This work is dedicated to my mother, Elizabeth Cole, who taught me to revere the name of Jesus; to my mother-in-law, Megan Clark, who has shown me what such reverence looks like in life; and to my father-in-law, Livingstone Clark, whose preaching of the cross brought me to Christ.



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# Series preface

*New Studies in Biblical Theology* is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we shall try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

Few if any themes are more central to the Bible than atonement. The evidence depends on more than Paul's asseveration to the Corinthians, 'For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). The sacrificial systems of tabernacle and temple, the significance of Passover and Day of Atonement, the dramatic way in which all four canonical Gospels climax in the cross and resurrection (some wag has said they are all passion narratives with extended introductions), the nuanced arguments of Hebrews, the fact that the Apocalypse depicts the triumph (of all things!) of a slaughtered Lamb, all combine to provide powerful support for the centrality of the theme explored in this volume.

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Even to begin to do justice to this theme one must attempt at least five things: (1) The way the theme of sacrifice and atonement develops in the Bible's storyline must be laid out. (2) Equally, the way this theme is intertwined with related themes (the holiness of God, the nature of sin, what salvation consists of, the promise of what is to come, and much more) must be delineated, along with (3) more probing reflection on a selection of crucial passages. These first three items belong rather tightly to biblical theology. Of course, (4) how these themes have been handled in the history of the church's theology must not be ignored. (5) Equally, if the volume is to speak to our generation, it must engage some of the more important current discussion.

Dr Graham Cole is well qualified to address all five of these dimensions. My hope and prayer is that this volume will become a 'standard' contribution in the field, informing and enriching its readers as to what God achieved by sending his dear Son to the cross on our behalf. Eternity itself will not exhaust our wonder at these truths. This book, I am sure, will establish many in the right direction.

*D. A. Carson*  
*Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

# Author's preface

There is nothing like having to write a book to concentrate the mind on a subject. And what a subject it is – the atonement! I soon found that the more I explored the subject the more I saw the need to place the story of the atonement (the work of Christ on the cross in traditional terms) within the larger context of the triune God's grand purpose to restore a broken creation to his glory. And what a glorious purpose I have found that to be. I am indebted to many for this work. Particular thanks are due to colleagues D. A. Carson and P. T. O'Brien, and to doctoral students Josh Gregersen, Owen Strachan, Jim Franks, Jeremy Treat and Scott Harrower. I am especially grateful to Adam Johnson – another doctoral student – who read through much of the manuscript in draft, and made many helpful criticisms and comments. Thanks are also due to numerous students who presented papers, debated and discussed atonement issues past and present in doctoral seminars I have conducted on the subject over the years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I am very appreciative too of the Board of Regents of Trinity for granting a sabbatical to pursue this project. My beloved wife, Jules, was wonderfully supportive as ever. The translation used throughout is the New International Version unless otherwise specified. Any errors remain my own.

*Graham A. Cole*



# Abbreviations

1QH	<i>Thanksgiving Psalms/Hymns</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> (Josephus)
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BBCNT	Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (EIRC)
BBCOT	Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament (EIRC)
<i>BDT</i>	<i>Beacon Dictionary of Theology</i> , ed. R. Taylor, Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983
c.	circa
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994)
CD	<i>Damascus Document</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
<i>CD</i>	K. Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–77
<i>ChrCent</i>	<i>Christian Century</i>
<i>CJC</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Criminology</i>
<i>CJCC</i>	<i>The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection</i> , Rio, Wisc.: Ages Software, 2002, CD-ROM version
CNTUOT	Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament
<i>DBI</i>	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i> (EIRC)
<i>DFTIB</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture</i> , ed. K. J. Vanhoozer, London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005
<i>Di</i>	<i>Dialog</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i> (Justin Martyr)
<i>DJG</i>	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> (EIRC)
<i>DLNTD</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Development</i> (EIRC)

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<i>DPHL</i>	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i> (EIRC)
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1997, CD-ROM version
<i>EDT</i>	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i> , ed. W. A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994
EIRC	Essential IVP Reference Collection, Leicester: IVP, 2001, CD-ROM version
<i>EJT</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>Enc</i>	<i>Encounter</i>
<i>ERT</i>	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
ESV	English Standard Version Bible
<i>ETR</i>	<i>Etudes théologiques et religieuses</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
Gr.	Greek
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
Hebr.	Hebrew
HSB	HarperCollins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, W. A. Meeks, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993
<i>HSOB</i>	<i>Hard Sayings of the Bible</i> (EIRC)
<i>IJP</i>	<i>International Journal of Philosophy</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JSB	The Jewish Study Bible, ed. A. Berlin, M. Z. Brettler and M. Fishbane, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint
mg.	margin
MS(s)	manuscript(s)
<i>NA</i>	<i>New Advent: Featuring The Catholic Encyclopedia</i> , 2nd ed., Pennsauken, N. J.: Disc Makers, 2007, CD-ROM version
NBCRev	New Bible Commentary Revised (EIRC)
<i>NBD</i>	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i> (EIRC)
<i>NDBT</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> (EIRC)
<i>NDCA</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics</i> , ed. C. Campbell-Jack and G. J. McGrath, Leicester: IVP; Downers Grove: IVP, 2006

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>NDT</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Theology</i> (EIRC)
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> , ed. L. E. Keck, 12 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1993–2002, CD-ROM version
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary, 2002, CD-ROM version
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. C. Brown, 3 vols., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, CD-ROM version
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. W. A. VanGemeren, 5 vols., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, CD-ROM version
NIV	New International Version Bible
NIVACNT	NIV Application Commentary, New Testament, 1996, CD-ROM version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible
OBC	Oxford Bible Commentary
<i>OCCT</i>	<i>The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought</i> , ed. A. Hastings, A. Mason and H. Pyper, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000
OT	Old Testament
<i>Per</i>	<i>Perspectives</i>
pl.	plural
<i>RelS</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version Bible
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>STRev</i>	<i>Sewanee Theological Review</i>
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
TOSB	The Orthodox Study Bible, New Testament and Psalms: Discovering Orthodox Christianity in the Pages of the New Testament
tr.	translation
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary, 2004, CD-ROM version
<i>WW</i>	<i>Word and World</i>



# Introduction

We live in a troubled world. As I write, there are reports of a devastating cyclone in Myanmar, an earthquake in China, fighting in the Sudan and Iraq, shooting death after shooting death on the south side of Chicago. The list could go on and on. The waste of human life is enormous. Some of these troubles and calamities involve nature without any help from us. A volcanic eruption is an example. But other troubles are caused by human beings. Some of us behave appallingly. The holocaust comes to mind. Yet Christians believe in a good God who as the Creator has never lost interest in his world. The key evidence and the chief symbol of that divine commitment is the cross of Christ. This God, revealed in the canon of Scripture, has a project. Novelist Frederick Buechner sums up the project in these terms: ‘God creates the world, the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it.’<sup>1</sup> Central to the divine strategy is Christ, his coming and his cross. The troubles and calamities will end.<sup>2</sup>

The cross is scandalous, however, and has been from the start. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that to the Jews of his day the crucified Christ was a stumbling block and to the Greeks (non-Jews) foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23). In fact, the earliest extant depiction of the cross in Christian art comes from the sixth century. By then Christianity was the religion of empire, at least in the East. However,

<sup>1</sup> Buechner 1992: 44.

<sup>2</sup> The problem of evil is immense and beyond the scope of this study to address at any length. Scripture is non-postulational in character (the biblical writers do not float theories about the essence of things) and therefore shows little interest in explaining evil. The problem of evil has two dimensions. First, the *arrival-of-evil* problem has to do with how there can be evil in a creation which is the work of a good, wise, all-knowing and all-powerful deity. And secondly, the *survival-of-evil* problem has to do with what the good, wise all-knowing and all-powerful deity is going to do about it. Scripture is much more interested in the latter than the former and thus eschatology is a key part of the divine response to the biblical cry ‘How long, O LORD?’ (Ps. 13:1).

there are earlier depictions, by pagan critics, that illustrate Paul's point. The earliest is scratched on plaster and is dated circa AD 200. It is found in the Paedagogium on the Palatine Hill and may have been scratched by a servant in the imperial household. A man with an ass's head is on a cross and is being worshipped by one Alexamenos. The graffito reads, 'Alexamenos worships [his] God.'<sup>3</sup> How such a violent event can bring peace to creation is one of the questions this study will need to address.

A traditional theological code word to describe the core of the divine response to evil is 'atonement'.<sup>4</sup> The word has an interesting history in English-speaking theology and in fact is as James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy suggest 'one of the few theological terms that is "wholly and indigenously English"'.<sup>5</sup> William Tyndale (1494–1536) used it to translate Leviticus 23:28 (the Day of Atonement) and 2 Corinthians 5:18–19:

Nevertheless all thinges are of god which hath reconciled vs vnto him sylfe by Iesus Christ and hath geven vnto vs the office *to preach the atonement*. For god was in Christ and made agreement bitwene the worlde and hym sylfe and imputed not their synnes vnto them: and hath committed to vs *the preachynge of the atonment*. (My emphases)

In 1611 the Authorized Version replaced 'atonement' with 'reconciliation'.<sup>6</sup> Christ and his cross bring peace.

Paul in a big-picture passage written to the Colossians shows how the concepts of the cross and peace are intimately connected. He wrote this of Christ in some of the highest Christology found in the New Testament:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness [*plērōma*] dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace

<sup>3</sup> For the substance of this paragraph I am indebted to 'Alexamenos Graffito', accessed 17 Dec. 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Markham (2008: 2) argues provocatively that '*Christian doctrine is the Christian response to the problem of evil*' (original emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Beilby and Eddy (2006: 9) are quoting in part R. S. Paul.

<sup>6</sup> For this history I am indebted to Sykes (1997: 2–3). English spelling in the early sixteenth century was not standardized, and so in Tyndale's translation he spells 'atonement' in two slightly different ways. Before Tyndale's time Wycliffe, in the fourteenth century, had used 'onement' as a verb to signify to unite.



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[*eirēnopoīēsas*] through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Col. 1:19–23)

Clearly, Paul's gospel is no narrow affair. His theological vision is cosmic in scope 'to reconcile to himself all things'.<sup>7</sup> The cross touches the individual, the church and the wider creation. The cross makes peace.<sup>8</sup>

Peace in Scripture is not to be reduced to a mere absence of strife, nor to a psychological state of mind. According to S. E. Porter:

The concept of peace in the Bible is different in many ways from modern ideas of peace. Peace as the absence of strife, war or bloodshed, so often sought by humanity at any cost, is far removed from the focus of the biblical teaching. The biblical concept of peace is one in which God's authority and power over his created order are seen to dominate his relations with his world, including both the material and the human spheres.<sup>9</sup>

An Old Testament word that captures this idea is *shalom*. And the New Testament use of the term 'peace' (*eirēnē*) is an example of a Greek word used with rich Old Testament resonances. As T. J. Geddert notes, 'The Greek term *eirēnē* in classical Greek literature means little more than absence of war. In the NT, however, it incorporates the breadth of meaning conveyed by the Hebrew *šālôm*.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Whether there is a centre to Pauline theology, and if so what that centre may be, is itself a matter of much debate. Martin (2001) boldly suggests, 'These far-ranging and distinctive ideas – covering cosmic, personal, societal and ethnic areas of our human story – are nevertheless part of a pattern, whose picture fills the tapestry. The various strands are closely textured and intricately woven together. Yet they are not aimlessly put into a frame. There is an emerging design and a coherent picture. And the most adequate and meaningful title for the result is, we submit, "reconciliation".'

<sup>8</sup> The reconciliation it brings is not automatic for the individual. Paul writes, 'if you continue in your faith' (Col. 1:23).

<sup>9</sup> Porter 2001a.

<sup>10</sup> Geddert 2001.



Nicholas Wolterstorff adds to the picture, ‘To dwell in shalom is to *enjoy* living before God, to *enjoy* living in one’s physical surroundings, to *enjoy* living with one’s fellows, to *enjoy* life with oneself’ (original emphases).<sup>11</sup> As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the great enemy of shalom is sin (angelic and human).

The title of this book, ‘God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom’, attempts to capture this important biblical perspective on what God intends for his broken creation.<sup>12</sup>

## The big picture

From a literary point of view, the canon of Scripture presents a divine comedy. Literary scholar Leland Ryken defines a comedy as ‘a work of literature in which the plot structure is U-shaped, with the action beginning in prosperity, descending into potentially tragic events, and ending happily’.<sup>13</sup> The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* amplifies his point in relation to the Bible per se:

The overall plot of the Bible is a U-shaped comic plot. The action begins with a perfect world inhabited by perfect people. It descends into the misery of fallen history and ends with a new world of total happiness and the conquest of evil. The book of Revelation is the story of the happy ending par excellence, as a conquering hero defeats evil, marries a bride and lives happily ever after in a palace glittering with jewels.<sup>14</sup>

From Genesis to Revelation we see the U-shaped structure working itself out: from the harmony of Genesis 1 – 2 through the disharmony of Genesis 3 – Revelation 20 to harmony again and albeit of a higher

<sup>11</sup> Wolterstorff 1983: 70. Since so many writers employ ‘shalom’ rather than transliterate the Hebrew, I shall do the same for the rest of this study, unless the transliterated form appears in a quotation.

<sup>12</sup> Others have seen the value of peacemaking as an organizing idea. E.g. Swartley (in Jersak and Hardin 2007: 12) in his foreword suggests, ‘To many quests here [in the book] to understand atonement, I commend *peacemaking* as an over-arching trope’ (original emphasis). Clearly, I myself have drawn inspiration from Col. 1 and Paul’s use of the idea of peace and its relation to the cross of Christ. Of course, other angles of vision are possible. Hence Boersma (2004: 261) in a most stimulating work on the atonement can employ the idea of the various faces of hospitality – divine, cruciform and public – as his organizing principle without neglecting the peace motif.

<sup>13</sup> Ryken 1980: 359.

<sup>14</sup> Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman 2001c.



## INTRODUCTION

kind in Revelation 21 – 22. Theologian Stephen Sykes also explores the doctrine of the atonement from a literary perspective, complementing both Ryken's and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery's* analyses: 'In Christian narrative, God's world is the *setting*, the *theme* is the rescue of the fallen world and of humankind; the *plots* are the biblical narratives, from creation, election, to incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension; the *resolution* is the last judgment, heaven and hell' (original emphases).<sup>15</sup> Crucial to the resolution is the cross of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

### The importance of the cross

The importance of the cross can be seen in the two key practices of Christian corporate life: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Miroslav Volf concurs:

A good way to make the same point about the centrality of self-donation [the cross] would be to look at the two fundamental rituals of the church as described in the New Testament: baptism, which marks the beginning of the Christian life and therefore determines the whole of it; and the Lord's Supper, whose reiterated celebration enacts ritually what lies at the very heart of the Christian life.<sup>17</sup>

In these practices – as old as Christianity itself – it is the Good Friday and Easter Sunday stories that are accented. For Paul, baptism symbolically enacts our dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:1–7) and the Lord's Supper preaches 'the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). The *Book of Common Prayer* captures the Pauline note in its prayer of consecration in its Holy Communion service:

All glory to you our heavenly Father, for in your tender mercy you gave your only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death on the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one

<sup>15</sup> Sykes 1997: 14.

<sup>16</sup> In the light of the comedic structure of the canon, Vanhoozer's (2005) theo-drama approach could more accurately be described in literary terms as a theo-comedy approach. However, if the idea of theocomedie were adopted rigorously, then eschatology would need to feature more formally and materially in his stimulatingly rich book beyond pp. 357–359.

<sup>17</sup> Volf 1996: 24.



oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; and instituted, and in his holy gospel commanded us to continue, a perpetual memory of his precious death until his coming again.<sup>18</sup>

Important to observe is the fact that the centre of gravity in these practices is not the Christmas story but the Good Friday and Easter Sunday ones. Put another way, the incarnation is not central; the cross is. James Denney puts the point forcefully: ‘Not Bethlehem, but Calvary, is the focus of revelation, and any construction of Christianity which ignores or denies this distorts Christianity by putting it out of focus.’<sup>19</sup>

## A useful distinction

The story of the cross and the one who died upon it will be at the heart of this study, but not the whole of this study. As R. W. Yarbrough suggests:

‘Atonement’ may be defined as God’s work on sinners’ behalf to reconcile them to himself. It is the divine activity that confronts and resolves the problem of human sin so that people may enjoy full fellowship with God both now and in the age to come. *While in one sense the meaning of atonement is as broad and diverse as all of God’s saving work throughout time and eternity, in another it is as particular and restricted as the crucifixion of Jesus.* For in the final analysis Scripture presents his sacrificial death as the central component of God’s reconciling mercy. This explains why Revelation 22:3, for example, shows not only God but also the Lamb – slain to atone for sin – occupying the throne of heaven in the age to come.<sup>20</sup>

Narrowly conceived this study would simply focus on the cross. However, following Yarbrough’s insight, this work needs to set the

<sup>18</sup> This form of words is taken from *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1999: 112), which in its First Order of Holy Communion puts the classic Book of Common Prayer service of 1662 into contemporary English.

<sup>19</sup> Denney 1973: 179.

<sup>20</sup> Yarbrough 2001; my emphasis. Beilby and Eddy (2006: 9) argue similarly, ‘Broadly speaking *atonement* . . . refers to a reconciled state of “at-one-ness” between parties that were formerly alienated in some manner’ (original emphasis).



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cross in a much broader framework. This broader perspective reckons with God's grand plan to restore the created order, and places the story of Jesus, his cross and empty tomb within it.<sup>21</sup> Thus this work takes the broad approach but hopefully not in a way that masks 'the cruciality of the cross'.<sup>22</sup> As a way forward, when this study speaks of God's 'atoning project' or 'atoning work' it has the broader perspective in mind.<sup>23</sup> But when it refers to 'the atonement' per se, it is the cross of Christ in view.

In terms of the broader understanding of the divine atoning project, the grand goal of the divine comedy is nothing less than to secure God's people in God's place under God's reign living God's way enjoying God's shalom in God's loving and holy presence as both family and worshippers, to God's glory.

### Some crucial questions

What then are the questions that animate this study?

- What, if anything, is there in God's character that requires atonement?
- Is God's love in conflict with his wrath?
- Is wrath an attribute of God, and, if so, what kind?
- What is so wrong with the human situation that it requires atonement?
- How do God's dealings with Old Testament Israel feature in the story of atonement?
- Is the cross of Christ the whole story of atonement?
- What place has the life of Christ and not just the death of Christ in the story of atonement?
- How important are the resurrection and the exaltation of Christ to the story of atonement?
- What are some of the controversial issues attending the atonement (e.g. violence and the cross, the cross as divine child abuse and so forth)? How might they be addressed?

<sup>21</sup> An example of the narrow approach – as I am using it, this is not a pejorative term – is the discussion in Boyd and Eddy 2002 (ch. 8, 'The Atonement Debate', deals with the death of Christ as understood by three of the historic interpretations of atonement). In contrast McKnight (2007) takes a broad approach.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Forsyth (1909) for the phrase.

<sup>23</sup> One could also characterize the divine project broadly as God's at-one-ing, peacemaking or reconciliation project.



- How central, if at all, is penal substitution to a theology of atonement?
- Did Christ bear the sins of the world without exception or without distinction?
- How is the atoning work of Christ to be embraced by us for our benefit?
- Is the gospel good news for those who do not welcome God's shalom?
- What flows from the atoning work of Christ at the individual, corporate and cosmic levels?
- Can shalom-making sum up adequately the divine intention in the atoning work of Christ?
- How then are we to live individually and as God's people in the light of God's atoning project centred as it is on Christ?
- What is the divine motivation informing the atoning project?
- What is the divine intention driving the atoning project?
- How does atonement bring shalom?

## Assumptions

Having set up the key questions addressed in this study, what is assumed in doing so? This study assumes a high view of Scripture as God's Word written. Scripture in my view is the product of an asymmetrical double-agency. Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*). Even so, the concursive outworking of such inspiration does not mask the individuality of the biblical writers. Given divine inspiration predicated on a doctrine of God who not only acts (creation, providence, redemption and judgment) but also speaks (revelation), and, given this view of divine inspiration, one should expect a unity to Scripture in the midst of its diversity. Leland Ryken expresses it well:

Although biblical literature is a collection of diverse works, it must also be regarded as possessing a high degree of unity. There is unity of national authorship, with only two books in the whole Bible (Luke and Acts) not having been written by [Israelites and] Jews. There is unity of subject matter, consisting most broadly of God's ways with people and the relationship of people to God and fellow humans. There is a unity of world view and general theological outlook from book to book. There is unity of purpose underlying all



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biblical literature – the purpose of revealing God to people so that they might know how to order their lives.<sup>24</sup>

He develops this last important point:

There is, finally, a unity of literature texture based on allusion. Various biblical writers allude to earlier works in the same canon, or to the same historical events, or to the same religious beliefs and experiences, or to the same cultural context. The resulting unity of reference is immediately evident when one consults a modern Bible containing cross references in the marginal notes. No other anthology of literature possesses the unified texture of allusions that biblical literature displays.<sup>25</sup>

Scripture is thus the touchstone, that which tests the quality of any theological proposal.

Touchstone is an interesting metaphor for Scripture's theological function in the life of God's people. A touchstone is a piece of quartz that can be used to test, for example, whether a piece of ore is really gold or merely fool's gold. Scripture as the Word of God is the norming norm (*norma normans*). If a putative doctrinal proposal is textless – that is to say, it lacks biblical support – then it may be held as a speculative possibility but not as a candidate for a non-negotiable conviction expressing the Faith. Of course, other authorities such as tradition, reason and experience are operative in Christian theology and life. But these lesser authorities are ruled norms (*norma normata*). In any conflict between authorities the appeal to Scripture is paramount since it is the touchstone and rules the others. In my own tradition, Article 21 of *The Articles of Religion* of the Church of England of 1562 expresses the point well: 'General Councils . . . may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining to God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture.'<sup>26</sup> Similarly,

<sup>24</sup> Ryken 1980: 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> Reproduced in Grudem 1994: 1175. The nineteenth-century Christian leader Bishop J. C. Ryle captures the theological use of the metaphor in his sermon on the fallibility of ministers: 'Let us receive nothing, believe nothing, follow nothing, which is not in the Bible, nor can be proved by the Bible. Let our rule of faith, our touchstone of all teaching, be the written Word of God' (Ryle, accessed 30 July 2008).



reason (our ability to mount and demolish arguments) may err, especially if it is at the service of a world view that is inimical to biblical supernaturalism. And experience may mislead. It may, for example, be wrongly described theologically even if authentically of God. Some of the tongues-speaking that I have heard appears to be in this category. Those who practise it seem to benefit devotionally by it.

Another caveat is in order. Not all has been revealed. There are secret things that belong to the Lord, as Moses declared on the plains of Moab (Deut. 29:29). This should also remind the theologian that mystery or incomprehensibility attends the actions of God. Truth has been revealed, but not exhaustively so. An epistemic humility applies to any doctrinal construction or exploration of Scripture, including the present work. The theologian needs to distinguish carefully what proposals ought to be considered as non-negotiable convictions, what as opinion and what as speculation. In other words, some notion of dogmatic rank needs to be at work explicitly or implicitly.

## Approach

This work is part of a series entitled *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, which raises the question ‘How does the present study fit into the philosophy of the series as set out in the preface to it?’ This study attempts the delineation of a biblical theme, which is summed up in the subtitle, ‘How Atonement Brings Shalom’. The biblical theology dimension can be seen in the way the study broadly speaking follows the Bible’s own plotline from the story of creation to the fall to redemption to the consummation, and not merely in the adducing of biblical texts as evidence for the assertions made – although such evidence is of paramount importance.<sup>27</sup> Appearances notwithstanding, the fact that the first chapter treats the doctrine of God is in keeping with the approach. How so? We begin the substantive discussion where the canon begins; namely, with God (Gen. 1:1). I have attempted to keep technical discussion to the footnotes as much as I could in order to leave the text as uncluttered as possible.

<sup>27</sup> Rosner (2001) provides an excellent description of biblical theology: ‘What is biblical theology? To sum up, *biblical theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible’s teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible’s overarching narrative and Christocentric focus*’ (original emphasis).

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What is the value of biblical theology for our task? Biblical theology helps the reader to know what the accents of Scripture are when canonically considered. Its work is descriptive in the main. Systematic theology asks the prescriptive or normative questions of what is to be both believed and lived in the light of the Scriptural testimony and does so informed by biblical theology and with sensitivity to the history of discussion (historical theology) and contemporary application (practical theology). Put another way, at the heart of this work is the theological interpretation of Scripture.<sup>28</sup> In this theological interpretation of Scripture, both the narrational and didactic portions of the biblical testimony have their place. With due apologies to Immanuel Kant – narrative without the didactic is blind, the didactic without the narrational is empty. This is not a new insight. In 1846 John Williamson Nevin put it this way:

All turns on the stand-point of the interpreter, and the comprehensive catholicity of his view. He must be consciously within the horizon, and underneath the broad canopy, of the new supernatural creation, he is called to contemplate; and then each part of it must be studied and expounded, in full view of its relations to every other part, and to the glorious structure in which all are comprehended as a whole. This is the true conception of biblical theology. Only under this form, can bible proof, as it is called, in favour of or against any doctrine, be entitled to the least respect.<sup>29</sup>

Put another way, Nevin teaches us that the whole (the canon) and the parts (the various pericopes) need to be in constant dialogue.

### The plan of the book

The first three chapters of this work deal with the human plight. J. Rodman Williams is right to argue, ‘The basic problem to which atonement is related is twofold: *who God is* and *what man has become*.’<sup>30</sup> Thus the first chapter examines who God is in nature. Understanding the shape of the canonical story, and why the need

<sup>28</sup> For more discussion of the approach I favour see my article, Cole 2005a: 259–263.

<sup>29</sup> Nevin 2000: 230.

<sup>30</sup> J. R. Williams 1996: 354.

for Christ's life and death, is predicated on grasping that the righteous God is both love and light, or, to use P. T. Forsyth's pregnant expression, 'holy love'.<sup>31</sup> Holy love is not indifferent to sin. The second chapter examines the paradoxical nature of humankind outside Eden or 'what man has become'. Taking a cue from Pascal it examines how we are both the glory and the 'garbage' of the universe. Some grasp of the multifaceted problematic created by human sin is a prerequisite for understanding the depths of the divine response. This problematic is explored in chapter 3.

The next three chapters focus on the divine provision for humanity in the light of the human plight. The fourth chapter looks at the foundations of the divine provision in God's own loving nature, the *protoevangelium* (first gospel) of Genesis 3:15, and the call of Abraham, as well as its foreshadowings in the experience of Israel. The fifth chapter considers the atoning faithfulness of Christ exhibited in the righteous life he lived *coram Deo* (before God) as the faithful Son. The sixth chapter next looks at his atoning death on the cross, or the atonement per se, and some of the questions it raises. Sacrifice, victory, satisfaction and substitution will be key terms here.<sup>32</sup> This chapter also focuses on how Christ's faithful life and righteous death are both vindicated and validated by his resurrection from the dead and his subsequent enthronement at the right hand of the Father. Without that vindication it can be said of Christianity (to quote from W. B. Yeats's magnificent poem *The Second Coming*), 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.'

Chapter 7 considers the 'peace dividend' – to use Rowan Williams's helpful phrase. In particular, it explores how the peace/shalom that comes through the cross works itself out at the personal, corporate and cosmic levels.<sup>33</sup> Chapter 8 asks the 'So what?' question. How then are we to live if these things are really so? Chapter 9 discusses the grand purpose behind it all and offers a theory as to why the divine desire for glory is not celestial narcissism. Chapter 10

<sup>31</sup> 'Holy love' (the conjunction of 'holy' and 'love' to form 'holy love') is found in many theologians' (besides Forsyth's) discussions of God's character. I am attracted to it because the conjunction reminds me not to sentimentalize God's love. For a history of the use of the expression 'holy love' in British, European and American theology see McCurdy 1999: 239–265.

<sup>32</sup> I am very much aware that for some the very mention of 'substitution', let alone 'penal substitution' (a view embraced in this work), is abhorrent. However, I hope that there is profit to be had for those of contrary opinions to my own in reading this work.

<sup>33</sup> R. Williams 2007: 81.



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concludes the study proper by reviewing the journey. Furthermore, this final chapter addresses the question raised by the title of the study; namely, how God the peacemaker brings shalom through atonement in both the broad and narrow senses of the term. An appendix deals with a range of controversial aspects of the cross, including the centrality of penal substitution, the morality of penal substitution, whether moral influence and exemplarist theories are really atonement theories, whether there is healing in the atonement, the Holy Saturday debate and evaluating a new family of theories commonly known as non-violent theories of atonement. An extensive bibliography rounds out the study.

### How to read this book

Three reading strategies commend themselves. One is to read from beginning to end: the traditional approach. Chapters 1–9 actually follow in the main the biblical storyline. Chapter 1, for example, begins where the Bible does with God, and chapter 9 examines the divine desire (glory). In other words, the familiar contours of the biblical story are in view: creation, fall, redemption and consummation. Another way to engage this work is to use the questions listed previously as a guide and ask, as you read, to what extent and how successfully they are being addressed. The final way is to start with the appendix to get a grasp of some of the current issues under vigorous discussion concerning the atonement before reading the main argument.

### A caution

This study is an exercise in theology drawing upon the disciplines of biblical theology and systematic theology with an awareness of the history of theological discussion (historical theology) and an eye on contemporary Christian life with its challenges (practical theology). As such, there is much conceptual map work, which brings with it its own fascination. However, it must not be forgotten that the reality is of the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Thus a caveat is in order and I know of no other writer who has put it as forcefully as J. S. Whale. He writes:

We have to get somehow from *mandata Dei* [the commandments of God] to *Deus mandans* [the commanding God] if our



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study of Christian doctrine is to mean anything vital. We want a living synthesis where those very facts, which the intellect dissects and coldly examines, are given back to us with the wholeness which belongs to life . . . Instead of putting off our shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is holy ground, we are taking nice photographs of the burning Bush, from suitable angles: we are chatting about theories of Atonement with our feet on the mantelpiece, instead of kneeling down before the wounds of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Cool reflection ultimately needs to give way to worship. Again Whale is helpful: 'The need is obvious. Is it met anywhere? The answer is that it is met in the worship of the Church, where the Christian religion is given to us in all its living meaning.'<sup>35</sup> Whale, writing last century, would be amazed to find these days that for many worship has shrunk to singing love songs to Jesus without reference to the cross.

<sup>34</sup> Whale 1957: 146. The account of William Haslam's conversion provides a classic example. In 1851 in his Cornwall church during the course of his sermon on the atonement he froze. He saw the personal import of what he was preaching. He knelt down, as it were, mid sermon before the wounds of Christ. Parishioners streamed out of the service declaring, 'The Parson is converted! The Parson is converted! Hallelujah!' And converted he was. I am grateful to Dr Richard Turnbull, Principal of Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, for drawing my attention to this account. For more on Haslam's journey in his own words see C. Wright 2005: 49–60.

<sup>35</sup> Whale 1957: 146.

## Chapter One

# The righteous God of holy love

We start where Scripture does – with God. And the God revealed in Scripture is the righteous God of holy love. However, I live in a largely profane society, so understanding holiness does not come easily to me. I do not see temples on street corners and animals being led to sacrifice. I do not see thousands washing themselves in the Chicago River to become pure. (Given that river’s history such would be an act of faith beyond compare!) Yet without an understanding of divine holiness the God of biblical presentation is problematical (to say the least) for many moderns in his acts of judgment. Moreover, the cross of Christ seems immoral as the linchpin of the divine plan of salvation. How could God be in Christ reconciling the world to himself in such a violent event? Likewise, the idea of divine righteousness does not immediately resonate with modern sensibilities. As R. T. France observes, ‘Of all the uninviting words of an old fashioned religious jargon, “righteousness” is one of the worst. If it means anything at all to the average man, it expresses a stuffy legalism, prim and unattractive, or at best it is a Victorian synonym for good deeds.’<sup>1</sup> In fact, if I hear the term ‘righteous’ used in secular contexts, more often than not it has to do with describing someone pejoratively as ‘self-righteous’. That is to say, conceited in their own sense of personal goodness in contrast to others.

The idea of a loving God comes more easily. This is not a new phenomenon. Lactantius (c. 250–325) dealt with it in the early church period. In his *On the Anger of God* he writes:

But now we will argue against those who, falling from the second step, entertain wrong sentiments respecting the Supreme God. For some say that He neither does a kindness to any one, nor becomes angry, but in security and quietness enjoys the advantages of His own immortality. *Others, indeed,*

<sup>1</sup> France 1970: 92. This is not France’s personal view, as we shall see.

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*take away anger, but leave to God kindness; for they think that a nature excelling in the greatest virtue, while it ought not to be malevolent, ought also to be benevolent. Thus all the philosophers are agreed on the subject of anger, but are at variance respecting kindness.*<sup>2</sup>

Lactantius sweepingly asserts that the philosophers of the day would never ascribe anger to God. However, there were some prepared to predicate kindness of God. More recently, Catherine the Great of the eighteenth century supposedly said, 'Ah, God is good; he's bound to forgive us; that's his job.'<sup>3</sup> Not a hint of judgment here.

The sentimentalizing of God gives comfort to many, especially in the face of death. Such a God is sure to welcome us, or our loved ones, into the divine presence. This God is good for one's self-image. Such a mono-attributed God may be a darling to some of the affluent who live in a stable social order. But to the persecuted, to those who live on the underside of the exercise of power in a society, to those who know what injustice is, this God is no comfort at all. African-American theologian, Rufus Burrow, Jr., rightly decries 'the tendency to speak of God's attributes in monopolar terms. That is, to claim that God is only one thing, e.g., love, and nothing else.'<sup>4</sup> He argues powerfully for the recovery of the fully orbed biblical presentation of the God who is both love and light:

My claim is that the idea of divine love needs the truth in divine wrath as much as the latter needs the tenderness and care of God's compassion. As polar opposites we cannot know the fuller meaning of either without the other. A God who only loves but is not affected by violations of the divine image of God in persons and therefore will not condemn such violations may be deemed too soft and sentimental to respond realistically to much of the excruciating unearned suffering that Afrikan [*sic.*] Americans and other persons of color are forced to endure nearly every moment of their lives. And yet

<sup>2</sup> Lactantius 2007; my emphasis. Lactantius is attacking Stoics and Epicureans in particular, and according to McGuckin (2004: 202–203), 'His antipagan apologia was the most sustained, and reasoned, of all the early Latin writers (with the possible exception of Tertullian).'

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Carson 2000: 66.

<sup>4</sup> Burrow 1998: 384. Some theologians have privileged holiness as the key divine attribute (e.g. W. G. T. Shedd); still others, justice (e.g. A. H. Strong). See the discussion in Bloesch 1995: 139–145.

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a God who is essentially wrath and anger would not be worth the time of day, and most assuredly would not be worthy of worship.<sup>5</sup>

Burrow rightly points out the problem with reductionism of the left (a God only of love) and reductionism of the right (a God only of wrath).

In biblical terms, we are created to be worshippers. Yahweh created an entire people with that great end in mind:

the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.

(Isa. 43:21)

According to Jesus, the Father is seeking worshippers who do so in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). The eternal gospel of the book of Revelation is 'Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water' (Rev. 14:7). There is no higher pursuit than the worship of the living God. Indeed, we become like the God or gods we adore and serve for good or ill. All hangs upon the nature of the God or gods we follow. How then we construe God's character is of utmost importance. If we serve the living God of biblical revelation, then we shall image him. If we follow idols, we shall image them. A. W. Tozer saw this clearly:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us . . . The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God . . . Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.<sup>6</sup>

Tozer stood on solid exegetical ground for his view. The psalmist says of the worship of idols in Psalm 115:8:

<sup>5</sup> Burrow 1998: 397–398.

<sup>6</sup> Tozer 1965: 9.

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Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them.

(Ps. 115:8)

And in the New Testament, if by the Spirit we contemplate (*katoptrizō*, 'looking at as in a mirror') Christ we shall be transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to the next (2 Cor. 3:18).<sup>7</sup>

In his argument for the necessity for atonement, Anselm famously says to Boso, 'You have not yet considered what a heavy weight sin is.'<sup>8</sup> To which may be added, 'You have not yet considered who God is as scripturally revealed.' Both considerations are vital to the doctrine of the atonement and to exploring its logic rather than what picture of God and ourselves will make us feel better in our own skins. Hence in this chapter we attend to the character of God, and in the following two, respectively, consider what we have become with the irruption of sin in creation and the problem it creates.

### The divine perfections: a righteous holy love

The triune God of Scriptural revelation has perfections.<sup>9</sup> In other words God has a nature. Understanding that nature is crucial for understanding the course of the atonement. Karl Barth argues suggestively that love is the basic definition of who God is: 'God is the One who loves.'<sup>10</sup> He maintains, 'All our further insights about who and what God is must revolve round this mystery – the mystery of His loving. In a certain sense they can only be repetitions and amplifications of the one statement that "God loves."<sup>11</sup> In fact, Karl Barth argues for two kinds of divine perfection: the perfections of *divine freedom* (unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence,

<sup>7</sup> I am following Martin (2004), 'The translation "we reflect" removes the contrast of the Christians with the Jews, who because of their veil cannot see; so the rendering "we behold" is to be preferred' (comment on 2 Cor. 3:18); and also Hafemann 1996, comment on 2 Cor. 3:18.

<sup>8</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.21, in Fairweather 1956: 138. Boso was Abbot of Bec (102, n. 3). Boso (138) was under the impression that he 'could blot out [a] sin by a single act of sorrow'.

<sup>9</sup> Some would say 'attributes' and others 'properties'. I am treating these terms as synonyms for the purpose of this study and will thus use them interchangeably. Strictly speaking, God is his perfections. We must not think of the divine nature as a pincushion, with the various perfections related to the divine nature being different pins in the cushion.

<sup>10</sup> *CD II/1*: 84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 12: 283–284.

eternity and glory) and the perfections of *divine loving* (grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom).<sup>12</sup> Such dichotomizing for the sake of theological discussion is common.<sup>13</sup> Other theologians write of the natural and moral attributes of God; still others of his incommunicable attributes. In Barth's case it is clear though that the divine loving is the controlling idea. The Barthian dichotomy is highly suggestive, but perfections of divine loving are too specific and thus too restrictive. Is holiness, for example, a perfection of divine loving? Not in any obvious sense.

Each of the persons of the Trinity, however, is righteous, holy and loving, and always has been. The Barthian view is too narrow in making 'God is the One who loves' the basic definition of God.<sup>14</sup> Take how Jesus construes the Father as a case in point. According to John's Gospel, Jesus prayed in the garden to his 'Holy Father' (John 17:11) and to his 'Righteous Father' (John 17:25).<sup>15</sup> Although Jesus does not address the Father in this context as 'Loving Father', the references to the Father's love for the Son in the same prayer are indicative of the Father's loving character (John 17:23–26). Righteousness, holiness (understood in moral terms) and love are relational values. That God is a trinity helps us understand why righteousness, holiness and love have always been true of the Persons of the Godhead in their communion. It would be so much harder to see the sense in ascribing such perfections to an undifferentiated monad before there was a creation to which to relate.

Let us now explore each of these perfections in turn because they are particularly relevant to our understanding of the need and nature of the divine atoning project. Divine righteousness and holiness

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 351–678.

<sup>13</sup> Not all theologians work with a dichotomy. Milne (1982: 64–71) has a fourfold schema: the Glory of God, the Lordship of God, the Holiness of God and the Love of God.

<sup>14</sup> Some contemporary writers also tend to be reductionist when it comes to the divine perfections. E.g. Chalke and Mann (2003: 63) maintain that love is 'the one, primary lens' through which all of God's interactions with the world ought to be viewed. The authority they cite for their view is Barth. No other attribute ought to be considered outside the context of divine love; otherwise the gospel is distorted and God's character misrepresented. Moreover, they claim that 'The Bible never defines God . . . as anything, other than love.' This claim, however, fails exegetically (e.g. cf. 1 John 1:5 and 4:8). To make one of the communicable attributes of God (love) do all this work is as fraught with question begging as is to make one of the incommunicable attributes (e.g. aseity) do so.

<sup>15</sup> Forsyth (1957: 3) rightly draws attention to this prayer as revealing Christ's 'central thought' of God. However, he highlights only holiness; whereas the passage is much richer.

inform the need for atonement. Divine love provides it, as I hope that this and subsequent chapters establish.

### *Divine righteousness*

To say God is righteous is to claim that he acts as a relationship morally requires or allows. In other words, God gives every creature its due. It is no accident then that in the Old Testament the Hebrew term *šēdāqâ* may be translated ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’. Likewise, in the New Testament the Greek term *dikaïosynē* may be translated ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’. According to M. A. Seifrid:

In English usage, the term ‘righteousness’ is associated with the idea of individual moral rectitude. ‘Justice’, on the other hand, generally signifies a right social order, that is, the proper distribution of goods and honour, including retribution for evil. Thus the latter is often forensic, while the former is associated with personal ethics. Although such concepts are not foreign to the biblical authors, their concerns lie along other lines. The lexical distinction to which we are accustomed in English is absent from the Scriptures. The biblical terms often translated as ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’ belong to a single word-group, that associated with the *šdq* root in Hebrew, or that based on the *dik*- root in Greek.<sup>16</sup>

A fascinating example in the Old Testament of the concept is found in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. Tamar’s husband, Er, dies (Gen. 38:7). Judah, her father-in-law, instructs Onan, Er’s brother, to make Tamar pregnant. But he schemes to circumvent Judah’s wishes. He, too, dies at God’s hands (Gen. 38:8–10). Judah has had enough of this and fears that he will lose more sons. So he condemns Tamar to widowhood (Gen. 38:11). She knows where the relational responsibility lies.<sup>17</sup> So she disguises herself as a prostitute, seduces Judah and gets pregnant by him (Gen. 38:13–15). In the encounter she obtains a staff, seal and cord from Judah as a pledge of good faith (Gen. 38:18). Once the pregnancy becomes known, he is all for putting her to death (Gen. 38:24). However, she produces

<sup>16</sup> Seifrid 2001. Indeed, Seifrid adopts as a convention ‘Righteousness/justice’ in two of his main headings, which is illustrative of how aligned the terms are in Scripture: “‘Righteousness/justice’ as a creational concept”, and “‘Righteousness/justice’ as a forensic concept’.

<sup>17</sup> For details on the custom involved see Whybray 2000: 61.

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the staff, seal and cord. Upon this revelation Judah declares, ‘She is more righteous [*šĕdāqā*] than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah’ (Gen. 38:26). In this comparative statement Judah claims that Tamar has acted more appropriately in relationships than he has.

Isaiah 51 presents God as the righteous one. Israel needs rescuing from Babylon. God promises to comfort Zion (Isa. 51:3). Israel’s hope lies in the righteousness of God (Isa. 51:5). He will act appropriately in relation to his now-disciplined people. From the Hebrew parallelism we learn that God’s salvation will last for ever; so too his righteousness (Isa. 51:6, 8). This rescue will involve nothing less than a rerun, as it were, of the Exodus event (Isa. 51:9–10). The result of God’s righteous action will be that

The ransomed of the LORD will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.  
(Isa. 51:11)

The righteousness of God on this occasion will also show itself in judgment upon the Babylonians:

For the moth will eat them up like a garment;  
the worm will devour them like wool.  
(Isa. 51:8)<sup>18</sup>

The New Testament likewise affirms the righteousness of God in the context of divine judgment. Paul’s address to the intelligentsia (Stoics and Epicureans) at a meeting of the Areopagus in Athens provides a notable example (Acts 17:16–34). Moved by the idolatry and concomitant ignorance of the living God evident in the city, he gives the meeting a lesson in Old Testament Doctrine of God 101, but sensitively, given the audience, without explicit biblical reference. The address climaxes on the note that in the past God overlooked such ignorance (i.e. did not judge whenever such ignorance showed itself), but now the day of reckoning is set. Paul proclaimed, ‘In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands

<sup>18</sup> For a fine discussion of the righteousness of God see France 1970: 92–96.

all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice [*dikaio synē*, ‘righteousness’] by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:30–31). The judge, as yet unnamed by Paul, has been appointed. The guarantee (*pistin paraschōn*) that this day is coming lies in the fact that God has raised the man from the dead. Significantly, the judgment to come will be done in righteousness. Perhaps judgment has this modifier because the fact that God has overlooked previous ignorance may raise the question of what kind of judgment this will be and how just. The response of the audience is mixed. Some sneer at the idea of resurrection, some want to know more and some become disciples (Acts 17:32–34).<sup>19</sup>

### *Divine holiness*

To say God is holy in some biblical contexts is to claim that he is separate from creatures. In other words, God is transcendent: he is the incomparable one:

‘To whom will you compare me?  
Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One.  
(Isa. 40:25)

In other biblical contexts, to say God is holy is a moral claim. To use the language of Habakkuk, God’s ‘eyes are too pure to look on evil’ (Hab. 1:13). In context, Habakkuk predicates this claim on the nature of his God as ‘my Holy One’ (Hab. 1:12). Because of his holiness Habakkuk is puzzled why God has not yet judged ‘the wicked’ who ‘swallow up those more righteous than themselves’ (Hab. 1:13).

The *locus classicus* in the Old Testament for divine holiness is Isaiah’s vision in ch. 6 of Yahweh in the heavenly temple. As R. T. France observes, ‘to understand fully what is meant by the holiness

<sup>19</sup> I have heard it argued that Paul made a mistake in not preaching the cross at Athens. Consequently, he made sure he emphasized the cross when he preached at Corinth (1 Cor. 2:2). However, the argument is specious. Large numbers of converts are mentioned in the early chapters of Acts, where the audience is Jewish and therefore expecting a divine intervention in their affairs; but once the gospel is taken into the Gentile world, such numbers are no longer mentioned (see Acts 2:41; 4:4; 17:32–34). Fernando (1996), commenting on ‘A Failed Mission? (Acts 17:22–34)’, helpfully discusses the debate. He notes, ‘those who work with non-Christians know that even a small number of converts from a highly intellectual audience can be considered a huge success’.



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of God, we must turn to Isaiah, who *saw* what holiness means'.<sup>20</sup> Isaiah recounts:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

(Isa. 6:1–3)

His reaction to the vision is dramatic:

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’ (Isa. 6:4–7)

Here is a vision of both the holiness and the majesty of God. The accent on holiness is emphatic in the trisagion ‘Holy, holy, holy’ (Isa. 6:3). According to R. T. France, ‘Repetition of a word in the Old Testament is a way of laying emphasis upon it, and a threefold repetition is rare indeed.’<sup>21</sup> Isaiah is before a greater king than any Uzziah. The implied contrast is a pointed one. Under Uzziah, Judah enjoyed fifty-two years of prosperity. But Isaiah is now in the presence of the King of the creation. The divine king is seated, which, according to William J. Dumbrell, is the posture of judgment.<sup>22</sup> In the presence of such holiness Isaiah’s uncleanness

<sup>20</sup> France 1970: 62; original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 62–63.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Dumbrell’s fine discussion (1988: 102–103).

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becomes patent and must be addressed. The unclean must be cleansed, and he is.<sup>23</sup>

Divine holiness cannot be disregarded without peril, as Isaiah 5 demonstrates. Divine holiness and divine righteousness are not to be opposed to one another. In Isaiah 5:16 there is a remarkable claim:

But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice,  
and the holy God will show himself holy [*qādôš*] by his  
righteousness [*šēdāqâ*].

Geoffrey W. Grogan comments:

Verse 16 is often treated as summing up the connection between holiness and righteousness in Isaiah (See, e.g., N.H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1944], pp. 51, 53.) God's separateness from human beings is not simply ontological but moral, his holiness not a simple synonym for his majesty (though majesty is an element in it; cf., e.g., Exodus 15:11) but the basis in his eternal character of his righteous judgments on sinners.<sup>24</sup>

The context is one of judgment. There is sin in the southern kingdom and not only among the rapacious well to do (Isa. 5:8–10). There is no due regard for the deeds of the Lord in general (Isa. 5:11–12). God will show his holiness by his righteousness through sending his people into exile (Isa. 5:13). Holiness acts appropriately (i.e. righteously) when faced with sin. A story from the Torah also shows the danger of disregarding divine holiness. Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu discover this to their mortal cost. Despite a contrary divine command, they offer unauthorized fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1). Fire comes out from the Lord's presence and they die (Lev. 10:2). Moses interprets the event in terms of the holiness of God. He recalls the divine revelation:

<sup>23</sup> Coggins (2000: 444) points out, 'No particular theory of atonement for sin is here implied; it is the fact of such cleansing that is all-important.'

<sup>24</sup> Grogan 1997, comment on Isa. 5:16. J. D. Watts (2004) maintains, 'The semantic spheres of "holiness" and "righteousness" are very different (cf. the theological dictionaries). The vision insists on merging them to define Yahweh's character and to understand how his acts of "righteousness" relate to his "holy" nature' (comment on Isa. 5:16).

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Among those who approach me I will show myself holy;  
in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.

(Lev. 10:3)

Divine holiness can show itself with a fierce face.

There is another side to holiness in action. God also may save because he is the holy one. He looks upon his broken people in Hosea 11 and, filled with compassion for their plight, although deserved, declares:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I treat you like Admah?  
How can I make you like Zeboiim?  
My heart is changed within me;  
all my compassion is aroused.  
I will not carry out my fierce anger,  
nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.<sup>25</sup>

(Hos. 11:8–9)

Instructively, the reason then given is:

For I am God, and not man –  
the Holy One among you.  
I will not come in wrath.

(Hos. 11:9)<sup>26</sup>

Like righteousness, in some contexts holiness expresses itself in wrath, but in others it saves. Indeed, to return to Isaiah for a moment, repeatedly we read with regard to Israel that Yahweh is ‘your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel’ (Isa. 41:14; 43:3; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5, 8). And even wrath may have a positive aspect. God is not morally indifferent. As Terence E. Fretheim maintains, ‘God’s wrath means the deliverance of slaves (Exod. 15:7), the righteous from their enemies (Ps. 7:6–11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exod. 22:21–24), and Israel from its enemies (Isa. 30:27–30).’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Day (2000: 577) rightly describes this passage as ‘one of the most moving passages in the OT’.

<sup>26</sup> The Hebrew has *ki* for ‘For’, which may mean ‘because’ in response to questions. The LXX has *dioti*, which is rightly understood as ‘because’ or ‘on account of’.

<sup>27</sup> Fretheim 2002b: 25–26.

There is no discontinuity between the older covenant and the new on this matter of the holy character of God, as John found. The trisagion ('Holy, holy, holy') is the cry heard in heaven too (Rev. 4:8). John's first letter also witnesses to the divine holiness and does so from the start. John writes:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light [*phōs*]; in him there is no darkness [*skotia*] at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:5–7)

This message emanates from Jesus himself. Fundamental to it is the polarity between light and darkness. Perhaps the language is working at multiple levels, as so often is the case in Johannine writing. According to Stephen S. Smalley, 'The declaration, "God is light" [*ho theos phōs estin*], is a penetrating description of the being and nature of God: it means that he is absolute in his glory (the physical connotation of light), in his truth (the intellectual) and in his holiness (the moral).'<sup>28</sup> The light of God's truth does indeed dispel the darkness of ignorance. More probably though, the accent in this context is that God's moral purity (light) cannot abide moral impurity (darkness).<sup>29</sup> Without cleansing from defilement the impure cannot walk or fellowship with the pure. The sacrificial death of Christ (the blood) provides the requisite cleansing from sin. In fact, the sacrificial term 'blood', according to I. Howard Marshall, 'is used more often than any other expression to indicate the death of Jesus'.<sup>30</sup>

### *Divine love*

The nearest thing to a systematic statement of the being and attributes of God to be found in Scripture is found in Exodus

<sup>28</sup> Smalley 2004, comment on 1 John 1:5–7.

<sup>29</sup> Burge (1996: 67) places the accent elsewhere: 'He [God] is pure, perfect, and utterly righteous. And above all, light is revealing. Light unveils our spiritual identity – whether we abide in the Son – and it identifies boldly those who live in darkness.' Calvin (2002b), on the other hand, emphasizes the idea of moral purity: 'Then the sum of what is said is, that since there is no union between light and darkness, there is a separation between us and God as long as we walk in darkness; and that the fellowship which he mentions, cannot exist except we also become pure and holy' (comment on 1 John 1:5–7).

<sup>30</sup> Marshall 1990: 82.

34:6–7.<sup>31</sup> Upon request, God reveals his name to Moses on the mountain of God. To reveal one’s name is to reveal one’s essential being. As Charles H. H. Scobie argues, ‘*God’s name is an expression of his essential nature.*’<sup>32</sup> John Webster insightfully suggests, ‘The divine attributes . . . are ways of offering a gloss on the divine name.’<sup>33</sup> As Moses stands hidden in the cleft of the rock, Yahweh passes him by and proclaims:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. (Exod. 34:6–7)

This is the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God who has set his love on Israel, but even so is not to be presumed upon. The only perfection accented twice is love (*hesed*), while the only perfection qualified is love. God abounds (*wērāb*) in steadfast love (*hesed*). In the Old Testament narrative such love led to the rescue of God’s people from Egypt: ‘But it was because the LORD loved [*’ahābat*; LXX has *agapan*] you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt’ (Deut. 7:8).

The New Testament tells us a similar story. According to 1 John 4:8, 16, ‘God is love [*agapē*].’ Judith Lieu rightly observes, ‘That “God is love” (vv. 9, 16) is not a statement about the “divinity” of love or an abstract definition of God: it is God as experienced.’<sup>34</sup> This is a love that takes the initiative and provides for the other. It donates. And how did this love manifest itself? The epistle is clear: ‘This is love [*agapē*]: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (1 John 4:10).<sup>35</sup> This

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of this passage and its importance for developing a doctrine of God see Cole 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Scobie 2003: 108; original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Webster 2003: 40.

<sup>34</sup> Lieu 2000: 1279. Unfortunately, she cites 1 John 4:9, when the relevant text is 1 John 4:8. Her point is unaffected by the slip.

<sup>35</sup> For an excellent treatment of the love of God in Scripture and its contemporary significance see Carson 2000.

love shows itself in a deed: the cross. Scripture does say that the divine love does on occasion discipline those who are his children (Heb. 12:5–11), but nowhere does it assert that the divine love judges.<sup>36</sup> This is one difference between how divine love acts, in contradistinction to divine holiness and righteousness. Yet, to be faithful to the Scriptural testimony and to understand the divine atoning project, all three perfections need to be predicated of the God of biblical revelation in requisite measure.

## The theological conversion of P. T. Forsyth

It was the appreciation of the biblical presentation of the holy love of God that transformed theologian P. T. Forsyth's life. Up until that point he was conventionally liberal in his theology. He wrote in 1907:

There was a time when I was interested in the first degree with purely scientific criticism. Bred among academic scholarship of the classics and philosophy, I carried these habits to the Bible, and I found the subject a new fascination, in proportion as the stakes were so much higher. But, fortunately for me, I was not condemned to the mere scholar's cloistered life. I could not treat the matter as an academic quest. I was kept close to practical conditions. I was in a relation of life, duty, and responsibility to others . . . And I was convinced that they were in no spiritual condition to have forced on them those questions on which scholars so delighted and differed.<sup>37</sup>

Then he movingly adds:

*It also pleased God by the revelation of His holiness and grace, which the great theologians taught me to find in the Bible, to bring home to me my sin in a way that submerged all the school questions in weight, urgency, and poignancy. I was turned from*

<sup>36</sup> Lactantius thinks otherwise. He (2007: ch. 6) argues that "These are the opinions entertained by the philosophers respecting God. But if we have discovered that these things which have been spoken are false, there remains that one last resource, in which alone the truth can be found [Scripture], which has never been embraced by philosophers, nor at any time defended: *that it follows that God is angry, since He is moved by kindness*" (my emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Forsyth 1981: 281–282.

*a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace.*<sup>38</sup>

Strikingly, this transformation took place some years after his ministry began in 1876 at Shipley, which is located in Bradford.<sup>39</sup>

## The cross as revelatory of the character of God

Although the cross of Christ will be discussed at some length in a later chapter with regard to the atonement, at this juncture it is important to draw attention – albeit briefly – to its revelatory power because, as Thomas F. Torrance argues, ‘The cross is a window opened into the very heart of God.’<sup>40</sup> Just how it does so is the question before us.<sup>41</sup>

With regard to the divine love and righteousness in relation to the cross, Paul is the chief New Testament witness. In his letter to the Romans he contends that the divine love is demonstrated in the death of Christ. He notes how rarely anyone would sacrifice himself or herself for a righteous person. But in God’s case Christ dies for us *while we are alienated from God*. Craig C. Hill comments, ‘In their unreconciled state, humans are described as “weak”, “ungodly”, “sinners”, and “enemies” of God (vv. 6, 8, 10), a portrayal that recalls the description in 1:18–32.’ He concludes, ‘A less pointed description, however, might undermine his [Paul’s] argument concerning the absolute necessity of the atonement.’<sup>42</sup> Paul writes:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6–8)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 282–283; my emphasis. For a discussion of Forsyth’s ‘theological conversion’ see McCurdy 1999: 29–31.

<sup>39</sup> Hunter 1974: 15.

<sup>40</sup> Torrance 1992: 112.

<sup>41</sup> For an excellent exploration of how the doctrine of God may be derived from the cross see Blocher in McCormack 2008: 125–141. He asks, in effect, the transcendental question ‘If God was capable of the cross, what does it teach us about God?’ His thesis is that only the God of trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy is capable of the cross.

<sup>42</sup> Hill 2000: 1094.

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The Greek is instructive. The divine love is continually on view in the cross of Christ (*synistēsin*, present aspect, active). In this broken world of the groaning creation (Rom. 8:18–22), where is the divine love to be seen? The Pauline answer is to look to the cross as placarded in the gospel.

Paul is also a chief witness to the cross as revelatory of the divine righteousness. Let us turn to Romans once more. Paul claims that the cross demonstrates the righteousness or justice of God. The apostle writes:

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. (Rom. 3:25–26)

One of the purposes of the death of Christ on the cross was to display or to prove (*eis endeixin*, v. 25) that God is a righteous God (*tēs dikaiosynē*, v. 25; and *pros to einai auton dikaion*, v. 26) who does not overlook sin but judges it.<sup>43</sup> God takes his relationship to creation with the utmost moral seriousness. He behaves as he ought. Sin in creation is not a trivial matter. It is momentous. It requires a divine response.

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross reveals the holiness of God.<sup>44</sup> This is the logic of the book of Hebrews. A morally perfect high priest offers a morally unblemished sacrifice. Only he is qualified to be that high priest and to present that sacrifice that definitively deals with sin. In so doing, he ensures the holiness of those for whom he died. The writer tells his Christian readership:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of

<sup>43</sup> This is the element of truth in the governmental theory of the atonement that is famously associated with Grotius. Grotius' theology of the cross will be explored in chapter 6.

<sup>44</sup> Blocher (2008: 138–141) argues that the cross reveals the sovereign singularity, righteousness and love of God, but fails to mention the holiness of God (esp. 138–141).

God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. (Heb. 10:11–14)

This important statement is part of a summation (Heb. 10:11–18) that draws together the themes of Hebrews 8:1 – 10:10.<sup>45</sup> In the passage quoted, a great contrast is drawn between the old order, on the one hand (*men*), which could not definitively address the problem of sin and unholiness because of the imperfections of the priests and Jesus, on the other hand (*de*), who alone can be the agent of the definitive divine action. Those caught up by his work are in a process. They are being made holy (*hagiazomenous*, present passive participle).<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the cross is of immense epistemic significance. There on display are the three perfections of God that we have been considering: righteousness, holiness and love.

## Is divine love in conflict with divine wrath?

If the cross truly reveals the divine love and divine holiness, and if such love and holiness show themselves on the plane of history in mercy and wrath respectively, then a longstanding question merits some discussion. Is God internally conflicted? Is divine holiness at war with divine love? Does sin create a ‘dilemma’ for God?<sup>47</sup> The great Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke certainly thought so. He maintained, ‘It is at the heart of the Lutheran view of God that God does contradict himself, that he sets his grace in opposition to his judgment and his love in opposition to his holiness; indeed, the gospel itself can be traced to this fundamental contradiction within God himself.’<sup>48</sup> So I must ask whether ‘holy love’ as a phrase is an

<sup>45</sup> Attridge 2000: 1250.

<sup>46</sup> An argument may also be made that the cross shows God’s holiness because it reveals the divine wrath towards sin. Divine wrath is how holiness behaves in the presence of sin. Since the divine wrath is to be discussed at length in a subsequent chapter, I have chosen not to follow that line of argument here.

<sup>47</sup> Boyd and Eddy (2002: 116) appear to think that the penal substitutionary view of the atonement assumes that ‘This sinfulness poses a dilemma for God, for he perfectly loves us, on the one hand, but he is perfectly holy and cannot have anything to do with sin, on the other hand.’ Not all who hold to a substitutionary view of the atonement would be comfortable with the language of ‘dilemma’ because it seems too anthropomorphic, as though God is more like us than an accurate reading of Scripture suggests.

<sup>48</sup> Thielicke 1969: 575.

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oxymoron. Let us consider an important attempt to answer the question.

In his *The Cross of Christ* John Stott criticizes the view of P. T. Forsyth, which asserts that ‘there is nothing in the Bible about the strife of attributes’.<sup>49</sup> Hosea 11 provides Stott with evidence against Forsyth’s contention. According to Stott:

All parents know the costliness of love, and what it means to be ‘torn apart’ by conflicting emotions, especially when there is a need to punish the children. Perhaps the boldest of all human models of God in Scripture is the pain of parenthood which is attributed to him in Hosea, chapter 11.<sup>50</sup>

Stott maintains, ‘Here [Hos. 11] surely is a conflict of emotions, a strife of attributes, within God.’<sup>51</sup> Thus there is duality in God, but not an irreconcilable one: ‘For God is not at odds with himself, however much it may appear to us that he is.’<sup>52</sup> Thus when confronted with human sin a problem arises: ‘The problem is not outside God; it is within God’s own being.’<sup>53</sup> The cross of Christ provides the solution for Stott.

The problem with Stott’s appeal to Hosea is that, as we saw previously, the prophet declares,

For I am God, and not man –  
the Holy One among you.  
I will not come in wrath.

(Hos. 11:9)<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Stott 1996: 129.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 133. According to Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke, in the incarnation and cross we see the miracle of God’s Yes (mercy) overcoming his No (judgment). He argues, ‘The gospel is the wonder of this turning in God.’ He describes the gospel as God’s ‘self-overcoming’ (188). This is a bolder position than Stott’s and shows his debt to Luther’s Law–gospel dialectic. See Thielicke 1977: 187–190.

<sup>54</sup> Butterworth (2001) points out, ‘The last part of v 9 means either “I will not come against a city” (see the NIV mg.), or “I will not come in wrath” or “burning”. On either reading, divine holiness means in this context that God takes pity on undeserving Israel. Calvin (2002d) says, “This is what the Prophet means when he says, ‘I will not enter the city’; that is, ‘I will make war on you and subdue you and force you to surrender and that with great loss; but when the gates shall be opened, and the wall demolished, I will then restrain myself, for I am unwilling wholly to destroy you.’” (comment on Hos. 11:9).

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Holiness on occasion does judge, but like righteousness it may also save.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, I am unconvinced that there is a conflict of attributes presented by the Hosea passage. Moreover, as D. A. Carson rightly contends:

there is nothing intrinsically impossible about wrath and love being directed toward the same individual or people at the same time. God in his perfections must be wrathful against his rebel image-bearers, for they have offended him; God in his perfections must be loving toward his rebel image-bearers, for he is that kind of God.<sup>56</sup>

A distinction needs to be drawn between conceptual strife and the human experience of psychological strife. Holiness (expressed on occasion as wrath) and love (expressed on occasion as mercy) are not logically contradictory ideas.

Holy love then is not an oxymoron, unlike 'bittersweet'. Indeed, Hans Urs von Balthasar argues, 'There is no right love without wrath.' Why? Because 'God cannot love moral evil, he can only hate it. Of its very nature, it stands in complete opposition to God's essence.'<sup>57</sup> Now it may well be the case that, in our human psychology, to feel wrath and love towards the same object engenders enormous internal conflict. But who can say what 'divine psychology' is like? We must be careful not to fall into the Feuerbachian criticism of turning anthropology into theology, and projecting our thought and emotional life on to some notion of God. God is his perfections and they complement, not compete against, one another.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, it is important to note that holiness is an essential attribute of God. Wrath is not. Wrath is an expression of holiness in certain contexts. Likewise, love is an essential attribute of God, but mercy is not. Mercy is how love acts in certain contexts. Some theologians make the category mistake of treating holiness, love and wrath as though all three were essential divine attributes. For example, Thomas Smail criticizes Stott's view along these lines: 'but how these two contradictory attributes [God's wrath and love]

<sup>55</sup> Webster (2003: 46–49) brings out the positive and negative aspects of holiness.

<sup>56</sup> Carson 2000: 69.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Oakes 2005: 244.

<sup>58</sup> See the useful discussions in Erickson 1993: 297–298; McCurdy 1999: 204–208; Marshall 1990: 46.

cohere in the same divine nature is left undefined'.<sup>59</sup> If wrath is an essential attribute of God, then God has eternally been wrathful. However, there is no biblical justification for this idea that wrath is an essential, and therefore an eternal, attribute of God.

## Conclusion

The God of biblical revelation has a character. Divine action flows from that character. God is love and he is light. Moreover, he is righteous in all his ways. This is the story of both Old and New Testament. True, there is mystery. God is incomprehensible. We are finite, but God is not so limited. T. F. Torrance is right to contend, 'The reason for the atonement, its why and its how, is hidden in the holy love of God [I would say 'righteous holy love'], before which the very angels veil their faces and which they shield from our prying eyes.'<sup>60</sup> Even so, it is only as we grasp the righteous holy loving character of the God who has made us that we can begin to grasp in some measure the depths of the human plight outside Eden. And it is only against that dark backstory that the glory of the cross of Christ is revealed as the centre of God's plan to bring shalom. But to speak of the human plight raises the questions of just who we are as God's creatures, and what we have become that makes atonement so necessary. To these questions we turn next.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Jeffery, Ovey and Sach 2007: 286. The Jeffery, Ovey and Sach discussion of whether divine anger is compatible with divine love would be even sharper if the category distinction between divine holiness and love, on the one hand, and divine anger, on the other, were observed.

<sup>60</sup> Torrance 1992: xiii.