

Atonement: Soundings in Biblical, Trinitarian, and Spiritual Theology

Chapter 2: Atonement in the New Testament

In Chapter 2, we cross the threshold to the New Testament, which announces as its central claim that the Old Testament promise of divine forgiveness has been finally fulfilled, because in the passion and death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, atonement has been definitively achieved. Now since *that which brings fulfilment* must be understood together with *what it fulfils*, we need to show that the OT process of atonement reaches its (utterly astonishing) acme in the Father's sending his only-begotten Son as a mortal man to atone for the sins of the whole world and, simultaneously, to make His glory known.¹ The bilateral reciprocity of forgiveness-atonement that emerged in the OT is here "raised to the height of a Trinitarian event". It now unfolds within the unfathomably more intimate interplay of love between God the Father and God the Son incarnate.

But this prompts us to ask: Why is atonement for the sins of *human beings* the passion and death of *God the Son* incarnate (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10)? Where is the sense of proportion here?

To answer these questions, we need to understand **what sin really is, in the Christian view**. The deepest character of sin can be penetrated only if we take seriously **the biblical doctrine that God creates us "in Christ"** (Col 1:16; 2 Cor 5:17), that is, in the "place" that belongs to the beloved Son within the Trinity, the only-begotten God who is closest to the Father's heart (see Jn 1:18).

There's more. Not only does God create us "in Christ." **God also creates us for one ultimate end: to become sons/children of God by participation in the Son's personal relation to the Father within the Trinity.**² God wants to communicate His own divine life to every human being He creates. He creates everyone to become His sons/children by grace – to be "born of God."³

This means that **our reason for being (raison d'être) is a mystery of Trinitarian proportions**. It means that, from the very outset, we creatures rest within the space of inner-Trinitarian affection. We are loved with that very love which the Father has for His only-begotten Son. All the love God has for us has been saturated in advance by that infinite love with which the Father eternally begets His Son.

Therefore, because we are created to take part in the Trinity's life of love as "sons in *the* Son," **sin too is a mystery of Trinitarian proportions**. Pope St. John Paul II states it plainly: "Faced with the mystery of sin ... it is not enough to search the human conscience, ... but we have to penetrate the inner mystery of God, those Trinitarian 'depths of God'." Seen from this Trinitarian vantage point, sin is an inter-personal event between "Father" and "son." Sin at its objective root is the creature's "No" to God's gracious call to share in the divine life as beloved "sons" of God. The specifically Christian core of sin is grasped only when sin is perceived as the refusal to let the divine Father-Son relationship extend itself to and in us. In a word, **sin is the refusal of sonship in the Son.**

- Sin spurns God the Father, who wishes to be Father to His Son in us.
- Sin rejects God the Son, who wishes to be Son to (and Image of) the Father in us.
- And sin resists the Holy Spirit, who wishes to be the Spirit of Sonship in us.

¹ See 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10; Jn 1:1-18; Heb 1:3; 7:27; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15.

² See Gal 4:4-6; Col 1:16; Rom 8:14-17, 29; 1 Tim 6:16; 1 Jn 3:1f.

³ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs #50-52.

This is why sin has “*superhuman* rank” (Hoffmann). **Sin possesses an infinite quality** inasmuch as it is the rejection of a gift of infinite magnitude: the love with which the Father wants to beget (divinize) us as adopted “sons in *the* Son.” This intimates that God is love toward us in such a way that the rejection of His infinite love has a “repercussive effect” on God’s Heart that exceeds the bounds of what is human and creaturely. If sin is a mystery, it is because God gives His love with such ardent generosity that He can be “pained” by His creatures’ rejection of the gift (the gift, remember, that is our *raison d’être*). And since God’s love is infinite, His *passio caritatis* in the face of sin takes the form of infinite love-suffering. This is affirmed repeatedly in the teaching of Popes JPII and Benedict XVI (more on this later).⁴

What, then, is to be done about sin? As we noted in our reading of the OT, sin is not merely walked away from; it must be “borne away,” effaced, annihilated. Sin is “borne away” in being transformed or converted into its opposite. And if sin is to be transformed into its opposite, then that which is *the opposite of sin – filial love* – must take up and bear sin away. But filial love can bear sin only insofar as it is willing to bear the effects of sin, chiefly, estrangement from God (the theological core of sin). And **given the enormity of sin, its complete and definitive effacement calls for a filial love infinite in efficacy, capable of plumbing the Trinitarian proportions of sin.**

And there’s the rub: although atonement must involve human freedom, human freedom alone cannot turn round the repercussions of rejecting the extension of the divine Father-Son relationship to and in human persons. By itself alone, it cannot convert sin’s effects into material for the expression of a filial love infinite in quality that perfectly images – and thus perfectly glorifies – the Father’s *passio caritatis* in the face of sin. **This can be accomplished only by the divine Son who, taking up human freedom in His incarnation, makes it the place in which a return of love – precisely in the form of an infinite filial love-suffering – can be made to God the Father.** Pope Benedict XVI explains it thus: “because of His equality with God, [the Son] can take upon Himself all the sin of the world and then suffers it through to the end – omitting nothing...[in His identification] with the fallen.”⁵ “He must go through, suffer through the whole of it, in order to transform it.”⁶ At the “hour” of God’s definitive work of redemption through judgment (see Is 1:27), “the abyss of sin penetrates deep within Jesus’ soul.”⁷ Indeed, “the abyss of...evil and enmity with God He now takes directly upon Himself, or rather into Himself, to the point that He is ‘made to be sin’ (cf. 2 Cor 5:21).”⁸ Yet this process of transformation cannot be efficacious without “the filial will” of Jesus surrendering itself totally to the Father’s will.⁹ Hence we have Benedict’s brief summary of the process as the Son “taking men’s ‘No’ upon Himself and drawing it into His ‘Yes’ (2 Cor 1:19).”¹⁰ **Thereby sin “is truly absorbed, wiped out, and transformed in the pain of infinite love.”** Said differently, **sin is changed into the suffering form of Christ’s sonship.** Only the Son incarnate who is closest to the Father’s heart (see Jn 1:18) can, as the sin-bearing Son, suffer the Father’s concealment such that the abyss of enmity with God is converted into material for a staggeringly “new” form of filial intimacy with the Father.

⁴ See *Atonement*, pp. 34-47, 247-61.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, 20. See also 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 2, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123. See also 225.

It should go without saying that Jesus, in consenting to bear away sin, does not identify with (in the sense of echoing) the actual No of sin. Jesus is always and only an obedient and loving Yes to the Father. But when He takes the place of sinners, He stands *in* their sinful estrangement from the Father and endures it, bears it. As John Paul II explains:

Jesus's human soul is reduced to a wasteland, and He no longer feels the presence of the Father, but undergoes the tragic experience of the most complete desolation. ... [T]he Father is silent now. That silence of God weighs on the dying Jesus as the heaviest pain of all.... In the sphere of His feelings and affections, this sense of the absence of, and abandonment by, God was the most acute pain for the soul of Jesus, who drew His strength and joy from union with the Father. This pain rendered all the other sufferings more intense. That lack of interior consolation was His greatest agony. But Jesus knew that by this final phase of His sacrifice, which had reached the inmost fibers of his heart, He was completing the work of reparation that was the purpose of His sacrifice for the atonement of sins. If sin is separation from God, then Jesus had to experience in the crisis of His union with the Father a suffering proportionate to that [sin-wrought] separation.

And what of **the Father's role** in the Cross event? Atonement, after all, is a patrogenetic process (a process that has its source in the Father). What definitively atones for sin is the forgiving Father moving Jesus to willingly act as His filial image and collaborator in suffering through the paternal-filial estrangement wrought by sin. Jesus, on His side, lets the Father's forgiving love work its full effect in His sacred heart as the definitive sin-bearer (see Jn 14:10; 19:30). **Father and Son are jointly involved here: sin is countered by their interplay of love which transforms the separation (estrangement) that our sins have wrought into a form and expression of their unbroken and unfailing communion.**

And note: primacy in this interplay belongs to the Father. He is not deprived of it in his love-suffering any more than in His love. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (Jn 3:16). "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be atonement for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). It is the Father's *passio caritatis* that has priority in the atoning sacrifice of His Son. Indeed, as John Paul II reminds us, God's "paternal 'pain'" – God's paternal love-suffering – "is at work" in the Cross event, "that love which brings man back again to share in the life that is in God himself." JPII's own words merit quoting at length:

It is not possible to grasp the evil of sin in all its sad reality without "searching the depths of God." ... [If the world is to be convinced concerning sin (see Jn 16:8-9), it will] have to mean revealing suffering. Revealing the pain, unimaginable and inexpressible, on account of sin [which the Bible, notwithstanding certain anthropomorphic formulations] seems to glimpse in the 'depths of God' and in a certain sense in the very heart of the ineffable Trinity. The Church, taking her inspiration from Revelation, believes and professes that sin is an offense against God. What corresponds, in the inscrutable intimacy of the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, to this "offense," this rejection of the Spirit who is love and gift? The concept of God as the necessarily most perfect being certainly excludes from God any pain deriving from deficiencies; but in the "depths of God" there is a Father's love that, faced with man's sin, in the language of the Bible reacts so deeply. ... [T]his inscrutable and indescribable fatherly "pain" will bring about above all the wonderful economy of redemptive love in Jesus Christ ... in whose humanity the "suffering" of God is concretized. ...

If sin caused suffering, now the pain of God in Christ crucified acquires through the Holy Spirit its full human expression. Thus there is a paradoxical mystery of love: in Christ there suffers a God who has been rejected by his own creature: “They do not believe in me!”; but at the same time, from the depth of this suffering...the Spirit draws a new measure of the gift made to man and to creation from the beginning. In the depth of the mystery of the Cross, love is at work, that love which brings man back again to share in the life that is in God himself.¹¹

From this vantage point, we can look upon the crucified Son as the true “pierced one” (Zech 12:10; Jn 19:37) whose (mirroring) representation of the Father’s *passio caritatis* in the bearing of sin brings to fulfillment not only Israel’s but also humanity’s vocation to glorify God’s generative love as God’s authentic filial image. **Thus it would be short-sighted to regard atonement as simply a penalty. It is truly a saving event that promotes the filial beloved’s perfection (his reason for being: participation in divine sonship) and, equally so, an occasion for the glorification of God** (albeit “east of Eden”).

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¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, nos. 39 and 41. See *Atonement*, pp. 34-47, 247-61.

Divine Fatherhood

Divine/Adoptive Sonship * receptive to God's generative love
* 'Yes' to Sonship

sin * opposition to God's generative love
* 'No' to Sonship

- * In the eternal Trinity, the begotten Son exists op-posite the Father (positioned vis-à-vis the Father).
- * In the Godhead, the Son's op-position to the Father is wholly *positive* – defined through and through by mutual love.
- * The Son receives all from the Father, and reciprocates in love without reserve.
- * The Son *is* perfectly corresponding love vis-à-vis the Father and hence the Father's divine Image.
- * **Human beings** are created and called to be divinized by grace as sons in the Son, and hence are posited op-posite (vis-à-vis) the Father (cf. Eph 1:3-14).
- * **Sin**, however, turns this originally *positive* op-position into *negative* opposition: resistance against, calloused indifference to, rejection of the Father's self-giving.
- * Instead of filial correspondence to (obedient imitation of) His paternal love (cf. Eph 5:1), God finds in sinners the denial of their filial identity to be His living image and locus of glory.
- * In consequence, God's paternal love endures estrangement from the creatures He made to be sons; and human beings are tending toward the dead-end of everlasting separation from God.
- * **The Son** takes our place in the work of atonement, because we are created and called in His 'place' within the eternal Trinity.
- * The countermovement against sin involves **atonement**.
- * **Atonement** is accomplished when **sin** is borne in such a way that it is transformed into its opposite: obedient **sonship**.
- * On the Cross, Christ's **Yes** of obedient love as the vicarious sin-bearer reaches definitive expression in the place of sinners' **No** to God, such that Christ suffers death under the sin-wrought conditions of distance from the Father ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") thereby transforming sin into the suffering form of His sonship.
- * Yet Christ's cry of *God-forsakenness* bespeaks, in reality, his unparalleled *union with* the Father. The **Father's forgiving love** is at work in His Son incarnate (cf. Jn 14:9-12) producing in Him a reciprocal, mirroring love in the form of atonement.
- * **Atonement** is the form which the love of God takes in His Son, Jesus Christ, when He *transforms* our *unholy distance* from God into material for the expression of His *holy intimacy* with the Father.
- * What definitively atones for sin is the forgiving Father moving Christ to willingly act as His filial image and collaborator in suffering through the paternal-filial estrangement wrought by sin.
- * Sonship takes sin upon itself – indeed into itself, without ceasing to be itself – in order to transform sin into its opposite (an expression of sonship) thereby annihilating it.