The Atonement of the Death of Christ
In Faith, Revelation, and History

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The content of the following pages is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with what should be said about the atonement in the faith of the church, the second with what is said about the atonement in the revelation of Scripture, and the third with what has been said about the atonement in the history of doctrine.

It is this third section that requires an explanation. It has been customary in histories of the atonement to single out two or three main ideas and to subsume under these headings writers on the subject throughout the centuries. The general designations most favored have been objective and subjective, or penal and moral. There is something to be said for this procedure. It is helpful at least to the student to have a writer pigeonholed in this way. But sometimes by this method the specific view of a writer is obscured.
For even when an author avows his allegiance to any one theory, he still expresses it with his own nuance and nomenclature. It is these we have sought by going to the sources themselves in an effort to uncover the precise views of those with whom we are concerned, and to give to each view its own distinguishing title.

This procedure accounts for the uneven length of the following chapters. In chapters 26 and 27 summaries of views on the atonement over the ages are given in addition to the specific statements in the previous chapters. At the end, in the light of the biblical and historical approach the declarations of chapters 1–4 will be all the more vindicated. The truth will be made secure that as far as Christianity is concerned, it is the cross of Christ's atonement that is its distinctive. It is here that its message of forgiveness, of new life, of hope, of reconciliation, of all that belongs to man's salvation, has its source, its validity, and its power.

It remains only to add with Martin Buber, who in *Between Man and Man* (p. 34) expressed the "hope for two kinds of readers for these thoughts: for the *amicus* who knows about the reality to which I am pointing . . . and for the *hostis* or *adversarius* who denies this reality and therefore contends with me."

In final issue, however, it is not whether the following pages inspire admiration or excite aversion; whether they are the occasion for compliments or for criticism. What is important is that their readers, whether friendly or hostile, should acknowledge it as of the essence of Christian faith that Christ did truly bear our sins in his own body to the tree; and that in the deed of the cross he did finally make secure for faith that

There is a way for man to rise
To that sublime abode;
An offering and a sacrifice,
A Holy Spirit's energies,
An advocate with God.
The Atonement and Gospel

As it was with man's creation, so it is with man's redemption. For each there was the prior that was its cause, its dynamic, and its goal. In the beginning of creation there was God, and in the beginning of redemption there was gospel. In the realm of nature first there was God, by whose action man was created in innocence. In the realm of grace first there was gospel, by which action man is re-created in righteousness. Not, then, by man was the scheme of his redemption devised. Nor yet by the church were the great realities of divine forgiveness and newness of life thought up. Man's redemption is not a theory hammered out by an assembly of well-intentioned religionists and designed to induce man to abandon his native egoism and adopt instead an altruistic spirit of social welfare. Such is not the church, and such is not the gospel. Rather is the church the product of the gospel. It is not its originator. The gospel created the church, not the church the gospel. The gospel was prior to the church. In the beginning was the gospel, and by the word of the gospel was the
church formed. The gospel brought into being the new humanity of the redeemed in which the distinctions of race, nation, and class are lost, and which is designated in the New Testament the temple of God and the body of Christ.

But while the church exists only by the gospel, it also exists only for the gospel. The gospel that created the church is the same gospel that is in the custody of the church. The church has, therefore, its place in the scheme of the gospel as its primary agent. The church is not itself the gospel. The Reformers rightly took their stand against the notion that the church, equated with an exclusive priesthood, stands between God and man as the mediator of God's salvation. To exalt the church is to obscure the gospel. "Wherever the Church is preached, the Gospel comes short. We have then Catholicism, and we cease in due course to have a Gospel at all."1

The Reformers nevertheless did not decry the church. They were too certain that the church is only truly the church in relation to the gospel. In the light of Paul's word that Christ loved the church and gave himself for it (Eph. 5:25) they felt bound to speak well of it. Luther indeed declares that "whoever seeks Christ must find the church," for, he says, "I believe no one can be saved who is not part of this community and does not live in harmony with it in one faith, word, sacrament, hope, and love."2 Calvin is even more emphatic. It is with some surprise we hear him speak of the church as "Mother" and insist that "there is no other means of entry to life unless she conceives us in her womb, and gives us birth, unless she nourishes us at her breasts, and, in short, keeps us under her care and government until divested of mortal flesh." He declares further that "away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation... It is always disastrous to leave the church."3 He boldly stigmatizes as "detestable" some "who have a passion for splitting churches."4

By speaking thus, the Reformers were not backtracking on their protest against the sacerdotal ecclesiology of the medieval church. Rather were they making the point, which the New Testament gave them authority so to do, that to experience God's salvation in the gospel is to share in the faith of the people of God. Union with the One brings with it communion with the many. Our becoming Christian through the power of the gospel entrusted to the church is to be one with Christ in his church. There is, therefore, a sense in which Christian experience is not private and dumb (see Rom. 10:9-10). It comes to the individual, to be sure, but it is authentically a Christian experience only if it carries into the soul the weight of the church's faith concerning its objective source. It is too easy to take a rapt religious feeling for a creative belief and the exuberance of a natural piety for the power of the Spirit; mere stoicism, mere aplomb, for serene confidence in God; and subjective affections for objective trust. But the most dazzling of experiences is truly Christian only if it be of the historic gospel affirmed in the faith of the church. Thus—and this is what the Reformers were about in the deference they gave to the church—every true church has at the back of it the whole true church and its one full word of salvation. It has all the catholicity of the gospel behind it. It has in its gospel the power of God's salvation, with which, through its witness and worship, individuals come to identify and in which they share. The church has, then, its apostolicity in the historic gospel on which it was founded and the one essential New Testament gospel which gave it birth.

Its spirituality and success depend on the standing faith and saving word of the gospel's unchanging content. The church is what it is in the gospel that created it; so is every soul created anew in Christ a part of the church. For the church is not of man but of God. It is not the product of human sympathies or a mere voluntary association of like-minded enthusiasts joined together by common affinities and contracts. The church is a divine creation, a spiritual entity in which man discovers in Christ the shape of his soul. Man is united to the church by being united to Christ, and with Christ and the church through the gospel. The redeemed are in principle and in position one in the Great Church created and sustained by the saving action of the Triune God. "Therefore every soul is born for the Church. For every soul is born for society; and it is also born for redemption; and therefore it is born for the society of redemption."5

It then behooves the church to be sure of and secure in the gospel. "For there is no small weight in the designation given to her, the house of God, Pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). By these very words Paul intimates, that to prevent the truth from perishing in the world, the Church is its faithful guardian, because God has been pleased to preserve the pure preaching of his word by her instrumen-

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1. Forsyth, Positive Preaching and Modern Mind, 96.
4. Ibid. 4.11.1.10; 8.12.
tality, and to exhibit himself to us as a parent would while he feeds us with nourishment, and provides whatever is conducive to our salvation." The chief danger for the church is that it should have within it those who are not of the gospel. This happens when the church becomes obsessed with niceness and numbers rather than with salvation and newness of life; when the church becomes a mere assemblage of the once-born whose interest is in the humanitarian outflow of religion while being themselves without the experience of the church's gospel. Such may indeed have a taste for higher things, but have no taste of the highest. They will consider Christianity to have good ideas, but they have no hold on its divine truth. They will interpret Christianity as a way of life rather than the recasting of the soul and the church as a place to inspire unselfish deeds rather than the habitation of God.

The other peril, not far behind the first in seriousness, is that the church should itself lose grip on the historic gospel and instead give its blessing to what it considers best in the spirit of the age. There are churches that have gone overboard in their efforts to be in sympathy with the pseudohumanism of their time and who tell men, even the poorest of prodigals and the blackest of scoundrels, that they are better than they are painted; that they have more of Christ in them than they know; and that they can, if they will, with one stroke of a strong determination break through their hard shells and release in themselves the slumbering divinity and so give expression to their true humanness. But that will not do for man's salvation. A gospel robbed of its rapport with man's real need as a sinner and a redemption that has no relation to the divine holiness are not the power of God for man's salvation. Truly to speak to the time is to proclaim to it the apostolic gospel that is for all times. It is not shoring up that man needs but cleaning out; not just nudges of encouragement to strive harder but a divine word to relieve his guilt. It is not pep talks he needs but a new life; not stimulus but salvation. The one thing that the human heart most sorely requires is the one thing the church is commissioned to give: the gospel of a radical redemption. When once a church dilutes that gospel, it cannot grow, neither does it live. According to the hold the gospel has upon the church and according to the commitment of the church to the gospel can its real strength be assessed and its true influence be measured.

Therefore the one question that the church must constantly ask itself is whether it is standing in right relation to the gospel. To answer that question the church has to go back to the apostolic word in which it has its existence. It is always a salutary thing for the church to return to its divine source and rejuvenate itself in its primary spring.

The term *gospel* belongs to the vocabulary of the faith which gave birth to the church. It is, that is to say, specifically a New Testament word, occurring at least one hundred times. On seven occasions, beginning with Romans 1:1, it is designated "the gospel of God," and on eleven occasions, beginning with Mark 1:1, it is referred to as "the gospel of Christ." This association of the gospel with God and Christ, without any awareness of incongruity, must be read as highlighting at once its divine origin and its divine reality. Therefore the gospel grounded in God and granted in Christ is further designated the gospel of "grace" (Acts 20:24); of "power" (Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:5); of "righteousness" (Rom. 1:17); of "truth" (Gal. 2:14; Col. 1:5); of "promise" (Eph. 3:6); of "hope" (Col. 1:23). It is consequently, according to 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 1 Timothy 1:11, the "glorious gospel," and Revelation 14:6 "the everlasting gospel."

The word *gospel* is the modern form of the Anglo-Saxon word *godespell*, which is used to translate the Greek term *euangelion*. In earlier days it was thought to have the literal meaning *good news* or *good story*. Now, however, it is generally agreed to signify more specifically "God's news" or "God's story." The Old Testament background for the distinctively Christian use of the term is Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1. The latter passage is quoted by our Lord himself as fulfilled in himself (Luke 4:18). In its primary context it describes the function of the Servant of the Lord divinely appointed "to bring good tidings to the afflicted." Those addressed in its historic context were the afflicted in Babylon. They were to hear that for them the acceptable year of the Lord had come and that God would save them by delivering them from their enemies and bringing them once again to their own land. Isaiah 52:7 is quoted by Paul in reference to the gospel (Rom. 10:15). Its Old Testament reference is to the exiles of Israel and to Jerusalem which sits in the dust of her ruins. But the exiles will return, and the lost children of Jerusalem will be restored.

These two passages that feature the idea of God's news provide the key for an understanding of the term in the New Testament. Its use by Jesus stamps it at once with its Christian significance. Right from the beginning the word was on his lips. He had come among men, it was declared, as God's anointed to bring "good news of a great joy" to "all the people" (Luke 2:10). To proclaim God's news was he sent (Luke 4:43). Read then in the light of its Old Testament background and of Christ's own usage the term *gospel* holds at once the thought of an anointed person and an accomplished work. Thus is the term

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The Atonement and Gospel

gospel a summary word for the person and work of Christ; Paul can affirm "him we proclaim" (Col. 1:28) and "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). In the gospel the person and work of Christ coalesce in one grand atoning act to accomplish and assure God's saving purpose for mankind. It is this constellation of events centered in Christ's person and conditioned by his work that provides the content of the gospel and is the subject matter of Christianity.

Throughout the ages this actuality of Christ, who he is and what he has done, has been understood as the revealed truth and proclaimed as the essential gospel. There were three crosses on Golgotha's hill. But only one of the three, that central one, has atoning purpose for humanity. And it has this significance because of the one who there gave himself to death thereon. That death has its atoning value not because it was the death of just someone, which God graciously accepted in lieu of man's debt. The death of Christ has saving worth because of who he was. The gospel is therefore the proclamation of "him"—"crucified." Sometimes in the proclamation the accent falls on the him as the Savior of men and sometimes on the crucified as the way of man's salvation. So is there the call, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31), and so the assurance, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). Christ is Savior because he gave his life a ransom for many; and being he who was, he gave his life a ransom to save his people from their sins.

In the person of Christ there is the revelation of God, and in the death of Christ there is the redemption of man. In his incarnate life he brought God to man, and in his atoning cross he brought man to God. It is not the apostolic gospel then to reduce the person of Christ to that of a superbly good man, a religious genius, or even an honorary god. Nor yet is it of the gospel to tone down the cross to an object of man's noblest endeavors. He did not come to stimulate our sin-consciousness. His purpose in the world is not to inspire man at his best but to redeem man at his worst. To do this he must take account of man's sin, the real barrier in the way of man's approach to God. It is the very heart of the gospel that in Christ's person and work the way is opened up for man to reestablish his relationship with God, broken as a result of his sinful rebellion.

Direct the gospel manward, to the influence it may have on man, and Christianity becomes a religion and the cross a symbol. Direct the gospel Godward, to the effect it had upon God, and Christian faith must be seen as revelation and the cross as redemption. In Christ's person and work is the marrow of the gospel, the divinest originality of the Christian revelation and the sublimest reality of Christian faith. If Christ at his highest is regarded as but the noblest of the human species, the finest of its inherent greatness, its supreme product in virtue, then his cross will become the mere apotheosis of human sacrifice with its chief effect on man and not the divine atonement with its first effect on God. The choice is between a Christ who is the ideal and the inspiration of man's best endeavors and a Christ who has come from God and, as God, has made for man an absolute atonement. The absolute nature of the salvation brought to our faith is not a product of a human nature at its struggling finest. In Christ's work we have God truly present as Redeemer. It is in Christ that we have that divine redemption, not simply through him. He is, then, no mere creature of time who had this transcendent ability as a gift of God or acquired by moral effort with the help of God.

7. Forsyth, Person and Place of Jesus Christ, 6.
The work of Christ was, indeed, his commission, but even more was it a function of the love, the justice, the power, the glory, and the grace of God. It was, that is to say, an act of very God. Not merely did God send his Son; he came as Son and in him: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." God did not meet the atoning necessities of the sins of the world by a deputy. Christ was man's substitute, not God's. It does not belong to God to receive a sacrifice greater than he makes. He did not delegate redemption. He himself redeems in his Son with whom he is eternally one. God gave his Son, reconciling the world unto himself. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." He did not come to give us a gospel to be preached. Thus is Calvary the very divinity of Christ's person, for the cross is the expression of the divine destroyer of man's sin, as the eternal salvation historically present. Jesus did not come to give us a gospel; he came to be in his person and work the gospel to be preached. Thus is Calvary the very cross and passion in gracious fulfillment of the loving purpose of the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God has once and for all, on behalf of and instead of sinful man, made a full and perfect atonement for the sins of the world, whereby the broken relationship between God and man should be restored and the barrier to communion with God removed. Without this reality of the cross there is no sure word of redemption for man. This is the divine "transaction"—there need be no hesitation about admitting the word—that makes Christianity not just another religion, not simply another suggested path by which man can rise to God, but a revelation from God of the one gospel of Christ for the world. God himself has come to man and in Christ has himself made the way for man to rise to the sublime abode. He has himself in Christ made an offering and a sacrifice holy and acceptable. In the atonement of Christ's cross, out of a love that knows no measure, he has met all the consequences of his holy reaction against man's sin by bearing the justice of its punishment and the shame of its guilt.

Such is the gospel of the divine atonement. And because of it there is sure forgiveness and eternal life for such as on the grounds of Christ's work come in faith to the cross. The gospel concerns Christ—"him crucified." That prince among preachers of the gospel, C. H. Spurgeon, shows the way to proclaim the word of the cross. In a powerful sermon on the words the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19) he first affirms that because of who Christ is, there is worth in his blood. It is the blood of Christ. Here, powers of speech would fail to convey to you an idea of the preciousness. Behold here, a person innocent, without stain within, or flaw without; a person meritorious, who magnified the law and made it honourable—a person who served both God and man even unto death. Nay, here you have a divine person—so divine, that in the Acts of the Apostles Paul calls his blood the "blood of God." Place innocence, and merit, and dignity, and position, and Godhead itself, in the scale, and then conceive what must be the inestimable value of the blood which Jesus poured forth.

Then follows his declaration: "The precious blood of Christ is useful to God's people in a thousand ways."8 He limits himself to twelve! And these he sets forth as its redeeming power, atoning efficacy, cleansing power, preserving power, pleading prevalence, melting influence, gracious power to pacify, sanctifying influence, power to give entrance, and confirming, invigorating, and overcoming powers. At the end he calls the people to "turn those eyes of yours to the full atonement made, to the utmost ransom paid." That is preaching the gospel; that is proclamation of the atonement.

Calvary—Calvary: Golgotha, the crucifixion, the place of the skull; Calvary, the cross, the shaping of a soul. Golgotha where man did his evillest, his wickedest to Christ. Calvary where God did his holiest, his divinest for man.

8 Spurgeon, Twelve Sermons on the Passion and Death of Christ, 33-34.
Alfred North Whitehead gave voice to a remarkable utterance in his declaration, "Christ gave his life. It is for Christians to discern the doctrine." His words are for the church a caution and a challenge. For "to discern the doctrine" enshrined in the statement Christ gave his life is at once an impossible possibility and a possible impossibility. It is the first because that event has had results so cosmic and individual as to demonstrate that there is something divine, and therefore unfathomable and impenetrable, about it which cannot be coordinated into a single system. Of the far-reaching and many-sided redeeming action of the cross no one word or phrase can gather into itself the total significance. All the tremendous realities of human life—sin, death, faith, love, hope, forgiveness, justice, holiness, and the rest—have a different content and context since Jesus, the Son of God, "gave his life." In the arms of the cross the whole world is somehow embraced, while its head reaches to the highest heavens and its shaft to the nethermost hell. How can such an extrahuman event be embodied in a neat formula? How could the divine deed wrought out at Calvary be put into one word? Not by one word—not, indeed, by many words—can the full quota of the blessings that have been made available to mankind because "Christ gave his life" be expressed. At the end only the inspired affirmations of the New Testament can do justice to a divine work so great as that accomplished by the atonement of the death of Christ. And even then they come to a full stop in the ultimate majesty and mystery of God.

Yet the word of the cross must be spoken. But it cannot be spoken to effect in an unintelligible language, or in terms without meaning, or in nonsense syllables. Here then is the possible impossibility that confronts the Christian as he seeks a reason for the hope he shares with the believing community. He must, that is to say, find the theological foundation that gives rationale to his experience. It is the Christian's testimony that in Christ and him crucified he has acceptance and communion with God. But while the blessings of Christ and him crucified, are, as we shall see in chapter 4, apprehended and apprehendable in experience, that which is so apprehended and apprehendable, the atonement of the cross, is objective to experience and is its cause and condition. It is easy for Christians to become more concerned with their own experience of the cross than with the cross of which they have experience. In this way is their Christianity egocentric rather than theocentric, and their efforts focused on their own spiritual culture rather than on the Calvary of their spiritual redemption. Better would it be for such to forget their spiritual development, whether by means ascetic or genial, and to live more in the light of the cross, of the finished atonement, and of the kingdom of God for which Christ gave himself.

All this means that the experience of salvation has its reality in the application to experience of the historical fact that "Christ gave his life." But not simply the bare historical fact as such but the historical fact in its divine interpretation. Thus is the Christian doctrine of the atonement founded not merely upon the historical fact that Christ died but upon the actuality that his dying accomplished. A faith that does not apprehend the biblical significance given to the fact is not Christian faith. A Christianity without a theology of the atonement according to the Scriptures is not the authentic message of the gospel. Sensitive to the historical figure of Christ it may be, but spiritual sensitivity is not biblical faith. Without a positive theology of the cross, without indeed a dogmatic atonement doctrine, Christianity is but another one of the religions of the world. The really vital
thing, the truly great thing, in the New Testament is that in the work of Christ there is settled fully and finally the issue between a holy God and the sin of man. In other words, the atonement is a fact revealed, a reality brought about for man by the sole initiative and action of God.

There is then a biblical doctrine of the atonement. From first to last Christian faith rests upon the work of Christ. Without a true apostolic understanding of the cross no church can continue to exist or have reason for its existence. The atonement of the death of Christ in the New Testament is a theological truth. There is, on the one hand, a series of historical facts—the death and resurrection of Christ—and, on the other hand, the interpretation of these facts in terms of man's salvation. The facts and interpretation coalesce in the biblical revelation as determinative of the Christian doctrine of the atonement. In the New Testament the fact that Christ died is always related to its divine necessity and to man's need.

It is not right to distinguish, as some have done, between the "fact" and the "interpretation" of the atonement. The bare fact is that one Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew of the first century, was crucified. Belief in that historical fact is of no saving value. What gives it its redemptive significance is the disclosure of who he really was in his relation to God and what he truly did in the purpose of God. There is no specific benefit in contemplating the death of Jesus as such, as an event of the distant past. It is the revealed meaning of that cross which makes it for sinful man the place and the way of his reconciliation to God. Thus would the New Testament have Christ's work understood, first and foremost, as this act of atonement: that he "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24); that "Christ . . . died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Peter 3:18); that he was made "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13); that he "died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3); and that "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). Such is the great, the profound doctrine of the cross in the New Testament. "Christ gave his life"—presented himself in love as an atoning sacrifice to meet the necessities of the divine reaction to sin, and so to reconcile man to God.

It is in the light of this fundamental biblical doctrine of the atonement that every other allusion to the death of Christ in the New Testament has its validity. In relation to this ultimate theological truth all other ideas regarding the significance of the cross are nullified. Thus, if the cross is only an exhibition of God's love, then it is a mere meaningless display that evokes no worthy response; if it is no more than an example of noble self-sacrifice, then it can give no comfort to the burdened soul; if it is nothing other than a grim revelation of God's holy hatred of sin, then it must but deepen our despair. The death of Christ does indeed teach these things, but only if its central meaning as an atoning work in our stead is preserved. In the context of the truth that the cross is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes, all other ideas of the cross derive their significance.

The sole purpose of Christ's coming into the world was that he might be the Savior of man. He came to save his people from their sins. And what is clear from the New Testament is the simple yet profound truth that the redemption of man is inseparable from the satisfaction rendered to God in the atonement of the death of Christ. To appease the wrath of God against sin Christ must suffer. To forgive sin he must bear it. Christians are too prone to dwell on the simple side of the gospel, to put all their capital into small circulation. But the New Testament would have us explore the profundities of the cross; to take it, indeed, as the key to our fuller knowledge of God by which our experience of his grace is enlarged and enriched. The real object of the atonement is not that of tuning up humanity's natural best. Rather is the cross the means whereby men and women are brought out of the sin and guilt of their native worst into a vital, living communion with very God. For the final truth about the atonement is that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. The cross was not just human nature presenting its very best to God; it was God giving his absolute all to man for his salvation. The real subject of the New Testament, then, is the atonement of the death of Christ. It is consequently from the perspective of the cross that our theology must be construed. There we know best what God is and who Christ is; there we discover what man is as a sinner and as redeemed.

It is the biblical conception of the atonement that enables us to attain to a right view of God. For in the atoning cross there comes into fullest action his love and his holiness, which are not just detachable attributes of God but realities of his fundamental being. It is the action of his essential nature as holy Love that redeems mankind. The holiness of God is the creative principle of his justice that would punish sin, and the love of God is the creative principle of his grace that would forgive sinners. But God acts as one: all that he is, is in all that he does. Thus is his redemption of man in the atonement of the death of Christ a reality "affecting Godhead." It is not something to be related to some one specific attribute of God but to God as God, to God as Holy Love. Thus do his holiness in his judgment on sin and his love in the forgiveness of the sinner unite in
The Atonement in the Faith of the Church

the atonement of the cross. Neither reality—his holiness nor his love—has priority. Because of his love he forgives sin in holiness, and because of his holiness he judges sin in love—in the death of Christ.

As central in the New Testament the doctrine of the atonement is the proper perspective from which to approach an understanding of the person of Christ. P. T. Forsyth is perfectly right to affirm that “the Godhead of Christ is a faith that grows out of that saved experience of the Cross which is not only the mark but the being of a church; so that undogmatic Christianity is foreign, false, and fatal to any church.” It is in the atonement of Christ that the salvation of God has come to us. Atonement is in Christ; salvation is from God. The predicate in each case overlaps and brings into a relationship of homousios Christ and God. To be redeemed in Christ is to be saved by God. To be united to Christ is to be one with God. To experience the action of Christ’s cross in us is to know the action of God’s grace for us. When doctrinally stated this means that the fullness of Christ’s person is to be understood by the nature of his work and, vice versa, the fullness of his work by the nature of his person. So is his atoning work the key to his nature, and so is the interpretation of the cross the interpretation of his person. Christ did something for mankind because of who he was; and because of who he was, he did what he did. He made an atonement for us. He, being in the form of God, humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death on the cross. In that death—his death—he bore our sins. It is then “the doctrine of the atonement which secures for Christ his place in the gospel, and which makes it inevitable that we should have a Christology or a doctrine of his person. Reduced to its simplest expression, the doctrine of the atonement signifies that we owe to Christ and his finished work our whole being as Christians.”

All that God must do for us that we might be reconciled to himself Christ has done. In his person God has given himself to us, and in his work God has given himself for us. With the New Testament in our hands as guide there is nothing so clear as this: that for our salvation the atonement of the death of Christ is the one essential. Had not Christ suffered, neither would we have been redeemed. We are reconciled to God by the death of his Son. God comes to man in the abiding reality and power of the cross of Christ. Christ and his work have, then, for the Father an absolute value; and it is on these grounds only that our reconciliation to God has been accomplished. Thus was Christ’s death an atonement, not simply because it was his loving self-sacrifice even unto death, but because it was his sacrifice in love unto the holiness of God’s radical judgment on sin. The utmost of the divine reaction to sin Christ on the cross bore to the utmost. He identified with our manhood; and he took to himself the sin of the world in its essence and penumbra, to exhaust in the atonement of his death its every woe and guilt. The only cross, then, the church has “to preach is a theological one. It is not the fact of the Cross, it is the interpretation of the Cross, the prime theology of the cross, what God meant by the Cross, that is everything. That is what the New Testament came to give. That is the only kind of Cross that can make and keep a church.”

The saving work of God is, then, the atoning work of Christ; and the reconciling work of the Father is the saving work of the Son. By his cross and passion, in gracious fulfillment of the loving purpose of the Father, Jesus Christ has once and for all, on behalf of and instead of sinful men, made a full and perfect atonement for the sins of the world, whereby the broken relation of man to God should be restored and the barrier to communion with God removed.

The reality of the atonement arises out of the fact of the mutual estrangement of God and man. It is because sin is real that atonement is required. God and man stand apart from each other. Thus, implied in the language of reconciliation is the personality of both God and man. Herein is emphasized the facts that God is such a Being who deals consistently with man, and man is such a being as has responsibility to God. Man’s true nature is that of existence in relationship with God. In that relationship man has his chief good to enjoy life in fellowship with his Maker. Out of that relationship man is alienated from God and subjected to death. There is then a basic mutual relationship of universal significance between God and man on which the blessedness of man is founded and on which the attainment of his well-being depends. But in point of fact this relation has been disturbed by man’s wrongdoing. Thus is man’s sin at once the derangement of his existence in relationship with God and of the moral order in which the actuality of his living to glorify God could be fulfilled. By sin the personal relation subsisting between God and man has been destroyed and violence done to the constitution under which man was created to form with God one moral community of being to serve the same moral ends.

Two questions stand, then, to be answered. The first is, What is the specific need of man in relation to God that requires the atonement? The answer to this question is already implied in the foregoing

2. Forsyth, Person and Place of Jesus Christ, 29-30.
3. Denney, Death of Christ, 231.
paragraph. But simply stated it is this: That which creates the requirement of atonement is the fact of man's sin. Only in reference to God is sin understood for the terrible reality that it is. In reference to God man's sin is such to render him unable to bring himself back into fellowship with God. For it belongs to the nature of sin itself to show man that he cannot redeem himself from its reality and its effects. Thus in his recognition of what he is, man discovers what he cannot be; in what he has done, what he is unable to do. It is not in him to bring his state into harmony with his nature or to fulfill the purpose for which he was created. He cannot in his condition as a sinner enter into renewed fellowship with God; nor can he get rid of his past, annul his guilt, or attain to a righteousness acceptable in the courts of the Majesty on high. Before God man stands as a sinner, condemned and unclean. The need of redemption is therefore patent; it is indeed desperate.

But if man cannot bring about of himself his own redemption, it can then be his only if someone other than man, and yet of man, can act for him. Yet even in his sin man has an instinctive feeling about himself that he is worth saving, although he is aware that he is not worthy of it. Indeed, the very recognition of his need is itself an indication of its possibility. The man sensitive to the requirements of the situation will therefore have no difficulty about the atonement. He will accept that God cannot just forgive with a lighthearted readiness. He will rather see how rightly the atonement is addressed to the actuality of sin, and that it somehow meets the conditions for his forgiveness and his acceptance with God. His own moral nature will witness to him that the way of atonement is instinctively proper. In the atonement of the death of Christ he will recognize that his pardon and reconciliation have their absolute assurance. For that is what the atonement means: it means redemption through the blood of Christ. It means that Christ has wrought for man a good work whereby his sin no longer counts against him before the eternal throne; it does not count him out at the bar of heaven.

The second question to be asked is, What is the revealed nature of God in relation to man that necessitates an atonement? The atonement of the death of Christ appears in the New Testament a necessity for man's redemption. But how necessary? And of what sort? Is it the necessity of the most fitting way, or of the all-loving way, or of the only adequate way? Each view has its advocates. But why cannot each be an aspect of the one truth? To distinguish between the moral and the metaphysical necessity of the atonement and to opt for the one against the other is surely to introduce a false dichotomy into

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God's relationship with his total created order. "But reality is not one thing and God another; and if we are at enmity with God, we are at enmity with reality, past and present, as well as to come. To be at enmity against God is neither more nor less than to be in bitter hostility to reality, with the sense that it is all against us." There are some who talk and write about the spiritual principle of the atonement and declare that the real nature of the atonement lies in its display of some spiritual quality. Sin is a spiritual transgression and brings spiritual penalty. But the reality of man's sin and God's wrath against it does not lie outside the moral order of nature. For there surely is a moral constitution of the physical world. Sin is consequently such an act or state of man against which the whole order of things, at once natural and physical, in which man lives reacts. It is not right then to divide either man or the universe into two variant realms. We cannot limit the divine reaction against sin, or the experiences through which it is brought home to man, to the purely spiritual sphere. Every sin of man is a sin of an indivisible human being and has reactions in the world in which the physical and the spiritual interpenetrate and supplement each other.

Man as a moral being is set in a world built on moral principles, and it is to man as a sinner and to the moral order affected by his sin that the atonement is related. It is therefore right to declare that in these relations the atonement is an absolute necessity. Thus the cross "represents an actual objective transaction, in which God actually does something, and something which is absolutely necessary." It is an absolute necessity both for man's redemption from sin and for the just appeasement of God in his holy reaction against sin. Thus is the atonement of the death of Christ at once an act of divine love and justice. It is therefore credible to assert the absolute necessity of the atonement mediated to sinners through the work of Christ. It is indeed possible for God to redeem, but possible for him only as the God he is. Thus is the atonement the supreme outgoing of his love in an act in which justice is done to his holy reaction against sin. So must God's act of redemption be of necessity consistent with his essential nature. Equally expressed in his atoning deed will be his love and his holiness, his compassion and his judgment. God would not be true to himself if he did not forgive sinners in his love, nor would he be true to himself if he did not judge sin in his wrath. The atonement reveals the consistency of God with himself. "For nothing
else in the world demonstrates how real is God's love to the sinful and how real the sin of the world is to God."1 The wrath of God discloses how seriously he regards sin. It lies under his condemnation. What has to be overcome in the work of atonement is not simply man's distrust of God, but God's condemnation of man. It is then this special character of sin—its drawing forth from God his wrath and condemnation—with which Christ deals. He does not deal with it by ignoring it and counseling us to ignore it. Rather does he take the full burden on himself, and all our responsibility, by submitting in his death to God's condemnation of sin as the expression of his righteous wrath. Thus did Christ in the atonement of the cross put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. To the question, What according to the New Testament did Christ do for our sins? the answer is clear and uncompromising. He died for our sins. And in dying for them he bore them and put them away. This is the ultimate truth about the atonement. Christ's death is a sin-annulling death. In his death sin's wages are cancelled, sin's guilt is removed, sin's condemnation is exhausted. The truth, the fact, the reality is that in the atonement of the death of Christ the question of sin has been answered, the problem of sin has been solved, and the possibility of sin's victory finally and absolutely destroyed.

In the action of the cross God's love for sinners and God's judgment on sin coalesced for man's salvation. The surest evidence that God is love is there: in Christ, the Son of God, taking to himself sin's condemnation. There is no need to oppose, as some have done, the love of God to his requirement of propitiation, and to argue that because God is love there is no necessity for such. The truth is quite other. It is just because God is love that he has himself provided the propitiation whereby man may be redeemed in righteousness. In the New Testament the propitiation is contained in the love. "Herein is love," says John, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10, KJV, italics added). "God," says Paul, "shows his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:8-9). These two declarations bring together the love of God and the propitiation of Christ's death.

The love of God is not in the New Testament a truth declared, so to speak, antecedent to the work of Christ. It is rather the uniform teaching that it is in relation to Christ's coming and deed that his love is declared. It is the act of atonement itself as God's judgment of our

1. Death of Christ, 297.