

Christ under God's Wrath: A Pauline Perspective

Adam C. Koontz

Why the Death of Christ?

C. S. Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves about the atonement shortly before his conversion from a stunted theism to full-blown Christianity:

What I couldn't see was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now—except in so far as his *example* helped us. And the example business, tho' true and important, is not Christianity: right in the centre of Christianity, in the Gospels and St. Paul, you keep on getting something quite different and very mysterious expressed in those phrases I have so often ridiculed (“propitiation” – “sacrifice” – “the blood of the Lamb”)—expressions [which I could] only interpret in senses that seemed to me silly or shocking.¹

The atonement of Christ had been in the way of Lewis's embrace of Christianity, but he could see that the blood sacrifice of Jesus was at the heart of the New Testament. Lewis was neither the first nor the last to stumble at atonement. He was also one among billions of readers of the Bible to understand that Christianity's center is the atonement of Jesus.

Atonement is an unusual theological term, Middle English,² not Greek or Latin.³ The “Early Version” (1382) of Wycliffe's fourteenth-century Bible translations used

¹ *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 427.

² The early fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Bevis of Hampton* speaks (l. 3510) of two parties reconciled to one another as, “So þai atonede wiþ oute sake” (Modern English, “so they were reconciled without strife”), and at the end of the fourteenth century Wycliffe's translation from the Vulgate rendered Ezekiel 37:17 where the prophet has two sticks in his hand, one representing Judah and one Israel, and then puts the sticks together in one hand, as “And ioyned thou the trees oon to the tother in to o tree to thee; and tho schulen be in to onement in thin hond.” The bringing together of two things once separated is “onement.”

³ “atone, v.,” OED Online, March 2020, Oxford University Press, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/12596?rskey=AIVe03&result=2>. The noun *atonement* was used in the sixteenth century, though the verb form, *atone*, did not enter the English Bible until the 1611 KJV. In 1513, thirteen years before Tyndale's translation, Thomas More used the noun in a discussion of English history, “the late made attonemente” between two political groupings (*The historie of the pitifull Life, and unfortunate Death of Edward the Vth* [London: Wm. Sheares, 1652]).

Adam C. Koontz is Assistant Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. He can be contacted at adam.koontz@ctsfw.edu.

the word to describe what the blood sacrifices would accomplish on the day of sacrifice called “the day of cleansing, that is, the day of atonement” (Lev 23:27, 28; 25:9), called also in Numbers 29:7 the “day of atonement.”⁴ In the sixteenth century, Tyndale used *atonement* to express the reconciliation Christ’s sacrifice achieved, translating the noun *καταλλαγή* as “atonement” and the verb *καταλλάσσω* as “to atone” in many (but not all) of its appearances in the New Testament, especially Romans 5 where he alternately used *reconciliation* and *atonement* for the same Greek word.⁵

Atonement was not nearly so popular with the New Testament translators of the Geneva Bible (the Bible of Puritan New England and much of early America)⁶ and the 1611 Authorized Version or King James Bible,⁷ appearing in both versions only at Romans 5:11. The word *atonement* survived in the King James mainly as a term set within the Old Testament sacrificial system, separated from the more common use of *reconciliation* in the New Testament, such as in 2 Corinthians 5 or Romans 5:10. *Atonement* survives in the English Standard Version, the English Bible most often used in the LCMS today, only as an Old Testament cultic term with no verbal echo in the New Testament.⁸

These vagaries within atonement’s language of origin reflect the indeterminacy with which *atonement* has often been connected with Christ’s sacrifice, so that *atonement* can appear in constructions such as “his scheme of . . .,” “his model of . . .,” or “one’s theory of . . .” Removed from its biblical relationship to the Old Testament cultic sacrifices, the *meaning* of Christ’s death occurring “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3) becomes harder to discern. When something is termed

Tyndale was taking an extant English term to render the sense of the reconciliation of an offended party with the offender.

⁴ Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

⁵ For example, in Romans 5:10, “we were reconciled to God,” and in 5:11, “we have received the atonement.” Tyndale employed *atonement* for what priestly sacrifices and/or the removal of bloodguilt accomplished at Leviticus 5:10, 13; 16:34; Numbers 6:11; 15:25, 28; 25:13; 28:22, 30; 29:5, 11; 35:33. At 2 Corinthians 5:18, the office of the ministry of the New Testament is specifically “the office to preach the atonement.”

⁶ Despite *atonement*’s appearing fifty-four times in the Old Testament, especially heavily in Leviticus and Numbers, it is almost entirely absent in the Geneva New Testament.

⁷ *Atonement* was more prevalent in the AV/KJV than in the Geneva Bible with which it was a major competitor when first published in 1611. *Atonement* appeared sixty-nine times in the Old Testament, but like the Geneva Bible, it appeared only once in the New Testament. This verbal disconnect between sacrificial vocabulary in the Old Testament and the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament puts asunder what God joined together: the Old Testament sacrifices and Christ’s sacrifice.

⁸ *Atonement* and *atone* appear eighty-two and ninety-three times in the ESV Old Testament, largely in connection with sacrifices, priests, and blood, but neither word appears at all in the New Testament, whether in connection with Christ’s work, his sacrifice, his priesthood, his blood, or anything else.

a “scheme,” a “model,” or a “theory,” there is a lightness about it that does not accompany other theological terms such as *Christ* or *Trinity*. The weightiness of *Christ* stems from its obvious importance in the Old Testament (1 Sam 2:10, 35; 12:3, 5; 2 Sam 22:51; Ps 2:2) and New Testament Scriptures, the debate about the identity of Christ in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 2:4; 16:13–20; 22:41–42; 24:24; 26:63), and the subsequent adjudication of the doctrine of the person of Christ in the church’s theological battles in the centuries after the formation of the Christian canon. *Trinity* is not a “Bible word” but is the church’s hard-fought formulation of the biblical revelation of the one and only true God in three persons (Matt 28:19). Proposals for another model of Christ or of the Trinity other than the confessionally definite formulations of the church in antiquity or Reformation times are not on the table for orthodox Lutherans.

Why is *atonement* different? Does the Bible present differing models of the atonement? One has first to ask what the atonement means. If one uses the word’s natural English sense of an accomplished reconciliation between offender and offended, the only means of atonement between offending humanity and the offended God is Christ’s bloody sacrifice as the propitiation for God’s wrath upon sin. This is why each of the Gospels includes the atoning passion of Jesus as its penultimate event before his resurrection.

If one’s doctrine of atonement does not express this *necessity* of Jesus’ suffering and death, then one’s doctrine of atonement is out of line with the Bible.⁹ Simeon Zahl has noted that despite the confusion among theologians and church historians about schemes, models, or theories of the atonement, many Christians instinctively profess a penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement of Christ: “The vehemence of reactions against substitutionary and forensic models over the centuries has often obscured recognition of their sheer effectiveness in a wide variety of contexts and over many centuries.”¹⁰ It is as if penal substitutionary atonement comes naturally to the faithful when they hear the story of Jesus and read the Bible. Why?

There is something underneath the story of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross driving that story. Every biblical doctrine is related to every other doctrine generally, as all divine revelation has one Author whose truth is coherent, but those relationships of one doctrine to another are specific, as Scripture’s Author determines. Christ’s sacrifice, for example, is biblically related to the Old Testament sacrificial system, as some English Bible translations make clear. The sacrifice of Jesus thus has to do with the same topics found in the Old Testament sacrificial system: blood, the need for

⁹ Matthew 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 24:26, 46; John 3:14; 12:27, 34; cf. Acts 17:3.

¹⁰ Simeon Zahl, “Atonement” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 637.

atonement, forgiveness for sin and transgression, repentance. The sacrifice of Christ is not *unlike* Old Testament blood sacrifices in its aim of propitiation. It is not that God was wrathful in Old Testament times so that a blood sacrifice was then necessary, but now God has no wrath upon sin so that Christ's blood does not need to propitiate divine wrath. Jesus' sacrifice is not unique in being unrelated to wrath; it is unique in how it supersedes all other propitiatory sacrifices. All other sacrifices for sin are needless now that Christ has died once for all.¹¹ Beneath the edifice of atonement and sacrifice in both the Old and New Testaments is the substructure of divine wrath, as a building has far more supporting and anchoring it than meets the eye.

The divine wrath (ὀργή) is a major theme in Paul's letter to the Romans especially (e.g., Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9). When the divine wrath is neglected as a factor in the death of Jesus specifically or a factor in how God deals with sin generally, one's understanding of the death of Jesus and thus of atonement will be off. When the nature of the divine wrath is understood, the urgency, the power, and the beauty of Christ's atonement all become clearer. However else one may want to speak of "atonement," one must build on the foundation of Christ's vicarious suffering as a blood sacrifice propitiating God's wrath.

Why God's Wrath?

Paul's formulation of divine wrath offers an especially clear and significant exposition of how divine wrath relates to Christ's sacrifice, particularly in the cover letter for his mission to the nations: the letter to the Romans. In Romans, he made particularly clear the necessity of God's wrath upon all human sin and the revelation of God's righteousness in Christ's sin-bearing death.

Wrath Present and Wrath to Come

Divine wrath is revealed in the present, the tense for the verb ἀποκαλύπτω in Romans 1:18. There is no caprice in God's wrath because it is poured out on "every ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" who are actively suppressing the manifest truth of God's power and divinity (Rom 1:18). Divine wrath is present in the horrors human beings busily practice in devoted unrighteousness. The practices of idolatry and homosexuality are linked later to the exchange of a godly piety and wholesome sexuality according to one's created nature as male or female for idolatry and destructive sexuality that is contrary to nature (Rom 1:24–32). Those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness may practice unrighteousness or merely approve of

¹¹ See ἐφάπαξ in Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10.

those who do, but Paul says unrighteousness is so manifest that even those who merely approve and lack personal acquaintance with ungodliness know that ungodliness and unrighteousness are “worthy of death” (Rom 1:32) from the divine judge.

Wrath is revealed against ungodliness and will be revealed in the day of wrath and revelation of the judgments of God (Rom 2:5), who renders to each according to his work (Rom 2:6; John 5:29). Secrecy is important in Romans 2 because there are both open idolaters practicing ungodliness and secret idolaters practicing what they themselves preach against (Rom 2:1–2). Neither class shall escape the judgment of God (Rom 2:3). There is no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God for the sexually immoral or the unclean or the covetous, whose actions have brought “the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph 5:6). There is a present divine wrath upon sin that will be revealed in awful fullness at the second coming of Jesus. Paul thus exhorts the Ephesians not to become *συμμέτοχοι* (sharers, companions) with the sons of disobedience but to walk as sons of light who will receive their reward at Christ's coming (Eph 6:8).

God's kindness at present is meant to lead people to repentance, not harden them further. The unrepentant person is accumulating treasures of wrath for the day of wrath, when God will repay him for his hardheartedness with divine wrath (Rom 2:5). In 1 Timothy 5:24–25, people's sins are described as either manifest sins, which “[go] before them to judgment,” as to a destination common to all, or as presently disguised, which will “follow” the sinner though now hidden from human eyes. What Paul calls “the other [works],” that is, evil works, cannot in the end be hidden. The power of divine judgment will overcome men's efforts to suppress their own evils. All will be revealed, and each will receive what is due (Rom 2:6).¹²

The righteousness of divine wrath is so obvious to Paul that it is included once in Romans 2:3 and once in Romans 3:5 in rhetorical questions. Could God's wrath possibly be unrighteous or out of place? “By no means!” Obviously God shall judge the entire created world (Rom 3:6). The manifest nature of divine wrath makes it more substructure than superstructure because it rests on the foundation of God's righteousness and goodness. Paul proclaims the gospel, which is a mystery of God, revealed solely by God's grace. The gospel in a broad sense for Paul is that God will judge the secrets of mankind “according to my gospel through Jesus Christ” (Rom

¹² Cranfield's catalog (C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol. I, I–VIII, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975], 146) of Romans 2:6's echoes is extensive: Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Isaiah 3:10; Jeremiah 17:10; Hosea 12:2; along with Matthew 7:21; 16:27; 25:31–46; John 5:28–29; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 11:15; Galatians 6:7–9; Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24; 2 Timothy 4:14; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23; 20:12; 22:12.

2:16). The circumcision of the heart will alone receive praise from God in that day (Rom 2:28–29).

Our present justification in Christ's blood is the seal that we shall in the day of his mighty coming be saved "from his wrath" (Rom 5:9). Salvation from divine wrath at the second coming of Jesus also exists according to his grace because present realities of salvation—justification in his blood (Rom 5:9) and reconciliation to God through the death of Jesus (Rom 5:10)—are the seals of God's mercy toward believers, who shall at the coming of Jesus be saved from God's wrath (Rom 5:9) and by Christ's resurrection life (Rom 5:10). Apart from regeneration by the Holy Spirit, human beings are "children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). The riches of God's mercy is his salvation given by faith in Jesus Christ apart from works, which creates a new man walking in the good works God has prepared beforehand for him.¹³

Wrath is not absent from the world still engaged in the practice of ungodliness, nor will wrath be absent from the second coming, but believers look forward to shelter from righteous wrath in the day of judgment. Wrath is already present in the world upon sin but shall also come at the last day, so that the Thessalonians, having turned from the service of idols to the living and true God, now await his son "from the heavens," Jesus, "who saves us from the coming wrath [of God]" (1 Thess 1:10). That same God has not ordained his faithful "for wrath" but "for salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:9–10). Christians remain awake and sober in this present age because they are sons of light and expect to receive resurrection at the coming of Jesus (1 Thess 5:5–8).

The connection between wrath and the second coming illumines the final articulation of divine wrath in Romans, where in Romans 9:22–24 Paul names some human beings as "vessels of wrath" whom God endures in a display of his long-suffering. Though these vessels of wrath proceed from the evil wills of the devil and corrupted human beings, they will not impede God's purposes for salvation in Christ for his elect vessels of mercy (Rom 9:23; cf. FC SD XI 80–82). The connection between wrath, the second coming, and the election of grace, Paul's main topic in Romans 9–11, is that they all solely depend on God's determination.¹⁴ God shall

¹³ Ephesians 2:10; cf. FC SD II 26; IV 7.

¹⁴ I agree with Middendorf that one's interpretation of Romans can best be tested in the interpretation of 9–11, especially of 9:6–13, but disagree that seeing predestination in Romans 9 is somehow "about 'me,'" (Michael Middendorf, *Romans 9–16* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2016], 867). The word of promise (Rom 9:9) concerns both God's deeds and his sure salvation for his people. They cannot consider themselves or their salvation apart from considering his deeds, nor are his deeds for something or someone other than the objects of his mercy (Rom 9:23): "We have a glorious comfort in this salutary teaching, that we know how we have been chosen for eternal life in Christ out of sheer grace, without any merit of our own, and that no one can tear us out of his hand. . . . In the midst of our greatest trials we can remind ourselves of them, comfort ourselves with them, and thereby quench the fiery darts of the devil" (FC Ep XI 13). Robert Kolb and Timothy

pour out judgment upon sin and bring final salvation for his people at the time of his own choosing. He alone is divine, and everything and everyone else is under his control. This is so basic as to often go unmentioned in our sermons and teaching, yet so profound as to merit far more examination as the basis for the proclamation of the gospel to undeserving sinners.

Church Practice

Paul's church practices are incomprehensible without the understanding that divine wrath is coming upon sin. The forsaking of judgment of the brother commanded in Romans 14:10 is because everyone will appear before God's judgment seat and will have to give an account of his own doings, not of his brother's. Excommunication has the same basis in the sure and just judgment of God upon the righteous in praise and upon the unrighteous in wrath. The excommunication of the man sleeping with his mother-in-law in 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 is *not* an exercise in "judging" according to the contemporary understanding of "being judgmental," a capricious bothering with someone else's problems while neglecting and concealing one's own flaws. Paul himself does not submit to human judgment and is unaware of gross sin on his own part but is not in 1 Corinthians 4:4 thereby justified. The only Justifier shall come and reveal the secrets of men's hearts and give out due praise at that time. Excommunication is intended to discipline the man's flesh so that his spirit might be saved "in the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:5). Excommunication operates in view of Christ's coming and hopes practically for repentance prior to the Lord's Day, the day of judgment. If the man had not been excommunicated, the congregation would have confessed that *πορνεία* was not actually a sin, or that they did not care enough about the man's spirit to discipline his flesh.

There is a clarity about mankind present already in the church (cf. the description of the Divine Service as the revelation of the secrets of men's hearts in 1 Cor 14:24–25) that necessitates clarity about sin and its forsaking in the church's practice. The *ὄλεθρον*, the destruction or discipline of the flesh that was temporary and instructive according to 1 Corinthians 5, shall become "unending" according to 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9 when those who have not "obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus" receive "unending destruction away from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his power." The church's present discipline is meant to save someone from the certain ruin he will experience under the wrath of God apart from Christ. The

J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 518.

church is the place where judgment is already present upon sin according to Peter: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Pet 4:17).

The one “gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27) and its attendant practices of unity in faith and in suffering that Paul mentions in Philippians 1 are for unbelievers signs of their destruction but for the church signs of their salvation, and these are all “from God” according to Paul. Similarly in Philippians 3:17–4:1, the commanded imitation of Paul’s way of life is also an avoidance of the way of life of those who “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18). Their end point will be destruction, as, conversely, the end point of the believers will be reception of the Lord Jesus “from the heavens” (Phil 3:20), the location in Romans 1:18 of the revelation of divine wrath. But this coming of Jesus is good news for the Philippians whose bodies of humiliation will be transformed at the coming of Jesus to be conformed to the body of his glory, even as now their bodies are conformed to the body of his humiliation in their sufferings with him and with Paul his apostle (Phil 3:21). Christian suffering is, thus, a testimony of hope in the coming transformation of the body through the simultaneous judgment and salvation of Jesus Christ at his coming.¹⁵

In a phrase reminiscent of Ephesians 5:3, Paul exhorts the Colossians to put to death their members that are “of the earth,” that is, what in them savors of ungodliness such as “sexual immorality, uncleanness, lust, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” because on account of these things the wrath of God is come (Col 3:5–8). The Colossians themselves once did such things, but now they must put off all such practices along with “[human] wrath” and a host of other evils. Repentance is shaped according to divine judgment and wrath, forsaking what would earn further divine wrath and conforming to the pattern of Christ, who has passed under the yoke of wrath already and now lives forever. The proclamation of divine wrath on sin is certainly not the human assumption of a wrathful attitude toward other creatures. Neither Paul’s proclamation against sin nor the communal practices of excluding open sin from the congregation are occasions for human wrath, recrimination, or judgment. The proclamation of wrath now before Christ’s coming and the mortification of sinful flesh before the day of judgment are intended to bring peace in Christ between God and Christians and between Christians themselves.

¹⁵ E. A. Judge, “Changing Ideals of the Great Man,” in *Paul and the Conflict of Cultures: The Legacy of His Thought Today*, ed. James R. Harrison (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2019), 135.

The proclamation of the word of God “in season and out of season” is commanded in view of the coming of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead (2 Tim 4:1–2). The gospel is heralded forth *prior to the judgment*; the gospel is public now *although the judgment is hidden now*. The reward of the servant of the gospel is now hidden but shall be received as a crown of righteousness in that day when the righteous judge shall reward Paul and “not only [Paul] but all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8). The Christian looks forward to the second coming of Christ not as a day of wrath but as a day of reward. Contrarily, Alexander the coppersmith who did Paul much harm shall receive his own “reward” “according to his works” at the coming of the Lord (2 Tim 4:14).

The preaching of Paul recorded in Acts seconds all the evidence about divine wrath and judgment we have gleaned from his own letters. In Athens, he preached that the times of ignorance are now over, and a definite time for repentance has now been divinely appointed *because* God has established for himself a day when he shall judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:30–31). The seal that this is true and that Paul's God is true, that the day of judgment shall come to pass, is that he has raised a man from the dead whom he has appointed for this judgment. The resurrection of Jesus is the seal of God's coming judgment and the earnest of his command to mankind to repent of their sins.¹⁶

The newness of the resurrection for Paul was not that resurrection would occur at some future date. He clearly told Felix that he shared that hope with his opponents and accusers (Acts 24:15). The uniqueness of the gospel is that the end of the ages has begun already and shall be completed in and because of Jesus Christ. Paul claims that the difference between himself and his accusers is a matter of “the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 24:21). He sincerely believes that their difference concerns when and how that resurrection has begun to take place uniquely in Jesus Christ. In view of that resurrection of Jesus, Paul's message to Felix and Drusilla is summarized as “righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25). Those three themes in Paul's preaching result from his apocalyptic sense of the world's transformation through the resurrection of Jesus. Since Jesus was crucified for sin and raised from the dead, vindicated in his innocence, Felix and Drusilla's lives should change. In Christ, wrath, judgment, works (both good and evil), and repentance hold together.

¹⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2: *Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004), 1562–1568.

Christ under God's Wrath

Divine wrath upon sin and its concomitant divine judgment of sinners are “substructure” because they are not the sum of Paul’s gospel. They are part of Paul’s gospel according to which through Jesus Christ the world shall be judged, but they are not the entirety of his gospel, which is *the* gospel (Rom 16:25). Neither the scriptural articulation of Christ’s sacrifice nor our present preaching of the gospel make sense within the Bible or to anyone listening to our preaching without this substructure of divine wrath upon sin.

Christ is the recipient of the wrath of God upon sin, having purchased our redemption, as Paul says in Romans 3:24. The display of God’s righteousness is the blood atonement divinely put forth in the death of Jesus. Where Paul speaks of the gospel, he *must* speak of human sin and blood because righteous divine wrath against sin is satisfied only by the blood of Christ. Christ is specifically the one who was delivered up on account of our trespasses (Rom 4:25). The reason for his death is the substitution of him for us. He wrought the satisfaction of divine wrath through death and was raised from the dead for our justification (Rom 4:25). Paul’s surprised delight is that these things were done “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8), but he maintains clearly that Christ did not die for people who treated him as a friend.¹⁷ Rather, Christ died for people *deserving of wrath*, but justified right now in his blood, *we shall be saved from his wrath* at his coming (Rom 5:9). Blood is the only means of drawing near to God, so that the blood of Christ is the only way the Ephesians are no longer strangers to the divine promises (Eph 2:13). The death of Jesus effects the new creation, ending hostility between peoples and between God and man through his death, so that God may now be called “Father” commonly by all, whether far off or near (Eph 2:17–18). Everything in the cosmos changes because of Jesus’ sacrificial blood.

The proclamation of peace in Christ’s blood comes from the fact that he has made peace already through the “blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). This reconciliation is the removal of divine wrath, so that peace between God and men can now exist through his blood. He now presents us “holy and blameless and without reproach before his face” (Col 1:22). The one made alive with Christ through Baptism has been forgiven all his trespasses, a removal of wrath and its penalty through burial into Christ because the record of debt standing against the sinner in God’s righteous wrath has been removed through Christ’s payment of blood. The so-called “Christus victor” model of atonement (“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” [Col 2:15]) cannot be separated

¹⁷ Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 97–101.

from the fundamental penal substitution of Christ mentioned in the verse just prior: “by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:14). There would be no disarmament of powers lording it over us unless Christ had suffered divine wrath for us, paying in his body the penalty due for sin.¹⁸

The distinction between Christ and all those who are “in Christ” on the one hand and those who are not in Christ on the other is that only in Christ is God’s righteous wrath extinguished. The things of wrath, especially death, have no hold on Jesus (Rom 6:9), so that the one who is in Christ should reckon himself even now as no longer a slave to sin but present himself as a slave of Christ. This is why human judgment can be dismissed so easily in Romans 8. Condemnation is no longer possible for the one who is in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1, 2, 34). Human judgment is laughably light compared to the weightiness of Christ’s glory. Christ has already died under God’s wrath for sinners and has already been raised, so it is impossible that we should be separated from his love (Rom 8:35, 39). He has passed through wrath, judgment, and death, and been vindicated in the Spirit through resurrection (1 Tim 3:16). Wrath is not absent from Paul’s understanding of how the world works or what God will do in the future to “those who do not obey the gospel of God” (1 Pet 4:17). Wrath is no more, *only* and *blessedly* in Christ alone.

Paul grounds the reason for a new life individually and corporately among the Corinthians in the death of Christ our Passover (1 Cor 5:7). New things belong to this new age that has dawned with the passing from death into unending life that Jesus has accomplished. The cleansing that church discipline should effect in 1 Corinthians 5 is a cleansing in keeping with this day of salvation. Paul argues that certain things are not fitting for this new time and must, therefore, be removed from the house of God as leaven that does not belong. The reason anyone “in Christ is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17) is because Christ’s death and resurrection have brought about a coexistence in our time and space: a new creation in Christ that is alive and not subject to wrath, and an old creation that is passing away and shall be punished in righteous wrath for its sin. Reconciliation to God is not an abstraction for Paul, as if God waved his hand and suddenly had no problems anymore with sin. Reconciliation has occurred only in Christ, so that the ministry of reconciliation that Paul has is a ministry of preaching Christ, not of telling everyone everything will work out. The proclamation of Christ is the only hope the world has in the face of

¹⁸ Our understanding of the atonement cannot be “kaleidoscopic” (Joel B. Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2006], 157–185), because unlike in a kaleidoscope, not all parts are of equal value, forming new combinations and perspectives. If divine wrath is fundamental to the atonement, vicarious satisfaction of divine wrath is fundamental to anything else we can say about the work of Christ.

divine wrath. This is Paul's urgency in exhorting the Corinthians, "Be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor 5:20).

The inauguration of this new age was established in the words of greatest importance that Paul passed on to the Corinthians: the words of institution of the Lord's Supper and the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7. In the words of institution, Jesus indicates that the covenant between God and man shall exist by virtue of his shed blood—necessary as a sacrifice for sin—and what Paul passed on to the Corinthians as of first importance was Christ's death according to the Scriptures, meaning that the Old Testament necessitates the death of the Christ for sin to stay God's wrath. This is Paul's reference to the vicarious suffering of the divine Servant in Isaiah 53—who is stricken for another's sins, not his own, who undergoes the punishment deserved by others, not himself. Without wrath upon sin, there is no sense to be made of Isaiah 53 or 1 Corinthians 15. Knowing that wrath comes upon sin, the gospel of Isaiah 53 and 1 Corinthians 15 is that Christ has received the penalty due for sin, shedding his blood as an atoning sacrifice and propitiation of divine wrath. Eusebius expressed the centrality and simplicity of Christ's sacrificial death to the Christian religion: "Even as children we had this view concerning him—that he suffered all these things because of us in order that he might set us free from all retribution."¹⁹

Using Paul's teaching on the reality and the presence of divine wrath on sin even now, we can help people understand many of the things occurring in their lives better than ascribing no human agency at all—as if everything in our lives were inconsequential and weightless. It is *not* Paul's teaching that everything that happens in a person's life occurs because of that person's sin. People sometimes suffer innocently and inexplicably, as Job suffered after Adam's sin had earned the divine curse. It *is* Paul's teaching that some of one's sufferings are due to divine wrath on sin—as was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah, the towns on which Jesus pronounced woes for their hardness of heart, Paul's own people whose rejection of the gospel grieved the apostle so deeply—and all suffering is finally due to Adam's sin. If we hide this from people or shrink back from discussing divine wrath, they will still intuit it themselves and either blame themselves without recourse to Christ or harden themselves in their pride in sin. The seeming spiritual necessity of wrath as a structural element in understanding one's own life is probably why Simeon Zahl can identify so many people who go on believing that Jesus has taken the divine

¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong (Ancient Christian Texts) (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2013), 263. Eusebius, "Commentaria in Isaiam," in *Patrologia cursus completus: Series graeca*, 162 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857–1886), 24:457.

punishment for *their* particular sins even when their churches have never told them that clear biblical message. Even when the church or her theologians are unable to say clearly *why* Jesus is the Lamb of God, the gospel story in itself with its necessary suffering of an innocent and divine victim reveals Jesus as the sacrificial sin-bearer. The story is stronger, deeper, and greater than the theories about it.

Theory is not therefore needless, and there are other things about the death of Christ that are significant in Scripture apart from his propitiation of the Father's wrath upon sin. Christ's death is an example of how Christians should conduct themselves in humility and self-sacrifice, and his death has put the powers of hell to flight. But no theory should be constructed, or can be constructed, that is *biblically sound* without articulating divine wrath upon sin and the propitiation of divine wrath in the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus. Penal substitutionary atonement is the foundation of any biblical doctrine of the atonement.

In preaching, as in theory, the substitutionary death of Jesus is fundamental. In the stories people tell themselves about themselves, the sense they try to make of their own lives under the influence of the church's preaching and the Bible's revelations about human sin, the necessity for a satisfaction of divine wrath must come up. People cannot help needing a penal substitutionary atonement. Growing acquaintance with one's own particular sins and trespasses does not bring condemnation to the one who knows that Christ has died not only generally to end sin and death, but to be an atoning sacrifice once for all of one's own particular sins—even the besetting and most deeply buried ones. Walther had the following to say regarding people who regard their personal sins but lightly:

People who speak in this way picture God, the Holy and Righteous One as a feeble, old man like Eli, who saw his sons sin and merely said, "No, my sons," thinking that he had already done his full duty. True enough: God is love. But He is also holiness and righteousness. For the people who rise up against Him, God becomes a terrible fire, and His fiery wrath follows these sinners into the depths of hell.²⁰

Recognizing the substructure of Christ's atonement—the biblical frames of divine wrath upon sin and coming divine judgment upon all—helps us see the truth of the Scriptures better and thus not step shyly away from these topics. It affords a better view of why the Bible everywhere insists on the *necessity of Christ's death* as the only means of reconciliation between God and men. Finally, it allows us to magnify

²⁰ C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, ed. Charles P. Schaum, John P. Hellwege Jr., and Thomas E. Manteufel, trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 366.

Christ for his salvation. The biblical message is that only blood, in which is life (Gen 9:4–6), satisfies divine wrath, and that blood is Christ's.