

DYING AND LIVING WITH CHRIST: A SKETCH OF A PARTICIPATORY THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT FOUNDED IN PLATONIC REALISM AND AN IRENAEAN “SOUL-MAKING” THEODICY

Albert R. Haig

Independent Scholar, Townsville, Australia

ABSTRACT

A theory of the atonement is outlined which is grounded in an appropriation of the Platonic doctrine of participation, and an Irenaean theodicy. The purpose of Christ's life and death was to enable humans to destroy the sinful aspects of their character, and to manifest Christ's righteousness, by means of participation in the same Form. The theory is similar to versions of the Christus Victor model which emphasise recapitulation and theosis. Forgiveness of past sin is connected with Christ's sacrifice because such forgiveness must be conditional upon the possibility of rehabilitation of the offender, and this rehabilitation is only possible because of Christ's sacrifice. The sacrifice of Christ was metaphysically necessary if human salvation was to be achieved. A number of assumptions are involved: the Platonic theory of Forms, the temporality of Form, strong metaphysical constraints on divine omnipotence, and suffering as essential to the finite expression of goodness. Scripturally, the theory is motivated by the insights of the “new perspective on Paul.” Since both forgiveness of past sin, and also sanctification/theosis are dependent upon Christ's life and death, the theory readily accommodates a wide range of scriptural motifs concerning the atonement, including substitution and appeasement of divine wrath.

KEYWORDS

Atonement, participation, Christus Victor, new perspective on Paul, Platonism, theodicy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present in outline a participatory theory of the atonement, by first providing a sketch of its basic philosophical premises and its metaphysical logic, and then giving a brief idea of the way in which relevant biblical texts are understood. This theory is called “participatory” because its central element involves a straightforward adoption of the classical doctrine of participation as found in the Platonic tradition and the theory of Forms.¹ This adoption might raise opposition on the grounds that a foreign “pagan Greek” philosophical conceptualisation is being employed for the purposes of Christian theology; that criticism will not be addressed here, but has been dealt with in detail elsewhere.² The corresponding advantage of this approach, however, is that in adopting the Platonic concept of participation, a metaphysical theory is being appropriated which is both familiar to scholars and thoroughly developed, having an almost continuous 2,500-year history in Western thought.³ By working within this framework, much philosophical legwork can be avoided.

This theory has a range of motivations, both philosophical and biblical. To begin with the latter, the “new perspective on Paul,” and especially the work of E. P. Sanders, has brought into question whether forensic concepts really are the main concepts in Paul’s understanding of the atonement.⁴ Sanders in particular (like Albert Schweitzer before him) has argued cogently that participatory concepts are more fundamental to Pauline soteriology than forensic ones.⁵ Of course, neither Sanders nor Schweitzer were using the term “participation” in a specifically Platonist sense. It should be noted that it is not being claimed here that when Paul

1 Richard Kraut, ed., “Introduction to the Study of Plato,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–50 (at 7–9).

2 Albert R. Haig, “Modernity, ‘Radical Orthodoxy,’ and Cornelius Van Til: A Journey of Rediscovery of Participatory Theism,” *Colloquium* 47 (2015): 257–73.

3 There has been debate about whether the classical doctrine of participation should be “reworked” to some extent in a Christian theological context; that issue cannot be addressed here. See John Milbank, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–20 (at 3–4).

4 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 463–6.

5 Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 434–74.

talks about participatory concepts in his Epistles, he is consciously using Platonist concepts. All that is being claimed is that, whatever Paul's specific way of thinking about participation in metaphysical terms may have been, the Platonic theory of participation represents a fruitful way in which Paul's insights may be incorporated into a systematic theology of the atonement. It should be acknowledged that there is a gap between biblical scholarship and theology; these should inform each other, but they are distinct disciplines. It is not being claimed here that Paul was a Platonist, only that his theory of participation can be profitably developed and coherently systematised within a Platonist framework. In other words, what Paul said about the atonement almost begs for a Platonist elaboration, even though Paul may not have thought in quite those terms himself.

In addition to Paul's Epistles, there are, of course, many other passages of Scripture which bear on the issue of the atonement. A brief sketch of how these Scriptures can be theologically understood or incorporated within a participatory framework will be presented here. The claim made here is that this incorporation of atonement motifs within Scripture can be achieved with as high a degree of plausibility for the theory to be presented here, as for any competing atonement theory. Again, in doing theology, we must conceptually go beyond the original meaning of the text; but that is true for every atonement theory.⁶ It is extremely doubtful that the writer of the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah, for example, had a conscious, explicit theory of the atonement, along any of the lines that various Christian theologians developed millennia later, in part drawing upon this text.⁷

Moving from the biblical to the philosophical motivations for the present theory, the theory outlined here, like the penal substitutionary theory, regards the atonement as an indispensable necessity if human salvation is to be achieved. However, unlike the penal substitutionary and other so-called "objective" theories of the atonement, the participatory theory grounds this necessity in metaphysics, rather

6 Adam J. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 36–38.

7 "They [verses 4–6 of Isaiah 53] have nothing to say about the way in which this exchange (substitution is perhaps the wrong word for it) of penalties had been effected." Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 238.

than in ethics, law, or “justice.”⁸ The basic metaphysical claim upon which the theory is based is this: it is metaphysically impossible for a finite being to be made righteous without suffering. This is, of course, the central claim of the Irenaean “soul-making” theodicy, that suffering is “character-building.”⁹ The easy way in which the present theory lends itself to enmeshment with an Irenaean theodicy is, in the opinion of the present author, a major advantage with the theory.

Finally, it should be noted that the participatory theory presented here is consistent with a range of other models of the atonement. In recent times, it has come to be understood that models of the atonement do not need to be mutually exclusive, but may instead be helpful complementary perspectives on an event that has significance at a range of levels.¹⁰ In particular, the participatory model of the atonement presented here is compatible with, and may even be considered to fall within the broad ambit of, the Christus Victor theory, particularly those versions which emphasise recapitulation and theosis.¹¹ One might well regard it as simply an explicitly Platonic subtheory within the broad Christus Victor fold.

In addition to Christus Victor, however, the participatory theory also bears a strong affinity with “subjective,” “moral influence,” or “exemplarist” theories of the atonement.¹² These could almost be considered as mirror reflections of each other, depending upon whether a nominalist (exemplarist theory) or Platonic realist (participatory theory) doctrine of universals is adopted. However, it should be noted that some theories which are traditionally classified as exemplarist, most notably that of Abelard, contain a strong strand of “mystical participation,”¹³ which would bring them close, at least in spirit, to the theory outlined here.

The theory presented here, however, is not logically compatible with the penal substitutionary theory. This is because a different theory of justice has to be

8 Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way Through the Maze* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 43.

9 John Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” in *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. W. L. Rowe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 265–81.

10 Johnson, *Atonement*, 5, 36–37.

11 Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, 26–41.

12 Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, 123–43.

13 Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, 130.

introduced from that which is presupposed by the penal substitutionary theory, to account for a range of scriptural evidence that connects Christ's death at Calvary with our forgiveness from past sins.¹⁴

THE ATONEMENT IS METAPHYSICALLY NECESSARY FOR SANCTIFICATION/THEOSIS TO BE POSSIBLE

The basic claim of the participatory theory of the atonement is about the purpose of Christ's life of humility and death on the cross. The claim is that, through participation in the same Form, finite human beings can destroy ("put to death") the sinful aspects of their being, and can come to express a true righteousness which is the righteousness of Christ. This requires a participation in Christ's life and in his death. Each individual can have their character moulded into the image of Christ (which involves both destruction of bad and construction of good character), but only by means of participation in the Form that he instantiated. Christ instantiated perfectly the Form of goodness as it must manifest in finite human mode.¹⁵ The only way that humans can be transformed from wicked to righteous (and thereby divinised) is through participation in Christ's life and death. They cannot do it by autonomous human effort.

A crucial objection that might be raised at this point is that, in Platonism, the Form in question (of righteousness/goodness) is eternal and has always existed. So why could humans not just participate in that Form, without Christ having to be incarnate and express it in the temporal created world first? Why would the incarnation be necessary at all? The answer proposed by the participatory theory is that Christ's expression of this Form was necessary as an example or blueprint. Instantiation of the Form of goodness is not something that can just happen automatically or unconsciously, without a conscious understanding and deliberation on the part of the person who expresses it. It is something that is realised as a result of

14 Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 67–116.

15 This involves an identification of God with the Form of the Good, a common assumption for many early Christian thinkers. See John Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 386–413 (at 408).

conscious choice of the will, and this is integral to the nature of the Form. A “robot” which perfectly expressed good character towards others due to its programming would not thereby express goodness. Expression of the Form of the Good is something which comes about by virtue of being freely chosen through the will of the agent who consciously understands and has comprehended the good. That is itself an essential component of the Form, so that in so employing their own finite will to choose goodness, they instantiate the divine will in a limited manner (something that was eminent in the divine will is manifested formally in the finite subject).¹⁶

Goodness cannot be chosen unless it is understood what it looks like, and how it is manifested in human form. Otherwise we would not know what choice to make in any given instance. In Platonism, and especially Neoplatonism, there is room for a mystical, intuitive apprehension of the Forms, which grants the elite few who are capable of it an understanding of how to behave rightly.¹⁷ In an ideal society, this elite would comprise the ruling class, who would instruct other citizens how to be good.¹⁸ By this means the need for an incarnation would be bypassed. The claim of the participatory theory is that this classical Platonist basis for the expression of goodness must necessarily be inadequate. The classical idea need not be rejected completely; an intuitive, mystical grasp of the Form of goodness may still play a vital role. It is just that such an understanding of the Form of goodness must be mediated by a concrete expression of perfect goodness in temporal humanity. In other words, *contra* Plato, any such comprehension of the Form of goodness must require a human example of perfect goodness, the contemplation of whose lived humanity serves as a vehicle to illuminate the understanding. In short, Christ’s life and death provide a crucial example or blueprint of what perfect goodness looks like in human fashion.

The undeniable similarity to the example theory of the atonement now becomes apparent. However, unlike in the example theory, the person who follows

16 Albert R. Haig, “Was Calvin an Implicit Pantheist? Nominalist Theism, Secondary Causation, and the Eleatic Principle,” *Colloquium* 49 (2017), 66–79 (at 71).

17 Christopher Bobonich, *Plato’s Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 216–7.

18 Plato, *Republic Books 6–10*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library 276 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 71. Also, Plato, “Laws,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1615.

Christ's example actually participates in its Form, the Form of the life and death of Christ. Since "the fulness of deity dwells bodily" in Jesus (Col 2:9), the life of Jesus contains eminently within it everything that believers manifest concretely and formally in their own lived experiences as they submit to Christ.¹⁹ The finite humanity of Christ contains eminently the infinite Form of the Good (and therefore the finite can be said to contain the infinite). In common with Lutheranism, the participatory view rejects the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*, which must imply that something of Christ's divine nature remained unexpressed in the incarnation.²⁰ The participatory theory requires that the entirety of God's divine goodness was revealed and expressed in the humanity of Jesus; nothing was held back, nothing is unrevealed or remains hidden. Since Jesus' humanity was finite, some of this goodness must be contained eminently, rather than formally; but it is still contained therein. In this regard, the participatory theory provides a vastly richer "blueprint" in Christ's life than is found in the example theory, since the latter can rely on nothing but what was formally present in Christ's humanity. The example theory, due to its underlying nominalism, cannot admit that there is a Form to be grasped eidetically through Christ's life, but is limited only to the bare facts of that life. On the participatory theory, however, the infinite is contained within the finite by virtue of the infinite Form that is instantiated in the concrete finite and which lies behind it, and which can be intuited through the concrete finite.

Because, in expressing Christ's example, believers are actually participating in the Form of his life and death, the participatory theory cannot be said to be Pelagian, involving unaided human effort towards goodness, as Bernard of Clairvaux alleged concerning the exemplar theory.²¹ It is not merely the human agent who acts, but God who acts through them. The one act is at the same time both an action of the creature

19 On the scholastic distinction between eminent and formal containment of an attribute, see John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense: Book 1 Distinctions 1 and 2*, trans. Peter L. P. Simpson (The City University of New York, 2012), 132–4, accessed January 3, 2018, <http://www.aristotelophile.com/Books/Translations/Scotus%20Ordinatio%20I%20odd.1-2.pdf>.

20 Andrew M. McGinnis, *The Son of God Beyond the Flesh: A Historical and Theological Study of the Extra Calvinisticum* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 1–2.

21 Thomas Williams, "Sin, Grace, and Redemption," in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, eds. Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258–78 (at 259).

and an action of the Creator, as has been discussed by this author elsewhere.²² The theory is synergistic, but in a particular sense: it is not that God contributes some of the effort, and humans the remainder—rather, the effort of God and humans is one and the same effort, viewed from a different relative standpoint.

THE TEMPORALITY OF FORM AND METAPHYSICAL CONSTRAINTS ON DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

Having argued that for finite humanity to be able to express the Form of goodness in their character requires a perfect example of the Form of goodness as a template to follow, other potential objections can be addressed. Given that Christ, in his resurrected humanity, is now in a perpetual state of perfect goodness without any further suffering, and granted that those who follow him will similarly one day be made perfect and free from suffering, why is suffering necessary at all? Why could God not simply create humans in a final state of moral perfection, such as they will inherit at the resurrection of the righteous? The answer to this question, from the point of view of the present theory, is that the structure of Form in finite expression is inherently temporal.²³ That is, the Form of a thing, the kind of thing that thing is, is something that is determined by its features over time, and not merely by its features at any given point in time. The most obvious example of this is music; music is a purely temporal art, and the meaning of a piece of music cannot be understood by just examining one moment in the piece, but only by considering how it has unfolded over time. What is true for music is true for all finite instantiations of Form. The significance of anything finite is given only in relation to all its past states. We are not merely our present selves, but are our present selves *in relation to* all our past states. If the past states are taken away, then the present self becomes something entirely different.

In short, God cannot create creatures in a perfect state of goodness because the perfect expression of goodness is something that can only be expressed through a

22 Haig, *Was Calvin an Implicit Pantheist?*, 75-6.

23 More precisely, the Form of entities, when instantiated in the lowest plane of reality, the physical world, manifests as a temporal discursive unfolding. See Andrew Smith, "Eternity and Time," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 196-216 (at 210-4).

chronological sequence or temporal structure, and that temporal sequence necessarily entails suffering in its earlier stages. God cannot create a “fake” past for things; that is metaphysically impossible. For example, courage cannot be expressed in finite form except in the face of danger and difficulty, and by endurance through these sufferings courage is actualised. Without the reality of these sufferings and difficulty, courage could never be manifested in concrete reality. But once the sufferings are over, the reality of the courage remains as a characteristic of the individual who endured.

This requires imposing some constraints on how divine omnipotence is conceived. Saying “God can do anything,” by this view, means he can achieve any metaphysically possible end. It does not mean that he can do the metaphysically impossible. It is metaphysically impossible for a finite being to be morally perfect, unless they have undergone a phase of “soul-making” involving suffering. This involves a rejection of the central claims of the Condemnation of 1277, which (aimed at the Aristotelians) condemned any limitation on the freedom of God.²⁴ It was this Condemnation that led ultimately to nominalism, and the radical idea of divine freedom in Calvin.²⁵ These developments in Western theology were arguably unfortunate. We should acknowledge that there are far stronger metaphysical limitations on divine freedom and omnipotence than is generally acknowledged. Some things just *cannot* be; just as God cannot make a square circle, or a rock heavier than he can lift, neither can he do the metaphysically impossible, such as creating a morally perfect finite creature *ex nihilo*.²⁶ The scriptural texts regarding divine omnipotence are perhaps being misread when used to support radical nominalist notions of divine freedom. Even Jesus in his humanity had to be made “perfect through suffering” (Heb 2:10, ESV).

24 Alexander S. Jensen, “The Unintended Consequences of the Condemnation of 1277: Divine Power and the Established Order in Question,” *Colloquium* 41 (2009), 57–72.

25 S. M. Heim, “The Powers of God: Calvin and Late Medieval Thought,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 19 (1979), 156–66 (at 157).

26 An argument for this claim lies outside the scope of the present work; for present purposes, this is simply an assumption or premise. For a discussion of the way in which necessity is seen as compatible with divine freedom in Neoplatonism, see Georges Leroux, “Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 292–314 (at 294).

Now that the philosophical and theological foundations of the participatory theory have been outlined it has hopefully become clear why the atonement was absolutely necessary if God were to redeem humanity. Without the example of Christ's life and death, humans themselves would not be able to participate in its Form, and therefore would be left in unredeemed sinfulness. There was no other way to achieve human salvation, except for God the Father to allow his Son to suffer as he did. But this necessity is grounded in metaphysics, not in any forensic concept of law or justice. It also should be obvious how the participatory theory is integrally related to a broader Irenaean theodicy. In the opinion of this author, the question of the atonement cannot really be considered distinctly from the question of theodicy, since the central Christian claim concerning the atonement is, to be blunt, that for some reason a parent expressly willed that their child should endure an excruciating death.²⁷ That immediately raises acute questions in relation to the problem of evil that must be addressed. It is better to address these concerns from the outset, in developing the theory, rather than as a postscript. While grounding the necessity of the atonement in metaphysics requires a more "limited" view of omnipotence than other options, it is ultimately far more plausible than grounding it in the concept of divine justice, as the penal substitutionary view does. The problem with grounding the atonement in the law of God is that, ultimately, God is the one who makes the law. It is true that the law is an expression of God's nature. However, if that law requires the cruel death of an innocent party, which could otherwise be avoided by making appropriate modifications to the law which in ethical terms are intuitively plausible and obvious, then it does start to raise questions about whether or not God can be said to be good. Laws are, in the final analysis, always something which are created by, and can be changed by, the relevant authority;²⁸ and which serve some purpose,

27 Hence the accusation that God is an abusive parent—for example, in Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182–3.

28 This comment is not intended to buy into the medieval debate between voluntarism and intellectualism. All would agree that God establishes laws for humans; all that is being asserted here is that these laws must objectively have some moral justification, if God is good. Whether will or reason are primary in terms of divine action is not being addressed. See Tobias Hoffmann, "Intellectualism and Voluntarism," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 414–27.

and require meaningful ethical justification. An arbitrary notion of justice is an implausible notion of justice, whereas metaphysical necessity is truly unalterable.

THE RELATION OF THE ATONEMENT TO FORGIVENESS OF SINS

There still remains the question of how forgiveness of sins is connected to the atonement on the participatory view. Up to this point, the atonement has been explained entirely in terms of its necessary role in achieving a transformation of character, i.e., in terms of sanctification/theosis. The answer is as follows. The participatory view rejects the idea central to the penal substitutionary theory, that God cannot justly forgive sins, unless the full legally mandated penalty for those sins has been paid (although not necessarily by the person who did them). The penal substitutionary concepts of “justice” and “forgiveness” are intuitively implausible, and unsupported by Scripture. Forgiveness involves the free remission of debts, without any requirement that the penalty also be paid. A classic example of this conception of forgiveness in Scripture is the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:21–35). Note that the master just freely forgives the debt of the servant (verse 27). If the penal substitutionary theory’s concept of justice and forgiveness were in play here, the master should have said, “I would very much like to forgive you the ten thousand talents, but that would not be just unless someone else pays me the full amount.” Intuitively, and in Scripture such as this parable, forgiveness necessitates *by definition* not extracting the penalty of sin; full extraction of the penalty of sin is mutually exclusive of forgiveness. The idea that not extracting the full penalty for a wrong is inherently unjust has no ethical, logical, or scriptural basis.²⁹

It might be objected that in this parable, the forgiveness in question was enormously costly to the master, who had to bear the whole financial loss. In this sense, forgiveness is not “free.” It can cost the one who forgives an enormous amount. But that is different to demanding full repayment of the debt, which is not forgiveness

29 The appeal here is to ordinary moral intuition and reasoning. In light of this, it might be objected that Paul’s critique of the “wisdom of the world” in relation to “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1–2) implies that ordinary categories of rationality cannot be applied to the atonement. However, Paul’s comments in this regard are tightly focused on the idea that salvation coming through suffering, self-denial, and death (crucifixion) is intellectually and morally unacceptable and offensive to the world. He is not making a general argument about rationality in relation to theological theories.

at all. It might also be argued that God both demands the debt and pays the debt, since the Father and the Son are both God. This kind of reasoning is a common strategy in relation to the penal substitutionary atonement, as illustrated by Butner's recent defence of the theory emphasising the unity of the divine will.³⁰ Butner argues that this unity of divine will enables the theory to escape accusations that the Father is abusive because the Son freely willed the plan of salvation along with the Father. While this strategy might work in this respect, it cannot ultimately solve the problem raised here without eliminating the distinction of persons entirely and collapsing into modalism/Sabellianism. Even if both the Father and the Son willed the plan of salvation, it was nonetheless the Father who punished and the Son who endured punishment. This distinction cannot be eliminated if the doctrine of the Trinity is to be meaningfully retained (modalism is indeed also known as patripassianism, the idea that the Father suffered). But if the distinction is retained, then the argument that God both demands the debt be repaid, and also repays it, is an equivocation which does not resolve the problem, because the divine persons are distinct in this respect; one demands repayment, and the other pays.

This idea of the free forgiveness of sin without any demand for the penalty to be paid does require some qualification. Free forgiveness is not just as a general rule in all circumstances, but only if a specific set of criteria are met. Within a commonsense ethical and legal framework, free forgiveness of a serious wrong should only be considered if the offender is genuinely remorseful, admits their wrong, and requests forgiveness and reconciliation. It is also contingent upon there being the possibility of rehabilitation of the offender, and a commitment on their part to undergoing the rehabilitative process. If these conditions are not met, then letting the offender off "scot-free" does indeed seem unjust. But if these conditions are met, then free forgiveness seems entirely compatible with justice, both intuitively and in biblical terms.

The necessity for the possibility of rehabilitation of the offender, in order for free forgiveness to be offered, is quite crucial to the participatory theory of the atonement because it explains why Christ's sacrifice is necessarily connected to the

30 D. Glenn Butner Jr., "Against Eternal Submission: Changing the Doctrine of the Trinity Endangers the Doctrine of Salvation and Women," *Priscilla Papers* 31 (2017), 15–21.

forgiveness of sins. If free forgiveness is just, it might be argued, then the atonement (which is centred on transforming the character and sanctification), is completely separated from forgiveness of sin (which is freely offered by God quite independently of Christ's work on the cross). However, this is not so, for the following reason: free forgiveness can only be offered contingent upon the possibility of, and commitment to, a transformation of character (rehabilitation); and this transformation of character itself is only possible through Christ's suffering and death on Calvary. So, the participatory theory of the atonement necessarily grounds the possibility of forgiveness in Christ's atoning sacrifice.

SCRIPTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE PAULINE EPISTLES

An overview of the scriptural considerations in relation to the participatory theory will begin with Paul's Epistles, because the theory especially draws its inspiration from contemporary Pauline scholarship. As Schweitzer³¹ and Sanders³² have noted, participatory language abounds in Paul's Epistles. That is, Paul often speaks of dying and living "with Christ" (Rom 6:8; Eph 2:5–6;³³ Phil 1:21; Col 2:20; 3:3), and manifesting Christ's death and life in his own body (2 Cor 4:10). Particularly striking are his statements which alienate Paul's own ego from his actions, so that he almost presents himself as a medium through whom Christ is acting: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20, ESV; see also Col 1:29). There is a recurring dichotomy presented by Paul between the "old self" (the "I" or ego-self), which has been crucified with Christ and is to be "put to death," versus the "new self," which is Christ acting in and through the believer (Rom 6:6–8; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–11). All of this language can be given a natural and quite literal metaphysical foundation by means of the participatory theory. While it is possible to interpret this language in less literal terms, doing so seems less plausible,

31 Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), 219–26.

32 "There should, however, be no doubt as to where the heart of Paul's theology lies. He is not primarily concerned with the juristic categories, although he works with them. The real bite of his theology lies in the participatory categories . . ." E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 502.

33 For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that Ephesians and Colossians are both authentically Pauline in authorship. Nothing particularly hangs on this assumption, however.

given the conceptually basic role that participation plays in Paul's thought. Not only do participatory concepts recur exceptionally frequently, but he also explains other concepts in terms of participation, but never participation in terms of other concepts.³⁴ Furthermore, Paul develops lines of argument about certain kinds of behaviour being immoral because they involve wrong kinds of participation (1 Cor 6:15–20; 10:16–21), which would make less sense, and have their strength and urgency undercut, if the participation in question is merely metaphorical.

Similarly, passages which talk about believers possessing Christ's righteousness are given a natural and straightforward resolution on the participatory theory. The two classic instances are 1 Cor 1:30 and 2 Cor 5:21. These are often cited by proponents of the penal substitutionary theory as biblical evidence for the imputed righteousness of Christ to believers.³⁵ However, neither passage says anything about imputation, but both speak instead in ontological terms: in 1 Cor 1:30 Christ "became" (ἐγενήθη) to us wisdom, righteousness, and so forth, and in 2 Cor 5:21 we "become" (γενώμεθα) the righteousness of God. The participatory theory of the atonement allows us to take these passages in a more literal sense than the penal substitutionary theory. Arguably, this also fits the context better; space does not permit that to be developed here, so I will rely on the work of Sanders.³⁶

Scholars such as Dunn³⁷ and Wright³⁸ who are aligned with the "new perspective" have argued that the repeated references in Romans and Galatians to

34 "Paul's 'juristic' language is sometimes pressed into the service of 'participationist' categories, but never vice versa." Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 503.

35 Indeed, there is no Pauline evidence for the idea that either sins or righteousness can be imputed from one agent to another. Paul speaks of God not imputing a person's own sins to themselves (e.g. 2 Cor 5:19), and of imputing righteousness to a person (which is exactly synonymous with not imputing their own sins to them, as Romans 4:6–8 makes plain). But he never explicitly speaks of the imputing of one person's sins to someone else, nor of imputing someone's righteousness to someone else.

36 "But even the foundation stones of the substitution theory—Rom. 8.3f.; II Cor. 5.21; Gal. 3.16—do not really convey the doctrine of redemption by substitution. They are primarily participationist . . ." Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 466. See also at 502 (in relation to 1 Cor 1:30).

37 James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 121–40.

38 N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 116–8.

“works of the law” describes the requirements of the Mosaic Law that demarcate Jewishness from Gentiles. The participatory theory of the atonement requires some theological development of this idea. In agreement with Dunn and Wright, the participatory view holds that there are two different kinds of “works” in Paul. The first kind is “works of the law,” and the second is works done by Christ working in the believer through faith (Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:29). Paul’s polemic is directed against the former, not against the latter, which he sees as essential for salvation. As Wright has pointed out,³⁹ Paul repeatedly teaches judgement according to works (Rom 2:1–16; 14:10–12; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 2 Cor 5:10). At this point, Reformed adherents might object, “if you say good works contribute to salvation then you’re relying on your own effort instead of Christ.” But this response misunderstands Paul’s doctrine of Christ living in me. According to this interpretation of Paul, I cannot claim credit for these good works of faith done because it is Christ, by his grace, living his life through me that did them. It is not really “me” acting at all; “I” am dead. And if “I” am dead, then how can “I” claim credit for anything? I, myself, have nothing to do but *die*. I have to die so that Jesus can live through me. That is how the participatory theory of the atonement thinks of salvation; by means of participation in Christ’s death, the sinful aspects of believers are destroyed, and by participation in his life, Christ’s righteousness is lived out in them. Thus they become objectively righteous, and thereby merit salvation.⁴⁰ However, at no stage have they trusted in themselves, and nor can they claim credit for the outcome; they have trusted in Christ to work through them, so the works are his, not theirs. As in many of the Eastern fathers, salvation is seen as achieved by theosis.⁴¹

39 N. T. Wright, “Justification by (Covenantal) Faith to the (Covenantal) Doers: Romans 2 Within the Argument of the Letter,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 72 (2014), 95–108.

40 Sanders argues that there are “weighty reasons” for rejecting the classical Protestant claim that justification and sanctification are systematically distinguished in Paul; the idea that justification is a “forensic doorway” to a life of participation in Christ “breaks down” and cannot be sustained (Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 506–7).

41 Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, 31–33.

THE MOSAIC SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM AND OTHER ATONEMENT MOTIFS IN SCRIPTURE

The Mosaic sacrificial system, of course, forms the background for much of what the New Testament teaches about the atonement. It is from this background that the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement draws most heavily. Erickson, for instance, claims that “These sacrifices were necessary, not to work reformation in the sinner nor to deter the sinner or others from committing further sin, but to atone for the sin, which inherently deserved punishment.”⁴² According to Hebrews 10:4, however, the Mosaic sacrifices did not actually deal with sin. They were a symbol, or a picture, of the work of Christ. What needs to be brought into question, is precisely in what manner they symbolised Christ’s work.

It is important to recognise that sin does not merely incur guilt in a forensic sense but also damages the character. Just as doing good builds good character, so giving into temptation and doing evil results in the development of bad character. Each sin that we commit results in a deformation of our being. That is why the Old Testament so frequently talks about sin as being analogous to wounds in the body (e.g. Isaiah 1:6). The idea of becoming “unclean” need not be understood merely in an external formal sense, like a negative point score in a game, but as representing an actual deformity in the soul of the one who is unclean. This does not mean that formal guilt is not also incurred. What it does mean, though, is that this formal guilt cannot be forgiven, and the penalty for sin set aside, unless the underlying deformation of the character is also healed. This is another instance of the principle that a necessary condition for forgiveness to be justly granted is rehabilitation of the offender.

For this reason, it is not adequate to create an either/or dichotomy between sacrifice as a “work of reformation” on the one hand, and as an atonement for sin, on the other, as Erickson does in the quote above. Both aspects are integrally related, with the latter dependent upon the former. Scriptures which speak of Mosaic ritual as symbolically taking away sin (e.g. Lev 16:22), or of Christ as actually taking away sin (e.g. John 1:29), can straightforwardly be understood as involving *both* a healing of the character (a “work of reformation”), *and* as forgiveness of guilt. Either or both

42 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 822.

aspects could legitimately be described in terms of the removal of sin. Similarly, Scriptures which speak of Christ “bearing” our sins (such as Isaiah 53:4–6 and 1 Peter 2:24), are easily understood as involving both aspects.⁴³ Not only are these two particular passages easily understood in these terms, but they almost demand such a theological elaboration. Isaiah 53:5 combines the image of Christ’s suffering for our sins, with the statement that through his wounds we are “healed” (from the verb *ἰάω*). Healing fits more obviously with reformation of character than it does with forgiveness of guilt.⁴⁴ Even more strikingly, 1 Peter 2:24, though often read in forensic terms, is strongly participatory, asserting that Jesus bore our sins in order that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; that is, that we might participate in Christ’s death and life. Other sacrifice-related metaphors in Scripture are similarly easily read in both these terms (reformation of character and forgiveness of guilt); for example, Christ’s blood washes away our sin, it cleanses us from sin, and so forth. Once the either/or dichotomy imposed on these Scriptures is removed, it becomes evident that they are completely consistent with the participatory theory, in some cases more so than with an exclusively forensic, penal substitutionary approach. The oft-quoted statement, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22), is, in context, speaking within the framework of the Mosaic law, and this symbolically pictures the fact that without Christ’s shed blood, there could be no forgiveness.

There are a number of Scriptures which are often interpreted as teaching that Christ was our substitute. This interpretation is based particularly on the usage of the Greek prepositions *ἀντί* and *ὕπερ* in certain passages, which many scholars insist must mean “instead of” or “in place of”⁴⁵ in these instances. On the participatory view, it is natural to speak of Christ as suffering “instead of” us, in that because he

43 North, *The Second Isaiah*, 238.

44 Healing imagery is so frequently related to the atonement in Scripture that it has given rise to an entire theory of its own: the “healing” or “therapeutic” view of the atonement. See Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Healing View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 117–55.

45 Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 90 (on *ἀντί*), and 101–2 (on *ὕπερ*).

suffered, we can avoid ultimate suffering (i.e. hell⁴⁶). Had Christ not died, no humans could be sanctified, and therefore all would be condemned to hell. Even in the penal substitutionary view, Jesus did not suffer an exactly identical fate to that of unbelievers; unbelievers are punished through the means of hell, not through the means of Roman crucifixion. Jesus suffered instead of us, in that his suffering (by Roman crucifixion) prevents our punishment in hell. The penal substitutionary and the participatory view are both in precise agreement on this point. It's just that they differ regarding the explanation as to *why* this is so. In the penal substitutionary view, Jesus suffered the exact legally required penalty for our sin (although how Roman crucifixion can be a legally equivalent punishment to hell is puzzling⁴⁷). In the participatory view, Jesus' suffering (Roman crucifixion) was metaphysically necessary to prevent our suffering (hell). Verses which teach "substitution," in the sense that Christ suffered "instead of" us, are therefore just as compatible with the participatory theory, as they are with the penal substitutionary one. It is natural to speak of Jesus' suffering as being vicarious in the participatory atonement theory.

An additional aspect of the atonement concerns the appeasement of God's wrath against sin.⁴⁸ That God is angry with sin, until it is freely forgiven on acceptance of the condition of submission to participation in Christ's life and death, is consistent with the participatory view. It therefore seems natural to speak of Jesus' death as propitiating or appeasing God's wrath, since it created the conditions upon which forgiveness is possible. It is even possible to speak of God's wrath as directed specifically against Christ at Calvary, provided that we assume that God's wrath is rehabilitative, rather than retributive, in nature and motivation. In Christ's case, this wrath was directed not against any defect of character due to actual sinning, since Christ was sinless. Rather, it was directed against those aspects of fallen human nature which give rise to our susceptibility to temptation and sin. As Dunn writes, "...

46 The word "hell" here is being used as a shorthand catch-all term to include any of the differing conceptions of ultimate eschatological punishment—at least any which involve conscious suffering.

47 This is a point that was exploited by Borges in his wonderful short story "Three Versions of Judas." Jorge Luis Borges, "Three Versions of Judas," in *Labyrinths*, trans. ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007), 95–100.

48 See Ben Witherington, III, "The Death of Sin in the Death of Jesus: Atonement Theology in the NT," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 50 (2015), 7–22 (at 8).

for Paul the way in which Christ's death cancels out man's sin is by destroying it—the death of the representative sacrifice is the destruction of the sin of those represented, because it is the destruction of man's sinful flesh, of man as sinner."⁴⁹ This obviously requires that Jesus, in becoming fully human, shared in these characteristics, although he never actually sinned. Thus, the participatory theory finds itself in agreement with Karl Barth's view that Jesus took on a human nature that was fallen, but did not actually sin.⁵⁰ Jesus fully expressed the divine nature through his humanity, and thereby "divinised the flesh" (to use a phrase from Schwenckfeld⁵¹), but in his crucifixion he also destroyed the sinful dimension of fallen human nature, which he had subjugated and resisted yielding to throughout his life. This subjugation and resistance of fallen human nature was itself an expression of the divine nature in finite manifestation.

CONCLUSION

Space does not permit further examination of the scriptural evidence regarding the atonement. However, it seems that the primary Scriptures to which various theories of the atonement appeal for support fit readily with the participatory view. In particular, granted the insights of the "new perspective on Paul" the participatory view arguably fits much more naturally within the framework of Paul's Epistles than other views. The participatory view has a natural logic and significant advantages over other views which, as it does, regard the atonement as being indispensably necessary to enable human salvation.

The participatory view does involve a range of definite metaphysical commitments. These include the Platonic theory of Forms, the temporality of Form, strong metaphysical constraints on divine omnipotence, and suffering as essential to the finite expression of righteousness. The degree of plausibility with which one

49 James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus," in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology*, ed. Robert Banks (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1974), 125–41 (at 138).

50 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, part 2, Study Edition, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 153.

51 See Paul L. Maier, *Caspar Schwenckfeld on the Person and Work of Christ* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1959), 52–70.

regards these assumptions will probably be the determinative factor in deciding whether or not the theory is thought to be tenable. Granted these assumptions, however, the theory has significant strengths. In particular, by grounding the necessity of the atonement in metaphysics, rather than in ethics or law, the actions of the Father in sacrificing his Son can be justified in a convincing manner. More intuitively plausible and less arbitrary notions of justice and forgiveness are possible than with the penal substitutionary theory. This makes the participatory view more apologetically defensible. The theory lends itself naturally to a broader Irenaean theodicy.