The atonement as healing of divine and human pain

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Introduction

I had never experienced a major epiphany before. My impression was that these were pleasant, even happy experiences. Mine was anything but. At about 4 a.m., after an hour of fitful, semi-sleep, I sat bolt upright in bed. My twenty-two year old son, who had wanted to be a philosopher, or perhaps a pastor like his dad before he was struck down by serious mental illness at age eighteen, had taken his own life the night before. Unless someone has experienced a traumatic loss – has been hit in the face with suffering and despair, it is almost impossible to explain what I was feeling. As a pastor I had seen this pain on the faces of others a few times in my ministry. I recognised it was an agony beyond anything I was able to comprehend. It was a grief seemingly beyond consolation. Now this pain was on my face, and the faces of my family. That morning I knew two things with certainty. First, I would never be the same person again. The scars left by my son’s mental illness and death would remain for life. And second, I knew that my theology would never be the same again. What I experienced in the midst of my darkest night was a vision of Christ on the cross – in agony – and the Father looking on (not away) in utter grief. In that moment I began to understand just how much God sacrificed for us – and just how much pain God continues to bear on our behalf. My own burden began to feel just a little bit lighter.

Thus, for me, began a journey of reflection on the connection between suffering and the atonement. I asked the same questions I had long asked as a theologian, but now I asked them also as one in deep pain. They now seemed like new questions. What is it that separates us from God? Just what did Christ accomplish on the cross? Why was it necessary that Christ suffer? Did the Father also experience suffering? Over the centuries a number of theories of the atonement have been put forward which attempt to articulate what Christ did for us on the cross. Classical examples of these include the ransom theory, the satisfaction theory, the moral example theory, the penal substitution theory, and the Christus Victor (or Christ’s victory over the powers) view.1 Most have

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strong elements of truth when correctly understood. They also have weaknesses. If God's holiness was offended, why did Jesus have to suffer and die? If human sin needed to be punished in some sort of juridical way, why couldn't God simply declare our guilt acquitted? If it was God whose holiness was offended, God who demanded a payment for sin, God who needed a ransom to be paid, then it is troubling that God demanded the rejection, suffering and death of Jesus.

The penal substitution theory has been particularly dominant in recent times, to such an extent that for many Christians this particular model of the atonement has become the doctrine of the atonement itself, and any other model is seen as a rejection of the church's teaching. Joel Green put the problem well:

Gone are the days when discussions about atonement might signal the term's derivation from the combination of 'at + one + ment' in Middle English, and so refer generally to reconciliation. Gone are the days when ‘atonement’ might refer more broadly to the doctrinal affirmation of ‘the benefits of Christ's death for us’. The model of penal substitutionary atonement is so pervasive that many Christians may wonder whether the saving significance of Jesus’ death can be understood in other way.

What I have come to understand is that the atonement, that is, God making us ‘at one’ with him, is not primarily about a legal satisfaction – even though there is some biblical basis for this imagery and it certainly contributes to our understanding of what Christ did for us on the cross. And the atonement it is certainly not about God's need to punish someone. Rather, the atonement, understood broadly in the older sense of reconciliation, is about God embracing, redeeming and healing human pain and suffering through the cross of Christ. For those who know firsthand deep suffering this is a far more powerful idea than that of mere juridical transactions or punishing another in our stead. It flows from the very nature of God and speaks to the pain of human suffering which is sign, symptom and source of our alienation from God. God brings us peace, making us ‘at one’ with God, taking up our pain on the cross and making it his own.

The key starting point for any theory of the atonement is the identification of the core problem to be resolved. In other words, what exactly is it that separates God and humanity? These are usually given variously or in combination as the guilt of sin, the offended righteousness of God, or the gulf between God's holiness and human

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sinfulness. The atonement is then held to pay the ‘legal’ penalty of our sin, ransom us back (from whom?), or set us a moral example of how to live in a way that overcomes the barrier of sinfulness and alienation from God. In fact, in a theological landscape dominated by the penal substitution view of the atonement, it is hard for many to conceive that it is anything other than (or in addition to) sin which separates us from God.

But what if none of these are the core issue but rather additional manifestations of the breach between God and human beings? The central thesis of this paper is that it is chiefly suffering, both human and divine, that interrupts the relationship between God and humanity. It is therefore suffering is the core problem to be addressed in order for God and humanity to be ‘at one’.

The critical place of divine suffering in the work of Christ has a long history of being minimised, overlooked, or even openly rejected within the history of Christian thought. This is to be seen nowhere more clearly than in the early church’s taking up the Greek idea of impassibility (or non-emotion) as a virtue. For the dualistic Greeks who saw the spirit as good but the flesh as a weak encumbrance, any passion was a sign of the weakness of the flesh. A God who would naturally exhibit all the best qualities of an ideal human could not show emotion, and could certainly not experience suffering. For many of the early Greek philosophers the long catalogue of misdeeds of the gods was a scandal. Thinkers like Plato and Aristotle responded by conceptualising a supreme creator above such ‘passions’. An impassible, immutable God who stood in stark contrast to the follies of Zeus and his tribe was the result. Early Christian thinkers, especially the apologists of the second century, also found themselves needing to distinguish their God, the true God, from the gods of the Greek pantheon. They were understandably eager to embrace the Greek philosophical conception of God and align themselves with the best of Greek thought at the same time. But in so doing they shifted the understanding of God away from that of the biblical texts. In fact, the doctrine of impassibility, still trotted out today in many lists of divine attributes, was always at odds with the texts of both the Old and New Testaments. Rather than allow the texts to correct this Greek conception, they were interpreted instead so as to fit the teaching of impassibility. Out of this came the rejection of the idea that God the Father, and not simply the Son, experienced any kind of suffering on the cross.

So what does a theology of the atonement look like, as understood from the perspective of human and divine suffering? In this paper we can only sketch its seminal points, in the form of several key theses.

**Thesis one: The core problem in the relationship between God and humanity is suffering. Human pain and anguish alienates us from God as well as causing God**

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pain. We cannot be ‘at one’ with God if the issue of human suffering is unresolved. Neither can God be at one with humanity when our rejection of divine love is causing God pain.

God is not impassible but feels pain at the broken relationship with humans. God’s pain in the Old Testament is hard to miss. It is a major theme in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea and comes up frequently in the Psalms and Ezekiel. The Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori, strongly influenced by Luther’s theology of the cross, was moved to write his ground-breaking *Theology of the Pain of God* after being deeply struck by two Old Testament passages: Isaiah 63:15 and Jeremiah 31:20 which used very similar language. Jeremiah 31:20, translated literally, reads: “Is Ephraim my beloved son? Is he a pleasing child? For since I spoke against him, I cannot forget him; I writhe in anguish for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.” In the many complaints God raises against his people, one detects more hurt than anger.

The memory of God for his people is filled with pain. ‘Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, “We are free, we will come no more to you?”’ (Jeremiah 2:30–32). Significantly, the prophet Isaiah opens with these words: ‘Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know me, my people do not understand’ (Isa 1:2-3). And perhaps even more poignantly, we read in Jeremiah:

> My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick within me. Hark, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: ‘Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her?’ Why have they provoked me to anger with their graven images and with their foreign idols? For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. . . . O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (Jer 8:18 – 9:1)

The picture we gain from the Old Testament is not so much of a God angry at humans because of our sin as a God who is deeply pained at our rejection. The radical thought that springs from this insight is that, on the cross, God is seeking neither a ransom nor someone to punish. God is seeking healing of a broken heart.

8 See particularly the discussion in Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, who notes that ‘memory functions for God in ways not unlike the way it functions for human beings, except that for God there is “total recall”, and that must make the hurt in the present even more severe’ (page 114).
It is the suffering God who heals human suffering. Martin Luther, never shy of speaking clearly about what Christ has done for our sins, was also very much aware that sin is not the only burden we bear. In his 1519 treatise on ‘The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ’ he notes the whole range of things we bring to the crucified one for healing. Wrote Luther: ‘Whoever is in despair, distressed by sin-stricken conscience or terrified by death or carrying some other burden upon their heart, if they would be rid of them all, let them go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar and lay down their woe . . .’. And again, he says it is as if Christ were saying: ‘I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you, so that you in your turn may do the same for me and for one another.’

What a beautiful image of reconciliation, which focuses on our pain and suffering, while portraying a Christ who also hurts and needs this reconciliation as well.

**Thesis Two: The identification of divine and human suffering as the core problem to be overcome in order for God and humans to be reconciled is not a rejection of either the reality or the role of sin in our broken relationship with God. Sin plays a complex and inescapable role in both human and divine suffering.**

Suffering, not sin, is the immediate cause of our alienation from God. Yet sin and suffering are intricately connected. Sinful actions cause suffering. Sometimes the most intense anguish is a result of sinful actions that we cannot undo. While sin has long occupied centre stage in discussions of the atonement in Western Christianity, it would seem a relatively straightforward matter for God to simply declare the slate clean. So why does God need to suffer and die on a cross?

Ask any person undergoing intense grief or some other form of suffering if they would rather have their sins remitted or their pain healed and most will opt for the healing of their pain. Similarly, surveys consistently show that the biggest question that hinders people from either believing in God or accepting God’s love for them is that of human suffering. The weight of respondents’ own sin seldom comes up. This, of course, is not to say that sin is an unimportant problem. Sin is very real and deeply divisive for our relationship with God and with one another. But our historic tendency to make the problem of sin the primary framework from which we approach the question of the atonement has served to obscure the biblical theology of the cross — which points us ultimately to the pain of human and divine suffering.

Human grief and suffering are crippling. People in deep grief often experience breakdowns in relationships, loss of productivity at work, and a greatly diminished sense

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11 By way of illustration, Lee Strobel had the Barma Group conduct a survey across the US asking, ‘If you could ask God any question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?’ The number one response were questions clustered around the theme of ‘why suffering?’ And a survey conducted by Mark Mittelberg asked Christians, ‘What question are you afraid of being asked?’ Again, the problem of suffering ranked top. Alex Murashko, Christian Post: Church and Ministry, 11 March 2012, @www.christianpost.com/news/lee-strobel-why-does-god-allow-suffering.
of peace and joy in life. When we are in great pain, either through physical suffering or emotional grief, we are not able to function as we should in relationships with one another, let alone in our relationship with God. In some cases our pain may be the result of our own wrong actions, in many others in may be the result of the wrong actions of others. Human centredness upon self, or sin, does not escape the censure of culpability for our predicament. It is the pain and grief that result, however, which often becomes the cause of further wrong actions and also creates a seemingly insurmountable barrier in our relationship with God. Suffering, then, becomes the critical issue to be addressed if God and humanity are to be reconciled. Addressing the issue of human sinfulness is an important part of that solution but it is not the only component.

**Thesis Three: God’s wrath is intimately connected with God’s pain. God’s wrath does not need to be appeased with the death of Christ, rather God’s pain needs to be fully expressed as God finds healing and reconciliation within God’s own suffering on the cross.**

Part of the confusion in many theologies of the atonement stems from a misunderstanding of the wrath of God as a major theme in the Old Testament. Writers such as Kazoh Kitamari (*Theology and the pain of God*) and later, American Lutheran biblical scholar Terence Fretheim (*The suffering of God*), have pointed out the often overlooked link between God’s wrath and God’s pain. Kitamori wrote: ‘The wrath of God means the estrangement of [humanity] from God, and [humanity’s] pain reflects the reality of God’s wrath. ... Estranged from God, [humanity] has no point of contact with God. But when the wrath of God is actualised and [humans] suffer pain, God and [humanity] are united through the pain, the symbol of the pain of God’.\(^\text{12}\) We too easily project our human experience of wrath onto God and assume that God needs to resolve this wrath by inflicting deserved punishment on sinful humans. We have also, traditionally, felt more comfortable with a God who experiences wrath than a God who experiences pain and grief. Though wrath is also an emotion, we have often been willing to accept this emotion within God while denying others, frequently misreading texts that speak about the wrath of God while failing to see the pain of God in those same texts.

In Psalm 106 we find a litany of complaints against Israel until we are told ‘the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people’ (v. 40). The Psalm is a powerful illustration of the fact that it is the people we love most who have the greatest power to hurt us. God’s wrath arises from God’s pain. But God’s love, again prevails, as the Psalmist writes: ‘Nevertheless the Lord regarded the distress of his people when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according the abundance of his steadfast love’ (vv. 44, 45).

One of the most striking texts portraying the pain God experiences in his relationship with his people is Hosea 11. In this text we see the anger of God, yet we cannot fail to also see a God who is deeply hurting. In Hosea 9 the prophet announced ‘that the

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days of punishment have come’ and that God ‘will remember their iniquity, he will punish their sins.’ (vv7,9). At the end of chapter ten God promises warfare and destruction, using some of the most angry and wrathful words of the Old Testament: ‘The tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Betharbel on the day of battle; mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus it shall be done to you, O house of Israel, because of your great wickedness. In the storm the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off’ (Hosea 10: 14,15).

Yet the very next verses, in chapter 11, show a God who is angry because he is deeply hurt – a God who portrays himself as a rejected parent and who does not at all want to punish his children, despite all the rejection experienced at their hands.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba’als, and burning incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love. I was to them like those who lift the infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. . . . My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it. [Yet] how can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! . . .

This biblical interplay between wrath and divine suffering at God’s rejection is frequently overlooked, with significant implications for our understanding of the atonement. Despite God’s justifiable wrath at our continual rejection of him, our punishment brings no peace or healing. God seeks reconciliation (though we do not deserve it) and healing of his own pain as well as ours.

**Thesis Four: The God-forsakenness of Christ on the cross is indicative of the suffering of God as trinity. Father, Son and Spirit all suffer the pain, rejection and death of the cross, yet in distinct ways.**

Nowhere is the doctrine of the Trinity more significant than in our understanding of what transpired on the cross. As Moltmann put it: ‘The material principle of the doctrine of the Trinity is the cross of Christ. The formal principle of knowledge of the cross is the doctrine of the Trinity.’

He cites Bernhard Steffen, an early 20th century Lutheran theologian, who poignantly observed:

> The scriptural basis for Christian belief in the triune God is not the scanty Trinitarian formulas of the New Testament, but the thoroughgoing, unitary testimony of the cross; and the shortest expression of the Trinity is the divine act of the cross, in

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which the Father allows the Son to sacrifice himself through the Spirit.\textsuperscript{14}

Of the well-known last words of Christ on the cross the most haunting, troubling and ultimately most enlightening is that from Matthew 27:46: ‘And about three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ It is here that an underdeveloped or misunderstood view of the Trinity can lead us most astray. If we focus too much on the unity of God we leave no room to comprehend the suffering of the Father and Spirit as distinct from that of the Son on the cross. If we focus too much on the distinctiveness of the persons, the Son is often the one who exclusively endures the cross, leaving the Father and Spirit emotionally untouched. And if we fail to appreciate the dynamic and relational nature of the Trinity, the cross becomes an event that ticks for us some vague ‘necessary for salvation’ boxes without any clear conception of how profoundly it defines the very being of God.

Jürgen Moltmann, in his book \textit{The Crucified God}, did perhaps more than any other theologian of his era to dispel the notion that God – particularly God the Father – cannot and does not suffer. For Moltmann the doctrine of the Trinity is not a vehicle whereby the Father can be somehow excluded from the suffering of the cross. Rather, it is precisely the doctrine of the Trinity that shows us the necessity and extent of the Father’s suffering. Moltmann writes:

To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in Trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.\textsuperscript{15}

The whole of God experiences death on the cross, but each of the persons experiences it differently. The God-forsakenness of Christ was a part of the Son’s suffering, but it also indicates the pain of the Father and the grief of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{16} The Latin American Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino perhaps puts it most pointedly: ‘On the cross of Jesus God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history’.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Thesis Five: The suffering of God on the cross is complete. Physical pain, alienation, rejection, God-forsakenness, and the disruption of the inner-Trinitarian life are all experienced fully and completely by God as God.}


\textsuperscript{15} Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, p. 243.

\textsuperscript{16} While the suffering of the Spirit is often not explored as fully as that of the Son and the Father, Timothy Wiarda ‘Divine Passibility in Light of Two Picture of Intercession’, in \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology}, 2013, points out that the suffering of the Holy Spirit can be seen clearly in two key texts concerning intercession: Romans 8:26–34 and Hebrews 7:25, pp. 159ff.

For God, the journey of embracing suffering begins with the incarnation. It is the whole life of Jesus that is one of redemptive suffering. Yet the salvific culmination of divine suffering is focused on the cross of Christ. On the cross God suffers both physically and emotionally, including the experience of God-forsakenness. Jesus not only suffered physical pain, the rejection of the people and being abandoned by his disciples, but in his last moments experienced the ultimate pain of God-forsakenness. The Father in this moment ‘forsook’ the Son so that the Son’s suffering might be complete. The pain experienced on the cross was not simply relegated to the incarnate Son, but was an intra-Trinitarian pain.

The popular Christian song ‘How Deep the Father’s Love’ says ‘the Father turns his face away, as wounds which mar the chosen One, bring many sons to glory’. For many worshippers the implication from the context of these lines is not only that there is a separation of the Father from the Son on the cross, but that it is because of our sin that the Father could not look upon the Son. And also that the Father distances himself from the suffering of Christ on the cross. This little pinch of semi-rhymed iambic folk theology completely misses the point. Far from the Father turning his back on Jesus because he was too holy to look upon Jesus bearing our sin, the Father joins in the redemptive suffering of Christ—as the Father. The Father may have allowed Jesus to feel the full weight of God-forsakenness that through his completed suffering, our suffering might be healed, but the Father did anything but look away. Indeed, Psalm 22, to which Jesus’ words on the cross allude, is actually a promise that God will not turn his face away from those who suffer. ‘For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him’ (Ps 22:24).

**Thesis Six: The suffering of God is redemptive. It is the suffering of the triune God which makes it possible for us to be at one with God. God identifies with our human suffering through the fullness of divine suffering. God not only empathises with our suffering - God redeems our suffering.**

Only a God who suffers and who suffers fully and completely can defeat suffering. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it from his prison cell: 'The Bible directs us to God’s powerlessness and suffering: only a God who suffers can save us'. From the moment of the incarnation, suffering is exactly what Christ came among us to do. As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it: ‘Suffering is in fact the pinnacle of the Jesus’ achievement on earth.’ God redeems our suffering and makes it no longer pointless, not with some rational explanation for our suffering, but by freely embracing the fullness of suffering within his own being. God’s suffering makes us at one with God. God defeats death with death, suffering with suffering. The death of Christ signals the end of death, just as the suffering of Christ signals the end of suffering. Kitamori put it this way: ‘We seek the pain of God which heals our wounds caused by his wrath. When . . . [our pain] becomes the symbol

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of the pain of God and unites with the pain of God, our pain is in turn healed. What heals our wounds is the love rooted in the pain of God. It is clear that by the manifestation of his wrath, the pain of God is realized, and the love rooted in his pain becomes a reality’.  

For many contemporary Christians it is a first, but difficult step, to recognise that God suffers. The next step is the recognition that this divine suffering is more than simply empathetic. The redemptive quality of God’s suffering is at the core of our being made ‘at one’ with God.

**Thesis Seven: The suffering of God on the cross changes God in both God’s inner-Trinitarian relationship and in God’s relationship with human beings.**

God experiences death, but did not die and is not dead. God is the basis for all dynamism and relationality in creation. There is a strong link between the Greek concepts of impassibility and immutability. They stand or fall together. A God who is not impassible will be a God who is also not immutable in the strictest philosophical sense. We cannot interact with others relationally and we cannot experience genuine emotion without these experiences contributing to who we are. That is to say, they change us. Raimundo Pannikar made the interesting suggestion that God is only unchanged in God’s changing. In other words, only when God is always changing, always in dynamic relationship, does God really remain unchangingly, immutably God.  

A God who is able to truly feel and suffer is also a God who inevitably is changed and re-defined by this suffering. The experience of death and suffering and even God-forsakenness on the cross changes God, and changes God profoundly. The cross is the defining moment that makes God not just some demiurge or original creator, but our God, the Christian God of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. God is who God is within his own trinitarian self and toward us because of God’s experience of the cross. The suffering of God and the at-one-ment this brings between God and humanity becomes an intrinsic part of who God is not only for us (*pro nobis*) but also (*sui generis*) in God’s self.

**Thesis Eight: The God who suffers on the cross and is changed by this suffering has always been the God who suffered on the cross and has always been changed by this suffering.**

We must not jump to the conclusion that if God suffers, and is changed by this suffering, especially God’s suffering on the cross, then somehow this means God in not constant, not dependable; one thing today, another the next. Far from it. God is not only omnipresent, but omni-temporal. An entire essay could be written exploring this concept,

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20 Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God*, p. 64.
22 What kind of change does suffering bring about in God? We read in Hebrews 2:10 that God ‘made the pioneer of our salvation perfect through suffering’. 
but a few words here will have to suffice. God is not only equally present in all places, but is equally present at all times. God transcends our human experience of space and time.

We have known since the seminal insights of Albert Einstein into relativity that space and time are not separate entities, but exist as a single, unified space-time. We confess freely God’s transcendence of space, but continue to speak about God as if he were as limited to and by time as we are. Picture time as a library full of books. We can go through the books on the shelves of the library only one page at a time. The page we are on is our present. Our sense of past comes from our memory or records of what has already happened. Our sense of the future can be no more than anticipation and projections of what is yet to come. We live only on the present page of each volume. God, however, in this analogy, stands back from the shelves and has equal access to each volume and each page. They are all equally present to God.

So what does this mean for the Christian perplexed at the idea that God not only relates, feels and suffers, but is changed by these experiences? It means that we confess in confidence that even at the creation of the world God was the God who died on the cross. There was never a time when God was not already profoundly changed by this event. God has always been the God who defeated death by his death and who reconciled us through his own suffering.

**Thesis Nine: Suffering is not restricted to humans but extends to the entirety of God’s creation. The suffering of God likewise brings healing to all creation.**

The link between human and non-human creation is clear. The whole of creation exists in relationship to God (Col 1:16f.). Christ holds all creation together. He is bound to it, and it to him. The whole of creation suffers because of our broken relationship with God, and the whole of creation also shares in the benefits of the atoning work of Christ. The apostle Paul draws the connection between human suffering, the suffering of creation which groans, ‘subjected to futility’, and the liberation from this ‘bondage to decay’ that is bound with our own human reconciliation with God (Rom 8:18–25). This brings the question of the scope of the atonement firmly into the discussion. The old Reformed argument about limited versus unlimited atonement is far too narrow, focused as it was on whether the atonement applies to all of humanity or only a part of humanity. Elizabeth Johnson, writing of the concept of ‘deep incarnation’ with reference to the whole of creation, says: ‘God’s own self-expressive Word personally joins the biological world as a member of the human race, and via this perch on the tree of life enters into solidarity

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25 I am indebted to Bob Russell, Director of the Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley CA, for this illustration.
with the whole biophysical cosmos. It is this perspective that allows her to conclude that ‘the logic of deep incarnation gives a strong warrant for extending divine solidarity from the cross into the groan of suffering and the silence of death of all creation.’

God’s suffering on the cross is universal. Nothing is withheld. So, too, the significance is universal. Paul even goes so far as to declare that through Christ and his suffering ‘God was pleased to reconcile himself to all things, whether on earth or heaven; by making peace through the blood of the cross’ (Col 1:20). The anthropocentric understanding of the atonement has long caused us to begin and end our reflections on what God accomplished on the cross with human beings. As human-centred as Christ’s actions are, the biblical texts make it clear that we are not the exclusive focus of his atoning work. Humans must not believe that we alone benefit from the suffering of Christ on the cross, for this event brings healing to all creation in ways that we cannot fully comprehend.

**Thesis Ten: The view of the atonement as God making us at one with him through embracing suffering, thereby healing his pain and ours, has its foundations in Luther’s theology of the cross.**

The theology of the cross is one of the best known themes of Luther’s theology. Luther described the essence of the theology of the cross most distinctly when he bound it to the suffering of God on the cross. In thesis 20 of his Heidelberg Disputation he wrote:

> But he is rightly called a theologian who understands that part of God’s being which is visible and directed towards the world to be presented in suffering and in the cross. For God … willed that he should be known from suffering, and therefore willed to reject such wisdom of the invisible by a wisdom of the visible, so that those who did not worship God as he is manifested in his words might worship him as the one who is hidden in suffering (1 Cor 1:21). So it is not enough for anyone to know God in his glory and his majesty if at the same time he does not know him in the lowliness and shame of his cross. … Thus true theology and true knowledge of God lie in Christ the crucified one.

Luther, admittedly, did not articulate a specific theology of the atonement built upon the concepts of divine and human suffering. Nonetheless, a theology of the atonement that has at its core an understanding of God healing our human suffering through God’s own suffering on the cross flows quite naturally from the theology of the cross championed by Luther. Paul Althaus rightly observed: ‘The theology of glory knows God from his works; the theology of the cross knows him from his sufferings.’ It is no accident that many of those who pioneered the rediscovery of the suffering of God in modern theology have been strongly influenced by Luther’s theology of the cross. Kitamori, one of the twentieth century pioneers of the rediscovery of the suffering of God, wrote: ‘The essence of God

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27 Johnson, p. 205.
can be comprehended only from the ‘word of the cross’. The pain of God is his ‘essence’. Theology that is ashamed of this still belongs to a theology of glory (theologia gloriae). The “theology of the cross” (theologia crucis), is, strictly speaking, the theology which wonders most deeply at pain as the essence of God.\textsuperscript{30}

The God hidden in suffering, so central to Luther’s conception of God,\textsuperscript{31} is only fully revealed when we embrace the offence and the foolishness of a God who suffers on the cross in order to embrace and redeem our suffering, making us, once more, at one with God.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The view of atonement articulated in this paper is not meant to replace our language and understanding of God redeeming human sinfulness, of the great exchange of our righteousness for Christ’s, or even of Christ being our ransom. These images all have biblical foundations and convey a part of the story of how God has made us at one with God’s self through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet when they are taken in isolation and a complete theory of the atonement is sought within them, we come up short, with a skewed view of God and God’s atoning work in Christ. When these images are understood, however, within the larger biblical context of divine and human suffering, they take on new perspectives.

In a world in which people are much more concerned about the problems of evil and suffering than they are about their own sinfulness or God’s offended holiness, recovering this biblical perspective will resonate where traditional theories have left modern persons cold. A rediscovery of the biblical idea of a God who experiences suffering, while in no way becoming any less God, opens new understandings not only of the atonement, but also of incarnation, creation and, of course, the problem of suffering itself.

A theology of the atonement that has as its starting point divine and human suffering may seem a radical departure from traditional understandings. In reality, it is a return to earlier biblical teachings, obscured by centuries of captivity to the Greek idea that suffering (or emotion of any kind) is a sign of weakness and that such could not be found in God. The rejection of the idea that the whole of God experiences the suffering of Christ on the cross is one of the last vestigial remnants of early Gnosticism. It needs finally to be removed from the Christian idea of God if we are to present a true representation of God within a world that knows no shortage of suffering. Only then can we begin to fully grasp what it means for God to make us ‘at one’ with God’s own self.

\\textsuperscript{30} Kitamori, \textit{Theology of the Pain of God}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{31} As von Loewenich put it: ‘The idea of the hidden God is most intimately connected to Luther’s theology of the cross’. Walther von Loewenich, \textit{Luther’s Theology of the Cross}, tr H. Bouman, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1976, p. 29.