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Did Paul See the Saving Significance of Jesus' Death as Resulting from Divine Violence? Dialogical Reflections on Romans 3:25

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Don Schweitzer: Theories of substitutionary atonement have been widespread in Western Christianity. In these theories Jesus' death is understood to result from his suffering God's punishment of sinners in their place. This way of understanding the saving significance of Jesus' death was classically expressed by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 C.E.) in his dialogue *Cur Deus Homo*.¹ According to Anselm, sin creates an infinite debt to God's honour, which no finite person can repay. Christ "suffered death of his own will," to pay this debt and so secure humanity's salvation.² The first person of the Trinity was not willing "to rescue the human race" unless something as great as this was done to pay this debt.³ By dying on the cross Christ paid it and secured for humanity forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God.

The meaning expressed here can be pastorally very significant. In situations where a person's identity has been irrevocably spoiled by their own or others' actions, by discrepancy between social norms and their physique, sexual orientation, racial or gender identity, or by their inability to achieve something that they consider meaningful, this understanding of Jesus' saving significance can powerfully express the grace of God. In Paul Tillich's terms, it can enable people to accept themselves even though they experience themselves as unacceptable⁴ or suffer a lack of acceptance by others.

However, this way of understanding Jesus' saving significance has been sharply criticized in recent decades for portraying God as demanding the violent death of an innocent victim in order to forgive sin.⁵ Wrath against sin and a need for violence to satisfy this appear as the dominant characteristics of the first person of the Trinity here. This critique has given rise to a wide-ranging debate about the role of God in Jesus' death and the saving significance of the cross. Christians seem faced with a dilemma. In affirming the

pastoral meaning of this understanding of atonement, must we also affirm that God is inherently violent?

Substitutionary theories of atonement like Anselm's are often linked to the writings of Paul, particularly to passages like Romans 3:25, where Paul describes God as putting Jesus forward "as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" (Romans 3:25 NRSV). This verse is part of a key passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans which expresses "in effect the essence of Paul's gospel: salvation for all human beings by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and what he has achieved for humanity."⁶ Does Paul's understanding of God's saving action here portray God as inherently violent?

According to John Calvin, it does. Commenting on this verse, Calvin wrote: "Paul teaches us only this, — that until the death of Christ there was no way of appeasing God."⁷ More recently, C.E.B. Cranfield also interprets Paul as saying here that in dying on the cross Jesus bore God's righteous wrath which sinners deserve.⁸ Other Biblical scholars disagree.

Christian A. Eberhart: From the perspective of biblical studies, I can affirm that the passage in Romans 3:25 quoted above contains a central argument of both Pauline theology and New Testament atonement concepts.⁹ Yet it is true that this passage has often been understood as portraying God in violent terms; if Jesus is, as NRSV translates, the "sacrifice of atonement" being put forward by God, then this does sound as if God-Father sacrifices his divine Son. Is this really at the core of Paul's understanding of salvation? In response, a few aspects need to be addressed and specified:

First, a brief clarification. The passage appears in Paul's letter to the congregation in Rome. The authorship of this text is not seriously debated in modern biblical studies. There is unanimous consent that Paul himself wrote this letter, or rather that he dictated it to a scribe by the name of Tertius whose job it was to produce the actual letter, and all of this happened in the house of a certain Gaius in the city of Corinth (see Romans 16:22-23).¹⁰ So while Paul is the author of Romans, scholars have identified some passages in which he references, or actually quotes, older confessional formulas or hymns.¹¹ One such hymnic fragment appears in Romans 3.¹² If these passages are older than the remaining letter that is commonly dated to the winter of 57 or 58 C.E., then they must have originated in the early 50s or even in the 40s, so just some ten years after Jesus died in approximately 30 C.E.

This means that such formulas or hymnic fragments allow us rare and precious insights into the very beginnings of Christianity!

Scholars have then attempted to reconstruct the fragment used by Paul in Romans 3 with the following result:

“...whom God put forward as a *hilasterion*¹³ through his blood to show his righteousness by passing over the sins previously committed through his divine forbearance.”¹⁴

So Paul would have adopted this older confessional formula just like we today sometimes tend to employ passages from a creed or church hymn when we prepare a sermon or write an article or a book. This means, however, that the passage featuring the atonement concept was not originally ‘invented’ by Paul, but by somebody else who is no longer known to us. Paul chose to employ it when he dictated his letter to his scribe by the name of Tertius because he thought that it helped to further his own argument about reconciliation through Jesus Christ and the righteousness of God.

Second, I would like to comment on the translation of the Greek term *hilasterion*. Some of our most widely used modern English Bible editions render this term as “sacrifice of atonement;”¹⁵ a footnote in the biblical text might indicate that “place of atonement” is an alternative translation.¹⁶ For the proper understanding of this passage, it is important to know that the latter is the correct rendering while the former is not. The terminology used in the original Greek text of Romans 3:25 is based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. There, however, the Greek term *hilasterion* never means “sacrifice of atonement.”¹⁷ It is instead the technical term for the golden cover of the Ark of the Covenant. It is described in detail in Exodus 25:17-22; 37:6-9; some English Bible versions render the Greek term *hilasterion* “Mercy Seat”¹⁸ or “atonement cover.”¹⁹ The Ark with its cover was located in Israel’s most holy sanctuary, namely in the Tabernacle tent which ancient Jews considered to be the residence of God. It is probably this object that the early Christians who wrote a confessional formula about Jesus had in mind: for them, Jesus was some sort of ‘place of atonement’ or ‘Mercy Seat’ like the cover of the Ark. And when adopting this passage for his letter to the congregation in Rome, the apostle Paul would have thought about the same device.²⁰

What difference does this make? The cover of the Ark was in fact the object of an annual blood application ritual. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest had the duty of applying the blood of sacrifices to this cover in order to purge it from sins and impurities. *This process was called atonement* (Leviticus 16:15-16). It was one way of eliminating sins, which means of obtaining forgiveness. In Romans 3:25 Jesus is compared to the golden cover that became the centre of attention on the Day of Atonement, and the words “through his blood” are a reference to sacrificial blood. This certainly means that salvation in Christ is available for all humans who have sinned. But this passage is not about substitutionary atonement that you have correctly defined above as a scenario in which Jesus would suffer God’s punishment in the place of sinners. In Romans 3:25 and its context, there is no mention that Jesus is being punished instead of humans. The passage instead references a cultic process of purification that imagines the blood of Jesus as a cleansing agent. This is how atonement ‘functioned’ in the minds of early Christians: atonement is when sins are being purged. This idea has little to do with patriarchal violence or a God-Father punishing his divine Son. The atonement concept in Romans 3:25 is probably based on the Last Supper, and specifically on the cup that contains the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Thus it might go back to Jesus himself.

I should add one last observation. The formula or hymn quoted by Paul states that God put forth Christ Jesus as a place of atonement. The words “put forth” could also be translated as “to be displayed publicly;” they imply a scenario of exhibition like that of crucifixion that was to be witnessed by a large audience. It has, however, been noted that these words stand in contrast to the depiction of Jesus as a place of atonement: the Ark and its cover are located in the Holy of Holies in the Judean sanctuary which could only be accessed by the high priest.²¹ Hence it was not a public but a rather exclusive place. But I think such an argument misses an important aspect since Paul and other early Christians imagined this location of atonement in the Judean sanctuary to be opened up and made accessible to all who have faith in Jesus Christ. As noted by Robert Jewett: “This blood covers both shameful discrimination and the guilt of groups as well as persons because Christ’s death overcame the ethnic and religious boundaries that barred access to atonement for Gentiles.”²² In the New Testament Gospels, this is conveyed through the

event of the temple curtain that was torn in two (Matthew 27:51).²³ In this particular sense, the cross of Jesus as the new and public place of atonement stands in opposition to the temple in Jerusalem, the traditional place of atonement.

Don Schweitzer: This raises further questions. As you note, Romans 3:25 states a central argument in Romans. In Romans 3:23 Paul concludes that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Yet Paul then states in Romans 3:24 that despite this, people have been justified by God. Romans 3:25 describes the crucial action on God’s part that effects this transition, so that people are no longer alienated from God by their sin. For Paul this central action is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here in Romans 3:25 he focuses on the saving significance of Jesus’ death, using the Jewish “cultic atonement tradition to interpret”²⁴ it. Why does Paul use this tradition to interpret Jesus’ death here, and what does he see as having happened through Jesus’ death?

Comments on Romans 3:25 by John Calvin and Martin Luther raise other questions. In describing humanity alienated from God, Calvin notes that while God “hates our uncleanness,” God does not hate what is God’s “own workmanship” in us.²⁵ Here Calvin is saying that as a result of sin, people have a complex moral identity. All people are created by God and yet sin (Romans 3:23). As a result, people are neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but a mixture of both. Consequently they are both loved and judged by God. This ambiguity of the human condition means that peoples’ moral identities are complex; they transcend the categories of good and bad or good and evil. These opposing moral categories require very different responses. While these categories are essential to any human community, no person can be adequately described or related to simply in terms of either one, because a person is generally neither one nor the other, but both at once. Doing justice to this complexity of a person’s moral identity requires going beyond moral categories of good and evil while still preserving them. Justice requires moral judgments and actions, but also those that are more than moral, trans-moral, that go beyond what a person morally deserves. Such actions only do justice to people if they are more than moral, not less. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) the father’s reception of the prodigal son exemplifies a transmoral attitude and actions. The prodigal son didn’t deserve to be treated as a son, but the father gave him more than he deserved, receiving him as

such despite what he had done. However, the transmoral is always in danger of becoming sub-moral, less than morally appropriate, in two different ways. One is through failing to acknowledge the moral realities of sin, evil and goodness. In the parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother judges his father's actions as sub-moral in this way.

Anselm's and other theories of substitutionary atonement attempt to describe how God in the person of Jesus Christ addresses the moral complexity of human identities. In doing so Anselm and many others unfortunately tend to separate God's justice from God's love or mercy, so that the first person of the Trinity is portrayed as demanding a violent death in order to forgive sin. The first person of the Trinity is thus portrayed as sub-moral in a second sense, as perpetrating sin and evil. Anselm's theory strays into this. On the one hand, the love shared by the Trinity for humanity is the reason for Christ dying on the cross. On the other hand, the first person of the Trinity demands Christ's death so that humanity might be saved. The first person of the Trinity is ambiguously portrayed here as both loving humanity and yet demanding that an innocent victim be violently sacrificed for this love to have effect. Substitutionary theories of atonement accurately recognize how sin complicates human identities and people's relationship to God. But in seeking to articulate how God responds to this, many portray God in ambiguous terms. Does the comparison of Jesus to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant that Paul uses in Romans 3:25 portray God ambiguously or as sub-moral in this second sense? How did Paul understand Jesus' blood to function as a cleansing agent? Did Paul understand the first person of the Trinity as requiring Jesus' death so that some might be saved?

A mistake that leads to substitutionary theories of atonement portraying the first person of the Trinity in sub-moral terms is a failure to consistently articulate that God never stops loving sinners. Sin does not cause God to hate sinners, so that God's wrath must be placated before God can accept them. God's judgment is actually an expression of God's love for us,²⁶ intended to evoke repentance and a return to God on our part. Sin however creates a condition of alienation from God and others that no action on our part can rectify. God's action in Christ is the "outworking of the love of God in the face of"²⁷ such sin. Thus God's love both judges sin and works to save one from it. The violence of sin is not met with an act equally violent or sinful on God's part. Instead, God's love responds to human sin creatively. As Paul argues in Romans 3:25, with Christ something new has come into being.

Through Christ God created a new possibility for humanity that did not exist before. The justice of God is fundamentally creative. It does not give people what they deserve, but makes them deserving. How does Paul in Romans 3:25 see Christ's suffering on the cross and death relating to this creative initiative on God's part, through which God creates a new possibility for humanity? Does God will Christ's suffering and death as the price of this new relationship, or does God will the new possibility and Christ suffers and dies in the course of creating it?

Luther understood God's action in Christ, God's justice, as creative and transformative. According to Luther, Romans 3:25 shows that "the apostle calls God righteous because" God "justifies or makes righteous."²⁸ Yet Luther would also argue that while God's action that Paul describes and interprets in Romans 3:25 justifies sinners or reconciles them to God, it does not end the complexity of our moral condition. How according to Paul is God's action in Jesus' death able to reconcile sinful humanity to God even though our identity continues to be morally complex, a mixture of sin and virtue? According to Paul, in what sense does God's action in Christ make us righteous, when our moral identity remains ambiguous?

Christian A. Eberhart: Your questions lead us into the heart of the concept of atonement as the apostle Paul understood it. They also articulate some of the key problems that come with most traditional atonement theories.

You wonder why Paul uses the atonement tradition in Romans 3:25 to interpret Jesus' death, and what it is that he sees as having happened through this death. In response, I would point out that the atonement tradition is only one concept that interprets the death of Jesus. Paul uses several other concepts as well; for example in the earliest of his surviving letters written in approx. 49–50 C.E., he writes that Jesus "died for us, so that ... we may live with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:10; see also Romans 5:6, 8; 1 Corinthians 8:11; 15:3). The logic behind this statement is that of an existential exchange between Jesus and humans. Yet another concept is that of reconciliation found in statements like this: "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more certainly, having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10; see also 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20, 22). This image is based on a

Hellenistic concept from the secular realm of ancient diplomacy. This means Paul did not have to choose atonement concepts derived from the temple cult when talking about the death of Jesus; he also deployed other concepts that were available to him.

So what exactly happened, or was effected through the death of Jesus according to the concept that he was “put forth as a place of atonement” (Romans 3:25)? The death of Jesus makes his blood available so that purification can be effected. Blood, however, represents life and vitality. This idea is attested not only in the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 17:11) but also in the ancient Near East.²⁹ How then did Paul understand the blood of Jesus to function as a cleansing agent? It works just as the blood of sacrificial animals did, for example on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16). Since these old Jewish rituals require that sacrificial blood be brought in physical contact with the objects to be purged, a corollary question might be asked: How could the blood of Jesus have any effect on humans, and how can it have any effect today? How can we be brought in physical contact with this blood since nobody among us was present at the crucifixion? The answer is the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper: In this celebration, Jesus gave humans for all times the privilege of ‘being in touch’ with his blood, now symbolized through wine. By drinking this wine, humans are being cleansed of all their sins.

While the death of Jesus makes his blood available, a different way of stating the effect is to say that the life of Jesus, or indeed Jesus himself, has become available in a different fashion. Let us consider one example. In the story of Mark 5:25-34, a woman who approaches Jesus from behind is healed just by touching his garment and believing in Jesus. According to Mark’s Gospel, this was one way in which the contemporaries of Jesus were healed from their physical suffering. Did the violent death of Jesus forever stop any chance of encountering him and experiencing his healing presence? No. The opportunity of approaching Jesus and believing in him is still available to us today because we are invited to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and drink from the cup which is the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25), representing the blood of Jesus. This allows us to literally ‘be in touch’ with him. Thus we still receive the healing and salvation that Jesus provided for humanity.

But on the way to Jesus, don’t we encounter other problems with this concept? You pose the question of whether God might appear in an ambiguous or sub-moral fashion. Did Paul really understand the first person of the Trinity as requiring Jesus’ death so that

humans might be saved? I think this is not the case. Perhaps it is slightly confusing that we read in Romans 3:25 about God 'putting forward' Jesus as the place of atonement. I said above that Paul quotes from a confessional formula here. I assume he would have phrased this slightly differently had he not relied on an older statement. In fact, Paul put the matter less ambiguously a few years earlier when he wrote his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). This eliminates the possibility that God would have sacrificed somebody else because of the human disaster of sin; this eliminates the possibility that God acts in a sub-moral fashion. According to 2 Corinthians 5:19, *God acted in Jesus Christ!* This means that *nobody else but God* agreed to suffer! Thus in Christ, *God* acted in a truly transmoral fashion. The real problem of correctly understanding Paul's atonement concepts is, therefore, the propensity to separate the triune God. Thus God, the Father and first person of the Trinity, is being accused of having made Jesus, the Son of God and second person of the Trinity, the 'whipping boy.'³⁰ The solution is seeing the triune God as one: it was God who, in Christ, accepted to be punished for the sins of humanity.³¹

Another question is whether God wills Christ's suffering and death as the price of this new relationship, or whether God wills the new possibility and Christ suffers and dies in the course of creating it? This is a difficult question. But I think that the love which God showed us humans has been perfect. Such perfect love willingly "bears all things, ... endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7). It is the absolute extreme of love. Hence it goes to the extreme of demonstrating that God loved even to the point of total humiliation and shame. This point is not only death as such, but death on a cross, which means a particularly painful, slow, and dishonorable death.

However, are really all humans in need of salvation through Jesus Christ? You rightly emphasize that the human identity continues to be morally complex and is a mixture of good and bad, of sin and virtue. To put things differently, according to Paul, in what sense does God's action in Christ make us righteous when our moral identities remain ambiguous? I guess we all experience that human nature is both good and evil. Even the most virtuous person on earth has certainly done something wrong at some point while the worst human probably did something good at some point. So our moral identities are indeed ambiguous. Yet for Paul it is essential that humans have sinned and will always sin.

He expresses his — more skeptical — view of human nature in Romans 3:23: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This is the sober conclusion of what Paul explicated earlier in Romans 1-3. Humans either commit all sorts of sins as those listed in Romans 1:18-32. Or humans don’t commit these specific sins — yet then become arrogant and start judging those who fall under the previous category (Romans 2:1-11).

So which ever side you belong to, it is Paul’s understanding that you are a sinner. What then about human virtues? Are they not accounted for? Paul knows about virtues, but thinks that the presence of sin corrupts a human being despite virtues: “Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?” (1 Corinthians 5:6) Virtues are not enough to balance our human morals. Paul is therefore aware of the moral complexity of the human being. But he concludes that we all count as sinners in front of God and hence are all in need of salvation, even if we lead the most virtuous lives (Romans 3:24).

Don Schweitzer: This highlights the continued importance of the pastoral meaning of substitutionary theories of atonement. Some contemporary theologians have re-formulated these using spatial terms. As you note, in Romans 3:25 Paul uses a cultic atonement concept, *hilasterion*, that was probably used by the Christian community before him, to express how Christ restores communion with God for those whose sin has ruptured it. In using this term Paul “alludes to the sacrificial system of Judaism,”³² but does not elaborate a fully worked out theory of atonement. The fact that Paul uses different atonement concepts at various times to bring out the saving significance of Jesus indicates his awareness of the multifaceted nature of sin and human need for God, and of how the one Jesus, crucified and risen, saves from different kinds of sin in different ways. Here in Romans 3:25 Paul is primarily speaking of the saving significance of Jesus’ death in relation to identities spoiled by peoples’ own sin.³³ He is not unpacking the saving significance of Jesus in relation to external evils as he does in Romans 8:35-39.

As you note, the atonement concept used in Romans 3:25 has spatial aspects. It speaks of a place where Jesus’ blood becomes available to purge the stain of peoples’ sin. Blood represents life. Here Jesus’ blood represents the divine life. Jesus’ death on the cross is the ‘place’ where this purifying divine life is made available in a final way. Some theologians have focused on this spatial aspect to re-formulate substitutionary theories of

atonement, so as to preserve their pastoral meaning while purging them of violent concepts of God.³⁴

The experience of guilt and/or alienation from God, resulting from a spoiled identity, can be described as “a spiritual, psychological space of pain and anguish and sense of separation from God.”³⁵ The cross symbolizes this kind of place. At the same time, in keeping with Paul’s thought in Romans 3:25, Christ is “the new place where God’s presence is manifest.”³⁶ By dying on the cross Christ brings God’s presence into ‘places’ of guilt and/or alienation from God. What is saving about Jesus’ cross in this sense is not primarily Jesus’ suffering, but that through undergoing it he symbolically extends God’s presence to places of spiritual and physical suffering.

At the heart of substitutionary and similar theories of atonement in patristic, medieval, Reformation and many contemporary theologies is the notion of incarnation.³⁷ In the incarnation, the distance separating humanity from God, regardless of its cause, is bridged by God assuming human nature, coming to be with humanity in Christ. This distance that is bridged is the experience of the absence of God, sometimes resulting from God’s wrath or judgment. As noted earlier, judgment and anger are not the opposite of love. In a world plagued by sin, what Beverly Wildung Harrison observed of human anger is also true of divine wrath. Anger is not necessarily love’s opposite. It can instead be a mode of connectedness, a response to injustice arising from love.³⁸ The wrath or anger of God is a sign that something is wrong in the moral quality of our relationships.

In Anselm’s theory of atonement, the contradiction between the suffering and death of Jesus and God’s love is forgotten. Jesus’ cross becomes something willed by God, the means by which judgment is carried out and guilt forgiven. But in some contemporary re-workings of substitutionary atonement, Jesus’ suffering and death are not willed by God but an evil which Jesus endures in order to bring God’s presence into what the cross symbolizes. Here in this utter humiliation, God’s love for sinners finds definitive expression. The persons of the Trinity are completely one with each other in this communication and effecting of divine love and through it completely with the guilty or dehumanized person.³⁹

If Jesus is to truly enter this place of God’s absence, he must suffer, as all who enter it do. Yet Jesus’ suffering is not the work of God. While Jesus’ resurrection charges his cross

with salvific meaning, there remains an irrevocable opposition between his resurrection and his death that theologians must articulate.⁴⁰ Each person of the triune God wills to be in communion with those in the spiritual or physical places that the cross symbolizes. God does not demand the death of an innocent victim in order to forgive sin. The violence done to Jesus was willed and done by sinful humanity, not God. It was endured by God in Jesus, so that all who dwell in what the cross symbolizes can experience communion with God, in spite of their guilt or suffering. As a result of Jesus' death on the cross, there "is no suffering which ... is not God's suffering; no death which has not been God's death in the history on Golgotha."⁴¹ In this way, the death of Jesus continues the incarnation's work of bringing the light of God's love into the guilt and pain of the world, even in and through suffering and death that contradicts such love.⁴² By symbolically entering the isolation of sinners through dying on the cross, Jesus "bestows upon them a new, complex identity of being at once a sinner and yet loved and accepted by God in spite of this."⁴³ Regardless of what we have done or do, regardless of our suffering, our experience of the condemnation of others or of the judgment of God, we know from this that we are loved by God. Does this seem an adequate and appropriate interpretation of Paul's thought in Romans 3:25?

Christian A. Eberhart: I would say that your words are, by and large, an adequate and appropriate exposition of New Testament soteriology. As such, your words also convey central ideas of Paul on how humans are saved through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. We need to bear in mind, however, that Romans 3:25 is a rather short statement: it articulates how sinful humanity has freely received redemption from God through Jesus Christ whom God has made a new place of atonement. As I have pointed out above, this statement depicts the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross as the means of forgiveness for humans. Thus forgiveness appears as a process of purification or consecration.

Your idea that it is God who suffers and dies on the cross forms the Christological backdrop of Paul's statement. It leads us to another important topic, namely that of incarnation. It is a central concept in the Christian tradition, but also exists in other religions.⁴⁴ In Christianity it expresses the idea that God became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁵ It allows Christians to see how Jesus is associated with God.

Paul is one of the first Christian writers to articulate this concept. In his Letter to the Philippians, written toward the end of his life around 61–63 C.E., Paul again references or quotes a hymn that describes Christ as having possessed “the form of God” and been equal with God. Christ nevertheless humbled himself by becoming human and even dying on the cross. Therefore God exalted him, “and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:6-11).⁴⁶ Other New Testament writings convey similar ideas. Now Jesus was being portrayed as ‘the image of the invisible God’ who is ‘before all things’ (Colossians 1:15, 17; see also Hebrews 1:2-3). This passage closely identifies Jesus Christ with God, the creator of the universe. In the New Testament Gospels, the same idea is manifest, for example, when Jesus is called ‘Emmanuel’ (‘God is with us,’ Matthew 1:23). Also the famous opening verses of the Gospel according to John express this idea when calling Jesus the ‘Word’ (Greek *logos*) that was God (John 1:1) yet ‘became flesh and lived among us’ (1:14). Finally, the divine name “Lord” (Greek *kyrios*), which is the Septuagint rendition of the tetragrammaton YHWH in the Hebrew Bible, refers to Jesus Christ in New Testament writings. This observation conveys the fact that early Christians understood Jesus as the manifestation or incarnation of the God of the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁷

These New Testament passages about incarnation are important as they suggest that the salvation through Jesus Christ is not limited to his death on the cross. Salvation history in Christ started with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth; it extends throughout his life and includes his death and resurrection. Therefore the New Testament Gospel stories about Jesus feature all of these elements. And it is during his life and death that Jesus, as you mention above, experienced pain and anguish as characteristic aspects of the human predicament. “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:18). Through the atonement in his death, on the other hand, Christians receive a new identity as a holy community that inseparably belongs to God. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann put it this way: “...God’s will for relationship is a personal relationship realized in God, God’s self, a personalization of the divine-human relationship through incarnation.”⁴⁸

Paul articulates this human identity that is based on the relationship to God in Romans 8: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (v. 31) The apostle has experienced this in the hardship of his own mission, yet writes defiantly: “Who will separate us from the love

of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (v.35) Christians belong inseparably to the holy God, and because of that they are themselves holy. Such a new identity is communicated through the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. It is not based on any human achievement; it is given by God as a free gift and humans can only receive it as such (Romans 3:24, 27).

Don Schweitzer: This new identity that Jesus extends to Christians through his death on the cross can have important meaning for Canadian Christians at this time, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is currently receiving testimony from former students of church-run residential schools, their children and others.⁴⁹ Many Christians worked in these schools or supported them out of a sense of Christian calling, believing that by doing so they were evangelizing First Nations and/or Metis children and civilizing them so as to improve the quality of their lives and enable them to better contribute to society. At the meeting of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in Saskatoon, June 21-24, 2012, former students spoke of beatings they received in these schools, of enduring loneliness and separation from their families. Many spoke of suffering sexual abuse, denigration and of lasting emotional, physical and psychic scars left by their experiences in residential schools. Although there were positive aspects to the experiences of some students, the system as a whole was destructive.⁵⁰ Though most Christians who aided or participated in this system did so out of faithfulness to Jesus, the system was sinful. It has permanently stained the identity of Canadian churches that participated in it. Churches, church groups and the federal government have apologized for their parts in it.

Crucial for many students who survived these schools, for their descendents and others, is that their stories be heard and that the wrongs and harm done through these schools be acknowledged. Non-Native Christians, when first hearing of these wrongs and harms, often react defensively, attempting to deny them, or to justify or normalize the ways residential schools were run. The new identity of justification by grace, of being convicted of sin and yet accepted by God in spite of this, implied in Romans 3:25, enables a more efficacious, truthful and faithful response. When our identity is secure through what God has done for all in Jesus Christ, we don't need to justify ourselves. With this identity Christians are able to acknowledge the sin of their churches' participation in residential

schools. They are able to own the churches' apologies and requests for forgiveness for themselves. This is a crucial first step towards preserving Christian identity and a sense of the churches being truth seeking communities in this situation, and towards reconciliation between First Nations peoples and non-Native Christians in Canada.

What Paul states in Romans 3:25 also has a second, future oriented public meaning in relation to the struggles of First Nations, Metis and other peoples for recognition in Canada. Modern democracies require "a 'people' with a strong collective identity,"⁵¹ as the basis for a public dialogue and the formation of a common will necessary for democracies to function with legitimacy. Those who are culturally, religiously or ethnically different can become an identity threat to the majority in a democracy.⁵² This need for a strong collective identity produces a tendency to exclude, suppress or assimilate them. Residential schools resulted partly from this tendency. While they are no longer operative, it still is. Sharing identity space has become common in Northern Canada.⁵³ But in recent years the attitudes of many English Canadians have become less open towards demands of Quebecers and First Nations peoples for recognition and accommodation of their identities within Canadian public life.⁵⁴ Justification by grace through faith bestows upon Christians an identity able to work against this exclusionary tendency inherent in modern democracies.

In going to the cross, Christ enters into the place of those who are alienated, separated or different from God. In so doing, God in Christ opens God's self to those who are different. Christians are those who have a new identity of having been embraced by God in spite of their difference from God. As we receive this embrace and new identity, we are in turn called and empowered by it to make space in our identities for those who are different from us, even for those who seem a threat to us.⁵⁵ Through Christ's death on the cross, we receive an identity of belonging to God that is open to and inclusive of all. This can help us live together with those who are different, resist the exclusionary tendency of modern democracies and embrace diversity in public life. In this way the atoning work of Christ that Paul describes in Romans 3:25 enables Christians to hear the truth, accept their church's responsibilities regarding residential schools and to work towards a future where hopefully such things will not happen again.

Christian A. Eberhart: I agree that the testimonies given by First Nations people during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Saskatoon, SK, June 21–24, 2012) revealed a variety of very disturbing and tragic practices in the history of this country. Above all, these practices displayed a lack of respect and understanding for those who lived here before. What could have helped to prevent such disturbing events? This important question brings to mind a brief terminological reflection by Fletcher R. DuBois about the encounter with others: “...the word understanding may contain a treasure of allusion pointing to being able to ‘stand under’ the aegis of what or who is to be understood.”⁵⁶ I think that an attitude of openness and humbleness toward the others might have prevented some of the disturbing and tragic events that First Nations people suffered.

I experienced just this humbleness and respect when I had the privilege of visiting people from the Anishinabe nation in Kingfisher Lake, Ontario, in the winter of the year 2012. Asked to teach an intensive course on Paul’s life and writings, I was amazed to witness how these First Nations people specifically related to Paul’s testimony of personal persecution and hardship while embracing the message of God’s saving presence. The latter was particularly meaningful to them because they had lived through the former. They understood Paul’s life and message in a very deep and existential way, and this understanding became visible in their respect, humility and love not only toward each other, but also to me. At this point I could experience what it means that in Jesus Christ, people from different nations or ethnic origins all belong to one family. In the first century C.E., Paul expressed such a vision of unity over against the prevalent tendency to separate people according to various aspects and descriptors of human identity: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Is not the end of conflicts and the unity of humans amongst each others and with God the goal of atonement?

I hope that the salvation and reconciliation through Christ that is available to all, as Paul states in Romans 3:25, shape our identities so that we learn to respect and love each other. I hope that salvation and reconciliation as key aspects of the gospel message may be the ground for a better future and for more peaceful and respectful relations between First Nations communities and those who arrived in this land in recent centuries.

Endnotes

¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, Translated by S. N. Deane with an “Introduction” by Charles Hartshorne (La Salle, ILL: Open Court, 1962), pp. 171-288.

² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 196-97.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 173.

⁵ This critique has generated “one of the most heated conflicts in contemporary theology” according to Nancy Duff, “Atonement and the Christian Life,” *Interpretation* 53/1 (January 1999), p. 22.

⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AncB 33, New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 341.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1849), p. 145.

⁸ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Limited, 1975), p. 217.

⁹ With regard to New Testament writings, it is more appropriate to speak about ‘atonement concepts’ than ‘atonement theories.’ Paul did not present elaborate theories in his writings but typically responded to problems in various Mediterranean congregations. This is also manifest in the passage Romans 3:25 in which only two words evoke atonement concepts.

¹⁰ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp. 40-43; Christian A. Eberhart, “Reading Between the Lines: Paul’s Letter to the Romans Shows How Scribes May Have Helped Frame and Deliver New Testament Texts,” in: *Canada Lutheran* June 2010, p. 8.

¹¹ Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung: Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (WMANT 60, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), pp. 196-98; Wolfgang Kraus, “Der Erweis der Gerechtigkeit Gottes im Tode Jesu nach Röm 3,24-26,” in: L. Doering/H.-G. Waubke/F. Wilk (eds.), *Judaistik und Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft: Standorte – Grenzen – Beziehungen* (FRLANT 226, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008, pp. 192-216), pp. 195-97.

¹² Other citations of confessional formulas and hymnic fragments in Romans have been identified in 4:24-25; 5:6-8; 8:32-34; 10:9; 11:33-36; and 13:11-12.

¹³ For the moment I have left the Greek word *hilasterion* without translation. Its correct rendering will be addressed below.

¹⁴ Kraus, “Erweis,” pp. 195-97; see also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 271, 283-91.

¹⁵ See, for example, NRSV, NIV; also Robert J. Daly, *Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background Before Origen* (Studies in Christian Antiquity 18, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1978), pp. 238-40.

¹⁶ NRSV.

¹⁷ The expression “sacrifice of atonement” is entirely unknown in the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁸ NKJV; ASB; NRSV. See also “*Gnadenthron*” (*Die Bibel nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984); “*propitiatoire*” (*Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible*, Paris: Société biblique française/Editions du Cerf, 1988).

¹⁹ NIV. See also “Deckplatte” (*Die Bibel: Elberfelder Übersetzung, Revidierte Fassung*, Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1985).

²⁰ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 349-50; Jewett, *Romans*, pp. 283-88; Kraus, “Erweis,” pp. 200-07.

²¹ Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, “Zur neueren Exegese von Röm 3,24-26,” in *Jesus und Paulus* (ed. by E.E. Ellis/E. Gräßer, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975, pp. 315-33), pp. 321-28.

²² Cf. Jewett, *Romans*, p. 287.

²³ Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, vol. 3 (translation of: *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*; translated by James E. Crouch; Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 565.

²⁴ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Waco: Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), p. 467 n48.

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, p. 143.

²⁶ This notion depends upon an accurate understanding of God’s judgment or wrath, not as violent action against sinners, but fundamentally as the experience of God’s absence, intended to lead a sinner to repent and return to God. As Jürgen Moltmann points out, the “opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference;” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), p. 272.

²⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 407.

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, edited by Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 116.

²⁹ In ancient Near Eastern cultures, various creation myths feature blood as a substance embodying life forces. According to the Babylonian *Enuma Eliš* (6:33), humans are created from the blood of a slain god. In Egyptian mythology, the divine couple *Hu* and *Zia* originates from a blood drop that fell from *Re*’s phallus during his circumcision; menstrual blood of *Isis* is being prevented from flowing out of her vulva in order to avoid a miscarriage. The Canaanite god *El* offers bread and “wine” to the goddess *Anat*; the latter is paraphrased as “blood of the grapevine.” If blood is the symbol of vitality, then the blood of slain enemies powerfully conveys successful warfare and military victory. Thus several Canaanite texts depict the war goddess *Anat* wading in enemy blood (CTA 7:1:9; 18:4:24); Egyptian deities can be described as bloodthirsty when convened to drink sacrificial blood. Cf. Christian A. Eberhart, “Blood. I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,” *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* vol. 4 (Berlin/New York: Walter DeGruyter, 2012, pp. 201-212), pp. 202-04.

³⁰ It should be mentioned, however, that this is more or less the way the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is depicted in the book of Hebrews. According to Hebrews 9:14, Christ offered himself unblemished to God; so the second person of the Trinity is separated from the first person. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann describe this trinitarian separation in Hebrews as follows: “The Father does not show mercy to his children, but the high priest does for his siblings. Only the mediator has sympathy, while God ‘himself’ is ‘a consuming fire’ (Heb[rews] 12:29) and it is a horror to fall into his hands” (God, p. 336). Medieval and post-Tridentine Catholicism were heavily indebted to such a trinitarian concept when defining the core of the Eucharist as a sacrifice in which the church offers the crucified Jesus time and again to God (cf. Karl Lehmann/Edmund Schlink, “Einführung der Herausgeber,” in *Das Opfer Jesu Christi und seine Gegenwart in der Kirche: Klärungen zum Opfercharakter des Herrenmahles* (ed. by Karl Lehmann/Edmund Schlink, Dialog der Kirchen 3, Freiburg: Herder/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983, pp. 9-16), p. 15). However, this particular understanding of sacrifice featured in Hebrews is clearly not that of Paul. The careful reader of Paul’s writings will note the difference and avoid conflating both notions uncritically. It should also be noted that the book of Hebrews was probably written approx. half a century after Paul’s writings. Pamela M. Eisenbaum dates the text to the late 1st or early 2nd century C.E.; cf. her “Locating

Hebrews within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins,” in: Gabriella Gelardini (ed.), *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods, New Insights* (BibInt.S 75, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005, pp. 213-37), pp. 226-31.

³¹ Cf. Otfried Hofius, “‘Für euch gegeben zur Vergebung der Sünden:’ Vom Sinn des Heiligen Abendmahls,” in: *ZThK* 95 (1998, pp. 313-37), pp. 326-27; Stephen Finlan, “Spiritualization of Sacrifice in Paul and Hebrews,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (ed. by Christian A. Eberhart, SBL.RBS 68, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011, pp. 83-97), p. 87.

³² C.K. Barrett, *Paul: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 117. However according to Barrett, in Romans 3:25 “[t]here is enough to justify the attempts of later theologians to produce such a system” (ibid.).

³³ Paul does not mention Jesus’ resurrection here, but Gerd Theissen argues that it is in the background; Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 148, 158-59. He notes that “Judaism could imagine that a death could bring salvation only if there was the prospect of a restoration to life. God does not create salvation by killing but by overcoming death, and that also applies to expiatory death;” ibid., p. 150.

³⁴ For examples of this see William Placher, *Jesus the Savior* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 128-41; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 200-78; Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 247-73; Don Schweitzer, *Jesus Christ for Contemporary Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), pp. 144-74.

³⁵ Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, p. 141.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

³⁷ The notion of incarnation as expressed in John 1: 1-18 or affirmed by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon is not explicitly present in Paul’s thought. But he did speak of Jesus Christ in terms that can be interpreted this way; James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980/1989), p. 255.

³⁸ Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections*, edited by Carol Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 14.

³⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, pp. 251-52.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 246.

⁴² Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p. 259.

⁴³ Schweitzer, *Jesus Christ for Contemporary Life*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ For example, in ancient Egypt the Pharaohs could be considered incarnations of deities. In Hinduism, this term generally refers to a manifestation (called ‘Avatar’) of the god *Vishnu*. On the other hand, both Judaism and Islam reject any doctrine of an incarnation of God.

⁴⁵ The concept of incarnation conveys that God became “flesh” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is interesting to reflect on the broader dimension of this process. In Jesus of Nazareth, God became a male; as a male God also became human; as a human God also became a mammal; as a mammal God also became an animal (in the broader sense of the term); as a mammal God also became a living being; as a living being God also became molecular matter. (I am grateful to my colleague Cameron Harder for these insights.) The concept of incarnation therefore describes how God shared in a wide range of aspects of this world.

⁴⁶ The first to recognize a traditional hymnic fragment in Philippians 2:6-11 was Ernst Lohmeyer in his *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2,5-11* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, vol. 18, 4. Abhandlung, Heidelberg: C. Winter Verlag, 1928), pp. 4-10.

⁴⁷ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God*, p. 41-50.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁹ The Commission has issued a report, *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools* (Winnipeg, MB: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 130.

⁵² Ibid., p. 201.

⁵³ Doug McArthur, "The Changing Architecture of Governance in Yukon and the Northwest Territories," in *Northern Exposure: Peoples, Powers and Prospects in Canada's North*, edited by Francis Abele, Thomas Courchene and Leslie Seidle (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), pp. 187-231.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 129.

⁵⁶ Quoted from Fletcher R. DuBois and Christian A. Eberhart, "Talking with the Other(s): Towards Interfaith Understanding," in: *Consensus* 30/2 (2005, pp. 79-92), p. 81.