

George L. Murphy

## Article

# Chiasmic Cosmology and Atonement

George L. Murphy

An understanding of atonement that is plausible in a scientific context is a necessity if the gospel is to be proclaimed convincingly in a scientific world.

*Traditional views of atonement have come under attack recently. Not only have specific theories been criticized, but some writers reject the very idea of atonement. Since some arguments to this effect have been based on scientific knowledge of the world, it is important to develop an understanding of atonement that makes contact with the modern science-theology dialogue. In this article,<sup>1</sup> that is done as part of the chiasmic cosmology program in which the universe is seen in the context of a theology of the cross.*

*Sin is described here as a threat to creation, and a view of atonement stressing the idea of “new creation” is presented. This involves a reorientation toward God’s intended goal of the evolutionary development of humanity and the world, which sin had thrown off course. The work of Christ is then seen as the descent of the Creator in order to re-create, the cross-resurrection event paralleling God’s initial creatio ex nihilo. The effects of this work on humanity are the death of the human as sinner and the new life of the believer reconciled to God. This article concludes with brief discussions of the Christ-Adam relationship, the new creation theme in other models of the atonement, and the cosmic scope of atonement.*

**B**elief in the atoning work of Christ has come under attack recently. There is nothing new about criticisms of specific “theories of the atonement,” but today a number of writers who want to retain some semblance of Christianity reject the very idea of atonement. There are a number of reasons for such criticisms, such as the belief that divine requirement of atonement implies a legalistic and vindictive picture of God.

## The Need to Relate Salvation and Science

There are also, however, arguments based on the modern scientific understanding of the world. Two centuries ago and more, some writers saw the heliocentric model of the planetary system and the possibility of a plurality of worlds as incompatible with Christian ideas of salvation. In 1832, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “I regard it as the irresistible effect of the Copernican astronomy to have made the theological scheme of Redemption absolutely incredible.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, the difficulty of reconciling the traditional Christian “Fall” scenario with what is known of evolution has been claimed to render the concept of atonement pointless. John Spong argues this way:

As post Darwinians, we no longer believe we were created perfect. We were created as single cells of

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life and evolved into our present complex, conscious and self-conscious forms. Since we were never perfect, we could not fall into sin. Since we could not fall into sin, we could not be rescued. How can one be rescued from a fall that never happened or be restored to a status we never possessed?<sup>3</sup>

Such claims are not new. They have long been used by nonbelievers in attacks on traditional Christianity and by Christians who reject the idea of human evolution. In an earlier article in this journal, I explained why such arguments are inept and sketched a way of understanding original sin in an evolutionary context.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, an understanding of atonement that is plausible in a scientific context is a necessity if the gospel is to be proclaimed convincingly in a scientific world.

In recent decades, an extensive dialogue between Christian theology and science has focused on issues related to the doctrine of creation but has shown relatively little interest in questions of how God saves humanity and the world in Christ.<sup>5</sup> The need to make the message of salvation in Christ convincing to scientifically literate people means that the scope of religion-science discussions must be extended to include salvation in a more central way.

This is also necessary for the coherence of Christian thought, which holds that the God who saves us is the God who has created us. As Athanasius said in a phrase so basic that it might be called "Athanasius' Axiom," "The renewal of creation has been the work of the selfsame Word that made it at the beginning."<sup>6</sup> Theology must take science seriously in its treatment of sin and salvation, as well as in its reflections on creation.

Christians over the centuries have developed a number of "theories of the atonement," such as Christus Victor, Vicarious Atonement, and Moral Influence.<sup>7</sup> These all have some biblical support and can be helpful in preaching and in Christian education. My point here is not that they should be abandoned entirely but that there is another way of understanding atonement that is better able to deal with issues raised by the modern scientific picture of the world. The model I will sketch sees atonement in terms of the biblical concept of "new creation," an idea implicit in Athanasius' Axiom. More precisely, and with evolution in view, we will

speak of a *reorientation* of creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Other theories have not neglected the new creation theme, but they have not given this concept a prominent place.

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The word "atonement" is often understood in a limited sense, as if it had to do only with sacrificial concepts. It is important to remember the more fundamental meaning of the word. Here popular etymology is correct, for the word is literally at-one-ment. It was used by Tyndale to translate *katallagēs* in 2 Cor. 5:18, where most modern versions use "reconciliation."<sup>8</sup>

While the model of atonement suggested here has broader interest, the purpose of presenting it in this setting is to relate atonement to scientific understandings of the world, and especially to issues raised by evolution. We will not consider the work of Christ in itself as a scientific theory. Scientific issues are more important for understanding the context of salvation (and, in particular, what we are saved *from*) than for the process of salvation itself. So if science seems to have a peripheral role in some of the following discussion, readers should remind themselves of the whole picture of divine activity in the world, activity of which the atoning work of Christ is a part.

Previously I have dealt with issues of science and technology in terms of a theology of the cross, as part of what I have called "chiasmic cosmology."<sup>9</sup> Luther developed that theology to deal with issues of sin and salvation, the central concerns of the Reformation.<sup>10</sup> In addressing scientific issues related to creation, I have used it in a different way, and now reconnect with the matters that Luther had in view. The connection between the cross-resurrection event and creation will not be a surprise if we remember Athanasius' Axiom. The Creator is also the God of new creation, who in spite of sin and everything that threatens the world brings creation to its intended goal.

## The Threat to Creation

Ephesians 1:10 tells of God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth." Creation is for the sake of Christ. But something has gone wrong with that plan. Atonement is needed because creation is alienated from God, an alienation revealed by human sin. In Romans 1, Paul emphasizes that refusal to acknowledge the true God *as Creator* is the basic human problem.

Sin threatens creation. The basic sin has often been seen as pride, the desire of the creature to usurp the place of the Creator. We want to be more than what God has created us to be. Feminist theologians, however, have emphasized that, in their experience, resistance to God's will is often expressed in the opposite way, as a failure to be what God intended them to be in the fullest sense. We may indeed be tempted to usurp God's place, but we may also be tempted to be unengaged non-entities, refusing our calling to represent God in ruling and serving the world.<sup>11</sup> Our failure may be the deadly sin of pride but it can also be the deadly sin of sloth. And it may be falsehood, a willful denial of the truth about God and the world.<sup>12</sup> Sin in all these forms is an attempt to thwart God's will for creation.

The common biblical terms for sin (Hebrew *chata'* and Greek *hamartanō*) have the sense of missing a mark. The same idea of failing to achieve a goal can be discerned in the Old Testament's common word for "repent," *shubh*, which means to turn back or return. If God intended creation to move toward the goal described in Eph. 1:10, creation is under threat if part of it moves away from that goal.

Seeing sin in this way helps us to deal with the challenge to Christian concepts of sin and salvation, the challenge that arises from evolution. The rest of this section summarizes an earlier article in this journal, which should be consulted for further detail.<sup>13</sup>

God has created humanity through an evolutionary process in which natural selection was a major factor. Our prehuman ancestors were the members of their species who were most successful in competition with others for various survival needs. They were not "sinful" because they killed, deceived, were sexually promiscuous, and did other things

that would be sinful for their human descendants. But when the first humans, hominids who somehow were made aware of God and God's will for them, came into being, they would have had strong propensities for the same types of behavior which would have been difficult to avoid. They would have been strongly tempted by the basic sin, that of putting other things ahead of God.

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Studies of our closest primate relatives show that they do behave in ways that natural selection leads us to expect of the first humans.<sup>14</sup> There is cooperative behavior among other primates, as there presumably was among our ancestors. But our knowledge of evolution in general and primate behavior in particular makes it quite unlikely that the first humans lived in a sinless "state of integrity" for any period of time.

Consider then those first hominids (without deciding how large that group may have been, or where or when they lived) who had evolved to the point of self-awareness and linguistic ability. They have developed abilities to reason and to communicate and, in some way, can receive and faintly understand God's Word. They have intimations of God's will for them, though we do not know how those intimations may have come to them. These first humans are at the beginning of a road along which God wants to lead them and their descendants to mature humanity and to complete fellowship with him.

In principle they can follow that road, but it will not be easy. They have inherited traits that enabled their ancestors to survive and pass on their genes, traits that predisposes them toward selfish behavior and away from the kind of relationships that God intends for them. Sin is not "hardwired" into them, but tendencies toward it are strong. They can refuse to trust God and can disobey God's will for them.

History shows that humanity from the beginning has not worshipped and served the God of Israel and has been involved in continual conflict. That historical reality corresponds to the theological picture of humanity's gradual departure from God in Genesis 1–11. The first humans took a wrong road, one leading away from the goal that God intended. They and their descendants soon had lost their way.

This image of "taking the wrong road," like that of "the Fall," is a metaphor for the human condition, not a historical narrative. It is important to emphasize that it is not the condition of being on a journey that is sinful. The problem of sin is not that we are on a metaphorical evolutionary road, but that we are on a *wrong* road. Failure to make this distinction may result in the work of Christ being seen simply as one phase of the creative process, rather than as a correction of something that had gone wrong with it.<sup>15</sup>

Humanity is a "symbiosis" of genes and culture.<sup>16</sup> Both help to transmit to each person the essence of humanity but both can also contribute to deviation from God's intention for humanity. Our genetic makeup, conditioned by natural selection, inclines us toward selfish behavior. The cultures in which we are conceived, born, and live exacerbate those tendencies. We are born as members of a tribe lost in the woods.

To say that there is a genetic component of original sin does not mean that there is a "gene for sin." Whether or not an action is sinful generally depends on the context in which it takes place as well as the action itself. Genes may give us tendencies for certain behaviors, but they do not force us to do those things.

To say that there is a cultural component of original sin means that sin is in part a result of our environment, an effect of "nurture" as well as "nature." The effects of our environment can be far more pervasive than mere examples, as the analogy of fetal alcohol syndrome due to a uterine environment suggests. They are not things that we freely choose to accept or reject, but influences that we take in "with our mother's milk."

There is solidarity in sin,<sup>17</sup> so that people make up a "corrupt mass" (*massa perditionis*) in a classic phrase. More modern language speaks of "structures of sin" such as racism in human societies.

A person born into a racist society is not predestined to be a racist, but it will be very "natural" to become one. Because of both genes and culture, we all start our lives on that wrong road, far from God, and thus are "missing the mark" from our beginning. Our sin of origin truly is sin. As Tillich put it, "Before sin is an act, it is a state."<sup>18</sup>

Neither strict Augustinians nor determined Pelagians will be satisfied with this model. Unregenerate people are not compelled to sin, but all people are sinners and would need grace even if they could theoretically avoid "actual sins." This approach does preserve the essence of what the western church has insisted upon, without theories about human history and the transmission of sin which are now seen to be untenable.

## The Reorientation of Creation

With humanity separated from God and threatened with "not dying merely, but abiding ever in the corruption of death,"<sup>19</sup> what was God to do? Scripture is clear about what God did do. With Abraham, God began to turn the course of history in a direction that would result in "all nations" being blessed. The prophets call people to "return to the LORD, your God" (Joel 2:13). Finally, the Creator appears on the scene in person, Jesus Christ.

"Why Did God Become Human?" That was the question posed by Anselm in his book *Cur Deus Homo*.<sup>20</sup> All the "theories" or "models" of the atonement have tried to answer that question. We need to bear in mind Forde's reminder that theories themselves do not save us or reconcile us to God.<sup>21</sup> Theories and models are, however, helpful in communicating the gospel clearly.

The answer to Anselm's question for which I argue here starts from two texts from St. Paul: "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17) and "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" (Gal. 6:16).

The explicit phrase "new creation" is found only in those two verses but the idea is much more common. We might think, for example, of the psalmist's prayer of repentance that asks, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). The use of the verb *br'*



which expresses the divine prerogative of creation, as in Gen. 1:1, is significant. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ echo God's initial *creatio ex nihilo*. As Bonhoeffer puts it,

[T]he God of creation, of the utter beginning, is the God of the resurrection. The world exists from the beginning in the sign of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Indeed it is because we know the resurrection that we know of God's creation in the beginning, of God's creating out of nothing. The dead Jesus Christ of Good Friday and the resurrected *κύριος* of Easter Sunday—that is creation out of nothing, creation from the beginning.<sup>22</sup>

Themes related to new creation have been discussed, with greater or lesser emphases, throughout the course of Christian thought. With Athanasius' Axiom in mind, it is natural to look first to that theologian's early treatise *On the Incarnation*. The basic human problem here is that, after humans had been created and given the chance for participation in the life of God, their choice of sin set them on the way back to nonbeing.<sup>23</sup> Athanasius argues that humanity was safe from dissolution and non-existence only through participation in the Logos, and thus could be saved only by virtue of the re-creative work of the Logos. "For being Word of the Father, and above all, he alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with the Father."<sup>24</sup>

Over a century before Athanasius, Irenaeus, in his defense of the Christian tradition against the Gnostics, emphasized the unity of Creator and Redeemer and presented a distinctive view of the work of Christ as *recapitulation*. He saw Jesus going through the whole course of an individual human life to save humanity at all stages.<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that humanity is simply to be restored to its original condition. As Wingren explains Irenaeus' view,

[S]ince man was a growing being before he became enslaved, and since he is not restored until he has begun again to progress towards his destiny, man's restoration in itself is more than a mere reversion to his original position. The word *recapitulatio* also contains the idea of perfection or consummation, for recapitulation means that man's growth is resumed and renewed. That man grows, however, is merely a different aspect of the fact that God creates.<sup>26</sup>

To recapitulate all of human life Christ also had to come to the end of life: "Then, at last," Irenaeus says, "He came on to death itself, that He might be 'the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence,' the Prince of life, existing before all, and going before all."<sup>27</sup> But as Irenaeus also insisted, the cross was not simply one element in a formal scheme.

Atonement comes about because God in Christ actually *does* something to change the status of people who "were dead through the trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). To be effective, the work of Christ must overcome the nothingness toward which sinful humanity is headed, a nothingness which through its terror of death, guilt, and meaninglessness, it already experiences. If humanity and (as we shall note later) the rest of creation with it, is on the way to nothingness, God must re-create from nothing. Atonement parallels in a precise way the divine *creatio ex nihilo*. If that is the case, then we can begin to understand the necessity of the cross in two related ways.

## The Descent of the Creator

Calvary is the way in which God enters into death—even into the lowest and most humiliating end, "the utterly vile death of the cross."<sup>28</sup> It is not just that he dies, but that he suffers what was considered the worst kind of death, one designed to be humiliating by Roman oppressors and considered cursed by the Jewish tradition.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was a death in separation from the source of life, in the darkness in which God cannot find God. And that is not only a human cry, for it is the person of the Son of God who speaks. By taking on human dying, God goes into the Deep, the nothingness that threatens creation.

This is not mere metaphor or symbolism. The Apostles' Creed is quite explicit: "crucified, dead, and buried." It continues with a phrase that was probably the last to be added to the creed and which has inspired a good deal of discussion: *descendit ad inferna*. Even the translation of this phrase is debated. The traditional rendering is "He descended into hell," while the version of the International Consultation on English texts is "He descended to the dead."<sup>29</sup>

The traditional translation is richer but the modern one is not a mere banality. The redundancy, if indeed it is that, of saying “crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to the dead” means “He really did die. It is no figure of speech.” Furthermore, we should not be misled by speculations about the afterlife that envision the souls of the departed as being immediately in heaven. There is, of course, that kind of picture in some places in the New Testament, but there is a sterner view in the Hebrew tradition. “In Sheol who can give you praise?” (Ps. 6:5; cf. also Ps. 88:5).

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However, the traditional English translation is “he descended into hell,” and the typical Orthodox icon of the resurrection shows the “Harrowing of Hell,” with the risen Christ breaking down the gates of hell, trampling down Satan, and releasing the saints of the Old Testament from prison. A similar idea was endorsed by Luther and the Lutheran tradition at the time of the Reformation.<sup>30</sup> The descent, in other words, is seen as the first act of the risen Christ.

The Reformed tradition, on the other hand, has understood Christ’s descent into hell as his suffering the torments of the damned, including forsaken-ness by God, before his death. Mark 15:34 points in this direction. The descent into hell is then seen as the depth of Christ’s passion.<sup>31</sup> Barth developed this idea at some length in the *Church Dogmatics*. The Roman Catholic von Balthasar, on the other hand, in his theology of Holy Saturday, emphasized Christ’s descent or his “going to the dead” as following his physical death but still, in a sense, as part of this passion. A recent study deals with the approaches of both of those theologians, with extensive citations.<sup>32</sup>

Those two views, the descent into hell as the nadir of the passion and as the first act of the resurrection, are not mutually exclusive. Popular Ameri-

can television can illustrate that. The series *Prison Break*, in its later seasons, has moved on to other plot elements, but its original idea was intriguing. A man has been wrongly sentenced for murder, and to free him, his brother deliberately gets convicted of a crime so that he can get into the same prison and break his brother out. That illustration can be used to speak of Christ’s descent into hell only with care, but within limits it is useful. God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

### “Dead to Sin and Alive to God”

As Rom. 6:11 indicates, this work of re-creation is not something that God does for God’s own self. It is the work of atonement, the restoration of creation to its divinely intended course of development which culminates in the goal sketched in Eph. 1:10.

Since the idolatry of which Paul speaks in Romans 1 separates humanity from God, that false faith must be destroyed before true faith in the true God is possible. In the passion and death of Christ, false faith comes to its inevitable consequence, the destruction of humanity. Jesus Christ is what humanity was always intended to be, and humanity that has turned away from God, humanity that does not want to be what God intended, kills him.

Which is to say, *we* kill him. Of course the cross did not come upon God unawares: it happened “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). But it was not God who cried, “Crucify him”; it was not God who demanded his death. It was our representatives in the Jerusalem crowd. Jesus died “for us” because we had to get rid of him in order to preserve our systems and our projects that were challenged by the message he proclaimed.<sup>33</sup>

God allows us as sinful people to kill our one hope, the union of God with humanity in Christ, as the end of our self-chosen road. This is God’s “alien work” which is foreign to God’s character as love. But it is work that must be done if true faith is to be possible. Because if we are brought to realize what has happened—that our idolatry has destroyed the basis for our life and the hope for our future—then our false faith is shattered, and we are brought to see that we cannot put our ultimate trust in ourselves or in any creature.

And when we have been reduced to nothing, the fact that Christ crucified is risen can bring about real faith in the real God, the one who “justifies the ungodly ... gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:5, 17). Trust in the true God comes about when the cross-resurrection event becomes a reality for people. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Against these claims for a new creative act of God in the death and resurrection of Christ, a skeptic may point out that there was no radical change in the world or the human race around AD 30. But no one who reflects on God’s initial creative work should be surprised by this. God did not make a fully formed world instantaneously. His creative Word called into being a world that was capable of development; the universe was ten billion years old before life came into being on our planet. Over the past fourteen billion years, God has been working in and through created things as instruments, cooperating with the natural processes which science describes.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the claim that the historical development of our world was turned back toward its proper goal by God’s re-creative act in the cross-resurrection event is compatible with the belief that it may take a long time before God’s activity in creation through the means of grace has made significant progress toward that goal.

New creation takes place for the individual, but it is not just an individual matter. It is the creation of a new humanity (Eph. 2:15).<sup>35</sup> Paul speaks of this as the Body of Christ, the corporate reality of which Christ is the head. Teilhard de Chardin suggested that the Body of Christ should be seen as the future of the evolutionary process.<sup>36</sup> As single cells united a billion years ago to form multicellular organisms, so single persons are united in Christ in a true human community. Individual differences are not crushed out but, as Paul emphasizes in 2 Corinthians 12, they are brought out by being united. As Teilhard put it, “union ... creates ... *differentiates ... [and] personalizes.*”<sup>37</sup>

## Christ and Adam

A question that will naturally be asked about this discussion of sin and atonement has to do with passages in which Paul connects Christ and Adam—Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–49. How can the

work of Christ reverse the effects of the sin of Adam if there was no historical Adam? The background of these Pauline texts and their interpretation are complex and cannot be explored in detail here, but some aspects of an answer to that question are in order.

To begin we should note that the model of original sin developed in an earlier article and summarized here does *not* require that there was no historical Adam. Genetic data make it hard to see how all present humans could have descended from a single couple living at any time that might fit a historical Adam and Eve, but the proposed model would not have to be changed if that turned out to be possible. My arguments do not depend on the size of the original human population.

We should also not overemphasize the importance of the Christ-Adam connection in Romans. In the first three chapters, Paul sets out the basic problem of universal sinfulness and God’s solution to the problem in Christ without mentioning Adam. He sees sin extending far back in history but there is no mention of Adam or a unique “Fall” event. It is not until Chapter 5 that Paul appeals to the Christ-Adam pattern. This does not mean that the latter chapter should be ignored, but it would be wrong to infer from it that Paul believed the atoning work of Christ to be dependent upon a fall of an individual Adam.

In fact, that Christ-Adam relationship is expounded for the sake of Christ, not of Adam. Paul’s purpose in these passages was not to teach us about Adam but rather to tell us the significance of Christ. It is “the man of heaven,” not “the man of dust” (1 Cor. 15:48–49) who shows us what God intends humanity to be and who, in fact, accomplishes that goal for creation.

It is certainly likely that Paul, as a first-century Jew, believed Adam to have been a historical figure. The situation may be similar to what we find in Genesis 1, which uses ideas about the physical world such as the “dome” of the sky and the waters above it (Gen. 1:6–8). These are instances of the Holy Spirit’s “accommodation” of inspiration to the views of a biblical writer and that writer’s cultural context in matters that are not essential to the theological point being made.<sup>38</sup> The theological point for Paul is the significance of Christ, not the historicity of Adam, and one way of speaking about the signifi-



cance of Christ may make use of a nonhistorical figure. Dunn's brief discussion of this point is helpful.<sup>39</sup> In particular, "[T]he effect of the comparison between the two epochal figures, Adam and Christ, is not so much to historicize the individual Adam as to bring out the more than individual significance of the historic Christ."<sup>40</sup>

## The Theme of New Creation in Other Theories of the Atonement

All three major "theories of the atonement" have connections with the theme of new creation, though they do not give it a central role. In the "Latin theory," Christ makes satisfaction for the offense to God's honor by human sin. God's "honor" was not simply an abstract concept for Anselm but had to do with God's plan for a predestined number of souls to enter the heavenly city. That had to include humans because of the fall of some of the angels.<sup>41</sup> Thus atonement repairs the damage done to creation by sin so that God's purpose for creation can be fulfilled.

In the Christus Victor model, Christ defeats the powers of evil that stand against humanity and that hold us in bondage. Although Christians have not always been aware of it, this theme is connected with the ancient image found in some Old Testament texts (Job 26:12-13; Ps. 74:12-17; Ps. 89:8-13; Isa. 51:9-10) of the *Chaoskampf*, the battle with chaos through which God created the world. The Gospel stories of Jesus walking on the sea make the point that the same God is present in Christ, and suggest that his work parallels that of those ancient mythic images of creation.<sup>42</sup>

The Christus Victor theory could thus be seen as a model of re-creation clothed in dramatic images and metaphors. The approach taken here does not have the emotive impact of a combat with demonic powers, but it is correspondingly free of the problems that are raised by giving a central role to Satan in our understanding of atonement.<sup>43</sup>

In "moral influence" theories, the crucified Christ brings about a change in those who behold him. The focus of most versions of such theories has been our response of love to the love shown by God, but we should emphasize first the creation of *faith*—faith which indeed is active in love (Gal. 5:6).

In spite of the way in which such theories are often described, the change that takes place need not be purely "subjective." At their best, they can be understood as descriptions of an act of new divine creation that God brings about. With John 12:32 in mind, Knutson spoke of these theories as giving a "Magnet Picture" of the atonement.<sup>44</sup> We can think of the way a magnet makes pieces of iron into little magnets even as it draws them to itself.

## The Cosmic Scope of New Creation

To this point, the focus has been on our own species, but there are biblical texts that suggest that all creation, not just terrestrial humanity, is in need of atonement. Paul's statements in Rom. 8:18-25 about the subjection of creation to "futility" and its longing for liberation; the hope for new heavens and earth in Isaiah, 2 Peter, and Revelation; and especially the promise of the reconciliation of "all things" to God through the cross in Col. 1:20 point in this direction. We need to remain aware of these statements about the wider creation, but we should not allow the cosmic sweep of atonement to tempt us into excessive speculation about how it might be effected.

While the first human sin did not cause an abrupt change in the natural world, sinful human attitudes and behaviors have had a negative impact on the terrestrial environment. In recent years, we have become aware of how exploitation of nature has led to the destruction of habitats and extinction of species. The reconciliation of humanity to God would include fulfilling our responsibility to represent God in caring for the earth; as a result, the "nonhuman" parts of our planet would become more fully what God intends for them.

What we have said about the inevitability of sin for an intelligent species created through evolution applies to any putative extraterrestrials as well as to humans. If there are intelligent extraterrestrials, we can be sure that they are in need of atonement. The fact that at present we know nothing more about such creatures, either from Scripture or from science, means that anything else we say about the matter must be guesswork. Nevertheless, it seems likely that an understanding of atonement centered on the idea of new creation will be better equipped to deal with this issue than will models which were



developed before the church took the possibility of extraterrestrials seriously.

We have, at best, hints about how the work of Christ might affect creation beyond the earth. Ephesians 3:10 says that the church is to make known the wisdom of God “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” That originally meant proclamation to angelic powers, but we may see it today as a call to a cosmic mission.<sup>45</sup> Robert John Russell argues that the resurrection of Christ is the first instance of a new law of nature, and that might be connected with the possibility of causal influence of God’s ultimate future on the past.<sup>46</sup> It is worth pursuing such ideas as we attempt to understand more fully the atoning work of Christ in a universe that we understand through scientific study. But we must also bear in mind Paul’s reminder that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12a). \*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This is a revision of a paper presented at the joint meeting of Christians in Science and the American Scientific Affiliation, Edinburgh, UK, 3 August 2007. I would like to thank the Rev. Sandra Selby for conversations and suggestions about the present version. I also appreciate the comments of reviewers of an earlier draft. Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Michael J. Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750–1900* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), 236. For other examples of this and other views on the issue, see the Subject Index entries under “redemption and incarnation, Christian doctrines of” on p. 678.

<sup>3</sup>John Spong in his email newsletter of August 15, 2007.

<sup>4</sup>George L. Murphy, “Roads to Paradise and Perdition: Christ, Evolution, and Original Sin,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 58 (2006): 109.

<sup>5</sup>See, however, the discussion initiated by Celia Deane-Drummond, “Shadow Sophia in Christological Perspective: The Evolution of Sin and the Redemption of Nature,” in *Theology and Science* 6, no. 1 (2008): 13, with other contributions by James W. Haag, Nathan J. Hallanger, William O’Neill, SJ, and Robert John Russell.

<sup>6</sup>Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* IV, 2d ser. (1891; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 36.

<sup>7</sup>See the classic discussion in Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1961). A recent presentation of four views is found in James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>The *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “atone” and “atone-ment.” For Tyndale’s text (with the spelling “attonement”)

see Luther A. Weigle, ed., *The New Testament Octapla* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup>George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther’s Works* 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 35–70. Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), discusses the implications of the theology of the cross for issues of sin and salvation.

<sup>11</sup>Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 25–42. This essay was first published in 1960.

<sup>12</sup>For these three “forms” of sin see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, no. 1 (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1956), 142–3.

<sup>13</sup>Murphy, “Roads to Paradise and Perdition.”

<sup>14</sup>E.g., Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *Origins Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), chap. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Several essays in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) illustrate this.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), especially pp. 28–31. He attributes the idea to Ralph Wendell Burhoe.

<sup>17</sup>Stephanus Trooster, *Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Newman Press, 1968).

<sup>18</sup>Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 155.

<sup>19</sup>Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” 38.

<sup>20</sup>Saint Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* (1903; reprint, Forth Worth, TX: RDMc Publishing, 2005).

<sup>21</sup>Gerhard O. Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

<sup>22</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 34–5.

<sup>23</sup>Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” 38.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>25</sup>Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” II, xxii, 4 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (1884; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 391.

<sup>26</sup>Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 173–4.

<sup>27</sup>Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 391.

<sup>28</sup>This Latin phrase was the original title of Hengel, *Crucifixion*. For the citation of Origen and discussion, see p. xi.

<sup>29</sup>For the history, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2d ed. (New York: David McKay, 1960), 378–83. A brief presentation of the rationale of the *International Consultation on English Texts* for its rendering of the phrase is its *Prayers We Have in Common*, 2d rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 4–5.

<sup>30</sup>Article IX of the “Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord,” in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 1051.

<sup>31</sup>Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 490–4.

<sup>32</sup>David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>33</sup>The discussion here owes a good deal to Forde, “The Work of Christ,” especially section 4.

<sup>34</sup>Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross*, chapters 6 through 8.

<sup>35</sup>On this topic see George L. Murphy, "The Church in Evolution," *Seminary Ridge Review* 5, no. 1 (2002): 38.

<sup>36</sup>Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 254-72; *Activation of Energy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 99-127, 148-51, and 271-80; *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 15-17, 66-74, and 165-8.

<sup>37</sup>Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy*, 115-6.

<sup>38</sup>Paul H. Seely, "The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 15, especially section VIII. George L. Murphy, "Couldn't God Get It Right?" in *Covalence* (March 2006): [www.elca.org/faithandscience/covalence/story/default.asp?Copyright=06-03-15&Author=murphy&Pages=1](http://www.elca.org/faithandscience/covalence/story/default.asp?Copyright=06-03-15&Author=murphy&Pages=1)).

<sup>39</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary 38: Romans 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 289-90.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>41</sup>Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man," in Eugene R. Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), Book I, chapters 16-9.

<sup>42</sup>Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895); John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (New York: Cambridge, 1985); Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); George L. Murphy, "The Sea of Chaos and Creation," presented at the 2000 meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation.

<sup>43</sup>These problems appear vividly in Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Power of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) and *God at War* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). Quite different is the "Narrative Christus Victor" approach of J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>44</sup>Kent S. Knutson, *His Only Son Our Lord* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), 72-5.

<sup>45</sup>One suggestion in this regard is given in the story sermon "The Signal" in George L. Murphy, *Pulpit Science Fiction* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 2005).

<sup>46</sup>Robert John Russell, *Cosmology, Evolution and Resurrection Hope* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006); Ted Peters, *Anticipating Omega* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2007); Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross*, chap. 12.

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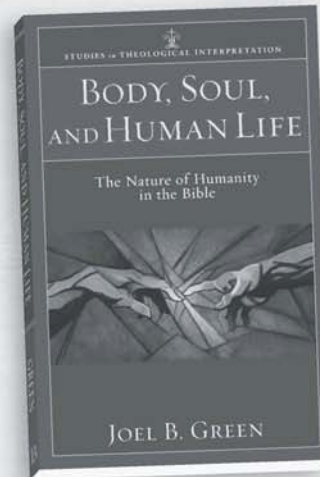
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