

- **The Atonement in Reformation Theology**
- **L'expiation dans la théologie de la réformation**
- **Die Sühne in reformatorischer Theologie**

David Wright, Edinburgh

RÉSUMÉ

L'expiation ne constituait pas un sujet de discussion dans la controverse de la Réformation, à la différence de la justification. Son traitement théologique est dispersé, il apparaît, lorsqu'il est abordé, en liaison avec d'autres sujets, tels que le sacrifice, la messe ou la christologie. L'approche caractéristique de la théologie dans la Réformation est l'exposition de l'Écriture plutôt que la systématique. Ainsi cette étude se base sur le commentaire de Calvin sur 2 Corinthiens 5.18–21, tout en tenant compte d'autres expositions de ce texte au XVI^e siècle. Non seulement Calvin

voit le ministère de l'Église comme une mise en œuvre du ministère de réconciliation, c'est à dire de l'expiation, mais aussi, en comprenant l'exhortation « soyez réconciliés » . . . (v. 20) comme étant adressé aux croyants, il envisage une expiation quotidienne de nos péchés dans une repentance toujours renouvelée. De plus, il s'attaque à la question de savoir quand Dieu a commencé de nous aimer. Enfin, Calvin lit le passage comme présentant Christ coupable et pécheur « en notre personne ». Tous les éléments de la doctrine de l'expiation élaborée par la réformation sont virtuellement présents ici.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Sühne war, ganz im Gegensatz zur Rechtfertigung, zur Zeit der Reformation keine kontroverse Angelegenheit. Ihre Abhandlung erfolgte, wenn sie denn erfolgte, unzusammenhängend unter verschiedenen Überschriften wie z.B. 'Opfer und die Messe', 'Christologie' etc. Die charakteristische Methode der reformatorischen Theologie ist die Schriftauslegung und nicht die systematische Theologie. Aus diesem Grund beschäftigt sich die folgende Abhandlung vor allem mit Calvins Kommentar zu 2. Kor. 5,18–21, zieht

aber auch andere Auslegungen des 16. Jahrhunderts zu Rate. Calvin versteht die geistliche Rolle der Kirche in erster Linie als einen 'Dienst der Versöhnung' (d.h. der Sühne). Mehr noch, die Worte 'laßt euch versöhnen . . .' (V. 20) als an Gläubige gerichtet verstehend, steht ihm ein tägliches 'Sühnen' unserer Sünden in ständig erneuerter Buße vor Augen. Darüber hinaus ringt er mit der Frage, wann Gott anfang, uns zu lieben. Die Korintherstelle versteht Calvin so, daß sie Christus darstellt als jemanden, der schuldig ist, ja ein Sünder ist, 'in uns'. Sie vereinigt also im Grunde alle Bestandteile der reformatorischen Sühnelehre.

Where does one find a doctrine of the atonement in Reformation theology? It was, I believe, the subject of no major controversy, whether between the Old Church and the new evangelicals or between evangelicals themselves. If one looks to the Decrees of the Council of

Trent—a reliable indicator of what the Old Church's establishment thought had gone wrong in Protestantism—justification receives lengthy and important attention, original sin a few pages and the sacrifice of the mass is declared to be truly propitiatory:

The victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different. The fruits of that bloody sacrifice . . . are received most abundantly through this unbloody one.¹

But atonement proper is barely visible.

If we turn to the confessions and catechisms of the Reformation movements—their official presentations of doctrine, as it were—the treatment is remarkably variable. The Augsburg Confession of 1530 has articles on original sin and justification, and also on the Son of God, which affirms that he was ‘truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath’. Moreover, prominent among the corruptions of the mass in article 24 is ‘the abominable error’ of the sacrificial role of the mass ‘by means of which sin was taken away and God was reconciled’. The corrective teaching from Scripture is then set forth. The Catholic Confutation of the Confession and Melancthon’s Apology pick up all three topics at length—original sin, justification and the mass. On the last the Apology provides an extended discussion of sacrifice, distinguishing two main types, propitiatory and eucharistic. The former ‘reconciles God or placates his wrath or merits the forgiveness of sins for others’; by the latter ‘those who have been reconciled give thanks’. The only real propitiatory sacrifice in the world is the death of Christ. The context determines that, as far as atonement is concerned, Christ’s sacrifice is said only to reconcile God.²

The early Genevan Confession of 1536 has brief articles on ‘Salvation in Jesus’ and ‘Righteousness in Jesus’. The former declares that ‘it is Jesus Christ who is given to us by the Father, in order that in him we should recover all of which in ourselves we are deficient’. The latter mentions the reconciliation of ‘enemies of God and subjects of his wrath and judgement’.³

The distinctive Scots Confession (1560) deals with the sacrifice of Christ in article 9, ‘Christ’s Death, Passion, and Burial’, which ends with a reference to ‘the everlasting purgation and satisfaction’ purchased for us thereby. In a widely available modern rendering the two nouns have been collapsed into ‘atonement’. The two words of the sixteenth-century version precisely reflect the Latin.⁴

More interesting in this Confession is the preceding article on ‘Election’, in which the mediation of Christ is set in the frame of the ‘maist holie fraternitie’ between Christ our brother and ourselves. By the Father’s appointment before the foundation of the world, his Son took ‘a bodie of our bodie, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bones’.

If now we are not afraid to call God our Father (John 20:17), it is because he has given his only Son to be our brother. There follows an account of the suffering of the God-man for human salvation.⁵ The Scots Confession reminds us how variable are the forms and expressions of what we too readily sum up as ‘the Reformation’.

Another product of the 1560s, a fruitful decade for confession-writing, was the Belgic Confession of 1561. This has two articles on justification, one of which quotes Paul as saying that ‘we are justified by faith alone’, and two others which present what we might call the work of Christ. The first of these views it as the manifestation of God’s justice and mercy in Christ, and the second in terms of satisfaction. Our everlasting High Priest ‘presented himself in our behalf before his Father in order to appease his wrath by his full satisfaction’. As a consequence no other means of being reconciled to God is needed.⁶

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 is widely appreciated as the most mature of the Reformed confessions of the century. It is certainly the longest, but it is scarcely more satisfying to those in quest of an explicit statement on atonement. Much is to be found under justification (with a clear echo of 2 Corinthians 5:21), and some in the full article 11 ‘Of

Jesus Christ, True God and Man, the Only Saviour of the World', which is primarily Christological. Here a paragraph on the passion and all that Christ did and endured for our sake by coming in the flesh presents Christ as thereby reconciling the heavenly Father to all the faithful, expiating sin, disarming death and shattering condemnation and hell. I note that a modern translation has reversed the terms of the reconciliation—believers to the Father instead of vice versa.⁷

If one consults handy one-volume introductions to the theology of the Reformers, the result is little different. Wilhelm Niesel's *Reformed Symbolics* (1962) has chapters on 'Union with Christ', 'Justification and Sanctification' and 'Christology'. Timothy George's *Theology of the Reformers* (1988) devotes a few pages to a comparison of Calvin's and Anselm's presentations of the atonement, but otherwise barely mentions the topic—although he concurs with Ian Siggins' judgement that Luther followed no one consistent or dominant theory of the atonement, drawing instead on the range of historic approaches.⁸ Edmund Schlink's *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (1961) subsumes a few mentions of atonement under justification.

This selective survey leads to the conclusion that theologising about the atonement in sixteenth-century Protestant reform is diffused rather than concentrated. It emerges in varied contexts of engagement with Catholicism, or with competing expressions of Protestantism. As for the former, it was the fact that the mass had been turned into a sacrifice usurping the place of Christ's unique self-offering that above all else persuaded Calvin to regard it not as a corruption of the Lord's supper but as a diabolical rejection of it, ripe not for reformation but for replacement. And so this controversy invited exposition of a biblical understanding of Christ's sacrifice.

Or again the supper-strife between Lutherans and Swiss/Reformed became the catalyst for Christological elaboration, especially on the Lutheran side. Such developed Christology instinctively

related the union of divinity and humanity in Christ to his reconciling work and delighted to quote Luther himself, here from his work on *The Councils and the Church*:

We Christians must know that unless God is in the balance and throws in weight as a counterbalance, we shall sink to the bottom with our scale. I mean that this way: If it is not true that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost. But if God's death and God dead lie in the opposite scale, then his side goes down and we go upward like a light and empty pan. Of course, he can also go up again or jump out of his pan. But he could never have sat in the pan unless he had become a man like us, so that it could be said: God dead, God's passion, God's blood, God's death. According to his nature God cannot die, but since God and man are united in one person, it is correct to talk about God's death when that man dies who is one thing or one person with God.⁹

In fact, it is not merely that the doctrine of the atonement appears dispersed in Reformation theological writings. The central Reformation decades witnessed little in the way of systematic theology. Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* and Calvin's *Institutio* are not representative of the literary endeavours of the leading Reformers. Peter Martyr Vermigli's *Loci Communes* were compiled from his works after his death. Wolfgang Musculus, the learned Augsburg Reformer, issued his *Loci Communes* in 1560 not long before his death, after impressive productivity in translating the Fathers and commenting massively on major parts of the Bible.

A significant proportion of the Reformers' theological writings were expositions of Scripture in one form or another. (Calvin used four forms in Geneva—sermon, lecture, pastors' corporate Bible study (French 'congrégation') and remonstrance or admonition.) Perhaps the most characteristic mode of Reformation theology is exegetical or expository. *Loci* commonly appeared appended to the appropriate passage of Scripture; on the papacy, to Matthew 16:17–19, on church

and state, to Romans 13:1–7, etc. It was Calvin's intention to ensure that his commentaries were not cluttered up by *loci*, and so he put them into the *Institutio* from the 1539 edition onwards.

And so the rest of this paper will revolve around perhaps the *locus classicus* for the atonement in the Bible, 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 (on the assumption that atonement focusses specifically on the theme of reconciliation). I will take as the platform for our consideration the commentary by John Calvin published in 1547 in French and in 1548 in Latin. As I pick up points in his exposition I will refer to other sixteenth-century commentators, both Protestant and occasionally Catholic. But first I present an abridged text of Calvin's comments on what he calls here 'a quite remarkably important passage'.¹⁰ I have sought to omit nothing of substance. Musculus likewise held it to be 'a passage always to be valued most highly by all believers, to be instilled deeply in our minds with special care'.¹¹

John Calvin on 2 Corinthians 5:18–21

18. Moreover, all things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ: and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

19. Because God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, by not imputing to them their sins; and he entrusted to us the word of reconciliation.

20. Therefore we act as ambassadors on behalf of Christ, as though God were exhorting through us: we beg on behalf of Christ, Be reconciled to God.

21. Him who knew no sin, he made sin on our behalf, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

18. *All things are of God.* He means all things that belong to Christ's kingdom, as if he had said, 'If we wish to be Christ's we must be regenerated by God, but this is no ordinary gift.' . . .

Who reconciled us. There are two main points here, one concerning the reconcili-

ation of men and women with God and the other concerning the means by which we may obtain the benefit of it . . .

The first is that *God has reconciled us to himself through Christ*. There follows immediately the explanation that *God was in Christ* and in his person has brought about reconciliation. The way in which he did it is next added, *by not imputing to them their sins*. And this also is explained by showing how Christ made a guilt-offering for our sins and procured righteousness for us. The second main point is that the grace of reconciliation is applied to us by the gospel, so that we may share in it. Here, if anywhere in Paul's writings, we have a quite remarkably important passage and we must carefully examine the words one by one.

The ministry of reconciliation. This is a most remarkable description of the Gospel as a message delivered through an ambassador to reconcile men and women to God. It is the singular dignity of ministers of the gospel to be sent by God to us with a mandate to be the messengers and in a manner the pledges of his good will towards us. But this is said not so much to glorify ministers as to comfort the godly so that, whenever they hear the gospel, they may know that God is dealing with them and, as it were, negotiating an agreement with them about their return to his grace. What blessing could be more desirable than this! Thus let us remember that this is the main purpose of the gospel, that, although we are by nature children of wrath, the quarrel between God and us can be resolved and we can be received by him into his grace. Ministers are given authority to declare this good news to us and to increase our assurance of God's fatherly love towards us. It is true that any other person can also bear witness to us of God's grace, but Paul teaches that this duty is laid specially upon ministers. Thus when a duly ordained minister declares from the gospel that God has been made propitious (*propitiatum*) to us he should be heard as God's ambassador, carrying out a public duty as God's representative, and endowed with rightful authority to make this declaration to us.

19. *God was in Christ.* Some take this to mean simply 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ', but the meaning is fuller and richer than that, for he is saying, first, that God was in Christ and then that by this intervention he was reconciling the world to himself. This is said of the Father, since it would be unnatural to say that the divine nature of Christ was in Christ. Thus he is saying that the Father was in the Son, in agreement with John 10.38, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.' Thus he who has the Son has the Father also. Paul expresses himself in this way so that we may learn to be satisfied with Christ because in him we find God the Father also, as he communicates himself to us by his Son . . .

The second clause deals with the work of Christ, which is to be our propitiation, since apart from him God is displeased with us all because we have departed from righteousness. Why has God appeared to humankind in Christ? For reconciliation, in order that the hostility might be ended and we who were strangers might be adopted as sons. Although Christ's coming had its source in the overflowing love of God for us, yet, until human beings know that God has been propitiated by a mediator, there cannot but be on their side a separation which prevents them from having access to God. But of this more soon.

By not imputing to them. Notice how human beings return to God's favour—by being regarded as righteous, by obtaining remission of their sins. As long as God imputes our sins to us, he cannot but regard us with abhorrence, for he cannot look with friendship or favour upon sinners. But this may appear to contradict what is said elsewhere, that 'we were loved by him before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1.4), and to contradict still more John 3.16, where he says that his love for us was the reason why he expiated our sins by Christ, for the cause must always precede the effect. My answer is that we were loved from before the foundation of the world, but not apart from Christ. But I do agree that the love of God

was first in time and in order also as regards God; but, as regards us, his love has its foundation in the sacrifice of Christ. For when we think of God apart from a mediator, we can conceive of him only as being angry with us, but when a mediator is interposed between us, we know that he is pacified towards us. But since it is also needful for us to know that Christ came forth to us from the fountain of God's free mercy, Scripture explicitly teaches both; the Father's wrath has been placated by the Son's sacrifice and thus the Son was offered for the expiation of human sins, because God has had mercy upon them and has made this sacrifice the pledge of his receiving them into his favour. To sum up: wherever there is sin there is also God's wrath for God is not propitious towards us until he has blotted out our sins by not imputing them. Since our consciences cannot grasp this blessing apart from the intervention of Christ's sacrifice, Paul is right to make it the foundation and cause of reconciliation as far as we are concerned.

Having entrusted to us. He says again that a commission to offer this reconciliation to us has been given to ministers of the gospel. For an objection could be raised. It might be asked, 'Where is Christ the peacemaker between God and humanity now? How far from us does he dwell?' He says that as he once suffered, so now every day he offers the fruit of his suffering to us through the gospel which he has given to the world as a sure and certain record of his completed work of reconciliation. Thus the duty of ministers is to apply to us the fruit of Christ's death.

But in case anyone should imagine this application in some such magical manner as the papists have invented, we should note carefully what he says next and how for him the application consists entirely of the preaching of the gospel. For the pope and his priests use this as a pretext to provide some shadow of warrant for the altogether ungodly and execrable traffic they conduct over the salvation of souls. 'The Lord', they say, 'has given us commission and authority to forgive sins.' I

accept this, provided that they carry out the work of ambassadors as Paul here describes it . . . The ministers of the church restore us to God's favour in a right and orderly manner by bearing witness to us through the gospel of how God has been reconciled to us by his grace. . . .

20. *As though God were exhorting.* This is of the greatest importance and indeed absolutely necessary to give authority to our ministry. For who would allow a question that that involves his eternal salvation to depend merely upon human testimony? . . .

We beg on behalf of Christ . . .

Be reconciled. We should note that here Paul is dealing with believers and he declares that he has to execute his commission to them every day. Christ did not suffer just to expiate our sins once, nor was the gospel instituted only in order that the sins we committed before baptism should be forgiven us, but rather, since we sin every day, so by a daily forgiveness God receives us into his favour. The work of the gospel ambassadors is perpetual, for the gospel must be proclaimed ceaselessly in the church to the end of the world and it cannot be preached without a promise of the forgiveness of sins. We have here an explicit and relevant passage to refute the ungodly teaching of the papists which requires men to seek the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins elsewhere than in the expiation accomplished in Christ's death . . . He recalls us, as much after baptism as before it, to that one expiation made by Christ, that we may know that we always receive forgiveness by free unmerited grace.

21. *Him who knew no sin.* Note well how in all Paul's writings there is no other way of returning into God's favour than that which is founded exclusively upon Christ's sacrifice. Let us learn then always to look to him, when we wish to be absolved from guilt. It is commonly taught that here 'sin' means an expiatory sacrifice for sin, so that it is rendered *piaculum* in Latin. In this and other passages Paul has borrowed this expression from the Hebrew in which *āshām* means

both an expiatory sacrifice and a fault or a crime. But the meaning of this word and of the entire sentence will be better understood if we compare the two sides of the antithesis contained in it. Sin is opposed to righteousness for Paul teaches that we were made the righteousness of God as a result of Christ's having been made sin. Here righteousness means not a quality or habit but something imputed to us, since we are said to have received the righteousness of Christ. What then is meant by 'sin'? It is the guilt on account of which we are accused before the judgement of God. As a man's curse used to be cast upon the sacrificial victim, so Christ's condemnation was our absolution and with his stripes we are healed.

The righteousness of God in him. First, the righteousness of God means here not the righteousness that is given to us by God, but rather the righteousness that is approved by him, just as in John 12.43 the glory of God means that which God approves and the glory of men that which wins the vain approval of the world. So in Rom. 3.23 when he says that 'we have come short of the glory of God' he means that in ourselves we have nothing in which to glory before God. To appear to be righteous before men is not difficult, but that is only a false semblance of righteousness, which finally brings about our ruin, for the only true righteousness is that which is accepted of God.

We may now return to the contrast drawn in this verse between righteousness and sin. How can we become righteous before God? In the same way as Christ became a sinner. For he took, as it were, our person, that he might be the offender in our name and thus might be reckoned a sinner, not because of his own offences but because of those of others, since he himself was pure and free from every fault and bore the penalty that was our due and not his own. Now in the same way we are righteous in him, not because we have satisfied God's judgement by our own works, but because we are judged in relation to Christ's righteousness which we have put on by faith, that it may become our own. That is why I have chosen

to retain the preposition 'in' rather than replace it by *per*, 'through', since this gives a meaning more in line with Paul's intention.

1. Why reconciliation?

Calvin lets his answer to this question emerge as the exposition proceeds: 'by nature children of wrath'; God is *infensus*, hostile to us (here translated weakly, 'displeased'); 'regards us with abhorrence' (*exosus*, hated); enmity, anger of God, etc. Some points of translation suggest a nervous translator! The reference (v. 19) to 'a separation on their side', on the side of human beings, should perhaps be 'affecting them' (*eorum respectu*); 'quarrel . . . resolved' (v. 18) is weak for 'division . . . abolished' (*dissidio . . . abolito*).

We need not delay over this question. Calvin makes it clear that while our sins are still counted against us there can be no peace between God and ourselves. Musculus brings this out more explicitly, but no commentator reveals a need for a direct address to the question 'why?' at the outset.¹²

2. God's initiative

Calvin leaves this largely unnoticed until v. 19 is reached, but Musculus's more expansive exposition highlights it most effectively: 'God did not wait for us until we pursued reconciliation as suppliants, but he reconciled us when we were ignorant of his purpose, indeed alienated and dead in sins, and did so of his own free initiative and mercy through his Son. . . . Offended majesty takes the lead in reconciling its enemies.' We are sampling here the commentaries of pastor-theologians, for whom it was the most natural thing to lace their works with worship, exhortation, rebuke and consolation. The age of the restrictedly academic commentary had not arrived.

3. The ministry of reconciliation

This deserves more than routine attention, for Calvin is not the only expositor

to treat this ministry almost as part of the effecting of reconciliation. 'It is the illustrious title of the gospel that it is an embassy to reconcile men and women to God.' When we hear the gospel, we may know that God is engaged with us (*tractare*) and, as it were, negotiating (*pacisci*) about our return to his favour. It is God entreating, beseeching, begging us through his servants (v. 20). Calvin properly stresses that this ministry is one of declaration—that God has been made propitious to sinners—and he can combine both emphases as follows (on v. 19): 'The church's ministers in due order restore us to God's favour when through the gospel they are witnesses to us of God's favour having been reconciled to us.' (The Latin is bolder than Smail's translation: *de reconciliata nobis Dei gratia*.)

Musculus nicely complements Calvin from a more anthropological angle. 'Reconciliation cannot take place between the unwilling, but requires the assent and will of both parties. Our reconciliation as far as God is concerned, is indeed completed (*perfecta*) in the death of the mediator Christ, but from our side it is not completed (*perfecta*) unless we genuinely accommodate ourselves to its terms (*conditionibus*) so that we can be receptive (*capaces*) of it. These terms are repentance and faith in Christ.'

The metaphor of the ambassador lends itself to imaginative development in more than one commentator, especially Musculus and Thomas Cajetan de Vio (before whom Luther was summoned at Augsburg in 1518). Both Calvin and Musculus on v. 19 ('entrusted to us the word of reconciliation') go out of their way to find fault with the multiplication of means of reconciliation under the papacy—masses, private confessions, papal indulgences, absolutions, what Calvin calls 'that whole godless and execrable traffic that they exercise in the salvation of souls'. Ministers have warrant in Scripture to be ambassadors of the gospel—no more and no less.

Paul's phrase has accustomed us to speaking of 'the ministry of reconciliation' as a task to be undertaken, or at least

shared, by human agents. Why do we not so comfortably talk of our engaging in 'the ministry of atonement'? Or even in 'the ministry of salvation/redemption/etc.'? Calvin wants to emphasize, and Musculus even more clearly, that human ministry is almost part of the atonement. To paraphrase Cyprian (and many after him, including Calvin), 'No atonement without the church's ministry.'

The difference between Catholicism and Protestantism may be expressed in the following terms: whereas the former sacramentalises 'the ministry of reconciliation' (or atonement), the latter homiletises it.

4. God was in Christ

Here dogma and exegesis meet, with no agreement among expositors and sometimes confusion. Calvin divides the statement, making 'God's being in Christ' the intervention which effects 'the reconciling of the world'. He has no doubt that 'God' here means the Father, for it would be awkward to say that 'the divine nature of Christ was in him'. Musculus agrees with this reading, but very briefly—'God himself indwelling Christ his Son'. Erasmus's *Paraphrases* put it neatly, 'God the Father was in him.'¹³ But for Bullinger the text speaks unquestioningly of two-nature Christology, to which, in a relatively short treatment of these verses, he gives disproportionate and fairly technical attention.¹⁴ Both Bullinger and Calvin cite John 10:38 ('I am in the Father . . .'), but with divergent interpretations. Conrad Pellican, Reformer in Basel and Zurich and able Hebrew scholar, presented both, apparently without discerning their incompatibility—i.e. both 'God the Father was in him' and 'Truly Christ was God', and there was no salvation or life for us unless he were so. The explanation for this lies, I think, in the derivative character of Pellican's material.¹⁵

Others make no comment at all or too briefly to be of much help. Cajetan gives three possible constructions (and then combines them all), one being simply 'God was in Christ *personaliter*'. Another

understands God as active 'through Christ reconciling the world'. Although there is an obvious difference between the latter, more instrumental role for Christ and other interpretations which stress the coming or presence of God in Christ, the way Calvin develops his comment on this clause—Christ as Immanuel, for example—shows that conceptual sharpness was elusive.

5. How was reconciliation effected?

'By not imputing their sins to them' is Calvin's distinctive version of the Pauline text—*non imputando* instead of the nominative participle (*imputans*) of the Greek, the Vulgate and Erasmus, but he leaves his readers to discover his reason. His exposition of what he calls the *officium Christi* draws upon a variety of concepts—propitiation, placation, pacification, removal of hostility, expiation, remission, adoption (a distinctive Calvinian note), sacrifice, mediation. He pursues no narrow exegetical path in presenting the import of 'not imputing'. What becomes crystal-clear (and this may be why Calvin opted for the instrumental gerundive) is the total absence from his mind—and from every sixteenth-century commentator I have looked at—of the notion that God's presence in Christ of itself reconciles and non-imputes. The profusion of metaphors emphasises that reconciliation, i.e. the pacifying of wrath, is not achieved without remission of sins, that is, the non-imputing of sins, which requires the mediation of Christ's sacrifice.

6. Which 'world' is reconciled?

Calvin omits any mention. Musculus, however, aware that some in his day from this and similar passages attempted to revive the error of universal salvation, faces the question. 'As far as the work of reconciliation goes, it is ready (*paratum*) and sufficient for the reconciling of the whole human race.' But, as we noted above, for Musculus there can be no reconciliation with the unwilling. But if, in response to 'the ministry of reconcili-

ation', all the world embraced it, then no mortal would perish. Since this is not the case, Musculus concludes that only those share in 'this universal (*generalis*) grace' who embrace it in repentance and faith. What could be neater?

It was left to Catholic Cajetan to show a concern to limit 'the world' to God's people, suggesting that the phrase be construed differently—'reconciling the world-in-Christ', that is, not the world in its entirety but as it is yoked to Christ, all from any nation who are members of Christ, the elect. This construal, he believes, squares both with the truth and with the *ratio* of the ministry of reconciliation.

7. When did God start loving us?

Calvin raises a momentous issue, which emerges as much from his exposition as from Paul's text. He has said, on 'by not imputing . . .', 'As long as God imputes our sins to us, it is necessary that he regard us with abhorrence (*exosus*), for he cannot be friendly or propitious to sinners.' But were we not loved before the foundation of the world? Was not God's love the cause of the expiation of sins? Calvin concludes that Scripture teaches two apparently contradictory things: 'I admit that the love of God is prior in time and also in order as regards God (*quantum ad Deum*), but from our point of view (*respectu nostri*) the beginning of love is placed in Christ's sacrifice.' (Not the least interesting feature of this sentence is that Calvin uses two words for love, *dilectio* and *amor*.)

One of the things Calvin wants to say is clear enough: we sinners cannot be persuaded that God is merciful to us until we see that mercy embodied in the sacrifice of the mediator. Hence Paul is right to make this sacrifice the beginning and cause of reconciliation *nostri respectu*. But Calvin does not appeal to his well-known theme of accommodation in order to resolve the difficulty, which in reality persists. One might deduce from this paragraph that, according to Calvin, God both loves and hates us (sinners, the elect) from eternity. (It is interesting that

neither does Calvin resort to the time-eternity difference.)

The Reformer confronts the same problem at greater length in *Institutio* 2:16:2–4, where he displays a sharper touch but ends up with a long quotation from Augustine, which includes the following: 'In a marvellous and divine way God loved us even when he hated us . . . He knew how, at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made and to love what he had made.' This invokes a distinction not between sinner and sin but between sinner and creature, which in turn may raise some eyebrows. It is not the glory of the gospel to set forth God's love for sinners? Yet this is how Calvin himself put it: 'All of us have in ourselves something deserving of God's hatred . . . But because the Lord wills not to lose what is his in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love. However much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures.'

This is indeed a fascinating section of the *Institutio*. At one stage Calvin seems to be adapting a more Lutheran law-gospel model (unless we are overwhelmed by fear of God's wrath, we will not fully grasp the divine mercy). At another point he asserts that, although his explanation is geared 'to the weakness of our capacity' (*captus*), i.e. accommodated, 'it is not said falsely'. In fact what Calvin exposes here is the difficulty of propounding propitiation and penal substitution without setting divine justice over against divine mercy, and Father over against Son. In wrestling with it here we observe Calvin the biblical theologian as much as the systematician. Propitiation is sometimes criticised for dividing the Trinity. One reply might be that we must follow Scripture, in the light of which the Trinity too is to be construed.

8. Being reconciled every day

Musculus drew attention to the absence of an object 'you' in v. 20: 'as though God were exhorting through us, we beg on behalf of Christ . . .' Consequently 'Be reconciled' need not be viewed as

addressed to the Corinthians but as illustrative of the general proclamation God has entrusted to his servants. Or perhaps there were some among the Corinthians who had not responded in repentance and faith and still needed to be reconciled.

Calvin had no problem in treating 'Be reconciled' as spoken to believers, to whom Paul has to execute his commission (the ministry of reconciliation) every day. He then takes our breath away: 'Christ did not suffer in order once only to expiate our sins . . . Just as we sin daily, so also by a daily remission are we received by God into favour (*gratiam*).'¹⁵ The voice of the gospel ambassador is to resound in the church to the end of the world. What surprises here is the use of 'expiate' of the ever-repeated divine forgiveness of our ever-repeated sinning. It reminds one immediately of the Lutheran formula *simul iustus, simul peccator, simul penitens*. But in the context in this commentary, Calvin applies it to a condemnation of Catholic teaching which requires people 'to seek remission of sins after baptism elsewhere than from the expiation accomplished (*peracta*!) in the death of Christ'. He rejects the distinction between pre-baptismal and post-baptismal sins, which had had enormously far-reaching effects on the shape of medieval religion in the West. So here we observe an example of what I earlier characterised as the dispersion of the doctrine of atonement in the Reformers. In a myriad passages like this the once-for-all reconciliation accomplished in Christ's sacrifice is turned by Reformers to a sharp critique of central elements in papal religion.

9. The great exchange

In what sense was Christ 'made sin'? The common explanation, found in Erasmus,¹⁶ Pellican, Musculus and in Catholic writers like Cajetan, cites Hebrew usage of 'sin' in the sense of 'sacrifice (*hostia*) for sin' (Exod. 30:10, Levit. 4:21, Hosea 4:8). Calvin mentions this interpretation, but prefers one that does greater justice to the parallelism of the verse. Just as the righteousness we are said to be made is not a

qualitas or a *habitus* but given by imputation, so the converse is guilt, and Calvin can talk of 'Christ's condemnation'. We become righteous before God 'in the way in which Christ became a sinner. He adopted, as it were, our *personam*, so as to become guilty under our name and be judged as a sinner, not by his own offences but by others'.

Melanchthon comes close to this: as 'made sin' Christ was *quiddam reum coram Deo*, 'something guilty (neuter) before God, whereby he felt the horrendous wrath of the eternal Father against all sins, as though he had polluted himself with your sins and mine and everybody's.' Erasmus's *Annotationes*, on the other hand, reflect a concern (which he ascribes also to Lefèvre d'Étaples) that Christ should not from this text be called 'a sinner'.

Yet however 'made sin' is exegeted, all commentators stress that in this character Christ bore the penalty for our sins. He is called redeemer, says Melanchthon, because he paid the price for us. More than other writers Melanchthon dwells on the dread awfulness of the transaction. Musculus in turn emphasises God as the agent: 'God himself laid on his innocent Son all our sins, to be expiated on the cross, outside the gate.'

An illustration how exegesis may reflect dogma rather than determine it is provided by the Dominican Ambrosius Catharinus (Politi). 'God made him sin' is a figure common to scripture (though no other instances are given), meaning that God placed all our sins, especially original sin, on him. In his body, crucified and dead, sin is at the same time crucified and dead. This prepares the ground for Politi to link the next clause, 'that we might become the righteousness of God in him', to Christ's resurrection. 'Righteousness' here means 'righteous people', on the analogy of circumcision—or simply, 'the righteous'.¹⁷

It is with this final clause of the chapter that less of a consensus becomes evident among our commentators. Politi's leaning towards the righteousness of 'the new creature' comes through in Cajetan. He

first speaks of righteousness communicated to us 'from the merit, the sanctification, the reconciliation of Christ', but then of our being transformed gradually into that righteousness, so that we progressively become righteous in understanding, motive, action and endurance.

For Calvin, on the other hand, righteousness here is a matter solely of imputation, not given to us but acceptable to God (*illi probata*). He backs this up with some comparative exegesis. By the great exchange, as Christ became a sinner, 'so we are now righteous in him, . . . and are assessed (*censemur*) by reference to Christ's righteousness, which we put on by faith so that it becomes ours'. 'In Christ' rather than 'through Christ' (so Erasmus, although originally in 1516 he translated *in illo*) is a significant difference for Calvin.

Musculus explicitly sets v. 21 in the framework of an 'exchange' (*commutatio*), and forcefully parallels the two movements. By bearing our sins Christ no more became a sinner like us than we, by receiving his righteousness by imputation, become righteous like him. Melancthon, on the contrary, wants to go further. 'We are pronounced not guilty but righteous, God justifying, that is, accepting us and at the same time renewing and vivifying us . . . He covers me with his righteousness like a coat; it is imputed to me and at the same time initiates in me new and eternal righteousness.' Calvin would not have disagreed, but he did not find it in this passage.

A study of this kind cannot produce a systematic or unified presentation of the atonement in Reformation eyes. That would have been possible, I submit, only by concentrating on one Reformer or one confession or catechism. Nevertheless, I doubt if any significant element of a doctrine of the atonement faithful to the main thrust of the Reformation has been omitted entirely. Furthermore we have reminded ourselves how the Reformers professed to do theology, out of the Scriptures in interaction with other scriptural expositors. And in 2 Corinthians 5 we have a passage that marvellously

concentrates minds. We may end with Bullinger's commendation of it:

In brief compass this chapter is full of saving doctrine, and I urge that it be often read and re-read. It has a wonderful warmth of the Holy Spirit, it reinforces hope beyond measure, its comfort is of the highest. It presents the liveliest depiction of the gospel and the most exalted praise of the ministry of the Word. You can scarcely read a more vivid passage elsewhere in Paul. Pay heed, therefore, believing soul, to what the Lord is telling you.

Summary

The atonement was not an issue in Reformation controversy, unlike justification. Its theological treatment is dispersed, appearing under other heads, such as sacrifice and the mass or Christology, if at all. The characteristic mode of Reformation theology is scriptural exposition rather than systematics. So this paper centres on Calvin's comments on 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, taking note of other sixteenth-century expositions. Not only does Calvin subsume the church's ministerial role within 'the ministry of reconciliation', i.e. atonement, but also, through taking 'Be reconciled . . .' (v. 20) as addressed to believers, he envisages a daily 'expiating' of our sins in ever-renewed repentance. Moreover, he grapples with the question when God started loving us. No less frankly, Calvin reads the passage as presenting Christ as guilty and a sinner 'in our person'. Virtually all the ingredients of a Reformation doctrine of atonement are here.

Notes

- 1 *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, tr. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL, 1978), 146.
- 2 *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia, 1959), 29–30, 58, 252–3.
- 3 *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, ed. A. C. Cochrane (London, 1966), 121.
- 4 Cochrane, *Reformed*, 170; Philip Schaff,

- The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols, 6th edit. (New York, 1931), III, 447.
- 5 Schaff, *Creeds* III, 444–6.
 - 6 *Ibid.* III, 406–8.
 - 7 Cochrane, *Reformed*, 246 (his own work, 222–3). See instead Schaff, *Creeds* III, 257, 853.
 - 8 George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN, 1988), 220–23, 59, referring to Ian D. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1970).
 - 9 Cited in the *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VIII, ed. Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 599; for the original, *Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe), 50, 590.
 - 10 *Calvin's Commentaries: The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* . . . , tr. T. A. Smail (Edinburgh 1964), 77. The text of Calvin's comments that follows is largely from Smail, except that I have provided a fresh translation of the Pauline verses and lightly revised some of the commentary. There is a modest essay on 'Epochs in the History of Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:14–21', by Richard T. Mead in J. P. Lewis (ed.), *Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:14–21: An Exercise in Hermeneu-*
 - tics* (Lewiston, NY, 1989), 65–86. Its brief treatment of Calvin (82–6) is not wholly accurate.
 - 11 *In Apostoli Pauli Ambas Epistolas ad Corinthios* . . . (Basel, 1611), 392. The commentary was first published in 1559.
 - 12 Melanchthon speaks of 'the evil' of sin, 'with which God is horribly angry and which has been horribly condemned by God': *Preface* to his incomplete commentary on 2 Corinthians (it did not reach ch. 5), *Corpus Reformatorum* 15, 1198–9.
 - 13 *Paraphrases, ad loc.*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. LeClerc (Leiden, 1703–6), VII, 925.
 - 14 *In Omnes Apostolicas Epistolas . . . Commentarii* . . . (Zurich, 1549), 290. The first edition of the commentary on 2 Corinthians appeared in 1535.
 - 15 *In Omnes Apostolicas Epistolas, Pauli . . . Commentarii* . . . (Zurich, 1539), 300–301.
 - 16 *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: Acts–Romans—I and II Corinthians*, ed. Anne Reeve and M. A. Screech (*Studies in the History of Christian Thought* XLII; Leiden, 1990), *ad loc.*
 - 17 *Commentaria . . . in Omnes Divi Pauli . . . Epistolas* . . . (Venice, 1551), 233–4.

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