

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rewriting Calvin: Schleiermacher on the atonement and priestly office of Christ

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## Abstract

The burden of this essay is to show that Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology of the atonement and account of Christ's soteriological work as priest is marked by recognisably Reformed commitments and logics that both build from and critique John Calvin and later Reformed scholastics. The essay contends that it is when Schleiermacher departs strongly from orthodox conclusions regarding substitutionary atonement that he mostly clearly appeals to key aspects of Reformed theology. Put differently, when Schleiermacher critiques the material content of Reformed orthodoxy, he does so by drawing on other doctrinal claims that are fundamental in Reformed thought: the divine decree, union with Christ, the import of sanctification and the interconnection between dogmatic expression and Christian piety. Schleiermacher presents creative solutions to theological conundrums, particularly those that plague Calvin and the later Reformed tradition about the relationship between God's eternal decree of grace and the appeasement of divine wrath on the cross.

**Keywords:** atonement; John Calvin; Reformed theology; Friedrich Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher's summary of §104 in the *Christian Faith* reads as if it has been extracted directly from the pages of Reformed orthodoxy. Employing the typology of Christ's threefold office, he describes Christ's priestly work as including 'his perfect fulfillment of the law, His atoning death, and his intercession'.<sup>1</sup> These same categories of active and passive obedience to fulfil the law, vicarious suffering and heavenly intercession are all found in the descriptions of Christ's priestly work *pro nobis* by earlier Reformed theologians such as John Calvin, Theodore Beza and Francis Turretin. While Schleiermacher's categories are borrowed from Calvin and later Reformed theologians, his own account of Christ's redemptive work creatively deconstructs and then rethinks these central Reformed theories of Christ's death. Gone are any notions of divine wrath and punishment, vicarious payment for sin and the soteriological elevation of the cross over the ministry of Jesus. Instead, each aspect of Christ's priestly work is rethought within Schleiermacher's broader account of redemption and reconciliation as

<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, trans. D. M. Ballie et al. (London: T&T Clark, 1999), §104, p. 451. All citations will be taken from the Ballie translations with corresponding references to the section number (§° in the original German from Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube* (1830/31), (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). German text or terminology will be noted in parentheses, with citations given to the English translation's pagination.

the assumption of believers ‘into the power of Christ’s God-consciousness’<sup>2</sup> and ‘into the community of his unclouded blessedness’.<sup>3</sup> In order for Schleiermacher to speak in the language of Protestant Reformed orthodoxy, he must rewrite Reformed theology.

### *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*

The burden of this essay is to show that Schleiermacher’s reconstruction of Christ’s soteriological work as priest is nonetheless marked by recognisably Reformed commitments and logic. In fact, I contend that it is where Schleiermacher departs most strongly from scholastic orthodox conclusions regarding substitutionary atonement that he mostly clearly appeals to key aspects of Reformed theology. Put differently, when Schleiermacher critiques the material content of Reformed orthodoxy, he does so by drawing on other doctrinal claims that are fundamental in Reformed thought: the divine decree, union with Christ, the import of sanctification and the interconnection between dogmatic expression and Christian piety. In so doing, Schleiermacher presents creative solutions to theological conundrums, particularly those that plague Calvin and the later Reformed tradition about the relationship between God’s eternal decree of grace and the appeasement of divine wrath on the cross.

Nearly four decades ago, Brian Gerrish invited theologians to consider Schleiermacher’s relationship to the Reformation and to explore ‘the elements of tradition and innovation’ in the great Berliner’s relationship to Luther, Calvin and the later tradition.<sup>4</sup> The past two decades have seen a revival of scholarship on Schleiermacher, especially in English-language work, that reads him not only as the founding figure in the liberal theological tradition, but also as a Protestant theologian engaged in the task of thinking with scripture, tradition and context to articulate afresh the doctrinal claims of the church and its piety, especially his own union church that sought to bridge Lutheran and Reformed divides.<sup>5</sup> Dawn DeVries, Christine Helmer, Kevin Hector, Shellie Poe and Ruth Jackson Ravenscroft, to name only a few, have engaged the material content of Schleiermacher’s dogmatic theology. By shifting the primary scholarly focus away from the *Speeches* and early paragraphs of the *Glaubenslehre*, renewed attention is given to Schleiermacher’s material contributions to theological understandings of the divine decree, the integration of Christ’s person and work, ecclesiology and divine love. This work has also succeeded in drawing Schleiermacher into historical theological conversation with his Protestant theological inheritance, moving beyond readings that interpret him solely the founder of modern liberal theology. The theological method of *Glaubenslehre* means that Schleiermacher rarely quotes directly from the Reformers or later Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy, but he does engage ‘representatives of Reformed Orthodoxy more implicitly’.<sup>6</sup> Daniel Pederson has recently argued that

<sup>2</sup>CF, §100.1, p. 425.

<sup>3</sup>CF, §101, p. 431.

<sup>4</sup>B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 194.

<sup>5</sup>While there continues to be important scholarship on Schleiermacher in German, the focus has been primarily on his methodological, philosophical and hermeneutical contributions and less on his dogmatic claims. There are exceptions to this generalisation in the work of Dietrich Korsch, who sees Schleiermacher as a theologian of redemption.

<sup>6</sup>Henk van den Belt, ‘Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Reformed Orthodox Doctrine of Predestination’, in Frank van der Pol (ed.), *The Doctrine of Election in Reformed Perspective: Historical and Theological Investigations of the Synod of Dort 1618–1619* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), p. 218.

there is significant continuity between Schleiermacher and Reformed scholastic accounts of the divine attributes.<sup>7</sup> As this essay will show, Schleiermacher's decision to deploy the threefold office to explicate his doctrine of the work of Christ is a case in point of implicit engagement with the Reformed tradition, albeit one where he redeploys categories for new theological ends.

Beyond tracing the connections between Schleiermacher and the Protestant theology that he inherited and rethought, the essay also challenges dominant depictions of Schleiermacher's theology of the atonement and redemption as subjectivist, individualist and fundamentally concerned with moral influence. Too often, systematic theologians both within and beyond the Reformed and Lutheran traditions from within which Schleiermacher wrote have neglected his insights, relying instead on cruder stereotypes of his thought. The reasons for this view of Schleiermacher's theology of the atonement are multiple, but I shall highlight two. First is Schleiermacher's (in) famous 1787 letter to his father. In it, the 18-year-old Schleiermacher expresses his discontent with Moravian pietist theology of the cross: 'I cannot believe that his death was a vicarious atonement ... and I cannot believe it to have been necessary.'<sup>8</sup> While Schleiermacher never returns to a theology of vicarious satisfaction, his theology becomes far more developed and engaged with the tradition than when he wrote this letter. Far too much has been made of Schleiermacher's theology of atonement from a letter written when he was only 18 years of age and challenging the inherited theology and piety of his father and community.

More important than the letter is the prevalence of 20th-century critiques of Schleiermacher, be they by Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Gustav Aulén, Colin Gunton or George Lindbeck. These works insufficiently engage Schleiermacher's mature theological reflection in the later edition of the *Glaubenslehre*, focusing instead on his method and philosophical theology. For instance, Aulén's influential, if reductive, categorisation of three types of atonement still shapes how Schleiermacher's theology of redemption is perceived. Aulén dedicates a chapter to Schleiermacher and his so-called 19th-century disciples, arguing that Schleiermacher's theology is fundamentally grounded in commitments to the Enlightenment and thus is inherently anthropocentric. In his reading, 'Schleiermacher says quite plainly' – although no citation is offered – 'that the change in the spiritual life which comes to pass as the soul's consciousness of God is deepened, is the real meaning of that which is called Atonement'.<sup>9</sup> He further asserts that the role of Christ is not one of Redeemer, but of 'the starting-point of the influences that work towards the strengthening of man's consciousness of God, because He is the embodiment of the ideal religion, the Pattern Man, who has an absolutely perfect and blessed consciousness of God'.<sup>10</sup> A similar example can be found in Gunton's reading of Schleiermacher. Gunton claims that Schleiermacher's rewriting is a 'reductionist account of the doctrine' marked by a rationalism that leads to 'a strongly subjectivist interpretation of traditional doctrines, so that their meaning is realized more in the experience of the Christian than with reference to the historical incarnation and

<sup>7</sup>Daniel Pederson, 'Schleiermacher and the Reformed Scholastics on the Divine Attributes', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17/4 (2015), pp. 413–31.

<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Schleiermacher: As Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, 2 vols., trans. Frederica Rowan (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1860), vol. 1, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2010), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

cross'.<sup>11</sup> Gunton argues that Schleiermacher circumscribes the saving work of Jesus to merely the historical act of transmitting his unique God-consciousness to a community. As this essay will argue, Schleiermacher's rejection of substitutionary atonement also includes a rejection of salvation as moral example alone. Instead, Schleiermacher offers an account of the work of Christ that envisions the whole of Jesus' life, ministry and death as one entire act of redemption and reconciliation. No single point can or should be isolated from the whole. Moreover, the redemptive and reconciling activity of Christ is fundamentally framed through an account of our union with the person of Christ, one that is mediated in history by the Spirit and through the community that Christ founded. What is lost, then, in Aulén's and Gunton's renderings of Schleiermacher's theology of redemption is the central place of union or communion with Christ. In fact, they mistakenly ascribe to Schleiermacher the very view he rejects: namely an exemplary atonement. So while Gunton is right that Schleiermacher deploys the language of the Christian tradition and gives it new or altered meaning, especially in regards to terms prominent in the Reformed tradition like satisfaction or vicarious atonement, this is not done in order to champion an individualistic, rationalist or exemplary account of redemption. Attending more closely to the heritage that Schleiermacher received and rethought presents new possibilities for contemporary theologians, both those within the Reformed tradition and beyond, to engage critically and constructively with Schleiermacher for debates on union with Christ and the meaning of the atonement.

### Calvin on necessity and grace

Before turning to a study of Schleiermacher's rewriting of Calvin and later Reformed scholastics, attention needs to be given to an ambiguity in Calvin's discussion of the priestly office of Christ and how it shapes his understanding of God's love and the means of divine forgiveness. John Calvin is regularly viewed as a chief representative of a penal substitutionary account of the atonement. For the sake of this article's argument, we need not linger on the centuries of debates on Calvin's theology of atonement. Still attention must be given to a tension that runs throughout book II, chapters 12–17, of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* between Calvin's insistence on God's free grace and eternal decree of love that precedes our reconciliation and his equally adamant claim that Christ's atoning death merits our salvation through alleviating God's wrath and appeasing justice. Calvin adheres to two non-negotiable claims that are seemingly irreconcilable. God freely reconciles human beings to Godself; God must receive atonement and justice be repaid in order for God to be reconciled to human beings. Calvin himself admits that there is 'some sort of contradiction' in upholding both claims, but asserts that both are affirmed by scripture as an accommodation to human capacity and as a testimony to divine benevolence.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin begins his description of the priestly office of Christ as consisting in the mediation of the divine and the human being through the offering of a perfect sacrifice. 'Christ's priestly office: as a pure and stainless Mediator he is by his holiness to reconcile us to God. But God's righteous curse bars our access to him, and God in his capacity as

<sup>11</sup>Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 504.

judge is angry toward us.’<sup>13</sup> According to Calvin’s reading of the Old Testament’s account of the priesthood, the priest acts as a mediator between God’s holiness and Israel’s sinfulness, offering sacrifices on behalf of the people. In his messianic office of priest, Jesus Christ fulfils this mediatorial and sacrificial role. Christ’s mediation occurs through ‘an expiation’ and a ‘sacrifice’ that would ‘obtain God’s favor’ and ‘appease God’s wrath’.<sup>14</sup> Taking on the dual role of both priest and sacrifice, Calvin shows how Christ paid the price of our sins in his death: ‘the apostles clearly state that he paid the price to redeem us from the penalty of death’.<sup>15</sup> It is on Christ’s death that Calvin claims ‘our whole salvation turns’.<sup>16</sup> The central means of salvation and redemption comes through Christ’s death.

At the same time, Calvin is aware that a singular focus on Christ’s death jeopardises God’s freedom and might call into question the unmerited nature of grace. He intersperses his reading of the sacrificial nature of the atonement with constant refrains such as the following: ‘He is moved by pure and free love of us to receive us into grace’, and ‘the work of atonement derives from God’s love’.<sup>17</sup> Christ’s death, while meriting salvation and appeasing God’s wrath, is not the conditioning cause of God’s love toward sinners. God’s love is the generative driving force of reconciliation and redemption. Calvin approvingly quotes Augustine, ‘the fact that we were reconciled through Christ’s death must not be understood as if his Son reconciled us to him that he might now begin to love those he had hated. Rather, we have already been reconciled to him who loves us’.<sup>18</sup> So while Calvin opens by insisting that human beings are enemies of God, he also asserts the priority of God’s love as testified to in John 3:16 and Romans 5.

Why then an atonement? Why the need for expiation, sacrifice, appeasement and death, if God’s love precedes reconciliation? Could not God have forgiven without appeasement? At the most basic level, Calvin eschews these more speculative questions and offers an account of the salvific importance of the cross in the Gospels, Pauline epistles and Hebrews. The cross is necessary because it is scripturally narrated as such. In addition to this scriptural focus, two key features of Calvin’s argument demand further attention, especially in relationship to how Schleiermacher develops his own argument nearly three centuries later.

First, Calvin appeals to the eternal decree of God in order to make sense of the tension between divine love of sinners and divine wrath toward sinners. ‘We go back to God’s ordinance, the first cause. For God solely of his own good pleasure appointed him Mediator to obtain salvation for us.’<sup>19</sup> The atonement, the incarnation and the cross, then, are rooted in the eternal decree of God. Expiation is necessary because God willed it to be so. Aware of the paradox, Calvin writes, ‘in some ineffable way, God loves us and yet was angry toward us at the same time, until he became reconciled to us in Christ’.<sup>20</sup> God’s eternal decree and free grace is given priority, but almost in contradiction to the priority that Calvin also places on Christ’s vicarious death.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 501.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 532.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 502.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 506.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 506–7.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 529.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 530. Note how for Calvin God is reconciled to us and not only us to God.

Dawn DeVries writes, ‘although Calvin speaks of the need for union with Christ ... he insists, nonetheless, that an objective, historical sacrifice is the *sine qua non* of reconciliation’.<sup>21</sup> Even when Calvin wants to emphasise God’s sovereignty, freedom and eternal decree, he is also unable to free himself fully from the transactional language that implies the necessity of expiation for God.

In addition to explaining the necessity of the cross by appealing to the divine decree, Calvin argues that divine wrath and an expiatory death serve to enhance Christian piety by illustrating the depths of the love of God. Language of God’s anger at sin and sinners testifies to the cost of salvation; ‘expressions of this sort have been accommodated to our capacity that we may better understand how miserable and ruinous our condition is apart from Christ’.<sup>22</sup> The scriptural tension between anger and mercy within God is a ‘fitting’ (*convenire*) way to communicate God’s work in Christ and enhance Christian piety.<sup>23</sup> By emphasising the depths of sin and the rightful anger of God towards humans apart from Christ, the redeemed sinner is ‘even more moved’ by God’s benevolence and the atoning work of Christ. Centuries later, after numerous critiques of Calvin’s theology of the cross as overly transactional or valorising suffering, it is easy to lose sight of the original pastoral aim. Calvin thought, rightly or wrongly, that knowing the cost of grace and the length that Jesus Christ went on our behalf to secure our salvation from God’s wrath would engender deeper love of God in human beings. ‘Grace is too much weakened unless we grant to his sacrifice the power of expiating, appeasing, and making satisfaction.’<sup>24</sup> In fact, Calvin argues that understanding the pastoral function of scripture’s discussion of the atonement is the key to dispose of the apparent contradiction between God’s anger and mercy. Emphasising both God’s mercy and Christ’s merit turns humans away from the importance of our own works and toward a recognition of the magnanimity of grace.

While these pastoral provisions are important for understanding Calvin’s theology of atonement and the priestly office, there remains a nagging sense in the *Institutes* that the contradictions and conundrums are not fully resolved. Calvin may protest that ‘it is absurd to set Christ’s merit against God’s mercy’, but his rendering of God’s justice and Christ’s sacrifice implies that God’s mercy is conditional on an atoning death.<sup>25</sup> Calvin’s own intellectual migration, as noted by Paul Helm, from a recognition of the fittingness of the cross in his commentary on John to a position in the 1559 *Institutes* that inches closer toward claiming it is a necessity is a case in point.<sup>26</sup> If there is a tension in Calvin that remains unresolved, later Reformed theologians will tend to address this by arguing for the absolute necessity of the atonement. For instance, Francis Turretin sides with those ‘who maintain its absolute necessity, so that God not only has not willed to remit our sins without satisfaction, but could not do so on

<sup>21</sup>Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 98.

<sup>22</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 504.

<sup>23</sup>Here the use of *convenire* diverges from both Thomas’ use in describing the fittingness of the incarnation and crucifixion as well as from later scholastic Protestants who discuss whether or not the cross is fitting or necessary. Rather than discuss the fittingness of the atonement in relation to God, as is the focus in these debates, Calvin deploys *convenire* to depict how God’s communication was a fitting and appropriate way to communicate with finite and fallen creatures. The term functions more in relation to Calvin’s understanding of divine accommodation than in relation to the atonement.

<sup>24</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 532.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 529.

<sup>26</sup>Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 336–8.

account of his justice. This is the common opinion of the orthodox (which we follow).<sup>27</sup> John Owen similarly asserts the necessity of the cross where he argues against Socinianism that the glory of divine justice entails a commitment to the necessity of the satisfaction and the punishment of Christ.<sup>28</sup> This increasing emphasis is a response, at least in part, to the theological challenges of Socinianism, which critiqued theologies of the necessity of satisfaction by upholding the freedom and power of God. But as is often the case with theological debates, the binaries of polemics constrain theological options and push toward an overemphasis on one scriptural or theological account over its alternative. In this case, those of divine justice and wrath, the necessity of the cross and the importance of suffering in Christ's merit. It is this inheritance, as well as Calvin's more ambiguous position, that Schleiermacher inherits and simultaneously rewrites.

### Schleiermacher on Christ's mediation

Schleiermacher forcefully demurs from the Reformed argument of the necessity of Christ's death to merit divine mercy and satisfy divine justice, even as he maintains Calvin's emphasis on the import of Jesus's mediation of salvation. At the outset of his analysis of Christ's saving work, Schleiermacher critiques understandings of forgiveness of sins that 'depend on punishment' or imagine blessedness as a 'reward which God offers Christ for the suffering of that punishment'.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that Schleiermacher lacks a theology of redemption or reconciliation. Far from it. Earlier in the *Glaubenslehre*, he described redemption as the unique essence of Christianity, since Christians relate everything to 'the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth'.<sup>30</sup> Christianity is a religion of redemption that depends upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the second half of the work, and not the preliminary discussions of method, can be read as the central material core of the book. The two paragraphs (§100–1) that open the *Glaubenslehre's* account of the work of Christ articulate his understanding of redemption and reconciliation. In §100, he describes the 'redemptive work' (*erlösende Thätigkeit*) of Christ as the mediation of his own God-consciousness, both during his earthly life and through the community that he forms and continues to impact. Section 101 offers an account of Christ's 'reconciling activity' (*versöhnendte Thätigkeit*) as the assumption of the faithful into 'the community of His unclouded blessedness' (*die Gemeinschaft seiner ungetrübten Seligkeit*).<sup>31</sup> Schleiermacher defines Christ's redemptive (§100) and reconciling (§101) activity as mystical and warns against two dangers in understanding redemption: the magical and the empirical. The magical affirms the redemptive work of Christ but claims an 'influence not mediated by anything natural, yet attributed to a person'.<sup>32</sup> Redemption is attributed to Christ without attention to how this is enacted in history and mediated through the community that

<sup>27</sup>Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillisburgh, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1994), p. 419.

<sup>28</sup>John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice: Or, the Claims of Vindictory Justice Asserted* (Madrid: HardPress Publishing, 2019 [1653]).

<sup>29</sup>CF, §101.3, p. 435.

<sup>30</sup>CF, §11, p. 52.

<sup>31</sup>CF, §101, p. 431.

<sup>32</sup>CF, §100.3, p. 430.

Christ founded. By contrast, the empirical view envisions Christ's saving power as principally involving his 'teaching and example', which increases perfection in us. This empirical theology, which we already saw has been wrongly attributed to Schleiermacher by his readers, cannot account for the distinctiveness of Jesus in overcoming sin and bringing human beings into the consciousness of grace which is the 'peculiar redemptive activity of Christ'.<sup>33</sup> Growth toward perfection does not redemption make. The nature and character of Christ's redemptive and reconciling activities are neither only forensic nor merely exemplary.

Christ saves through his presentation and proclamation of the kingdom of God – which is one and the same thing as his person. This is a 'supernatural thing, which, becomes natural as soon as it emerges into manifestation'.<sup>34</sup> Schleiermacher describes this theology of salvation as mystical, insofar as it depends on the person-forming presence of Christ both in history and through the work of the church. The account that Schleiermacher charts is one that recognises the 'miracle' of Christ and redemption, but offers an account of his work and its mediation in and through history and natural means.

Schleiermacher opts to unfold his theology of Christ's mystical work through use of the threefold office of Christ as king, high priest and prophet in §§103–5. He admits that his adoption of the threefold office as a means to understand 'the whole activity of Christ' (*Gesammtthätigkeit Christi*) has the 'appearance of being very arbitrary'.<sup>35</sup> However, he engages with this categorisation both to maintain a connection between the earliest Christians' presentation of Christ's work within the context of Judaism and to draw out the distinctiveness of Christianity and the church in contrast to the 'old' kingdom.<sup>36</sup> These three offices, especially given their importance in the life of ancient Israel, provide a basis for a holistic interpretation of the meaning of Christ's redemptive work. The interconnection between the three is vital and focusing on only one risks obscuring the ways that all of Christ's ministry redeems. As Evan Kuehn rightly notes, 'extended reflection upon the actual implications of Schleiermacher's understanding of Christ as prophet, priest, and king for the rest of his system, and his doctrine of redemption in particular, has been lacking'.<sup>37</sup> For instance, neither Richard R. Niebuhr's *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* nor Catherine Kelsey's *Thinking about Christ with Schleiermacher*, though otherwise impressive books, attends to how the *Glaubenslehre's* account of Christ's work is organised around the threefold office of Christ.

The priestly office proves to be the most important for understanding how Schleiermacher engages with claims about the necessity of Christ's death. He notes how the priestly motif is often equated with sacrificial and penal theologies of the cross. He argues that, if Christ's redeeming work is only described through the priestly office, it 'would be almost impossible to avoid the magical conception of His influence'.<sup>38</sup> This is particularly apparent when examining his rendering of the typology of Christ as priest in §104, where those notions of penal substitution, vicarious payment

<sup>33</sup>CF, §100.3, p. 431.

<sup>34</sup>CF, §100.3, p. 430.

<sup>35</sup>CF, §102.1, p. 438.

<sup>36</sup>It must be noted that Schleiermacher's own account of the old kingdom and of the Old Testament is marked by strongly supersessionist logics that tend to cut off the church from Israel.

<sup>37</sup>Evan Kuehn, 'Godforsakenness as the End of Prophecy: A Proposal from Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*', *Harvard Theological Review* 107/3 (2014), p. 291.

<sup>38</sup>CF, §103.1, p. 441



and passive suffering that he rejects are customarily located. His own theological understanding of redemption and mediation requires a revision of the function of the priestly office of Christ, one that rethinks the motif through themes of union and representation instead of sacrifice and substitution.

The first step in understanding Schleiermacher's positive rewriting of Christ's work is to note the analogical nature of the threefold office. Describing Christ's work as priestly entails relating his work to the functions of the high priest in Israel. However, the theologian cannot draw a straight line from the priest's work in the temple to Christ's work of salvation. She must discern the parallel or symbol system at work in the Hebrew Bible and then alter it in order to apply it to Christ. A wholesale appropriation is deeply problematic. Accordingly, Schleiermacher transfers many 'functions of the High Priest' to 'one of the other two offices'.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Schleiermacher maintains that the priest's role of receiving teaching from God and imparting it to the people is better rendered under the prophetic office, and that the priest's blessing of the people is more aligned with the kingly office. In terms of the priestly motif, Schleiermacher is willing to appropriate those themes or concepts from the Old Testament vision of priest that he finds acceptable, even as he rejects certain elements that are inapplicable to Christ and the nature of redemption.

As such, Schleiermacher begins §104 by pointing out the representative function of the high priest in the Old Testament; the priest is set apart as a mediator in order to offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people. This motif of a perfect priest atoning for people through a representative offering is the route for viewing Christ's death as vicarious sacrifice. However, Schleiermacher borrows the notion of Christ as perfect representative in order to describe the redemptive power of Christ's life lived in constant harmony with the divine will, even as he 'disregards' 'the fact that Christ offered himself' as an 'offering'.<sup>40</sup> Christ represents humanity in his perfect God-consciousness, but Christ is not a substitutionary offering that displaces our relation to God. To use the later distinction by Dorothee Sölle, Christ is a representative of humanity not a substitution for us. Christ's priestly work is to unite us in fellowship to himself and thus to God and to 'share in His perfection, if not in execution, at least in impulse'.<sup>41</sup> Christ works as priest by constantly maintaining union with God and thereby uniting humanity to God so that we may grow in God-consciousness and blessedness.

Salvation is our assumption into fellowship with Christ, which is a 'person-forming divine influence upon human nature'.<sup>42</sup> Christ's assumption of us produces a 'new life in fellowship' consisting 'in the combination of regret and change of heart; and ... Faith, which is the appropriation of the perfection and blessedness of Christ' (§108, pp. 480–1). Redemption is the work of Christ taken up by each individual, mediated by the community through the Spirit, as they grow in God-consciousness and blessedness. Priestly mediation is shifted away from mediation as a transaction and toward an account of Christ's entire life as a mediation of the divine. Christ's high-priestly work is the result of Christ's entire life, and thus 'we can separate off no moment in His life' as the event of salvation.<sup>43</sup> Our salvation turns on the whole of Christ's life, which is continually mediated to us through the community that Christ founded.

<sup>39</sup>CF, §104.1, p. 451.

<sup>40</sup>CF, §104.1, p. 452.

<sup>41</sup>CF, §104.3, p. 455.

<sup>42</sup>CF, §100.2, p. 427.

<sup>43</sup>CF, §104.2, p. 453.

In line with Schleiermacher's moral critique of substitution, Christ's mediation of the divine continues in the life of the community and invites our participation and incorporation. Thus, Schleiermacher insists that we not locate Christ's redemption on the cross alone, but attribute it to the 'total activity of Christ', including his ongoing effect on the church (§104.1, p. 451). A single moment of vicarious sacrifice or death does not redeem; Christ's ongoing person-forming influence does.

By locating Christ's death within Christ's life, Schleiermacher is able to guard against a number of problematic interpretations. First, Schleiermacher shows how Christ's death can have a form of necessity without being explicitly chosen. He does this by interpreting Christ's decision to go to the cross as 'identical with His persistence in redemptive activity'.<sup>44</sup> Christ does not choose death *per se*; to do so would be 'arbitrary self-torture'.<sup>45</sup> Rather, Christ persisted in his vocational work of redemption, both in his proclamation of the kingdom and in his persistence in sympathising with human misery. Suffering is not a punishment for sin that levels the scales of justice. Suffering occurs because of Christ's commitment to the kingdom of God. Christ does not choose suffering or death for its own sake, but vocation and life even in the face of death's shadows. Christ can thus be said to have voluntarily chosen his death, but only insofar as it was part of the 'duty involved in His vocation' and in order to 'proclaim the full dominion of the spirit over the flesh'.<sup>46</sup>

Schleiermacher's reading of the relationship between Christ's life and death allows him to expose the dangers of viewing suffering as a punishment for sin. If Christ did not directly choose the cross, but simply persisted in his vocation, then the cross cannot be interpreted primarily as a punishment for sin. Christ's entire life, not just his death, is actually touched by suffering. 'Now Christ's sufferings can be thought of in connection with his redemptive activity only when regarded as a whole and a unity; to separate out any particular element and ascribe it a particular reconciling value' is flawed insofar as this fails to see how the whole of our lives are marked by sin and suffering.<sup>47</sup> This is the case because Christ existed in our world, one marked by experiences of suffering in the sensible self-consciousness. It is within these qualifications that he affirms, then, a connection between suffering and salvation. To borrow from Kathryn Tanner, God is not changing God's relationship to us in the redemptive activity of Christ, God is addressing our condition and relationship to God. Avoidance of suffering is simply not possible for creatures.

Christ's suffering, which is typically described under the category of passive obedience, is a characteristic of his whole life and ministry. Christ suffers in all of his life in so far as he sympathises with our sin and misery; Christ is actively obedient, even in death, as he maintains an unbroken union with God. His whole life is saving, not because of what it merits from the Father, but because of how it provides healing for us. Suffering is caused by Christ's opposition to misery and sin. The climax of his suffering was sympathy with misery. For Schleiermacher, Christ saves by maintaining blessedness and God-consciousness even in the face of sin and death. *Contra* Moltmann, there is no divine suffering in the cross or radical breach between Jesus and the one he calls Father. Instead, Christ saves by maintaining full union with God even to the point of death. His blessedness is 'not overcome by the full tide of suffering', a form of suffering

<sup>44</sup> *CF*, §104.4, p. 462.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *CF*, §104.4, p. 463.

<sup>47</sup> *CF*, §101.4, p. 437.

that 'arose out of opposition of sin' and sympathy with our misery, but since Jesus Christ is the Redeemer this occurred 'without disturbing His blessedness'.<sup>48</sup> Even in death, nothing can separate Christ from the love of God.

Finally, Schleiermacher's combination of Christ's death and life in his reading of Christ's priestly office avoids viewing Christ's life as a mere exemplum – a charge that, as I mentioned before, is too often levelled against Schleiermacher. By borrowing notions of union and representation from Reformed theology and the broader Christian tradition, Schleiermacher presents Christ's work on our behalf as truly being *pro nobis*. Christ's life and death are all *pro nobis* insofar as Christ works for our benefit and as our representative. This does not negate the need for our lives to become 'animated' by the 'divine will' through our incorporation by the Spirit into Christ's God-consciousness.<sup>49</sup> However, Schleiermacher's inclusion of the priestly work guards against the opposite error, namely the empirical view that Christ's life is source of redemption by example only. Schleiermacher demurs from positions that view redemption as possible through imitation of Jesus' life apart from incorporation into fellowship. Redemption is a gift given through Christ's mediation of the divine. It is Schleiermacher's willingness to employ the motifs of priest and death that allow him to proclaim that Christ 'through his total action' accomplishes 'not only the beginning of redemption in time, but also the eternally inexhaustible source, adequate for every further development, of a spiritual and blessed life'.<sup>50</sup> Christ is not merely an example that brings redemption, but the very source for our ongoing redemption.

### The Reformed logic of Schleiermacher's theology

Given how radically Schleiermacher departs from central conceptions of the atonement and priestly office of Christ, to what extent should he still be read as a Protestant theologian working in the Reformed tradition? Is not his reputation as the founder of liberal theology who marks a radical fissure with the tradition of the creeds and scholastics more apt than arguing his is a properly Reformed dogmatic theology? If by Reformed theologian, we mean one who subscribes to Westminster Confession or the Three Forms of Unity or the conclusions of Reformed scholastics' claims regarding election, scripture or the atoning sacrifice, then Schleiermacher is clearly deviant. If, however, the Reformed tradition is viewed more expansively as an expression of the Christian tradition in its Protestant iteration that involves certain contours and inclinations around God's sovereign grace, sin's pervasiveness, theology's orientation toward piety, the demand to think with tradition but also challenge it afresh and to orient all of theology around the saving work of Jesus Christ, then Schleiermacher is certainly not simply deviant, but also a bit of a Calvinist. If we follow Oliver Crisp's call to broaden our understanding of Reformed theology, then the great preacher and theologian of Berlin, Schleiermacher, is aptly named as a deviant Calvinist.

In this conclusion, I want to draw attention to some of the ways that Schleiermacher's aforementioned articulation of Christ's priestly office are marked by Reformed sensibilities. The first area concerns the primacy of the divine decree for understanding the relationship between love and justice. Central to Schleiermacher's critique of penal substitution is a worry about its implications for his theology of

<sup>48</sup>CF, §101.4, 436.

<sup>49</sup>CF, §104.3, 456.

<sup>50</sup>CF, §104.4, p. 461.

God, especially anthropomorphisms that imply a split in the divine essence and will. There is no tension within God between justice and grace, damnation and salvation. God does not require or need a death in order to forgive because God has only 'one eternal and universal decree justifying men for Christ's sake'.<sup>51</sup> God's will is not divided between a decree for justice and a decree for forgiveness, but is unified in decreeing our redemption. This perfect will is made present in the life of Christ.

You can see how at a key moment in Schleiermacher's account of Christ's priestly work he employs the very moves or arguments Calvin makes in order to critique Calvin. Just as Calvin steps back into God's eternal decree to attempt to balance a commitment to both appeasement and free grace, Schleiermacher points to the very same notion of God's eternal decree to reject a notion of appeasement. It is because God's eternal decree is bent toward the reconciliation of all and is marked only by love that Schleiermacher can maintain that God does not demand a sacrifice. Furthermore, God's sovereign freedom is not constrained by retributive theories of justice and thus God's redemption in Christ should not be thought of as meriting anything from God. It is the sovereign God's one eternal decree for redemption in Christ that pushes Schleiermacher to critique substitutionary atonement and rewrite the priestly office.

The Reformed logic of Schleiermacher's understanding of election and atonement in the *Glaubenslehre* is developed in his 1819 essay 'On the Doctrine of Election'. There he offers a qualified defence of Calvin's teaching over and against Lutherans, even as he critiques certain misunderstandings in Reformed model. One of the more fundamental problems in the Reformed tradition is the idea of a 'twofold will to divine mercy', one efficacious and another non-efficacious, as being insufficiently attentive to the relationship between the 'universal and particular'.<sup>52</sup> By becoming fixated on the particular question of individuals, the scholastics compromise divine oneness and fall into anthropomorphism. Like he does with his revision of providence, Schleiermacher emphasises election as God's willing of the whole as primary over and against fixations on the individual. Election is best interpreted as God's comprehensive and singular will – a will that encompasses both creation and redemption. Election should not be approached through the question of God's double predestination of particular individuals, but through the more expansive view of God's will to save and draw the whole into communion. Romans 9–11 is to be read in light of 1 Timothy 2. When understood as such, it becomes incoherent to posit a division within God's attributes or will between mercy and justice. 'This decree, viewed in terms of its oneness, is nothing other than demonstration of divine love.'<sup>53</sup> Here we see something of the Reformed logic at work even when Schleiermacher is most critical of the Reformed tradition. The eternal decree of the sovereign of God interprets atonement and vice versa. Speculation must not overstep the pastoral demands and call of piety, thus the divine will of love guides Schleiermacher's theology of redemption. Altogether, Schleiermacher does not reject substitutionary atonement simply because it is 'magical', but also because it risks obscuring the truth about Divine Unity and Love.

Schleiermacher's rejection of the substitutionary models of atonement is not only motivated by a worry about its theological incoherence, but also a concern about our ongoing redemption. Put differently, Schleiermacher attempts to integrate the account

<sup>51</sup>CF, §109.3, p. 501.

<sup>52</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Doctrine of Election*, trans. Iain G. Nicol and Allen G. Jorgenson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), p. 53.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

of objective and subjective redemption in book II and book III of the *Institutes*. Our growth in sanctification must be related more directly to theological descriptions of Christ's work as priest. If Schleiermacher seeks to disentangle views of God's retributive justice and Christ's death, he seeks to tie more closely Christ's life and ours. He rejects any model of atonement that describes objective reconciliation apart from the mediation of Christ's Spirit in history. He claims that there is no epistemological or ontological access to redemption apart from the communion with Christ given by the community's fellowship with and mediation of the Word. To view Christ's death as ontologically saving apart from history is 'magical'. The ontological or substitution model attributes to Christ a saving work without explaining how this redemption is mediated by the very person it claims is its source. Christ's redemptive work in Schleiermacher's reading of Calvinist models, then, lies outside of the natural nexus of mediation and would not include 'the effective influence of Christ' upon the believer since it severs objective salvation from subjective appropriation.<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that Schleiermacher separates any and all connection between the cross and the forgiveness of sins, a link that is prominent not only in the Reformed tradition but in numerous scriptural passages. Instead, he emphasises how forgiveness and redemption depend not on a transactional theory, but on our 'vital fellowship' (*Lebensgemeinschaft*) or union with Christ the Redeemer.

Schleiermacher departs from models of substitution due to concern that they fail to influence positively the ongoing moral lives of humans. He rejects a model of Christ that reads the *pro nobis* to imply that human beings remain morally unchanged through the work of Christ in the threefold office. 'That Christ fulfilled the divine will in our place or for our advantage. That is to say, He cannot have done so in our place in the sense that we are thereby relieved from the necessity of fulfilling it.'<sup>55</sup> Christ's death on the cross is not an eclipse of the moral universe that elides human agency or moral responsibility. Instead, Christ's work is *pro nobis* in so far as he 'animates us' to 'ever more perfect fulfillment of the divine will' and 'moves us' such that 'His motive principle becomes ours also'.<sup>56</sup> Christ does not take our place in the moral universe; instead, he invites us into the power of his God-consciousness so that our lives can become marked by the divine will of love. We become united to Christ in order that we might grow in likeness to the Redeemer. Again, we can pick out how Schleiermacher is recasting Reformed concerns about the genuine usefulness of the law, the importance of sanctification and Christian living into his own language about Christ's work.

Finally, Schleiermacher writes theology with attention to its role in reflecting and shaping the piety of the community. For him, theology does not emerge through speculation on theological or philosophical conundrums, but as an articulation of the living practice of the community of faith. His is a theology within the limits of piety alone. It is here that Schleiermacher sees the importance of reflecting on the effect of theological language for Christian life. Much like Calvin did when he explained why emphasising the cost of Christ's death was important to instil gratitude toward God, Schleiermacher fears that the fixation on punishment and repayment discourse actually impedes piety. To speak of God demanding payment, satisfaction and punishment is to imagine that God is dependent upon creaturely reality. Moreover, for Schleiermacher this wrongly

<sup>54</sup>CF, §101.1, p. 431.

<sup>55</sup>CF, §104.3, p. 456.

<sup>56</sup>CF, §104.3, pp. 456–7.

attributes to God's righteousness a form of vindictiveness that is nothing more than a transfer 'to God from the crudest human conditions'.<sup>57</sup> A God who depends upon creation is not the Whence of our absolute dependence. Katherine Sonderegger summarises Schleiermacher's concern aptly: 'To understand the work of redemption as the vicarious satisfaction of Divine wrath for sin is to bring the fatal confusion of sin with punishment deep within Christian piety and proclamation.'<sup>58</sup> Fear of retribution and punishment impedes our growth in God-consciousness. The gospel of redemption is not to be equated with penal substitution theories of the cross. Calvin's model risks obscuring God's 'divine love' that is 'seen in the work of redemption'.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

To borrow Karl Barth's language, Schleiermacher 'begins again at the beginning' with the old language of Reformed orthodoxy. And while questions remain about his account of justice and whether or not he has sufficiently disentangled human limitation and sin – questions that we must save for another time – these do not limit the ways that Schleiermacher remains a vital resource for contemporary theological debates on union with Christ, vicarious atonement and the meaning of Jesus's life. For more traditional Reformed theologians, what would be added to recent retrievals in Reformed studies of union with Christ by including Schleiermacher? As of yet, the renewed interest in union with Christ amongst Reformed theologians such as Todd Billings and J. V. Fesko has yet to include analysis of Schleiermacher. What would it entail to trace the branches of Reformed tradition beyond orthodoxy, not simply to Jonathan Edwards or Herman Bavinck or Barth, but through Berlin? And for those outside of the Reformed tradition, Schleiermacher's attempt to chart a middle way between exemplary theologies of the cross and penal models provides a coherently Protestant grounding for incarnational or participatory models of the atonement that may provide a bridge into Catholic and Orthodox soteriological understandings and debates. Moreover, there has already been important work by Mary J. Streufert and others that envisions ways that Schleiermacher's theological account might be brought into constructive dialogue with Womanist and feminist theologies of the cross.<sup>60</sup> He also sketches a model for explicating the saving power of Christ to Christian critics, be they Enlightenment or Islamic, who see penal theories of atonement as morally problematic, theological incoherent and insufficiently concerned with our own moral and spiritual transformation. For these reasons and others, Schleiermacher's nuanced and dynamic theology of the atonement merits reconsideration and engagement for the task of systematic and constructive theology in the 21st century.

For Schleiermacher, Christ's death reveals the love of God; it does not create the possibility for it. Christ's death is not punishment for sin; it is the abolishment of the myth of punishment. Christ's death does not valorise suffering; it shows Christ's sympathy towards those who suffer. Christ's death is not the point of the incarnation; Christ's life and ongoing redemptive work are. Christ's presence with us, both in his earthly

<sup>57</sup>CF, §104.4, p. 460.

<sup>58</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Vicarious Atonement in Schleiermacher and Baeck', *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 2/2 (1995), p. 183.

<sup>59</sup>CF, §166, p. 727.

<sup>60</sup>Mary J. Steufert, 'Reclaiming Schleiermacher for Twenty-First Century Atonement Theory: The Human and the Divine in Feminist Christology', *Feminist Theology* 15/1 (2006), pp. 98–120.

ministry and through the community he forms, is a living testimony of what both John 3:16 and Romans 5 say: that God's love for us is the guiding power of life. Any recast theology of atonement would do well to heed this advice, even if they wish to jettison some of Schleiermacher's language and categories. For insofar as Schleiermacher's reconstruction highlights God's constant love, he names more clearly that which Calvin claims defines God's work and Christ's life and death: 'God's love that precedes our reconciliation'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 505.