

# ATONEMENT IN MORMON THOUGHT

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The Christian doctrine of atonement teaches that it is because of Christ's life, suffering, death and resurrection that forgiveness of sins is possible. Sin consists in injury to human relationships and resulting alienation. Atonement consists in eradicating from our lives whatever gets in the way of loving relationships with God and each other. Atonement thus heals our alienation. Why is it that healing, reconciliation and unity are not possible without Christ? The traditional answers have focused on various metaphors and images that don't seem to answer this question. They seem to entail that Christ must overcome the anger of an unjust and unloving father, deal with the devil or appease some realm of cosmic absolutes. Further, they don't really explain why simply forgiving and being forgiven are impossible without these punishments, dealings and cosmic contraptions.

The Mormon scriptures suggest a departure from the traditional explanations signaled by focusing on Christ's experience in Gethsemane. In preparation for the experiences to follow, Christ prays to be one in unity with the disciples just as He is one with the Father. He also prays for return of His pre-mortal glory that He enjoyed with the Father, as the second divine person of the Godhead, before the world. Further, Christ experiences surpassing spiritual anguish in Gethsemane for humans sin as a prelude to the path to death on a Roman cross. It is in Gethsemane that the purpose of atonement is realized: achieving a relationship of loving and interpenetrating unity of the type enjoyed by the divine persons in the Godhead. The focus on Gethsemane in Mormon scriptures is the story of how the alienation inherent in mortal life is overcome and healed by the compassion that God learns by suffering as a mortal. Atonement is the story of God's gracious offer of love to accept us as worthy of covenant relationship just as we are and to enter into a relationship in which the energies of our lives are literally mingled as one so that we can grow and be made over in the divine image.

**A. Desiderata for a Theory of Atonement.** The *doctrine of atonement* is the claim that through Jesus's incarnation as God into mortal life, death and resurrection we are saved from sin and reconciled to God. It is the core of the Christian gospel. The notion that Christ suffered excruciating pain in Gethsemane and took the pain of our sins upon him is central to Mormon claims about atonement. However, it is important to distinguish between the *doctrine* of atonement which is a claim of faith, from a symbolic or *metaphorical expression* of atonement and both from a *theory* of atonement. One can believe something without understanding it. I believe that quantum physics is more or less accurate, but I don't fully understand quantum theory well. Nevertheless, one must have some grasp of what is asserted to have faith that it is true. If the center of one's faith happened to be that "blinks can jump over the moon," such a claim literally cannot be believed because we have no idea what is being asserted. Is the atonement like that? We believe it but have no idea what is being asserted when we say that "Christ atoned for our sins"?

A *symbolic or metaphorical expression of atonement* tells us something about what atonement is like. There are at least five dominant metaphors for atonement in the earliest Christian scripture: (1) atonement is like being acquitted in a court of law and therefore accepted as in right covenant relationship with God (the doctrine of justification by faith – Rom. 3:21-4:25; 1 Cor. 1:30); (2) atonement is like having the price of one's release from slavery paid by a charitable benefactor (the doctrine of redemption – Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14); (3) atonement is like being reconciled from alienation and healing a breach of relationship between friends (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Col. 1:20-21); (4) atonement is like a sacrificial offering of a paschal lamb or other offering that

expiates or eradicates sin (Heb. 10:12; 1 Cor. 5:7); (5) atonement is like a military victory over forces of evil (Gal. 1:4; Col. 2:15) However, such word-pictures give rise to numerous notions that often don't work well together. They give rise to numerous questions that aren't answered by such metaphors.

The notion that the suffering of a man who lived more than 2,000 years ago is somehow operative in enabling us to be forgiven of our sins here and now – or more technically to have our sins eradicated through expiation – is puzzling to say the least. How could the fact that a man suffered and died 2,000 years ago still have some relation to my repentance here and now? How is it possible that the sins I commit now could cause him pain 2,000 years ago? Yet it is as clear as anything can be that the scriptures assert in many varied ways that Christ suffers pain because he takes our sins and infirmities upon him. Such statements are ubiquitous in both Old and New Testaments and the Mormon scriptures.

A *theory* of atonement, in contrast, is an explanation of how Christ's life, death and resurrection save us from sin and reconcile us to God and why Christ's life, death and resurrection make a difference for us here and now. Such theories attempt to make sense of the various scriptural metaphors and symbols and to defend the basic faith claims against arguments that atonement is unintelligible, immoral or just plain unnecessary to explain being forgiven. Atonement is often called a solution to a problem where there is no problem. Indeed, it looks like Christianity erroneously asserts that we need a Savior that can be appropriated for salvation only within the confines of the Christians faith tradition. Do we even need an atonement to be forgiven or to forgive?

It seems to me that a theory of atonement ought to answer – or at least cast some light upon – at least the following questions:

1. How is Christ's life, death and resurrection either necessary or uniquely beneficial to expiate or eradicate the effects of sin in our lives so that we are reconciled to God here and now?
2. Why can't we just be forgiven without someone suffering?
3. Why does Christ's suffering and experience atone for our sins in a way that the Father and the Holy Ghost do not?
4. How could Christ "bear our sins" or "take our sins upon him" that we commit in the here and now in a way that caused him to suffer?.
5. How do the ordinances of sacrament and baptism (among others) signify what occurs in atonement?

In addition, a theory of atonement ought to meet *Abelard's Constraint* to develop a model of atonement that is "neither unintelligible, arbitrary, illogical, nor immoral." After all, who wouldn't prefer a theory which is intelligible, non-arbitrary, logically coherent and morally acceptable?

Why should a theory of atonement be required to answer just these questions? A theory is judged by its ability to best explain the relevant data: Our own experiences of salvation through Christ, release from sin, reconciliation to God and forgiving and being forgiven. However, the primary data for any theory of atonement are the scriptural claims about the atonement and experiences of atonement expressed in scripture. It seems to me that few claims are better attested in the Mormon canon of scripture than these:

**(A) Christ takes upon him and into his being the effects of our sins.**

(E.g., “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.* By his wounds you have been healed,” 1 Pet. 2:21-24; “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,” 1 Pet. 3:18).

**(B) As a result of bearing our sins, Christ suffers physically and spiritually.**

(E.g., “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people,” Mosiah 3:7. “he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. . . . But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” Mosiah 14/Isaiah 53 “He took upon himself our infirmities and bare our sickness,” Matt. 20:28; “his sweat was as it were great drops of blood,” Luke 22:44; “Christ was once suffered to bear the sins of many,” Heb. 9:28; “11 And he shall go forth, *suffering pains and afflictions* and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith *he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people*; 12 And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and *he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy*, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.” Alma 7:11-12).

**(C) Because Christ bears our sins, we are released from the effects of our sins and our alienation and we are therefore reconciled to God and found “in Christ”.**

(E.g., “my blood was shed for many for the remission of sins,” Matt. 26:28; “justified by his blood, we shall be saved,” Rom. 5:9; “Therefore if any man *be in Christ*, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation,” 2 Cor. 5:17-19; “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ,” Eph.2:13; “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent,” D&C 19:16; “For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him,” D&C 18:11; That he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness.” D&C 76:41).

**(D) Christ’s mercy shown in taking upon himself our iniquities satisfies the demands of justice for those that repent.**

(E.g., “For the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who have not the law given to them,” 2 Ne. 9:26; “Therefore if that man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt,” Mosiah 2:38; “And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of

justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption,” Mosiah 15:9; “Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice.” (Alma 34:16); “And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also . . . For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved.” Alma 42:15, 24)

I suggest that no theory in the history of Christianity to date has actually met the burden of explaining how Christ’s suffering somehow eradicates our sin in the here and now. I submit that no theory to date has adequately answered the questions raised by the claim that because of Christ our sins are forgiven. None has adequately explained how Christ could possibly bear the pain of sins that haven’t even occurred yet – and might not occur because sin is necessarily the result of free choices that could be otherwise. Finally, no theory that I am aware of meets Abelard’s Constraint of providing a non-arbitrary explanation for Christ’s atonement that is both coherent and morally acceptable.

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**C. Mormon Theories of Atonement.** There have been several theories of atonement that are both historically unique and inherently interesting. I think that it is safe to say that most Mormons accept a form of penal substitution theory of atonement.<sup>1</sup> The new theories have been suggested largely out of dissatisfaction with substitutionary theories and the unique beliefs and resources of the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith.

**1. The Demand of Eternal Intelligences for Justice.** A novel and interesting theory was introduced by Cleon Skousen. As Skousen expresses it, all material reality consists of intelligences that act as they do because of their trust in God. God’s power and glory depend upon the faith and trust that the intelligences place in God. If they did not honor and trust God, then “God would cease to be God.” (See Alma 42: 13, 22; Mormon 9:19) The fact that we have sinned and not been punished for it calls into question God’s governance and justice. The intelligences demand justice. If the intelligences are not satisfied, then they will rebel against God’s governance and God will cease to be God. The intelligences demand that someone must suffer for the wrongs that have been committed. To satisfy the demand for justice, God sends his own Son because the intelligences respect and trust the Son as much as they do God. However, when they see the suffering of a person who is entirely innocent and without sin whom they love, they are revolted by their own demand for justice. They see, in effect, that their demand for justice is itself a form of injustice and refusal to forgive. Their demand for justice is thus appeased and replaced with a change of heart that leads the intelligences to be merciful<sup>2</sup>.

There is a lot to like in this theory. It goes a ways toward answering some of the questions that form

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Hyrum L Andrus, *God, Man and the Universe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), chs. 15 and 16; Boyd K. Packer, “The Mediator,” *Ensign* (May 1977); “The Necessity of a Sinless Messiah,” by Ronald A. Heiner, *BYU Studies*, Volume 22, no. 1 (1982), 5-30.

<sup>2</sup> From a typescript of a talk given 18 December 1980 in Dallas, Texas by Cleon Skousen. See also, *The First 2000 Years* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1953), appendix.

the basis of a theory of atonement. There is no eternal law that prevents God from forgiving us from sin. He could just forgive us. However, there is an unjust demand from subjects of the kingdom that requires that someone must pay the price for sin by suffering. There is a reason why the suffering must be done by Christ or at least someone like him: the intelligences must respect and love the victim of the unjust crucifixion. Further, the extent of the suffering must be so excessive and unjust that it shocks the conscious and awakens feelings of outrage and reconsideration of one's own unjust demands and refusal to forgive without someone giving a pound of flesh. The suffering is related to forgiveness because it occasions a decision to let go of unjust demands for retribution and thus leads to forgiveness and repentance. This theory exposes our own unjust demands for justice and refusal to forgive others. It exposes our own unjust refusal to let go of demands for retribution. All of this is very enlightening.

However, the theory doesn't account for the scriptural data that must be explained by a theory of atonement. It doesn't connect with the scriptural sense in which Christ actually bears our sins. According to scripture, the pain that Christ suffers arises from taking our sins upon himself and indeed into his own person. (See 1 Peter 2:21-24) My sins don't seem to be involved in anything that Christ does because the intelligences were persuaded to give up their unjust demands 2,000 years ago. What I do in the here and now seems totally disconnected from this explanation for atonement. Perhaps it could be said that Christ bears the brunt of an unjust demand for retribution and in this sense bears the sins of the intelligences. However, our sins are not limited to just making unjust demands for retribution. Moreover, the atonement functions by God giving in to unjust demands and thus entails that God in fact is complicit in unjustly requiring his son to suffer to appease these unjust demands. Moreover, the biggest question it raises for me is: why doesn't the Father himself undergo the punishment to assuage the unjust demands? This view seems to entail that the Father is both unjust and a coward. Wouldn't the intelligences lose faith and trust in the Father for failing to take accountability for the solution? Perhaps it could be argued that it was tougher for the Father to stand on the sidelines and watch his son suffer. But that merely underscores that the Father had every reason to undergo the unjust suffering himself.

Moreover, is God's status as God really that precarious? If the intelligences simply fail to honor him, God ceases to be God. If that is so, why would such a god inspire us at all – let alone be in a position to command our total allegiance as he is wont to do throughout all scriptural texts? Moreover, the scriptural warrant for this view is obviously questionable. Alma's discussion of the "demands of justice" in Alma 34 and 42 rather clearly has nothing to do with the demands of intelligences for someone to pay the price of violation of the law.

**2. The Self-Rejection Moral Theory of Atonement.** Eugene England gives an eloquent expression to his view of atonement. What is unique is that England presents the "demands of justice" spoken of by Alma (34 and 42) as our own demand for justice to meted out to ourselves for our own moral failures. We are estranged from ourselves by our own sense of moral responsibility for what we have done that is beyond our power to repair and thus we are thus unable to accept ourselves:

Paradoxically, our moral sense of justice both brings me to the awareness of sin that must begin all repentance and yet interferes with my attempts to repent. I feel that every action must bear its consequences and that I must justify my actions to myself; since there is a gap between belief and action I am in a state which brings into my heart and mind a sense of guilt, of unbearable division within myself. As Alma taught his sinful son Corianton, "There was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man" (Alma 42:18). This same moral nature, this sense of justice that demands satisfaction, causes

me to want to improve my life but also to insist that I pay the penalty in some way for my sin. But of course there is no way I can finally do this. . . . God pierces to the heart of this paradox through the Atonement, and it becomes possible for us personally to experience both alienation and reconciliation, which opens us to the full meaning of both evil and good, bringing us to a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart where we can freely accept from God the power to be a god. And Alma also taught his son this other essential role God plays in the Atonement. Besides giving mortals "remorse of conscience" by giving the law and judging us, "God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice ..." (Alma 4 2:15).<sup>3</sup>

However, God intervenes through Jesus to assuage this sense of moral responsibility that leads to estrangement from God and ourselves. He penetrates our refusal to accept ourselves by showing us that we are worthy of our own self-acceptance because God accepts us unconditionally:

Christ is the unique manifestation in human experience of the fullness of that unconditional love from God which Paul chose to represent with the Greek term *agape*. As Paul expressed it, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Christ's sacrificial love was not conditional upon our qualities, our repentance, anything; he expressed his love to us while we were yet in our sins—not completing the process of forgiveness, which depends on our response, but initiating it in a free act of mercy. This is a kind of love quite independent from the notion of justice. There is no *quid-pro-quo* about it. . . . and that is precisely why it is redemptive. It takes a risk, without calculation, on the possibility that we can realize our infinite worth. It gets directly at that barrier in us, our sense of justice, which makes me incapable of having unconditional love for myself—unable to respond positively to my own potential, because I am unable to forgive myself, unable to be at peace with myself until I have somehow "made up" in suffering for my sins, something I am utterly incapable of doing. The demands of justice that Amulek and Alma are talking about, which must be overpowered, are from *our own sense of justice*, not some abstract eternal principle but our own demands on ourselves; those demands which bring us into estrangement with ourselves (as we gain new knowledge of right but do not live up to it) and thus begin the process of growth through repentance, but we cannot complete that process.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, England's theory must be seen as a form of moral influence theory. The effect upon us is a psychological realization that we are worth while. As England expressed it: "That the Atonement is performed by Christ, the son and revelation of God, is, of course, crucial. He represents to us the ultimate source of justice and is the one whose teachings and example bring us directly to face our need for repentance; he awakens our own sense of justice and stands as a judge over all our actions and thus only he can fully release us from what becomes the immobilizing burden of that judgment, through the power of mercy extended unconditionally in his Atonement."<sup>5</sup> However, when pressing his own theory with the question as to why Christ must suffer and

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene England, "That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Autumn 1967), 85-86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 86. (Emphasis in original)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

how this suffering is supposed to link-up with our sins here and now, he ultimately begs off giving an answer because the New Testament is not a book of theology and we are best left with a kaleidoscope of various metaphors: “The question ‘Why is man's salvation dependent on Christ and the events surrounding his death?’ is the most central and the most difficult question in Christian theology. The answers (and there are many) are, as I have said, the chief scandal of Christianity to the non-believer. Attempts to define logical theories of the Atonement based on New Testament scriptures have been largely contradictory and ultimately futile—mainly because the New Testament is not a book of theology, a logical treatise, but rather gives us the reaction, the varied emotional responses.”<sup>6</sup> However, England does claim that the atonement is necessary because only Christ can motivate the kind of change to accept ourselves with our own self-love: “The Atonement is a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in salvation from sin—necessary because only Christ can fully motivate the process in free agents, and insufficient because an agent must respond and complete the process. There is no condition in which we can imagine God being unable to forgive. The question is what effect will the forgiveness have; the forgiveness is meaningless unless it leads to repentance.”<sup>7</sup>

However, it seems to me that England is mistaken in his assertion that only Christ can motivate “the process” of self-love in agents – much less the kind of repentance that can be accomplished even without any atonement on England’s own view. There are numerous examples of persons who have suffered unjustly and with forbearance and love. Why don’t the sufferings of Peter who was supposedly crucified upside-down or Mahatma Ghandi suffice without God himself undergoing the pain of a Roman crucifixion? According to England only Christ will do “because he is the ultimate source of justice.” However, just what it could mean for Christ to be the “ultimate source of justice” is vague indeed. Certainly such an extravagant metaphysical and meta-ethical claim requires some support. I fail to see how England’s observations provide us with anything more than an inspiring example of loving acceptance. But of course Christ was far from unique in being an inspiring example of love. Further, one hardly has to look to Christ for an example of a human suffering injustice at the hands of others or undeserved death.

Moreover, there doesn’t seem to be any sense in which Christ bears our sins on this view. There is no sense in which his suffering is related to our actual sins or to forgiveness of those sins. Indeed, what is necessary isn’t suffering but merely God’s loving acceptance without any prior conditions. Such loving acceptance surely can be given and manifest without any suffering or Christ bearing our sins. Further, are there really that many who are not morally blind to their own guilt? It seems that the much more common problem is failure to take accountability for one’s own evil rather than failure to accept one’s self because of one’s own sins. It seems that I could have all of the benefits of atonement given England’s theory without anything done by Christ at all. All I have to do is give up my own unjustified demand for self-rejection. He provides no reason I can’t just do that on my own. That of course is a general criticism that applies to all moral influence theories. There is nothing immoral or illogical about such a view. It meets Abelard’s Constraint. It simply fails to explain what a theory of atonement must explain. Perhaps England would suggest that he wasn’t attempting to give a theory at all (since he disclaims any such enterprise). Rather, he just wanted to illuminate some aspects of our human experience of atonement – and in that he undoubtedly succeeded.

**3. The Empathy Theory of Atonement.** Dennis Potter presented a novel theory of atonement that focuses on qualifying Christ to be our judge. Potter argues that justice can be satisfied equally well by either

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 89.

punishment or forgiveness. However, forgiveness instead of punishment is only appropriate in certain circumstances. God should forgive us only when it is best to do so. The judgment as to when forgiveness is best depends on considerations such what best serves the sinner, the remorse and repentance of the sinner and whether the sinner has truly reformed. However, according to this theory, God does not have a sufficient basis to judge us because he hasn't shared our mortal experiences of alienation and sin first hand. Potter asserts:

The suffering in Gethsemane is a miraculous event in which Jesus experiences exactly what each of us experiences in our sinning. Only then can he fully understand why we do what we do. Only then can he fully understand the circumstances of our crimes. Only then can he know our remorse, and know whether our hearts have changed.... Being one of the judges himself, this understanding of our hearts allows him to justly pardon us in the event that we feel remorse for our sins.<sup>8</sup>

Christ can judge justly because he can empathize with us. The “demands of justice” which the Book of Mormon says are “satisfied” by Christ’s sacrificial atonement are met because God will not forgive where mercy is not warranted. (See 2 Ne. 2:26; Mosiah 2:38; 15:9; Alma 34:16; 42:15, 24 for reference to how the mercy shown in atonement “satisfies the demands of justice”). Mercy is also granted when it is warranted by the best judgment based upon considerations of the sinner’s contrition, reparations and reform. But this theory goes far beyond that. The Empathy theory seems to adopt the Buddhist view that to understand all is to forgive all. However, it seems to require that Christ actually knows exactly what we do and the reasons that we do it before we do it. How does he know such things? Such claims seem odd since Potter accepts, as I do, that foreknowledge is incompatible free will. Thus, God cannot know our free acts before we do them. Yet this theory seems to require that Christ knows precisely what we do and why we do it – not only for the past sins that had occurred when he was in Gethsemane, but also for the sins that we do 2,000 years later. Indeed, he knows our reasons for sinning as well. How could Christ know that about us in Gethsemane? Certainly God knows what our reasons are for sinning at the time we do them in virtue of his omniscience – but that means that Christ doesn’t need to have the miracle in Gethsemane at all.

Perhaps we should construe Potter to be asserting that Christ knows only what it is like to be subject to temptation and the reasons that one could sin. He has empathy for us in Gethsemane, not actual foreknowledge of what we will do. There is something that seems right about this assertion: Christ is better qualified to judge us, it seems, if he has shared our same mortal condition and suffered with us. But how does this account explain the extreme pain that he experienced as recounted in scripture? This theory fails to account for the scriptural claims that Christ actually bears and suffers for our sins. It fails to account for the claim that because of this suffering we are released from suffering and reconciled to God. While we might have more confidence in God to be fair to us, does this account do anything to explain how we become “sanctified through the atonement” as the scriptures claim? (2 Ne. 2:8; D&C 74:7)

Further, doesn’t this theory imply that God doesn’t forgive us until after we repent? It doesn’t explain how atonement enables us to repent as Mormon scriptures repeatedly claim. (See 2 Ne. 2, Alma 34 and 42) Why do we need atonement at all if we can repent on our own and we are deserving of forgiveness because we have repented? It seems that we have earned the right to be forgiven on such a view. This view might account for why Christ is in a position to be our judge; but it doesn’t begin to explain what must be explained by an

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Potter, “Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 57-81, quote from p. 83.



adequate theory of atonement.

**4. The Divine Infusion Theory.** Jacob Morgan has presented what he terms the divine infusion theory. According to Morgan, there are two kinds of laws of justice.<sup>9</sup> The first is punitive justice which demands a punishment if someone sins whether they later change or not. The second type is what he calls deserts punishment which gives a person what s/he deserves. Deserts punishment is not as worried about what a person did as what a person presently is. It's goal is reform and if a person repents there is no reason to punish the sinner. According to Morgan, the "demands of justice" spoken of in the Book of Mormon are the demands for punishment of punitive justice. However, there is another law which applies to those who repent, the Law of Restoration that is a desert based sense of justice – everyone gets what they deserve based on their works – or on the principle that everyone naturally reaps what they sew. There is a natural result for our actions that dictates that we receive mercy for mercy, light for light and so forth (citing D&C 88:39-40)

The purpose of punitive justice is to motivate us to repent. If we don't repent, then we are punished. However, mercy can "overpower justice" (Alma 34:15) when repentance based upon true reform has taken place. As he states: "there is no need for suffering (vicarious or otherwise) once we have reformed from our sinful ways." To be saved in the celestial kingdom, we must learn to live the celestial law. God cannot decide which kingdom of glory we will receive because that determination follows naturally from the kind of law we live. "Justice is ultimately concerned with what we are – not merely that we obtain forgiveness from God, but that we become like God if we want to live where he does."

Morgan contends that according to Mormon scripture we would be in a "super-fallen state" except for the atonement. That is, we would not be able to repent. We would be unable to choose to repent because we would lack a conscience that allows us to discern between right and wrong. However, as a result of the atonement every person is enlightened with the light of Christ which provides to every person the ability to discern between right and wrong. (Citing 2 Ne. 2:26 and Moroni 7:16, 19) Thus, the atonement is the basis of human agency. "Without conscience, we would have no practical hope of choosing the right and overcoming temptation. We rely on borrowed light for our recognition of goodness. We could not progress through the exercise of agency if our environment was full of temptation toward sin without anything tempting us toward righteousness."

Morgan summarizes his view of atonement: "The atonement was not a matter of satisfying justice's relentless thirst for suffering. Instead, it was a matter of pulling the universe far enough out of the darkness to make repentance and growth possible." God does that by giving his light to give life to all things. This light is the law by which all things are governed. Morgan this concludes that "atonement brought life to all things by infusing the light of Christ in all things. Surely that makes the resurrection more at home in the divine-infusion theory than in any of the other theories."

It seems to me that all of this is correct – except the claim that there are two laws, one punitive and one deserts based. There is only one law of justice – the Law of Restoration. According to this law we reap what we sew and if we refuse to repent then we reap the punishment attendant that refusal. If we demand justice and refuse to forgive, then we will receive justice rather than mercy. However, this disagreement is merely a small correction. My biggest problem is that Morgan doesn't present a theory of atonement. Rather, he presents

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Morgan. "The Divine Infusion Theory: Rethinking the Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 57-81.

a theory of prevenient grace. He fails to address all of the crucial questions that a theory of atonement ought to address. Not once does he mention either Gethsemane, the cross or even reflect on why Jesus suffers or how Jesus bears our sins in atonement. Morgan admits that the divine-infusion theory “does not answer the question of why suffering is necessary to infuse the light of Christ in and through all things, but such is the testimony of modern revelation.” Indeed, it is clear that Jesus does not need to suffer in order for his light to be in and through all things – it was in and through all things before he suffered. So why does he? Any theory of atonement that fails to even address the question just isn’t a theory of atonement. However, I reiterate that it seems correct to me as far as it goes.

**D. A Brief Summary of the Compassion Theory of Atonement.** I suggest that the Mormon scriptures contain the suggestion of a view of atonement that radically differs from the historical theories and has the resources to avoid all of the problems of the other theories. The (barely) essential features of the Compassion Theory of Atonement are as follows:<sup>10</sup>

1. *Sin is Self-Absorbed Alienation.* As we grow from childhood we all freely (but initially innocently) make the choice to hide ourselves from God and each other by hardening our hearts. We betray ourselves by violating the law of love and choose to harden our hearts against God and others. In so doing, we alienate ourselves from authentic existence and engage in numerous behaviors that injure our relationships with others. We engage in a self-deceived way of being where we convince ourselves that remaining alienated will bring us the greatest happiness.

2. *Atonement Persuades us to Give Up our Alienation.* In the absence of atonement we would be “super-fallen” in the sense that we would be angels to the devil, stuck in our sinful nature and unable to freely choose to repent. However, God gives us our agency by: (a) giving us the light of Christ which actuates our conscience and a knowledge of good and evil; and (b) offering to enter into relationship with us as a matter of unconditional grace and unmerited love. Because of the atonement we are made free to choose between relationship in eternal life with him or to suffer the pain of alienation and spiritual death. He offers to accept us into covenant relationship through the sign of baptism. At the moment we freely accept this free gift, we are “justified” or in right covenant relationship with God. In the moment of opening our hearts to accept Christ, we are redeemed from our alienation and reconciled to God. Realizing that God loves us unconditionally and regards us as justified or worthy to be in covenant relationship with him as a matter of grace can persuade us to soften our hearts and open to relationship once again.

3. *Repentance Heals and Maintains the Relationship.* In order to be in relationship with a perfect being, we must be willing to abide those conditions which are inherent in a close and abiding relationship of fellowship – the provisions of the law of love. The conditions of the law of love define the terms of the covenant necessary to remain in relationship with God and the community of God’s kingdom. We must be willing to let go of our past and all of the behaviors that, by their very nature, create alienation. That is, we must repent by ceasing to engage in behaviors contrary to the law of love, making reparation for the harms we have caused and asking for forgiveness of those we have treated with less than love.

4. *Union with Christ Results in New Life and Light.* When we repent and open to accept Christ, we

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<sup>10</sup> A more complete expression of the theory can be found in chapters 6 and 7 of Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Love of God and the Problems of Theism* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2006).

accept his light into our lives to commingle with the light of our lives. We become a new person “in Christ” living co-shared-life in which his light shines in our countenances. We become “new creatures” who are born-again into this newness of life in Christ. He takes up abode in us and we take up abode in him. We take his name upon us and his image is renewed in us. In this sense, we are at-one with Christ. Prior to entering into union with Christ our lives are burdened by the darkness of sin. When we overcome our alienation by entering into union of life in Christ, the darkness of our lives that we share with him is transformed by the light of his love to a greater brightness that grows in the process of sanctification. That is, sanctification is the process of growth in the light toward deification. Deification is the fulness of glorification in union with the divine persons in the Godhead

5. *A Condition of Entering into Union is Willingness to be Vulnerable to the Other in Relationship.* Love, by its very nature, entails vulnerability to the free choices of the other with whom one is in relationship. The compassion theory maintains that our sins cause pain for those who would choose to be in relationship with us as a natural necessity of the way that authentic relationships function. It is painful to be in relationship with us who violate the law of love in many ways. In addition, divine union entails the coinherence or indwelling of our lives in each other. According to Mormon scriptures, we share our light or life’s energy with each other in union. The Compassion Theory posits that when the darkness of our sins is mingled with the perfect light of Christ we are enlightened, but the darkness that is in us causes him to experience momentary but excruciating pain. The darkness is a cause of momentary pain that is turned to joy through repentance and healing relationship. Christ is not punished for our sins, nor does he bear our shameful guilt or moral culpability; rather, what he experiences is the pain and subsequent joy of entering into relationship of shared life and light with imperfect humans.

6. *Christ is Uniquely Able to Accomplish Atonement.* To enter into the union of life in a way that expresses not merely empathy and omniscient knowing, but experiential sharing of our alienated condition, Christ learned compassion by the things that he suffered. According to Mormon scripture, Christ learned how to succor us and share our lives fully by the things that he suffered as a mortal. Christ is uniquely qualified by his experience because he achieved a fulness of union and glory with the Father while in the Garden of Gethsemane and knew first-hand the pain of omniscient empathy of all the sin that had occurred in the world. Further, fully divine beings, as such, cannot experience first-hand the alienation that is the essence of our human condition because they abide in a relationship of complete union with the divine persons. Only by becoming mortal and experiencing alienation first-hand can such experiential knowledge be possible. Christ suffered the essence of spiritual death while on the cross when he experienced complete abandonment by the Father following his complete union with the Father. Only he, in all of history, knew the fullness of the loss of that union and the depth of pain of complete abandonment. These experiences uniquely qualify Christ to succor us in pain and to persuade us to overcome our alienation by choosing to repent and enter into relationship with him. Only Christ had the fulness of experience to transform our darkness with his light in virtue of his experiences in Gethsemane and on the cross. His forgiveness of those who nailed him to the cross while in this state of alienated abandonment is the completion of divine love necessary to render at-one-ment and overcome our alienation.

Christ is also uniquely able to effect atonement because he has power in himself to lay down his life and take it up again. Christ is able to resurrect and to grant the power of resurrection to us as well. The resurrection overcomes our alienation by bringing us back into the presence of God to be judged according to our works. We are judged according to the desires of our hearts by the Law of Restoration which returns to us what we truly desire as shown by our works in life. (Alma 41) The Law of Restoration is also recognized by the fact that the degree of light or glory that “quickens” or gives life to our bodies in the resurrection is

dependent on whether we abide a telestial, terrestrial or celestial law. (D&C 88:20-32)

7. *Atonement is the Mode of Relationship God Seeks to Have with Us.* To be at-one is to be in divine union. Being at-one is the very mode of being that Christ seeks with us at all times. He seeks to have the greatest possible unity of loving relationship. He seeks for us to relate to him in the very same unity of oneness with which he relates to the Father and Holy Ghost. Through our union with Christ we shall thus also be at-one with the divine persons in the Godhead in the same sense that they are one.

8. *Christ Satisfied the Demands of Justice of the Law of Restoration.* Christ suffered as the first person ever to join together the fulness of capacity for experience as God with mortal experience intimately acquainted with human suffering first-hand. The magnitude of suffering was so great that Christ shrank at the prospect, but willingly experienced the pain to fulfill the will of the Father so that he is fully moved by compassion: “And thus he shall bring salvation to *all those who shall believe on his name*; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the *bowels of mercy*, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.” (Alma 34:15) “Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; *being filled with compassion towards the children of men*; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, *taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions*, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice.” (Mosiah 15:9) The “demands of justice” are the demands of the Law of Restoration that each person shall have returned what s/he has sent out, reaping what has been sown. If we repent, then Christ willingly and lovingly accepts into his being what we would have suffered so that we don’t have to. If we don’t repent, then we must suffer for our own sins. (See Alma 41) The purpose of the law that decrees that we shall receive according to our works in judgment is to awaken us to the suffering we will endure as a natural result of our actions if we don’t repent.

Thus, the demands of justice are answered in Christ’s atonement because we each receive what we freely choose – nothing could be more just than that. If we choose to repent, then we receive mercy by letting go of our past and forgiving all others. As we forgive and show mercy, so we are forgiven and receive mercy. If we don’t, then we suffer the full weight of justice for our sins by bearing the pain ourselves for the *natural consequences* of unloving conduct.

Thus, the Compassion Theory rejects the retributive notion of justice that demands that someone must suffer and pay a price in order for someone to be forgiven. The demand of suffering and payment is replaced by the condition that one must repent and have a genuine change at the core of one’s being – one’s very heart – to meet the demands of justice. Because the atonement meets the demands of justice by placing us on probation and allowing us time to repent rather than executing justice immediately, we need not be punished to satisfy the demands of justice. Instead, God has demonstrated his mercy by placing us on probation and giving us time to repent before the final judgment. (See Alma 42)

The primary merit of the Compassion Theory, in my view, is that it answers the questions and explains the basic scriptural claims that must be explained by a theory of atonement without being unintelligible, arbitrary, illogical, or immoral. I believe that it has the added merit of doing so in a way that is not merely faithful to, but explanatory of the various scriptural metaphors and claims about what the atonement achieves. It explains both how and why Christ bears our sins. It explains how and why he suffers as a result of our sins of which we repent. He bears our sins because he takes our lives into his life in union. He suffers for our sins compassionately because he knows of our suffering and actually experiences the pain of our sins as his own because there is darkness and pain in our lives that causes him to suffer.

In fact, the Compassion Theory explains how and why Christ suffers for our actual sins but does not suffer needlessly or unjustly. He does not suffer to appease the wrath of a vengeful Father or to satisfy the unjust demands of some Platonic ideal of justice. He doesn't suffer because someone must suffer in retribution to pay a price. God can in fact forgive us without requiring that someone must first suffer. His suffering is directly related to my sins because he actually bears the pain of my sins for which I repent but does not unjustly suffer for those of which I don't repent and therefore suffer myself. By letting go of the pain of our sins that is in us through repentance, we are released from further suffering the effects of our sins. Moreover, the atonement is directly related to our justification and sanctification because it explains how the union of our lives creates a new person by eradicating our sinful being with the light of Christ. It explains how Christ freely takes our lives into his to make us over in his image. It puts in bold relief the compassionate and sacrificial love that Christ manifests to justify and redeem us and to progress in the light of sanctification. Thus, the Compassion Theory has the incredible virtue of being the first theory of atonement that actually answers the relevant questions and explains the scriptural data.

Moreover, the Compassion Theory also has the benefit of illuminating and interacting with the best Pauline scholarship. Our union in Christ's life – being at-one in him – is symbolized by baptism through which we enter into covenant, die with Christ and rise to resurrection of life with him. We symbolize taking his life into ours, and indeed making him the energy of our lives and becoming embodied in our own bodies, by symbolically eating his flesh and drinking his blood in the sacrament. The New Perspective on Paul explains that Paul's focus was not imputation of Christ's righteousness to us so that we are deemed righteous when in fact we are not, but of being found "in Christ" through covenant faithfulness. Consider the correspondence with the Compassion Theory from a summary of Paul's thought by New Testament scholar Morna Hooker:

The sin of Adam was reversed and the possibility of restoration opened up when Christ lived and died in obedience and was raised from life to death. Those who are baptized into him are able to share his death to sin (Rom. 6:4-11) and his status of righteousness before God (2 Cor. 5:21). Since Adam's sin brought corruption into the world, restoration involved the whole universe (Rom. 8:19-22; Col. 1:15-20) . . . [Christ] shared our humanity, and all that means in terms of weakness . . . in order that we might share in his sonship and righteousness. To do this, however, Christians must share in his death and Resurrection, dying to the realm of flesh and rising to life in the Spirit. Thus Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ in order that Christ may live in him (Gal. 2:19-20). The process of death and resurrection is symbolized by baptism (Rom. 6:3-4). By 'baptism into Christ', believers are united 'with him', so that they now live 'in him'. These phrases (in particular 'in Christ') express the close relationship between Christ and believers that is so important for Paul.<sup>11</sup>

The focus is on the incarnation and sharing our mortal condition with us in indwelling unity of life rather than the punishment that God imposes on him to satisfy his wrath. Perhaps the best summary of the Compassion Theory is Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 5:18: "For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him [Christ]." That is, he takes the effects of our sin into him to heal it and thus the sin in us is transformed into life and light in Christ. We become the righteousness of God in Christ by accepting the light of Christ into our hearts in atonement. Thus our alienation is healed and we are reconciled to God.

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<sup>11</sup> Morna Hooker, "Paul," in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Piper (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 522.

However, the Compassion Theory has been critiqued because it is immoral to suggest that Christ willingly accepts the pain of our sinful lives and suffers when we are justified and redeemed (not every time we repent as has been mistakenly argued) because it means that we foist pain upon Christ when we should be willing to suffer the pain for our sins instead of allowing him to do so. It is to these critiques that I now turn.

**C. Green's Critique of the Compassion Theory.** The Compassion Theory has been criticized by several persons. The measure of a theory is its ability to respond persuasively to trenchant criticism from able critics. I believe that it has the resources to respond to the most serious criticisms.

*1. The Problem of Causing Christ Pain for our Sins When we Repent.* Deidre Green maintains that the Compassion Theory is vastly unacceptable for both Mormons and feminists because it focuses on suffering in an unacceptable way and suggests that those who repent sadistically impose pain on Christ. She stated:

If Christ's suffering for an individual's sins does not occur until that individual repents, two problems arise. The first is that atonement becomes a matter of conscious and volitional sadism on the part of the repentant sinner; the second is that because of this, human individuals themselves who have compassion and empathy for Christ would be highly unmotivated to repent. If, as Ostler states, "the purpose of the Atonement is to overcome our alienation by creating compassion, a life shared in union where we are moved by our love for each other," then this object is largely subverted by creating a model in which human persons either selfishly and sadistically transfer their pain to Christ in an immediate sense, or choose to refrain from participating in repentance and atonement for the sake of sparing Christ more suffering. This is especially true for women who are socialized to place their feelings of others before their own and to choose to suffer themselves in order not to impose suffering on others.<sup>12</sup>

It is a fact that given the commitments of the Compassion Theory that Christ will experience pain if and when we enter into healing relationship with him and, through him, with the Father and Holy Ghost as well. However, we do not foist any such pain on him as Green contends. He willingly chooses to enter into relationships that entail momentary but excruciating pain in order to realize the joy of healing and indwelling union. Although Green repeatedly decries any view that involves God in pain as a result of relationships, she admits that it "does seem that from one aspect of the LDS perspective, Christ suffers in order to experience solidarity with human beings and that human individuals at times experience suffering for the purpose of empathizing with the suffering of Christ. This points to the fact that suffering is a natural part of both human and divine realities and that simply cannot be avoided. . . Experiencing suffering helps individuals appreciate what Christ did for them and allows them to relate their own sufferings to his."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Green argues that the Compassion Theory is morally repugnant because it entails that we foist pointless pain upon Christ in the act of repenting and no sensitive person would ever choose to do that as a means of repentance.

What Green apparently finds appalling is that Christ cannot avoid suffering if we choose to repent. However, Green's critique is mistaken on many different levels. Green repeatedly describes the pain that Christ suffers according to the Compassion Theory as a form of "sadism," or the experience of pain for the purpose of

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<sup>12</sup> Deidre Green, "Got Compassion? A Critique of Blake Ostler's Theory of Atonement," *Element* vol. 4 Issue 1 (Spring 2008), 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

experiencing pain as something sought in itself as the goal of the experience. Her argument that feminists should be especially repulsed by such a view because they often willingly take on pain of others for no reason underscores this point. Such a view vastly distorts the Compassion Theory and engages in the most uncharitable view of suffering possible as a basis of critique.

To proceed, I will make a few basic distinctions. First, I will distinguish different ways in which the divine persons may be aware of our pain and participate in it:

*Empathetic Sharing of Experience:* Empathy is sharing another's experience by attempting to imagine how the other must feel based upon one's own experience.

*Omniscient Sharing of Experience:* Omniscient beings participate directly in the experience of others in the sense that they know from a third-person perspective what the other is experiencing.

*Compassionate Sharing of Experience:* Participating in another's experience from a first-person perspective by having the same experience and sharing the very experience that is experienced by another.

I have argued that the divine persons united as one Godhead share in our experience in the sense of empathetic and omniscient sharing of experience. However, they cannot have a first-hand experiential knowledge of alienation, rejection, isolation and aloneness while united as one Godhead. This limitation on the divine knowledge is inherent in their mode of being at-one with each other or being united in coinherence or indwelling unity. The Compassion Theory claims that Christ's experiential knowledge qualified him uniquely to atone in two respects. First, his experience includes first hand experience of the fullness of alienation on the cross in light of a knowledge of what union with the Father is in Gethsemane. Second, he shares with us the very pain of our sins because whatever energy it is that causes that pain in us is transferred to him in union of our life's light to be transformed and "quickened" by his light.

Thus, the Compassion Theory posits that in Gethsemane and on the cross Christ experienced: (1) empathetic suffering for all who have and will suffer under the weight of sin; (2) omniscient suffering in knowing all the sins that had been committed to that point in time; and (3) compassionate sharing of experience for all who had repented to that time. Further, Christ suffers a momentary pain when we are joined to him in the moment of justification by faith through the grace of unconditional acceptance in love. However, this momentary pain is transformed into greater light and enduring joy through the healing power of his life's light. Both Christ and we receive mutual joy through atonement by being joined in healed relationships of intimate union.

Green's critique rests on the false assumption that we cannot be justified in choosing to create pain for another or that we could do so out of love. However, I want to distinguish between pointless suffering and redemptive suffering to demonstrate how far off her critique is. This distinction is critical to discussing the Compassion Theory and it is Green's failure to attend to this distinction that vitiates her critique.

*Pointless Suffering:* Causing another to suffer psychological and/or physical pain for the sake of experiencing the pain or for no reason at all.

*Redemptive Suffering:* Giving occasion for another to freely choose to suffer psychological and/or physical pain so that suffering further pain can be avoided or for some benefit that outweighs the dis-value of the pain.

It is of course commonplace that we may justifiably choose to cause another to suffer some physical pain because of the benefits that may be derived from doing so. For instance, parents may choose justifiably to cause pain to their children to become vaccinated through a shot. Could a person choose to allow another to voluntarily experience pain to benefit one's self as well as the one for whom pain is caused? To answer this question, I'll tell two stories.

In the year 1850, a husband had been discussing with his wife whether to have children. He knows that pregnancy appears to be beyond uncomfortable and that child birth is extremely painful and perhaps deadly. He has (limited) empathetic understanding of the pain she may experience if they choose to have children. But he wants to be a father. He wants to beget new life and participate in raising children. His wife says that she also wants to have children. Could he justifiably choose to engage in intimate union with his wife to create new life even though he knows that it will cause great though momentary pain for his wife and could even result in her death? Could he do so out of love? I submit that the answer to both questions is rather clearly, "yes."

Now this scenario may seem patriarchal because it approaches the question from the male's point of view. However, consider the roles. He is cast as the sinner and she as the savior by analogy to the Compassion Theory of Atonement. She also wants to have a baby. She knows that by entering into intimate union with her husband to create new life she will be exposed to great pain and that she will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But out of her love for her husband and her unborn child she is willing to undergo that pain. Is that remotely sadomasochistic? I trust that even a feminist could see the point of this analogy – and perhaps it is precisely the feminist who will appreciate it most.

Consider another story. A husband has committed adultery. He has hidden the truth from his wife because he doesn't want to hurt her. He knows that she will feel pain if he reveals his secrets. He is truly sorrowful for the injury he has caused to their relationship. However, he desires to have an honest, authentic and truly trusting relationship with his wife. He loves her and wants to realize true intimacy and a deeper relationship with her. He realizes that he cannot achieve his desire for more intimate and authentic relationship with her unless he confesses. Indeed, he realizes that by withholding the truth he deprives his wife of the freedom of choosing to be in relationship with him as he truly is. He has made the judgment that if she truly knew him she would reject him – and thus his secrecy is a form of failing to trust her. Perhaps she will reject him – but he realizes that is her choice to make. He realizes that he is being paternalistic by attempting to shield her from the pain that the truth about his sins will cause.

Is the husband a sadist if he chooses to confess the truth about his affair to his wife and ask her forgiveness? Hardly. It seems to me to be the most loving thing that he can do. Given the fact that he has sinned against her, it demonstrates genuine trust to honor her freedom to choose by facing up to the truth about what he has done. Perhaps a relationship that is a facade can be endured for a small amount of time, but who could endure such a relationship for an eternity? I suggest that such constraints on authentic and loving relationship are exactly the same for a faithful, trusting, and authentic relationship with God.

Both of these stories demonstrate redemptive love – willingness to allow another to willingly experience pain for the benefit of authentic relationships and new life. I submit that they show that Green's approach to suffering suffers from failure to recognize the distinction between pointless pain and redemptive suffering. Is an eternity of union in fulness of love with us through our repentance worth the pain that Christ suffers in atonement? I suggest that the answer is, once again, clearly and resoundingly "yes". Moreover, he has already voluntarily made the choice to undergo such suffering in order to be reconciled to us. He has already fully prepared himself through his incarnate experience to heal our stripes and salve our wounds with his loving light.



He has already said “yes” to us and accepted us as worthy of relationship with him as a matter of loving grace. If we refuse to repent and accept his offer of relationship, then the pain of his mortal experience is meaningless in our lives and we reject his own demand to repent.

Perhaps more importantly, the truth is that our sinful actions cause pain to those in relationship with us. Indeed, sin consists in precisely the evil of pain committed when interpersonal relationships are injured and alienation is created. Given the commitments of the Compassion Theory, the *only* way to avoid the pain inherent in sin is to refrain from sinning in the first place. The *only* way to stop the pain once we have sinned is to trust Christ and repent. Green thus misses the central motivating point of the Compassion Theory: To avoid creating pain for Christ in atonement one must avoid sin.

It is ironic that Green critiques the Compassion Theory by arguing that it fails to recognize that an unjust double punishment could motivate us to repent. Green argues: “While double punishment significantly challenges the concept of justice, it could prove efficacious in motivating persons to repent. Since Ostler’s theory focuses on compassion, it might allow for the possibility that when a person believes that Christ has already suffered for sins, she may be motivated to repent by the desire not to allow that previous suffering to go in vain. Ostler’s solution presented in order to preserve justice, fails to recognize how the concept of double punishment could serve as impetus for repentance for a compassionate person.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet Green’s suggestion here seems both backwards and morally reprehensible. She admits that double punishment is in fact unjust; but this injustice can motivate us to repent because we can give meaning to the pain that Christ has already suffered. How? He has already suffered and he suffers regardless of whether we repent. What could be less motivating than the fatalistic realization that Christ has suffered and there is nothing we can do about it because he has already fully suffered whether we sin or not? That seems to be maximally unmotivating to me. In contrast, the Compassion Theory entails that if we don’t sin, then he doesn’t feel the pain of our sins that never occur. Thus, we are motivated to refrain from sinning in the first place and we realize that there is no cheap grace that gets us off Scott free with no one suffering. It also entails that his suffering is given meaning *by our repentance* because our repentance has achieved Christ’s purpose in suffering – reconciliation, avoidance of any future suffering for our sins of which we repent and transformation to new life in union with Christ and his God in the greatest joy possible. If that isn’t motivating to repent, what could possibly motivate us to repent? Indeed, D&C 19:15-20 urges us to repent so that we can avoid the pain of our sins that we will experience if we don’t repent. I turn to that scripture now.

2. *Critique of Scriptural Exegesis.* Green also critiques the scriptural basis that I claim for the Compassion Theory of Atonement. In particular, she criticizes the use of D&C 19 to support the theory. Doctrine & Covenants 19:15-17 states:

15 Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not.

16 For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

17 But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

18 Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 5.

and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

19 Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

20 Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit.

Green states: “The canon, to which Ostler wants to give primacy, states that Christ has *already* suffered for our sins and that we will suffer for them *in futurity* if we do not repent of them while in mortality. Scripture is clear that this is a suffering we have not yet experienced and that we cannot comprehend. Yet Ostler claims that Christ feels our pain through our volitional transference. . . . Ostler is correct that the transfer is real, but not that it happens in real-time in the act of repentance. Moreover, section 19 implies that God does not consider double punishment unjust.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Green reads D&C 19 to state:

(a) God suffered these things (in Gethsemane) for all who have been, are now or ever will be mortal regardless of whether they repent.

I accept that Green’s reading of D&C 19 is one possible reading – and perhaps the standard view as far as I know. However, I pointed out four problems with this standard reading: (1) *Problem of Backward Causation*: It creates a problem of backwards causation because Christ suffers for sins that haven’t even been committed yet. (2) *Denial of Free Will*. If Christ has suffered for our sins that we will commit, then we cannot be free to not commit them. Nothing could be surer than the logical entailment that we do not have power to avoid performing acts that have already had causal effects in the world before we commit them. (3) *Double Punishment*. The standard reading creates a problem of double punishment because Christ suffers for our sins that we don’t repent of and thus we both suffer for the same sins. (4) *Violates the Innocence Principle*. The notion that Christ suffers for our sins violates the principle that it is unjust to cause an innocent person to suffer for the actions of another person who is guilty of those actions. To avoid these problems, I offer another reading of D&C 19 that I believe remains faithful to the text:

(b) God suffered these things (i.e., empathetic pain in Gethsemane, on the cross and also the actual pain of our sinfulness) for all those who repent; and those who don’t repent must suffer these pains personally.

Given the fact that the original revelation didn’t have any punctuation,<sup>16</sup> the statement in D&C 19:16-17 is actually: “Behold I God have suffered these things for all that they might not suffer if they would repent but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I.” The referent of “all” is thus to “all those who repent” and not to all that might exist at any time. I suggest that this reading has two overriding virtues: (1) it avoids the four problems with the standard reading I have discussed; and (2) it makes more sense of the two conditional clauses

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations*, Vol. 2, eds. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, Steven Harper (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 25-26. The particular pages of the manuscript that apparently contained D&C 19:15-19 are missing. However, from the remainder of the revelation manuscript the lack of punctuation is clear.

of the text.

Green agrees that the problems I have pointed to are real problems that deserve due consideration. To accommodate these problems so that Christ's suffering doesn't involve backward causation and attendant denial of free will, Green suggests that there is a better reading:

“There is a better way around the problem of God's limited foreknowledge by relying on LDS scripture . . . While for Ostler a negation of absolute foreknowledge precludes an infinite atonement being wrought at a particular historical moment, in order to be true to LDS scripture, he must allow the possibility that there is an upper limit to the amount of sin that individuals can commit. If this is so, then there is some maximal level of collective sin of which God is aware and for which Christ could have atoned at a particular moment in the past.”<sup>17</sup>

“Given the scriptures of the Restoration one can presume that God can anticipate an upper-bound of sin and suffering humans will experience individually and collectively. This does not require God's absolute foreknowledge, but only that God knows where the bounds are set. Christ suffers the maximal amount of human sin. Christ's suffering is not unjust, since his suffering is volitional.”<sup>18</sup>

Green's view would require us to reject the standard reading and re-interpret D&C 19:16-17 as follows:

(c) God suffered the pain of these things in Gethsemane for all who have, do now or may ever become mortal to the full extent they could possibly sin even if they don't actually commit the sins and regardless of whether they repent.

Now this is a rather amazing suggestion given Green's concern about what she calls the “sadistic” suffering she claims is entailed by the Compassion Theory. This view entails that Christ suffers for sins that aren't even committed. Indeed, Christ suffers to the maximum extent logically possible given the persons who could exist! Green's theory indeed entails that Christ suffers the maximum amount of pointless suffering possible. What could be more sadistic and calculating than this view suggested by Green?

On the other hand, the Compassion Theory of atonement entails that all of Christ's suffering is redemptive and none of it is pointless. It is all in furtherance of repentance and the gift of new life in union with Christ. The entirety of Christ's suffering is directed toward the purpose of healing relationships and transforming our darkness into light. Christ's suffering is thus maximally redemptive on the Compassion Theory of Atonement and maximally pointless on Green's reading. That is ironic, to the say least, given her critique.

Further, Green suggests that Christ suffers the actual pain of “guilt” even though he is innocent and not guilty of anything. Green also claims that this needless suffering “is not unjust, since his suffering is volitional.” Even were Christ willing to suffer for sins that are never committed, it isn't just for him to suffer for our guilt. Say that I have stolen an item from a store but the store owner thinks my son did it and he is punished in my place. My son hides my involvement to keep from exposing my guilt. If my son is punished for something that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 17.

I did and he willingly undergoes that punishment to hide my guilt, it seems to me that matters are made doubly worse: the person who should be punished escapes punishment and the innocent person is unjustly punished. This double problem plagues Green's suggested view of atonement. But it gets even worse. Christ suffers pain for sins that were never in fact committed on this view. He is punished for nothing at all.

This latter problem of innocent suffering is made even greater because Green insists that is precisely the pain of being guilty and morally culpable that Christ must suffer if he suffers pain for our sins. She states: "What is the 'pain for our sins' other than guilt? In an LDS view Christ suffers for pains *other than* pains for our sins, and transfer of these pains need not imply moral culpability. [Green cites Alma 7:11-13 here] The 'pain for our sins,' however, seems to be precisely pointing toward the issue of guilt and implies moral culpability."<sup>19</sup> She also rejects that guilt for sins is personal by its very nature. Yet her own view of atonement violates the innocence principle in the most egregious way possible by having Christ pay the price for sins that are not even ever committed. It also entails, if her argument here holds any water, that Christ feels the pain of such upper limit of possible sins precisely because he is guilty and morally culpable for them even though he did nothing for which he is guilty. This view seems to be maximally morally reprehensible to me.

Thus, while Green's suggested explanation for Christ's suffering in fact solves the problem of backward causation, it fails to resolve the problem of double punishment and violates the innocence principle three times over. Moreover, what causes this actual pain in Christ for sins that are never committed? Sins that are never committed couldn't cause such pain given the very plausible principle that what doesn't exist cannot cause anything. Does the Father cause this pain? If so then the Father is not merely unjust but sadistic. It also follows that to know the supposed upper-limit of sin requires God to have middle-knowledge -- which I have argued at length is conceptually incoherent and inconsistent with free will.<sup>20</sup> Just why Green feels that LDS scripture entails that there must be an upper-limit to the pain that can be generated by sin, or whether there could possibly be a maximum amount or number of sins, simply escapes me.

Green nevertheless claims that the Compassion Theory gets the "temporal ordering" of the atonement wrong because she claims that D&C 19 shows that Christ already completely suffered and fully completed the atonement while in Gethsemane. However, that isn't what it says. Look again at what D&C 19:19 states: "Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and *finished my preparations unto the children of men.*" Christ finished his "preparations." The Compassion Theory maintains that the extremes of Christ's mortal suffering uniquely prepared him to atone -- to accomplish healing of our relationship in the here and now. He completed everything necessary to be able to bear our sins: "Having ascended into heaven, *having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice.*" (Mosiah 15:9) So there is an already completely accomplished aspect of atonement in Christ's experiences in Gethsemane, death on the cross and resurrection. He has completed his "preparations" necessary to be able to atone. However, there is also an aspect of atonement that is ongoing and not yet fully accomplished -- union with us through our repentance here and now.

Green also argues that the Compassion Theory adopts a problematic "notion of retributive justice" that

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>20</sup> See, Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 163-181.

ought to be critically assessed. She argues that my citation of Alma 34:11-12 (see also Alma 42:) entails such a notion of retributive justice or the notion that persons must suffer punishment for their violations of law:

11 Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. Now, if a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother? I say unto you, Nay.

12 But the law requireth the life of him who hath murdered; therefore there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world.

Green is correct that the Nephite law reflected in Alma 34:11-12 assumes a retributive theory of justice where a person must suffer a penalty for a violation of law – capital punishment for murder. However, I expressly rejected the retributive theory of punishment.<sup>21</sup> The only purpose for which I cite Alma 34 is to establish the innocence principle: it is unjust to punish an innocent person for what a guilty person did. Moreover, I expressly adopted a different view of justice: the Law of Restoration discussed by Alma in Alma 41 where we each receive in return what we send out and ultimately what we truly desire. This is the notion of justice inherent in an agape theory of ethics which bases moral judgments on the nature of what is required to establish loving relationships. Indeed, I spend not less than three chapters arguing for this view of justice – so I’m a bit discomfited that a reader as intelligent as Green could have misunderstood what I wrote about the notion of justice. However, I’m sure that the failure to communicate effectively is mine and not her’s.

3. *Claims of Logical Inconsistencies.* Green also claims that there are several logical inconsistencies in the Compassion Theory. Green claims that the Compassion Theory “appears inconsistent” because it claims that the pain for sins is extinguished in the death of Christ’s flesh on the cross. She claims that such a claim is inconsistent with the claim that there is no backward causation or foreknowledge.<sup>22</sup> But Green is confused. I don’t claim that all sins were extinguished in Christ’s death on the cross. Rather, only all of the sin that existed as of that time were extinguished. I speak metaphorically of how even our sins are extinguished in the cross because in virtue of Christ’s death on the cross the reign of sin is overcome in the resurrection. He completed his preparations to atone and thus the sins for which we repent are atoned already in the sense that all we have to do is repent and Christ is able to do the rest in virtue of his mortal experiences and resurrection. He has already accepted us into relationship – the question is whether we will reciprocate. Green admits: “Ostler may be speaking metaphorically here,” however, she argues that the “metaphor is misleading as it attempts to locate the necessity of Christ’s suffering in the historical past.” Of course all metaphors break down at some point, but I suggest that the metaphor is more than appropriate. With Christ’s death and resurrection our ability to repent is assured. The Compassion Theory clearly doesn’t try to locate Christ’s suffering for our sins only in the past – it is also in the moment of justification in which we enter into a new relationship of shared life in Him.

She also claims that the theory is inconsistent because it claims that “Christ suffers when we sin, i.e., fail to live the law of love, yet Christ does not suffer until we repent, i.e., succeed in living the law of love by working toward reconciliation and obedience to Christ . . .”<sup>23</sup> I of course do not claim that God doesn’t experience pain until we repent. He suffers the pain of loss when we reject him. Green’s assertion of inconsistency fails to pay attention

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<sup>21</sup> See my discussion in *Ibid.* 204-16.

<sup>22</sup> Green, “Compassion Theory,” 7.

<sup>23</sup> Green, “Compassion Theory,” 8.

to the distinction between suffering at the time we choose to breach the relationship and alienate ourselves from God and the compassionate pain that only a God can suffer by sharing our lives with us in indwelling unity. These two kinds of suffering are not mutually exclusive – which of course they must be for Green’s argument to work.

There are also claims made by Green (following Ivone Gebara) that are rather outrageous in my view. Green joins many feminist theorists in claiming that women suffer in particular as victims of the view that Christ showed love by his sacrificial death. She claims that: “What is problematic with lifting up the crucifixion as the ultimate act of love is that it not only validates current suffering, but incites women to seek unnecessary sacrifice.”<sup>24</sup> Neither Green nor Gebara provides a shred of evidence for this rather strident empirical claim. Moreover, it appears to me to be unsupportable. How would they know that viewing the crucifixion as an expression of God’s love for us somehow “incites” women to seek unnecessary suffering? It is this kind of victimology that I believe is not only evidentially unjustified, but it devalues and denigrates Christ’s gift to us.

Let us agree that there is nothing good per se in suffering itself. The horror of Jesus’s brutal and violent death on a Roman cross is a reminder of the corruption of imperial governmental power and the depth of human depravity in sin. However, the suffering of Jesus is also the ultimate expression of God’s loving choice to be with us sinners in the depth of human despair and alienation. The fact that God himself, the Son of the Father in the Godhead, emptied himself of his glory to descend below all things to experience the most remote depths of such excruciating physical pain and abandonment by the Father in the moment of greatest need expresses a love so great that it shocks us. In this suffering we see perfect obedience to God’s will to lay down his life for his friends. Green’s suggestion that we should not recognize love in Jesus’s suffering because it “validates suffering” misses the entire point of the fact that we have a Savior who suffered for and with us so that we don’t have to. Her claims trivialize the undoubted failure to adequately value women’s voices in the past. Christ’s suffering ends the need to suffer. The message, for not only women, but all of us, is that we already have a Savior and we don’t need another. Indeed, the most emphatic point of Christ’s atonement is that both sin and continuing to suffer for our own sins is pointless and just plain stupid. We don’t have to suffer for our sins if only we will repent by turning back toward God who stands with open arms waiting for us to walk into his embrace.

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<sup>24</sup> Green, 13, citing Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 88. As Kathryn Tanner, another feminist theologian, observed, feminist theologians risk missing the entire point of Christ’s atonement by merely judging the suffering involved as something negative and therefore to be denigrated: “Of course, a feminist and womanist focus on Christ’s ministry can itself become one-sided, and therefore susceptible of critique on the grounds . . . that the cross can fall out of consideration altogether except as something simply negative. The usual recourse of feminist and womanist theologians is to dismiss that the idea that there is anything saving going on in the crucifixion.” See, “Incarnation, Cross and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal,” *Anglican Theological Review* vol. 86, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 39.