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## An Orthodox Atonement: A Philosophical Elucidation

### Abstract

This article focuses on providing a philosophical elucidation and reconstruction of the Eastern Orthodox conception of the Atonement. This elucidation will take the form of addressing three aspects: the recapitulative nature of Christ's life, the victorious nature of his death, and the transformative nature of his resurrection that enables theosis, which are central to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Atonement. These aspects will be addressed by employing a tri-conceptual framework that includes a combination of philosophical concepts proposed by Eleonore Stump, Linda Zagzebski, Alexander Pruss, and Richard Swinburne, which will provide a means, through the formulation of the 'Recapitulative Theotic Victory' model, for one to understand how Christ's



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atonement work enables humanity to enter into an everlasting agápēic relationship with God within our contemporary philosophical context.

### Keywords

Atonement, Resurrection, Recapitulative Theotic Victory, Theosis, ecumenic

## 1 Introduction

This article offers a philosophical elucidation of the Eastern Orthodox conception of the Atonement, focusing on three elements traditionally associated with Orthodox soteriology: recapitulation, Christ's cosmic victory over evil (often called *Christus Victor*), and theosis. Although these three elements are especially prominent in Eastern patristic sources, they also resonate with theological insights in Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. We can thus bring these three concepts together succinctly as follows:

- (1) (Atonement) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ recapitulates human experience, defeats cosmic evil, and enables humanity's transformation into the divine likeness (i.e., theosis) through a relational union with God.

Many Western thinkers, including some who identify as Catholic or Protestant, have adopted Irenaean or patristic perspectives that highlight both the healing dimension of salvation and its transformative goal of union with God. Nevertheless, Eastern Orthodox theology has typically placed a unique emphasis on the interconnectedness of Christ's recapitulation of humanity, his victory over sin and death, and the eventual deification of human beings. By focusing on these themes within a contemporary philosophical framework, one can clarify how the Orthodox tradition

conceives of Christ's work as both the healing of human nature and the beginning of humanity's personal participation in God's own life. The approach presented here, which I will call the *Recapitulative Theotic Victory* (hereafter, RTV) model, is grounded in insights drawn from Eleonore Stump and Linda Zagzebski on the nature of personal presence and empathy, Alexander Pruss on the nature of agápēic love, and Richard Swinburne on the notion of sin and wrongdoing from an anthropological and moral-philosophical perspective. Each of these thinkers provides conceptual resources that, when integrated, shed new light on Orthodox soteriology. The model is also informed by the broad scholarly conversation on atonement, including discussions by Kathryn Tanner, T. F. Torrance, Oliver Crisp, Jordan Wessling, and Robin Collins. While these authors develop accounts of the Incarnation and salvation that share some ground with the classical themes of recapitulation, cosmic victory, and sanctifying union, the present project aims to offer a more thoroughly Eastern framework—one that places theosis at the forefront and underscores how Christ's solidarity with humanity, his defeat of cosmic evil, and his imparting of divine life converge in an integrated vision of atonement.

In what follows, I first discuss how "sin," in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, is understood not primarily in legal or forensic terms, but as an ancestral distortion of human nature that produces corruption, mortality, and an inclination toward wrongdoing. I then outline the three motifs that ground this tradition's view of atonement. Recapitulation highlights the role of Christ's entire life, rather than merely his death, in restoring human nature; Christus Victor underscores how Christ's death and resurrection defeat the powers of sin, death, and demonic evil; and theosis stresses that the ultimate goal of salvation is not simply forgiveness or liberation, but rather the human person's ongoing union with God and transformation into the divine likeness. After reviewing these essential components, I employ the philosophical notions of personal presence, empathy, agápēic love,

and the anthropology of wrongdoing to shed light on how the Orthodox emphasis on healing and transformation can be understood in a coherent philosophical manner.

By undertaking this project, I hope to address two challenges that often arise when Western philosophical theology engages Eastern Orthodox views. First, there is a tendency to assume a sharp East–West divide in theology. Although such a divide has sometimes been overstated, there remain genuine differences of focus and emphasis, especially around healing, synergy, and the concept of theosis. Second, there is a need for a clearer account of how metaphysical, ethical, and anthropological elements undergird the Orthodox vision. This article thus aims to supply a systematic account of how one might argue, in contemporary philosophical terms, for the recapitulative and transformative dimensions of Christ’s saving work, grounded in an understanding of divine empathy and human synergy. While this proposal shares certain family resemblances with other contemporary atonement theories—such as moral influence approaches, Marian mindreading models, or accounts centered on union—it attempts to weave them together in a distinctively Orthodox manner. In doing so, it provides a more precise model of how Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection can overcome humanity’s ancestral proneness to wrongdoing, heal the mind and will, and ultimately effect real union between God and human persons.

Thus, the plan is as follows: in section 2 (‘The Theoretical Foundation of the Atonement’), there will be an explication of our tri-conceptual framework, which includes the metaphysical concepts of personal presence and empathy, the ethical concept of *agápē*, and the anthropological concept of the human condition. Then, in section 3 (‘Elucidating the Atonement: Recapitulation, Victory and Theosis’), there will be an application of this framework to the Orthodox conception of the Atonement, which will provide a means for one to understand the recapitulative nature of Christ’s life, the victorious nature of his death, and the transformative nature of his resurrection that enables humanity’s theosis through an everlasting *agápēic* relationship with God. After

this, in section 4 ('Comparisons with Other Contemporary Accounts'), there will be a comparison of the RTV model with other available model sin the contemporary literature, which will help to further highlight its unique features. Finally, after this section, there will be a concluding section ('Conclusion'), which will summarise the above results and conclude the article.

## 2 The Theoretical Foundation of the Atonement

### 2.1 Theological Framework: Doctrinal Foundation

In Orthodox theology, sin is not merely a legal debt or the violation of a law carrying a penalty, though transgression and guilt are not denied outright. Instead, sin is understood as a disease or distortion of human nature, sometimes traced to what is called 'ancestral sin'.<sup>1</sup> We can thus state this succinctly as follows:

- (2) (Sin) A disease or distortion of human nature inherited from ancestral corruption, which darkens the mind and weakens the will, requiring healing rather than juridical payment, and involving both personal corruption and cosmic enslavement to death and demonic powers that draw humanity from communion with God.

Rather than inheriting Adam's guilt, human beings inherit from their first ancestors a corruption of nature and a subjection to death, which in turn darkens the mind (nous) and weakens the will. Writers like St. John Damascene characterize sin primarily in medical or therapeutic terms, as something requiring healing rather than a juridical payment.<sup>2</sup> This focus on healing and transformation is closely tied to the tradition's emphasis on Christ's

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<sup>1</sup> See Romanides, J. S. (1957). *The Ancestral Sin*. Zephyr Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> For additional patristic support of the therapeutic understanding of sin and salvation, see John Chrysostom. (1889) 'Homily 13 on Romans'. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip

incarnation and entire earthly life, since the Orthodox Church has long taught that Christ heals what he assumes. Because of his full assumption of human nature, Christ can restore and sanctify it in every aspect of life. This understanding of sin broadens into a cosmic dimension: sin involves an enslavement to the “tyranny of death” and the power of demonic forces. Humanity’s fall is not only the transmittal of mortality but also a subjugation under parasitic powers that draw humankind away from communion with God. Early theologians like St. Gregory of Nyssa and later interpreters such as Gustaf Aulén’s exposition of *Christus Victor* bring out this cosmic dimension, insisting that redemption is not limited to addressing individual guilt but must also deal with death, demonic oppression, and the corruption that pervades creation.<sup>3</sup> Without this cosmic perspective, the Eastern Orthodox claim that atonement is “therapeutic” and transformative can appear too focused on personal holiness alone. In reality, the tradition affirms that healing and transformation come hand in hand with a victory over the cosmic forces that enslave humanity. Because humans inherit a nature corrupted by ancestral sin and are entrenched in habits of wrongdoing, their minds are darkened and their wills are enslaved. This twofold corruption blocks the possibility of uniting with God on their own. Orthodox theology therefore insists that salvation must involve not only the forgiveness of sins but also a profound reconfiguration of human nature, so that human beings can truly share in the divine life. This idea of reconfiguration finds an echo in certain Western accounts of sanctification, but it is given distinctive articulation in Orthodoxy by the doctrine of theosis: the real, ontological trans-

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Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co. Chrysostom emphasizes the medicinal nature of divine discipline and the healing work of Christ.

- <sup>3</sup> Aulén, G. (1931). *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. SPCK; Gregory of Nyssa. (1893). *The Great Catechism*. In P. Schaff (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 5. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.

formation of the human person into the likeness of God, in synergy with divine grace.<sup>4</sup> This synergy emerges from God's self-giving and humanity's free but aided response. The crucial question, then, is how Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection, accomplishes that reconfiguration and makes possible the everlasting agápēic relationship between God and humanity that Orthodoxy calls deification.

Now, three patristic motifs are classically intertwined in the Orthodox understanding of atonement.<sup>5</sup> First, recapitulation, associated with St. Irenaeus of Lyon,<sup>6</sup> teaches that Christ, as the "new Adam," retraces the entire course of human life, sanctifying each stage of existence.<sup>7</sup> By uniting himself to our nature, living a fully sinless human life, and offering perfect obedience to the Father, Christ "recapitulates" humanity, establishing himself as the new head and source of restored life. His entire earthly life—infancy, childhood, adulthood, his acceptance of suffering, his death, and

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<sup>4</sup> On the distinctive Orthodox understanding of synergy between divine grace and human freedom in the process of deification, see Meyendorff, J. (1979). *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. Fordham University Press. Meyendorff explains how Orthodox theology avoids both Pelagian and predestinarian extremes through its doctrine of synergy.

<sup>5</sup> On the historical development of these three patristic motifs in early Christian doctrine, see Pelikan, J. (1971). *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. University of Chicago Press. Pelikan traces how recapitulation, Christus Victor, and deification themes emerged and developed in the patristic period.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon. (1885). *Against Heresies*. In A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 1). Christian Literature Publishing..

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon. (1885). *Against Heresies*. In A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 1). Christian Literature Publishing. For a comprehensive treatment of theosis in Orthodox theology, including the distinction between God's essence and energies crucial to deification, see Lossky, V. (1974). *In the Image and Likeness of God*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. Lossky provides the definitive modern Orthodox exposition of theosis as participation in divine energies while maintaining the essence-energies distinction.

his resurrection—becomes an extension of God’s healing action toward the human race. Second, the motif of *Christus Victor* draws attention to the ways Christ’s death and resurrection overthrow the powers of sin, death, and demonic forces, liberating creation from their tyranny. This cosmic dimension finds a vivid expression in writers like St. Gregory of Nyssa, who liken Christ’s incarnation to a strategic entrapment of evil powers that overreach themselves by taking the incarnate Son into death.<sup>8</sup> The resurrection thus marks God’s decisive victory, exposing the impotence of evil before divine life and love. Third, *theosis* names the process by which human persons, now freed from bondage and made participants in Christ’s renewed human life, come to share in the divine life itself. Following St. Athanasius’s famous statement that God became man so that we might become God, Orthodoxy sees the final goal of Christ’s redemptive work as the deification of believers, who are called to undergo an interior transformation of mind, will, and heart that unites them to God’s energies without blurring the distinction between Creator and creature.<sup>9</sup>

These three motifs often appear together, for they are mutually reinforcing. Recapitulation signifies the healing of human life in Christ, *Christus Victor* underscores the cosmic dimension of his passion and resurrection, and *theosis* designates the eventual transformation into divine likeness. Yet many questions arise about how Christ’s life, death, and resurrection can truly “carry” all human persons, as the recapitulation theme suggests, and how they effect a real inner transformation of each person’s mind and will rather than merely guaranteeing external pardon. To clarify these links, one can draw on certain philosophical concepts related to personal presence, empathy, the structure of

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. (1893). *The Great Catechism*. In P. Schaff (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 5. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius. (1981). *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (C. S. Lewis, Introduction). St Vladimir’s Seminary Press.



love, and the anthropology of wrongdoing. By using these conceptual tools, we can better specify what it means that Christ “took us all up” in his life, died for us, defeated cosmic evil, and then shared his renewed life with humanity so that every person might become “partakers of the divine nature”. We will now turn our attention to the first of these philosophical concepts which focus on the notions of personal presence and empathy.

### *2.2 Metaphysical Framework: Personal Presence and Empathy*

The central concepts of our metaphysical framework, personal presence and empathy, focus on the personal and emotional structure of cognitive entities, and can be stated succinctly as follows:

#### (3) (Personal Presence)

An entity *x* is personally present to another individual *y* if *x* is psychologically connected to *y*.

#### (4) (Empathy)

An entity *x* is empathetic to *y* if *x* has undergone the process of acquiring an emotion similar to that of *y*.

At a general level, and in following Stump,<sup>10</sup> one can take it to be the case that an individual can be present, firstly, at a *place*, through occupying a certain region of space; secondly, at a *time*, through existing at a certain moment of time, and, thirdly, *personally present*, through having a psychological connection with another individual. The third type of presence is personal presence—which is a presence *with* or *to* another individual that is expressed as a direct awareness of another individual's conscious state.<sup>11</sup> This type of presence goes beyond mere physical or temporal co-existence and enters the realm of emotional and

<sup>10</sup> Stump, E. (2018). *Atonement*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> With a given individual being able to be present in each of these three ways or all of them.

cognitive engagement. It is through personal presence that people can truly connect with others on a level that transcends the physical boundaries of space and time. Whether through empathy, shared experiences, or deep conversations, personal presence fosters a unique bond where individuals can understand and be understood, offering a glimpse into each other's inner worlds. This connection is not only about recognising emotions or thoughts but also about responding to them in a way that is both meaningful and validating.

Now, one can begin to further understand the nature of this presence better by turning our attention to explicating the notion of 'empathy'—where emotions are transferred between individuals. Empathy, especially among humans, involves acquiring an emotion similar to another's, though not necessarily identical, but closely related.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Zagzebski distinguishes empathy from emotional contagion,<sup>13</sup> which is merely a passive emotional spread, by noting that empathy requires actively perceiving and responding to others' emotions. Hence, empathy involves reacting to another's feelings with similar emotional responses, and recognising these emotions as reasons for corresponding feelings in oneself. For instance, if person X sees their colleague Y upset, empathy would mean X feeling upset because of Y's distress, provided X perceives Y's condition as a cause for their own. This emotional alignment might strengthen their bond, or help X understand Y's behaviour better, regardless of their personal relationship. Zagzebski describes this as an 'imaginative shift'—assuming the perspective of another by emotionally placing oneself in their situation, which is more profound

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<sup>12</sup> For a different conceptualisation of empathy—namely, that of the 'phenomenological approach'—which does not require an empathiser to share the emotional states of the individual that they are empathising with, see (Zahavi, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Zagzebski, L. (2023). *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay on God and Subjectivity*. Oxford University Press.

than merely imagining oneself in the same circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, empathy involves a dual perspective where one adopts another's emotional state while recognising it as a simulation, making empathetic emotions representational rather than identical to the original. This dual aspect suggests that empathetic emotions begin as imitations and are shaped by the empathiser's own beliefs and emotions, resulting in what Zagzebski calls a 'congruent' emotion.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, truly empathising with another's emotions means actually experiencing those emotions yourself, although empathising with someone's judgments or decisions does not necessarily involve agreeing with them. Zagzebski extends this concept to 'total empathy',<sup>16</sup> which encompasses all aspects of another's consciousness, including beliefs, sensations, moods, desires, choices, and emotions. This cognitive state of total empathy involves empathising with every aspect of a person's life, representing a complete and accurate reflection of their conscious states. That is this form of empathy—total empathy—allows them to live through the experiences of others while retaining their own self-awareness. Thus, an individual that is totally empathetic, intimately knows *what it is like to be* another being without losing their identity, embodying a direct, empathetic acquaintance with every conscious state of that individual. Hence, *perfect* total empathy is the complete and accurate representation of all of another individual's conscious states, as Zagzebski further notes,<sup>17</sup> if X has perfect total empathy with Y, then, whenever Y is in a conscious state, C, X acquires a state that is a perfectly accurate copy of C and X is aware that her conscious state is a copy of C. If an individual has perfect total empathy for another individual in this particular way, then the former individual is able to grasp *what it is like* for the latter

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<sup>14</sup> Zagzebski, L. (2013). *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute*. Marquette University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zagzebski, *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay*.

<sup>17</sup> Zagzebski, *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay*, 29.

individual to be in that specific state. Yet, because the individual is in an empathetic state, their awareness of their individuality will be included in their empathetic state. Furthermore, the individual would always have an awareness that their empathetic copy *is a copy*—that their empathetic copy of the individual's state is not the state of being that individual. This theoretical framework thus suggests that an individual can understand and experience everything another individual does, from a first-person perspective, but through an empathetic lens, ensuring that he remains distinct from those whose experiences they share. Given all of this, it is thus plausible to take God (if he exists) to be a *cognitively perfect* being, and thus, one would be a being who has total perfect empathy with *all* conscious beings who have ever existed (or will ever exist). In short, it is a plausible assumption to take God to be an entity that possesses the attribute of being *totally empathetic*—with the nature of this form of empathy being a direct acquaintance with the conscious states of all of God's creatures—a form of like direct seeing, yet without there being any physical difference between God and his creatures. As a totally empathetic being, God thus lives through the conscious experience of each being who possesses consciousness. That is, as Zagzebski notes,<sup>18</sup> God knows everything you know or understand from living your life, and similarly, for every other conscious being, God knows what it is like to be you, what it is like to be your dog, and what it is like to be each and every animal that has ever lived and had conscious awareness. In other words, God experiences everything we experience by living our life—that is, God grasps it as if it were from their first-person point of view—yet, in an empathetic way, such that God does not 'forget' that he is not that individual. Thus, God feels total empathy towards another individual; he shares in the total conscious expe-

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<sup>18</sup> Zagzebski, *Omnisubjectivity: An Essay*, 30.

rience of this individual—as if it was happening to him—without, however, him losing his own identity in this shared experience.

Through empathy and perfect total empathy, personal presence is achieved by establishing a profound connection that extends beyond mere physical or intellectual engagement. That is, empathy allows an individual to align emotionally with another, essentially feeling the emotions of the other as if they were their own. This alignment fosters a psychological connection that is crucial for personal presence, as it involves a direct awareness and interaction with the conscious states of another person. In addition to this, total empathy deepens this connection by involving a comprehensive understanding of all aspects of another's consciousness. By empathising completely, one not only shares emotions but also aligns with the other's beliefs, desires, and experiences. This total immersion into another's psyche does more than just link two individuals; it allows one to 'be' the other without losing one's own identity. This unique aspect of total empathy ensures that personal presence is not just about being alongside someone else physically or temporally but involves a deep, empathetic participation in their emotional and psychological state. In this way, personal presence is enriched and intensified by the capability to fully comprehend and resonate with every part of another's being, making the connection not only more intimate but also more meaningful. This level of empathy reveals not just an awareness of another's feelings but a shared experience of those feelings, establishing a personal presence that is both emotionally profound and psychologically comprehensive.

### *2.3 Ethical Framework: Agápēic Love*

The notion of *agápē* is at the heart of a loving ('agápēic') relationship between two individuals: the lover and the beloved, and we can understand the nature of this notion more specifically as follows:

- (5) (Agápē)
- (i) *Determination:* A determination of the will of an individual in favour of the beloved
  - (ii) *Forms:* A multi-formed concept with three interrelated aspects: a complacent aspect, a benevolence aspect and a unitive aspect.

In conceptualising the nature of *agápē* more fully, one can understand that, within a theological context that is based on the teaching of the Christian Scriptures, all individuals are presented with a duty to show *agápē* towards all individuals. More specifically, as Pruss notes,<sup>19</sup> 'the ethics of the New Testament centres around a specific duty to love'. That is, according to the Christian Scriptures—specifically that of the New Testament—every individual has a specific duty: the duty to love everyone and to act in that love in such a way that all of morality is included within this act (John 13: 34-35; Romans 13:8-13). In other words, all individuals are obliged to love, and do so in an *appropriate* manner—to love the beloved *as they are and not as what they are not*.<sup>20</sup> This understanding of one's moral duty to love—to show *agápē*—is thus one that is focused on particular actions that are for the betterment of the beloved in the loving relationship. Additionally, this specific duty provided by *agápē* implies three reasons why love is not to be conceived as, or reduced to, a static feeling or emotion. The first reason is that loving feelings or emotions are not under volitional control, whereas one is always obliged to love. The second reason is that feelings are often transitory and thus can be lacking in certain times of distress, whereas the New Testament sees love as being best exhibited in situations of great distress—such as during the suffering of Christ (Mark 15:34).

<sup>19</sup> Pruss, A. R. (2013). *One Body: An Essay in Christian Ethics*. University of Notre Dame Press, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

The third reason is that feelings are not closely connected to action—they do not always need to be acted on, but instead can wilfully be ignored. However, as Pruss notes,<sup>21</sup> within the New Testament, *agápē* is seen as being the fulfilment of the moral law, and thus 'it is taken for granted that love expresses itself and is sufficient, in and of itself'. *Agápē* is thus not a feeling, but neither is it a *disposition* or *tendency* to feel an emotion—as dispositions are even less under direct volitional control than feelings and thus cannot serve as a guarantor for right action. From this non-reducibility of *agápē* to a feeling or disposition, we can see that *action* is a central component of *agápē*, and as actions are an expression of an individual's will, *agápē* is to be conceived of as a *determination of the will of an individual in favour of the beloved*. Now, within this agápēic framework, the various forms of love—filial, romantic or fraternal love etc.—are all forms of *agápē*. That is, in Pruss' thought,<sup>22</sup> *agápē* is not a distinct type of love alongside the other forms of love; rather, it simply *is* love, a multi-formed love. More specifically, this multi-formedness of *agápē* is grounded upon two factors: linguistic and theological. Linguistically, within the New Testament, all 'types' of love are forms of *agápē* in the sense that the word has a very wide range of meanings, such that spousal love (Ephesians 5:25), sexualised love (Song of Songs 2:5), and even love for certain possessions—such as the love for the best seats in the synagogue (Luke 11:43)—are all referred to as *agápē*. In short, the New Testament usage of *agápē* appears to have a semantic range that corresponds to that of the English word 'love'. Moreover, at a theological level within the New Testament, all 'types' of love are forms of *agápē* in the sense that the love that humanity is to have for God and for their neighbour (Matthew 5:44), and the love that God has for humanity (John 3:16), is regularly referred to as *agápē*—and is expressed as a selfless generosity that is directed towards the other and desires reciprocation for the good of the other. Given this

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

wide range of linguistic and theological usage, the scriptural understanding of *agápē* does not distinguish it from other forms of love; rather, it presents the forms of love as unified forms of *agápē*—every love is *agápē*, a multi-formed love. Hence, at a conceptual level, *agápē* is best conceived of as a multi-formed love that is a determination of the will of an individual in favour of the beloved. That is, *agápē* is thus a concept that is connected to action—it guarantees right action—and thus, individuals are responsible for love, rather than being passive receivers of it. To fulfil this responsibility, one must love by willing the good for the beloved—for their sake, rather than one's own—but one must also appreciate the beloved and seek union with them. More specifically, there are three aspects of all forms of *agápē*: a 'appreciative' aspect, a 'benevolence' aspect and a 'unitive' aspect. Unpacking this in more detail: first, *agápēic* love has an appreciative aspect—and thus is an 'appreciative love'—in the sense that it is a love that respects and appreciates the intrinsic worth or value of the beloved, in a manner that reflects and honours their worth or value. Second, *agápēic* love has a benevolence aspect—and thus is a 'benevolent love'—in the sense that it seeks to bestow what is good on another individual and prevent/alleviate what is bad for another individual—not, however, because the beloved has earned it or deserves it but simply because the beloved's welfare is valued for its own sake.<sup>23</sup> Third, *agápēic* love has a unitive aspect—and thus is a 'unitive love'—in the sense that it is a love that seeks union. That is, the lover seeks, mentally and/or physically, to 'become one' with the beloved—as further explained below. Now, these three aspects of *agápē* are interconnected as follows: a complacent love for the beloved would result in a recognition that it is right to bestow goods on them through

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the nature of this aspect of love outside of work of Pruss, see Kronen, J., & Reitan, E. (2022). Annihilation or Salvation? A Philosophical Case for Preferring Universalism to Annihilationism. *Religious Studies*, 58(1), 138-161.



acts of will. Moreover, exemplifying a complacent love for the beloved would lead to one seeking union with them in such a way that the beloved's good becomes that of the lover's good as well. By one being benevolent towards the beloved, and thus willing the good for the beloved for their sake, one would value them as an individual on who it is appropriate to bestow goods upon, and one would also be united with the beloved in will, given that the beloved would also will the good for themselves. Additionally, by one aiming for an intimate form of union, where one would treat the good and bad experiences that befall the beloved as befalling themselves, it would thus be natural that the lover would have complacent love towards the beloved, expressed by them appreciating the beloved as one who is worthwhile of experiencing the good, resulting in one naturally having a benevolent love for them, and thus willing the good for the beloved. These three aspects of *agápē* provide a basis for there to be a selfless and generative love between the lover and the beloved. Moreover, all the various forms of *agápē*—all the various types of *agápēic* relationships—will include these three aspects within them, yet they will be manifested in different ways. That is, each form of love—self, romantic, filial and, fraternal love etc.—will exhibit, in distinct ways, a complacent love for the beloved, a benevolent love for them, and a striving for some form of union with them. Precisely, the differentiation between the forms of *agápē* will be distinguishable by the *type of union* that one is impelled to enter into: *formal union* and/or *real union*—with the type of union that is appropriate between the lover and the beloved depending, in part, on the characteristics of the individuals.

Focusing now on these unitive aspects of *agápē*: the formal union between a lover and their beloved is a *union of mind and will*.<sup>24</sup> This union of mind and will consists of a mutual 'indwelling' of

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<sup>24</sup> As, the first two aspects of love will not vary drastically between the different forms of love—one can appreciate the same good of an individual in a romantic, filial and fraternal context, and the very same goods can also be willed within these contexts as well.

the lover and beloved—even in the cases of unreciprocated love. In this mutual indwelling, the lover has the beloved 'living within their mind' and strives to understand the nature and goals of the beloved from their perspective—understanding the beloved from the inside—which leads to a willing of the other's particular good and the performance of actions for the sake of the lover *as if the beloved were the lover themselves*. In a certain way, love is *ek-static*,<sup>25</sup> in the sense that through their union, the lover comes to live outside of themselves and in the lover. Hence, in a loving relationship, the lover dwells in the beloved intellectually and in will, and, in turn, the beloved dwells in the lover intellectually and in will as well. There is thus a formal union that can be increased as one gains a better knowledge of the beloved—enabling the lover to understand what is good and bad for this particular beloved and understand them better from their own point of view. Moreover, one's will is united with the beloved by willing the good for them, and thus, this formal union is derivable from the appreciative and benevolent aspects of love and is, therefore, always present in every case of love. Formal union is present simply in virtue of one loving another, and thus can exist without reciprocation, as Pruss writes, 'formal union is already achieved at any time love is there...formal union can exist without any reciprocation'.<sup>26</sup> However, the love that is present in a relationship nevertheless impels one toward *real* union. Real union is thus the *external* expression of the formal union between the lover and the beloved. That is, real union is the way that the lover and the beloved, who are each united in mind and will, are together in a particular manner that is determined by the nature of the form of love that is present. Real union is the reciprocation of love that achieves an additional union between the lover and their beloved through a *shared activity*. *Agápē* thus makes an individual seek real union with another, with the specific form of real union that is sought being the primary distinguishing factor

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<sup>25</sup> More on this notion below.

<sup>26</sup> Pruss, *One Body*, 32.

between the different forms of *agápē*. For example, filial love might require physical touch—such as hugging a child—whilst the friendly love between two colleagues might not call for this expression of their union—where an intellectual conversation might be more appropriate for this type of relationship.<sup>27</sup>

The love between people must thus take on a form that is *appropriate* to the lover, the beloved and their relationship, with some type of real union being paradigmatic of the form of love between them. Love, construed as *agápē*, thus must be *dynamic* and *responsive* to the reality of the beloved, with the achievement of a real union between the lover and their beloved being the central goal that has an external expression—a 'consummation' of the form of love that is present. Paradigmatically, the consummation of a real union would thus be a *shared activity* that expresses the *distinctiveness* of the type of relationship that is present and enables the love to be *fulfilled* with respect to the particular form that it takes. The unitive aspect of love is thus fulfilled by this consummation, which includes—in all forms of love—a psychological union, and for a specific form of love—romantic love—a physical union as well. In summary, a relationship of love centres around the expression of *agápē* between the lover and the beloved. *Agápē* is a multi-formed love that is a determination of the lover's will in favour of the beloved and is expressed through their complacent and benevolent love towards the beloved, their formal union with them, and the seeking of real union with them as well.

#### 2.4 Anthropological Framework: The Human Condition

The human condition is such that, by possessing 'libertarian free will', humans (genetically and socially) inherit an inclination towards wrongdoing, which results in them being 'spiritually darkened', and ultimately in 'bondage to sin'. We can state the human condition more fully as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> Pruss, A. R. (2008). *One Body: Reflections on Christian Sexual Ethics*. <http://alexanderpruss.com/papers/OneBody-talk.html>

(6) (Human  
Condition)

The condition of humanity is such that each individual human, with libertarian free will, has a genetically and socially inherited a proneness to wrongdoing that results in them becoming spiritually darkened, and being in bondage to sin.

To fully understand the human condition, one must distinguish between two types of good actions, as emphasised by Richard Swinburne: obligations and supererogatory actions.<sup>28</sup> Obligations are actions one is duty-bound to perform or avoid, while supererogatory actions are good but not obligatory. Performing a supererogatory action, such as sacrificing oneself for a comrade, is praiseworthy, but failing to do so does not make one blameworthy since no wrongdoing has occurred.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, failing to perform an obligatory action, or performing an action one is obligated not to, constitutes wrongdoing and makes the person blameworthy.<sup>30</sup> Swinburne further divides wrongdoing into objective and subjective categories: objective wrongdoing involves failing to fulfil one's obligations, regardless of one's awareness. For example, a parent who doesn't properly educate their child commits an objectively wrong act, even if they believe they are fulfilling their duty.<sup>31</sup> Subjective wrongdoing occurs when someone fails to try to fulfil their obligations. If a person believes they have a duty to educate their child but neglects it, they have committed a subjectively wrong action, even if the child ends up being educated by someone else. Humans thus have a tendency not only to perform bad actions in general but

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<sup>28</sup> Swinburne, R. (1989). *Responsibility and Atonement*. Clarendon Press.

<sup>29</sup> Swinburne, R. (1997). *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Swinburne, *Responsibility*.

also a ‘proneness to wrongdoing’—a tendency to perform morally blameworthy actions. One might ask why God would create humans with this specific proneness. Swinburne suggests that the primary reason is to bestow upon humans the good of possessing ‘libertarian free will. This is the ability to have done otherwise at a specific time without being causally determined.’<sup>32</sup> It is the freedom to choose whether or not to bring about some effect, where the total causes influencing the choice do not completely determine it.<sup>33</sup> In making free choices, humans are influenced by their desires—innate inclinations to prefer one action over another—which arise partly from physiology (desires for food, drink, sleep, sex) and partly from societal context (desires for fame, fortune). Alongside desires, individuals are presented with reasons for choosing one action over another. Recognising a reason to perform an action only inclines one to do it if all other factors are equal; other factors may provide better reasons not to do the action.<sup>34</sup> Believing there is an overall reason to perform one action over another means considering it the most sensible or rational choice.

Despite this, one might still not perform that action because they yield to non-rational forces—desires—influencing their purpose. If one believes there is a balance of reason supporting an action, they will perform it if unimpeded by their desires.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, for an agent to have the option of doing less good or bad actions, they must be subject to a stronger desire to do an alternative action. Only by having such desires can an individual have the free choice to pursue the best or not. A free choice arises in two situations: choosing between two equally best actions desired equally, or choosing between an action desired more and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>35</sup> Swinburne, *Providence*.

one believed to be better—more reasonable or rational. The latter is what Swinburne calls ‘temptation’.<sup>36</sup> Temptation comes in three forms, where the stronger desire is for an action that is less good, bad but not wrong, or wrong. In these forms, conforming to the good may require varying effort, depending on the strength of the opposing desire. Therefore, to have libertarian freedom to choose between good and bad, a person must have strong desires for the latter. Without temptation—a strong desire to do what is bad—one would not have a free choice between good and bad. Essentially, free moral choice requires awareness of good and bad and a desire to perform the latter.<sup>37</sup> Human free choices are made in light of moral beliefs and under the influence of desires that make certain actions easier. Each individual can act to gradually form their character, but nature and nurture begin shaping us before we can mold ourselves, making it harder or easier to change. Humans share the feature that their strongest desires are for their own perceived enjoyment. Bodily desires and desires for power and admiration are self-centered, and focused on personal satisfaction and respect from others.<sup>38</sup> Human desires often conflict, as fulfilling one person's desire may prevent another's. These conflicts are innate, stemming from the basic feature that each individual desires what they believe they would enjoy. Selfish desires often influence individuals to satisfy them, even when it is wrong. Thus, humans have a proneness not only to bad actions but also to wrongdoing. Because human desires are often selfish and operate where selfishness is objectively wrong, humans have wrong desires that lead them to spontaneously perform objectively wrong actions. Moreover, when a desire is combined with the belief that the action is wrong, individuals may be inclined to do what they believe is wrong.<sup>39</sup> Susceptible to ‘weakness of will’, humans not

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Swinburne, R. (2008). *Was Jesus God?*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Swinburne, *Responsibility*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 113.

only do wrong actions spontaneously but also intentionally perform subjectively wrong actions. This proneness to wrongdoing is reinforced when individuals refuse to acknowledge their moral beliefs or the consequences of their actions, leading to self-deception. For example, an obedient official who organises atrocities may hide from himself the consequences of his actions and pretend he has no obligations beyond duty to superiors.<sup>40</sup> The temptation for self-deceit—concealing one's moral obligations—is evident in human life and transforms moral weakness into deliberate wickedness if not for successful self-deception. The propensity for wrongdoing requires moral belief and self-centred desire. Moral beliefs are transmitted culturally, while the proneness to wrongdoing is biological, through genetic transmission.<sup>41</sup> If society fails to teach correct moral distinctions, it may fail to commend conduct derived from these distinctions. Teaching inadequate or incorrect morality fails to provide reasons to pursue the good and may provide reasons to pursue the bad, strengthening wrong desires and increasing objective wrongdoing. False moral teaching may also lead to a disregard for morality, weakening the will and increasing subjective wrongdoing.

The proneness to wrongdoing may be strengthened or weakened by examples. This is that, even if society's moral teaching is correct, treating it casually can lead to imitation contrary to the good. Conversely, good examples have enormous power.<sup>42</sup> The central aspect of the proneness to wrongdoing is transmitted genetically, but the societal environment influences its strength. An ideal education would weaken bad desires and reinforce good ones, but such systems are rare, mainly due to the genetically transmitted proneness to wrongdoing. As individuals yield to bad desires, they tend to ignore ideas, leading to less selfish mo-

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 115.

rality. They may treat morality unseriously and become bad examples. Reconceptualising this within a theological context, 'sin' refers to wrongdoing in relation to God and others, with objective wrongdoing being 'objective sinning' and subjective wrongdoing 'subjective sinning'. By inheriting a proneness to wrongdoing—which, alongside (Orthodox) tradition we can term 'ancestral sin'—and performing wrong actions, individuals become plagued by a spiritual 'illness' that creates a form of spiritual and moral darkness along with a bondage to sin inherited from ancestors. Following N.T. Wright,<sup>43</sup> one can understand that sin consists of 'forces' actively working against God's purposes. When we serve forces within creation, we hand over our power to forces eager to usurp our position—such as money, sex, and power. These 'forces' seek to enslave humanity and creation, resulting in spiritual darkening that pulls away from God's intention. By abdicating their purpose and responsibilities, humans have surrendered power to forces that are neither divine nor human, leading to chaos and suffering.<sup>44</sup> Thus, there is a 'spiritual dimension' including certain entities—'forces'—analogous to our cultural dimension, including humans. Operating within this dimension, humans, by acting on ancestral sin, become bound to sin and spiritually darkened by these 'forces', becoming 'prisoners of bad desires'.<sup>45</sup> This spiritual darkness and bondage are inherited similarly to the proneness to wrongdoing. Therefore, humans are not only prone to sin but also clouded in mind and bound in will to it. An individual whose mind is darkened and bound to sin lacks a natural desire to perform actions ordered toward the good. Considering the human condition, we see the issue preventing humans from flourishing in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God. This is that, the human condition

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, N. T. (2016). *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*. HarperOne, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Revolution*.

<sup>45</sup> Swinburne, R. (1983). A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell. In A. J. Freddoso (Ed.), *The Existence of God* (p37-54). University of Notre Dame Press, 49.



is thus one in which libertarian free creatures, such as human beings, have an inherent proneness to wrongdoing (ancestral sin) that centres on a badness of desire, weakness of will and false moral beliefs—with this genetically transmitted proneness to wrongdoing thus producing and encouraging a socially transmitted proneness to wrongdoing as well. The inheritance of this proneness results in all humans actually performing wrong actions. In a theological context, the result of this performance of a wrong action is that humans are in a state of spiritual darkness in regard to their minds, and are bound to sin in regard to their will. God can thus not be in a formal union with an individual in this condition, as either it would be wrong for him to unite his mind and will with them (and thus treat them in a manner as if they did not wrong him and, therefore, reinforce their wrongdoing) or humans would not themselves be able to unite their mind and will with God, given the lack of correspondence between God's mind and will and the mind and will of each human. Hence, in their current condition, humans are not able to flourish by being in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God.

The question that thus now stands before is: how would God respond to the human condition that forestalls all individuals from entering into an agápēic relationship with him? One way in which God could respond to this situation is by requiring all humans to deal with this problem themselves by overcoming their ancestral sin—and thus acquiring a mind and will that is similar to God's. However, this would be too great a task, given the fact that humans are plagued with a proneness to wrongdoing, and most humans are within a societal context that provides opportunities and motivation for wrongdoing, and thus there would always be a high probability that each human will decide to continue to sin. However, if this is indeed the case, then this would further darken their minds and bind their will to sin. It is thus plausible that humans are not able to deal with this problem themselves. Hence, given this inability, and the importance of one dealing with sin before entering into a relationship with the

incommensurate good that is God, one could indeed take the position that God would decide to let go of his plan and desire for humans to flourish in an agápēic relationship with him. In short, God could decide to simply reject humans (and the relational goal that he set for them). However, it is quite clear that God would not seek to do this based on the duty, as noted previously, for all individuals to express *agápē* towards one another—and thus, in fulfilment of this duty, God would *necessarily* have his will directed towards the good of all humans. Hence, if humans cannot acquire this good without further help, God would thus seek to provide the needed help. That is, God himself could provide the means that will enable humans to enter into an everlasting agápēic relationship with him. And, given God's omniscience and perfect goodness, he would see that this is the best action and thus inevitably seek to perform this action of providing this means. Now, the form that this specific means could take can be construed in a number of ways; however, one way found within the Christian tradition is through that of 'atoning' work of Christ that enables all individuals, once appropriated by them, to participate in this election and thus relationally flourish in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God. It will be important now to detail the nature of this atoning work.

### 3 Elucidating the Atonement: Recapitulation, Victory and Theosis

#### 3.1 *The Nature of the Recapitulative Theotic Victory Model*

In precisifying the Orthodox doctrine of the Atonement, within the perspective of the theoretical foundation detailed previously, we can reconstrue our previous definition of the Atonement in the form of the RTV model, which can be stated succinctly as follows:

- (7) (Atonement\*) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ recapitulates human experience by Christ living a perfect life in which all humans are personally present through his perfect total empathy, defeats cosmic evil by Christ empathising with and subjecting the enslaving powers of sin to death, and enables humanity's transformation into the divine likeness (i.e., theosis) through the appropriation of Christ's new mind and will and the establishment of an everlasting relationship of agápēic love with God through union with Christ.

For the notion of Atonement, as conceived of through the RTV model, God has provided a means of dealing with the human condition—that is, the problem of sin (i.e., ancestral sin and the spiritual darkness of the mind and the bondage of the will to sin)—that plagues all of the human race. The means provided by God has as its foundation the participatory life that Christ lived, the death that Christ endured, and the resurrection that Christ experienced (that cleared the spiritual darkness, broke the hold of sin in the lives of all humans and provided a means for all humans to possess a new mind and will)—which ultimately allows all humans to be able to enter into an everlasting agápēic relationship with God, *in an indirect manner through the person of Christ*. This is that, for the notion of salvation, God desires for all humans to be reconciled to him—and thus be in an agápēic relationship with him—which is made possible by an individual hearing the 'Gospel' and ceasing to resist the offer of God's grace that is made available by the Atonement of Christ. By an individual doing this, they are able to freely appropriate Christ's work in their lives and thus be brought into an everlasting agápēic relationship

with God. Within the context of the establishment of an everlasting agápēic relationship between God and humanity, there is thus a correspondence in the RTV model between Christ's *life*, and the notion of *recapitulation*, his *death*, and the notion of *Christus Victor*, and his *resurrection* and our *appropriation* of his atoning work, and the notion of *theosis*. It will be important to now break down these elements featured in (6) in more detail.

### 3.2 A Recapitulating Life

The first aspect of the atoning work of Christ in the RTV model is that of recapitulation, the idea that Christ, as the new Adam, retraces and corrects the steps of the first Adam, thereby undoing the effects of the fall and restoring humanity to its intended state. Christ's life, in which all humans are 'personally present' through his 'perfect total empathy'—thus them participating in his virtuous journey and having their lives rewritten in a righteous manner—provides the foundation for the overcoming of sin through his death and resurrection. More fully, one can understand Jesus's deep connection with humanity through the concepts of personal presence and perfect total empathy. As noted previously, personal presence refers to the psychological connection and direct awareness of another individual's conscious state, transcending mere physical or temporal co-existence. It is through personal presence that true emotional and cognitive engagement occurs, fostering a unique bond where individuals can understand and be understood on a profound level. This type of presence goes beyond simply occupying the same space or existing at the same time; it involves a deeper level of connection that allows for the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. When individuals are personally present with each other, they can communicate on a level that is both intimate and meaningful, creating a sense of unity and understanding that bridges the gap between separate minds and hearts. And a form of personal presence is that of empathy, and, in our specific case perfect total empathy—where if one has perfect total empathy with another, they fully understand what it is like for that person to experience

any given state—acquiring a copy of all of their cognitive states—yet them being able to maintain awareness of their own individuality.

In the case of Jesus, his perfect total empathy enables all humans to be personally present to him throughout his life. As a divine being, Jesus would be a cognitively perfect being, and thus have the ability to be perfectly totally empathetic with all cognitive entities—that is, Jesus possesses the ability to accurately represent and live through all aspects of each person's consciousness throughout their entire life, including their beliefs, sensations, moods, desires, choices, and emotions. This means that he has direct, unmediated access to the subjective experiences, emotions, and conscious states of all humans, allowing him to live through their experiences as if they were his own, without losing his individual identity. Through this unique attribute, Jesus can empathise with every human on a level that is unparalleled by any other being. He understands (not only in his pre-incarnate state with the other Trinitarian persons, but also in his incarnate, human state) the joys, sorrows, hopes, and fears of each person, not just intellectually, but experientially. This intimate knowledge of the human condition allows Jesus to connect with humanity in a way that is both deeply personal and universally relevant. By being personally present to each individual, Jesus demonstrates the depth of God's love and concern for every human life, regardless of their circumstances or actions.

Hence, from the moment of his birth, Jesus was imbued with the capacity for perfect total empathy,<sup>46</sup> enabling all humans to be personally present to him—through copies of each and every humans cognitive states being acquired by him. As he grew and developed, this connection only deepened, allowing Jesus to experience the full range of human experiences and emotions.

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<sup>46</sup> This is not to say that he did not possess this ability prior to the incarnation; however, this possession was more specifically that of *the pre-incarnate Son's*, rather than that of Christ's—who is identified as the Son in his incarnate state

Throughout his life, Jesus maintained this profound connection with humanity, living through their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and struggles. This personal presence was not limited to those who encountered Jesus during his earthly ministry but, through his ongoing perfect total empathy, extended to all humans, past, present, and future. That is, through his perfect total empathy, Jesus became the ultimate embodiment of the human experience, demonstrating the depth of God's love and understanding for every person. By living a sinless life while experiencing the fullness of the human condition, Christ recapitulates humanity's journey, correcting the missteps of Adam and Eve. And through this personal presence, humanity is deeply connected to Jesus, participating in his life and experiences. As Jesus lives his life, all humans are intimately involved—through each of their cognitive states being present ‘within him’—in his journey, sharing in his victories, struggles, and unwavering commitment to virtue. This shared experience allows for a collective transformation of humanity, as Jesus rewrites the lives of *all humans in a virtuous manner*, guiding them towards righteousness and goodness. Hence, by being personally present to Jesus, humans are not merely passive observers of his life, but active participants in his mission to redeem and restore the world. Through this connection, Jesus's teachings, actions, and, ultimately, his sacrifice take on a new level of significance, as they become not just historical events, but shared experiences that have the power to transform the human heart and mind. As humans participate in Jesus's life through personal presence, they are invited to embrace his values, his love, and his vision for a world reconciled to God.

Moreover, Jesus's personal presence with humanity reveals the profound depth of God's love and concern for each individual. By engaging in perfect total empathy, Jesus demonstrates that God is not a distant, impersonal entity, but rather a deeply connected and intimately involved presence in human life. Through his perfect total empathy, Jesus offers a glimpse into the inner worlds of every human being, responding to their emotions and thoughts

in a way that is both meaningful and validating. This presence is not conditional or selective; it extends to all people, regardless of their background, beliefs, or actions. By being personally present to each human, Jesus affirms the inherent value and dignity of every person, demonstrating that no one is beyond the reach of God's love and grace. This understanding of God's presence through Jesus has the power to transform how humans view themselves and others, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and compassion that transcends the divisions and prejudices that often plague human relationships. Christ's recapitulation of the human experience, marked by perfect total empathy and personal presence, restores humanity's relationship with God and each other.

This understanding of Jesus's personal presence and perfect total empathy has significant implications for human identity and the nature of the divine-human relationship. If all humans are personally present to Jesus, then his journey becomes a shared one, and human identity is deeply connected to the divine through the person of Jesus. This means that the human experience is not isolated or disconnected from the larger story of God's interaction with the world, but rather is an integral part of it. Through personal presence, humans are invited to participate in the unfolding of God's plan for redemption and restoration, finding their true purpose and meaning in relation to the divine. Moreover, Jesus's ability to empathise with human suffering provides comfort and hope, assuring that no experience goes unnoticed or unacknowledged by the divine. Through his perfect total empathy, Jesus is intimately acquainted with the pain, sorrow, and hardship that are an inevitable part of the human condition. He does not observe this suffering from a distance, but rather experiences it first-hand, sharing in the struggles and trials of every person. This empathetic presence is a powerful reminder that God is not indifferent to human suffering, but rather is deeply moved by it and desires to provide comfort, strength, and, ultimately, redemption. By being personally present to those who are hurting, Jesus offers a concrete expression of God's love and

compassion, assuring them that they are not alone in their struggles. This understanding of Jesus's empathy has the potential to bring hope and healing to those who are facing difficult circumstances, providing a source of strength and resilience in the face of adversity. Through his recapitulation of human suffering, Christ transforms its meaning and purpose, making it a path to redemption and unity with God. Christ's personal presence with humanity, enabled by his perfect total empathy, establishes a profound and transformative connection between the divine and human experiences. Through this intimate bond, Jesus guides humanity towards goodness and righteousness, revealing the depth of God's love and concern for each individual.

Most importantly, however, the purpose of the recapitulative life of Christ was to create and perfect a human mind and will directed solely towards the good—a consciousness aligned with divine virtue and untainted by sin. Through Christ's perfect total empathy with all humans, enabling them to be personally present with and in him, the mind and will that was created and developed throughout his life would fit each human and be suitable for them all—as all of their experiences have been experienced *by him* as well (and thus his mind will have all of the 'experiential marks' of each and every human)—which enables him to both be a template and transformation of human consciousness. In other words, this work of creating a perfect human psychology was accomplished through Christ's perfect total empathy with all humans, ensuring that the righteous mind and will he developed would be compatible with and transferable to every human person. More fully, the life that Christ lives (and the death and resurrection he experiences) is indeed 'therapeutic' in the sense that it creates a new mind and will that is suitable and individualised for each human through their personal presence with him. As Christ lives a sinless life while experiencing the full range of human emotions and challenges, he develops a perfect human psychology—a mind and will aligned solely with divine goodness and untainted by the disease of sin. And, as noted numerous



times, through his perfect total empathy, Christ enables all humans to be personally present with him throughout his life. This personal presence allows Christ to create a unique mind and will for each individual, tailored to their specific needs and experiences. As humans participate in Christ's virtuous journey, their lives are rewritten, and their own minds and wills are transformed to align with divine goodness. This new mind and will, created and perfected by Christ, will be given to each individual through their experience of death with Christ (thus bringing an end to their tainted minds and wills) and being brought to life with Christ through his resurrection (thus enabling them to be imparted with Christ's new mind and will, once appropriated).<sup>47</sup> In this way, Christ's life serves as a means of creating a new, individualised consciousness for each human, preparing them to be reconciled with God through the renewal of their inner selves. The therapeutic aspect of Christ's life lies in its ability to heal and restore the human mind and will, guiding them towards a state of harmony with divine goodness, while taking into account the unique characteristics and experiences of each individual. Thus, Christ's life, in which all humans were personally present through his perfect total empathy—thus participating in his righteous life and having their consciousnesses rewritten in accordance with divine goodness—provides the foundation for the overcoming of sin through his death and resurrection. And so, in the context of recapitulation, Christ's life becomes the means by which humanity is restored to its original state, as he lives through the fullness of the human experience without sin, enabling humans to participate in his perfect obedience and be prepared, through the virtuous life of Christ, to be reconciled to God. This thus leads us to the second aspect of the atoning work of Christ.

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<sup>47</sup> The process of how this new mind and will is given to each human will be discussed in more detail later.

### 3.3 A Victorious Death and Resurrection

The second aspect of the atoning action of Christ builds upon the foundation of his virtuous human life, in which all humans were personally present through his perfect total empathy.<sup>48</sup> As discussed previously, Jesus's life was a shared experience, where he rewrote the lives of all humans in a virtuous manner, guiding them towards righteousness and goodness. This profound connection between Jesus and humanity, established through his perfect total empathy, sets the stage for the transformative power of his death on the cross. This is that, through his suffering and death, Christ is able to overcome sin at an *ontological level*. As within the RVT model, all humans are taken to be 'present' with Christ, not just through during his life, but all during his death—which thus becomes the means by which God addresses the problem of sin for every individual. More specifically, on the cross, Christ willingly opens himself up to every human mind, and through the power of his divine nature, he empathises with the entirety of each person's consciousness, including their experiences, emotions, and mental states, across all times. This perfect total empathy results in the fact of Christ emphasising with all humans on the cross (in continuation from his empathy with them from birth, but in a more 'heightened form'), and thus their minds being present within his own. Consequently, when Christ experiences physical death, all human minds undergo a spiritual death. This participation in Christ's death frees humans from their bondage to sin, as the proneness to sin and spiritual darkness tied to their minds cease to exist. The corrupted minds and wills of humanity are put to death, and the power of sin and enslavement is broken.

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<sup>48</sup> The following proposal concerning the ontological function of the death of Jesus shares similarities to, and is inspired by the conception of personal presence through 'mind-reading', which was proposed by Stump, *Atonement*—with the focus in the present proposal being instead on that of the notion of perfect total empathy.

Christ's perfect total empathy extends not only to humanity but also to the enslaving powers that have held humans in bondage to sin—namely Satan and his demons. This is that, by empathising with these malevolent beings, Christ allows them to be personally present with him in his death. Christ's death, therefore, becomes a direct confrontation and defeat of the enslaving powers, including Satan and his demons, that have brought about humanity's spiritual darkness and bondage to sin. That is, by willingly entering into the heart of this darkness and taking upon himself the full weight of these powers through his perfect total empathy, Christ exhausts their power and breaks their hold on humanity. And so in empathising with *both* humans and the enslaving powers, Christ ensures that his death is a comprehensive victory over sin and its agents. Through this perfect total empathy, Christ not only bears the weight of human sin but also directly engages with the source of that sin, Satan and his demonic forces. Hence, by allowing them to be personally present with him in his death, Christ subjects these powers to the same fate as the corrupted human minds and wills. As Christ dies, the enslaving powers also experience a defeat, their influence and control over humanity shattered by Christ's ultimate sacrifice. This is that, as Christ experiences the agony and finality of physical death, Satan and his demons, being intimately connected to Christ's mind through his empathetic bond, undergo the same death that Christ himself experiences. This is a crucial aspect of Christ's victory over the enslaving powers. By willingly sacrificing himself on the cross and bringing Satan and his demons into the depths of his suffering and death, Christ ensures that their fate is inextricably tied to his own. As Christ breathes his last, the demons and Satan himself, present within Christ's mind, also experience the full weight of death—that is, they are not mere spectators to Christ's suffering but are active participants in it, sharing in the same destiny that Christ embraces on the cross. However, there is a critical difference between the death experienced by Christ and that experienced by the enslaving powers. While Christ's death is temporary, as he is ultimately resurrected

and brought back to life by the power of God, the death of Satan and his demons is permanent. That is, they remain dead, their power and influence forever broken by Christ's ultimate sacrifice. In this way, Christ secures a decisive and everlasting victory over the forces of evil that have sought to enslave humanity. As by bringing the enslaving powers into the very heart of his death through his perfect total empathy, Christ ensures that their defeat is complete and irreversible. Hence, as Christ suffers the consequences of death, he simultaneously destroys the power of those who have perpetuated that sin and death. Satan and his demons, once thought to be the insurmountable enemies of humanity, are forever vanquished through Christ's empathetic bond and their personal presence with him. This understanding of Christ's death highlights the profound scope and significance of his atoning work, as not only does he free humanity from the bondage of sin by allowing their minds to be present with him in his death, but he also defeats the ultimate source of that sin by bringing Satan and his demons to their permanent demise. Through his perfect total empathy, Christ ensures that his death is a complete and final victory over all the forces that have sought to separate humanity from God. In moving forward to the next aspect of Christ's atoning work, his resurrection, it is essential to keep in mind the finality of the death experienced by Satan and his demons. While Christ and the human minds present with him in death are brought back to life, the enslaving powers remain forever defeated. Christ's resurrection serves as a powerful confirmation of his victory over sin and death, a victory that includes the permanent defeat of Satan and his demonic forces.

Thus, the third aspect of the atoning work of Christ, is that of his resurrection—which establishes a means for all humans to be provided with a new mind and will, ultimately leading to the goal of theosis. The 'mind' of an individual is the combination of the intentional states of that individual. Meanwhile, the will of an individual is a will, in this specific context, that is directed towards the good (or the bad). Based on their genetic inheritance, humans lack a mind and will for the good, and, given their social

environment (and the influences of their genes), they cannot bring themselves to acquire it. More precisely, humans cannot reciprocate a formal union with God because they have a mind and will that are at odds with his. However, humans cannot obtain this mind and will by themselves. Hence, this mind and will must come from God. Yet, as God is a perfect being, he has a mind and will that is wholly different from humans—that is, his attitudes, perspectives, commitments, beliefs and will are completely different from those of humans. God's mind is such that it is not something that fits with the 'life-situation' of humans—who each have their mind in a manner that is tied, given the human condition, to their vulnerabilities, sufferings, inherent limitations, urges and dependence on the physical, and, ultimately, the reality of death. Hence, humans cannot directly adopt or 'share' God's mind, as it would be too alien from ours for this sharing to occur. This is analogous to the fact that a fish cannot survive on land; the environment is too alien for it. God must thus use another means to provide the required mind and will. Now, by all human beings indwelling within the mind of Christ—by them (i.e., their cognitive states) being personally present through his perfect total empathy—all humans have been put to death in the death of Christ. That is, as noted previously, the minds of all humans have participated in the death of Christ and thus cease to exist 'spiritually' at the time that Christ's mind ceases to exist 'physically'. However, as Christ is in an agápēic relationship with God, God would seek to bring him back to life so as to be in this relationship with him and enable others to stand in this relationship as well through him. The resurrection of Christ thus provides the grounds for humans to receive the goods made available to them by standing in a (saving) relation to Christ. By this event taking place, all humans are thus able to adopt the mind and will that was created during the life of Christ. More specifically, during the period of his incarnation, Christ entered as deeply as possible into the human life situation of suffering, limitations, dependence, vulnerability and death—and in this situation, where each human was personally present within

his mind—Christ responded to these issues with love, faith and hope. Thus, by Christ performing this action of identification, a fully human and divine mind and will were created in Christ—with this mind not being spiritually darkened, and this will not be subject to ancestral sin and being in bondage to sin.

However, one might object: if Satan and his demons have indeed been permanently defeated and killed through Christ's death on the cross, why does evil still seem to be such a felt reality in the world? Why do we still experience temptation, spiritual warfare, and the persistent effects of sin if Satan and his demonic forces are truly dead? This objection can be addressed through a helpful historical analogy. Consider Adolf Hitler's death in 1945, along with the deaths of his chief lieutenants like Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels around the same time: although Hitler and his key leaders were permanently dead, the ideology of Nazism and its destructive effects continued to be a felt reality for decades afterward. Nazi war criminals continued their activities, concentration camps had to be liberated, Nazi sympathizers maintained their beliefs, and the trauma and systemic damage caused by the Nazi regime persisted long after Hitler and his leadership circle had perished. The death of the leader and his chief officers did not immediately erase all the structures, followers, and consequences that had been set in motion during their reign of terror. Similarly, the permanent death of Satan and his demons through Christ's cross does not mean the immediate cessation of all sinful structures, habits, and consequences that were established during their reign over humanity. Just as Nazi ideology had to be actively countered, dismantled, and replaced with democratic values through a process of denazification and re-education, so too the effects of Satan's and his demons' influence must be actively countered through the ongoing work of Christ's redemption in the world. The sinful systems, habits of wrongdoing, corrupted social structures, and damaged human natures that developed under the influence of Satan and his demonic hierarchy continue to exert their effects even after their defeat. This analogy also helps explain why spiritual warfare remains a

reality even after Satan's definitive defeat. Just as we continue to see neo-Nazi movements emerge decades after Hitler's death—requiring ongoing vigilance and active resistance from democratic societies—so too Christians continue to experience spiritual warfare against the lingering systems and patterns of sin that were established during Satan's reign. The spiritual warfare believers face is not against Satan himself (who is permanently dead), but against the corrupted structures, sinful habits, cultural patterns of wrongdoing, and the ongoing effects of ancestral sin that continue to operate in the world. However, because these sinful patterns and structures were so thoroughly shaped by Satan and his demons during their reign, it can genuinely appear as if one is fighting directly against Satan and his demonic forces, even though the ultimate victory has already been secured. This is similar to how resistance fighters combating neo-Nazi ideology might feel as though they are still fighting Hitler himself, given how thoroughly his influence shaped the movement—with his images still being paraded at rallies, his slogans still being chanted, and his actions still being celebrated by followers—even though Hitler is definitively dead. The continued manifestation of his ideology through symbols, rhetoric, and devoted adherents creates the experiential reality of ongoing conflict with Hitler, despite his permanent defeat. Likewise, the continued manifestation of Satan's influence through persistent temptations, corrupted social structures, sinful habits, and patterns of wrongdoing creates the experiential reality of ongoing spiritual warfare with Satan and his demons, despite their permanent defeat on the cross.

Furthermore, just as those who had been indoctrinated by Nazi ideology required re-education and transformation to embrace democratic values, human beings who had been enslaved to sin under Satan and his demons require the ongoing process of theosis—the gradual transformation into the divine likeness through appropriating Christ's new mind and will. The death of Satan and his demons has broken the ultimate source of spiritual bondage, but individual humans must still undergo the healing

process of having their minds and wills renewed through union with Christ. The death of Satan and his demonic forces has made this transformation possible by removing the ultimate obstacles, but the therapeutic work of healing humanity's ancestral corruption is an ongoing process that unfolds through each person's journey toward theosis. In this way, the permanent death of Satan and his demons on the cross is analogous to the destruction of a disease's source while its symptoms continue to require treatment. The victory is decisive and complete, but the healing process takes time to fully manifest in the restoration of all creation. In further understanding this therapeutic work, one can understand that, by living a certain type of life, Christ created a new mind and will that was wholeheartedly conformed around the good—his intentional states and will were all directed towards the good—and thus, each individual is provided with the opportunity to replace their previously possessed 'tainted' mind and will by 'partaking' (adopting or sharing) in his. Yet, this mind and will cannot be imposed upon an individual by God, if their libertarian freedom and 'personhood' is to be maintained. Thus, an individual must freely partake of it by forming a desire for a mind and will that is directed towards the good—which will be of importance in the next section.

Nevertheless, through the death of Christ, humans are able to participate in this death and thus cease to possess their sin-inflicted minds and wills. And now, through the resurrection of Christ, humans can now also participate in his life by the mind and will of Christ replacing the individual's own mind and will in a manner that the intentional states of Christ are creatively individualised and integrated into their own. And, as the new mind and will created in Christ is radically at odds with the original minds and wills of other humans who have inherited ancestral sin, it undercuts it by now providing them with intentional states that are inclined towards the good. Therefore, by Christ performing the action of resurrecting from the dead, we now have the final element needed for humans to reciprocate their formal union with God—namely, that of a new mind and will now being



made available for all humans. This new mind and will, created through Christ's life, and made available through his resurrection, is the key to humans achieving theosis—the process of becoming more like God and participating in his divine nature. As by partaking in the mind and will of Christ, humans are able to align their intentional states with God's, gradually transforming their own nature to become more divine. This transformation is not a mere imitation of God but a real participation in his life and being, which is made possible through the intimate connection established by Christ's perfect total empathy and the renewal of the human mind and will in his resurrection. Thus, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, humans have been provided with the means to not only enter into an everlasting agápēic relationship with God but also to embark on the journey of theosis, becoming more and more like God himself.

Yet, it is again important to note that by employing this means, humans are able to enter into this relationship and pursue theosis, in an indirect manner, *through Christ*. That is, humans cannot directly replace their spiritually darkened minds and wills that are in bondage to sin, and thus overcome the barrier for entering into this relationship with God and achieving theosis, but they can remove it, indirectly, through the death and resurrection of Christ removing their tainted mind and will and providing them with a mind and will that is in conformity to God's—namely, Christ's. In other words, Christ is the sole human that can, and does, stand in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God and fully participates in the divine nature. However, through the actions performed by Christ, humans are now able to indirectly partake of this agápēic relationship with God and pursue theosis, in Christ, by the appropriation of the means of Atonement that was provided by him.

### *3.4 A Theotic Appropriation*

In light of the possibility for individuals to flourish maximally in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God and their inherent inability to enter this relationship due to the human condition,

it's crucial for God to provide the necessary means for this—which is Christ's atoning work. This, however, necessitates an appropriation of Christ's work by any individual to stand in this relationship, relying on God's grace infused by his energies and their will's orientation toward this grace.<sup>49</sup> More specifically, God's grace infused by his energies helps form a desire for good, understood as a desire to will what God desires, given that God only wills the good. At a general level, the operation of an individual's will can assent to, reject, or remain surrendered to God's will toward something, which indicates that there are different possible positions towards God's grace. Now, God consistently offers grace to all individuals, yet these individuals, who are subject to ancestral sin, typically resist this offer and lack the ability to accept it. God, however, cannot independently create such a will in someone. This limitation is due to the fact that if God acted on an individual's will while they resisted God's grace, the will would become God's will, not the individual's, thereby obstructing, not establishing, the union between God and the individual. Thus, individuals need to cease resisting God's grace and surrender to his will. This surrender leads to ceasing to resist God's grace, allowing God to infuse his grace into that individual, reconfiguring the person's will to assent to the goodness of God. This infusion of grace marks the beginning of the process of justification, which is the initial stage of an individual's journey toward theosis and an everlasting agápēic relationship with God. God thus produces faith in individuals who have ceased resisting God's grace, and so with the production of this faith also comes the desire for the good (i.e., a desire for a will to will the good). Thus, in providing this grace to an individual, God is providing

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<sup>49</sup> The following proposal concerning the appropriation of the Atonement by individuals, again shares similarities to, and is inspired by the position put forward by Stump, *Atonement*—with the focus in the present proposal being instead on the establishment of an agápēic relationship (including the establishment of a formal and real union) between God and humans, and the implications of this for the fulfilment of the goal of theosis.

all that is necessary to produce faith in that individual; yet, in producing this faith, God is responsive to the individual who is ultimately responsible for them ceasing to resist God's grace, and thus whether or not they have the desire in question. So, an individual's free will, personhood and individuality are maintained here when they are infused with God's grace—as the grace (and faith) that is received is had in response to the individual.

Now, humans can cease resisting God's grace in several ways; however, what is clearly needed is for there to be a softening or opening of the individual's heart, which can occur when they hear the Gospel (i.e., the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection). Hence, Christ's life (and death and resurrection) serves as a catalyst for the softening or opening of one's heart needed for an individual to cease resisting God's grace.<sup>50</sup> This occurs because people frequently have difficulty embracing love, often actively resisting it, since accepting love makes one vulnerable, reduces independence, and creates concerns about imbalances of power between those involved. Thus, for this resistance to love to be overcome, God can provide a means that wards off these issues in the form of his revelation: the incarnate Christ, living a life of suffering, vulnerability, selflessness, and powerlessness, which serves to overcome these points of resistance. Hence, hearing the Gospel and reflecting on the life of Christ can thus effectively help individuals to cease resisting God's grace, allowing them to surrender to God's will and receive his grace infused by his energies. This surrendering to God's will and reception of grace infused by his energies is the crucial first step in the process of theosis, as it enables individuals to begin the process of aligning their will with God's and participating in his divine life. This grace, in turn, brings about the desire for good, and this will or desire is, in effect, a desire to will what God wills, and its presence in a person constitutes justification. Thus, the life of Christ, as conveyed by the Gospel, plays an instrumental role in enabling

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<sup>50</sup> This concept of 'softening' of the heart through the hearing of the Gospel is based on a similar conceptual scheme provided by Stump, *Atonement*.

an individual to be justified, leading to real union with God if they persevere to the end. More precisely, once an individual has ceased resisting God's grace, God can then provide them with grace infused by his energies that is required for them to come to possess the needed desire for good. And thus, now these individuals would have the motivation and ability to proceed to appropriate the mind and will of Christ, which is needed for formal union with God.

The adoption and integration of Christ's mind and will by a particular individual occurs through the process of ongoing justification that is initiated when an individual comes to faith (and thus is initially justified), by receiving God's grace infused by his energies, and thus now also receiving the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.<sup>51</sup> Ongoing justification is essential for theosis, as it involves the gradual transformation of the individual into the likeness of God through the sharing of Christ's mind and will. The Holy Spirit now comes to indwell in the person and brings with him the mind and virtuous will of Christ that was formed during his life and which an individual can now directly partake of. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit thus enables an individual to be directly attentive to the mind of Christ and his character. However, by the Holy Spirit coming to dwell within an individual and infusing the mind and will of Christ into the individual, this does not remove the old dispositions that the individual acquired through their performance of morally bad or wrong actions. However, it does introduce virtues over them, and it counteracts the old morally wrong dispositions. Thus, at this stage, the individual is not wholly integrated around the good, as

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<sup>51</sup> For an accessible introduction to how Trinitarian theology undergirds the process of salvation and theosis in patristic thought, see Fairbairn, D. (2009). *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*. InterVarsity Press. Fairbairn demonstrates how the Eastern fathers understood salvation as participation in Trinitarian life.

they can still act on some behavioural dispositions that are contrary to the good as they see it. Yet, the individual is now in an intimate relationship with God, and thus, together, they can co-operate to make progress in the integration of the individual. More precisely, there is now a reciprocated formal union between God and humans where, in an 'ek-static' manner, each human lives outside themselves and in God, and now God, in the person of Christ, lives outside of himself and in a particular individual, through his mind and will now being given to that individual by the work of the Holy Spirit. This reciprocated formal union is a crucial aspect of theosis, as it enables humans to participate in the divine life of God and share in his attributes. Hence, in and through the person of Christ, all humans can now live in God intellectually by the mind and will of Christ (who shares the same nature as God) being given to them by the Holy Spirit. A justified human being thus can enter into formal union with God—where God now dwells in a particular justified human intellectually and in will. This formal union thus establishes the ground for a real union between God and humans, as a real union is an external expression of (the now established) reciprocated formal union between God and creation—in the way that God and a human individual, who are each united in mind and will, by the work of Christ, are now together in a particular manner through the shared activity of ongoing justification.

More fully, the integration of the mind and will of Christ, within the psychological structure of a justified individual, is at the heart of the process of ongoing justification (the work of which is called God's synergistic grace) and is a shared activity between God and that human. This is such that, as long as the individual continues to cooperate with God in allowing his grace (through the work of the Holy Spirit) to progressively impart the mind of Christ—that is, his intentional states—and the will of Christ—a will directed towards the good—into the individual, and this individual does not decide to return to their original resistance to God's grace that he has infused within them—then the process that has been initiated will continue to work within them to

strengthen the individual in willing the good, ultimately resulting in an individual's transformation (i.e., a change from an integration around wrongdoing to an integration around the good) and a real union with God. This transformation and real union with God is the ultimate goal of theosis, where individuals are fully conformed to the image of Christ and share in the divine nature. Hence, an individual's surrender to God's will, in response to the Gospel, is the central act that is met immediately by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—with the mind and will of Christ—which, over time, will ultimately culminate in a complete (i.e. formal and real) union with God. This all allows God and each individual human who is justified (and is currently undergoing the process of ongoing justification) to be in an agápēic relationship—that is, a relationship of love where each of the relata: God and the human individual, have their will determined in favour of one another, which is expressed by their complacent love for one another, their benevolence for each other, and a formal and real union with one another. This everlasting agápēic relationship, where humans dwell in God's presence forever, is the ultimate fulfilment of theosis.

The process of theosis is thus not a solitary one but is undertaken in the context of an everlasting agápēic relationship with God, made possible through the sharing of Christ's mind and will. This relationship is characterised by a deep, self-giving love, where both God and the human person pour themselves out for the sake of the other. As humans enter into this relationship, they experience a profound sense of union with God, as their own will becomes aligned with his, and they begin to share in his divine life. The everlasting nature of this agápēic relationship points to the ultimate fulfilment of theosis in the life to come. While the process of divinisation begins in this life, it reaches its consummation in the age to come, where humans will be fully transformed into the likeness of God and will dwell in his presence forever. This eternal communion with God is the ultimate goal of the Christian life and the fulfilment of the deepest longings of the human heart.

God's aim for union with humanity is thus able to be fulfilled by the work of Christ, as it is, first, the recapitulative life of Christ that creates a new virtuous human mind and will in him (and for all). Second, it is the victorious death of Christ that does away with the old sinful and bonded human mind and will. Third, it is the victorious resurrection of Christ that presents the new human mind and will to all individuals—which is that of Christ's. Third, it is the appropriation of this all (individually) by humans that enables them to receive the new human mind and will that, by the work of the Holy Spirit over the span of their life, is able to be integrated it into them. This all thus, finally, enabling them to be in a formal and real union with God in form of an everlasting agápēic relationship, which, ultimately, results in the completion of the process of theosis. It is thus the atonement of Christ that enables one to be initially justified, undergo ongoing justification, and be really unified (and thus deified) in an everlasting agápēic relationship with God. This process of theosis, made possible through Christ's atoning work, is the means by which humans can achieve their ultimate flourishing and participate in the divine life of God for all eternity. This all, however, has cosmic implications, as humanity's ability to participate in an agápēic relationship with God, and thus become like him through the process of theosis, all by the actions of Christ, initiates God's New Creation. More precisely, this initiation is manifested through Jesus's life, death and resurrection, which, by providing humanity with new minds and wills, restores God's initial plan for creation—where the original intent was for creation to mirror his glory, and for creatures to exist in just, peaceful, and life-affirming relationships. Thus, by Christ overcoming sin and evil (through his virtuous life and death) and overcoming death itself (through his resurrection), a pathway is opened for the comprehensive restoration of all things, thereby marking the commencement of God's New Creation. And this New Creation, under God's direction, is on a trajectory toward ultimate completion at the end of time—where God will be all in all.

#### 4 Comparisons with Other Contemporary Accounts

A brief comparison between the RTV model and other influential contemporary atonement theories can highlight the distinctively Eastern patristic thrust behind this proposal while showing its potential for wide-ranging dialogue within Christian theology. First, Eleonore Stump's "Marian" account of atonement draws heavily on Thomistic and Augustinian thought to show how Christ's suffering heals guilt and shame through an interior union between Christ and the sinner.<sup>52</sup> She emphasizes that Christ, in his passion, "mindreads" or empathically enters into the sinner's conscious state. This approach aligns with the Recapitulative Theotic Victory (RTV) model in its focus on empathy and personal presence, yet it remains anchored in a Western framework that highlights guilt-removal. Stump's emphasis on healing internal wounds through Christ's charity anticipates certain elements of Eastern patristic theology, but she gives less prominence to Christ's defeat of demonic forces and does not foreground the concept of theosis. By contrast, the RTV model retains a similar empathy-based dimension but situates it squarely within recapitulation and cosmic victory, culminating in the deification of humanity. This yields a broader vision: humanity's transformation is not merely relief from guilt and shame but an entry into the divine life through Christ's risen humanity.

Second, Mark Murphy's moral and legal perspective interprets atonement largely in terms of obligations, moral debts, and the restitution of justice.<sup>53</sup> On Murphy's account, Christ's work can satisfy or discharge the debts incurred by human wrongdoing, thus reconciling sinners with divine law. While Murphy acknowledges the importance of divine love, the legal paradigm shapes his argument, focusing on how God's justice is vindicated and moral order is upheld. In contrast, the RTV model does not deny

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<sup>52</sup> Stump, *Atonement*.

<sup>53</sup> Murphy, Mark C. Not Penal Substitution but Vicarious Punishment. *Faith and Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2007): 281--306.



moral debts but sees them as part of a wider scenario of enslavement to death and ancestral corruption. Christ's mission is less about settling a legal balance and more about healing human nature at its roots, overthrowing evil powers, and restoring communion with God. The language of moral-legal satisfaction recedes into the background, replaced by an emphasis on overcoming sin's ontological hold on humanity, so that the Atonement is understood as a cosmic liberation and renewal through Christ's incarnate, crucified, and resurrected life.

Third, Jordan Wessling's love-based atonement approach underscores that God's love is the supreme driver of salvation, aiming to elicit a reciprocal love in human creatures.<sup>54</sup> Wessling frames Christ's sacrificial death as a decisive manifestation of divine love, which encourages moral transformation and fosters a responsive love in believers. The RTV model resonates with this emphasis on divine love but integrates it into a more overtly "therapeutic" and "cosmic" structure. For the RTV model, Christ's love accomplishes more than a moral influence: it metaphysically reconstitutes human nature, defeating death and the devil and imparting Christ's new mind and will to believers. While Wessling's focus is on love's moral efficacy, the RTV perspective holds that this divine love also drives the cosmic conquest of sin and fuels humanity's path to theosis. In that sense, the ultimate objective is not simply to inspire human love through a potent example but to fully unite humanity with God in a transformed existence.

Fourth, Oliver Crisp's reflections on union with Christ locate salvation in a participatory bond wherein believers share in Christ's righteousness and life.<sup>55</sup> While Crisp writes mainly from a Reformed vantage, he acknowledges that union is more than a legal

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<sup>54</sup> Wessling, Jo. *Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God's Love for Humanity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Crisp, O. *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.

imputation: it is a genuine spiritual bond reshaping the believer's standing before God. This view converges with the RTV model's emphasis on the participatory dimension of salvation. Yet the RTV approach draws on explicitly Eastern categories, like recapitulation and theosis, to articulate the depths of this union. Christ not only gives believers his righteousness but reconfigures their very nature by recapitulating the entire human experience, thus forging a redeemed humanity in himself. Theosis becomes the full flowering of this union, in which believers do not merely receive the benefit of Christ's obedience but actually enter into the divine energies and receive Christ's own renewed mind and will. The cosmic overthrow of sin and death also receives a stronger highlight than in many standard Reformed articulations of union. These comparisons show how the RTV model relates to four influential currents in contemporary atonement discussions. By engaging Stump, Murphy, Wessling, and Crisp, the RTV approach demonstrates its resonance with key Western concerns—healing shame, satisfying moral debts, actualizing divine love, and securing spiritual union—while grounding those concerns in a robustly Eastern patristic understanding of recapitulation, Christ's cosmic victory, and theosis. The result is a comprehensive vision of atonement as Christ's empathetic assumption of human nature, his conquest of the enslaving powers, and his conferral of divine life upon those who freely cooperate in grace. In doing so, the model remains faithful to the therapeutic and transformative ethos cherished by Orthodox theology, all while opening promising avenues for dialogue with Western philosophical theology. Through this integration, it underscores that Christ's healing and restoration operate on both personal and cosmic scales, and it invites all who embrace his work to share in the everlasting *agápēic* union with God for which humanity was created.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has established a comprehensive philosophical elucidation and reconstruction of the Orthodox conception of the Atonement through the lens of the Recapitulative Theotic Victory model. Section 1 introduced the Orthodox understanding of the Atonement and outlined its three interconnected aspects: recapitulation, Christus Victor, and theosis, which together form a therapeutic approach to atonement and salvation centred on the healing and transformation of human nature. Section 2 unpacked the tri-conceptual framework—consisting of personal presence and empathy, agápēic love, and the human condition—providing a theoretical foundation for understanding these aspects of the Atonement. And thus, Section 3 applied these concepts to elucidate how Christ's virtuous life recapitulates human experience through his perfect total empathy with them (and their personal presence with him), how his death achieves victory over cosmic evil through his empathetic subjection of enslaving powers to death, and how his resurrection enables humanity's theosis through the appropriation of his new mind and will, ultimately establishing an everlasting agápēic relationship with God through union with Christ.

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