A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE INTERACTION
OF DISABILITY THEOLOGY AND IDEAS OF
ATONEMENT

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Abstract

This thesis brings together two fields of theological ideas. On the one hand, at the heart of Christian theology and faith are the person and work of Jesus Christ, centred on God’s initiative of Atonement through the cross. Here God addresses the whole condition of creation and humanity, usually expressed in terms of dealing with sin. On the other hand, the growing field of Christian disability theology is seeking a positive theological account of disability, viewing it as an integral part of the variety of humanity, and resisting normative assumptions that cast what is regarded as disability in a wholly negative light.

Drawing these fields together, does the way we think about the Atonement, and what God addresses and achieves through the Atonement, need to be disrupted and re-formed in light of the insights of disability theology? Conversely, if disability theology is to be distinctively Christian, should the Atonement play a far more foundational role within it than it has to date? If so, given the often negative juxtaposition of disability and sin within theology and in biblical texts, how is all this to come about?

The approach taken is first to examine both of these fields and the extent of their current interaction. In particular, their use of ideas and metaphor are explored, to determine whether these provide the means for making that interaction more fruitful. However, the interaction is found to be partial at best, and the ideas and metaphors shared are not found to provide the means for the task at hand.

Based on that work, however, a proposal is developed for reconsidering what sort of event the Atonement is, and the nature of God’s presence within it. Building on insights from Frances Young, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel and Paul Fiddes, it is proposed that the Atonement should be understood as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk (both moral and contingent) of creation, through which all that alienates us from God and each other is addressed. This opens up a theological space to talk of disability, sin and the cross together, one that does not require all aspects of what we identify as disability to fit into a binary sin/not sin analysis.

This Atonement-as-participation also provides an account of the Atonement that is inherently inclusive of humanity in all its variety, where disability is not a “special case”. This enables God’s initiative of the Atonement to function as a foundation for the various themes within disability theology as these continue to develop.
Declaration

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Acknowledgments

Many have contributed, sometimes unwittingly, to this work getting to the point of completion. Thanks are especially due to Professor Peter Scott, my main supervisor, for his patience, guidance and theological insight, and for making each supervision meeting eagerly-anticipated, challenging and thoroughly inspiring. Thanks also to Dr Graham Watts, my second supervisor, particularly for his early encouragement to get on and write, and for his wise counsel on where to draw the boundaries of the research.

The research was made possible by a scholarship from the Baptist Union of Great Britain bursary fund. I am very grateful for their support and for the encouragement of the fund committee.

The bulk of the work has been undertaken at Spurgeons College. My thanks go to Rev. Dr Nigel Wright, the former principal, who encouraged and enabled me to get started with research and teaching at the College. Also to the staff and students, on whom I have tried out many ideas. At the same time, my association with Young Epilepsy has kept the work grounded in the realities of life. There, staff and students alike are extraordinary in their dedication, compassion, good humour and wisdom.

It is of course my wife and family (Mary, Lachlan, Jacob, Joel and Mercy) who have put up with this project and its strange rhythms the most. Their love and encouragement are a constant and indispensable joy.
About the Author

David McLachlan gained a first class honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Metallurgy and Science of Materials at the University of Oxford (1982-1986). Later, after seventeen years working in finance and consulting in London, he felt called to full-time pastoral ministry and trained as a Baptist minister at Spurgeons College, London. In the course of that training he gained a first class honours Bachelor of Divinity degree through the University of Wales (2003-2006).

Through the experience of pastoral ministry, David developed an interest in Christian theological responses to disability. He undertook a Master of Theology degree with the University of Manchester (2013-2015), writing a research dissertation on the tension between disability theology and Christian charismatic theologies of healing, and was awarded the degree with distinction. David was then awarded a scholarship by the Baptist Union of Great Britain to pursue doctoral level research, based on a proposal to investigate the interaction of disability theology and ideas of Atonement.

Alongside his MTh and PhD studies David has taught undergraduate courses on Christian doctrine and ministerial formation to students training for ministry at Spurgeons College. He has also, for many years, been involved as a governor of the Young Epilepsy organisation (formerly the National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy).
Part 1: Introduction and Methodology
Chapter 1

Introduction

Questions and origins

This study concerns the interaction between Christian theological ideas of Atonement and the more recently developing field of Christian disability theology. The motivation behind the study has its origins in the experience of ministry as pastor, preacher and teacher in a local church in a village in the south-east of England. Near that particular village lies an extensive residential, educational and medical centre for young people with complex neurological conditions, giving rise to physical and cognitive disabilities. Sometimes students, along with their parents or carers, would attend services at our church. The members of the fellowship were welcoming, and indeed felt a sense of privilege that these young people would choose to join them. Discussion within the church soon turned to both physical accessibility and how to provide a suitable worship experience. However, such discussion seemed to have circumvented, or run ahead of, a deeper one. As the person tasked, week by week, with offering to the church an account of the Christian gospel, it seemed to me that the underlying question was what place there was, within the gospel account I was presenting, for mental and physical disability. Theologically, how do we understand the phenomenon and experience of disability, and the nature of hope for and within such a life, in the light of the Christian understanding of God?

At the heart of this question seems to lie the relationship between our understanding of disability as part of the phenomenon of human existence and our understanding of how God acts towards, or addresses, humanity. In the Christian account God addresses humanity most decisively in the person of Jesus Christ, and particularly through the cross and resurrection (here, “the Atonement”). It is a desire to understand something of that relationship and its impact on local ministry that gave rise to the research question for this thesis. In light of the not inconsiderable history of debate on the interpretation of the cross and resurrection,
and given the growing body of disability theology literature, the research question emerged with the following three components:

1. To what extent does current writing on disability theology take account of understandings of the Atonement?

2. To what extent are understandings of the Atonement within the Western Christian theological tradition challenged by insights from current disability theology?

3. Do those understandings of the Atonement need to be developed or enriched, both to better account for disability and to allow the Atonement to play a more foundational role in disability theology; and if so, in what way?

In a discussion involving disability there is always the question of who has a right to speak, and on whose behalf one can legitimately claim to do so. Thankfully, owing to the work of the disability rights movement, of which more is said below, closer attention is now paid to the voices and experiences of those with disabilities and those who care for them than was the case in the past. However, the question remains, particularly as I would not (currently) be regarded as disabled.

In approaching theological discussion of this sort, the order suggested by Kenneth Surin’s work on how we approach theodicy is helpful. Theology (in Surin’s case, theodicy) is what he calls second-order discourse. The first-order discourse is the one that allows the lived experience of the person with a disability to be articulated and explored and the questions, whether theological or practical, that it raises to be aired without assuming that God can be justified in the face of them. The second-order discourse explores how (in the present case) the Atonement, as God’s putative answer to the state of creation and the human condition, might be understood in a way that begins to respond to the first-order discourse.

Disability rights and disability theology literature, along with personal testimonies, aim to provide a hospitable space for such first-order discourse. This thesis does not claim to stand in place of that discourse, or to re-present it. Rather, it aims to

take that discourse seriously and, having paid attention, to begin to make a theological response as to the impact that discourse should have on a Christian account of God and on Christian ideas of Atonement.

As an accompanying observation, it is encouraging that at the same time as this thesis was underway, the profound reflections of theologian John Hull, who recently died, on the experience of becoming blind during his lifetime were released as a major feature film in July 2016 to positive acclaim. The film draws on Hull’s audio diaries, and eloquently brings together the sense of these first and second order discourses of testimony and theological response, which he considers to be how progress and greater understanding are generated. As an example, in a discussion with his students he says:

‘So now at last we come to this great problem, this question, the problem of mutual understanding. How can blind and sighted people truly understand each other? How can men understand women? How can the rich understand the poor? How can the old understand the young? Can we have insight into other people? This is the great question upon which the unity of our humanity hangs.’

Part of that unity is a theological understanding of the other, which in relation to disability this thesis attempts to locate in the work of God in Christ through the cross.

Words and meanings

At many points this study considers the use of language and the meaning that words are being asked or assumed to carry, particularly in crossing between the fields of Atonement and disability theology. At this early stage there are certain

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2 *Notes on Blindness*, Dir. by Peter Middleton and James Spinney (Oscilloscope, 2016), approximately 49th minute.
terms that merit comment on how they will be used within the thesis. The terms in question are “Atonement”, “disability” and “model”.

“Atonement”

Atonement is used in this thesis as the general word to make reference to the work of God through the death of Christ on the cross. Etymologically, the origins of the term as a way of speaking of that work of Christ are usually traced to William Tyndale’s 1526 translation of the New Testament. That may well have been a development of earlier uses of “onement”, carrying a sense of bringing together, or reconciliation. Later translations used it also in the Old Testament, particularly in Leviticus, with its setting out of the sacrificial system and of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16, drawing, it would appear, translational parallels between the sacrifices described therein and the death of Christ.

Whatever those translational intentions, the term “Atonement” has been chosen for this project since, as Gunton puts it, this is the ‘portmanteau word in English’ to encapsulate all that we might say is achieved by God in his great work of reconciling the world to himself. The word certainly retains a sense of focus within that work on the cross and resurrection and in doing so it should be acknowledged that those events do not stand alone, but are part of the broader drama of Scripture, and inseparable from other elements of that drama. Gunton again expresses this succinctly when he describes the achievement of the Atonement in terms of the complete narrative: ‘The purpose of the Father achieved by the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the incarnate Son has its basis in the creation by which the world took shape, and will find its completion in the work of the Spirit who brings the Son’s work to perfection.’ Within that scheme, however, there is the sense that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ serve as a focal

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point, both as a culmination of what has gone before and as the basis of what is to come. It is when Christ has died and risen that things are not as they were. The particular emphasis of this thesis as it develops is the investigation of how the Atonement in that sense interacts with disability theology: in what sense are things not as they were for all of humanity, inclusive of disability?

The reason for wanting to keep that focus is explored later in this introductory chapter when considering the possibility of a hermeneutical key to inform the interrogation of the literature. The choice of the term Atonement is not, however, intended to give undue weight to one particular understanding of the death of Christ over against other ways of understanding it. As Wright sees it, this is a summary word in broad use, not focussed on a particular theory of what happened at the cross. Neither is it intended to introduce a presumption that one such particular understanding is more relevant than others in the context of disability theology. Other terms have been considered as candidates for the task, such as redemption, reconciliation, salvation, restoration. Each carries the same danger of suggesting a presupposed “best” interpretation of the work of Christ and, as both Gunton’s and Wright’s comments suggest, it is in keeping with the literature to use Atonement as the general term.

At times within the thesis a further term, the “Christ event” is used as shorthand for the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, where it is useful to use an expression which is slightly broader in flavour than the Atonement. The term “salvation” is also used at certain points. While that is a term that can be restricted to discussion of saving or healing, it is also used occasionally in this thesis to indicate in a general sense the intended outcome of the work of the Atonement where the text has need of such a term.

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\* In his recent book on the crucifixion, Wright makes the point that, although a full account includes resurrection, ascension, ultimate resurrection of all and renewal of creation, ‘we must still insist that it is proper, necessary and vital to ask: By six o’clock on the first Good Friday evening, what had changed and how had that happened?’ See: Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion* (London: SPCK, 2016), pp.169-170.

\* Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p.68.
One of the achievements of the disability rights movement has been to raise awareness of the part that language has played, deliberately or not, in the experience of oppression by those with disabilities. A number of terms, such as “retarded” and “spastic”, in use until relatively recently, are now rightly regarded as unacceptably negative. Some terms included in translations of Scripture, such as “lame”, “crippled” or “madman”, if used other than in quoting the text, would fall into the same category. A history of the development of notions of disability and their attendant terminology is not presented here, but for the purposes of this thesis, a suitable choice of terminology is required. The terms adopted are those of “disability” and “people with disabilities”. These seem to fall into what Brock, in his review of present-day terms, calls ‘the more mainstream usage.’

Disability will therefore be used to denote both the fact of impairment, whether physical, cognitive or otherwise, in comparison to what might be regarded as the “typical” person (itself a notion fraught with danger), and the lived experience of the person who has that impairment. The choice of “people with disabilities” reflects a preference to acknowledge the full personhood of any individual before consideration or discussion of an impairment. At times within the thesis, the term “able-bodied” is used. There is also discussion of the “embodiment” of theological ideas, in that lived experience provides insight into those ideas. Where these expressions are used, they are not intended to refer exclusively to physical ability or disability, but to encompass the spectrum of ability and disability, unless noted otherwise.

The approach of this thesis is not to examine matters of disability as something of interest on the theological and social margins of humanity, but rather to suggest that there is no proper theological understanding of humanity, and in the present project of the Atonement, without the incorporation *ab initio* of all aspects of human ability or disability. However, to do that it seems unavoidable for now to

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Part 1: Chapter 1: Introduction

speak of people with disabilities as if speaking of a separate category and the choice of terminology is made to enable discussion to proceed.

“Model”

The term “model” arises frequently throughout this thesis, and in more than one context, which should be clarified here. Reading in wider disability studies soon encounters expressions such as the “medical model” or “social model” of disability. These are well-established terms in that field, used to distinguish underlying ways of thinking about disability. Thus used, they express an understanding of what it means to have a disability and what presumptions there might be about how the individual or society should respond to the existence and experience of disability. The meaning and use of “models” in this sense is described in greater detail in the locating of the present research below and in discussion of the taxonomy of disability in chapter 2.

This thesis also, separately, uses the idea of “models of the Atonement.” This is an important and deliberate use of the term and has to do with the language used to talk theologically about the Atonement. Language around the Atonement is found to be rather loose in terms of whether, for example, a word or expression is understood to encapsulate a whole set of ideas about the Atonement, or just a single useful, or evocative, mental picture. This is examined in some detail in chapter 4, drawing on scholarship on the functioning of models and metaphor, in order to develop an approach which will enable a more disciplined and careful interaction with the insights of disability theology. Some scholars refer to “theories” of the Atonement rather than models. As explained in chapter 4, the term “model” has been used here as it more readily makes the connection with the scholarship on language that is used in that analysis.
Part 1: Chapter 1: Introduction

Locating the research

In addressing the research question, it is useful to consider where this study sits within, and relates to, other work on both disability theology and Atonement theology.

Location within disability theology

To locate the study within disability theology, a sense of the location and focus of that sub-field itself is important. It can be linked broadly to, and certain parallels can be drawn with, the wider academic field of disability studies. That field itself is related to the disability rights movement, which traces its origins to the early- to mid-1970s. The aspect of the disability rights movement which is perhaps echoed most clearly in disability studies has been its reaction against what became known as the medical model of disability. This term came to be used for an approach to disability that classified it in terms of loss of function. That loss of function was viewed as a personal tragedy to be addressed through medical intervention. Within the disability rights movement (at least in the UK, where the analysis has had something of a Marxist political edge to it) the medical model was believed to have arisen from a combination of the rise in status of the medical profession, in diagnosis and treatment, and the rise of capitalism. Following Michael Oliver’s political critique, the emphasis of capitalism on the value of the individual in terms of what he or she could contribute to the tasks of an increasingly urbanised society correspondingly devalued those with disabilities.

By contrast, as the disability studies scholar and activist Tom Shakespeare puts it, the “big idea” of the disability rights movement was the development of a social

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10 For example, see the introduction to: This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies, ed. by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), p.2-3.

model of disability to replace the medical model.\textsuperscript{12} The term “social model” had been coined by Oliver, writing of the need for disabled people to discover and write their own histories, as black people and women had.\textsuperscript{13} Oliver suggested a two-fold classification: impairment, which is to be lacking part or all of a limb, or to have a defective limb, organ or other function; and disability, which is the restriction of activity caused by society taking insufficient account of those with impairments, the effect of which is to exclude them from the mainstream of activities.\textsuperscript{14} The social model is therefore, in large part, a constructionist concept of disability rooted in the experience of those with impairments and characterised by its recognition both of their voices and of the political and social structures that are oppressive to them.

The social model has become the dominant interpretative concept within disability studies. While its rise has caused a re-appraisal of significant, often unexamined, ideas about humanity, disability and our concepts of “medical” and “social”, it is not without its own challenges. Barnes’ review of the social model notes the criticism of its use as a ‘totalizing grand theory’\textsuperscript{15} that can have the effect of silencing discussion of important aspects of living with disabilities. In his more recent writing, Oliver also notes how powerful the tendency is to slip away from the discipline of the social model. This is at least in part because the social model demands changes to our whole understanding of disability at a level deep within our politics and culture. It is easier to claim to have “done something” in the disability arena by talking in terms of, say, funds provided to enable access for a particular group. However, this leads back towards seeing disability as the particular problem of a particular person or group, categorised by lack of a particular function.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Oliver, \textit{The Politics of Disablement}, p.xi.
\textsuperscript{14} Oliver, \textit{The Politics of Disablement}, p.11.
Disability theology is in many ways a theological response to similar concerns. It similarly challenges unexamined theological presumptions, seeking positive and rigorous theological approaches to disability, as well as making disability more fully visible within Christian theological scholarship and ecclesial practice. In that regard Nancy Eiesland’s book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* is often cited as a significant starting point, albeit that is not to suggest that theological literature had never mentioned the challenges of disability before then.¹⁷ Eiesland’s practical and intellectual goal was to find an approach that enabled full participation of people with disabilities in church life.¹⁸ Echoing the critique of the assumptions behind the medical model in disability studies, Eiesland described her experience of a Christian approach to disability that insists on divine healing as ‘the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine.’¹⁹ She proposed that a minority group model might provide the most useful way to think of those with disabilities, as a group who suffer discrimination because of a characteristic that they share.²⁰

That initiative has in turn raised other questions. For example, Hans Reinders has suggested that Eiesland’s model is too deeply rooted in ideas of self-advocacy. Taking what he regards as the most challenging situation, that of profound intellectual disability, he suggests that disability theology cannot be essentially a version of liberation theology, since it must encompass those who will never be able to comprehend or exercise such self-advocacy.²¹ Another approach, suggested by Deborah Creamer, is to suggest a “limits model” for thinking theologically about disability. Rather than measuring humanity in terms of how far

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¹⁷ An insightful review of the history of Christian theological engagement with disability is provided by: *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. by Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).


¹⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.117. Even where there is no insistence on divine healing of disabilities, Swinton still sees a version of the medical model in an assumption that in church life the task is to enable those with disabilities to function, with minimal disruption, within existing forms of worship. See: John Swinton, *Building a Church for Strangers*, Contact Pastoral Monographs, 9 (Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust, 1999), p.19.


Part 1: Chapter 1: Introduction

it falls short of an ideal “norm”, Creamer proposes that limits are an unsurprising aspect of life and do not need to demonstrate that they are not a deficit, theologically or otherwise.\(^22\) In pursuing the questions that these examples illustrate, the theological discussion of disability has tended to focus on particular themes. Chapter 3 considers these themes under the headings of anthropology, access, hermeneutics and soteriology, each of which asks demanding questions of wider Christian theology.

As that scholarship has developed, two dangers can also be identified. One is that a theology of disability can become a sort of special-interest theology only for those particularly concerned with disability. Eiesland herself challenges this, writing that: ‘A theology of disability must be made a visible, integral and ordinary part of the Christian life and our theological reflections on that life.’\(^23\) A second danger arises from the power of testimony within the disability theology literature. Not surprisingly, given what was said above about first- and second-order discourse, much of the literature rightly includes and reflects on autobiographical testimony. The power of such is crucial, but, as Brock has suggested in a presentation on how we speak of disability, it can prove too powerful. Testimony can have the effect of insulating itself from challenge and precluding critical discussion of the underlying theological questions.\(^24\)

With these dangers in view, the approach of this thesis is not to seek a niche, or specialised, presentation or expression of the Atonement that addresses disability concerns, but rather to ask in what way a main account of the Atonement might allow itself to be disrupted and re-formed, naturally to encompass all of humanity, inclusive of disability. It is an exercise in systematic theology as a response, a second-order discourse. There has been relatively little in the way of explicitly systematic theological writing in the disability field. Most notably, Amos Yong has written a substantial volume attending to a range of systematic questions and I


\(^{23}\) Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.75.

interact with his work at stages throughout this thesis. Yong identifies the philosophical concept of emergence as the governing principle for his disability-perspective systematic theology, building on an initial application of it to anthropology.\footnote{Amos Yong, \textit{Theology and Down Syndrome} (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p.172.} Reynolds’ excellent volume, \textit{Vulnerable Communion}, could also be considered a systematic theology (though not claiming to be such) founded on, or at least explored through, the governing principle of mutual vulnerability.\footnote{Thomas E Reynolds, \textit{Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality} (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), p.98.} The interaction of both scholars with the Atonement is included in chapter 3. Having considered the impact of disability insights on a main account of the Atonement, this study also asks how the doctrine of the Atonement, and a full engagement with the cross and resurrection, can act as a foundation for the ongoing development of disability theology.

\textbf{Location within Atonement theology}

It is unsurprising to assert that there is a longer history of theological reflection and scholarship on the Christian idea of Atonement. It would be possible to assess any one such historic contribution to Atonement theology in the light of disability considerations. However, the question addressed in this thesis concerns the broader interaction of the developing field of disability theology with ideas of Atonement as they are currently debated and expressed, and with a view to how these might shape each other in the future.

It seems timely that the Atonement should be examined in this way since the meaning of the Atonement, the claims made about its objective and subjective achievements, its connection with or disconnection from the actual Biblical narrative, and what language best describes it are the subject of lively debate, at least in Western (probably mainly Protestant) theological circles. An illustration of this is the recently published \textit{T&T Clark Companion to Atonement}, containing over a hundred articles and essays on the subject. Another is NT Wright’s 2016 book focusing directly on how we interpret the crucifixion of Jesus. Wright sees this ongoing active testing of ideas as the continued influence on Protestant thinking of
the Reformation, with its emphasis on the once-for-all sufficient and complete work of Christ.\textsuperscript{27} Taking a slightly different approach, Ben Pugh’s 2015 review examines a range of Atonement theories, asking how each emerged in its current form.\textsuperscript{28}

As it stands, however, that debate has not yet asked how ideas of the Atonement should be shaped by the insights of disability theology or disability studies. This thesis directly addresses that currently missing part of the discussion and develops an initial response to it.

\textsuperscript{27} Wright, \textit{The Day the Revolution Began}, pp.28-30.
\textsuperscript{28} Ben Pugh, \textit{Atonement Theories: A Way Through the Maze} (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015).
Chapter 2

Methodological matters

Method and structure

To approach the research question, in its three components, this study will undertake a review of relevant literature relating to the Atonement and to disability theology. Before that, two preparatory matters will be addressed. The first is to consider against what measure any account of the Atonement that appears in the disability theology literature might be assessed. What is needed is a consistent hermeneutical key that can be applied in reading that literature with a view to generating an orderly interpretation. The second is to consider the range of disabilities that should be within the scope of this study. This will involve insights from both disability theology and wider disability studies as to whether it is necessary or helpful to separate various disabilities into categories (for example, physical or intellectual disabilities) for such a study.

Having considered those questions, chapters 3 and 4 will begin to address the first two components of the research question. Chapter 3 will review the disability theology literature to determine the extent to which it already presents, critiques or appears to be shaped by an account of the Atonement. That review will consider such an account as it appears under each of the identified themes of anthropology, access, hermeneutics and soteriology, and applying the hermeneutical key identified in the section below.

Chapter 4 will review Christian ideas of Atonement and in particular the language in which the account of those ideas has been rendered. This will involve some sifting of the ongoing debate about the nature of the Atonement and about the value of the metaphors, models, or theories (such as sacrifice, justice and victory) that are typically deployed to describe and explain it. It will also involve careful consideration of the way in which such metaphorical language operates.
At that point chapter 5 will draw these two analyses alongside one another in a comparison of both theological ideas and language in order to complete the task set by the first two components of the research question and to begin to approach the third. That comparison should identify to what extent existing accounts of the Atonement address concerns raised by a disability perspective, or the challenges presented to them by such a perspective. To the extent that the interaction of the two fields is wanting, it should also indicate whether between them those fields already contain the resources of language and concept to improve that interaction, or whether an alternative path should be pursued. Those conclusions will shape the remainder of the thesis, in terms of developing or enriching the account of the Atonement and considering how it might play a more foundational role in disability theology (the last part of the research question).

Influences on the approach

Having set out the approach to the research questions, it is also valuable to identify what has shaped the framing of those questions and the expectations of what the approach being adopted might discover. The practical origins of the study were noted at the outset. The most significant influence of this is probably that it leads to a preference for a response to the challenge of bringing disability theology and the Atonement together that lies, or at least begins, within accounts of the Atonement that are as recognisable in a congregational setting as in the theological academy. Although this thesis is an exercise in systematic theological research, that background is likely also to lead to a preference for a response that is readily connected with the very practical pastoral challenges that shape much of the disability theology literature.

Another influence on the framing of the research question is an assumption that references to the Atonement are to an action by God, through the cross and resurrection, that can be experienced subjectively, but that has definite objective aspects to it. As a result, the Atonement debate envisaged by the question, and engaged with in the study, is the debate that assumes an actual Atonement, with both objective and subjective aspects.
Part 1: Chapter 2: Methodological matters

Finding a hermeneutical key

In considering how ideas of Atonement have been expressed, and in reading the disability theology literature, it is important that there is consistency in how these are interpreted. This can be achieved by applying a consistent hermeneutical tool, or key, which establishes the kind of action or event “Atonement” is referring to and what achievement(s) it is assumed to entail. In his book *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity*, Vernon White develops an argument, and indeed a challenge, based on the idea of a central claim lying at the heart of the various understandings of the Atonement. What emerges from White’s argument, and his insistence on articulating a central claim, is the possibility of a hermeneutical key which is particularly apposite to the present project.

The universal and the particular

According to White, the central claim of the Atonement is that what he calls the Christ event, and especially the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, is an event in history that brings about a universal ontological change, which is effective for all time. Following that event, things are not as they were. Crucially, it is not just that there is a change in perception: rather, as a result of the Christ event, ‘the effects of sin and the disruption it causes are not merely nullified ritually, but dealt with effectively.’

The claim is profound and far-reaching. White stresses that the claim he has in mind is not that the cross illustrates in a unique way some eternal truth about the nature of God or his character (although it may indeed do so), but rather that ‘the particularity of the Christ event is constitutive of universal reconciliation.’ Through this event God is working to reconcile all of creation, including humanity, to himself, instigating a cosmic renewal. This means that somehow this particular event reaches into every part of time and space and has an impact on all aspects of the universe, even in those times and places where

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current experience and evidence indicate that the effects of sin and non-
reconciliation continue.

White’s expression for what is being said here about the Atonement is that it is ‘a
large claim, but balanced on a narrow pivot. That is the paradox.’\textsuperscript{31} While this is
not quite a paradox in terms of these two being in apparent contradiction, White is
certainly correct in observing their potentially uncomfortable juxtaposition: the
magnitude of the claim and the insistence that it turns not on historical accident, or
a general movement of events, but on what indeed appears to be the very narrow
pivot of the life, death and resurrection of the man, Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{32} Even within
that scheme the pivot’s fulcrum seems narrowed to his death on a cross, outside
Jerusalem, on the Friday of the Passover festival in a year around 33AD, what
might seem an almost scandalous particularity on which to base universal claims.
Yet this is the point that White presses. White also observes that not only did the
large claim about this event seem to be asserted in the New Testament, if
anything it was widened by the early Church Fathers. He points out that Irenaeus’
notion of recapitulation allowed for the effects of the Atonement to reach back to
all people before Christ, thus covering the whole human race.

It is the extraordinary relationship within this claim, between universality and
particularity, that White suggests leads many to struggle conceptually with the
Atonement. When the claim was first made, in the Greco-Roman context of the
New Testament, that the death of Jesus affected the whole cosmos, the human
concept and experience of the cosmos was, we assume, different from that of
today in a number of ways. The people to whom the Apostle Paul wrote, for
example, would have been unaware of many of the people in the world in their
own time; much of the geography of the world was not known to them and the idea
that the firmament comprised stars separated by immense distances, that

\textsuperscript{31} White, \textit{Atonement and Incarnation}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{32} In light of the introductory comments in chapter 1 about the use and importance of model and
metaphor, White’s “narrow pivot” is itself a metaphor. Further comment is made on this usage in
the discussion of language in chapter 4 (Page 95).
nonetheless in principle could be visited, and planets upon which one might stand, was not part of their thinking.

White suggests, not unreasonably, that today, with so many people on our planet and our awareness not just of them, but of the vastness of the physical universe and the length of human and geological history, together with the realisation that the majority of people and places never encounter the gospel, this claim for the Atonement having universal scope may seem to become untenable.\(^33\) White’s point, though, is that the claim that the particularity of the Christ event is constitutive of universal reconciliation affecting the whole cosmos remains as presented in the New Testament, and that an argument against it of this sort, based on scope, scale, or remoteness is unconvincing. As he puts it, ‘Psychological cosiness is an unreliable criterion for theological truth.’\(^34\)

White goes on to observe that while there may be much discussion about Jesus, the cross and salvation, this discomfort over universality and particularity has led to a tendency for theological discussion to slip away from rigorously maintaining this large claim balanced on its narrow pivot. The slippage, White suggests, takes a number of forms, which he regards as defensive strategies adopted in the face of this sort of pressure. The approach of Hick, for example, is described as drawing back from the Christ event (birth to ascension) as being in any way necessary for salvation. Following that line, while Jesus may demonstrate for us certain things about God, the cross becomes no more unique than any other historic event.\(^35\) There is then no need to address the relationship between universality and particularity at all.

In other writers White finds a less extreme or less explicit distancing. Nonetheless, he notes that the claim that the Christ event is constitutive of salvation is quietly omitted, while greater emphasis is placed on its revelatory potential. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are unique in revealing things about the nature of salvation and the nature of God’s character, but little is said of


\(^{34}\) White, *Atonement and Incarnation*, p.11.

\(^{35}\) White, *Atonement and Incarnation*, p.32.
how the Atonement objectively constitutes that salvation. In part this occurs
through a movement away ‘from representing God as the man Jesus to God in the
man Jesus.’36 It might be that this arises out of an emphasis on the humanity of
Jesus and an instinct for demythologising the language of the Bible. Whatever its
drivers, this move results, White suggests, in Jesus becoming the ‘supreme
exemplar’37 of a life filled with the Holy Spirit, but perhaps no more than that.38

What is proposed for this thesis is that White’s challenge, not to slip away from the
large objective claim of the Atonement, despite possible discomfort with either its
scope or the narrow pivot of the cross on which it turns, provides a useful
hermeneutical key for the task of interpreting disability theology, western Christian
understandings of the Atonement and the relationship between the two. To
support that proposal, however, consideration must be given to why and in what
way this is indeed a suitable hermeneutical key for this project.

Both the universal and the particular in White’s challenge are important. Firstly, in
its dependence on the particular death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the
Atonement focuses on a specific, concrete, body and on the specific lived
experience of that body, including the experience of being despised, disfigured
and ultimately broken. This is apposite to disability theology, which demands an
emphasis on concrete bodies and on lived experiences. Nancy Eiesland, for
example, has suggested that, recognising that all human experience is embodied,
those whose bodies are impaired have begun to question the perceived prevailing
assumption that theology should be conducted principally with “normal”, or
“typical” bodies in mind. Rather, the acknowledgement of the particular embodied
experience of Jesus renders the experience of all bodies, including non-typical

36 White, Atonement and Incarnation, p.72.
37 White, Atonement and Incarnation, p.72.
38 In his review, White includes theologians who defend robustly the universal reconciling work of
Christ in the Atonement. To take an example, he considers John MacQuarrie’s suggestion that this
reconciliation is not an isolated event, separate from other acts of God, but is equiprimordial with
creation. However, White argues that even these strong defences fail to address whether or how
that reconciliation is constituted by the Christ event, including the cross, rather than just being
specially revealed there. The present thesis does not re-examine White’s critique of those texts,
but rather asks whether, or to what extent, that critique might apply in the context of disability
theology. See: White, Atonement and Incarnation, pp.29-39; and John MacQuarrie, Principles of
bodies, ‘a resource for “doing theology”’. As a result, disability theology is asking directly how the claims of the gospel, and in the present case of the Atonement, can be said to have meaning for people who are most likely very aware of non-typical bodies and of embodied experience, much of which is very demanding.

Taking particularity a step further, the focus of the Atonement on the concrete body and experience of Jesus continues through the appearance of Jesus as a physical body following the resurrection. The universal cosmic renewal wrought by the Atonement has become embodied in this risen, albeit in some way transformed, body. There is both continuity and discontinuity with the body that went to the cross. This sharpens the relevance of White’s challenge in the context of disability theology, as it allows those with what might be considered non-typical bodies to ask what sort of continuity and discontinuity is entailed for them, and by extension for all of us, in the cosmic renewal and reconciliation brought about by the Atonement.

Secondly, the universal within White’s challenge is a matter of the scope and nature of change. The Atonement is claimed to be in some way God’s answer to the problems of the world, especially perhaps problems of injustice and oppression. Disability theology in its present form, with its roots in the disability rights movement and disability studies, is addressing a particular “problem” in the world - that of the existence and experience of impairment and of the oppression of those with disabilities. The universal in White’s challenge provides the discipline of asking what purchase the claim of the Atonement has on these “problems” of disability and what change it should be anticipated to bring about.

**Using the key**

It should be acknowledged that White, having explored ideas of incarnation and Atonement in detail, makes use of that discussion for a purpose rather different from the present study. His concern is to ask how that particular event can have universal effect across all time and space and to find an explanation that he

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considers both theologically and philosophically satisfying. This he locates in God’s experience of incarnation, temptation, suffering and death equipping him with a moral authority to overcome those things. This thesis makes use of White’s discussion only as far his robust argument for maintaining the universality and the particularity of an objective Atonement. That is used as a hermeneutical key to ask, in a consistent way, to what extent such an account arises in, or shapes, disability theology; and to ask how such an account is expressed through prevailing models or metaphors for the Atonement. It also, conversely, suggests that for disability theology to be distinctively Christian, a full account of the Atonement, in both its universal and particular aspects, should play a foundational part.

Scope of disability within this study

Exploring the relationship between the Atonement and human disability invites the immediate question of what sort of disability should be included in such a project. The human lives with which we are surrounded reveal the great diversity of situations that we might consider encompassed by the term “disability” and it may appear inevitable on the face of it that any study must be limited to some sub-set of such a diverse group. However, it is also possible that for the theological task at hand, such a restriction should be avoided, albeit recognising that it remains important to acknowledge difference.

A starting point in addressing this question is to consider whether there is an existing taxonomy of disability that can helpfully be brought to bear and whether this carries over meaningfully into the theological discussion. Examining such a taxonomy might shed light on: (i) the basis on which we might usefully talk of a categorisation of disability; and (ii) whether there is a reasonably clear demarcation that can be made between categories of disability for the present theological purpose.

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40 White, Atonement and Incarnation, p.77.
Part 1: Chapter 2: Methodological matters

Taxonomy of disability

A comprehensive and internationally recognised classification of disability was produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1980 in the form of the *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps* (ICIDH). The document was written from the perspective of contact with health care systems, with a view to promoting consistent identification, recording, treatment and care for a range of conditions. Its approach to the taxonomy, or classification, of disability was arrived at through the following logical sequence: disease $\rightarrow$ impairment $\rightarrow$ disability $\rightarrow$ handicap.\(^{41}\)

Recognising that this was rather limited in its concept of the nature and causes of disability, the WHO has, over time, developed this further. The various impairments and conditions that may cause disability are now incorporated within the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*, version 10 of which (“ICD-10”) came into use in 1994. An eleventh revision was due to be released during 2018, although at the time of writing this remains in development.\(^{42}\) This is intended to be used in conjunction with the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) document, which was issued in 2001.\(^{43}\) According to the exposure draft of the manual for the use of the ICF, it incorporates the concept of the social model of disability. Its objective is for disability to be understood not just as a product of “disease”, but as a “bio-psycho-social synthesis”\(^{44}\) of the many factors that contribute to the experience of disability. While the ICD sets out a taxonomy of diseases and disabling conditions, the ICF sets out the areas in which disability can be experienced, including environmental and social factors.

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The extraordinary variety and detail evident in the combination of the ICD and ICF classifications contributes some important points to the present discussion. Firstly, disability is multi-faceted. For example, they demonstrate that the interaction of what might be thought of as physical and mental disability is often complex. Consequently, drawing a boundary between different situations of disability to identify a sub-set for the present purpose runs the risk of appearing, and indeed being, arbitrary or superficial. Secondly, the documents taken together indicate that there are criteria other than physical structures by which disabilities might be identified or grouped, and that these intersect with identification by structure in complex ways. Taken as a whole, for the present project, disabilities might be grouped under the following criteria (these are summary criteria, not terms specified in the ICD/IDF):

a) Type/structure: disabilities of physical, mental, sensory or emotional structures or functions;

b) Emergence: disabilities inherited genetically or otherwise at birth, or those arising during life through, for example, illness, degenerative conditions, accident, trauma, conflict, assault or the process of ageing;

c) Duration: disabilities that are experienced as temporary, intermittent, or permanent;

d) Lived experience: the impact of disability on the range of activities in which an individual is able or enabled to engage.

Responding to the two points of interrogation posed above in relation to taxonomy, it therefore appears that with the help of the ICD and ICF it might in principle be possible to talk of a categorisation of disability for this project. However, the demarcation and selection of categories in practice, and understanding those by reference to these intersecting bases for identifying disabilities, would certainly be complex. The next step is to consider how making such a selection would appear in the light of wider disability studies and initial consideration of the theological question.
Interaction with wider disability studies

Although the WHO resources referred to above suggest that it might be possible in principle to restrict this study to a category, or group of categories, of disability, doing so seems to entail accepting a principally medical framework for understanding disability. Johnstone, reviewing the development of the disability studies field, notes that those classifications were rejected by people with disabilities and by those organisations supporting them because of the overwhelmingly negative picture that that approach painted of disability. Although the present combination of ICD and ICF represents a considerable development in approach, it is still not much supported within disability studies because of its continuing connection with a medical model.

With their preference for the social model, disability studies and the disability rights movement in general would appear to steer us away from a discussion of disability as something broken down into categories by reference to a taxonomy, and towards one which focuses instead on social and political (or in the present case, theological) structures and attitudes which give rise to not just the phenomenon, but the lived experience of disability as a whole. However, there are other philosophical enquiries within disability studies that are also relevant to the present question. Two are considered here.

Definitions and values

The first concerns the way in which language and definitions are deployed in relation to disability. Edwards maintains that what we think our definitions and descriptions of disability mean depends on what sets of values we bring to bear. On the one hand, under the medical model, medical values are applied, which interpret deviation from morphology, or indeed behaviour, typical to the human

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species as indicating a pathology that requires treatment. On the other hand, under the social model a different set of values, moral values, are applied, which interpret what constitutes a good life for the person involved. Under that set of values, disability in a particular life will depend on the extent to which the experience of that life compares to the good life as determined by those values. To illustrate with an extreme example, Edwards suggests we might consider that a paraplegic is not significantly disabled if within the set of values applied, that person’s ‘vital goal’ in life were bird watching and he or she could readily be taken to places and enabled to do that activity without restriction.

The point that Edwards is making is that our ideas of what constitutes disability are heavily value-laden, and therefore subjective. The argument favours neither the medical model nor the social model in particular. However, its relevance to the question of whether to focus on a sub-set of disability is that it ought to make us cautious in assuming too readily that for our theological enquiry a meaningful discrete selection can be made. We would at least need to acknowledge that both the generation of the taxonomy used, and the selection made from it, are value-laden exercises.

**Constructionist and realist approaches**

The second area of discussion relevant here is a critique of the constructionist philosophy behind the social model from a realist perspective. Vehemas and Mäkelä discuss the extent to which impairments are “brute facts” (facts which do not depend on any observer input to exist) or “institutional facts” (those that do require observer input, such as language and social structures, to exist). An example given is of someone with Down Syndrome. A brute fact is the existence of a particular chromosome. An institutional fact is that that person has Down Syndrome. To exist, this latter fact needs language and an institutional

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understanding of the expectations of a human life and of the purpose or function of elements of the human body. It is acknowledged that this distinction becomes more difficult where the brute facts are less readily identified, such as mental disabilities diagnosed on the basis of behaviour, rather than on the basis of a clear physical cause.

Nonetheless, after considerable discussion, Vehemas and Mäkelä remain unconvinced by an argument that disability can be regarded as entirely socially constructed, that it simply does not exist prior to language and institutional values that enable it to be set up as a category. They argue for a realist view that it is not oppressive to acknowledge the physical dimensions of impairment, as long as there is also sufficient weight given to the social context and its disabling effects. What emerges from their argument is a combination of a medical model of impairment and a social model of disability.\(^5^0\) The relevance of this critique is that it suggests that it could be dangerous to insist that all disability should be grouped together as an undifferentiated whole, as to do so might unfairly ignore the importance, in the lived experience of the person, of the brute facts of a particular disability.

Taking these discussions into account appears to bring the argument about whether to limit this study to a sub-set of disability to the following point: The broadly accepted argument of the social model insists that a focus on taxonomy of the ICD/ICF sort will always frame the discussion in terms of the problems of the person with a disability, and fail to address society’s understanding of disability and how that, and the structures it gives rise to, can be oppressive. Therefore, the approach should be to tackle the understanding (in our case theologically) of ability and disability as a whole, not just of certain types of disability selected from a recognised taxonomy. In any case it seems clear that achieving such a selection would present significant difficulties. The discussion about how value-laden our descriptions of disability tend to be also supports this view. However, balancing that argument, the realist critique insists that such an approach is

\(^{50}\) Vehemas and Mäkelä, ‘The Ontology of Disability’, p.53.
acceptable only if at the same time the reality of the varied brute facts of impairment and difference are also acknowledged, rather than smoothed over, so that the discussion does not become so generalised as to be of little practical value.

**Theological taxonomy of disability**

As well as the need to be coherent in relation to wider disability studies, the discussion of whether to focus on a sub-set of disability should also consider whether there is some sort of theological taxonomy that ought to apply – a theological reason for confining the inquiry to certain aspects of disability. In this regard, the sustained discussion by Hans Reinders of theological anthropology in the context of profound intellectual disability is helpful. As mentioned above, Reinders sets out to establish what it means to be human and in doing so he suggests that those with profound intellectual disabilities provide the ultimate test of any conclusion, because of their inability to develop agency, self-awareness, self-advocacy or life-goals. Reinders considers historic and more recent ideas based on: criteria of rationality or self-awareness; or criteria that determine whether a life is worth protecting or saving, perhaps based on purpose or goal-setting; or indeed any criteria identified as unique to human beings within the created order. However, he concludes that all of these fail because those who do not meet those criteria, most of which involve a measure of agency or self-awareness, must necessarily be regarded as less than human. His proposal in response is that the measure of humanity cannot be self-generated, dependent on the human being. It must be extrinsic (based on the love God has for us) and unconditional (not based on our meeting certain criteria).

Along the way, Reinders provides an assessment of the disability rights movement and disability studies, as well as of various strands of disability theology. Much of the discussion is around a combination of what might inherently make us human and how our humanity is tied to a concept of a human *telos*. He supports the

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51 Page 25.
achievements of the disability rights movement, but finds that, along with disability studies and the development of the constructionist social model, it has imposed its own sense of human nature and *telos*, rooted in freedom and empowerment. However, because this requires the exercise of agency and self-awareness, it excludes those with profound intellectual disability, who cannot exercise the agency and choice required.\(^\text{53}\)

As regards disability theology, Reinders discusses approaches focussed on liberation, access and community (much of which is ecclesiological). These and other approaches are discussed in greater detail later in this thesis. For the present purpose, however, Reinders points out that they often focus on a particular category of people or a particular experience of disability. An example is Eiesland’s concept of the disabled God, which she herself admits emphasises physical disability.\(^\text{54}\) In addition, they tend to adopt uncritically the disability rights movement’s notions of the goals of freedom, self-advocacy, the fulfilment of purpose or the making of a contribution.\(^\text{55}\) Reinders concludes that all of these approaches share the fault of excluding those with profound intellectual disability as they are either outside the group considered or do not meet the level of agency or self-awareness assumed.

In the end Reinders retains the idea of humanity having an inherent, or absolute element as well as a teleological element, but insists that both elements are extrinsic to us. His proposal is that the first rests in the worth that God places on every human life as part of the gift of life itself, and the second rests in the gift of communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.\(^\text{56}\) Thus the meaning of being human is grounded in God’s friendship towards us, which gives rise to both of these elements, is exhibited most profoundly on the cross and can only be received as a gift.\(^\text{57}\) A possible area of criticism of Reinders’ approach is the nature of the friendship he has in mind. In the normal course of human relations, while we

\(^{53}\) Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, p.50.

\(^{54}\) Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.94.


would not suggest that friendship is possible only where the parties make identical contributions to the relationship, friendship is on the whole a mutual, or reciprocal matter. That reciprocation is the demonstration that the gift of friendship offered by one party has been received by the other. However, Reinders makes it clear that it is the very inability of those with profound intellectual disabilities to respond that highlights the fact that God’s gift of friendship does not depend on our response. As with so much about God, it is both like and unlike human friendship. It is God’s ‘continuous act of self-giving, by which he draws us into his communion.’

The relevance of this to the present discussion is that Reinders’ argument, which is directed towards arriving at a fully inclusive theological anthropology, strongly suggests as a by-product that the theological enquiry of this thesis should keep the full range of disability in view. This arises from his conclusion that what it is to be human, whether inherently or teleologically, is extrinsic to us. It is also consistent with Reinders’ criticism of approaches that by focusing on a particular category generate theological answers that exclude some people. Having said that, I am at the same time cautious about Reinders’ argument because, on its own, it is rather extreme. While Reinders makes it clear that he has deliberately chosen to argue his theological anthropology from the most demanding case, his argument is rather like an unconstrained constructionist social model, in that it risks becoming so universal as to smooth away the reality of the brute facts of difference amongst humanity and almost to shut down discussion of theological matters that remain relevant to those who have disabilities, but who also have agency and self-awareness. This risk must also be addressed.

**Implications**

Drawing together the elements of this discussion, the strong indication is that this thesis should proceed in a way that balances two concerns: on the one hand both the constructionist social model argument and the theological anthropology argument weigh against confining the study to a selected sub-set of disability; and

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58 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, p.298.
on the other hand the realist argument insists on acknowledgement of difference and of the brute facts and experience of disability. To do this, the approach proposed is two-fold: (i) to address the relationship in principle between the Atonement and all human disability, without making a taxonomic selection of a discrete sub-set of disability; and (ii) to ensure at each stage that both the questions formulated and the proposals developed also take into account situations of actual disability, with their attendant brute facts.

The second of these strands can be addressed by a return to the grouping of criteria for identifying disability that emerged from the discussion of the ICD and ICF classifications above (type/structure, emergence, duration and life experience). If a small number of situations of disability could be identified which represented a substantial cross-section of those criteria, then any theological questions or proposals can intentionally take those representative situations into account. Three situations are proposed:

a) a person who uses a wheelchair owing to a physical disability acquired during their lifetime, through accident or illness, but who is otherwise unimpaired;

b) a person with Down Syndrome; and

c) a person with profound intellectual disability

It is not suggested that this provides exhaustive coverage of the criteria. However, in light of the discussion in this section, this two-fold approach should avoid the trap of generating a theological answer that applies only to a certain category of people, perpetuating the theological invisibility of some aspects of disability. At the same time it should avoid being too generalised by bringing any theological questions or proposals into conversation with specific, albeit hypothetical, situations.

Having reached this conclusion and proposed approach, the task now is to review current disability theology literature to determine how the Atonement is addressed within it, before considering how that relates to what might be regarded as the
prevailing ways the Atonement has tended to be viewed within Western Christian theology.
Part 2: Atonement and disability theology: the present conversation
Chapter 3

The account of the Atonement in current Disability Theology

Introduction - themes in disability theology

The purpose of this chapter is to review current disability theology scholarship, making use of the hermeneutical key developed in chapter 1, of maintaining the large claim of universal reconciliation, balanced on the narrow pivot of the cross. This should provide a test as to how the subjective and objective aspects of the Atonement appear within the disability theology literature (where White would warn of slippage away from the objective elements). It should also begin to indicate whether there are questions that disability theology asks of accounts of the Atonement that have not been sufficiently addressed to date.

In setting about this review, it is not sufficient to look for direct references to the cross in disability theology writing and, to the extent that these seem to be absent, conclude that disability theology is weak in its theology of Atonement. Acknowledging that disability theology has had certain objectives is important in arriving at a legitimate interpretation of it. Developing alongside wider disability studies, it retains a strong thread of advocacy and that perspective makes sense of the fact that writing on disability theology has tended to develop along certain lines.

Although the body of literature is not yet as full as for longer-established areas of theology, there is sufficient to make it possible to identify the following as some of the main lines of development, or broad themes, which have emerged: (i) theological anthropology, questioning our understanding of what it is to be human and to be made in the image of God; (ii) a theology of access and inclusivity, with a focus on ecclesiology and worship; (iii) disability hermeneutics, seeking to read Scripture from a disability perspective and in a way that is not oppressive to those with disabilities; and (iv) disability soteriology, considering the effect of disability on
our understanding of salvation. This last theme has been identified here to capture those relatively few scholars who have to some extent addressed soteriology directly, given its close relevance to this study.

The objective is to identify to what extent, and in what way, each theme presents, or appears to be informed by, elements of an account of the Atonement. This involves highlighting the main issues that are explored under each theme, noting the contribution of various scholars, and then both identifying what is said directly about the Atonement and considering what assumptions about the nature of the Atonement can be inferred from the theological arguments being developed.

Disability perspective theological anthropology

The theme which has possibly received the widest attention from a disability theology perspective is theological anthropology. This is perhaps to be expected, since it explores the fundamental question of what it is to be a human being, made in the image of God, and intersects significantly with the objectives of the disability rights movement on questions of equality and inclusion. Included under this theme are those who write theologically from their own experience of disability, or of being closely involved with people with disabilities, and what they consider that experience has revealed about our understanding of humanity. This theme also draws in questions of eschatology, what one might call an anthropology of the new creation, as well as questions of medical ethics and genetics. Each of these aspects can be interrogated as to how it contributes to the part the Atonement plays in disability theology as a whole.

Humanity made in the image of God - the cross as revelation

This question is explored not so much in terms of asking whether humanity holds a unique place within God’s created order, but whether we regard those with disabilities as being of equal worth, in our own eyes as well as in God’s, as those who by our own assessment we regard as not having disabilities. The discussion includes what it means to be made in the image of God, both as that term arises in
the Bible and as it has been interpreted historically. Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*, already mentioned briefly, illustrates well the advocacy element of the discussion, since she specifically sets herself the objective of a theological approach that is not oppressive or degrading for people with disabilities. In pursuing that objective, she suggests a re-examination of our view of disability and our concept of the *imago Dei*. Eiesland writes of her personal epiphany of picturing God in a sip-puff wheelchair (a type of wheelchair used by people who, owning to paralysis, control the movement of their wheelchair through air pressure, inhaling and exhaling on a tube, sometimes called a “wand”). In this vision God was neither omnipotent, nor a suffering servant, but ‘a survivor, unpitying and forthright.’[^59] Her point is to press the possibility of God identifying fully (not sentimentally or condescendingly) with those with disabilities.

Creamer, commenting on Eiesland and others, identifies in this a general attempt to move away from a ‘deficit model’[^60] of humanity, which assesses humanity in terms of how we fall short of our image of God, or at least of Christ, the perfect human “form”, as one might find in Plato. Such an approach inevitably views those with disabilities as being more fallen, or in greater deficit, than others. To this Creamer contributes her proposed “limits” model, viewing limits as unsurprising and whatever abilities or attributes each person has as inherently positive, as mentioned above in chapter 1. Eiesland goes on to support her own idea of an *imago Dei* which fully incorporates disability by reference to the risen Christ bearing the marks of crucifixion in his hands, feet and side (for example, Luke 24:39-40 and John 20:27). Taking the view that the risen, wounded Christ, who bears the marks of his experience of becoming disabled on the cross, is a profound revelation of the *imago Dei*, as well as the fullest revelation of personhood, Eiesland concludes that ‘full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.’[^61]

[^59]: Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.89.
[^60]: Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, p.95.
[^61]: Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.100.
Eiesland’s argument is open to a number of questions. For example, the physicality of the visible wounds of the risen Christ might seem to favour those with visible physical disabilities with a special identification with the *imago Dei*, which is not so clearly held out to those with less visible disabilities. Would we be as willing to accept the idea of God with intellectual or emotional impairment, and if so, where is he to be found? Other disability theology writing has also widened this discussion. A slightly different approach to the “disabled God” concept is that of Amanda Shao Tan. Tan’s suggestion is that God’s identification with the limitations of all humanity, comes through the incarnation, not just through retaining the marks of the crucifixion. God limited himself, one might say disabled himself, by becoming a human person. Not only that, he became lowly and ultimately ostracised, despised, degraded, humiliated and, on the cross, physically incapacitated.\footnote{Amanda Shao Tan, ‘The Disabled Christ’, *Transformation* 15.4 (1998), 8-14 (p.11).} This incarnated God-in-Christ also underlined the extent of his identification with all of the limitations of humanity through his ministry to the sick and disabled.

Another aspect of generating an inclusive theological anthropology is to challenge concepts of the *imago Dei* that are based in reason and agency. This was explored in considering the arguments of Hans Reinders in chapter 2 above. In summary, profound intellectual disability demands a concept of humanity reflecting the *imago Dei* that is extrinsic to the person, based on God’s gift of life and his gift of friendship, revealed most significantly through the cross. On any intrinsic measure of reason or agency, some people will appear to be less than human.

A common theme across this literature is the challenge to unexamined “normate” views of what it is to be human. Reynolds characterises such views as ‘the cult of normalcy’,\footnote{Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.98.} which measures what it is to be human in terms of individualism and consumption, and which is oppressive to those unable to consume or express their individuality in the expected manner. As Hauerwas puts it, ‘the demand to be normal can be tyrannical unless we understand that the normal condition of our
being together is that we are all different.\textsuperscript{64} Reynolds provides something of a summary of disability perspectives on theological anthropology when he concludes that there is nothing inherently wrong with either the existence of disability or the lived experience of disability. Rather, ‘Disability is a factor of being finite and contingent in an open universe subject to elements of unpredictability, instability, and conflict.’\textsuperscript{65}

Applying the hermeneutical key to what is summarised here, what account of the Atonement is incorporated into this discussion of humanity and the imago Dei? While no direct or explicit claims are made about a universal ontological change brought about by the Christ event (an important element of White’s large claim), nonetheless the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross (and in particular the concrete embodiment of the Atonement in the person of Jesus) do play a significant role here in terms of identification and revelation.

One interpretation of what is revealed through the Atonement could be that, if the wounds of the risen Christ represent a deeper revelation of the eternal imago Dei, then the importance of the Atonement has been to bring about the revelation that God identifies fully and eternally with human impairment and the experience of it. In a similar vein, following Tan, the “disabling” of Christ on the cross completes the revelation already inherent in the incarnation: that God’s self-imposed limiting in the incarnation demonstrates his eternal willingness to identify with human limitation, including, by extension, impairment. Here, the work done by the Atonement as regards disability would lie in changing in our perception of our relationship with God and with each other, given that the imago Dei is now understood not just to allow for the possibility of disability, but to incorporate it fundamentally - there is no true expression of the imago Dei that does not incorporate disability. Such a change in perception ought to dispel non-inclusive normate ideas of the imago Dei and lead to positive changes in behaviour.

\textsuperscript{65} Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, p.187.
Eiesland’s interpretation goes further, suggesting that the Atonement introduces impairment into the *imago Dei*. God is changed by the disablimg experience of the cross, evidenced by the wounds of the risen Christ.66 Although that indicates an Atonement involving more in the way of ontological change, the outworking described is still primarily a subjective one, that in response to that revelation the church becomes “a communion of justice”67 in relation to those with disabilities.

**Disability as revelation**

As well as the cross acting as a source of revelation, a second significant suggestion made within this theme of theological anthropology is that disability itself is revelatory of what it means to be human. One of the best-known examples of this view, both in writing and in practice, comes from Jean Vanier and the L’Arche Christian communities, which now exist in many places in the world, and which serve people with severe learning disabilities. Those communities began with the decision by Vanier to live with and care for two men with learning disabilities in France.68 They continue to operate in that way, those with disabilities being seen as the core of a community where the objective is for those who assist them to become their friends rather than simply their carers.69 The consistent anthropological point that emerges from Vanier’s writing is that disability, of whatever sort, reveals to us what it truly means to be human, which is that we are vulnerable and dependant. Disability, he argues, shows up the vanity and illusion of humanity’s pretence to power and success.70 Vanier senses that this revelation is reliable because, in his experience, those with intellectual disabilities are unguarded. Their cries and their expressions of vulnerability would be those of us all if we did not hide them.71 (Reynolds emphasises that this surely includes a vulnerability to joy as well as to injury.)72

69 Vanier, *Essential Writings*, p.103.
72 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.38.
Vanier links the fact that disability reveals what it means to be human to what it also reveals about our calling as human beings, and especially as the church, to be willing to be with those who are vulnerable. This is a point also picked up and emphasised by Hauerwas in his discussion of our response to those with intellectual disabilities. He suggests that when people avoid those who suffer or have disabilities, this is primarily because of a fear of the isolation that so often results from suffering or disability. Hauerwas identifies two directions in which revelation operates here. On the one hand, those with disabilities reveal fundamental human vulnerability; on the other hand, because ‘God’s face is the face of the retarded,’ the calling of the church, to learn to be with and to love the sick or disabled every day, is revealed as being in part a calling to learn to “be with” and to love God. This whole experience in turn reveals more of God and his willingness to be present to humanity in all circumstances, most vividly through the incarnation.

The theologian Frances Young also explores and extends aspects of the revelatory nature of disability in her theological writing informed by her experience with her disabled son, Arthur. Young agrees with the revelatory premise and goes as far as to conclude that it is the vocation of Arthur’s life (rather than an incidental outcome of it) to reveal to those around him the human condition and its defining vulnerability. She makes a broader second point as well. Arthur cannot be said to have agency or the ability to develop and pursue life goals. His involvement in any aspect of life is always through and with others, those who are caring for him: his participation is always corporate. To talk of Arthur as part of the body of Christ demands that we recognise the inherently corporate nature of that body and of what it means to be made in the image of God. The body of Christ is a corporate image, rather than an individualistic one, and it is incomplete unless it incorporates all of its diverse elements, including disability. For Young, the Apostle Paul sees

73 Hauerwas, Suffering Presence, p.178.
both Adam and Christ as corporate figures: we were all in Adam, and we are fully in God’s image when, together, we are in Christ.\(^{75}\)

A third point Young develops, as she mines this vein of anthropological revelation, is that disability acts to reveal something of God’s judgement. Given the sensitivity around any suggestion that disability is somehow a consequence of sin, Young makes it clear that this is not God’s judgement in terms of punishment, but in terms of testing. Society is tested by how it treats those with disabilities and what this test tends to show up is that ‘our society is ambiguous’\(^{76}\) in its response. As a result, disability is acting not only to reveal vulnerability and dependence as fundamental to the human condition, but to reveal through our response to disability our need for redemption.

Certain points of caution are also raised in this aspect of theological anthropology. Reinders, writing as he does in the light of profound intellectual disability, points out the danger of moving from an argument that disability is revelatory, to the conclusion that it is therefore somehow necessary for humanity as a whole that some people live with disabilities.\(^{77}\) Pailin, reflecting theologically on his encounter with a profoundly disabled young child, also cautions against the insistence on identifying the “contribution” of those with disabilities. Doing so implies that there is a need for some to live with disabilities and falls into the trap of functionalising disability, rendering some disabilities more “useful” than others. It also potentially misconstrues the motivation of those caring for people with disabilities as being to gain the benefit of that contribution.\(^{78}\) Furthermore, in talking of revelation there is the risk of unfairly valorising those with disabilities. As Morris points out in his

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\(^{75}\) Young, *Arthur’s Call*, p.150.
\(^{76}\) Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p.143.
\(^{77}\) Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, p.216.
article on vulnerability, disability is just as often a situation of frustration and of understandable anger towards God.  

Applying the hermeneutical key to this element, the arguments summarised include little direct reference to either the universal or the particular in an account of the Atonement. However, there are potentially fruitful hints at useful intersections. One concerns the incarnation and the part it plays in our understanding of the whole Christ event. If disability provides a deeper revelation of humanity as a whole, then this suggests a deeper revelation of the sort of flesh that the Word assumed - the sort of flesh of which the particular person of Jesus was a representative at the cross. The second, indicated by Young, is the revelation of the human need for an Atonement of broad, if not universal, scope shown up by society’s being tested through how it responds to disability. Young’s thinking on this is explored further toward the end of chapter 5.

Eschatological questions

The third aspect of the anthropological theme mentioned above is that it also raises some eschatological questions. What is the place for what we might think of as the disabled body or mind in the new creation? This has not yet been developed as extensively as other areas, perhaps because discussion of the form of the resurrection body and mind is inevitably speculative. However, some writers have raised challenges to what they see as normative assumptions about the anthropology of the new creation. Amos Yong, for example, suggests that in Jesus’ parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24, the insistence by the host that ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ are gathered into his feast makes it clear that those with impairments are included in the Kingdom of God ‘just as they are, not with their impairments erased or made invisible.’ Yong supports his argument by references to Old Testament prophecies of the Day of the Lord. He finds Luke to be consistent with Jeremiah 31:8-9, Micah 4:6-7 and

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Part 2: Chapter 3: The account of the Atonement in current Disability Theology

Zephaniah 3:19b-20, where visions of the restoration of Israel typically include the blind and the lame among those who are gathered. Yong extends this argument in his reading of the eschatological judgement in Matthew 25:31-46. Here, those with disabilities, whom he includes in ‘the least of these’ are not only present eschatologically just as they are, but have a role in mediating the saving presence and activity of Jesus Christ to those who are welcomed into the Kingdom on the basis of their response to ‘the least of these.’ Yong extends this argument in his reading of the eschatological judgement in Matthew 25:31-46. Here, those with disabilities, whom he includes in ‘the least of these’ are not only present eschatologically just as they are, but have a role in mediating the saving presence and activity of Jesus Christ to those who are welcomed into the Kingdom on the basis of their response to ‘the least of these.’

This train of thought can be allied to the concept of the disabled God found in Eiesland and Tan, both discussed above. The wounds of Christ’s disabling by the cross, still present in his resurrected body, might indicate not only solidarity with humanity inclusive of disability, but the continuing presence of a diversity of able-bodiedness and disability post resurrection.

The point here is not to critique in depth the legitimacy of these readings of the biblical text, but to observe their interaction with the Atonement. The main point of engagement here is resistance to the assumption that the large claim of the cosmic renewal achieved by the Atonement includes the homogenisation of human bodies and minds, bringing them all into conformation with a notional perfect form, in line with criteria set by whatever happen to be current ideas of able-bodiedness. Hence Reynolds’ objection to the idea of redemption as the normalising of bodies and minds: ‘There is no assimilation into normalcy in the new life to come.’ Although it would go beyond the scope of this thesis, there is also a link here with discussions of the relationship between an account of the Atonement and theologies of healing, and how that relates to disability.

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81 Yong, The Bible, Disability and the Church, pp.136-142.
82 Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, p.208.
Genetics and medical ethics

Discussion of a disability perspective theological anthropology ought also to acknowledge its connections to the exploration of medical ethics. One aspect of this has already been discussed in relation to the medical model of disability, typically described as treating disability as a personal tragedy which ought to be fixed by medical or clinical intervention. Another significant aspect is that of the genetic testing of foetuses. This questions not only attitudes to the development of personhood in the womb, but also attitudes to the acceptability of types of persons in the world. Its relevance to the present project therefore lies in the question of what it means to be human and what sort of humanity we aspire to.

It is not uncommon to link this to an underlying tendency towards a eugenic attitude in society. Reference is made to pregnant women being encouraged to consider terminating a pregnancy if there is evidence that the foetus is likely to have a disability at birth (for example Down Syndrome, tested for through amniocentesis or more recently through non-invasive testing). The ethical objection is to an approach which seeks to eliminate certain categories of people from the (future) population, suggesting they are less qualified as humans than the rest. Theologically much of this again revolves around our concept of humanity made in the image of God. The part played in this debate by an account of the Atonement is certainly not explicit. However, Hauerwas infers a soteriological connection when he interprets the medical approach as succumbing to a temptation to offer a form of salvation, the achieving of an idealised, homogenous form of humanity. If our unexamined assumption is that this somehow echoes the goal of the Atonement (discussed in the section above), this will influence the theological contribution to that medical ethics debate.

86 Hauerwas, Suffering Presence, p.68.
Disability theology of access

The second major theme identified above is a theology of access, with a focus on ecclesiology and worship. As a practical matter, questions of physical access to places of worship (sometimes under the requirements of disability discrimination legislation) are often the first point of encounter with the concept of disability theology and there is a significant advocacy element here. However, writing on a theology of access goes beyond the enabling of physical presence in worship services. It addresses a range of barriers to the full participation of those with disabilities in ecclesial life. To take an example from Gillibrand, reflecting theologically on the experience of having a son, Adam, who has quite severe autism, how is Adam to be involved in worship when the ways in which Scripture, liturgy and tradition are usually used are simply not accessible to him? Within our concept of what constitutes worship and sacrament there are potential barriers of language, sight, hearing, ritual, physical practices, intellectual comprehension and expected response. The present question is to what extent approaches to such a theology of access contain or assume an account of the Atonement.

Jennie Weiss Block provides a useful example of a framework of for summarising the main elements of a theology of access. Block identifies six such elements. While her focus is on the ethical response to each element, and not on giving an account of where White’s large claim and narrow pivot of the Atonement feature in the argument, useful observations for this thesis can nonetheless be drawn out, in conversation with other literature.

Block’s first two elements are Christological. Firstly, she points out that Jesus Christ is God’s gift for all humanity, who identified especially with the outsider and the marginalised, indicating therefore that God identifies especially with the outsider (in this case the person who experiences exclusion because of disability). Within our understanding of the church as a hospitable community (see also in the

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fourth element below), Jesus thus acts as the ‘copious host’, offering the outsider the right to become an insider. Block’s theological point stops there, with what we might call the inclusivity of the incarnation. However, it seems important to extend it to say that it is most fully affirmed precisely because of that aspect of our hermeneutical key which is the embodied particularity of the Atonement.

Following Eiesland’s logic, the cross not only demonstrated the extent of Jesus’ willingness to identify with outsiders by becoming the ultimate outsider, the one unjustly executed, but the cross and resurrection incorporated disability into God (or at least revealed it there) in the wounds of the risen Christ. This offers those with disabilities a clear invitation to full participation in worship as humanity’s response to God’s gift of Christ.

The second Christological element Block identifies is what she calls a ‘relational Christology’. Her focus here is on the pattern of Jesus’ ministry as recorded in the Gospels and his willingness to be present and to devote attention to those with disabilities, particularly in the healing narratives. Here there is a connection with Reinders’ objection to a theology of access that relies on enabling people with disabilities to exercise rights of access. Such an approach excludes those who are unable to exercise such rights, perhaps through lack of agency or self-awareness. According to Reinders, what is needed is a theology of access that inspires those who are temporarily able-bodied to move towards those with disabilities, out of an appreciation of their sameness of humanity.

Block’s theology of access then moves to identifying two pneumatological connections. One is to recognise that historically in the life of the church the Holy Spirit has been ‘the marginalised member of the Trinity’ and that this proves useful as a point of identification for those who experience marginalisation as a result of disability. The other connection is the role of the Holy Spirit as advocate and the particular resonance of that term within the disability rights movement.

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89 Block, *Copious Hosting*, p.132.
90 Block, *Copious Hosting*, pp.133-137.
92 Block, *Copious Hosting*, p.138.
The Holy Spirit’s role in Block’s fourth element, an inclusive ecclesiology, has been explored more widely in the disability theology literature. Yong, for example, writing specifically on disability-perspective ecclesiology, identifies the church as an inclusive fellowship of the Holy Spirit.\(^93\) This fellowship emerges from the experience at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh, including those with disabilities. From there Yong moves on to the Apostle Paul’s metaphorical body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, within which ‘the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable’ (verse 22). This is the hospitable body constituted by the Holy Spirit. Yong includes people with disabilities within this category of the weaker members. Although Paul’s rebuke was to the elite and is not directed at disability, Yong’s argument seems consistent with Paul’s rhetoric.\(^94\) Hauerwas puts the ecclesiological point even more strongly by suggesting that unless we have the most vulnerable and marginalised at the core of the church, it may simply not represent the body of Christ at all.\(^95\)

Block’s fifth and sixth elements of a theology of access are more responsive and echo aspects of the theme of theological anthropology explored above. The fifth is a ‘spirituality of friendship.’\(^96\) The argument is similar to that of Reinders already discussed, that the decision by those who do not see themselves as disabled to enter into unconditional friendship with those who have disabilities is what creates true hospitality and affirms human value. Whereas Reinders linked this theologically with the Atonement through seeing the cross as the ultimate demonstration of God’s gift of friendship, Block expresses friendship more subjectively as an experience of human solidarity. That solidarity emerges also from the sixth element, which is that of understanding human vulnerability as

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\(^93\) Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.201.

\(^94\) There is a variety of views as to what Paul meant by the “weaker members” of the body. Brock, for example, resists the view that it is a reference to internal organs, suggesting Paul is usurping typical practice of using the body as an analogy of empire, with a controlling inner organ: Brian Brock, ‘Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ’, *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15 (2011) 351-376 (pp.361-362) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2011.620389> [Accessed 24 May 2017].

\(^95\) Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, p.178.

\(^96\) Block, *Copious Hosting*, pp.160-166.
revealing the true condition of all humanity and therefore acting as a source of communion.\textsuperscript{97}

If Block’s approach here is indeed representative, then applying our hermeneutical key, it is clear that the arguments around of a theology of access interact little with the universality or particularity of the Atonement. They are based, rather, on the inclusiveness of the incarnation, Jesus’ ministry and the work of the Holy Spirit in forming the church; and in a response of friendship and the recognition of vulnerability. It is notable, however, that a common reflection in the literature on the practical outworking of a theology of access is to consider access to the celebration of the Eucharist as a central part of worship. For example, Block articulates this via a creative imagining of a Eucharistic celebration, wherein she asks: ‘Where is Tim Jackman, who uses a wheelchair and can’t get up those steps… Where is Miguel Gonzalez, who has cerebral palsy and drools, maybe even in the Eucharistic cup… Where is the Smith family and their two young autistic children?’\textsuperscript{98}

There is no suggestion that somehow non-participation in the Eucharist by those with disabilities denies them the benefits of the Atonement, or that in some sense they do not require those benefits (albeit that the contention within this thesis is that this has not yet been explored adequately). However, the fact that those with disabilities find the celebration of the Eucharist to be, in Eiesland’s words ‘a ritual of exclusion and degradation’\textsuperscript{99} implies something, perhaps rather subtle, about unexamined attitudes within the church at large to the relevance of the Atonement to the lived experience of disability, as well as the significance to those with disabilities of the intimate connection with the embodied particularity of the Atonement that the Eucharistic celebration affords.

Gillibrand adds one of the closest connections to the Atonement in this regard. He suggests that on the cross all the apparent ability, gifting and purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry end in a death which seems pointless and that at that moment

\textsuperscript{97} Block, \textit{Copious Hosting}, p.157.
\textsuperscript{98} Block, \textit{Copious Hosting}, p.115.
\textsuperscript{99} Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God}, p.113.
‘meaning and meaninglessness are fused.’\textsuperscript{100} This allows Gillibrand to see in his son’s disability (autism) both a meaninglessness and at the same time profound meaning in a connection between salvation and vulnerability, which adds impetus to his concern for access, in particular in his son’s case to the connection provided through participation in the Eucharist.

**Disability perspective hermeneutics**

The third major theme of disability theology identified above is disability perspective hermeneutics. According to Reynolds, the reading of Scripture without an awareness of a normative bias, can prove oppressive to people with disabilities in several ways. It can denigrate disability as being in some way indicative of moral failure; or it can trivialise it by rendering those with disabilities nothing more than an illustrative cipher for the better understanding of the Gospel by those without disabilities; or it can present those with disabilities either as the grateful recipients of goodwill or as valiant sufferers.\textsuperscript{101} However, the task of redressing these outcomes faces substantial challenges. Amos Yong observes that one of the challenges is that we cannot assume that either in biblical times or throughout much of the history of the church there has been an understanding of disability similar to that of today.\textsuperscript{102}

Another challenge is that Scripture presents something of a mixed message on disability. Two comparisons illustrate this. In the Exodus account God makes it clear to Moses that God himself is the source of disability and ability alike (Exodus 4:11), implying perhaps that neither should be denigrated, and yet soon after we read that those with various impairments are barred by the Torah from presenting the priestly offering by fire (Leviticus 21:16-23). In John’s gospel Jesus warns the man healed by the pool not to sin lest something worse happen to him (John 5:14), seeming to link sin to the lameness from which the man has been cured.

\textsuperscript{100} Gillibrand, *Disabled Church - Disabled Society*, p.104.

\textsuperscript{101} Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.34.

\textsuperscript{102} Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, p.6.
and yet later, in the case of the man blind from birth, Jesus explicitly dissociates his blindness from sin (John 9:2-3). As Eiesland observes, the biblical account has Jesus seeming both to support and to contradict a causal link between sin and disability.103

Yong provides a good example of how a disability-perspective hermeneutic often proceeds. He suggests three hermeneutical elements to guide this reading. To summarise, these are that: (i) people with disabilities are created in the image of God; (ii) people with disabilities are people first, and are not defined by their disability; and (iii) disability is neither evil nor necessarily to be eliminated.104 Yong makes this last point particularly strongly in considering how our reading of Scripture might affect our view of situations in life where the condition regarded as a disability is intimately bound up in a person’s identity. His example, from his own family experience, is Down Syndrome, which is a chromosomal condition, and therefore part of a person’s genetic make-up. To eliminate the condition of Down Syndrome would seem to eliminate the person. Armed with hermeneutical principles of this sort, Yong and others revisit passages of Scripture containing people with disabilities, rediscovering them as complex characters of narrative depth and importance.

A distinction should also be drawn between the search for a hermeneutical approach from a disability perspective described here and work on the connection between disability studies and biblical studies. In pursuing the former, the latter are essential as they seek to understand the way that disability is perceived by the biblical authors and to locate their presentation, and what can be discerned about the presumptions behind it, within ideas about disability and illness in their ancient near east time, geography and culture.105 Armed with those insights, the hermeneutical challenge is to make sense of the biblical narrative from a present-day disability perspective.

103 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p.72.
104 Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, p.13.
Having made these general observations we can ask what account of the Atonement and its claims comes into view in a disability-perspective hermeneutic. The first, as observed in relation to theological anthropology, is in a disability-perspective reading of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus - part of the “disabled God” approach. The theological focus is on a revelation of solidarity, rather than on how the universal ontological change brought about by the Atonement, the substance of White’s large claim, relates to the circumstances or lived experience of those with disabilities.

John Hull, a theologian who became blind during his lifetime, adds a further layer of identification to reading the accounts of the cross and the wounds: he suggests that when, in the approach to the crucifixion, Jesus was blindfolded by his tormentors (Luke 22:64) he entered the condition of blindness, enabling people who are blind to identify with the passion of Jesus.\(^{106}\) While this approach is undoubtedly helpful to many in their personal reflection on Jesus’ passion, a note of hermeneutical caution is raised by McCloughry and Morris in their review of disability theology and attitudes in church life. They resist what they see as the temptation ‘to manipulate the facts of the life of Jesus’\(^{107}\) to enable identification with particular groups. Their caution resonates with the argument in chapter 2 above concerning the difficulties encountered when an attempt is made to separate out a discrete category of disability for theological consideration. Jesus lived his own limited life in a particular place and time, but should be seen as representative of all humanity through the incarnation and the embodied nature of the Atonement. In this case perhaps the approach of Tan as noted above, tracing God’s connection with disability through his willing embrace of incarnation as a whole, is the more helpful hermeneutical tool.

The second intersection with the Atonement is in the reading of the healing narratives in the gospel accounts. In those accounts it is not uncommon for Jesus


to appear to link healing with faith and salvation. A comparison from Luke illustrates the point. In Luke 7:50 Jesus says to a woman who had led a dissolute life, but demonstrates repentance, “your faith has saved you”. In Luke 18:42 Jesus uses the very same phrase to a blind beggar whose sight he has restored. Marshall calls this wording a ‘formula’, but here translates the Greek word σέσωκέν as ‘healed’.\textsuperscript{108} The use of the same phrase in the two situations appears deliberate in Luke.

However, the aims of a disability-perspective reading of Scripture tend to include arguing against any causal connection between sin and either disability or sickness (what might be called a “sin model of disability”) and instead drawing a distinction between the curing of sickness and the holistic healing and restoration of the whole person. This also involves eliminating, or at least reducing, the connection that Jesus might appear to be making between the healing he is instigating in the present and the benefits of the Atonement he would soon enact. Yong makes the point emphatically: even in the case of the man born blind in John chapter 9, it can appear that, if God is to be glorified in the healing, this reinforces the unspoken belief that God cannot be glorified in the disability, and also suggests strongly that only able-bodied (in this case sighted) people can be true followers of Jesus.\textsuperscript{109} The manoeuvre undertaken is to play down the emphasis on curing of medical conditions and to emphasise the holistic restoration of the individual and their reintegration into the community. Yong claims that only sometimes is the gospel emphasis on cure, but always people are made whole in a much wider sense.

Broadly two things emerge in applying the hermeneutical key to current disability perspective hermeneutics. One is that the reading of the particularity of the cross and resurrection narratives emphasises their embodied and revelatory aspects, much as observed in relation to theological anthropology above. The other is that, to the extent that the gospel healing narratives point forward to the Atonement,

\textsuperscript{109} Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, p.53.
current disability perspective reading avoids the universal element, which would identify a miraculous cure as presaging ontological change, to be brought about by the Atonement. Rather, it identifies a more subjective outworking in the restoring of the individual’s sense of self and acceptance in society in those narratives. This in turn points to the creation (certainly eschatologically, but also at least in part in the present) of a truly hospitable community as a work of the Holy Spirit, through the renewing of attitudes in response to the Christ event as a whole.

Disability perspective soteriology

The last of the four main themes of disability theology identified above is that of disability soteriology. Although there is not yet an extensive body of literature directly addressing the relationship between disability and the Atonement, there are contributions towards what in a broader sense might be called a disability perspective on God's saving work, and that are clearly relevant to this thesis. Four approaches are reviewed here, with a view to identifying what sort of account of the Atonement each presents, or appears to incorporate.

Salvation as worth

David Pailin writes on the Atonement in the light of his encounter with the life of a young child, Alex, who was born with a range of severely disabling conditions and whose life was very short as a result. Pailin, writing from a process theology point of view, had intended at the time to expand on the idea that God saves by in some manner preserving within himself a memory of the ‘values that are achieved’ in the world. However, he came to recognise that such a concept appeared elitist in the context of someone like Alex, whose contribution in those terms, rooted in achievement, seemed so limited. Pailin makes the point, echoed in the work of others, such as Reinders, that profound disability requires us to reconsider our soteriology (as indeed it does other elements of our main account of God).

110 Pailin, A Gentle Touch, p.3.
Pailin concludes that ideas of being “saved from” something by a saviour, who requires our acknowledgement, should be rejected and instead that salvation is experienced through one’s worth and significance being demonstrated by others.\textsuperscript{111} This, he says, is a prime calling of the church and can be experienced by all people, including someone like Alex. Applying our hermeneutical key, Pailin has moved quite deliberately away from any account of an objective achievement of the Atonement, focusing instead on the subjective changes in perceptions and behaviour brought about by what God reveals to us through disability. Also, although the embodied facts of disability are crucial for Pailin’s presentation, he does not link those explicitly to the embodiment of God’s initiative of Atonement in the particularity of Jesus’ crucified or resurrected body.

**Salvation as pneumatological transformation**

There are some parallels between Pailin and Amos Yong’s more detailed systematic approach to a disability soteriology. Yong develops an overarching approach to his proposed disability-perspective systematic theology which he calls “emergentist”. This approach draws on the philosophical idea of emergence: that, for example, the range of human experience, properties and abilities depends on the physical components and processes of our brains, but cannot be reduced to those components and processes. Rather, we are more than the sum of the parts, though each of the parts is essential.\textsuperscript{112} Yong’s suggestion is that, following this principle, salvation ought to emerge in all elements of life: embodied, social, political, geographical and inter-relational, and should involve body, mind, will and habits. Salvation involves all of these, but is irreducible to any subset of them. Within this scheme, Yong locates the redemptive power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in their revelation of God and of his identification with human vulnerability. He also suggests, in parallel, that the lived experience of disability acts in an analogous way to help us to understand this redemptive power of the

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\textsuperscript{111} Pailin, *A Gentle Touch*, pp.128, 135.
cross. In other words there is a two-way revelation of great value and richness at work here.

However, from that point on Yong presents salvation as a pneumatological accomplishment. It is ‘the transformative work of the Spirit of God’, which affects all areas of human life and moves us away from sin and alienation towards reconciliation and peace. Important to Yong’s argument is that this pneumatological salvation is experienced subjectively in the present by people anywhere on a spectrum of ability. Like Pailin, he is critical of approaches which intellectualise access to the benefits of this salvation in terms of “believing and confessing”, and which seem to put it beyond the reach of many. That question is pushed slightly further by Gillibrand, who asks what the Atonement means for his son, Adam, mentioned above. Gillibrand cannot identify an occasion when Adam has intentionally done what is wrong, but is wary of suggesting he is innocent and not in need of some aspect of the Atonement, as that would seem to ‘compromise a fundamental a priori of soteriology.’ One might add to this that such a suggestion that a person with disabilities is unable to sin also suggests, rather subtly, that that person is not fully human. Gillibrand does not resolve the tension.

Yong’s account of the Atonement is therefore a combination of a revelation of God’s solidarity with impaired humanity, together with a work of the Holy Spirit, enabling subjective changes in response. The soteriological weight of this approach therefore again leans away from the objective ontological change of White’s large claim, albeit drawing from the embodiment of the Atonement in the person of Jesus in a more direct way than is found in Pailin.

**Salvation as God’s double reparation**

A rather different approach to a disability-perspective soteriology is taken by Frances Young. Her analysis is much more directly concerned with what happens

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113 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, pp.176-180.
114 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.229.
115 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.234.
116 Gillibrand, *Disabled Church - Disabled Society*, pp.146-147.
at the cross than are the two approaches already noted. Young identifies a pattern in her experience of life with her disabled son, Arthur, which she also finds deeply embedded in Scripture - that of hope within despair and trouble. She suggests that the event of the Atonement, and its achievements, must be understood through that pattern as well, in that one of the main purposes of the Atonement is to render that pattern, and particularly the hope within it, credible.\(^\text{117}\)

To this end, she suggests that the objective aspect of the Atonement comprises a ‘double reparation’ at the cross. On one side of this reparation, the person of Jesus, as our representative, makes a perfect sacrifice of obedience, of which we can take advantage, and that deals with sin and restores relationships with God. On the other side of this reparation God takes responsibility for what Young calls the ‘gone-wrongness’ of creation.\(^\text{118}\) This state of creation exists because in the act of creating, God to an extent withdrew himself from creation, otherwise creation would just be more of God. That has allowed a world of imperfection and fragility, including accidents and disability, all of which God allows himself to be held accountable for by being present at the cross. This double reparation, which Young feels objectively renders hope credible, also has a subjective element, in the form of human response and experience, which in the case of Arthur is how salvation would most readily appear: ‘welcoming acceptance into a loving and supportive community which fully affirms him as essential to its being, in other words, incorporation into the body of Christ.’\(^\text{119}\) Young’s account does not insist on Arthur’s disabilities being eliminated as a result of the Atonement, because she sees them as part of who he is.

Applying our hermeneutical key, it is clear that Young’s account of the Atonement deliberately retains both the universal and the particular. She pushes the boundary of White’s large claim with her proposal that the objective achievement of the cross not only involves God’s dealing effectively with the consequences of


\(^{118}\) Young, *Arthur’s Call*, p.119.

Part 2: Chapter 3: The account of the Atonement in current Disability Theology

sin (here through a mainly sacrificial interpretation), but includes his taking responsibility for the way the world is in a broader sense.

**Salvation and the elimination of disability**

Not all those writing out of experience of disability agree with the lines of argument presented so far, none of which links disability to moral sin or insists on its elimination. A very different approach is adopted by Barton Gould in two papers approaching the nature of salvation from both theological and philosophical standpoints. It should be acknowledged that his view is less common in what would be regarded as disability theology literature, but the fact that he is engaging directly with that literature makes him an interesting contrast. Gould argues, against Amos Yong in particular, in favour of what he calls an elimination view of salvation.\(^{120}\) This is that all disabilities are healed, or eliminated “in heaven”, by which he means all people ultimately having typical mental and physical functionality as part of God’s restoration of all things. A fundamental assertion in Gould’s argument is that disability is one of the various effects of the Fall. It is a direct result of sin (though not of the sin of the person with the disability) and when sin and death are defeated by God in Christ, disability must be eliminated, otherwise evil would remain permanently alongside God.\(^ {121}\)

Drawing on his experience with his son, David, who has significant cognitive impairment, Gould expands his basic point by arguing that this has denied David some of what he sees as the objective goods for life of which his examples are: ‘personal relationships, productive activity, financial independence, and individual autonomy.’\(^ {122}\) By this measure, if life enabled by such things is good, then disabilities which work against them are objectively bad and as such are to be eliminated in the age to come. The fact that someone with a disability is content is

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not taken as a sufficient argument against this, since, Gould argues, the person (as they should be absent the effects of the Fall) can be conceived of separately from the condition in making this assessment.

Whether one has a relatively static idea of “heaven” (the contemplation of God, which Gould finds in Thomas Aquinas for example), or an active view where there is a joining in with the activity of God and constant new discovery (which he finds in Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of epektasis and more recently in NT Wright), Gould argues that in order to participate in this we must have typical function, particularly intellectual function.\textsuperscript{123} In response to the objection that this could render an individual unrecognisably different from the person who has lived this life, Gould suggests that post-resurrection there might be a gradual developing of these functions. For example, where Frances Young objected that her son Arthur has missed out on a whole life of development,\textsuperscript{124} Gould would conjecture that this life experience, together with physical and cognitive function, is gradually filled in.\textsuperscript{125}

It seems that Gould is guided by an assumption (which he does not critique) that participation in the age to come ought to be modelled on participation in this life. His analysis is also notably individualistic. There is no exploration of the possibility that “typical” functionality might be measured at a corporate level and thus include a wide range of ability within what is typical for a broad group of people. Whereas Yong’s vision appears to be of all societal and attitudinal barriers eliminated to allow participation just as we are, Gould’s does not accept that that constitutes full participation unless all are also brought to typical function by the elimination of all impairment.

Applying the hermeneutical key, the account of the Atonement reflected in Gould’s elimination soteriology reflects very strongly the objective, effective dealing with sin that White is looking for. It does so because of a conviction that disability stems from the Fall and is therefore bound up with sin. Because the focus of Gould’s articles is on the state of things “in heaven”, it is perhaps unfair to try to

\textsuperscript{124} Young, \textit{God’s Presence}, p.107.
read from them what he would say of the subjective impact of the Atonement in this life. Gould’s discussion also mostly concerns the content of the universal claim of the Atonement, rather than its pivoting on the particularity of the cross and resurrection. Indeed, he regards as counterproductive approaches such as the suggestion that the wounds on the resurrected body of Jesus should be interpreted as a revelation of God’s solidarity with impaired humanity.\(^{126}\)

It is clear that in most respects Gould’s approach is at odds with those emerging more widely in the disability theology literature. For example, two of the objectives of disability theology have been to move away from a link between disability and sin, and to move away from the idea that God’s intention is ultimately that human beings should be normalised, in line with a “typical” embodiment. Because Gould’s elimination view, though engaged with the literature, stands so clearly apart from it, in drawing some conclusions about the account of the Atonement in disability theology he will for the moment be set to one side. However, because he illustrates so well the challenge of deciding what should govern a soteriological account that engages fully with disability, his approach will be brought back into the discussion in chapter 8\(^{127}\) when considering how the Atonement can play a more foundational role in disability theology as a whole.

**Conclusion**

This chapter set out to review current disability theology literature with a view to identifying the account of the Atonement that emerges within it, or that appears to inform or shape it. Applying White’s challenge of the universality and particularity of the Atonement as a hermeneutical tool for interrogating the major themes of disability theology has brought to light a number of observations. These are important both in identifying areas where disability theology might be enriched by further engagement with the Atonement, and in identifying some of the concerns arising out of disability theology that ought to inform the way our theology of the

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\(^{127}\) Page 222.
Atonement is understood and expressed. These observations are summarised here, first concerning the particularity of the Atonement, then its universality.

The particularity of the Atonement, that it is embodied in the concrete person and lived experience of the one person, Jesus Christ, has been found to be the greater part of disability theology’s account of, and interaction with, the Atonement. This arises from an emphasis within disability theology on approaching theological questions in a way that is above all coherent with lived, embodied, human experience. The following observations contribute to this:

- that both the crucified and the resurrected Christ (and in particular his crucified body and resurrected body) provide a revelation of God’s identification with all humanity and humanity’s impairments; also that Jesus’ willingness to go to the cross is the most profound demonstration of God’s unconditional friendship towards humanity, that friendship being where the value of humanity can be said to reside;

- that disability itself (disabled bodies and their lived experience) is a revelation of: (i) the fact that vulnerability and dependence on God is the true state of all humanity; (ii) the corporate nature of the person of Jesus; and (iii) through our ambiguous response to disability, an aspect of our need for the Atonement;

- that the particularity of the embodied Atonement (crucifixion and resurrection) is a challenge to the idea of salvation as the homogenisation, or “normalisation” of bodies and minds in conformity to a “typical” pattern;

- that inclusion in the Eucharist is important as an intimate point of connection with the embodied particularity of the Atonement.

Turning to the universality of the Atonement claim, in terms of its achieving an objective cosmic reconciliation and dealing effectively with sin, this has been found not to be a concept so much explored or utilised across current disability theology (setting Gould aside for a moment). Perhaps not surprisingly, what might be called the subjective aspects of the Atonement have been found to speak more
directly to the concerns of disability theology. At the heart of this is the observation that to be meaningful, the effects of the Atonement must have some purchase on experience in the present, in the form of reformed attitudes and removed barriers to participation. Yong identifies this as the transformative work of the Spirit of God and his creation of the church as a hospitable and inclusive community. In other words, the universal claim of cosmic reconciliation appears in current disability theology mostly in the form of a call for new action as evidence of a response to the grace of God demonstrated to the world through Jesus Christ.

Although the term “subjective” is used here to make the distinction, the changes sought by disability theology are not devoid of an objective element. One can point to new action as evidence of actual objective change in the people involved. However, the emphasis is much less on talk of the Atonement dealing effectively with sin and bringing about an ontological change in the relationship between God and creation, or humanity. Nonetheless, White would more likely characterise this as a quiet ignoring of the objective aspects of the Atonement because of the pressures identified in chapter 1. Possibly the strongest evidence for that is in disability perspective readings of the healing narratives in the Gospels. Here there is a distinct focus on the present holistic and societal restoration of the individual and almost a rejection of interpreting these events as miraculous cures which presage an objective universal change soon to be wrought through the cross and resurrection.

The interaction of the themes of disability theology with the Atonement identified here begins to point towards the challenges that disability raises for an account of the Atonement. While it might be suggested that the more subjective emphasis in disability theology arises just from discomfort in placing the words “sin” and “disability” in close proximity, this seems inadequate as an explanation. What seems to underlie the discussion is the sense that there is much in the experience of life that is not as we would like it to be, and yet which falls outside an analysis just based on sin as moral wrongdoing. Frances Young begins to address this in

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128 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.201.
her suggestion that the Atonement involved a form of double reparation at the cross. This and the wider challenges emerging here are returned to in chapter 5 below. Before that, the next chapter will examine ideas of Atonement and the language used to express them. That will enable the present interaction of those ideas with the themes of disability theology examined here to be elucidated more fully and the question of how that interaction might be made more effective to be explored.
Chapter 4

Ideas of Atonement within the Western Christian theological tradition

Introduction

The above discussion has used the hermeneutical key developed in chapter 1, of White's large claim of a universal, cosmic reconciliation, balanced on the narrow, particular pivot of the cross, to identify what account of the Atonement arises within the major themes of current disability theology. The next task is to consider various ways in which the Western Christian tradition has come to express its understanding of how the substance of that large claim has been effected by God through the cross, and the concepts on which those expressions have drawn. The purpose of this examination is two-fold. Firstly it should allow examination of how those concepts interact with the elements of the Atonement discovered within current disability theology in the previous chapter. Secondly it should provide the background for a disability-perspective critique of existing accounts of the Atonement.

This present task inevitably entails visiting what are variously called theories, models, or metaphors of the Atonement. Doing so soon demonstrates the need to bring some discipline to the language being used. For example, there is some overlap in the literature between what seems to be a model (or theory) of the Atonement (for example, sacrifice, justice or victory) and what looks more like an achievement, or outcome of the Atonement (for example, forgiveness, restoration propitiation or establishment of a new covenant). Similarly, the words “model”, “theory” and “metaphor” are used by different writers to mean sometimes the same thing, and sometimes different things. Achieving a level of clarity requires some attention to be paid to the use of language and in particular to what is meant by the terms model, theory or metaphor and the work that we expect those terms to do when we are speaking of the Atonement.
It is evident from the review in chapter 3 above that disability theology has not to
date strongly adopted any of the more commonly referenced Atonement models or
theories considered here. That observation in itself points towards an uneasiness
with what those models or theories seem to communicate, and hence the
importance of considering whether, and if so how, they can function as
explanations of the Atonement for humanity which includes the full range of ability
and disability. The approach here will be to consider the debate around the
Atonement in more recent times; to look closely at the language that is typically
applied in explanations of the Atonement, with a view to arriving at a disciplined
approach to using that language; and on that basis to set out a framework of what
appear to be the prevailing models, their logic, and the resulting benefits of the
Atonement that they present. That should enable a more detailed comparison in
chapter 5 between Atonement and disability theologies.

A note on models and creeds

A useful observation might be made before embarking on these tasks. In the case
of, for example, Christology, the starting point for discussion could be a creedal
statement such as the definition of Christ emerging from the Council of Chalcedon
in 451AD. However, in the case of soteriology there has been no similar
development of creedal statements defining the relationship between the death
and resurrection of Jesus and the salvation it brings. McIntyre, in his review (see
below), offers two possible reasons for this. It might be because for a long time
there was no significant heresy surrounding the Atonement to be refuted, as there
was in Christology, and hence no pressure to undertake the work of developing
a creedal statement as a defence of orthodoxy. Alternatively (or perhaps
additionally) he suggests that the lack of soteriological theory could stem from the
practice of the Eucharist. The drama of the Atonement is acted out, with
accompanying liturgical statements, each time the Eucharist is celebrated.

129 See for example the Christological definition and its background in: R.V. Sellers, The Council of
130 John McIntyre, The Shape of Soteriology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), pp.15-16.
Moreover, it is celebrated as something received from Jesus himself. Thus soteriology becomes something we do, not just something we describe. McIntyre’s observation that ‘the plebs Dei felt themselves to be under no constraint to investigate the matter in theological detail’ is perhaps worth heeding, should there be a temptation to make too much of our soteriological theory, or to crown one model of the Atonement over others.

Debating the Atonement

Chapter 1 located this study within the current lively debate around the meaning of the Atonement and mentioned relevant recent publications. The intention is not to offer detailed critique of the approach of any one theologian, but rather to review examples of the debate that give a sense of the main ways in which understandings of the Atonement have been, and continue to be, expressed. This section will begin that review by considering the continuing influence of what is often referred to as the “three-fold typology” of Atonement theories. It will then look at attempts to embrace a much broader range of ideas attached to the Atonement, before considering contributors whose focus is on the nature of the truth claims that such ideas are thought to make. At this stage the terms “model”, “theory” and “metaphor”, mentioned in the introduction above, will be used rather interchangeably, as they are applied by the writers. Having opened up this material, the next section will use it to bring more order to its use of language and concepts, preparing the ground for bringing what can seem an unwieldy set of ideas into more constructive conversation with disability theology.

A three-fold typology?

One of the clearest continuing influences on the present discussion can be attributed to Gustaf Aulén and his 1931 book Christus Victor. Aulén made it clear that he saw his task as re-establishing an understanding of the Atonement as the victory of Christ over evil powers in the world as the one pre-eminent

131 McIntyre, Shape of Soteriology, p.10.
understanding, true to the early church, what he called the “classic” idea of the Atonement.\footnote{Gustaf Aulén, \textit{Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement}, trans. by A.G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1931) pp.20-23.} Aulén argued that three main types of the idea of the Atonement had developed over time (which has come to be referred to as his three-fold typology). The classic idea of the victory of Christ, which he maintained ‘emerges with Christianity itself’,\footnote{Aulén, \textit{Christus Victor}, p.160.} was usurped in the Middle Ages by the “objective” idea, attributed to Anselm of Canterbury, though building on earlier ideas from Tertullian and Cyprian. This was the legal idea of the Atonement as Christ’s offering of satisfaction in legal terms for the guilt of human sin, which has dishonoured God. The leaders of the Reformation, many of whom were lawyers, introduced a more contractual sense of the law from their own era, but retained the sense of an objective forensic accomplishment, disliked by Aulén.

Alongside this idea, Aulén identified the “subjective” idea of the Atonement. Here the cross is a demonstration of the love of God that engenders, by its profound example, a response of change in the hearts of humankind. Though Aulén related this to the work of Anselm’s contemporary, Peter Abelard (discussed further below), he attributed it as much to the influence of the Enlightenment and liberal Protestantism.\footnote{Aulén, \textit{Christus Victor}, p.149.} These objective and subjective accounts together were what Aulén called the “traditional account” of the Atonement, against which he sought to re-establish his classic idea.

A gathering of theories

Aulén’s three-fold typology has continued to function as a starting point for more contemporary debate. However, a brief review of Old and New Testament texts wherein God addresses sin and the human predicament quickly uncovers a much wider range of images and language than can readily be accommodated by Aulén’s typology. This has become reflected in a preference for a wider range of suggested theories, models or metaphors. John McIntyre provides an example. He sets himself the task of determining the logic by which a broad set (which he
Part 2: Chapter 4: Ideas of Atonement within the Western Christian theological tradition

calls the models of soteriology)\textsuperscript{135} operate and how they relate to one another. McIntyre identifies the following as models: ransom, redemption, salvation, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, atonement, reconciliation, victory, penalty, satisfaction, example and liberation. This is an impressive list, moving well beyond a three-fold typology, and many of these terms are explored in greater detail later in this thesis, as is McIntyre’s proposal as to the logic of how they relate to one another.

However, the list itself illustrates a point made in the introduction above. All of these terms are treated similarly by McIntyre as models, but all do not seem to operate at the same level, or perform the same soteriological function. The term “sacrifice”, for example, represents a whole system of activity, drawn from Old Testament practices, which, as McDonald also observes in his review, provided an objective atonement for sin and reconciliation of the relationship between the individual and God or between the company of worshippers and God.\textsuperscript{136} In this description it seems that sacrifice provides a broad context for thinking about the death of Christ on the cross, whereas, say, atonement (used here in the specific Leviticus 4 sense of a sin-offering) and reconciliation seem to speak of particular outcomes that Christ’s death achieves.

Schmiechen (1992) and Pugh (2014) provide more recent examples of attempts to organise and interpret a diversity of theories and ideas: on the one hand to understand historically the various contributions that have resulted in such a range of theories; on the other hand, while not smoothing out their differences, to place them within a framework that shows how they connect to one another.

Schmiechen selects ten theories and argues that each has arisen out of the context of the theologians whom he presents as its proponents. The importance of this is that each theory, while it is an attempt a ‘an internally coherent explanation of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection’\textsuperscript{137} with a sense of completeness

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{135} McIntyre, \textit{Shape of Soteriology}, p.26.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{137} Peter Schmiechen, \textit{Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p.5.}
to it, nonetheless has more immediate relevance in some circumstances than in others. A declaration of liberation, for example, speaks more to a person labouring under a sense of oppressive evil than a declaration that the honour of God has been satisfied. Schmiechen uses this emphasis on context to propose links between how the Atonement is understood theologically and the forms that the church has variously taken under that influence. It is therefore a theological and ecclesiological analysis.

This approach of emphasising context in discerning which theory is preferred (and which form of church results) raises an important question for the conversation with disability theology. There is a potential danger of reinforcing a view of disability, in all its variety, as a special case outside of “typical” humanity. The task could easily become one of finding which model or theory particularly appeals in the context of particular disability, rather than asking the deeper question of whether our main account of the Atonement (which each of the models or theories partly describes) is capable of encompassing all of humanity inclusive of disability.

Pugh’s approach, in contrast, has been to offer an historical analysis (involving, not surprisingly, much the same cast of characters as in McIntyre and Schmiechen) of how each strand of Atonement thinking has developed over time so that the reader has a sense of how we arrived at the current mixture of ideas. His objective within this exercise is also to form a judgement as to which theories are more convincing. To do so Pugh seeks what he calls the pole of each theory.  

Some have a theological pole in that they really say something about God and God’s issues, such as penal substitution. Others have an anthropological pole, with a focus on human, or ethical, response, such as a subjective account often attributed to Abelard. Others have a demonological pole (Christus Victor) or a soteriological one (such as Calvin and Luther with their emphasis on justification).  

138 Pugh, Atonement Theories, pp.162-164.

139 Pugh also includes the idea of recapitulation, or the reversal of the sin of Adam, favoured by Irenaeus, whereby Jesus goes over all the ground on which Adam, and we, have failed and remains faithful. Pugh suggests that this is a form of Christus Victor. The recapitulation idea seems less prevalent in more recent debate. Wiles includes it in his review, but concludes that it only remains relevant as long as the sin of Adam is conceived as a particular historical event with
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satisfying those with a Christological pole, which place together the work of Christ (what was achieved through the cross) with the person of Christ and the drama of the gospel accounts and which do not present the work as an abstract idea dealing mostly with God or with humanity.

Reviews of the sort illustrated briefly here are instructive and demonstrate the range of ideas available and how they relate to one another. However, they also leave the impression of a fragmented field of discussion, raising the question of how such a seemingly scattered debate might be brought, in an orderly way, into more constructive conversation with the themes of disability theology identified in chapter 3.

What sort of truth is this?

Another facet of the debate around how we speak of the Atonement is a focus on the sort of truth or meaning the accounts of the cross and resurrection in the gospels, and the commentary thereon in the rest of the New Testament, should be thought to contain. The significance of this for the present thesis is that it might indicate what sort of response can be expected to be found in Atonement theology to the insights and concerns raised by disability theology.

A substantial work often quoted in more recent discussion is that from 1968 by FW Dillistone. Dillistone reviews ideas of victory, law (whether guilt, satisfaction or penalty) and subjective response, familiar from the above lists. He also adds more imaginative formulations, such as the cross as the supreme tragedy, the eternal sacrifice (though not one related particularly to the Levitical code), and the heroic final Word of reconciliation in the face of destruction. Dillistone argues that we can only connect the idea of God’s dealing with human alienation from himself through

universal ramifications, reversed by the parallel particular historical event of the cross. In more recent times, when Adam is regarded more as an incisive description of the human predicament, dealing with the pervasiveness of sin, the need to link two particular historical events falls away (a view with which Vernon White agrees). See: Maurice Wiles, The Remaking of Christian Doctrine (London: SCM Press, 1974), pp.62-68; and White, Atonement and Incarnation, p.26.
the events of the cross and resurrection via such theories, each of which is ‘an imaginative pattern of comparison’\textsuperscript{140} which links the two.

He then makes a specific claim about the nature of truth or meaning carried by the theories: that they correspond to one of two patterns found in human life. We might see in Jesus’ experience the pattern of our common human experience of suffering. Alternatively, in Jesus’ overcoming what we cannot overcome we might see the pattern of individual achievement. In addressing each of his theories, Dillistone looks for these two patterns across ancient thought, in drama, literature, Christian thinking and wider human philosophy. In this way, for Dillistone the Atonement seems to operate as an ultimate analogy of the truths encountered with human experience. He does not deny the objective initiative of God through the cross, nor the language that has been used to describe it. However, his intention is to demonstrate how the cross addresses the depth and breadth of concerns and hopes that already arise in human experience and thinking, and that it should therefore appear reasonable and relevant to us in the present age.

A very different approach is taken by Colin Gunton, writing in response to what he sees as the debilitating effects of Enlightenment thinking on Christian confidence in the Atonement. On the one hand there had arisen a suspicion of claims that pictorial or metaphorical language can convey any actual truth at all. On the other hand, there was also direct attack on the idea of the need for any Atonement, which had its roots in, for example, Kant’s suggestion that God has become not the source of human freedom, but a threat to that freedom, or even its enemy. On that account, what is called salvation becomes something alien, imposed unwanted on humanity from outside.\textsuperscript{141} Similarly to White and his comments about Hick, Gunton is unimpressed by responses to this from a more liberal theological standpoint by the likes of Schleiermacher, who retreats from biblical Atonement language to speak of ‘inner human transformation’.\textsuperscript{142} Gunton laments the lack of robust theological response and within that there is perhaps an implied

\textsuperscript{140} F.W. Dillistone, \textit{The Christian Understanding of Atonement} (Welwyn: James Nisbet, 1968), p.27 (italics original).
\textsuperscript{141} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, pp.7-8.
\textsuperscript{142} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.16.
criticism of Dillistone’s earlier attempt to locate the meaning of the cross within human experience and philosophy. He is also unconvinced by more conservative responses that insist solely on a penal substitution understanding of the Atonement.\textsuperscript{143}

Instead, Gunton’s contribution here is to reassert that objective truth is indeed conveyed by the whole range of biblical metaphorical language used for the Atonement. Such metaphors (Gunton uses this term rather than “models” or “theories”) should, he claims, be taken from the New Testament, where they are already being used theologically.\textsuperscript{144} The three chief metaphors Gunton identifies are victory, justice and sacrifice. Victory he accepts as useful because it presents the Atonement as drama, rather than as a transaction. Justice is also useful, but can go astray when it becomes too individualistic, or when we lose sight of the fact that biblical justice concerns the covenant with God, rather than the Western idea of a transaction or contract.

For Gunton, however, the notion of sacrifice brings us closest to the heart of the matter, since it so directly addresses covenant, relationship and grace.\textsuperscript{145} In all of this, Gunton is also at pains to present the Atonement as a Trinitarian event whereby creation, incarnation, cross and resurrection, as works of Father and Son, all find ‘completion in the work of the Spirit who brings the Son’s work to perfection.’\textsuperscript{146} Gunton’s emphasis on understanding the ability of metaphorical language to convey truth is helpful in exploring the point made in relation to McIntyre above, that the various words and images used in relation to

\textsuperscript{143} Writing in 1988, Gunton here is perhaps referring indirectly to John Stott’s book \textit{The Cross of Christ}, published two years earlier and influential at a popular level. Stott presents penal substitution as the one governing model, based on the wrath of the sovereign God against human sin, coupled with the loving self-substitution of God on the cross to take the penalty for the related human guilt. Stott emphasises God’s self-substitution as a way of addressing criticism that this approach drives a wedge between God the Father and God the Son. In Stott’s scheme, any other image, model or language around the Atonement is subordinated to the forensic model of penal substitution. See, for example: John Stott, \textit{The Cross of Christ} (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.168.

\textsuperscript{144} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.48.

\textsuperscript{145} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.133.

\textsuperscript{146} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.154.
Atonement seem to operate at a variety of levels and do different work, which is developed further below.

A third example of exploring the truth claims carried by ideas of the Atonement is provided by Paul Fiddes, who has in his sights a particular question. Similarly to Vernon White in chapter 1, he asks how the single past event of the crucifixion, however we talk about it or understand it, can bring about salvation, and indeed transformation, in the here and now. His argument is that while the Atonement does need to deal with the sin and brokenness of the world in a universal objective sense, it also must have some purchase on the blight of sin in people’s lives in the present. Fiddes, like Gunton, considers that the ideas of sacrifice, victory and justice have become the broadly dominant models for speaking of what happened on the cross, but he finds all of these too objective and not convincingly related to a present experience of salvation. His contribution to the present discussion is therefore to require a better integration of these more objective accounts with the subjective element of salvation, being our experience of transformation in the present. However, rather than pursue is own philosophical mechanism as White does, Fiddes argues in favour of Peter Abelard’s understanding of the Atonement in terms of the moral influence of our encounter with it, which Fiddes calls the metaphor of a ‘healing act of love’.

Abelard has often been associated with a purely exemplarist view of the Atonement, that the exemplary life and self-sacrificial death of Jesus inspire a transformed way of living in his followers. In that form he has often been rejected, for example by Gunton, as being too vague on matters of substitution and sin. However, others have sought to rehabilitate Abelard in this regard. McGrath’s critique concludes that the strongly exemplarist proposal was in fact an Enlightenment manoeuvre, though it tended to cite Abelard as its source, or champion. Abelard’s point in his own writing was not that we are redeemed by Christ’s example, but that because Christ has redeemed us, our desire is to imitate

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him. Here McGrath reflects Weingard’s conclusion, in a detailed earlier study, that Abelard regarded the alienation between God and humanity as objectively real, and the Atonement as equally objectively real. Abelard steered away from theories of victory and satisfaction not because they were objective, but because they seemed to impose on God some sort of ‘alien necessity’ to act, whereas his objective action must surely be a manifestation of his own character of love. The result of encountering that love is that the individual is more fully bound to God and the reconciliation wrought by the Atonement ‘becomes manifest in the life of the redeemed.’

These discussions of the sort of truth that an account of the Atonement is expected to contain are important for this thesis. Some of the more subjective emphasis found in Dillistone and Fiddes seems readily to connect with the disability-perspective concerns indicated in chapter 3. But it also raises the challenge of whether theories or models used to describe a more objective Atonement can at the same time encompass those concerns.

Current state of the debate

In his introductory essay to the 2017 *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, Adam Johnson describes current movements in the debate outlined above. Part of this is a movement away from what he sees as rather caricatured treatment of Abelard and Anselm and their ideas of moral influence or satisfaction. There is also movement away from the sort of assumption that appears to be held by Aulén, at least as it comes across form *Christus Victor*, that there ought to be one main, or best, model or theory. There is also a movement towards expressing sacrifice less in terms of the taking on of a penalty and more in terms of cleansing from sin. He notes an openness to ideas of of theosis arising from Eastern

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Orthodox studies, as well as to insights from work on covenant and on feminist, womanist and non-violent critiques.

From the perspective of the current project, two points are notable from Johnson’s analysis. The first is that there is no mention of a disability perspective on the Atonement, either in his own discussion or in the large number of essays that follow. The second is that there remains little clarity as to what sort of thing a model, metaphor or theory is, when such is referred to by various scholars. One essay, by Oliver Crisp, does touch on that point, and is useful in embarking on the next section of this chapter.

Models and metaphorical language

The survey of the Atonement debate above raises the challenge of how to bring such a range of ways of talking of the Atonement into conversation with disability theology in an orderly way. In particular, there is a need for some order to be brought to bear on the use of terms such as “model”, “metaphor” and “theory”. In part this is so that the terms can be used with specific meanings to avoid confusion. More significantly, it is also to determine just what work the various terms are doing in helping to describe or explain White’s large claim and its relationship with the particular event of the death of a man called Jesus of Nazareth on a cross outside Jerusalem in the first century AD, as attested to by the gospel accounts.

Oliver Crisp's recent essay examines what he calls this methodological issue in discussing the Atonement. Crisp sets out to establish the way in which five different terms, which he identifies as: motif, metaphor, model, doctrine and theory are generally applied, and to discern how they interrelate. That essay again illustrates the challenge. However, Crisp’s suggested structure, which will be returned to in the light of the present discussion, seems complicated and difficult to

work with. The approach taken in this thesis will instead be to take a cue from Gunton and consider from a more fundamental starting point the way in which metaphorical language operates, and then use that to address the language structures used to speak of the Atonement. It is suggested that this provides a clear and straightforward way of bringing order and discipline to the use of language, enabling the conversation with disability theology and its insights to proceed effectively.

Metaphorical language

In a discussion about the logic and achievements of the Atonement we might first ask whether it is really necessary to speak in the indirect terms of models and metaphors at all. Is it not possible to present the workings of the Atonement in plain, literal terms, rather than resorting to the illustrative “picture” language of the Bible? If a literal presentation were sufficiently full and accurate, it would presumably rapidly make clear how disability did or did not fit into the Atonement, or at least into our current understanding of it.

According to Gunton, however, this very demand for literal language is part of the shrivelling of our thinking brought on by the Enlightenment. In fact indirect, metaphorical language is essential, since all of our knowledge of the world, and certainly of God, is indirect.155 This is the case in any field, including scientific advance, since advances in knowledge rely on changes in the meaning of words and the use of figures of speech to describe what has been discovered or what is being theorised. What matters is whether the language used ‘expresses human interaction with reality successfully (truthfully) or not.’156 All of such advances and expressions proceed by way of some form of comparison, which will tend to be called simile if explicit, or metaphor if implicit. Writing on the use of imagery in the Bible, Caird concludes that such comparison is ‘the main road from the known to the unknown.’157 And no special pleading is being made here for religious language, that somehow only religious metaphorical expressions are irreducible

155 Gunton, Actuality of Atonement, p.37.
156 Gunton, Actuality of Atonement, p.34.
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(cannot be replaced by literal language). Soskice maintains that there is an element of irreducibility in all metaphors, since any replacement with literal language involves some loss of meanings and associations. If these various assertions are correct, then it is not surprising that our understanding of White’s large claim and its narrow pivot have come through indirect language. It is important, then, to examine how that language operates in order to work with it effectively.

**How such language operates**

If indirect, metaphorical, language is necessary, how does it operate, both generally and in relation to talk of the Atonement? The discussion here draws particularly on work by Soskice, Ricoeur and McFague, all of whom rely at some point on principles set out by Max Black in the 1960s. It also makes use of the particular notion of calling the Atonement a sacrifice as a working example of such language.

Definition is not straightforward, but Soskice’s working definition of metaphor is a useful starting point, that ‘metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.’ For example, to refer to Jesus as “the lamb that was slain” would be to apply a metaphor in the manner described by Soskice. The way the metaphor conveys meaning is by drawing together two, possibly quite different, sets of associations. In our case, there is a set of associations around the person of Jesus, including what we know of his life, teaching, ministry, relationships, death and resurrection. At the same time there is a set of associations around the slaughter of a lamb, which includes its presumed innocence and meekness, the unavoidable violence in the shedding of its blood by another, its resulting death and the reasons for that death.

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159 Soskice, *Metaphor*, p.15 (italics original).
160 Soskice, *Metaphor*, p.49.
McFague stresses on this point that metaphor does not operate to dumb down a complicated idea, using another to make it accessible to the less sophisticated mind. The deeper insight comes as the two sets of associations are presented together.\(^{161}\) Ricoeur takes this further, pointing out that this richness of meaning is contributed by the tensions that exist within the comparison.\(^{162}\) There is tension inherent in the choice of subjects: Jesus is not a lamb and was not slaughtered in the way that a lamb would be. There is tension between the literal and metaphorical interpretations of the expression: we could take the comparison literally, which would make little sense beyond the fact that both have been killed, or metaphorically, which might reveal something more meaningful. Then there is tension in the level of correspondence between the subjects and their circumstances: Jesus may not be a lamb, but there is correspondence between the lamb and Jesus’ non-resistance, the shedding of his blood and the fact of his death, that opens up possibilities for the meaning of his death.

An important point for Atonement language emerges here, which McIntyre calls the positive and negative analogies within a metaphor.\(^{163}\) The positive analogy recognises the correspondence between the metaphor, in the present case the slain lamb, and the subject, Jesus. The negative analogy recognises the extent to which the two do not correspond. This is important in seeing the limits of the metaphor, but it also raises potentially fruitful questions about what lies beyond those limits. In using metaphoric language to talk of the Atonement, the negative analogy may indicate where some terms need to leave off and others take over the work.

The flow of meaning that takes place in the use of indirect language is not a one-way street. Gunton points out that when a metaphor is effective in describing an event such as the Atonement, it can affect the meaning of the metaphor in other usage.\(^{164}\) To talk of the death of Jesus in terms of the slaying of a lamb, drawing

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\(^{163}\) McIntyre, *Shape of Soteriology*, pp.75-78.

in associations with Old Testament sacrifice, affects how we go on to speak of sacrifice. Because we have drawn together sacrifice (something done to a lamb) with Jesus’ self-giving on the cross, the meaning of sacrifice might be extended to include not just the offering of an animal, but the giving of ourselves. Indeed Black suggests that this can go further and that, ironically, if a metaphor is too successful, the metaphorical use becomes literal. He wonders if this may be what happened in the past with the word “orange”. This perhaps points to a danger of using metaphorical language for the Atonement, that if successful we might begin to mistake metaphorical language for a literal description.

From metaphors to models

To work with biblical descriptions of the Atonement, a further step is required. This is from metaphors, which in a sense are momentary figures of speech, to models, which Barbour describes as ‘systematically developed’ traditions which provide a framework for concepts to be formulated, developed and evaluated. Something also should be said about the idea of “theories” of the Atonement.

The term “model” again requires some definition. There are different levels, or types, of models, which are quite distinct and not all of which are relevant to the present discussion. Ricoeur, following Black, describes three. First, there is the scale model, which renders something, which is otherwise too small or large, intelligible at our own size. One might consider a model train. Here some features will not correspond, but some, especially proportions, will. Second, there is the analogue model, where a structure or operation of interest corresponds to a greater and more complex whole, but where many other features of the whole are not represented, such as the operation of the water cycle as an analogue model of an ecosystem. Third, there is the theoretical model, which comprises a whole system or object with a high degree of correspondence to the features of the subject, but with which one is more familiar. Ricoeur, who has in mind

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philosophical and scientific models and metaphors, claims that the theoretical model is ‘full of implications and in this sense rich at the level of hypotheses.’\textsuperscript{168} This is because the model allows us freedom to explore the more challenging subject, and its relationships, using the language of the described model. An example might be the Bohr model for the structure of the atom as a notional solar system with its "orbiting" electrons.\textsuperscript{169} Care is of course needed to ensure that we do not overstep the level of correspondence between the model and the subject and claim insights that are not valid.\textsuperscript{170}

It is this third, theoretical, type of model that applies most usefully to discussions of the Atonement. Applying it to the sacrifice example, the whole structure of activity and belief that makes up the Old Testament practice of sacrifice becomes a theoretical model for describing the Atonement. There are areas of high correspondence, such as the sacrifice being efficacious for the forgiveness of sin, as was the sin offering described in Leviticus 4; or the slaughter of the Passover lamb of Exodus 12, the blood of which protected the people of God in the face of divine judgement; or the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, which carried away the sin of the community. This allows the New Testament writers to explore the meaning of the death of Jesus using the language of sacrifice and drawing on that whole system of meaning. As with any model, however, there are limits to its correspondence. For example, if we were to insist that, to be a sacrifice, Jesus must have been offered up by someone, we run the risk of claiming that the Father has offered up the Son in a way that unhelpfully separates the persons of the Trinity. At this point the notion of the negative analogy is helpful, as the limit of correspondence makes us consider carefully the relationship between Father and Son at the moment of Jesus’ death and how other models may need to be brought to bear to address that.

At this point it is noteworthy that it is common for writers on the Atonement to complain about the use of abstract "theories" or models. Aulén complained that

\textsuperscript{168} Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, p.285.
\textsuperscript{169} Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, p.32.
\textsuperscript{170} Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, p.292.
abstract objective and subjective theories had obscured the true drama, found in the “classic” idea of Christus Victor. Frances Young concludes that theories based around satisfaction, penalty, moral influence and victory all fail the gospel drama in some way, and Wright, more recently, expresses a desire to move away from theories that fail to listen to the gospel narratives. Having said all that, however, the witness of the New Testament remains that the event of the cross was more than a story of the tragedy of human violence, and that somehow God was present and active within it. In doing so, that New Testament witness draws on metaphorical resources, such as those provided by sacrifice noted above. Such language seems unavoidable. For example, having objected to models or theories in general, Wright’s own presentation of the Atonement is couched in the language of victory and sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

Having said that, one source of confusion is that some writers use the terms theory and model interchangeably. Some use one or other consistently, but without examining what sort of language it is. Because of this, and because the word “theory” has perhaps more often been associated with ideas of Atonement mechanisms or arrangements rather abstracted from the biblical narrative, this thesis will from this point speak of models, not theories, of Atonement.

The approach to be adopted

On the basis of this discussion, the approach in this thesis will be that when the term “model of Atonement” is used, it means a theoretical model in the sense described above. Such a model is therefore a whole system of thought or activity that provides a way of exploring the Atonement. The language which is used in applying a model will be referred to as metaphor, or metaphorical language. Also based on the review above, the theoretical models which will be adopted in this study are sacrifice, justice and victory. These are presented by Gunton and Fiddes as the three which remain the prevailing models, taking precedence over others. At least as importantly they meet the test of functioning as theoretical

172 Young, Can These Dry Bones Live, pp.22-39.
models in the way described above. Because they draw on whole systems of thought and activity, they also encompass the ideas found in longer lists such as McIntyre’s. Each of these prevailing models is explored in some detail in the section below.

In practice these models do not form watertight compartments and some metaphorical language might well cross borders. The term salvation, for example, may well arise under all three, since one may be saved from the blight of sin by sacrifice; or saved from the clutches of Satan and death by victory; or saved from condemnation by Jesus standing with us as advocate before the judgement of God. However, these three theoretical models, as set out here, provide a manageable structure within which to bring understandings of the Atonement into conversation with disability theology.

Metaphor and the hermeneutical key

Having decided on this linguistic discipline, a brief comment might also be made on the language of the hermeneutical key identified in chapter 1 for elements of this thesis. The starting point for that hermeneutical key was Vernon White’s statement that the Atonement represents a large claim (of universal, cosmic reconciliation) but balanced on a narrow pivot (of the Christ event, and in particular of the death and resurrection of Jesus). The effectiveness of White’s “pivot” metaphor lies in its being used, rather than explained. However, the choice of metaphor is interesting.

Considering the work this word is being asked to do as a metaphor, its correspondence lies in the concept of the pivot being the fixed point that is crucial to a mechanism or movement, here the atoning and saving work of Christ. It also lies in the dynamic mental image of balancing on the pivot, which works because of the tension between the universal scope of the claim, across all time and space, and the very particular point in time and space of the Christ event, especially the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, on which basis that claim is made. The limits of correspondence of the metaphor are also important. We would be moving unhelpfully beyond those limits if we were to insist, for example, that something
must rotate around the pivot; or if we were to ask what aspects of the Christ event constituted the spindle and bearing as possible elements in the pivot’s structure. White’s use of the metaphor therefore provides a useful and evocative mental picture for his point, without making inappropriate demands of it.

Models and relationships

The last part of this discussion is to consider how the models of the Atonement are related in a logical sense to each other and to the death of Jesus. This enables the models to be seen more as a system of understanding than as isolated ideas, transactions or mechanisms. McIntyre sets this out succinctly. He deduces that these are relationships of analogy in two senses.\[174\] Firstly, the models are related to one another and to the death of Jesus by analogy of attribution: the models are all ‘salvific’ because they are all related to the death of Christ. That event has the attribute of being salvific in the ultimate sense and the purpose of each of the models is, in its own way, to describe that event. Secondly, they are related to the death of Jesus by analogy of proportionality: in the sense of “a is to b, as c is to d”. Using again the example of sacrifice, it could be said that the death of Christ is to a sinner, as the sacrifice of an animal was to Old Testament Israel.

Soskice provides a broader picture of these relationships when she writes of the establishment and use of metaphors and models in all areas of Christian thinking, not just in thinking about the Atonement. All such thought, she proposes, emerges out of Old Testament events or practices, not ‘as a set of propositions, but as the milieu from which Christian belief arose and indeed still arises.’\[175\] In other words, these models are related to the death of Jesus precisely through their source being in the Old Testament, out of which our whole understanding of Jesus emerges. While this provides a firm anchor for the models, it raises a possible difficulty regarding disability. If Yong is correct in stating that we would be wrong to assume that in biblical times there was a similar understanding of disability to that in our own time,\[176\] the challenge of finding theological space for a present-day

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\[174\] McIntyre, *Shape of Soteriology*, pp.69-73.

\[175\] Soskice, *Metaphor*, p.158.

\[176\] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, p.6.
understanding of disability in biblical models of the Atonement could be heightened. Having said that, however, this very difficulty provides the beginning of an argument for the necessity of re-engaging with the biblical models in creative ways.

At this point we can return to the recent essay by Crisp mentioned at the start of this section. As Crisp discerns it, a model is a simplified description of something that is complex, and a model contains simple ideas, called motifs or metaphors, as elements. Motifs and metaphors are also elements of a doctrine, which is a comprehensive account of a part of Christian teaching. A doctrine of Atonement is expected to contain a mechanism by which the Atonement (at its heart a reconciliation between God and fallen human beings) takes place. There are also theories. While a model is a simplified presentation of facts, a theory is an overall explanation of them.177 There is much of interest in this account, but the resulting matrix of terms and relationships seems too complex to work with. The analysis is not particularly aligned with the wider scholarship on the functioning of metaphorical language outlined here, nor does it explore the significance of negative analogy or limits of correspondence, which seem crucial to a disciplined application of the models. Crisp’s proposed structure is not therefore utilised in this thesis, but nonetheless illustrates the challenge of bringing the whole matter into an orderly form.178

178 Similar problems arise from Schmiechen’s suggestion, mentioned earlier, that a theory of the Atonement is ‘an internally coherent explanation of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.’ Each theory, he says, is built on an image, such as the lamb, or vine, which has symbolic value. To this we add theological value, which says something of God, contextual value (its connection with people) and evangelical value (its ability to convey the gospel). Again, however, there is no mention of the way metaphor operates, or of limits of correspondence, giving the impression that each theory is a self-contained explanation which makes claims of comprehensiveness in a way that the idea of a theoretical model adopted in this thesis does not. See: Schmiechen, Saving Power, p.5.
The prevailing models that emerge

Having decided on the above strategy for bringing some order to the metaphorical discourse around the Atonement, the three prevailing models identified of sacrifice, justice and victory can be summarised. The objective at this point is not to review in detail their strengths and weaknesses. It is to set out their logic sufficiently, firstly to indicate more fully how they encompass the broad field of terms that tend to be applied to the Atonement; and secondly so that they can be used to interpret the soteriological content of the disability theology literature examined in chapter 3 above. That interpretation is pursued in chapter 5 below.

A general point can be made about the three models. That is the sense of substitution and representation within them. Gunton writes that Jesus is both substitute and representative. He goes as our substitute where we cannot go, to achieve what we cannot achieve. However, he also acts as our representative so that by following him, we can also come before God. Not all scholars agree that the two roles are quite so balanced. Those who heavily favour a penal substitution interpretation, such as Stott, demand that the role of substitute takes precedence. Frances Young, who prefers the language of sacrifice, but who sees sacrifice as being about relationships and sharing food, not about substitution (her approach is discussed in some detail towards the end of chapter 5) more strongly favours Jesus’ representative role. However, as the discussion develops in this thesis it is assumed that both terms, arising out of the metaphorical resources available, provide ways of speaking of important aspects of what happened on the cross.

Sacrifice

Much has been hinted at already through the use of this model as a working example in the discussion above. The model draws on the Old Testament system of sacrifice. While one might point to widespread use of sacrifice in the Ancient

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Near East, the model has in view the particular system instigated by YHWH, beginning at Israel’s encounter with him at Sinai in Exodus and considerably fleshed out in Leviticus. The model is seen as firmly rooted in discussion of the event of the Cross in sacrificial terms within the New Testament. An example from Paul would be his description of the Christ event in Romans 3:25-26: ‘Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of Atonement by his blood, effective through faith’; to that one could add the statement in 1John 2:2 that ‘he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world’; as well as the extended discussion of the cross in sacrificial language in the letter to the Hebrews.

The purpose of the sacrificial system was broad, including offerings not only for sin, but also for thanksgiving and wellbeing, and to reinforce the covenant with YHWH. The system therefore had to do with relationships, and the sacrifices to atone for sin, for example in Leviticus 4 (personal sin) and Leviticus 16 (Day of Atonement for Israel as a community) effected a purification from sin and the restoring of the relationship between the individual and God, or the community and God, which had been disrupted by sin. The purification, or cleansing from the pollution of sin was closely related to the shed blood of the sacrificial victim, the blood having been provided by God for the purpose of Atonement (Leviticus 17:11) and being symbolically sprinkled as part of the sacrifice ritual.

To speak of sacrifice is not, of course, to speak only of that Levitical system. Fiddes takes the view that the timing and language of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion link it most strongly with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. In terms of metaphorical resources, the Passover sacrifice certainly provides Exodus concepts of freedom from slavery, a covering over of sin in the face of God’s judgement and pilgrimage to a Promised Land. Wright is also in favour of a “new Passover” interpretation and argues that this was held by both Paul and the early church. However, he wants to add to this a stronger concept of forgiveness of sins, and so ultimately combines elements of Passover and Day of Atonement to

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183 Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p.296.
achieve that mix.\textsuperscript{184} Overall, McDonald’s observation seems justified, that all aspects of sacrifice sanctioned by YHWH in the Old Testament find a high degree of correspondence with the death of Jesus.\textsuperscript{185}

Pushing the question of correspondence further, Gunton talks of Jesus as having roles of both sacrifice and priest. Gunton suggests that a change in role takes place at the resurrection, after which Jesus as priest is able to baptise with the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{186} This makes sense, but it appears to miss the additional point, stretching the correspondence just a little more, that at the moment of sacrifice on the cross Jesus is perhaps both priest and sacrifice, as suggested in Hebrews 7:27 which talks of Jesus as the high priest who made a sacrifice ‘once for all when he offered himself.’

At this point something should be said of the limits of correspondence, McIntyre’s negative analogy, as far as the sacrifice model is concerned. For example, while we use the language of Jesus being offered as a sacrifice, of course he was in fact killed through the combined efforts of the human Roman and Jewish authorities. In that sense it was not a sacrifice under the Old Testament system at all, but an execution under imperial law. The way the model operates is by suggesting that God has taken that actual slaying and attributed to it the meanings of sacrifice in such a way that the benefits of Old Testament sacrifice, in terms of sin, cleansing and relationships restored, are made available to all of humanity. Use of the model for the present purpose therefore means both saying in what ways it was like a sacrifice and, equally instructively, acknowledging in what ways it was not.

**Justice**

The idea of justice as a model for the Atonement has considerable breadth. There is also some diversity of views as to how the model operates and what constitute the boundaries of legitimate correspondences with the death of Jesus. One of the strengths of justice as a model, Gunton suggests, is that it seems to go beyond

\textsuperscript{184} Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p.348.
\textsuperscript{185} McDonald, *Concept of the Atonement*, p.86.
\textsuperscript{186} Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, p.135.
Part 2: Chapter 4: Ideas of Atonement within the Western Christian theological tradition

Christian discourse and express a deep-seated human response to the world.\textsuperscript{187} Another strength, pointed out by Caird, is that the model of the law court is one which is used extensively within the Bible, often with God as judge, defending the weak or oppressed, but sometimes even with the sense of God himself being called to account.\textsuperscript{188} Examples would include David calling on the Lord to act as judge between himself and Saul, who is persecuting him (1 Samuel 24:12-15); the psalmist's reliance on the Lord to defend the cause of the poor (Psalm 140:12); or Job's desire for a court hearing to plead his case against God (Job 23:1-6).

Commentary within the New Testament on the death of Jesus certainly picks up the theme, particularly through the language of justification used by Paul. A single example could be Romans 5:9: 'now that we have been justified by his blood, we will be saved through him from the wrath of God.'

It is worth acknowledging a caution raised by Gunton around what assumptions lie behind references to law and justice. The Atonement is not a legal transaction, but an act of grace, which this model enables us to describe and explore using legal metaphorical language.\textsuperscript{189} In this regard, the justice model might usefully be thought of as drawing on at least four concepts of justice. Gunton's immediate point picked up the first (mentioned earlier), that Old Testament law was primarily concerned the keeping of the covenant with YHWH. This is a point explored in some depth by Gorman, who argues that the concept of the Atonement as the creation of a new covenant community, drawing on Old Testament covenant ideas, has been sadly neglected.\textsuperscript{190}

The second concept of justice could be identified as that of satisfaction, associated with St Anselm of Canterbury and mentioned briefly in the review of the Atonement debate above. Fiddes places the sense of Anselm's argument, which may sound odd in the present day, within the feudal legal system of the 11th century in which

\textsuperscript{187} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.112.
\textsuperscript{188} Caird, \textit{Language and Imagery}, pp.156-159.
\textsuperscript{189} Gunton, \textit{Actuality of Atonement}, p.85-92.
he lived.\textsuperscript{191} In his \textit{Cur deus homo}, Anselm explores how we dishonour God when our will and actions are not in accord with his: ‘He who does not render this honour which is due to God, robs God of his own and dishonours him; and this is sin’.\textsuperscript{192} Because God’s honour is infinite, the debt of guilt for this dishonour is beyond any human being to satisfy, and yet it is a human debt. The Atonement offered by Jesus, who is without sin and is both human and divine, pays this debt of satisfaction, removing our guilt. While Anselm did not appeal to Scripture to develop his argument, his instinct that a functioning justice system has correspondence with the Atonement seems reasonable, even if his feudal language goes well beyond what is found in the Bible.\textsuperscript{193}

The third, more abstract transactional or contractual concept of the law court is usually attributed to the influence of the western Church Fathers and the leaders of the Reformation. Here the focus is rather more on forensic guilt or innocence and, making much use of Paul’s justification language, Atonement as the means by which the sinner is declared innocent, as he or she would be if acquitted at trial. Penal substitution is one way of applying a forensic view, which has had much attention.\textsuperscript{194} Fiddes credits Calvin with developing this strong sense of the necessity of a penalty being incurred for sin, with God actually passing sentence as at a trial and applying that penalty, but the sentence and penalty being borne by Jesus on the cross.\textsuperscript{195} Wright suggests that this approach received such a boost in the Reformation because the focus on the once-for-all substitutionary punishment of Jesus was a way of counteracting both the post-mortem

\textsuperscript{191} Fiddes, \textit{Past Event and Present Salvation}, p.96.
\textsuperscript{193} Frances Young points out that Anselm’s model did not appeal to Scripture, but was developed as a philosophical reflection on the notion of legal justice and how it operated at the time. The idea has subsequently been related back to Scripture as it has been developed by others and it could be said to have become Scripturally based over time. There is scope to discuss further the comparative historical development of the various models described in this chapter. However, the discussion of the models here is confined to how they are applied currently as interpretations of the Atonement and how well they may or may not fare when examined from a disability perspective. See: Young, \textit{Can These Dry Bones Live}, p.22.
\textsuperscript{194} A concise summary of the penal substitution idea, particularly as developed in the 19th Century by Charles Hodge, and the biblical, legal and ethical problems it presents is provided in: Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, \textit{ Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts} (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), pp.140-150.
\textsuperscript{195} Fiddes, \textit{Past Event and Present Salvation}, p.88.
punishment of purgatory, and the need to keep witnessing the Mass, where Jesus was in some way re-sacrificed. While acknowledging the motive, Wright is deeply critical of the penal substitution mechanism that has resulted from it. He says this has become the idea that someone has to do something to make us good enough for God. The arrangement is that Jesus does the work of taking the punishment for our sin so that we are saved and go to heaven. Wright calls this a “works contract”, that has smuggled in a subtle version of salvation by works.

A fourth concept within the justice model might be described as “transactions governed by law or custom”. This would bring together the language of ransom or redemption, each of which refers to an action to effect the release of a person or object from a right over him/her/it held by another. This might draw on the image of the marketplace, where a debt or an item given as security is redeemed. McDonald's rather different suggestion is that ransom or redemption might be thought of as making propitiation by satisfying the ‘avenger of blood’, being the one entitled to put a murderer to death in the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. Perhaps more convincingly, since the avenger is not generally identified with God, Atonement as ransom or redemption could mean satisfying the obligations of the ‘kinsman redeemer’ or goel of Leviticus 25:51 to buy a relative out of debt. McDonald concludes, however, that the best fit is more simply with God who ‘will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol’ in Psalm 49:15. Used that way, it seems to have more in common with the economics of war, whereby prisoners of war were (and sometimes still are) ransomed back to their nation as a means of raising funds.

These various facets of the justice model illustrate the importance of recognising not only limits of correspondence, but also the influence of our own experience and preferences as interpreters in applying any of the models of Atonement. Indeed, the range of metaphorical language to which we claim access in applying any of the three prevailing models might vary considerably depending on whether,

196 Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p.36.
197 Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, p.299.
198 McDonald, *Concept of the Atonement*, pp.88-89.
to use this justice example, our own idea of justice is fundamentally one of
covenant, satisfaction, trial, retribution, punishment, rehabilitation or transaction
and penalty.¹⁹⁹

Victory

As mentioned above, discussion of victory as a model for the Atonement often
revolves around Aulén’s assertion that the Christus Victor interpretation re-
establishes the classical view of the Atonement.²⁰⁰ Dillistone’s suggestion is that it
was the massive wars of the 20th Century that provided a general appetite for that
view.²⁰¹ Gunton certainly commends Aulén’s presentation of this model not as an
abstract transaction or arrangement, but as a drama which, initiated by God, does
not just pay a penalty, but changes the nature of the relationship between the
world and God.²⁰² Scriptural references such as Colossians 2:15, referring to
Jesus’ triumph over ‘the rulers and authorities’ on the cross are important here, as
are many of the healing narratives in the gospels, particularly those demonstrating
Jesus’ authority over unclean spirits.

What is achieved under this model is the vanquishing by Jesus Christ of the
‘tyrants’ that oppress humanity. Fiddes identifies the tyrants as sin, the law, death
and Satan.²⁰³ Satan is identified as the personification of evil and the wielder of
the other three. That personification also draws in Paul’s references to the
principalities and powers that are defeated by Christ. The outcome of the victory
is freedom for oppressed humanity, although as Gunton notes, an important
feature of the victory is that while it is decisive, the promise and freedom of the
victory it is not fulfilled until, as 1 Corinthians 15:24 has it, Jesus hands the

¹⁹⁹ This thesis considers approaches taken to the Atonement in the western Christian tradition,
which in terms of justice mostly focus on individual, or communal, guilt and innocence. Eastern
cultures, which are based rather on notions of shame and honour, will inevitably interpret the
Atonement from that frame of reference. Such an eastern viewpoint is not explored here, but a
useful introduction to its impact on the interpretation of the Atonement is provided in: Timothy C.
Tennent, Theology in the Context of World Christianity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), pp.77-
101.
²⁰⁰ Aulén, Christus Victor, pp.20-23.
²⁰² Gunton, Actuality of Atonement, p.53.
²⁰³ Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, pp.114-125.
Kingdom to the Father. This model also has a significantly New-Testament focus. While in the Old Testament YHWH is presented as defeating his enemies and those of his people, this model mostly draws on New Testament descriptions of the Atonement. The main Old Testament connection is to identify Satan as the instigator of the Fall in the early chapters of Genesis.

Use of the metaphorical resources of victory needs to be approached with care. For example, Fiddes notes (as do many others) the idea from Gregory of Nyssa that Satan is defeated by deception. For Gregory it was as if the flesh of Jesus acted as bait to Satan, with which he swallowed the hidden hook of Jesus’ divinity, by which he was then defeated, albeit that such an act of deception raises questions about God’s morality. Perhaps the most significant aspect of victory being used as a model for the Atonement, however, is that it is achieved not through weapons that look more powerful from a worldly point of view, but through vulnerability and the apparent defeat of Jesus’ obedience to death on the cross.

Gunton observes two further areas of caution. The victory model, with its metaphorical language of spiritual conflict, runs the twin risks of either: (i) being seen as merely a description of a psychological conflict that takes place within the mind of the individual; or (ii) being taken too literally as a myth of a battle between transcendent beings, taking place in a realm which is abstracted from the realities of life. He wants to reconnect this model with our own lived experience of being human. Indeed, a significant part of what the victory model provides is a metaphorical resource for exploring something of the mystery of actual human experiences of encounter with temptation, sin and healing and how the cross relates to those. We avoid the Atonement becoming a remote and theoretical victory, Gunton suggests, by not losing sight of the fact that the victory of Jesus is not just something that took place in a spiritual realm, but involved the human Jesus successfully resisting temptation, challenging evil and going to the cross, alongside the supernatural victory. For this reason Gunton suggests that the

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victory model is incomplete unless it carries over from the event of the cross into the on-going life of the Christian and the church.

The subjective element – moral influence and connection

Having summarised these three prevailing models, it is also valuable to consider how the subjective impact of the Atonement they describe is to be spoken of. A purely subjective, or moral influence, interpretation of the Atonement is often rejected on the ground that it relies too much on human response, and human response is not salvific.206 Such an interpretation on its own would have little, if any, connection with White’s large claim of an objective cosmic reconciliation wrought by God through the cross. However, similar to Gunton’s comment above on the victory model, the question of connecting any understanding of the Atonement with on-going life remains significant. The insights of disability theology noted so far in this study, such as asking what “repent and believe” could mean in a context of intellectual impairment, sharpen the question.

When, as noted above,207 Fiddes argues for Abelard to be taken seriously within the debate, one of his reasons is that it balances his observation that the other models often appear too heavily objective, and do not have enough to say about the lived experience of salvation. Another is Fiddes’ suggestion that an understanding of the Atonement as primarily involving a healing act of love has particular resonance with the experience of ‘alienation in human existence’ in modern society.208 An encounter with this expression of God’s love, whether at the time or through the sharing of the story, particularly at the Eucharist, is capable of bringing real change and restoration. Updating New Testament language to express the change he has in mind, Fiddes suggests that Paul’s claim that ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ (Galatians 2:20) becomes ‘my ego is shattered by the crucifixion of Christ.’209 This is what sets the self free from a state of endless self-justification to one of trusting in God.

206 McIntyre, Shape of Soteriology, p.49.
207 Page 86.
208 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, p.10.
209 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, p.147.
This more subjective perspective on the Atonement seems to reflect the soteriological concerns of disability theology more readily than more purely objective accounts. Whatever proposal is made in relation to models of the Atonement and disability will therefore also have to be capable of addressing these questions of connection.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has considered how the Atonement has come to be described and explained within the Western Christian tradition, in terms of the large claim of cosmic reconciliation and its connection with the narrow pivot of the cross. A closer examination of how metaphorical language operates has enabled what can seem an unwieldy set of ideas to be marshalled under the three prevailing theoretical models of sacrifice, justice and victory. These provide a resource of metaphorical language with strong roots in the biblical narrative with which the Atonement can be explored, acknowledging both the correspondence of each model to the subject and the limits of that correspondence. The review also highlighted, in the light of insights from disability theology, the importance of any account of the Atonement sufficiently addressing the subjective question of its connection with on-going life.
Chapter 5

Disability Theology and Atonement: comparing language and ideas

Introduction - metaphors, shared and otherwise

Chapter 3 above identified the extent to which an account of the Atonement is incorporated into current disability theology. It made use of the hermeneutical key of the universal claim of the Atonement balanced on the narrow pivot of the particularity of the Christ event, developed for this purpose from White in chapter 1. Chapter 4 went on to examine, and bring some order to, the prevailing metaphorical language used to describe and explain that Atonement. This present chapter brings those two analyses together to determine whether, by comparing the language and concepts at work in the two fields, the means of a much deeper interaction between them can be identified.

Three analytical questions can be applied to facilitate this exercise. First, we can ask to what extent the elements of an account of the Atonement identified as operating within disability theology can already be understood in terms of the prevailing models identified above (even though disability theology has not tended explicitly to adopt any of the models) and whether this provides useful points of connection. This can be thought of as the possibility of “shared metaphors”: are there metaphors that arise in the Atonement models that are also at work in disability theology and, if so, what work are they doing there? Second, we can ask of each model whether it introduces metaphors that seem particularly awkward in the light of the concerns of disability theology identified in chapter 3. Third, we can ask, based on the review of disability theology, and by also bringing to bear the particular situations of disability suggested as representative in Chapter 2, whether there are some theological concerns about our understanding of the

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Atonement which are raised in the context of disability, but which appear simply not to be addressed by the models at all.

The approach adopted is to take each of the prevailing models of the Atonement in turn and consider the first two questions. A similar comparison of language is also made for the more subjective concept of moral influence. The third question will then be approached as a whole. It should be possible at that point to say whether the metaphors or concepts currently shared between the two fields already appear to provide the means of improving that interaction or, if not, whether they indicate in what direction such means might lie.

**Sacrifice language**

The language of the Atonement as sacrifice is not prominent as such within disability theology. The closest connection is perhaps made by Young, in exploring her idea of double reparation, where she refers to Jesus’ death principally in sacrificial terms. (This is not surprising, as Young had concluded in earlier work that sacrifice was the primary way in which the early church understood the death of Jesus).\(^{211}\) Having said that, however, applying the first analytical question, there is evidence of shared metaphors that may provide the possibility of more fruitful interaction. These include: the language of embodied theology; the identification of the sinner with the life offered in sacrifice; and the vulnerability of the sacrificial victim.

**Embodied theology**

It was suggested in the discussion of the hermeneutical key in chapter 1 that its focus on the particularity of Jesus’ body and bodily experience might render it apposite to an investigation of disability theology.\(^ {212}\) Chapter 3 has demonstrated that embodiment as a locus for theological insight is indeed important in disability

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\(^{212}\) page 34.
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teology, where actual bodies and embodied experience are never considered merely incidental or illustrative. However, comparison with the sacrifice model of the Atonement raises fresh questions. It is certainly possible to describe the sacrificial system, a central part of the cultus of Israel’s worship described in the Old Testament, as a form of embodied theology. God was in some sense encountered and interacted with, and the relationship between the individual and God, or the community and God, repaired and developed through the medium of the body offered as a sacrifice. Less dramatically perhaps in the case of grain or drink offerings, but the sacrifices that atoned for sin involved the bodies of animals (Leviticus chapters 1, 4 and 16). It is this idea, carried over into the model of Jesus’ death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice, that perhaps resonates with the call in disability theology to pay close attention to the physical (and mental and emotional) wounding and disabling of Jesus to the point of death.

However, when used in the disability theology literature, the language of embodied theology is not linked to Jesus’ body as a sacrificial offering of Atonement. Rather, it does the work of grounding theological discussion and insight in real, possibly impaired, bodies and in the brute facts of the resulting experience of life, within which God may or may not be encountered. This has been found especially in the disability perspective consideration of what it means to talk of humanity made in the image of God.

Identification

Although the idea of embodied theology is therefore operating in different ways, it does also point to another potentially useful shared metaphor: that of identification with the life offered in sacrifice. Within the sacrificial system the individual or community in need of Atonement brings the sacrifice and, in the case of an animal, is encouraged to identify with the sacrificial victim. In the case of the individual this

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213 John Dunhill has argued for a renewed understanding of sacrifice in Christian thinking by emphasising its ordinariness in cultures where it is practised. He has also argued for a closer connection between an understanding of sacrifice and more recent work on body theology. See: John Dunhill, ‘Communicative Bodies and Economies of Grace: The Role of Sacrifice in the Christian Understanding of the Body’, The Journal Of Religion 83.1 (2003), 79-93 ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials <http://search.ebscohost.com> [Accessed November 3, 2016].
is done through the one who brings the sacrifice laying their hand on the head of
the sacrificial victim (in Leviticus, chapters 1, 3 and 4). In the case of the
community as a whole, on the Day of Atonement the high priest lays both of his
hands on the scapegoat and confesses the sins of the community (Leviticus
16:21). The scapegoat is not then killed, but permanently removed from the camp,
so not a sacrifice in quite the same way, but part of the same system. That
insight might be compared to Paul’s discussion of Christ in Romans, as an
example of New Testament use of sacrificial metaphorical language to explore the
meaning of the Christ event. Paul talks of ‘Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as
a sacrifice of atonement’ (Romans 3:24-25) and then goes on to write of the
potential for identification with Christ and his atoning death and resurrection in the
strongest terms: that ‘Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into
death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:4).

In disability theology the idea of identification has emerged strongly: the
identification of the individual with Christ’s body disabled by the process of
execution and still carrying the marks of the wounds after the resurrection; and the
insight through that of God’s eternal identification with humanity inclusive of
impairment. Again, however, though shared, the metaphorical language is doing
different work. The disability theology literature develops the language of
identification with the crucified and risen Jesus in terms of the affirmation of the
individual, impairments and all, made in the image of God, and acceptable to God,

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214 The precise meaning of the laying of a hand, or hands, on the head of the sacrificial animal is
not without some controversy. Milgrom suggests an identification of ownership, such that the
spiritual benefits of the sacrifice are attributed to the correct worshipper. Rowley prefers an
understanding of identification where the death of the animal represented a ‘spiritual death’ of the
offeror. Whichever is preferred, identification of victim with offeror remains the point. See: Jacob
Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, 3 (New York:

215 The sacrificial language adopted by Paul for the Atonement is explored by Bell, who links it to
Paul’s Christology in general as well as to the Levitical sacrificial system. Bell argues that Paul
takes the idea of sacrificial identification and, in Romans 3:25 and 8:3 as well as in 2 Corinthians
5:19-21, enlarges on it. The identification now operates in both directions: Jesus identifies with
sinful humanity, such that humanity can identify with his sacrifice and resurrection. What was
symbolic in the Old Testament system has now become ‘the most concrete reality’. See Richard
rather than identification with Jesus’ body as a sacrifice of Atonement which carries the burden of our sin.

Vulnerability

The third area of possible connection is that of vulnerability. The sacrificial victim is in a state of extreme vulnerability. The account of Jesus’ crucifixion locates him also in a state of extreme vulnerability that readily fits within a sacrificial understanding of his death. The disability theology literature has drawn much insight from the vulnerability of those with disabilities. However, the link via this metaphor is again partial, since the point being made is the anthropological one, that disability acts to reveal vulnerability and dependence on God as the true state of humanity, rather than making a connection with God in Christ, who chooses to become vulnerable through the self-giving of sacrifice to effect Atonement.

What this exploration demonstrates is that while certain metaphorical language appears to be shared by the sacrificial model of the Atonement and disability theology, the work those metaphors are doing is quite different in the two contexts.

Problems with sacrifice

Applying the second analytical question, a disability perspective raises some concerns about the language of sacrifice. One such could be the critique in disability theology of normate assumptions about what is “normal” or “perfect” in a person. The emphasis on the bodily perfection of the atoning sacrifice in the Old Testament, typically ‘a male without blemish’ (Leviticus 1:3, for example) potentially muddies the waters in matters of identification. Disability theology encourages identification with Christ disabled by crucifixion (or indeed through the incarnation), and retaining the marks of that disablement in his risen body. The sacrifice model, although coopting the idea of perfection metaphorically in terms of sinlessness, perhaps inadvertently suggests identification with a Christ unhelpfully blemish-free in other respects.

A second identification challenge is that if the point at which Christ is most readily identified with humanity, incorporating all disability, coincides with the point at
which he bears that burden of sin, there is a danger that the sacrifice model does little to dispel the equation of disability with sin, seeing disability as a result of the Fall. A third concern is that in disability theology’s interaction with the Atonement, the resurrection body of Jesus was found to provide useful insight. This points to one of the limits of correspondence of the sacrifice model. Endowed though it is with rich metaphorical language for the death of Jesus on the cross, the model offers far less in the way of language for describing the resurrection and its meaning. For that another model would have to take over the work.

**Justice language**

**Looking for justice**

Given the sense of advocacy within disability theology noted previously, it would be surprising if it were found not to share metaphors with a model of the Atonement based on concepts of justice. As with the sacrifice model, however, where they arise, the work they are doing is rather different. Whether the justice model is approached in terms of a broken covenant, or in the more transactional terms of the law court, at its heart the individual is held to account for sin before God; but through the Atoning work of Christ the individual is declared innocent, or the covenant is restored. Turning to disability theology, justice metaphors arise in the call for a transforming work of the Holy Spirit, bringing about a lowering of barriers to full participation, experienced in this life. The review in chapter 3 found the concept of justice, in the form of inclusion, fairness and the removal of prejudice, within disability perspective theological anthropology, theology of access, soteriology and also in parts of disability hermeneutics. For example, the emphasis drawn from the healing narratives in the gospels is the overturning of exclusion, and the reintegration of the healed person into the community. The theme of justice is highly significant, therefore, but in terms of societal transformation rather than of Jesus standing as our substitute or advocate before God’s judgement on our sin.
Vindication

A closer sharing of metaphor is possibly discernible in the language of vindication. In the justice model of the Atonement, Jesus is vindicated by the resurrection. His innocence of the charges brought against him, his claim that he will defeat death, and claims that he is the Son of God, are shown to be true. A comparison is possible with disability perspective theological anthropology and its challenge as to what is meant by being human, made in the image of God. What is sought there is an interpretation whereby any person, however profound their disability, is vindicated in their claim to be fully human (and, by extension here, in their claim to be represented by Jesus on the cross).

Holding God to account

As noted in chapter 3, Frances Young’s work suggests also a possible extension of the correlation between disability theology and the justice model. This includes her concept of a double reparation at the cross where God allows himself to be held to account for creation; as well as the idea that disability, through society’s ambiguous response to it, reveals our need (convicts us of our need, perhaps) of an Atonement through which we can be declared innocent again.

The problem of guilt

Applying the second analytical question here, perhaps the main difficulty for this model lies in matters of guilt over sin. Where the justice model is expressed in the metaphorical language of a legal transaction it appears to demand an appreciation of accountability and guilt on the part of the one atoned for. Vindication is a setting free from this guilt through being declared innocent. This raises the question of how this model would operate in the case of those with profound intellectual impairment, or taking the example above216 offered by Gillibrand of his son Adam, those with autism. To require a sense of accountability and guilt over sin seems inappropriate in such a case; and yet to suggest a lack of such, and therefore an

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absence of the need for Atonement seems to suggest that the individual is somehow not human in the way that others are.

Victory language

Oppression, conflict and freedom

The victory model of the Atonement is interesting in this present comparison, as the metaphors it shares with disability theology prove to be in some ways strong and positive and in others rather awkward. A significant shared metaphor is that of oppression (often interchangeable here with enslavement): the acknowledgement of it and the demand for release from it. The victory model speaks of the oppression of humanity by sin, death and the (Old Testament) law. The overcoming of these oppressive powers by Jesus Christ through the cross and resurrection, and the on-going struggle with them in the life of the believer are expressed in dramatic metaphors of spiritual warfare. In Aulén’s summary: ‘God is pictured as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict against powers of evil which are hostile to His will.’

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This is at least in some form echoed in disability theology, which clearly identifies an oppressive trait within society and its institutions, evident in normate views and behaviour, among Christians as well as in society generally. The trait may not be personified in quite the same way as in the language of Christus Victor, but we might identify at least some parallel with the ‘authorities’ and ‘powers’ which Paul mentions (for example in Romans 8:38 or Ephesians 6:12) and which feature in the language of the victory model. Flowing from metaphors of oppression and release are those of freedom. The victory model envisages the human being set free from bondage by demonic spiritual forces. Disability theology speaks instead of freedom from an over-medicalised view of disability and from prejudice, and of the freedom of access and full participation in society and in ecclesiastical life. A further shared metaphor is that of vulnerability, although the work this is doing in

each context is quite different. As noted above, vulnerability acts in disability theology mostly as a revelation of God’s solidarity with humanity and of humanity’s true condition; in the victory model it is through embracing vulnerability that Jesus secures his victory over Satan.

**Problems of triumph, vulnerability and healing**

Other metaphors emerging from a victory model are, however, more problematic. In his extensive discussion of vulnerability, Reynolds suggests that with the introduction of ideas such as the disabled God, disability theology has made us rightly suspicious of the metaphors of Jesus as triumphant captain and conquering Lord, somehow overcoming human vulnerability along with the evil forces in the world. When by extension those saved are considered conquerors themselves, the implied emphasis on agency and achievement makes the task of identification with Christ difficult in the context of severe impairment.

Another difficulty lies in the use of the victory model and its language of spiritual warfare in charismatic theologies of healing. A detailed review of charismatic healing theologies is not set out here, but John Wimber could be taken as a significant example of such an approach. Wimber describes all sickness (undifferentiated and including disabilities) as originating in Satan’s kingdom. Within such a scheme, prayer for divine healing is engagement in the conflict between Satan’s kingdom and the kingdom of God, which is described as ‘a warship, navigating in enemy territory’. When healing occurs it is a victory in this conflict and a demonstration of the truth of the gospel. One might observe here that in co-opting the victory model’s metaphorical language to its purposes, such an approach to healing has perhaps unwittingly adopted a spiritual version of a strongly medical model of disability - that disability is a personal tragedy that ought to be put right by intervention, in this case through prayer. A Christus Victor

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219 Reference is made in chapter 3 above to a more extensive study of the interaction between charismatic healing theology and disability theology (page 57).
Part 2: Chapter 5: Disability Theology and Atonement: comparing language and ideas

approach of this sort to healing seems to leave little room for a social model concept of disability. This discussion therefore demonstrates that, for all the positive connections made through shared metaphors identified above, the concerns of disability theology render the model of victory and its attendant metaphorical language particularly challenging.

Moral influence language

The discussion of the prevailing models of Atonement in chapter 4 suggested that the importance of the subjective emphasis of Abelard, favoured by Fiddes, seemed heightened in the context of disability. It was not that moral influence was retained as a separate theoretical model, but that it raises questions of how the Atonement has purchase on, and connection with on-going life, whatever model is deployed. A moral influence emphasis certainly looks for transformation of life in the present as a result of encounter with what Fiddes summarised as God’s healing act of love at the cross.

The transformative emphasis in such an account can be compared with the language and ideas found in disability theology in chapter 3. For example, the purpose of exploring Jesus’ identification with humanity inclusive of its range of impairments, through his crucified and resurrected body, is to bring about a change in normate “us and them” attitudes and oppressive behaviour, moving towards full inclusion of those with disabilities. The same can be said of the ideas of the vulnerability of those with disabilities as revealing the true state of all humanity, or the encounter with God through theological discourse which begins with embodied experience.

In a slightly different way, Yong’s description of salvation as primarily a transformative work of the Holy Spirit, creating a new, hospitable community might be seen as a version of a moral influence emphasis. In that case the

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222 Page 106.
223 Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome, pp.253-258.
evidence of the reality of salvation is its emergence and subjective experience in various aspects of life, particularly those of community. There is also a connection with Reinders’ critique that demands not just a focus on rights of access, but rather a much deeper movement of the temporarily able-bodied towards those with disabilities.\(^{224}\)

If a moral influence approach to the Atonement is regarded as primarily exemplary, or subjective, there is therefore quite a close connection with the way that revelatory aspects of the cross and resurrection have been found to be employed within disability theology in its arguments for the transformation of normate theological presumptions. However if, as argued by McGrath and Weingard,\(^ {225}\) a better understanding of Abelard is that it is the objective actuality of the Atonement that undergirds the present transformation engendered by encounter with it, then although the change in action sought seems similar, the connection with the language and ideas of disability theology is not quite so close.

**Further challenges and particular situations**

The third question posed at the start of this chapter was whether there are concerns that seem not to be addressed by the models at all. In considering this question, the approach proposed in chapter 2 is useful: that while any theological discussions or suggestions arrived at should take into account disability as a whole, rather than any sub-set thereof, they should also be meaningful in the context of the brute facts of representative situations of disability. The situations identified were:

a) a person who uses a wheelchair owing to a physical disability acquired during their lifetime, through accident or illness, but who is otherwise unimpaired;

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\(^{224}\) Page 60.  
\(^{225}\) Page 86.
b) a person with Down Syndrome; and

c) a person with profound intellectual disability

These are hypothetical situations. In practice the attitude towards disability and towards the possibilities of the Atonement, both of an individual with a disability and of those close to that person, will depend on a range of influences. However, considering these three situations, along with the review of the themes of disability theology set out in chapter 3 raises the following two significant challenges for ideas of Atonement and the metaphorical language in which it is rendered:

Firstly, situations a) and b) taken together point to what might be termed “the diversity of hopes.” They suggest the possibility that some people with disabilities might regard their impairment and the lived experience of it as something from which they would rather be “healed”, “released”, or “restored” and might therefore consider that the cosmic reconciliation brought about by the Atonement ought to be seen as incorporating such healing, release or restoration. This might include the possibility of prayer for healing in this life, taking the Atonement as its basis, but certainly would look for that healing or release in life post-resurrection. At the same time, others with what some regard as disabilities might regard themselves as complete as they are, and would object to the idea of the achievements of the Atonement imposing a change on their body, mind or genetic make-up (beyond dealing with a fallenness common to all) to bring it in line with a theoretical “whole” person.

One might imagine encountering the first view sometimes in situation a), where the individual has lost function and looks forward to that being restored. One might imagine encountering the second sometimes in situation b), where proposing a version of this person without Down Syndrome seems to be proposing simply a different person. This picks up the theme of whether the cosmic reconciliation wrought by the Atonement is expected to, or permitted to, involve bringing bodies and minds in line with some sort of of “typical” body or mind, or as providing to a person a faculty or physical aspect they did not have, but might have had, during
Disability theology would certainly anticipate that the lived experiences of situations a) and b) would give rise in both cases to an equal expectation (just as importantly) that the Atonement would ultimately achieve a transformation of societal attitudes to disability. We might comment on situation c) also in this respect. Someone with profound intellectual impairment may not be able to express their hope for what is achieved by the Atonement. Indeed, hope in that case is likely to be carried and expressed by those who care for that person, as a shared hope arising from the experience of life together. The question this raises is whether there is an understanding of the Atonement that can adequately address this diversity of hopes that the experience of disability reveals, and whether there is scope within the metaphorical language of the prevailing models to do that effectively.

Secondly, situation c), along with the discussions of humanity made in the image of God and of disability perspective soteriology in chapter 3, prompts the question of what the Atonement is considered to achieve for those with profound intellectual impairment and how those people access those benefits. However, all three prevailing models express the large claim of the Atonement, balanced on its narrow pivot of the cross, using predominantly the language of sin. There is therefore a need to explore the usefulness and meaning of concepts of sin and individual responsibility and response for people in that situation, and to ask whether this can be conveyed through the metaphorical language of the prevailing models of the Atonement.

A final observation to be made, picking up this last point, is that all three of the prevailing models, sacrifice, justice and victory, have a substantial focus on what it means, using White's language from chapter 1, for God to deal effectively, and objectively, with sin. This is at the heart of White's universal claim of the

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226 There is clearly a strong link here with the concept of the resurrection body, and by extension the resurrection mind, encountered for example in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. References there to the perishable, physical body, sown in dishonour and the imperishable, spiritual body, raised in glory (verses 42 to 44) and to the change anticipated in verses 51 onwards require interpretation, and much speculation is possible. The present thesis does not embark on an interpretation of that eschatological text, but it is clear from the review of disability perspective soteriology in chapter 3 that there is a range of expectations.
Atonement and essential to our hermeneutical key. Based on the review in chapter 4, it could be argued that the main service into which the metaphorical language provided by all three models has been pressed is exactly this, to say something about God's effective dealing with sin. Sin is atoned for through the ritual and the blood of sacrifice; the guilt of sin is wiped away by Jesus taking our place before the judgement of God in justice; the power of sin, personified in Satan, is defeated in victory.

The review of disability theology in chapter 3 and the present exploration of shared metaphors, have found that this aspect of dealing effectively with sin has seldom been addressed within the disability theology literature. To be fair to that literature, its main concerns to date have not been to address general questions of human sin, but to raise particular theological challenges exposed by disability, in all of its forms. At most, the sin addressed by disability theology has been a sense of structural sin contained within a social construct understanding of disability, in other words the normate bias, exclusion and oppressive attitudes in society and the church. However, for disability theology to be distinctively Christian, not only is there a need for an understanding of the Atonement that addresses the concerns raised by disability theology, there is also a need for an account of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ within disability theology that includes and benefits from the whole of its universal claim to deal effectively with all sin.

Interpreting the comparison

This chapter has brought together the account of the Atonement that currently appears within the disability theology literature with the prevailing models and metaphorical language typically used to describe and explain ideas of Atonement. A comparison of the ideas and language employed in the two fields has been enabled by means of three questions posed at the start of the chapter, with the following results.
The discussion of shared metaphors as an exploration of the first two questions has indicated that, when the language of the prevailing Atonement models and that of disability theology are systematically compared, the two fields are not found to be somehow estranged from one another, or in contradiction, but rather to share a range of metaphors and ideas. However, these are doing rather different work in the two fields and, as a result, the connections they provide between those fields are often indirect, or partial, at best. Some metaphors which the models give rise to, as currently used, are found to be awkward in the context of humanity inclusive of disability. A similar result (that ideas seemed shared, but indirectly) was found when considering the more subjective question of the connection between the Atonement and on-going life. The third question highlighted two significant areas of concern from disability theology that are not typically addressed in the way the prevailing models of the Atonement are deployed.

This suggests that a better interaction between the Atonement and disability theology will not stem directly from developing the existing language of either disability theology or the prevailing theoretical models. The solution, it seems, will entail a further step of exploring a prior question about the nature of the Atonement and its relationship with disability. Nonetheless, the range of shared metaphors and ideas does also suggest that whatever understanding of the Atonement emerges, the models are likely to remain relevant in describing it in the context of disability theology.

A distinctively Christian disability theology

Drawing all of these insights together it is possible to summarise what seems to be required to enable a more thorough interaction between the Atonement and disability theology. As far as disability theology is concerned, its account of the Atonement currently is limited and also makes little use of the prevailing Atonement models. If a distinctively Christian disability theology is to develop, it is to be expected that the Atonement, as a cornerstone of Christian theology, would play a foundational role within it. For that to be possible, what is required is a way of understanding the Atonement that inherently incorporates those with disabilities
and that naturally presents itself as a foundation from which to pursue the objectives of disability theology. In doing so, the approach taken by Kenneth Surin in his examination of the challenges of theodicy is again significant. He considers what is required for any account of the Atonement to be one that can be uttered in the presence of actual suffering. Applying Surin’s approach here, what is sought is not a theoretical account of the Atonement that can in principle be extended to special situations of disability, but a whole or main account, applicable to all, that can be uttered in the presence of the most profound disability.\footnote{Surin, \textit{Theology and the Problem of Evil}, pp.144-149.}

An account of the Atonement that can be uttered

As far as our account of the Atonement is concerned, therefore, the analysis thus far presents the following challenges. It demands a main account:

- that finds a way of talking of disability, Atonement and sin together constructively. This must address the fact that, although the Atonement is usually spoken of mostly as dealing with sin, in terms of moral failure, there is much in the experience of life that is not as we would like it to be, and yet which falls outside an analysis just based on sin as moral wrongdoing. If the Atonement is the place where God addresses the whole of the human predicament, it should in some way address that whole spectrum;

- that addresses the diversity of hopes (in particular not insisting on or assuming the homogenisation of bodies or minds). This requires that the account is coherent in relation to humanity inclusive of disability as a whole, but that is also meaningful in the context of the brute facts of particular individual experiences of disability;

- that moves away from a reliance on an intellectual idea of the benefits of the Atonement being accessed through ‘believing and confessing’ and that can therefore be meaningful in the context of profound intellectual impairment;
• that values embodied experience of life as a source of theological insight and intentionally draws this in to how we talk about Atonement, including God's identification with all humanity, inclusive of all impairment, through the impaired body of Jesus;

• that gives due weight to those additional insights that are particularly revealed through disability, such as vulnerability and the corporate nature of Jesus and of the Atonement; and

• that also gives due weight to the need for subjective experience of transformation in the present life.

Once such an account of the Atonement is arrived at, it will be necessary to consider how the currently prevailing theoretical models, with their attendant metaphorical resources, fair as a means for expressing it and whether it is necessary to go beyond those. As well as considering the extent of metaphorical correspondence, this will include addressing what has been exposed in this chapter, that some aspects of the models can on the face of it appear awkward in the context of disability.

**A first step forward: the theology of Frances Young**

The reflections above indicate that, while it appears that shared metaphors might provide fruitful descriptive links between disability theology and the Atonement, the solution to a deeper interaction between the two will not arise directly from those. That seems to require a prior question of the nature of the Atonement in the light of disability to be explored.

The starting point chosen for that is the work of Frances Young. It was noted in chapter 3 that Professor Young has written directly on the subject of the Atonement, and a brief summary of her soteriological approach was given there,
recognising her preference for sacrifice as a way of understanding it. In that way, Young is already engaging with the “large claim and narrow pivot” of the Atonement that was identified in White and that has been used as a hermeneutical key in the analysis. She has also written extensively from her experience of caring for her severely disabled son, Arthur, and much of her writing therefore is deeply informed by the sorts of concerns raised within disability theology that were also outlined in chapter 3. This is more than a matter of alighting upon a coincidence of theological material. The fact that Young’s reflections on the meaning and interpretation of the Atonement have been developed in the context of her life with Arthur ought to lend them particular weight in the present exploration and afford them a significant place along the path of the argument being developed by this thesis.

Young’s presentation of ideas has developed over the course of a number of publications. In many cases her writing explores the theology of the early Church Fathers and the relevance of their arguments for our contemporary theological thinking, as well as the theology of books of the New Testament. Those broader aspects are not particularly examined here, but rather her ideas on the Atonement, and on how we think theologically about disability, that emerge alongside that other work. The discussion below represents a gathering together and weighing up of these aspects of Young’s writing in the light of the matters considered in the foregoing chapters of this thesis. These have been grouped into four broad areas: grappling with theodicy; the question of what happened at the cross (examining more closely the idea that Young calls “double reparation”); how humanity partakes of, or enters into, the benefits of what happens at the cross; and the revelatory “vocation” of her son’s disability.

**Grappling with theodicy**

Frances Young approaches her theological questions from her years of loving care for her son, Arthur. This calls for the world to be dealt with as it is, taking into

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228 Page 71. 229 It also reflects Professor Young’s very helpful insights and comments in a telephone conversation on 9 May 2017.
account from the outset its full range of ambiguity and suffering arising from a broad mixture of apparent evils. These evils certainly include sin in the sense of moral choice, but also encompass the experience of pain (recognising that sometimes it can act as a warning), the suffering that results from natural processes like storms, floods and volcanic eruptions, as well as more personal things that often appear to be accidental such as genetic mutation, infant malformation, and even death.

In seeking an account of God that deals with the world as it is, Young finds that many approaches to theodicy assume too readily that we can identify the nature, sources and purpose of evil and suffering. These include suffering as soul-making, or a clear split between moral and natural evil. Arthur, and her experience with him have ‘challenged all these convenient assumptions and easy solutions’.230 Young requires an account of theodicy, and indeed of the Atonement, that addresses the suffering caused by what she sees as a deep and complex ‘gone-wrongness’231 of the world. This gone-wrongness includes the contingent nature of life: things such as accident, variety or disability that befall us, as they have done Arthur, though it seems they need not have done so. It also includes a moral gone-wrongness. While this moral aspect does incorporate intentional choice, it equally includes the habits of living that accrue to individuals and to society along the way and in which all are caught up.232 Taking Arthur again as an example, the effects of this moral gone-wrongness befall him not least through society’s often ambivalent response to how he is. That aspect of the moral realm may not reflect conscious moral decisions, but culpability for it and for its effects remains. Young wonders whether God should in some way be called to account for the fact that life as we experience it is, as a result, chaotic and fragile.

Young’s thinking on this was significantly affected by an insight she recounts in the form of an epiphany. She reports, with great openness, that at a time when she

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230 Young, *Face to Face*, p.58.
231 Young, *Arthur’s Call*, p.119.
232 Young acknowledges that modern theologians expand the notion of sin from an individual to a corporate problem, a whole system that affects all people. However, she still feels this is too restricted to the effects of intentional moral choice.
was struggling with faith, she sensed God saying to her: ‘It makes no difference to me whether you believe in me or not.’\textsuperscript{233} Her interpretation of this was not that God is unconcerned with suffering, but that he is unchanged by it. She acknowledges the strength of the need to feel that God is immersed in human suffering and recognises what she sees as a modern tendency to say that an adequate theodicy requires a God who suffers along with humanity. However, she also finds that for suffering to be borne, we need a God who somehow is unchanged, or undiminished, by it. If in the midst of suffering God has become merely a co-sufferer, then what sort of God is he? Here Young considers the insights of the impassibility and other unknowable aspects of God, which she identifies in Eastern Christianity. Her resolution is to suggest that God ‘is impassible in his “essence”, but became “passible” in Christ, who is both human and divine.’\textsuperscript{234} She seeks to retain both aspects by finding a way in which God can be understood to connect fully with human suffering, and yet can remain unchanged by it, being in a sense beyond suffering.

This preferred resolution is not without its difficulties. For example, it is challenged by Paul Fiddes, whose objection is that if, as Young suggests, part of God is kept safe from suffering, then God does not really enter into the risk and suffering of creation in a way that would render credible the claim that he can redeem all aspects of it. Fiddes acknowledges the tension here, however, in that if, as he prefers it, all of God suffers, the point and distinctiveness of the incarnation and the person of Jesus Christ are called into question.\textsuperscript{235} My own reflection on Young’s way of speaking of theodicy in two parts is more that it seems to be in danger of creating too great a separation of Father and Son, with little in the way of a distinctive role for the Spirit; or, if Jesus is to be fully human and divine, too great a separation between Jesus’ divine and human natures. It is also an area where we find ourselves encountering the limits of correspondence in the use of metaphorical language, as discussed in chapter 4 and where it would be useful to

\textsuperscript{233} Young, \textit{Face to Face}, p.81.
\textsuperscript{234} Young, \textit{Face to Face}, p.237.
Part 2: Chapter 5: Disability Theology and Atonement: comparing language and ideas

acknowledge such more explicitly. Talk of the suffering of God necessarily makes metaphorical use of our own experience of suffering and should not be taken to be a description of God’s suffering directly as it is.

Interpreting the cross - a double reparation

The outcome of Young’s thoughtful and sensitive exploration of how to deal with suffering and how to speak of God and of Arthur is that, rather than beginning with a philosophical explanation, the place she prefers to begin is with the concrete evidence of the suffering of Jesus on the cross.\textsuperscript{236} As mentioned in chapter 3, in her earlier work Young had examined a sacrificial understanding of the death of Jesus on the cross and concluded that this was the dominant way the early church understood the event. She finds this unsurprising, interpreting it as the early church making inevitable use of inherited tools of language and worship readily available to them to talk about the things of God. This remains her view in later writing. Indeed, in her most recent work on the Atonement, \textit{Construing the Cross}, Young returns to a discussion of sacrifice, emphasising the liberation signified by the Passover lamb and the purification signified by both the scapegoat and the goat sacrificed on the Day of Atonement.\textsuperscript{237}

However, Young also points out that both of these sacrifices, as types for the cross, addressed not only individual moral sin, but the community’s wider corporate failure. They unmasked the violence and culpability of all of society, particularly when the fears or resentments of a group become focused in an innocent individual or minority. This unmasking was achieved by allowing that violence and culpability to be ritualised in the drama of sacrifice. Enacting that drama also became an opportunity for communal participation in thanksgiving for the aversion of judgement.\textsuperscript{238} For Young this is an important parallel - that part of what happened at the cross is that the drama of the event, like that of sacrifice,

\textsuperscript{236} The comments in the section on the various models of Atonement are deliberately brief where they would otherwise repeat material covered in chapters 3 and 4.
\textsuperscript{237} Frances M. Young, \textit{Construing the Cross}, pp.1-43.
\textsuperscript{238} Young, \textit{Construing the Cross}, pp.22-30. Here Young is employing, but also critiquing, the mimetic concept of sacrifice and Atonement developed by Rene Girard and others.
exposed sin and the complicity of the whole community in that sin.\textsuperscript{239} The need for Atonement here has a strong corporate aspect; it is not merely an individualistic thing.

Young does examine the models (or “theories” as she calls them) of the Atonement arising in the Middle Ages. She suggests that these arose as the church lost touch with its earlier Jewish roots, within which sacrifice had been a way of life and the natural language to use. She appreciates the attraction of Anselm’s idea of satisfaction and other legal ideas, even as far as penal substitution. But she criticises them on a number of grounds: the moral problem of substituting an innocent victim; making God subject to an abstract principle of justice outside of himself; and, in the case of penal substitution in particular, seeming to separate Father and Son.\textsuperscript{240} In addition she adds the question of what meaning an interpretation confined to sin and guilt of this sort could have for someone like Arthur.\textsuperscript{241} Abelard and ideas of moral influence she finds to be too subjective and to be taking too little notice of the strong New Testament language about the cross.\textsuperscript{242}

Young is drawn more to Aulén’s \textit{Christus Victor} argument. Reflecting her response to the gone-wrongness of the world, this seems to address not just moral failure, but rather something symptomatic of a much wider and deeper brokenness in creation, which draws in weakness, decay and ignorance, what she calls “the profound resistance of man and his environment to full and enduring life and peace.”\textsuperscript{243} However, for Young this model falls foul of an unacceptable dualism, as well as a lack of evidence today of the claimed victory in a world that still seems to be in thrall to evil forces.

Applying the terms developed in chapter 4, Young’s use of sacrifice is consistent with the full application of a theoretical model, drawing on that whole system of thought and practice to illuminate the cross. However, she regards sacrifice as

\textsuperscript{239} Young, \textit{Arthur’s Call}, p.102.
\textsuperscript{240} Young, \textit{Can These Dry Bones Live?}, pp.22-29.
\textsuperscript{241} Young, \textit{Arthur’s Call}, p.115.
\textsuperscript{242} Young, \textit{Can These Dry Bones Live?}, pp.29-32.
\textsuperscript{243} Young, \textit{Can These Dry Bones Live?}, p.36.
having a far deeper legitimacy and potential for hope than ideas of justice, victory or moral influence. Those she groups together and ultimately dismisses as attempts to present mechanisms that ‘purport to control and explain’ the cross. A danger of promoting a single model in this way is that it may push that single model to do descriptive and explanatory work that goes beyond its limits of correspondence with the subject, or may fail to recognise insights offered by other theoretical models. Nonetheless, Young’s conclusion is that a sacrificial understanding of the cross has the scope to address the whole of the moral gone-wrongness she has identified: unintentional sin, the distortion of good intentions and a sense of shame, pollution, stigma and exclusion.

Added to this, from her broader biblical reading Young discerns that a crucial interpretative insight here is the pattern of hope within despair and trouble. She suggests that this is so fundamental and widespread in the biblical text that the Atonement should be seen in the light of that pattern as well, alongside that of sacrifice. This conviction arises not least because she is able to relate this pattern in a moving way to her experience of the possibility of hope in the midst of the challenges of caring for Arthur. Here Young finds encouragement from the Bible’s willingness to acknowledge that the present is very unsatisfactory, and concludes that the Atonement renders credible the possibility of hope within that present.

For this to be so in the face of the world as it is, Young suggests that ‘a kind of double reparation is made on the cross.’ This operates as follows. Jesus as our representative, and the perfect worshipper, makes a perfect sacrifice of obedience and for sin, of which we can take advantage. At the same time, God takes responsibility for the world as it is and makes some sort of reparation for it. In discussing this, Young refers briefly to

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244 Young, Construing the Cross, p.124.
245 Young, God’s Presence, p.230.
246 Young, Can These Dry Bones Live?, pp.54-56.
247 Young, Arthur’s Call, pp.117-118.
248 Young identifies something of this connection in her review of the development of the creeds. She attributes to Athanasius: ‘a sense that since God is the source of all, he must ultimately bear responsibility for the presence of evil in his creation’ and does so at the cross. See: Frances Young, The Making of the Creeds (London: SCM, 1991), p.91.
the idea that as part of the event of creation God withdrew to an extent. Space was made for creation, which is inevitably imperfect, since creation is not God. This reflected the nature of God’s love in allowing independence to creation, but it also allowed the possibility of corruption, accident, and even the demonic, within creation. Young does not expand significantly on this kenotic approach to creation, though she finds its expression in the poetry of Simone Weil helpful.

As to the form that this double reparation takes, Young’s suggestion is that it arises from God’s willingness to be fully present and responsible for such a creation. At the cross, God is present not only in Jesus as our representative, but in himself ‘bearing the painful consequences of his own act of creative love.’

For Young, the important point of the double reparation is its demonstration that God not only deals with sin, but is fully present in all human suffering and allows himself to be held to account for it. The significance of this point in Young’s analysis is particularly highlighted in one of her contributions to a debate on the understanding of the incarnation. There she argues that it is important not to rush from cross to resurrection as if, appearing like some Deus ex machina, the resurrection makes the tragedy of the cross turn out alright in the end because it proves that Jesus was God after all. Instead, for Young it matters that God is present in and with Jesus in the suffering and tragedy of the cross. This allows us to say that the way that God is present in all human tragedy and suffering, the way he participates in it, is the same as the way he was present to Jesus, and through him to humanity, at the cross.

Young does not propose a mechanism by which this accountability-through-presence provides reparation for the gone-wrongness of creation. Indeed, it may

249 Young, Can These Cry Bones Live?, p.58.
251 Young is not alone here. Mary Schaefer Fast arrives at a similar point, but from a study of Luther’s theology of the cross. She suggests that one can deal with one’s lot in life (or vocation, following Luther’s notion, which Fast suggests might include that of disability) if one has a strong enough theology of the cross, where God is revealed in solidarity with all humankind. See: Mary Schaefer Fast, ‘A Theology of Disability: Living as a Theologian of the Cross’, in Journal of Religion, Disability and Health 15 (2011), 414-430 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2011.620392> [Accessed 8 February 2017].
be that she feels instinctively that any such proposal would be inadequate. Her suggestion in considering how it might operate is that the light and darkness approach of John’s gospel is useful. At the cross the darkness of the world does not disappear, as if by magic, nor is it explained away, but it is somehow transformed by the presence of God, rendering it bearable. This might be compared with Surin’s work on theodicy, referred to above.\textsuperscript{252} Surin draws the distinction between theoretical and practical theodicies. The theoretical asks questions such as: given there is evil and there is God, how is this the case? The practical, spoken from within experience, asks why this particular evil is happening now, to this person.\textsuperscript{253} Young’s proposal would fall into this second category. Like Surin, it does not remove or explain away the darker experiences of life, but seeks to be something that can be uttered about God in their presence. An example of such an utterance, concerning God’s impassibility, would be that God can be said to be beyond suffering in that ‘he is that ocean of love that can absorb all the suffering of the world and purge it without being polluted or changed by it.’\textsuperscript{254} Young reflects that such poetic expression, rather than literal language, is unavoidable here.\textsuperscript{255}

This, then, is Young’s insightful response to what she sees as the demands of theodicy set out above, the challenge to God to justify all of the gone-wrongness of the world and our experience of it. Importantly, what emerges from Young’s discussion is a conclusion that ‘Atonement is effected by the very presence of God.’\textsuperscript{256} She considers the Job narrative in the Old Testament, which she sees as revealing that it was the presence of God that satisfied Job’s desire to call God to account, not a ticking off of objective answers to his list of complaints. This is not to say that Young suggests that the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is of

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\textsuperscript{252} Page 123.
\textsuperscript{253} Surin, \textit{Theology and the Problem of Evil}, pp.144-149.
\textsuperscript{254} Young, \textit{Face to Face}, p.239.
\textsuperscript{255} This poetic, or narrative, expression is consistent with Young’s writing on the nature of the incarnation. There Young suggests a fruitful way to understand the incarnation is as telling two parallel stories: one of Jesus who lived as the ‘archetypal believer,’ trusting God to the end; the other of God being involved in the reality of human existence and suffering. See: Frances M. Young “A Cloud of Witnesses” in \textit{The Myth of God Incarnate}, ed. by John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 13-47 (p.37).
\textsuperscript{256} Young, \textit{Can These Dry Bones Live?}, p.62.
\end{flushright}
diminished importance. However, within her double reparation there emerges a strong emphasis on the presence of God, taking responsibility for all that goes beyond moral sin, as providing a full, credible account of Atonement. A summary expression of Young’s argument here might be that she arrives at “Atonement-as-presence”. Certain points of critique arise regarding this account, but before embarking on these, the third and fourth aspects of Young’s account are summarised.

How humanity partakes of the benefits of the Atonement

Young sees humanity’s participation in the objective and subjective benefits of the Atonement again in strongly sacrificial terms. The objective benefit is God’s self-emptying and being present to us, along with Jesus’ sacrifice of obedience. The subjective benefit is our response and experience of being changed by encountering God’s presence in that way. For Young, the central point here is that sacrifice and worship are completely intertwined. Therefore, although Jesus had offered the perfect, ultimate, sacrifice once for all, the continuing worship of the church in response to that should be seen in sacrificial terms. Christians, she suggests, saw baptism, martyrdom, repentance, praise, thanksgiving and thank-offering all as worship and as ways of entering into Jesus’ sacrifice and getting its benefits. They all stand in for the bringing of a physical sacrificial offering, which is hard-wired in our sense of what is required to approach God.

One might therefore summarise Young’s approach as follows: the estrangement of humanity from God resulting from our moral gone-wrongness (sin), intentional and otherwise, is dealt with by Jesus through the offering, as our representative, of the perfect sacrifice. The rest of the contingent nature of creation and its consequences are dealt with through God’s being present and accountable at the cross. We have access to the benefits of this double reparation by, on the one hand recognising the loving presence of God in the midst of trouble (since God’s presence is also what makes the suffering arising out of any aspect of creation’s

257 Young, Sacrifice, p.95.
258 Young, Sacrifice, p.82.
gone-wrongness bearable), and on the other hand responding to God in worship, which, being sacrifice, makes real to us the sacrifice of Jesus.

Reflecting again on the use of models, what Young claims about worship as sacrifice is not unreasonable, but does not of itself suggest that sacrifice as a model should take precedence over justice or victory. While worship may be interpreted as bringing a sacrifice, its content is just as likely to include a cry for, and commitment to, justice, as well as a celebration of the victory of the Atonement. In addition, although Young rather rejects a moral influence understanding of the Atonement, her comments on the subjective elements of it seem to reintroduce the same themes through another door.

The revelatory “vocation” of disability

Chapter 3 mentioned that Young explores the idea of the purpose, or vocation, of Arthur’s life. This includes revealing part of God’s judgement through our response to disability acting as a test that points to a need for Atonement. It also includes the insight that Arthur reveals that ideas of being made in the image of God, being in Christ, being the body of Christ, and participating in the benefits of the Atonement, are all best approached from a corporate perspective.

Young’s arguments here run along lines not dissimilar to those of Reinders in chapter 2, but the focus of her conclusion is different: that the image of God is a corporate idea, along with both Adam and Christ, who are corporate persons. She argues that the early Church Fathers, before the individualism of the Enlightenment, with its turn to the subject, did not regard the image of God as present inherently in each person. The image was a gift from God, through Jesus Christ, who is the true image. Therefore each person can participate in the image through faith by being “in Christ”, but it is not something we each individually own.259 Young takes this further by suggesting that each person displays part of the image of God (just as each is part of the body of Christ). Because Jesus was broken, or disabled, on the cross, some aspects of God’s image in Christ are only

259 Young, God’s Presence, p.176.
reflected within the church by people who are similarly impaired.\textsuperscript{260} However, there is danger in pursuing that line too literally. It can seem to make either the practicalities of the crucifixion, or the presence of disability, a necessity for the Atonement to be effective for all. However, such a logical step need not be insisted upon for the corporate discussion to point in useful directions for this thesis.

**Critique of Young’s account**

Young’s account presents important possibilities for enriching the conversation between disability theology and understandings of the Atonement. However, certain points of critique and weakness for the current project also emerge in addition to comments already made. It is clear that in the double reparation idea Young has found a powerful, pastorally effective interpretation, connecting everyday experience to the Atonement. However, both elements of that double reparation give rise to questions.

Concerning Jesus, as the perfect believer or worshipper, he appears to act in this analysis primarily as our representative. Chapter 4 noted that the prevailing sacrifice, justice and victory models of the Atonement all make as much, if not more, of the substitutionary aspect of Jesus’ role at the cross. In Young’s account, that role seems to have faded into the background. Of the models, Young clearly has a strong commitment to sacrifice as the principal lens through which to interpret the Atonement and our response to it. Yet while the earlier discussion of sacrifice illustrates that there is more to it than mere substitution of the animal for the sinful person, nonetheless an account of sacrifice without a substitutionary aspect seems to present only part of what that model has to offer. What seems to be missing in Young’s account is reference to Jesus not only as the offeror of the sacrifice, but as the sacrificial victim as well, despite the strain this puts on the correspondence of the metaphorical language, as recognised earlier. The

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{260} Young, *Arthur’s Call*, p.151.
\end{footnotesize}
universal reconciliation incorporated into the hermeneutical key seems to anticipate that fuller account of the cross.

Concerning the second part of the double reparation, pursuing such a strong emphasis on the presence of God might be in danger of the sliding away from the objective claim of the Atonement that White wants to resist. If it is primarily God’s presence (his willingness to “turn up”) that brings Atonement, then such an Atonement would seem to be achievable through a combination of the incarnation and revelations of his continuing presence, perhaps in the manner of that to Job. The cross would then be acting primarily as an offering of perfect worship together with a revelation of God’s character and willingness to accompany creation in its suffering. The sacrifice offered may address moral culpability, but the double reparation in this form leaves unanswered the question of what change is wrought by the Atonement for the rest of the gone-wrongness and contingency of the world. Young’s proposal of “Atonement-as-presence” seems to leave us with a subjective answer (we are confident of a sense of God’s presence within human tragedy) to an objective question (how, following the Atonement, are things not as they were as regards the whole contingent nature of creation and life?).

Concerning Young’s use of language, she refers to a deep and complex “gone-wrongness” throughout creation. While, as discussed above, to talk of moral gone-wrongness seems rightly to highlight a negative, to talk of disability as part of gone-wrongness is less straightforward. The “diversity of hopes” identified earlier in this chapter suggests that “gone-wrongness”, perhaps unintentionally, smuggles in a purely negative view of disability.261 While much of the experience of disability is difficult, the disability rights movement has emphasised that such experience is mixed and that there is much that is positive within it. This sense is better conveyed by talking of contingency throughout creation - that things are as they are, but might not have been so. This thesis will employ both terms so as to maintain the link with Young’s thinking, but to avoid a negative assumption.

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261 I am grateful to the attendees at a workshop at the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, held at Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles, 2017, for raising and discussing this point.
Conclusion: the possibility of participation

The contribution of Young’s approach to addressing the prior question of the nature of the Atonement in the light of disability is to open up a discussion of a wide, complex gone-wrongness, and to explore how all of that might be addressed in our main account of the cross. In the end Young leans towards an interpretation of “Atonement-as-presence”. With the more objective demands of the hermeneutical key in mind, the suggestion made here is that a rather different interpretive tack should be followed, by pressing Young's analysis much further and suggesting that at the cross God is not only present to the predicament of creation, but is in some way intimately participating in it: “Atonement-as-participation”. To begin doing so, it is illuminating briefly to recapitulate Young’s arguments, but deliberately identifying where notions of God’s participation, rather than presence, can be drawn out:

Young’s discussion of the demands of theodicy shape her account of the Atonement in the form of a double reparation at the cross. At the cross Jesus makes a perfect sacrifice of obedience (worship) which is effective in dealing with our culpability for sin, intentional and otherwise, and in healing our relationship with God. Young’s emphasis on a sacrificial understanding points towards a participatory dynamic operating with equal significance in two directions. Jesus, in his humanity, participates in the need that humanity has for the Atonement that sacrifice can bring. In response, we can participate in Jesus’ sacrificial offering through worship, which Young also, as noted, interprets primarily in sacrificial terms. What is more, that participation is best understood as a corporate affair as we, who already participate in the corporate person of Adam, can become included in the corporate person of Christ, the corporate body of Christ, and a corporate image of God. At the same time, God’s presence and accountability at the cross, reveals, or affirms, that since creation (not only at the focal moment of the cross) he has participated in the risk of creation’s contingent nature. In this way the Atonement might address objectively the experiences of life that seem to fall outside of an Atonement focused only on sin in the sense of moral misbehaviour.
This suggestion of Atonement-as-participation will now be developed as a response to the question of the nature of the Atonement and as a possibility for creating a richer interaction between Atonement and disability theology. The approach will be as follows:

a) The idea of Atonement-as-participation will be explored. This will involve taking Frances Young’s brief comment on God’s withdrawal at creation rather further and asking in what way we might speak of God’s participation in the whole risk and contingency of creation. It will also involve exploring the idea of the incarnation and Atonement as that participation at its most profound and complete, and whether the manner of God’s participation can be understood consistently across the themes of creation, incarnation and Atonement. Here also, in something of a departure from Young, the extent to which Jesus’ participation appears on the face of it to carry participation to the point of substitution, rather than mere representation, can be considered.

b) The question of what Atonement-as-participation addresses will be considered, and how that relates to Young’s “gone-wrongness”.

c) Keeping in mind the concerns of Abelard and Fiddes, the matter of what Atonement-as-participation says about the connection between the Atonement and on-going life will be examined.

d) At that point it will be important to revisit the prevailing models of sacrifice, justice and victory to ask how they fair as models of Atonement-as-participation. The fact that Young’s extensive use of (albeit only) the sacrifice model in her analysis is at least encouraging here.

e) The last question addressed will be whether Atonement-as-participation provides a basis for the Atonement to have a more foundational role in the major themes of disability theology as they continue to develop.
Part 3: The Proposal for a Better Interaction
Chapter 6

Atonement-as-participation

Introduction

The thesis that emerges from the discussion so far, in particular from the interpretive work of the preceding chapter and building on some of the thoughts of Frances Young, is that a fruitful way forward is to re-visit the idea of the Atonement in terms of God's participation in the whole risk of creation. To begin to develop that idea of Atonement-as-participation, there are some initial parameters to be considered around how the word “participation” is to be used.

Participation as a protocol, not a model

If we are to begin to talk of Atonement-as-participation and to apply it in the ways suggested above, it is important to decide whether it is being proposed as a new or separate model of the Atonement, in the sense of being a (theoretical) model as that concept was discussed in chapter 4. It might be put forward as such, either as a replacement for all of the prevailing models, were those felt to be on the whole unworkable in the context of disability; or to operate as an additional model, supplementing what the others are able to provide. After all, the point was made in that earlier chapter that the prevailing models should not be considered mutually exclusive, but that where the limits of correspondence are reached in applying the metaphorical resources of one model, another must step in to pick up the work.

However, Atonement-as-participation is not being presented in this thesis as a model in that sense, or for either of those purposes. As set out in chapter 4, such a theoretical model is a whole system, or structure of activity and belief, that can be held up against the subject of interest (here the Atonement), providing a high degree of correspondence, and allowing the cache of metaphorical language provided by that system to be used to explore the subject. While participation has emerged from a discussion of ideas and metaphors capable of bridging between the two fields of Atonement and disability theology, when it is developed below in
the form of Atonement-as-participation it is found to function instead as what might be called a “theological protocol” for approaching the Atonement as a whole, and which should guide the application of any model used to explore it.

What is meant by a theological protocol can be demonstrated by comparison with other concepts that act in a similar way. Examples would be the claim that the Atonement is God’s initiative; or that it relies on Jesus’ humanity and divinity; or that through it God in some way addresses sin. Talk of the Atonement is understood to be talk of this kind of action or event. Such protocols help to provide some agreed foundation of the type of action or event that the Atonement is. The models, whether sacrifice, victory or justice, are then deployed as ways of describing what God was doing through that sort of Atonement. The theological protocols help to guide and discipline the way in which the metaphorical resources of each model are so deployed. In some sense such protocols do similar work to, for example, the Christological statements in the Chalcedonian definition referred to briefly in chapter 4. In that case, talk of Jesus Christ is understood to be talk of the sort person who has been described by those statements.

Participation as a theological word

Participation is a broad term and its use in theological or philosophical discussion is hardly a new idea in itself. This is illustrated well by Anthony Balcomb’s thoughtful review of how what he calls “the metaphysics of participation” is increasingly at work in a number of areas. Briefly, Balcomb argues that there is currently a shift in philosophical thinking in favour of employing such ideas. Under a Cartesian approach, which he claims has for many years had something of a monopoly, knowledge arises by ‘subiecting objects to the control of our consciousness.’ Following that principle, we separate ourselves from that which we would observe and know, and this conceptual manoeuvre allows us to claim that our knowledge is objective. This has created a Cartesian anthropology which

262 Sellers, The Council of Chalcedon, pp.210-211.
separates being from the world, mind from body, animate from inanimate and so on. It has led in turn to a Cartesian approach to theology, tending to assume a separation of God from the world.

In contrast, Balcomb identifies a rise in the phenomenological approach to knowledge, the roots of which he finds mainly in Heidegger’s concept of knowledge arising through being-in the world, but also in the study of “primal cultures”, whereby properly to know the world we must participate in it, and indeed become immersed in it. Such an approach proposes that all things relate to and affect each other in some way and that the Cartesian separation at best lacks self-critique as far as that interaction is concerned. Balcomb considers a range of themes that run through current discussions of knowledge as participation. The theological aspect, or corollary, of these themes lies, he suggests, in God’s constant involvement in creation, birth, life, death and resurrection and in seeing creation as sacramental in quite broad terms. Balcomb’s own theological preference at that point is to lean towards a panentheistic or Process Theology approach in speaking of participation theologically. He acknowledges, though, that others find in Trinitarian language the necessary dynamics in the life of God to speak of participation without following where he wishes to go.

### Participation as divine initiative

The breadth of the philosophical backdrop painted by Balcomb’s commentary holds much encouragement for the present project. On the theological front, it also highlights the need to be specific in identifying the meaning of participation that is being applied within the theological protocol of Atonement-as-participation.

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265 This discussion has included only the briefest contact with the field of theories, or philosophies, of knowledge, via reference to Balcomb’s article. It is not part of the present thesis to examine such theories further, since the objective here is to examine participation as a theological idea. However, a discussion of non-Cartesian theories of knowledge does appear to be relevant to, for example, disability soteriology in the context of cognitive impairment. This point is returned to later in this chapter.
since it is certainly not novel for the word to arise in the context of either disability or the Atonement.266

In the first instance participation is being explored here as the manner in which God himself is present and active in God’s own initiative of the Atonement. The thesis considers, in light of the insights of disability theology, what has changed as a result of the Atonement (the objective aspect), and also how that change is recognised by or in humanity, inclusive of its full range of ability and impairment, and becomes connected to particular lives (the subjective aspect). To develop the concept of participation in this sense a further cue will be taken from Frances Young, from her brief comment on the withdrawal of God at creation.267 Beginning there, the discussion will consider the manner of God’s participation in the risk of creation and in the human predicament. It will then consider how that participation is expressed in the incarnation and, ultimately, the Atonement, before looking into what light that approach sheds on how to approach, together, the Atonement, disability and sin. The conversation partners chosen for the first part of this are Paul Fiddes, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel. Moltmann and Jüngel both make theological proposals in this direction in their discussions of God as creator and Fiddes draws on their insights in developing his own participatory account of the Trinity.

The discussion will then turn to the more subjective, or human aspect of how we understand ourselves to participate in the benefits of the Atonement, including how that past event comes to be connected with a particular human life in the present.

266 For example, Michael Gorman’s article on a new-covenant model of the Atonement calls that, among other things, participatory. However, his use of the term focuses on our participating in the new-covenant people of God as part of the outworking of the Atonement. That is rather different from a meaning of participation (primarily by God) pursued here. See: Gorman, ‘Effecting the New Covenant’, p.57.
267 Frances Young is not the only scholar to connect a kenotic approach to theological questions of disability. Amos Yong also makes the connection, referencing Moltmann, but again does so only briefly and does not develop the idea beyond the origin of contingency and an analogy between creation and the cross. See: Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome, p.180.
God and the risk of creation

What does it mean to say that God participates in the risk of creation and that this can provide a relationship between the Atonement and both the contingent and moral aspects of life? Young’s brief comment on the withdrawal of God at creation echoes Jürgen Moltmann’s discussion of God as creator, which provides a useful starting point. In pursuing a satisfactory account of creation, Moltmann maintains the emphasis from the Old Testament (which he sees arising over against a pagan pantheism) that God, YHWH, is other than the world. However, he suggests that a simplistic assumption that such otherness implies a separation of God from the world has proven unhelpful, devaluing creation and leading to its exploitation.

Moltmann therefore wishes to hold God’s otherness in tension with his immanence in creation. He looks, perhaps not surprisingly, to aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity at that point. The Spirit of God is involved in bringing creation to being, but is also present within creation, maintaining its every moment and every breath of life. This requires that in the act of creation God both creates and enters the world.268

Alongside this assertion Moltmann considers the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. Here he proposes that for such to be taken seriously as a theological concept, and for creation to be other than God, the nihil must first be conceived of and allowed. To explore this, Moltmann co-opts the concept of zimzum (or tsimtsum) from Jewish kabbalistic thought.269 This is the notion of God’s self-limitation that is linked to the Jewish doctrine of the Shekinah of God, that God could (and in his

269 The idea of zimzum was introduced into Jewish mystical thinking in the 16th century by Isaac Luria. Moltmann draws on Scholem’s account of Luria’s influence. Luria began with questions such as: ‘if God is “all in all,” how can there be things that are not God?’ and from there developed the idea of God’s withdrawal, using earlier ideas of God’s Shekinah. One aspect of zimzum is that God’s withdrawal and the accompanying setting of boundaries carries with it an anticipation of the need for judgement (the correction and ordering of things). Scholem sees in this the original latent possibility of evil. Scholem regards Luria’s concept of zimzum as a unique (and possibly the only) attempt at substantial articulation of creation out of nothing, which demonstrates the complexity and elusiveness of that seemingly simple formulation. Although Moltmann draws on the broad concept of zimzum, he does not adopt the subsequent details of its intricate outworking in Luria’s scheme of thought. See: Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (London: Thames and Hudson, 1955), pp.260-264.
humility would) limit himself such that his presence could be with his people in the tabernacle, in the ark, in the temple and in exile. Taking up this idea, God who is infinite would withdraw into himself to allow the space into which he would act creatively. This withdrawal of God allows the *nihil* out of which *creatio ex nihilo* can take place. The argument Moltmann presents allows creation to be other than God, and therefore not perfect as God is perfect, and at the same time allows a deep and constant participation of God in the world without falling back into pantheism.

A consequence of this scheme in terms of the risk of creation is that God’s self-withdrawal has created a nothingness that from then on threatens all of creation with a return to that nothingness, and against which God’s participation maintains creation. That original nothingness also acquires a more menacing aspect that arises within life in the form of sin as moral choice, which for Moltmann is exemplified by the history of Auschwitz. Overall, as Moltmann puts it, God creates ‘by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself’ and thus takes on a role of servant of his own creation.

There is no claim here that Moltmann provides a complete answer or mechanism. For one thing, it would be mistaken to treat this as a description of God as he is. Moltmann is using human spatial concepts metaphorically to explore the relationship between God and creation. Within that exploration we might still ask about God’s relationship with ‘the annihilating Nothingness’, whether God, in himself, is ever really at risk and what that could mean. Nonetheless, Moltmann’s approach does open up theological space for a creation that exists from the beginning at risk from the *nihil* from which it was created, which in turn provides meaningful theological space for contingency, accident, unexpected variety and, in

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271 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.86.
the present case, disability. In one sense, God participates in this “risk” by being implicated in contingency through the act of creation: he is responsible for bringing about a world under threat of return to nothingness. According to Moltmann, however, as God then accompanies creation, and human beings in particular, he also ‘suffers with them, he suffers because of them, and he suffers for them.’

Eberhard Jüngel also discusses the risk of creation in terms of God and the ongoing threat of nothingness, but approaches it in a slightly different way from Moltmann, which is also helpful. Part of Jüngel’s concern is to get away from arbitrary philosophical ideas of God as highest essence, or absolute causality, with attributes of infinitude and omnipotence. Instead he talks of God’s willingness to be in unity with perishability (the possibility of death) as a more fruitful train of thought. For Jüngel there is a point where God, who is inherently creative, chooses to go out into nothingness and to have to do with perishability. It is not so much that God contracts to make space for creation, but rather that God chooses to be in relation to non-being, and that in so choosing he provides the possibility of creation out of that non-being, or nihil. As with Moltmann, the struggle is to find a way to say that such a nothingness, which from then onward seems to threaten creation, is not God and yet is also not something which is over against God from eternity, since that would mean that God is not independent being.

Language is certainly stretched by both theologians, but the approach that each explores is a useful way to talk of the participation of God in creation and in the riskiness of its continued existence. One way or another it involves God intimately in the nothingness out of which creation arose and to which it always seems it might return, through the combination of contingent and moral risks inherent within it.

One of the points drawn out by Jüngel in his discussion of nothingness and perishability is that perishability might be more complex than it appears at first sight. It might be that it has both positive and negative aspects. He calls the

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277 Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, p.224.
phenomena of death and perishing ‘ontological similes’ for the nothingness that threatens life and the tendency of life to veer towards it. Our instinct is to regard these as wholly negative. However, he argues that perishing itself is ambivalent. On the one hand we can find within it the fitting boundary to what is real. That boundary is not necessarily the end of being as long as it has about it the possibility of becoming. In this case, perishing is a return to the possibility out of which being arose and might arise again. This suggestion does not stand alone as a statement about God as creator. It only takes on full meaning for Jüngel when that idea of possibility is considered in the light of the Christian understanding of resurrection, as is discussed in the section below.

The negative aspect of perishing, on the other hand, is that which removes any possibility of becoming. In his own vivid language, this is: ‘a negatively virulent emptiness without a place in being, a destructive undertow, a negative ontological whirlpool, a “nihilating nothing” (nihil nihilans).’ Jüngel’s proposal is that these positive and negative aspects can be separated out, at least in principle, in the sense that there could be differentiation within God’s addressing perishability as a whole through the Atonement. This proves to be a useful concept in developing the discussion of disability, sin, what the Atonement addresses, and what in chapter 5 above was termed the “diversity of hopes.” This point will be returned to after the discussion of the incarnation and Atonement below.

Fiddes makes a particularly useful contribution at this point in the development of the argument. He takes these ideas of creation and of God (either through withdrawal or “going out”) having to do with nothingness and perishability, and combines them through the concept of God being subject to “befalling”. Just as our experience of both the contingent and moral nature of life is such that things befall us which might not have done, so by analogy God is willing to be subject to things befalling him. The significance of this for the present discussion is that the manner of God’s participation in creation and in the human predicament within it

278 Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, p.211.
279 Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, p.216.
280 Page 119.
lies partly in God’s being responsible for the involvement of nothingness and perishability in creation, and for the contingency and risk within creation that result. It also lies partly in God’s willingness, in accompanying his creation, to be open to the risk of what might befall him, what might be called a willingness to be surprised by things that are, but might have been otherwise. More is added to the manner of God’s participation below when we turn to the incarnation and Atonement, but before doing so it is valuable to examine Fiddes’ approach in a little more detail.

A first observation is that Fiddes’ argument revolves around suffering being something that can befall God. There is no intention in this thesis to smuggle in the suggestion that disability should be equated in an undifferentiated way with suffering. To do so would be to fall into the ever-present trap of normative presumption. Fiddes’ discussion of suffering is therefore treated here as encompassing both positive and negative experiences of contingency and of moral choice, in the sense that not only suffering, but joy, might befall God, as it might befall us. Fiddes does pick up on the ideas of the positive and negative aspects of perishability, or death. He proposes that it is moral evil, which he describes as a turning away from the good, which has given death, otherwise a proper boundary to life, the additional property of being an enemy, a hostile non-being. He asks whether we could even say that moral evil was a “surprise” to God in that it was a possibility, but not a necessity, of creation. While there remains accountability for moral sin, its possibility was also part of the profound risk of creation.

However, Fiddes’ main argument concerns the suffering of God. He considers that our approach to the suffering of God is subject to the worldview of our time. In the past the idea of God as impassible seemed plausible, and indeed could lead to illuminating discussion of the nature of divinity. In the present, with a prevailing view of the world as a network of relationships, it only makes sense that a relational God would suffer in a way that is somehow analogous to the way in

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which we experience suffering - as something which befalls us. Fiddes sets himself is to find a way of saying that God suffers and experiences change, and yet that his character, his goodness and faithfulness, remain unaltered. This echoes Frances Young’s comments noted in the previous chapter, that although she wanted to feel that God experiences suffering, he must in some way remain unchanged, or at least undiminished, by it.

Fiddes’ proposal to address this turns on the idea that God does not desire suffering; he allows it to befall him, but is not overwhelmed by it because, although suffering is alien to him, ‘he chooses to make the alien thing his own.’ The idea that something is alien, but that God chooses to make it intimately his own is an important part of Fiddes’ argument. He explores it also through considering the apparent meaning of God’s love through the Old Testament. That love seems to be expressed in terms of suffering, particularly the suffering of anguish over the behaviour of the one loved (Israel), which befalls God and which he makes intimately his own. Therefore Fiddes’ particular contribution to this present exploration of the manner of God’s participation in the risk of creation lies both in drawing together the earlier ideas into that of God being open to the risk of things befalling him; and in the idea that God is willing to take that which is alien to him (and has befallen him) and make it most intimately his own, giving it purpose and meaning.

Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God, pp.38-40. The impassibility of God has of course been the subject of much debate and can be a matter of some subtlety. Fiddes suggests that the worldview of the Church Fathers was influenced by Greek philosophical ideas that the changeability of the world pointed to an unchangeability of the perfect world of God. He compares this to the Enlightenment worldview of, say, the 18th Century under which a rational theology cast the world as a machine and God as its remote designer. Under either way of thinking impassibility could be maintained in a way that it cannot in the present context. Fiddes’ argument should not be extrapolated to an assertion that disability theology is a mere artefact of a particular worldview; rather, a change in our concept of the world brings to light both presumptions and possibilities previously unexamined.

Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God, p.150.
The next stage in developing this concept of God’s participation in the risk of creation is to consider the idea that it is expressed in the flesh of the incarnation and reaches its deepest, most intimate point in the Atonement.

**Atonement as God’s deepest, once for all participation**

It could be said that to present a discussion of creation, followed by the incarnation and Atonement, is to go about things in the wrong order, since Moltmann, Jüngel and Fiddes all regard the understanding of God’s participation as creator in the risk of his creation, discussed above, as rooted in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. However, the argument is ordered as it is here to emphasise that what their analysis reveals is that the incarnation and Atonement represent not only the basis of that understanding, but also where it reaches its most profound, definitive point. It also demonstrates that a focus on God’s participation is a consistent and useful way of interpreting that movement.

Before returning directly to those theologians, however, it would seem appropriate in the present context to make some mention of Athanasius, with particular reference to his often-quoted declaration:

‘For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.’

On the face of it this seems to be an expression of the incarnation and Atonement in strong participatory terms that might well be important for the argument being developed here. As Athanasius’ discussion progresses, his focus is on how God has addressed the dilemma of corruption and death in creation brought on by sinful humanity, whom nonetheless it is in his character to continue to love. What

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Part 3: Chapter 6: Atonement-as-participation

is significant here about his approach is his emphasis on the manner of God’s participation through the incarnation.

Two points arise. First, Athanasius considers whether God could not have dealt with sin simply through repentance and forgiveness. This, he fears, would possibly have returned humanity to a point from which they could yet again fall away. Instead, he sees it as entirely fitting that God should address the dilemma “from within” through a physical human body. Weinandy observes in his commentary on Athanasius that the flesh assumed here is the same flesh as humanity, not in any way idealised or quarantined. As Athanasius puts it: ‘So it was right for the Word to use a human instrument and extend himself in all things.’ As a result, the work of the Atonement, whatever it addresses, takes place fully in the context of the (physical, mental, emotional) body and its life experience, Jesus’ body representing all of these. Athanasius’ treatment does not address disability, but his appreciation of the appropriateness of Jesus’ human physicality, that can be said to “extend himself in all things”, at least opens the space for the argument that diverse bodies and experiences are included here ab initio, rather than by later concession. Second, Athanasius sees the manner of God’s participation in the incarnation and Atonement as consistent with that in creation. As creator, ‘Just as he is in all creation, he is in essence outside the universe but in everything by his power.’ Similarly, the manner of Jesus' participation in humanity is that he takes on full, real humanity, but he is not contained, restricted, or polluted by it. He remains God and it is by this that his participation in humanity is effective and meaningful.

Athanasius does not particularly separate out the two elements of moral sin and the contingent nature of creation, which are an important part of the present discussion. In that regard, input is found elsewhere. However, it is encouraging to

289 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, p.44.
290 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, p.17.
note how consistent the approach behind Athanasius’ incarnational declaration is with the participatory argument being developed here.

Returning to Moltmann, Jüngel and Fiddes, their notions of God’s participation in the risk of creation find their fullest expression in the incarnation and Atonement. For Moltmann, God’s withdrawal to allow space for finite creation is a first act of the grace, or self-humiliation by which God self-defines his character. Consistent with the idea of zimzum, this grace is demonstrated in his presence with his people, Israel, and fulfilled in the incarnation and in God’s self-surrender on the cross. The importance of the incarnation for Moltmann is that God not only takes death into himself, he also participates in all of the realities of human life, which “stands under death, law and guilt.” Then, on the cross, with a particular focus on the moment of Jesus’ cry of abandonment, God in Christ enters into the nihil that threatened creation and fills it with his own presence and life. This enables the eschatological creation whereby the hold that the nihil had over creation is destroyed. For Moltmann, the self-humiliation of the incarnation and Atonement is not a Christological kenosis (Jesus Christ emptying himself temporarily of aspects of his divinity), but rather the fullest revelation of God’s eternal character.

Although Moltmann does not separate out positive and negative elements of death as clearly as does Jüngel, he adds that the most malign aspect of nothingness arising in life (typified in his writing by Auschwitz) is also entered into by Jesus and redeemed, not because it had some potential of its own, but because God can create life out of nothingness.

Jüngel continues his theme of God’s having to do with perishing and nothingness, which was the core of his concept of creatio ex nihilo. Through being incarnate in a body that was subject to the realities of perishing, and ultimately subject to death on the cross, God became involved in perishing in the living, then dead, Jesus and in the struggle with nothingness that issued in the resurrection. Jüngel suggests

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294 Moltmann, God in Creation, pp.91-92.
that in doing so, God took nothingness into his eternal being and gave it a place, which took away its destructive, hostile, chaotic character. God’s revelation here is that he can bear ‘the annihilating power of nothingness, even the negation of death, without being annihilated by it.’ While the cross is the definitive revelation of this in history, Jüngel sees God’s having to do with perishing at the cross, not as something entirely new, but as revealing God’s eternal character. Again, Jüngel is separating the positive and negative elements of perishing. That which is negative is dealt with by God; that which is positive, a boundary to life which has the possibility of becoming, becomes the resurrection.

Fiddes’ two concepts, of God allowing evil and suffering to befall him; and of God defining his character as one who is willing to take that which is alien and make it intimately his own, also find their fullest expression in the incarnation and Atonement. The incarnation does not befall God, but the taking on of real human flesh is a demonstration of God’s willingness that evil and contingency should befall him. On the cross, moral evil, not a necessity of creation, but seemingly an inevitable risk, befalls him at the hands of humanity. Here he takes death which is alien to him and makes it most intimately his own. This is important to Fiddes’ argument as it retains the significance of the cross beyond the resurrection. The fact that ‘the risen one remains the crucified one’ means that in God’s defining himself eternally as one who can overcome non-being, suffering what befalls him is central. This point, which is close to that made by Frances Young about the importance of not rushing from the cross to the resurrection, again helps in discerning the manner of God’s participation, through the incarnation and Atonement, in the human predicament. Fiddes, with his affinity for a moral influence understanding of the Atonement, goes on to make an additional proposal, that God’s encounter with death in Jesus demonstrates his ‘participation in our estrangement’, which prompts a real change in us, moving us to put our faith in him.

295 Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, p.219.
296 Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God, p.266.
Participation, suffering and eternity

Having reached this point, there is a note of theological caution to be raised in relation to the use of the word participation, as it is being developed here. In setting out an argument that, starting with God’s participation in the risk of creation, such participation reaches its most profound point at the Atonement, it is possible to end up with the sense that God’s participation evolves with time. Any expression of God’s participation (and of its temporal revelation) must be held in tension with the concept of God as eternal. This is needed to add balance to Fiddes’ comments above (also reflected in Frances Young) that a contemporary worldview demands that we must be able to speak of a God who suffers.

Herbert McCabe makes a valuable contribution here with his paper on what he calls God’s “involvement” as creator. McCabe approaches the point as follows. When we talk of God’s suffering, while acknowledging the strength (particularly in pastoral terms) of the human analogy favoured by Fiddes and others, we would not want to suggest that God’s suffering is entirely the same as ours. McCabe stresses that God is not changed by suffering (quite unlike the Process Theology thought that influences Fiddes). This is not because God is in any way indifferent to it, indeed quite the opposite. As creator, sustainer and redeemer, God is more intimately and eternally involved in the joy and pain of his creation than we ever can be. There is nothing about it of which he is unaware. McCabe’s suggestion is that it is neither necessary nor correct to say that God suffers, in God’s self, in a way that is closely analogous to human suffering and that the desire to do so arises from a weak doctrine of incarnation. A more complete sense of the incarnation would recognise that it is enough to know that ‘it is really God who suffers in Jesus of Nazareth.’

To be fair to Fiddes and Young, they both acknowledge this tension, but McCabe’s analysis of God’s involvement draws out more clearly that the participation revealed in Jesus, in the incarnation and Atonement, is a reflection of a participation (‘involvement’, in McCabe’s language) that must be eternally true of

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God. As well as a warning about insisting that God’s suffering is too closely analogous to ours, McCabe’s argument is also an affirmation of the point being developed in this thesis, that Atonement-as-participation expresses an eternal feature of God’s relationship with all of creation and not merely an alternative descriptive theoretical model of what happens on the cross.

The manner of God’s participation

While each of the theologians principally discussed here has his or her own way of navigating a consistent understanding of creation, incarnation and Atonement, and his or her own preferences of language, there is nonetheless important consistency here. In each case, the threat, or risk, that accompanied creatio ex nihilo and in which God was intimately involved as creator, is entered into by God in Christ through the particularity of the incarnation and in the most intimate way at the Atonement. While what was revealed of God’s character at the Atonement is something eternally true, nonetheless the Atonement represents a dealing with the nihil, or perishing that has a finality and completeness (and, per Athanasius, a “fittingness”) about it. At the Atonement God’s participation in the risk of creation reached its most profound point, and also, echoing Vernon White from chapter 1, brought about a universal ontological change, which is effective for all time.

Following that event, things are not as they were. To borrow the expression from Hebrews, chapters 7, 9 and 10, it was “once for all”.

The risk in which God participates and the threat of nothingness over creation certainly involves the consequences of poor moral choice, for which there is human culpability, but it clearly also involves the more complex web of contingency in creation, out of which much suffering and joy arise and which is of particular interest in the context of disability. This is discussed further in the section below on alienation.

Before moving to that discussion, however, it is useful to draw out and summarise from the discussion in this chapter so far what can be said about the manner in which God appears to participate in the risk of creation and in the human predicament. This also allows for some consideration of whether, in an
understanding of Atonement-as-participation, Jesus is acting as representative, substitute, or both. The elements of God’s participation have emerged as follows:

a) God as creator is responsible for the part that nothingness, perishability and contingency play in creation;

b) As he accompanies creation, God is open to the risk of things befalling him, including joy, suffering and evil;

c) God is willing to take that which is alien to him and make it intimately his own;

d) Through the incarnation, God in Jesus Christ is open to the consequences of nothingness, perishability, contingency, and indeed moral sin, befalling him;

e) At the Atonement all of these find their most profound expression, once for all. Not only do these things fully befall God in Christ, all of this that is alien to God, he takes and makes intimately his own. On the cross God also demonstrates that he is accountable for the way that creation is. The Atonement seen in this way, though it is once for all, is a revelation of a participation that is eternally true of God.

Does God in Christ participate as representative or substitute?

Moltmann, Jüngel and Fiddes (and indeed Athanasius) do not discuss at length whether Jesus’ role on the cross should be seen primarily as substitutionary or representative. Moltmann does examine the very early development of the Christian understanding that Jesus’ death on the cross was “for us”, but leaves it rather open as to whether this entailed Jesus being our representative or substitute. However, this question has often arisen in discussions of the prevailing models of the Atonement. With the reasonably developed picture above of the Atonement as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation,

it is difficult to sustain Frances Young’s suggestion that Jesus’ role on the cross is representative, as the perfect worshipper, and not substitutionary.

The elements of God’s participation as expressed here suggest much more strongly that Jesus played both roles. We could say that as the one who accompanies creation, and humanity in particular, and who is willing that the effects of moral and other contingency might befall him, God in Christ, taking responsibility for all this at the cross, appears to represent us and our predicament. That might well be expressed in terms of Jesus as the representative offeror of the perfect sacrifice. However, as the one who takes all that is alien to him, including sin and death, and makes it intimately his own, God in Christ at the cross appears to stand for us more as substitute, expressed in that case as the sacrifice offered.

This is not presented as a rigid attribution of the elements of God’s participation, proving that two wholly separate roles are fulfilled on the cross. The roles of representative and substitute are in any case difficult completely to disentangle convincingly. The point here is that an Atonement-as-participation approach helps in discerning the source and strength of both emphases within a theology of the Atonement as a whole.300

Alienation: disability and the language of sin

If Atonement-as-participation is to be proposed as above, two questions arise as to what it is that God is assumed to address through such an Atonement. The first of these emerges from considering the Atonement models discussed in chapter 4. There is a sort of “pairing-up” that happens in that each model directs its expression of the Atonement at its own target or set of targets. We might say that

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300 In his recent volume examining the nature of the event of the cross, Tom Wright is at pains to re-connect the theology of the cross with its historical context, arising out of the history of Israel and of the life and ministry of Jesus and reactions to him. In doing so, he emphasises Jesus’ vocation of “representative substitution”, as the one who stands for the many. See: Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp.210-223.
under the sacrifice model, the Atonement provides a ritual cleansing from the pollution of sin, or re-establishes a relationship broken by sin. Under the justice model the guilt, or the debt of guilt, arising through sin is removed or satisfied by the Atonement and a covenant is restored. Under the victory model, the powers that oppress humanity (sin, the law, death and Satan) are vanquished in the Atonement and the oppressed are set free. In each case, the language used for the target of the Atonement is related to the model as a whole and is part of what that model contributes to our overall perception of what God achieves through the Atonement. Although Atonement-as-participation is not being proposed as a separate theoretical model, if it is to open up an understanding of the Atonement and a way of applying those models that can address the concerns of disability theology, it is useful to ask whether it contains a sense of the target of the Atonement which enables more effective engagement with disability theology’s significant themes.

The second question is whether Atonement-as-participation runs the risk of diluting within Atonement theology the importance of the concept of sin, including its nature, its consequences and human accountability for it. After all, the hermeneutical key derived for this thesis was most definitely couched in terms of sin. It turned on the large claim that the Atonement has dealt effectively (and objectively, not only ritualistically) with sin and its consequences.301 A potential criticism of a participatory approach could be that the purpose of the Atonement has become that of addressing, in place of sin, a somewhat value-neutral contingency and risk inherent within creation.

These two questions are both related to the challenge already recognised, of finding a way to talk about the Atonement, disability and sin. There is understandable discomfort with speaking of sin and disability together. The analysis of the account of the Atonement found in existing disability theology literature (chapter 3) indicated a desire to steer clear of what could be called a “sin model of disability” that often appears to be present in biblical texts or normate

301 White, Atonement and Incarnation, p.10.
presumptions. However, if the aim of this thesis is to bring Atonement and disability theologies closer together, this is something to address here.

**Atonement and explanation relativity**

There are a number of ideas within the discussion so far that are helpful in addressing these questions. Disability theology in itself brings a perspective that challenges what sort of event the Atonement is and what God is addressing through it. As noted above, the prevailing models tend to express the target of the Atonement in terms of sin. However, a disability perspective indicates that there is much in the experience of life that is significant, negative and causes suffering, and yet which seems to fall outside of a concept of sin which is presented in terms of moral evil (a turning away from God’s will, per Fiddes above). There is a complex mixture of contingency and sin which is often difficult to disentangle, what Frances Young called a wide gone-wrongness in the world. Part of this was expressed towards the end of chapter 5 as the “diversity of hopes”, illustrated by the claim that it is mistaken to presume what sort of transformation someone with what we would perceive as an impairment “ought” to look to God to achieve through the Atonement.302

This challenge from a disability perspective is an example of what Garfinkel calls ‘explanation relativity’.303 Garfinkel’s work in this regard sets out to explore how we arrive at what we regard as valid explanations of phenomena within his particular field of sociology, but it is also relevant here. One of his major points is that what counts as a valid explanation is heavily influenced by our frame of reference.304 He also points out that what counts as an explanation may well presuppose other explanations.305 Garfinkel’s argument could be applied as

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302 The approach of systematic theology has typically been to identify the two categories of moral evil and natural evil and to consider a relationship between these and sin, or to identify some purpose behind natural evil. However, both Frances Young (in chapter 5 above) and Alistair McFadyen (in this chapter) present a more nuanced argument, suggesting that this binary categorisation as an approach to what the Atonement addresses is too simplistic.


304 Garfinkel’s work was also used by Kenneth Surin in his work on theodicy, mentioned in chapter 5 above.

305 Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation*, p.33.
follows to the question of what it is that the Atonement primarily addresses. If our frame of reference does not particularly encompass disability and begins with concerns about ethics and moral sin, then the prevailing models, such as they are, function as explanations of the Atonement. They provide various ways of exploring how God deals effectively with moral sin and the impact of that on humanity. They also presuppose that any other matters that might be brought into the picture (aspects of wider gone-wrongness in creation, to use Young’s term) are also in some way the results of moral sin.

If, alternatively, our frame of reference is firmly rooted in a social model of disability, as much of disability theology is, then what counts as an explanation of the Atonement is one that envisages the transformation of the social and attitudinal issues that generate much of the experience of disability. The seeming irrelevance, or at least inappropriateness, of speaking of moral sin in situations of profound impairment, particularly intellectual impairment, precludes much of such language from the explanation and certainly distances it from any link between disability and moral sin. However, the account of the Atonement being developed in this thesis, starting with God’s participation in the risk of creation, provides the possibility of an explanation that bridges these two frames of reference and anticipates that in the Atonement God addresses, and deals effectively with, all of this complex mixture of contingency and sin, allowing responses to the above questions to be proposed.

**Alienation as the target of the Atonement**

A number of theologians, writing about this complex mix and its effects on creation and humanity make reference to the term “alienation”, or similar, and consideration of how they do so indicates that it is a useful term to describe and explore what it is that is addressed by Atonement-as-participation. Fiddes captures the sense of this when he states that on the cross, God in Christ ‘consents to participate in the alienation which is the lot of a humanity which has lost communion with God.’ Fiddes’ concern here is to chart what he calls the journey of forgiveness.

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Paralleling human and divine forgiveness, he discerns that the journey demands movement from both the forgiver and the forgiven. The forgiver does not stand apart and offer a pardon, but must in some way enter into the world of the forgiven and make an effort to understand why they did what they did, in order to offer forgiveness which includes the possibility of establishing a new relationship. At a human level, then, Fiddes sees the forgiver participating in the life and world of the forgiven, which is a costly process. Fiddes finds the divine parallel and pattern of this on the cross, and in particular at the point of Jesus’ cry of forsakenness (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), where God in Christ participates in the experience of humanity that has lost all meaningful communion with God. The deepest point of God’s participation is in humanity’s alienation from himself.

Fiddes is close to Moltmann here. Moltmann criticises the early church for importing Greek philosophical ideas of the impassibility of God, which he claims became a barrier to understanding God in the crucified Christ. As mentioned above, he also locates the focal point of Jesus’ suffering in his cry of abandonment on the cross. At that point Jesus has suffered all the particular sins of those immediately around him (jealousy, love of power, moral failure) and the full impact of that is that he suffers a deep alienation from the Father. For Moltmann, ‘His mission is fulfilled once he has been abandoned on the cross.’

However, alienation at this point still leans toward something primarily related to sin as conscious moral choice. The picture is helpfully widened by Alistair McFadyen’s careful examination of human behaviour and experience in his book Bound to Sin. Here, using the deliberately challenging examples of child sexual abuse and the Holocaust, McFadyen’s objective is to examine whether it is possible to describe and explain such behaviour with just moral or psychological concepts and language, or whether theological concepts and language are necessary. His proposal is that St Augustine’s doctrine of original sin brings a way of understanding these phenomena that is not available to moral, psychological, or indeed some other theological, approaches. In the course of that argument,

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however, McFadyen explores the complex nature of our human relationship with
ourselves, others and God, those things addressed by the Atonement. He
challenges what he sees as core elements of a modern interpretation of those
relationships: an inalienable individual freedom of will; and a natural morality that
says I am responsible only for what I do. These are presumed to exist without the
need for any reference to God.

For McFadyen, the doctrine of original sin states that, on the contrary, the very
material (our situation, social structures, culture, politics) out of which we construct
those relationships and even our personhood are ‘pathologically distorted’ by a
history of sin. McFadyen does not press Augustine’s suggestion that we each
inherit biologically a culpability for the sin of Adam, but he argues at length that
modern notions of the freedom of the will and of moral choice are superficial.
Instead, the will is bound by a very broad inheritance. We are at least from birth
socialised into a world distorted by sin so that, while original sin is contingent
rather than necessary to being human, it is hard to claim that any person, group or
society is ever “in neutral” before God. There is choice, through which we
contribute to this inheritance. There is accountability for that choice, but that does
not stand in place of our solidarity with the whole of the world as it is.

A feature of McFadyen’s argument is its resistance to individualism. Humanity as
a whole is culpable for much, including its responses as a society to the contingent
nature of creation (for example, the existence of disability). But we struggle to
recognise our solidarity in such because we cannot identify it with specific acts of
the individual that we judge to be wrong. In his work on the nature of personhood,
McFadyen stresses this further: that true human existence is ex-centric, in that it is
orientated to others and to God. It is the disorientation of those relationships,

308 Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*
309 McFadyen also examines the contribution of feminist theology to this discussion of sin and
alienation. He finds that it usefully identifies pride as the pathology of sin in patriarchy and sloth as
the pathology of sin in women. However, he concludes that the feminist critique is coy about the
language of God himself. God is experienced in right relations, but is not really distinct, so the
analysis fails to reach what he considers to be the core of human alienation, being alienation from
through a host of influences and choices, generating a deep and complex alienation, that lies at the heart of what the doctrine of original sin was trying to articulate.\footnote{Alistair McFadyen, \textit{The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.38-45.}

McFadyen therefore helps to broaden the sense of what Fiddes and Moltmann refer to as the alienation in which God, in Christ, participates through the incarnation and the Atonement. A disability theology perspective then adds further breadth to the nature of such alienation. Nancy Eiesland, in her reflections on the experiences of Diane DeVries and Nancy Mairs, provides an example.\footnote{Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God}, pp.33-48.} DeVries was born without arms or legs and Mairs, an author, wrote about her experiences as she lived with multiple sclerosis. Eiesland describes DeVries’ surprisingly positive relationship with her body and her life experience, the rejection of some devices and treatments that seemed alien (prosthetics, for example), and acceptance and incorporation of others, such as an electric wheelchair. She also describes how others had responded, both positively and very negatively, to her body. This account is held alongside Mairs, who at times felt her body had betrayed her and left her feeling that she belonged neither in her own body nor in any physical space, yet at other times felt that she had discovered new and good ways of living, concluding that it is often difficult to distinguish between the blessings and curses of ordinary life.\footnote{Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God}, p.46.} What Eiesland draws out of this juxtaposition is that what seem like unusual situations serve to demonstrate that in ordinary life our relationships with our own bodies, as well as with others, incorporate contingency, difficulty and a mixture of joys, griefs and tensions. This leads on to her argument that the body and bodily experience should be seen as a source and indeed a starting point for theological insight (sometimes called body theology).

Without the need to resolve all of the points McFadyen raises about original sin, or how precisely Eiesland intends that body theology should operate, this discussion demonstrates that the idea of “alienation” is effective in gathering together the
complex moral and contingent situation of creation and humanity that Atonement-as-participation, as it is being developed here, is addressing. Other words might of course be considered as candidates to do this work. For example, exclusion or isolation might be regarded as suitable obverses to participation. However, they both seem to give questions around a theology of access priority over other theological aspects of disability. Lack of community might also serve, but perhaps does not lend itself so well to one’s relationship with oneself and experiences that are personal or private to the individual. Frances Young’s term “gone-wrongness” might also be adopted. However, discussions around this have indicated that the “wrongness” element of it smuggles in a presumption that all experiences of contingency are bad, which is a presumption rightly resisted by wider disability theology.

The term “alienation” seems better able to capture the broad raft of circumstances addressed by God’s participation. These can include the experiences of pain; diverse bodily and cognitive form or function; attitudes encountered in society; a sense of being of a different class or category of person (social constructs of “us and them”); physical exclusion or lack of access; our response to our own body, to God and to others, whether related to disability or not; and the effects of intentional or unintentional, personal and corporate moral sin. On this basis, the thesis will adopt alienation as the expression for the complex predicament that, in the terms used above, is the target of Atonement-as-participation. More can now be said about the meaning of alienation in this sense to provide a more complete picture.

Alienation and the positive and negative of perishability

The discussion has broadened the sense both of God’s participation, reaching its deepest point at the cross, and of that in which he participates. However, it has not yet successfully addressed what has to date been the uncomfortable relationship between sin and disability, or indeed the diversity of hopes. A helpful insight here can be drawn from Jüngel’s proposal above, that perishing is in itself

313 Discussions with participants in a seminar presented to the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, Los Angeles, June 2017.
ambivalent, having positive and negative aspects. As a proper boundary to existence, returning it to the possibility out of which existence arose, perishing is positive. This aspect is taken up by God in Christ and becomes the resurrection. However, perishing also has a negative aspect, a nihilating nothingness that alienates us from all possibility. At the cross, God in Christ enters into this, takes it to himself and gives it a place within himself without being diminished by it. This alienating part of perishing is what is contributed by sin, whether that of personal choice or, in McFadyen's terms, that of the systems into which we are socialised from birth. In Fiddes' language, God takes the aspect of death that is most alien to him and makes it intimately his own. Fiddes also suggests that this is why we encounter a mixture of reactions around the human experience of death: denial of it as the enemy into which sin has made it; and acceptance of it as a proper boundary of this life.

The significance of this approach for Atonement-as-participation and disability theology is to suggest that the same distinction might be carried into considerations of contingency, disability and alienation. If it can be said that there is an aspect of perishability that is positive and has dignity as a boundary to life, yet a part which is alienating, it might be said that there are aspects of contingency (in the present case, of disability) that are positive and have dignity as part of what shapes a particular life, yet also there are aspects which are alienating. The positive aspects are rightly emphasised in the disability theology literature in protest against normate assumptions. The alienating aspects are found in personal sin, in personal experiences of alienation and in encounters with an unaccommodating world. Eiesland's account of the mixture of experiences reported by Diane DeVries and Nancy Mairs noted above, though not expressed in Jüngel's terms, illustrates the point well. This approach to the analysis allows us to say that just as God in Christ took to himself and dealt with effectively what is negative and alienating in death, that arises from sin, so God in Christ took to himself and dealt with effectively what is negative and alienating in contingency (and in disability). Similarly there are aspects of contingency (and disability) that it is entirely legitimate to expect to be preserved.
A further reflection on this point can be drawn from John Hull's theological writing on his experience of blindness. He observes that, as the various texts in the Bible are on the whole written from a sighted frame of reference, darkness and blindness can be understood inadvertently to be entirely negative and alienating, particularly given the great themes of light and dark, seeing and blindness that so often emerge. However, his experience of blindness has suggested that this is an over-simplified understanding. In the Genesis 1 account of God as creator, darkness appears first as chaotic and threatening. When God creates light, darkness does not disappear. Instead, in language strongly reminiscent of Jüngel, darkness is given a place and God is discovered to be Lord over the darkness as well as the light.314

However, there are aspects of darkness, and blindness, that remain alienating and threaten a return to chaos. Hull expresses this as the plurality of worlds which people inhabit.315 Taking blindness as his example, rich and poor people who are blind live in what Hull calls the same “natural” world of blindness, which is quite different from the sighted world. At the same time, they live in separate, socially constructed, worlds of wealth and poverty. Indeed many people who are blind or have other disabilities find themselves confined to a socially constructed world of poverty. For Hull, much of the natural world of being blind he would want to keep, it being full of possibilities of becoming, to use Jüngel's language. By contrast, the socially constructed world of poverty that seems to attach itself to blindness is alienating and is to be addressed, critiqued and transformed.

Participation, alienation and the diversity of hopes

In summary, then, adopting Atonement-as-participation, God enters into, takes to himself and deals effectively with all that is alienating. This includes sin, the moral evil that has alienated us from God and from one another. It includes the deeply ingrained sinfulness of social and political structures into which we are socialised from birth and which shape not only how we act, but our very personhood and

314 Hull, In the Beginning, pp.1-3.
perception of what is good and bad. It includes our own often varying and
ambivalent reaction to disability. God also enters into all that is positive, all that for
Jüngel is not part of the "nihilating nothing", but rather retains "the possibility of
becoming", and preserves that through the resurrection. 316

As suggested in chapter 5, as well as such a proposal taking into account
contingency and disability as a whole, it should also be required to be meaningful
in the context of the discrete facts and lived experience of representative situations
of disability. The situations put forward as representative were:

a) a person who uses a wheelchair owing to a physical disability acquired
during their lifetime, through accident or illness, but who is otherwise
unimpaired;

b) a person with Down Syndrome; and

c) a person with profound intellectual disability

Consideration of situations a) and b) gave rise to what was called the "diversity of
hopes" - that people with a particular impairment may or may not find aspects of it
alienating and anticipate that those should be in some way eliminated or restored
through the Atonement. Though it is tempting for those without such impairments
to assume that they can judge what "ought" to result from the Atonement (and to
assume that there is a single answer to that) the testimony within disability
theology calls that judgement sharply into question.

Atonement-as-participation, however, opens up a way of addressing that diversity
of hopes constructively by moving away from a binary sin/not sin analysis that
insists that everything about disability is bad, and to be eliminated, or good, and to
be preserved. In situations a) and b) matters such as identifiable personal moral
failure, or discrimination, presumption and cruelty in response to disability are
readily identifiable as targets of the Atonement in terms of sin. There are others

316 This comment on its own opens up questions, in light of Atonement-as-participation, about the
resurrection body and mind and the meaning of various eschatological texts. Such a project lies
beyond the scope of the present thesis.
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where what is alienating in one’s life experience is more complex and personal and less easily rendered in the language of sin, but where the fact that God in Christ deals effectively with what is alienating and preserves what seems good opens a more constructive space for the interaction of the Atonement and hope in the light of disability. This allows the assertion that the presence of impairment and the lived experience of disability are fully validated as integral to humanity as a whole, as disability theology rightly demands, but Atonement-as-participation allows us to say also that they are not the final word.

In situation c) Atonement-as-participation similarly removes the need to place all aspects of the life of a person with profound intellectual impairment into binary categories of sin or not-sin. It recognises that there can be aspects of that person’s life, both in their relationships and in their reception by the world, which may be alienating, though the evidence allowing those to be discerned may be subtle and partial. Nonetheless, it opens a space within which we can speak of our solidarity with that person in our corporate human need for the Atonement. Atonement-as-participation, with alienation as its target, therefore enables the diversity of hopes to form part of our main account of the Atonement.

Participation and sin

The second question raised at the start of this section also asked how Atonement-as-participation might meet White’s challenge that expressions of the Atonement tend to slip away from the claim that God in Christ deals effectively and objectively with sin. That challenge was incorporated into the hermeneutical key in its insistence on retaining both the universality of the claim and the particularity of the cross. This proved to be a useful tool for a consistent and rigorous testing of the disability theology literature and for identifying what it is that the Atonement models are describing.

Atonement-as-participation provides a robust response. It does not move away from God’s objective dealing with sin, but instead explores what that can mean in

317 See comments taken from Gillibrand concerning his son, Adam, who has severe autism, in chapter 3 (page 59).
a world where so much of the suffering in life, and which God would be expected to deal with effectively, seems to lie outside a description organised just around sin as identifiable moral choice. Atonement-as-participation, and alienation as a way of articulating what God addresses through it, suggests that White’s analysis, while commendably objective and clear, is ultimately too narrow. What is required, and provided here, is a broader sense of what it is that is addressed through the incarnation and Atonement.

**The human aspect: our participation in the benefits of Atonement**

The discussion of Atonement-as-participation to this point has focused on God’s objective action through Jesus Christ, turning particularly on the cross, and on his presence within that action. However, chapter 5 above also emphasised the need for any proposal to address questions of the subjective outworking of the Atonement.\(^{318}\) To echo in participatory terms the Athanasian phrase quoted earlier in this chapter, it might be suggested that: God participated in the human predicament so that we might participate in the benefits he thus secured.

In that case, the way in which Atonement-as-participation anticipates our human participation in those benefits should be explored. A Pauline expression could be adopted here: how do we participate “in Christ”? There is wide discussion within scholarship on Pauline theology as to the meaning of being “in Christ” and the language of participation appears across that debate.\(^{319}\) The debate includes, for example, Paul’s understanding of righteousness, justification, election and the people of God, the ethics of discipleship, the role of faith and of the Holy Spirit in a union with Christ, and what it means to participate in the new covenant and in Christ’s reign. While a disability perspective may well enrich all of that discussion,

\(^{318}\) Page 124.

the particular aspects of it that focus on the interaction between Atonement and disability theology addressed in this thesis can be identified through three related, but distinguishable, questions:

1. How does the transformation wrought by God in Christ through the Atonement come to be connected with the life and life experience of a human person? There are a number of aspects to this, including how we come to perceive or apprehend the existence of the Atonement and the benefits it offers; who is allowed or expected, and on what basis, to have a share in those benefits; and how they might indicate that they are doing so. Typical formulations have included the encouragement to ‘repent and believe in the good news’ (Mark 1:15), or ‘call on the name of the Lord’ (Romans 10:3) in order to be saved. While any such apprehension and response would be understood to be quickened by the Holy Spirit, it can easily be assumed to be principally an individual intellectual and emotional acceptance of, and response to, the Atonement. Disability theology has contributed some challenges here, which are discussed within this section, below.

2. What is different for that person in the age to come, after death and resurrection? This question has to do with what aspects of this life are retained, eliminated, transformed, healed, or restored through God’s action in the Atonement. The section above has demonstrated that this requires an understanding of the Atonement that addresses the diversity of hopes, and has demonstrated that Atonement-as-participation, with alienation as its target, provides this.

3. What is different for that person and their community within this life as a result of the Atonement? The review in chapter 3 demonstrated that where matters of soteriology have arisen to date within disability theology, this question has been to the fore. It has concerned the subjective evidence and experience of transformed attitudes and behaviour in the present. This question will therefore be returned to as part of the discussion in chapter 8
below. There it will be suggested that Atonement-as-participation provides a way for a disability perspective soteriology to be developed that is not confined only to such a subjective analysis.

The question of connection (and moral influence)

Returning to the first of the three questions posed above, the matter of how the past event of the Atonement and its benefits come to be connected with a life in the present was precisely that being pursued by Fiddes, as described in chapter 4 above. It was this question that led Fiddes to argue in favour of retaining a moral influence understanding of the outworking of the Atonement. One might summarise that argument by saying that part of the affirmation of the objective achievement of the Atonement lies the subjective experience of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in this life, both personal and institutional. That transformation begins with an encounter with the Atonement, through experience, witness, or at the Eucharist.

The most obvious insight from a disability perspective, as already suggested, is that an understanding of such an encounter and transformation which turns on a requirement to “repent and believe” potentially breaks down in the context of intellectual, or indeed emotional, impairment. Where “repent and believe” requires a sufficient understanding of the person and work of Christ to be able to articulate those things, and an intellectual and emotional commitment to reflect those concepts in future living, we are already placing limitations on who has access to the Atonement and on what basis. The conundrum seems greater for people with intellectual disabilities. It might be presumed that those whose impairment is more apparently physical can “know God” and participate in the Atonement in an intellectually and emotionally “typical” way. If this describes our frame of reference, we are pushed to find an alternative understanding of what it means for those with intellectual disabilities (and possibly others with complex impairments).

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320 Page 86.
321 As an example of the tension here, though Peter Abelard appears an ally in the present discussion, Weingard points out that for Abelard, although we receive the benefits of the Atonement through faith, hope and love, the process is quite intellectualised. In particular, faith is mostly concerned with knowledge and understanding: Weingard, *The Logic of Divine Love*, p.183.
impairments, or indeed living with dementia) to respond to and participate in the Atonement. If not a completely separate alternative, our position at least seems to demand a way of extending “our” main explanation of what it is to participate in the Atonement to “their” special case by applying some sort of concession.

However, the contention of this thesis is that disability is not a special case as regards the Atonement. Humanity, for whom the benefits of the Atonement are secured by God in Christ, is humanity in its variety, that variety being part of the contingent nature of creation. There is no other, ideal or typical humanity. What is required is a main account of the Atonement and our participation in it that addresses humanity as a whole. The argument above has proposed Atonement-as-participation and alienation as a theological basis for such an account. That argument also provides a theological basis for exploring this more subjective, human side of the question.

Atonement-as-participation conceives the Atonement as God’s once for all deepest, most intimate involvement in the actuality of how things are (recalling for example McCabe’s insistence above on a full appreciation of the extent of that involvement). God’s involvement is not theoretical or idealised, but, through the incarnation, is in humanity as it is. This is reflected in God’s openness to the risk of things befalling him, both good and bad, as discussed earlier in this chapter. If the Atonement arises through God’s intimate participation in the predicament of humanity, with all its variety, then it is consistent, when considering the question of connecting the Atonement with present lives, to suggest that humanity, in all its variety, is fully able to participate in the Atonement’s benefits. The implications of this suggestion can be explored in greater depth by making use of three particular insights from the disability theology literature.

Ways of knowing God

The introduction to this chapter mentioned briefly the study of theories of knowledge that go beyond an analytical, or Cartesian, way of knowing to a phenomenological one. This idea emerges in disability theology, though not perhaps in those terms. Swinton, for example, raises precisely this point in a 1997
paper which considers what is required, in the context of intellectual impairment, or mental health challenges, to engage in Christian faith. His conclusion is strongly relational and phenomenological. Swinton reports that his own Reformed church background has emphasised words, concepts, reason and understanding as the bases for such participation, but he finds this inadequate in the face of cognitive disability. The root of his argument, that a different basis for participation is required, is that the life of Christian faith involves the great combined biblical commands to love God and love one another (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28). However, the nature of these commands, Swinton argues, is that they are perichoretic. Our relationship with God is bound up in our relationships with one another, such that we cannot understand our participation in the benefits of the Atonement outside of understanding participation in relationships with each other. In fact, he claims, ‘faith has a closer resemblance to friendship than dogmatic assertion’.322

The point that Swinton draws from this is that while intellectual knowledge is useful, other, more affective forms of knowledge, arising relationally, are as important in recognising and responding to God’s initiative, whether in the grand sense of the Atonement, or in the life of the individual. Thus, through relationships with others, those with cognitive disabilities can encounter God and respond in a way that he suggests might be termed “conversion”.323 Although Swinton does not extend his discussion on this particular point, the recognition of more affective forms of knowledge might usefully be extended to suggesting that there are more affective forms of repentance, again reflected in the development of relationships rather than in propositional statements. If the response to the Atonement is a combination of “repent and believe”, then it should be possible to conceive of all that constitutes that response taking a less analytical and propositional form.

323 Swinton develops these thoughts further in a later article, where he adds insights from the contemplative tradition (knowing God through loving him) and the liberationist tradition (recognising the presence of God in actions of social justice). See: John Swinton, ‘Known by God’, in The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L’Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences, ed. by Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 140-153.
This is an important argument, with practical and ecclesiological as well as soteriological implications. On the one hand, it resists a presumption of demonstrable, articulated intellectual assent as a requirement for participating in God’s saving act. On the other hand, it challenges our sense of who acts as “gate-keeper” to the Atonement in terms of assessing who is a disciple of Jesus Christ, who should be baptised and share in the Eucharist, and (particularly in a context of congregational governance) who should be a church member. Swinton’s suggestion is that it is those who are closest to people with cognitive impairment that are best placed to make those judgements, based, again, on affective, relational knowledge of the one in their care, rather than on an analytical assessment of competencies by others who stand outside of that relationship.

Before leaving this point it is interesting to make an additional connection. The section above that develops the concept of alienation included reference to Nancy Eiesland’s idea of “body theology”. Eiesland, and of course others, have suggested that our bodies and bodily experience should be seen as a source of theological insight. Attractive as that idea is, hitherto it has not moved much beyond an assertion that Jesus’ impaired crucified body, and the wounds of the cross on his resurrected body, reveal a solidarity with human impaired bodies.324 The concepts discussed here, of the Atonement as God’s most intimate, once for all participation in humanity as it is, which can be apprehended and participated in through affective forms of knowledge, gathered through the whole experience of the person, not just intellectually, would seem to provide a more solid foundation from which to develop that idea of body theology.

**God’s accommodation**

A second insight that is relevant to the human aspect of Atonement-as-participation is raised in an article by Jill Harshaw, in which she considers the doctrine of God’s accommodation. Harshaw begins with evidence of a presumption that, because the concepts involved in a relationship with God can seem complex, such a relationship is not available to those with intellectual

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324 Page 49.
impairments. She notes that the Bible on the whole has an intellectually able frame of reference, often speaking of hearing, obeying, following and seeking wisdom (just as John Hull had noted that it is a sighted text, as mentioned in the section above on alienation). Lack of awareness of that frame of reference can contribute to this presumption. From there Harshaw notes Wayne Morris’ review of the historic treatment of people with disabilities in education. Morris focused on Deaf people, whose treatment over many years involved avoiding means of communication particular to their situation (typically sign language) and focusing on “normalisation”. Under that approach it was presumed to be more beneficial to insist on means of communication as close to those typical of the hearing community as possible, even if this were to the detriment of the process of learning, or indeed of developing any effective communication skills.

What Harshaw draws out is a parallel, often unexpressed, presumption that intellectual and language capacities and the learning of a set of beliefs constitute faith and worship. She illustrates this by reference to situations of congregational worship. She notes anecdotes from occasions where those with intellectual impairments are present, and where some signs of “joining in” are noticed by others, or where worship is conducted in a way that makes such an indication of joining in more likely to appear, but she argues that this inclusion of “them” in what “we” are doing is not a theological basis for participation.

Instead, Harshaw proposes the doctrine of divine accommodation, which she finds widely expressed in Christian and Jewish thought. God accommodates to what we can comprehend in his use of language, in the incarnation, and indeed in all of his self-revelation. Harshaw examines a number of sources of the doctrine, including John Calvin and Gregory of Nyssa. Her overall point is, if we believe that

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God accommodates to the capacity of people to comprehend him, why should that be different for people with intellectual disabilities, or why should we assume a point beyond which God is unable or unwilling to accommodate? She also draws from Gregory of Nyssa that accommodation is not only a tool used by God, but a demonstration of the extent of his love. Accommodation is not the watering down of what is complex, but the choosing of a mode of communication of what is relevant to all.

The particular relevance of Harshaw’s approach to the present discussion is twofold. On the one hand it is consistent with Swinton’s comments on ways of knowing: affective ways of apprehending and responding to God’s initiative are no more or less dependent on God’s accommodation than intellectual or analytical ways. On the other hand, accommodation is part and parcel of God’s participation in his creation, culminating in the Atonement, otherwise his participation would remain something that God does, but that remains at best theoretical for us, outside of our engagement with it.

Corporate participation in the Atonement

The third insight is Young’s suggestion that part of her son Arthur’s “vocation” is to reveal to us the corporate nature both of the persons of Adam and Christ, and of being made in the image of God. Since Arthur’s ecclesial participation can only move beyond the merely theoretical if it involves others, it reminds Young that the image of God is not inherent to the individual, and that the body of Christ is not a collection of individuals, but is fundamentally a corporate organism, inclusive of the variety of disability. We are only ever “in Adam” in solidarity with others, as we can only be “in Christ” in solidarity with others, not as an individual. This presented a conundrum to Gillibrand, as mentioned in the discussion of disability perspective soteriology above. He did not want to say that his autistic son Adam is not in need of the Atonement, as to do so would be to say he is less than human (in some way not “in (the first) Adam”). However, he could not identify events of

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328 Similar to Moltmann’s discussion of zimzum and the Shekinah of God above (page 144).
329 Page 134.
moral failure in his son’s life to which he could apply an understanding of the Atonement rooted just in dealing with moral sin.\(^\text{330}\)

Atonement-as-participation opens up the theological space to explore these insights further. God’s participation in the risk of creation and in the predicament of humanity within that, reaching its deepest point in the Atonement, is a participation in all of the complex moral and contingent nature of life. Given the strongly systemic, corporate, interrelated aspect of life that has emerged from the discussion in this chapter (McFadyen, for example), it would seem inconsistent to suggest that the salvation achieved by God through that participation is atomised to the individual. It clearly has profound meaning and implications for the individual, but seems to arise through something much more corporate. This is not a bid for universalism, but rather a question of how we understand the process of apprehending and responding to the Atonement.

Swinton considers this in a 2011 article concerning his experience of the spiritual lives of people with profound intellectual impairment. His suggestion is that the unguardedness of those people he encountered, which has no pretence at independence, demonstrates that their (and by extension perhaps all) spiritual life ‘is a corporate rather than personal concept and experience.’\(^\text{331}\) His point is that we are all dependent on others for our encounter with God. Our knowledge of God (and in the current discussion of the Atonement) is personal, but not individualistic.\(^\text{332}\) Swinton includes arguments that we recognise Jesus in the marginalised, that the body of Christ is always corporate and that we encounter God especially in Christian friendships and relationships.

It is true that much is said elsewhere about Christian life being a corporate affair. Hauerwas, for example, makes the point in his challenge that the church is not the

\(^{330}\) Page 69.


\(^{332}\) Swinton and others, ‘Whose Story Am I?’, p.15.
body of Christ unless it has the most vulnerable at its core. Gorman’s concept of a new-covenant "model" of the Atonement emphasises the creation of the (corporate) new covenant people of God. However, the point being made here, that is consistent with Atonement-as-participation, is that we are dependent on each other in our very apprehension of and response to Christ and the Atonement. If life is essentially interdependent, it would not be surprising that participating in the benefits of the Atonement, wherein all of life is addressed, is similarly interdependent. Again, this can be related to the discussion above of different ways of knowing and suggests that we deceive ourselves in thinking that we can approach the Atonement individually and (only) analytically.

Returning to Young and Gillibrand, above, Atonement-as-participation affirms Young’s sense of Arthur’s vocation as regards the image of God and the body of Christ. It also takes it further in suggesting, with Swinton, that the activity of apprehending and responding to the Atonement is for all of us a corporate one, in which each is dependent on the other and on being open to the other’s ways of knowing. The conundrum raised by Gillibrand is also addressed by an understanding of alienation as the target of Atonement-as-participation. The solidarity which we have in our need for the Atonement is not only in identifiable moral sins, but in a complex alienation that is in many ways corporate and interdependent. Elements of that alienation arise from moral failure, from the deeply ingrained sinfulness of social and political structures, and from the contingent nature of life.

Conclusions

The proposal developed in this chapter is that to say that the Atonement is where God deals effectively with sin is certainly correct, but is not sufficient. Rather, the Atonement is God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation. There God takes all that is alienating, makes it his own and overcomes it; he also

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takes all that is good and through the resurrection preserves it and brings it to
fulfilment. The risk of creation in that proposal is a complex mixture of the risk of
moral failure, for which there is culpability, together with the contingent nature of
life and our responses to that. This Atonement-as-participation is not proposed as
an alternative to existing models of the Atonement, or as a supplemental model.
Instead it is proposed as a response to a prior question about the nature of the
Atonement. As such it should act as a “theological protocol” to guide the
deployment of any such model. To begin to draw conclusions as to the usefulness
of this proposal, it first needs to be assessed as a response to the challenges to
any account of the Atonement which were identified in chapter 5. These can be
considered in turn.

The general challenge identified in that chapter was to develop an understanding
of the Atonement that inherently incorporates those with disabilities. Atonement-
as-participation provides a positive response by re-visiting the nature of the
Atonement and approaching it from that inherently inclusive frame of reference.
The whole phenomenon and experience of alienation from God and from each
other is perceived as arising from a complex mixture of moral risk and culpability,
as well as the contingent nature of life, which gives rise to variety, accident and in
the present case, disability. The assertion that the Atonement is God’s deepest
participation in that risk and alienation, and that through the cross and resurrection
God addresses that all so alienates us, renders the Atonement inherently inclusive
of humanity with all its variety of impairment.

Atonement-as-participation, with alienation as what it addresses, recognises that
there are those aspects of the contingent nature of life (here, disability) that are, or
are not alienating. This opens up the theological space to talk of sin, disability and
the Atonement together without the imposition of a binary choice between
regarding disability as all bad and to be eliminated in the age to come, or all good
and to be preserved.

335 Page 123.
That broader sense of the Atonement as God in Christ taking to himself and dealing with all that is alienating also accommodates a diversity of hopes. While the inherent inclusivity of Atonement-as-participation is addressed by re-visiting our frame of reference, the clear acknowledgement of the complex nature of the risk of creation and of the diversity of the experience of alienation arising from that risk, avoids the tendency to assume a homogenisation of bodies and minds. This provides a response that is also coherent in the context of what were called the brute facts of particular experiences of disability. It also means that the theological task of understanding the Atonement is moved towards an approach that pays attention to the lived experience of actual bodies as a source of theological insight.

The emphasis on God’s intimate participation in the risk of creation and the alienation experienced by humanity, particularly in the person of Jesus, is consistent with the insistence, in response to situations of profound intellectual impairment, on a move away from an idea that we apprehend and respond to the Atonement only through intellectual faculties. It also takes seriously the insights from disability theology that this process has a significant corporate element, rooted in the idea that disability reveals vulnerability and interdependence to be the true condition of humanity.

Atonement-as-participation also responds to the emphasis within disability-perspective soteriology on subjective change in personal and societal attitudes and behaviours. It anticipates such change arising from a response to the Atonement, but the space it provides for all aspects of alienation, whether through sin or contingency, provides a much fuller soteriological account.

The conclusion at this stage, therefore, is that understanding God’s action through the cross as Atonement-as-participation does provide a positive response to the challenges arising from disability theology. To test the proposal further it is necessary to consider how the prevailing models of the Atonement fair as models of Atonement-as-participation, and also whether the proposal opens the way for the Atonement to play a more foundational role in the pursuit of the objectives of disability theology than it has to date.
Chapter 7

Re-casting the prevailing models as Atonement-as-participation

Introduction

It has been proposed above that Atonement-as-participation can be applied as a theological protocol for identifying the kind of action or event that the Atonement is, and that doing so opens up theological space for an account of the Atonement that addresses some of the significant challenges raised by disability theology. Chapter 8 below will go on to examine the extent to which this enables the Atonement to act in a more foundational way than it has to date within the themes of disability theology. Before that, however, this present discussion will return to what were identified as the prevailing models of the Atonement (sacrifice, justice and victory) to ask how well they continue to function when required to do so following this protocol, as models of Atonement-as-participation. The discussion of metaphorical language and theoretical models in chapter 4 and the work on shared metaphors in chapter 5 provide important background for this, as does the work on the manner of God’s participation in the risk of creation in chapter 6.

One of the significant features of metaphorical language raised in chapter 4 was the concept of limits of correspondence. To summarise, when a subject is described, and our understanding of it explored, through the deployment of a theoretical model and its resources of metaphor, the subject is not being described as it is, but by analogy. The importance of limits of correspondence is that they introduce discipline into the deployment of models, both by recognising the boundaries beyond which analogy between model and subject break down; and by prompting fresh questions about the subject and about what sort of model might pick up the work of analogy beyond those boundaries. These ideas are central to the present exercise of testing the three prevailing models as models of Atonement-as-participation. This can be done by asking of each theoretical model
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the following four questions, which are couched in the terms which have emerged in the course of the thesis thus far:

a) How does the model and its metaphorical language enable us to speak of what alienates us from God, others and ourselves, and correspondingly of the benefits of that alienation being addressed? How well does this encompass the complex mix of moral failure, the contingent nature of life and the diversity of hopes?

b) How does the model enable us to speak of the Atonement as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation and in the human predicament of suffering, joy and sin? Within that, does the model enable us to speak of God’s taking responsibility for how creation is?

c) How does the model enable us to speak of Jesus’ death in terms of God’s willingness for things to befall him and of God’s taking what is alien to him and making it intimately his own without being diminished by it?

d) In light of the discussion of shared metaphors in chapter 5, does Atonement-as-participation provide any other particular insight into the application of this model?

It is clear that there is some overlap among these questions. This is not surprising, as again they are being asked not of a mechanical system or set of arrangements, which can readily be sub-divided, but of how we describe or explain a drama of divine grace. Nonetheless, they do allow the effectiveness of the models under application of the proposed protocol to be tested.

**Sacrifice-as-participation**

a) **Sacrifice and alienation**

Because of its focus on the restoration of relationships damaged by sin, the sacrifice model readily provides metaphorical resources for speaking of the
alienation of parties to those relationships. Under the Levitical system, this is mainly expressed as sin, being moral failure which alienates us from God. In addressing that, sacrifice also allows talk of cleansing from the pollution of sin and moral weakness. This goes beyond a focus just on personal sin, however. There is an acknowledgement of the complex nature of sin and of our frequent inability to discern it from our standpoint in its midst, since the instructions for sacrifice emphasise unintentional sin (as distinct from intentional, “high-handed” sin identified in Numbers 15:30-31, which requires exclusion from the community). This extends to the culpability of the whole community for unintentional sin where it is difficult to discern the origin or source of a particular failure or weakness. There are echoes here of McFadyen’s discussion of the complexity of personal and systemic sin discussed earlier. That communal involvement is particularly clear in the instructions for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus, chapter 16), which allows the language of sacrifice to explore a sense of alienation that goes beyond the individual and God, to the community and God and even to interpersonal relationships and the restoring of a community damaged by sinful attitudes or behaviour. A great strength of the sacrifice model here is that its specific purpose was to declare that the alienation of sin is dealt with, that pollution is cleansed and that all parties have a fresh start. Under the sacrifice model this constitutes the forgiveness of sin achieved at the cross.

Where sacrifice offers less is in relation to the alienating experiences of the contingency of life that seem to lie outside an analysis based just on moral sin. This would include many of the life experiences of disability attested to in the disability theology literature. Correspondingly, the sacrifice model does not particularly provide metaphorical resources for engaging with the diversity of hopes as to what is addressed by God through the Atonement. One might look to the Passover sacrifice for help here, following the emphasis found in Wright and Fiddes. That sacrifice was connected to an experience of being set free from

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336 This inability to discern, and going beyond that, our perception that our actions or attitudes are right, though another may see them as clearly wrong, is part of Frances Young’s idea of a very broad gone-wrongness in life, discussed in chapter 5.
337 Page 99.
an oppressive situation, although as part of the Exodus narrative the sacrifice was more specifically a protection from judgement than the action that in itself brought about freedom. In doing so the language of sacrifice is also drifting into that of the victory model below. It should be recognised therefore that though sacrifice operates well in terms of a complex sense of alienation resulting from sin, there is a significant limit to the correspondence of the sacrifice model here, where other models must be looked to, to pick up the work.

b) Sacrifice and God’s participation in the risk of creation

God’s provision of the sacrificial system was part of his provision of the Torah, and through that of a comprehensive way of life for the people of Israel, set free from slavery in Egypt. The provision of the Torah was celebrated by Israel as a demonstration of God’s intimate participation in the life and dangers of their community. Psalm 119, for example, is an extended celebration of the Torah, its instruction and the sense of God’s intimacy that it creates. God’s initiative in providing the sacrificial system was part of that intimate involvement, allowing for offerings of thanksgiving and fellowship, as well as those directly addressing the risk and consequence of moral failure. This included God’s willingness to treat the sacrifices offered as effective in dealing with sin, and to act towards the individual and the community on that basis. It recognised that the alienation caused by sin could not be fully and effectively dealt with by human beings, but required God’s participation. As an expression of God’s character, this demonstrated his willingness to participate in the risk of alienation which is part of the moral contingency of life.

The sacrifice model therefore functions effectively as a model of God’s participation, at least in the complex moral risk of creation. In that case if Jesus’ death is the deepest, once for all participation in that risk, then these same metaphorical resources can be applied to that as the completed, once for all sacrifice for sin in all its complexity. Again, however, it has to be acknowledged that sacrifice encounters limits of correspondence in terms of God’s participation in experiences of alienation that seem to fall outside of a moral failure explanation.
As regards the aspects of sin and alienation it does address, the fact that God takes the initiative in providing the system, and that God is in Christ doing so by providing the ultimate sacrifice, it allows us to speak of God’s taking responsibility for those aspects of how creation is.

c) Sacrifice and Jesus’ death

If providing the sacrificial system is a demonstration of God’s ongoing participation in the moral risk attached to human life, then Jesus’ death can be described as the final, fully effective sacrifice inasmuch as God is said to apply the full weight of that system to Jesus’ death, such that it becomes the deepest, once for all expression of that means of participation. The metaphorical resources of sacrifice noted in chapter 5 contribute here. For example, death befalls the sacrificial victim as a result of the sin of the individual or the community. Hands are laid on the victim and the alienation of sin is identified with (if not transferred to) that victim. The victim, together with the sin, which is alien to it, is handed over to God. Correspondingly, what is alienating for us (and which is certainly alien to Jesus) is identified with him when sinful humanity lays hands on him, and in death he is handed over to God.

The correspondence here is interesting in many ways. The laying of hands on the sacrificial victim (Jesus) is treated as effective, even if it is unwitting. The death by execution that befalls Jesus becomes his initiative in handing all this to God, for example in Luke 23:46 which has him commend his spirit to his Father. The resurrected Jesus, who has taken what is alien and made it his own without being diminished by it nonetheless bears the marks of the death which has now been interpreted as sacrifice. As well as being marks of identification, perhaps these are also now a reminder of the eternal nature of God’s intimate participation in the risk of his creation. The model therefore functions consistently and effectively in describing Jesus’ death in terms of Atonement-as-participation as far as the alienation of sin is concerned.

338 Page 109.
d) Sacrifice, shared metaphors and other insights

The discussion in chapter 5 identified embodiment, identification and vulnerability as particular metaphors shared between the sacrifice model and current disability theology. Where sacrifice is applied as a model of God’s participation in the risk of creation, these metaphors continue to be a relevant part of that model. Perhaps the key aspect of Atonement-as-participation in this regard is that summarised above in the term “befalling”. The alienation of acknowledged sin and of sacrificial death befall the animal offered in sacrifice through its being chosen, through sin being identified with it and symbolically embodied by it, and through its demonstrable vulnerability to that befalling. We can say that, just as that alienation befalls the victim, and correspondingly as these things befall Jesus, God has to do with sin and perishing, which are alien to him (following Jüngel, above). This completes what is revealed of God’s participation by the incarnation, through which God in Christ is open to all of the risks of embodied life befalling him.

Two potentially awkward metaphors were also identified. The first was that if Jesus is the perfect, blemish-free sacrifice (as required of the Levitical victim), the claim that he particularly identifies with the life experience of impaired humanity, a strong theme in disability theology, might seem weakened. This issue does not simply go away when the Atonement is understood in terms of God’s participation in the risk of creation. However it is helped by explicitly acknowledging both the rich correspondence of the model in terms of moral sin, and its limits of correspondence in describing a broader sense of alienation. This avoids conflating the insight of Levitical perfection in dealing with sin, with the insight of Jesus’ embodiment of impairment at the cross. Pressing this point of Jesus’ perfection further, the emphasis on God’s full participation in varied and vulnerable humanity through the incarnation should, when the incarnate Christ becomes the crucified Christ, change our perception of what bodily perfection in a sacrifice is intended to signify. This would parallel the way in which the cross as victory changes our perception of victory from one secured through strength (typically ‘a mighty hand and an outstretched arm’ per Deuteronomy 4:34, for example) to one secured through vulnerability.
The second potentially awkward idea was that Jesus is most closely identified with the consequences of sin at the moment, as he approaches death on the cross, when he appears most disabled. This seemed to bring disability and sin into uncomfortably close proximity. Again an acknowledgement of the limit of correspondence is helpful. However, it is also suggested that enabling the Atonement as a whole to function more fully as a foundation for the objectives of disability theology (discussed in chapter 8 below) avoids too heavy a reliance on one moment of identification, which seems to be what is leaving this awkward point unresolved.

**Justice-as-participation**

It was suggested in chapter 4 that the justice model is best viewed as gathering together a range of understandings of justice and law and related metaphorical meaning. These were placed into four categories: (i) justice as keeping the Old Testament covenant; (ii) justice as providing satisfaction to restore God’s honour and dealing with the debt of guilt arising from offending it (Anselm); (iii) justice more in terms of forensic guilt, innocence, penalty and the law court, emerging from the Reformation; and (iv) justice as transactions subject to the correct application of law or custom. If justice is to act as a model of Atonement-as-participation, then each of these emphases should be expected to contribute to the responses to the four questions posed above for the models. For this purpose categories (ii) and (iii) will be combined as representing, albeit from different eras, an emphasis on ideas of guilt, innocence and trial in a law court.

**a) Justice and alienation**

Where the emphasis is on covenant, the metaphors for alienation arise from the breaking of the covenant through moral and ethical failure. The correspondence is extensive, since the covenant was the basis for relationship with God, for the creation and ordering of community, and for self-identity as part of that covenant community. Clearly there is overlap here with the sacrifice model, since sacrifice
was involved in re-commitment to the covenant, except as mentioned above for high-handed, intentional sin. However, with a covenant emphasis the justice model does not provide so much resource for describing experiences of alienation arising from aspects of the contingency of life that fall outside of direct questions of sin.

An emphasis on the law court provides metaphors for alienation in terms of guilt, condemnation and unworthiness before God and others, arising from wrongdoing. There is the need for the one who is guilty to be rehabilitated as well as the need to make restitution or to face a just penalty, and all of these can be explored through this emphasis. However, other metaphorical roles are also possible here. The cry to God as judge against persecution by others is rightly heard in the court context. This could be for deliberate unfair action against the individual. It could also be for the attitudes and reactions of others to, in the present case, disability. Experience of exclusion might not result from deliberate fault, but from a general ingrained systemic insensitivity or ignorance of society of the needs of those with disabilities (normate presumptions). This takes the model into at least part of the contingent nature of life which goes beyond a simple moral failure description. Here the justice model affords a slightly broader correspondence than is achieved through the sacrifice model.

Where the focus is transactional, such as ransom or redemption, the metaphorical correspondence operates slightly differently. The question of alienation becomes from what alienated state one is ransomed or redeemed. We might say this is from being a slave to sin (or to life’s negative experiences), or from being under the power or sway of such things. Being in that state distances us from God, others, and even from our own selves, as we envisage how we might otherwise be. As mentioned in chapter 4, trying to fill in too much detail, such as to whom the ransom or redemption payment is made, risks demanding an unfair level of correspondence. However, that very lack of detailed correspondence also allows this element of the justice model to extend to any part of life (not just moral failure) in which alienation is experienced. We have ended up “owned” by a master other than God through our own action, or that of others, or through complex
circumstances, and to speak of being ransomed or redeemed from that position is rich in meaning and pastoral possibility.

Overall, therefore, the justice model appears to provide metaphorical resources that go further than sacrifice for exploring God’s dealing at the Atonement with alienation arising from the wider contingency of life and, accordingly, for speaking of the diversity of hopes.

b) Justice and God’s participation in the risk of creation

A benefit of a covenant emphasis within a justice model is that it helps to address a possible weakness of the model if the focus is only on law-court imagery. As noted, Abelard avoided such models because he felt they imposed an alien necessity upon God. However, since the Old Testament (and indeed the New Testament) covenant is God’s initiative, a covenant emphasis enriches the correspondence of the justice model significantly by addressing the point that justice originates with God. God’s placing of himself within the covenant relationship is a way of speaking of his participation in the risk of its being broken.

In New Testament terms, in the gospel accounts Jesus through the incarnation lives as a Jewish man, participating in the inheritance of Israel’s struggle to keep the covenant. The consequences of that covenant having been broken in various ways over time pervade his life, ministry and death. These include divisive attitudes towards those considered unclean or sinful, as well as idolatry and the misuse of religious and political power. As declared through the Last Supper and its celebration at the Eucharist, God in Jesus takes upon himself the responsibility of re-establishing the covenant and extending it to all.

As indicated above, a law court emphasis extends the correspondence of the justice model to areas other than covenant. Although the image of the court as a place of accountability is used in the Old Testament narrative, forensic metaphors are perhaps more often applied to God’s participation in our predicament through Jesus himself. God in Christ suffers injustice as our substitute. Jesus also is our

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advocate, or representative before the judgement of the Father. Where the law court emphasis contributes particularly to an exploration of Atonement-as-participation is its ability, after the manner of Job (discussed in the context of Frances Young in chapter 5), to accommodate a calling of God to account for the experiences of alienation arising not just from identifiable sin, but from all the contingent nature of life. This applies the point made above that the cry for fair treatment is rightly heard in the court context. God’s participation in the risk of creation involves being present on the cross where all that is alienating about life is addressed and where Jesus, again as our representative, utters that cry against God on humanity’s behalf.

As before, a transactional emphasis provides a narrower range of metaphor, but nonetheless an important one. In wanting to speak of God’s intimate participation, the notion of “transaction” might present God in a more remote role, as one who hands over a payment and receives what is due to him as a result. However, the participatory sense returns when the nature of the “payment” is pursued. If redemption or ransom involve God in some way paying the price of human freedom, then perhaps the Garden of Gethsemane is a place where this aspect of the model speaks of God’s participation and initiative. There Jesus chooses not to withhold himself from paying (through himself becoming) what he seems aware will be the greatest possible cost. However, Gethsemane also emphasises (as do Old Testament passages about God redeeming or ransoming Israel or Judah) that the transaction is essentially a one-sided initiative, rather than a negotiation. God in Christ pays the price, but no one has a right to demand that payment. There is a connection here with the discussion about the nature of the risk of creation in chapter 6, that the threat, or risk to creation is not ultimately from a person, a counterpart to God, but from an annihilating nothingness.

c) Justice and Jesus’ death

A covenant emphasis enables Jesus’ death to be described in terms of the breaking of the covenant, which is something alien to God. Jesus’ death is real death, through which, in the tomb, we can say he is cut off completely from the
covenant people. This was the Old Testament consequence for sin with a high hand (Numbers 15:30-31), where sacrifice was not available as a remedy, which is also a good example of one model of the Atonement taking over the work from another. At Golgotha Jesus also symbolically dies outside the city, or “camp” of the people. Not only does God take the consequence of the broken covenant to himself in Jesus’ death, he uses that very thing as the foundation on which he establishes the new covenant. Through the Last Supper Jesus makes it clear that he will take the alien things of his body being broken and blood spilt and make them the ground of the new covenant. The covenant emphasis therefore proves particularly effective for this aspect of Atonement-as-participation.

If the emphasis is more forensic, the thing which is alien to God, and yet which he makes intimately his own through Jesus’ death is the guilty verdict passed on the one who is innocent. Jesus then suffers what the people, humanly speaking, regard as the suitable consequence of that verdict, which is his death. With this emphasis Jesus’ death is spoken of as a judicial punishment or penalty rather than representing exclusion from the covenant people.

In a transactional sense, Jesus’ death would instead be described as a price paid. It is alien to God as he is never in slavery or in debt to another, nor under the sway or control of persons or circumstances except through his initiative of participation in the risk of creation. It is a price which would destroy us, and yet which he pays in our place.

d) Justice, shared metaphors and other insights

Using the justice model as a means of describing and exploring Atonement-as-participation has made it clear that the full range of understandings of justice and law and their metaphorical resources are needed and that any one on its own is inadequate. This is particularly the case as regards the question of God’s

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340 This symbolic connection is made explicitly in Hebrews 13:11-12 as part of that letter’s extended discussion of the cross as sacrifice.
Part 3: Chapter 7: Re-casting the prevailing models as Atonement-as-participation

responsibility for how life is, and for moving to a frame of reference which includes both identifiable moral sin and other alienating aspects of the contingency of life.

The shared metaphors identified for this model in chapter 5 were justice, in terms of our accountability before God, and vindication, in terms of Jesus being vindicated and shown to be innocent and in the right. These continue to do that work when the model is applied to Atonement-as-participation, although vindication also takes on an additional resonance. Atonement-as-participation allows a move away from a binary analysis that insists that disability be seen as something to be either eradicated entirely through the cross, or retained entirely at the resurrection. The individual is vindicated in claiming that some aspects of that experience are positive, and some alienating. This in turn allows the claim that the life lived with disability as a whole is vindicated as valid, and yet is not the final word.

The metaphor within the justice model found to be awkward was that of guilt and how we understand it, and its apprehension, particularly in relation to people with intellectual impairment. This remains a potentially sensitive aspect of this model. The discussion has indicated again the importance of recognising limits of correspondence, even within different aspects of the same model. This cautions against a tendency to crown any one model of Atonement, such as a law-court version of justice, as taking precedence and requiring that its metaphors be applied as if they are describing the actual mechanism by which the Atonement proceeds.

Victory-as-participation

a) Victory and alienation

The victory model, with its metaphorical resources of conflict, or struggle, and God in Christ as the one who defeats the enemies who seek to oppress humanity, equips an effective and wide-ranging description of the alienation which is the target of Atonement-as-participation. The model naturally begins with the
experience of alienation in terms of oppression by these forces, rather than with a definition of moral sin. The model therefore readily identifies the complexity and interweaving of the forces that we find alienating. Fiddes’ identification of these “tyrants” as sin, the law, death and Satan has been mentioned. However, it seems justified to extend these to the alienating effects of, for example, ingrained societal and medical-model attitudes to disability, or to the complicated experience of “being different” (without necessarily having to distribute these sources of alienation amongst Fiddes’ four loci). Whatever those powers and sources of alienation are, and however they interact with each other, their defeat through the Atonement offers freedom. The model is therefore particularly effective in moving beyond a discussion that insists on moral sin as its sole focal point. That should make it a valuable metaphorical resource for a discussion of the diversity of hopes.

b) Victory and God’s participation in the risk of creation

In Old Testament terms, the victory model would have access to God’s record of defending Israel from her enemies, setting her free from Egypt, opposing her own injustices and bringing her back from exile in describing his participation in the risks facing his people. This might be seen as representative of a deeper participation in creation’s struggle, beginning with his judgement in Genesis 3:14-15 on the serpent who has acted to alienate humanity from God. In fact, as mentioned above, Christus Victor, as least as Aulén presents it, has much more of a New Testament focus on God in Christ. With that focus, Jesus participates fully in the predicament of humanity when he becomes vulnerable to the attack of these forces befalling him through the incarnation. As he approaches the cross, he is literally taken prisoner and loses his freedom. The cry of forsakenness (alienation from God) from the cross places Jesus at the deepest point of our own sense of alienation and of the human struggle against the forces which threaten to destroy us and the relationships which shape our personhood.

An important part of applying this model becomes particularly apparent if it is extended back to draw on Old Testament references to God’s involvement in our

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struggle, or battle. It is that the Atonement, as well as being the point of God’s deepest participation in the human struggle against oppressive forces, redefines the source of victory, as already mentioned, from the might of God’s outstretched arm, to Jesus’ vulnerability to the risks of the forces that threaten creation befalling him.

c) Victory and Jesus’ death

Following the victory model, Jesus’ death would be described as God making most intimately his own the greatest oppression and captivity that humanity could experience, being death itself. That oppression and captivity must be alien to a sovereign God. Death also has a particular role in the victory model in this regard. As Wright puts it in his examination of the significance of Jesus’ resurrection after death on the cross, ‘Death is the ultimate weapon of the tyrant.’ This is what gave the death and resurrection of Jesus its profound political impact as a repudiation of the Roman Empire and its power, which the early church regarded as the embodiment of sin and death. Wright couches his discussion in victory-model terms, saying that there is no negotiation or covenant made with this ultimate oppression. Death is overthrown.

d) Victory, shared metaphors and other insights

Metaphors shared between a victory model and disability theology, though doing somewhat different work in each, were identified in chapter 5 as oppression, freedom and vulnerability. These continue to operate effectively when victory is applied as a model of Atonement-as-participation, as demonstrated here.

One weakness of the model that was suggested was that it can appear to be describing something mythical, a conflict taking place among divine beings in a distant spiritual realm. Another was that metaphors of triumph, victory and overcoming can seem awkward in a disability context. A connection can be drawn there with a suggestion from Pugh that there is a risk, in a general sense, of the victory model becoming exemplarist: Jesus’ unmasking, challenging and undoing

of evil can come to be seen as behaviours we should emulate, rather than as Jesus' once for all victory over death. In a disability context, this might seem to require of those with disabilities a setting and achieving of goals that is not appropriate to them; or it might encourage others to valorise those with disabilities, or to ascribe to them a function of demonstrating the overcoming of adversity.\textsuperscript{343} Pugh's suggestion is that a better way to apply the victory model, to avoid these dangers, is to express it in terms of Irenaeus' concept of recapitulation.\textsuperscript{344} Following that approach, the victory of the Atonement is not only a cosmic battle won through the cross and resurrection. It involves Jesus going over all of the ground on which we (who are "in Adam") have failed and on which Jesus remains faithful and succeeds. Thus Jesus participates in all aspects of being human and his victory incorporates his human overcoming of a wide variety of (greater and lesser) temptation and suffering. Pugh's suggestion certainly renders the model in less mythical terms, but it is not clear that recapitulation does not continue to carry the danger of sliding into an exemplarist interpretation.

Another area of potential awkwardness was the use of a victory model of the Atonement in relation to healing ministries. To summarise the theological approach often encountered in such ministries,\textsuperscript{345} the victory of the Atonement is the basis for the victory over all sickness (which has its origins in sin and within which disability is not generally differentiated), that victory being experienced in the healing of sickness in this present life. A disability theology critique of this approach sees it as oppressive. It appears to impose its own view of what God "ought" to heal, bringing about conformity to a typical physical or mental pattern. It also appears to carry the accusation that any failure of disability to be so healed is a failure of faith, since faith in the Atonement would deliver such a change.

However, Atonement-as-participation, which recognises a diversity of hopes and can speak of both death and disability as having positive and negative aspects, addresses that critique. When the victory model is applied as a model of

\textsuperscript{343} These dangers of functionalising disability were also raised in the discussion of anthropology in chapter 3 (page 55).

\textsuperscript{344} Pugh, \textit{Atonement Theories}, p.25.

\textsuperscript{345} See discussion in chapter 5 (page 116).
Atonement-as-participation, that oppressive aspect is avoided. Wright’s statement above that death is overthrown seemed on the face of it uncontentious. Indeed it seems sensible to extend the victory he declares (via Revelation 21:4) to incorporate mourning, crying and pain. However, in what way does the victory extend to disability in all its variety? The Atonement-as-participation consideration of the diversity of hopes, which asks what is alienating about the various experiences of disability, allows much greater differentiation to be brought into the discussion of what the tyrants are that God in Christ is understood to have vanquished. It also requires that we refrain from dictating to those with disabilities the terms of what constitutes healing, and allow them and those who are their carers and know them most intimately to speak for themselves.

Moral influence, connection and participation

The discussion of models in chapters 4 and 5 has argued that while a moral influence account is not a separate theoretical model of Atonement, its challenge of accounting for the subjective connection between on-going life and the benefits of the Atonement applies whichever prevailing model is deployed. It should therefore be considered here, when deploying these as models of Atonement-as-participation.

It was demonstrated in that earlier discussion that disability considerations, particularly in the context of profound intellectual impairment, serve to sharpen these questions of connection. However, it was also shown that a response to those challenges is considerably assisted by insights emerging within disability theology. These were the ideas of different ways of knowing God, of God’s accommodation, and of our participation in the Atonement being a corporate affair rather than an individualistic one. This way of responding to the subjective question remains effective when Atonement-as-participation is being described using the metaphorical language of any of the three models.
There are certain connections that readily emerge when the subjective question is raised for each of the models. For example, the comments on affective ways of knowing God might be helpful in addressing within the justice model the fact that a sense of, and articulation of, guilt attached to an intellectual admission of wrongdoing is an awkward metaphor in the context of intellectual impairment. Equally, the idea of our corporate interdependence in our apprehension and response to the Atonement relates well to the idea of sacrifice as an inherently corporate activity. Indeed, it invites discussion of justice and conflict/victory as also being best seen in corporate, not individualistic, terms. These are helpful connections within particular models, but they demonstrate that the arguments developed within Atonement-as-participation for addressing the question of connection apply, whichever model is being adopted.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has tested the extent to which each of the prevailing models of sacrifice, justice and victory functions effectively as a model of the Atonement as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation. A number of conclusions and observations can be drawn from the analysis.

Overall, the three models do function effectively and provide rich metaphorical connections for Atonement-as-participation. Indeed, the analysis has demonstrated that the models provide creative and insightful connections for describing the Atonement in participatory terms. The fact that these models, which have considerable heritage, function well here serves as something of an affirmation that Atonement-as-participation is a reasonable proposal.

However, the analysis has also demonstrated very clearly the importance of recognising limits of correspondence between each of the models and the Atonement when this protocol is applied. This is not simply to say that each model has some strengths and some weaknesses. It is to assert that the intentional, disciplined identification and examination of those limits of correspondence is as
important in giving an account of the Atonement that embraces all of humanity inclusive of its range of ability and variety, as is identifying the aspects of the models where correspondence is strong. A willingness to allow one model to take over the work where another reaches such a limit becomes essential.

Particular observations to draw out in this regard are as follows. The sacrifice model is effective in the discussion of the Atonement addressing sin and the complexity and subtlety of sin that goes beyond individual identifiable acts, as well as the breadth of relationships that sin affects. However, it provides little metaphorical resource relating to the alienating experience of things that fall outside of ideas of sin, and as a result little for a discussion of the diversity of hopes. The justice model has great breadth when the different concepts of law and justice are recognised. Within that it is able to encompass a wider cry for fairness and for calling God to account for the way that life is than the sacrifice model. The aspect of the justice model that has been called a transactional emphasis is also able to extend the correspondence of the model to the contingency of life beyond moral failure. Similarly, the victory model, while again providing resources in discussions of sin, was also found to provide metaphorical resources successfully for a broader range of life experience which alienates us from God and from others.

Although the conclusion here is positive, it is not a claim that these three therefore somehow represent a “closed canon” of models of the Atonement. The insistence on recognising limits of correspondence would be at odds with such a view. In that regard, when these three models are taken together as a body of ideas applied to Atonement-as-participation, it seems fair to say that they function very effectively in terms of the alienation of moral sin in all the complexity and subtlety that has been considered in this thesis. However, the analysis and the summary above indicate that as a body they are a little more limited in addressing the contingencies of life that fall outside a sin explanation. This balance is an important point for further reflection. Although it would go beyond the scope of this study, it would be worthwhile considering the place of other metaphorical resources, which have similarly sound biblical roots, but which perhaps have not
hitherto been to the fore because they seem to speak less immediately of sin. This could include expressing God’s initiative and action through the cross and resurrection in terms of, for example, (i) exile and return; (ii) brokenness and restoration (or healing); or (iii) that which is lost and found. The question would again be to ask what resources they offer to a discussion of Atonement-as-participation.
Chapter 8

Atonement as a foundation for Disability Theology

Introduction

The thesis developed in chapter 6 is that if the Atonement is understood as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation, wherein he deals effectively with all that alienates us from himself and each other, this enables our main account of the Atonement to address the challenges raised by disability theology that had been identified in chapter 5.346 The task within this chapter is to take that further and to ask whether adopting the proposed theological protocol of Atonement-as-participation enables the Atonement to take on a more foundational role within the major themes of disability theology than was discovered in the review in chapter 3. There it was found that interaction with the Atonement in current disability theology literature is partial: the particularity of the incarnate, crucified and resurrected body of Jesus is certainly seen as revealing aspects of identification with humanity inclusive of impairment, but there is little engagement with the universal claim of dealing with sin and achieving a cosmic reconciliation with God.

The present task therefore has two aspects to it. On the one hand, the interpretative exercise in chapter 5 suggested that for disability theology to be distinctively Christian, a full account of the Atonement should have a foundational role within it.347 On the other hand, there is the question of whether in any case Atonement-as-participation provides a more sound and consistent (and hitherto underdeveloped) theological basis from which to pursue the various objectives of each of the main themes within disability theology. The approach taken is to revisit the objectives of each of the main themes within disability theology.

346 Page 123.
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identified in chapter 3 and to consider what Atonement-as-participation has to offer as a foundation for them.

**Participation and theological anthropology**

**Atonement as a foundation for anthropology**

The overall objective of disability-perspective theological anthropology, as indicated in chapter 3, could be said to be establishing that those with disabilities are of equal worth, in our own eyes as well as in God’s, as those whom we regard for the time being as not having disabilities. Possibly the most significant part of pursuing that objective has been to examine what it means to talk of humanity made in the image of God. What is sought is a basis for claiming with confidence that there is no sense of the image of God being defined primarily in the context of the typical or ideal human being and then extended by concession to encompass a “special case” of those with disabilities, with theological allowances being made to enable that extension. The point being made is not that the difference, or variety, represented by disability should be treated as irrelevant, or simply not mentioned, in coming to our understanding of the image of God. It is that our idea of humanity made in the image of God should incorporate and honour that difference as an inherent part of what that image is, rather than straining to accommodate it. It stands behind, for example, Nancy Eiesland’s claim that: ‘Our bodies participate in the *imago Dei*, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them.’

Swinton approaches this question of inclusion in the image of God from an ecclesial point of view in an article which introduces his friend, Stephen, who has significant learning disabilities. According to Swinton, learning disabilities should be ‘understood and respected’ as authentic forms of human existence which reveal

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something of the image of God.\textsuperscript{349} The task of the church is to value Stephen so that he is able to find ‘a valid place’\textsuperscript{350} as a full participant in humanity and the church. This illustrates very well that this is not only a question of making arrangements for Stephen to join in worship. It includes the desire for a fully inclusive understanding and expression of humanity made in the image of God. The question then becomes what the basis should be for making that inclusive claim.

Chapter 3 discovered in the literature a number of bases from which an inclusive idea of the image of God is argued. However, the prior underlying point to be made here is that if the overall anthropological objective is to assert successfully that those with or without disabilities are of equal worth in God’s eyes, then we must be able to assert with confidence that when, at the Atonement, God most profoundly addresses humanity and the whole human condition, his concern and action, and the manner in which he is present within his action, inherently encompasses within its main account the full variety of humanity and humanity’s whole predicament. The purpose in developing Atonement-as-participation has been to do that by responding to those concerns that have made disability sit awkwardly with that account: it does not insist that we say that disability is all good or all to do with sin; neither does it assume a homogenisation of bodies in the age to come; and it affirms a much broader sense of how we apprehend and respond to God’s initiative. As a result, those with disabilities are already "within the camp" of humanity addressed by God through the cross. The various bases of argument identified in chapter 3 can now be re-examined, to determine whether this approach gives them a firmer foundation in the Atonement.

The image and identification

One significant basis for this argument was that of the revelation of God’s identification and solidarity with impaired humanity. To summarise, the incarnation

\textsuperscript{350} Swinton, ‘Building a Church for Strangers’, p.43.
reveals God’s identification with humanity in the particularity of Jesus’ body and experience, subject to all the vagaries and risks of life. At the cross, Jesus is disabled to the point of death, revealing solidarity with disabled humanity and that solidarity continues into the resurrection, as evidenced by the wounds of the cross carried in his resurrected body. Eiesland pressed the point of the image of God and identification further by asking whether we could envisage a disabled God.\textsuperscript{351} Added to those matters of Jesus’ own body are his clear seeking out of and identification with the sick and disabled in his ministry.

In response, however, we might say that while revelation and identification, or solidarity, are insightful, and pastorally useful as regards the image of God, they are not the principal, large claim of the cross. Sticking with the opening hermeneutical key, that claim is that it effects a cosmic reconciliation, dealing with all that alienates us from God. Atonement-as-participation understands that action as one which in its very nature encompasses all of varied humanity. This seems a more theologically fundamental basis for the claim that whatever the Atonement does to reveal and restore the image of God, it is inclusive as a matter of course.

Importantly, this allows the points made about revelation, summarised here, not to have to do all the work, nor to be stretched unreasonably. For example, Jesus’ identification, through the disabling of the crucifixion, with visible physical disability is readily apparent; less so with a whole range of other less visible impairments. But if the true basis for inclusion is more fundamental, rooted in what God is doing through the Atonement, it is reasonable to cite those instances of revelation or identification as examples, or instances, of that underlying inclusion.

The image as extrinsic

A related consideration was Hans Reinders’ assertion that the worth of the human being must be extrinsic to the person, as discussed in chapter 2 above.\textsuperscript{352} If that worth found its origins in any intrinsic human attribute or function, then inevitably some with disabilities would fail to qualify. Reinders proposed a solution to such

\textsuperscript{351} Page 50.
\textsuperscript{352} Page 42.
undifferentiated inclusion based on God’s gifts. These have an inherent element, located in the gift of life itself, and an element located in God’s gift of friendship, the telos of which, drawing on Roman Catholic terminology, is full communion with God. Reinders describes the gift of friendship as God’s ‘continuous act of self-giving’ and briefly states that that friendship leads to freedom, and that freedom is secured through God’s judgement, made public through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

However, while Reinders’ exploration of the friendship of God is powerful, it would seem that a better foundation for applying his argument is to begin with the Atonement. Not only is the Atonement the only basis for the telos of full communion with God, or in other language for inclusion in the new creation, Atonement-as-participation understands our main account of it as inclusive of all humanity. It also emphasises that not only is life a gift, but God participates intimately in the contingency and risk of that gift, the experience of which can in itself prove alienating. Ultimately, at the cross, God takes full responsibility for the way this gift of life is. In this way the Atonement provides a foundation for exploring the idea of God’s friendship and of the worth of the human being as extrinsic, rather than those being the main ideas, with the cross functioning as an illustration of them.

This discussion is not unlike the rather different approach to the imago Dei taken by the Church Fathers, reported in the commentary on Frances Young’s theology in chapter 5. The approach of much disability theology, for understandable reasons, seeks to find the image of God reflected inherently, equally and essentially passively in each individual, requiring no particular attributes, achievements or response of the individual to establish it. However, Young reports that the Fathers regarded the full image of God as something inherent only to Jesus Christ, but something in which we might participate. Following Irenaeus’ concept of recapitulation, Jesus as the new Adam, goes over all of the

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353 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, p.298.
354 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, pp.313-314.
355 Page 134.
356 Young, God’s Presence, pp.174-175.
ground on which Adam, and humanity following him, has failed. Jesus, however, as the perfect, faithful, human believer and worshipper, succeeds and gives all things past, present and future new meaning.\footnote{Young, \textit{The Making of the Creeds}, p.84.} The point for the present discussion is that the foundation for participating in what Jesus has secured, and in the true image of God, is the Atonement, which was Jesus’ crucial step in the work of recapitulation. That Atonement is equally foundational for the place of disability in the image of God as long as disability and its challenges are part of our main account of what God addresses at the Atonement, which is how Atonement-as-participation understands it.

\section*{The image and eschatology}

Chapter 3 also noted an eschatological aspect to this theme, a hint at a theological anthropology of the new creation.\footnote{Page 56.} For example, Amos Yong uses the parable of the great dinner in Luke 14:15-24 to argue that those with disabilities are invited to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven just as they are. Exegetical questions arise over that reading of the text in addition to the comments made earlier. One is whether that picture of a great feast painted rhetorically by Jesus through the parable presents a description of the age to come which, though clearly figurative, nonetheless makes the claim that people of diverse embodiment\footnote{I am indebted to Justin and Lisa Hancock who introduced me to the concise and insightful term “people of diverse embodiments” and its background at the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, 2017.} would remain as they are in that coming age. It is possible that their surprising inclusion in the parable was principally intended to make a sharp point about the assumptions that Jesus’ listeners in positions of wealth and power in this age might make about who will be present and honoured in the next, rather than a point about their physical (or mental) state there.\footnote{See for example: Joel B. Green, \textit{The Gospel of Luke}, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp.554-563.}

The relevance to the current discussion is that, while Yong certainly acknowledges the latter interpretation, his disability perspective reading is based on the former.
Although presented in a hermeneutical study, this emphasis perhaps arises as an understandable reaction against normate presumptions that the anthropology of the age to come will entail the homogenisation of bodies to conform to a “typical” pattern. Yong’s argument is that such inclusion of those with disabilities in the Kingdom of Heaven should act as a basis for transforming normate assumptions about their part in humanity, church and society in the present: they have a fully valid place in each, just as they are.

However, the sense of a binary choice between two opposing theological views here is unhelpful. Just as one might resist the idea of homogenisation, one might respond to Yong’s suggested reading of the passage that there may well be aspects of the lived experience of ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame’ (Luke 14:21) which they would rather were not preserved, just as they are, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Yong suggests these aspects centre around ‘social shame and disapprobation’, but they might well include a more complex interplay of social, physical, cognitive and emotional elements of their lived experience, as explored in the discussion of alienation in chapter 6 above.

It is suggested that a better theological starting point for this eschatological discussion is an account of the Atonement, which after all is the event that inaugurates the age to come. Participation in the vibrant picture of the eschatological celebration dinner must be on the basis of whatever transformation has been secured through the cross and resurrection, and on the basis of freedom from whatever it is that God in Christ has thereby overcome. Any reflections beyond this on what such inclusion might entail (with the caution that such are inevitably speculative) must be consistent with it. Atonement-as-participation opens up the theological space for an Atonement that is less polarised in its

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361 This point was raised in chapter 3 (Page 57).
362 Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, p.135.
363 This is also necessarily a critical response to statements like that of Reynolds, that: ‘There is nothing inherently wrong with disability or with the people who have disabilities’. Although he goes on to talk of disability as part of living in an open and contingent universe, this use of the word “wrong” as a blanket term perpetuates the binary approach resisted in this thesis. See: Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.187.
364 Page 157.
assumed outworking. It does not demand that everything about the life experience of disability be excluded wholesale in the new creation, as in some way related to sin. It also does not demand that it all be retained, stifling the protest that aspects of that experience are indeed alienating. Instead it anticipates a new creation in which what is alienating has been dealt with and a diversity of hopes is fulfilled.

**Participation and a theology of access**

**Atonement as a foundation for access**

The overall objective of a theology of access can be said to be, as it was in chapter 3, to address a range of barriers to the full inclusion and participation\(^{365}\) of those with disabilities in ecclesial life and worship in particular, as well as in society more generally. The significant advocacy element of disability theology, with its links to the disability rights movement, can at times give the impression that disability theology is a theology of access. That is not to downplay the scale of the challenge it addresses. Some of the complexity of that challenge is captured by Reynolds when he observes that the injustices of exclusion from participation often arise, as does disability itself, 'at the intersection of different marginalized identities - such as gender, race, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation.'\(^{366}\) In other words, inclusion in terms of enabling physical access (and that access being utilised, resulting in actual physical presence and engagement) may involve addressing interlocking issues that extend well beyond replacing the steps up to the church sanctuary with a ramp.

As was the case with theological anthropology above, chapter 3 found a number of bases from which this access objective is pursued in the literature. These

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\(^{365}\) The word "participation" inevitably has a high profile in matters of access and inclusion. Chapter 6 developed it in a particular way as a theological protocol which should shape our whole idea of the Atonement. Nonetheless, its prominence, particularly within a theology of access, may give Atonement-as-participation a useful resonance across the field of disability theology as a whole.

included, in summary, (i) the fact that Jesus is God’s gift to all of humanity; (ii) the
distinctive emphasis within Jesus’ ministry on being present to those whom society
seemed to regard as outsiders; (iii) an emphasis on the Holy Spirit, both as the
person of the Trinity who has historically appeared rather marginalised and as the
one who acts as our advocate and who forms the church as a hospitable
community; (iv) a call for the body of Christ to have the most vulnerable at its core;
and (v) a spirituality that emphasises friendship and recognises a common human
vulnerability.

However, it seems that behind all of these must lie a more basic assertion about
our relationship with God. Any theological claim to physical, social or ecclesial
access and inclusion should surely presume a claim to what might be called
spiritual access to God: that none is excluded from the possibility of approaching
God or from inclusion in the body of Christ. The various bases above are
examples of this presumption in action. But both aspects of the presumption are
ultimately constituted by the Atonement. Our access to God the Father in its
fullest, most intimate form arises through the Son, whose death on the cross
precipitated the tearing of the curtain in the temple, symbolically opening the way
for all into the holy of holies, the place of God (Matthew 22:50, Mark 15:38
and
Luke 23:45). Our inclusion in the body of Christ arises from participating in the
death and resurrection of Jesus, symbolically through baptism, and revisited and
reinforced through the celebration of the Eucharist.367

If the Atonement is to be the foundation of that basic presumption of access to
God, then it is essential to the objectives of a theology of access that there is no
question of disability (of whatever sort) being considered a special case, somehow
outside of our main account of that Atonement, or included only by a special
extension of that account. Adopting Atonement-as-participation as a guiding
protocol for the sort of event the Atonement is addresses this directly. The
emphasis on the Atonement being God’s deepest participation in the risk of
creation recognises the contingent nature of life and the legitimate place of what

367 For example, Paul’s exploration of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians explicitly includes being
baptised into that body (1 Cor 12:13) and sharing in that body at the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16).
we call disability in the variety of the humanity that Jesus assumed in the incarnation and represented on the cross. The fact that Atonement-as-participation identifies all that is alienating (those aspects of life for which there is clear moral culpability as well as those that are harder so to categorise) as what is addressed by God through the Atonement allows both sin and disability (the existence and the experience of it) to have a full place at the table in any discussion of Atonement without an unnecessary or uncomfortable conflation of the two. It was also demonstrated towards the end of chapter 6 that an approach to the Atonement based on God’s participation in the risk of creation and in the situation of humanity as it is, in all its variety, provided a basis for the objective of finding ways to speak of apprehending and responding to God which are inclusive, particularly of those with profound intellectual impairment.

Having made this underlying point, it is useful also to consider other more specific arguments, or movements, within the area of the theology of access and to consider whether Atonement-as-participation also offers insight at those levels. Two examples are the consideration of rights and of presence.

**Access and rights**

A legitimate question in relation to a theology of access is whether its objective is essentially to provide a theological justification, or foundation, for the aims of the disability rights movement. On the whole, the disability theology literature tends not to make extensive use of the language of rights. However, the liberation or advocacy aspects of the literature are often close to it and might be read in that way.

Hans Reinders raises this in his review of various “theologies” of disability. His critique of the liberatory approach of Eiesland, for example, is along precisely

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368 For example, Disability Rights UK, as might be expected, uses language of both rights and participation in its literature. Its vision is ‘of a society where everyone with lived experience of disability or health conditions can participate equally as full citizens’ and it commits to ‘Promote the rights of disabled people in all our work and actions.’ See: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/about-us/our-customer-charter> [Accessed 19 June 2017]. The question here is whether what is sought in the former is really what is secured by the latter.
these lines. Eiesland adopts a ‘minority group’ model\(^\text{369}\) for her characterisation of the situation in which those with disabilities often find themselves. Alongside this she develops the idea of the disabled God as particularly powerful and meaningful for people within that minority group. As indicated in chapter 3 above, Reinders’ first objection is that the minority group model is inherently based on notions of self-representation (an aspect of a rights approach). Those with profound intellectual disabilities, the case Reinders is pursuing in his argument, are unable to engage in self-representation and the exercise, or indeed the comprehension, of rights. His second objection, to the disabled God idea, is that while it is indeed inspiring for those with (in that case physical) disabilities, an assertion of rights seems to offer little that will transform the attitudes of the currently able and that might move them towards those with disabilities.\(^\text{370}\) Reinders seems to have in mind a stronger sense of mutuality as a basis for disability theology in general.

Reynolds makes a similar point in his article testing the meaning of access in disability theology. Reynolds contends that discussion of access often uses the language of accommodation and inclusion of the other (similar to rights language). Yet using such language seems to perpetuate a sense of "us and them", which never really moves beyond a sort of tolerance, or at best a restricted or distant hospitality.\(^\text{371}\) Reynolds’ proposal for seeing “them” as genuinely "us" (or in Reinders’ terms, that moves “us” towards “them”) is that a change in attitude is required that values alterity as critical to humanity. The alterity of disability then becomes ‘a gift that teaches and empowers communities.’\(^\text{372}\)

Does the Atonement, seen as Atonement-as-participation, provide a basis for moving a disability theology of access beyond a notion of rights to one of mutual participation? Does it allow the Atonement to form a central part of the Christian response to this “us and them” dichotomy? Atonement-as-participation emphasises two points in that regard. One is that our solidarity, what joins us as human beings before God, is found in the common experience of alienation in all

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\(^\text{369}\) Eiesland develops that proposal in: *The Disabled God*, chapter 3.
\(^\text{371}\) Reynolds, ‘Changing the Conversation’, p.45.
\(^\text{372}\) Reynolds, ‘Changing the Conversation’, p.43.
of its moral and contingent complexity, all of which is addressed by God in Christ. The other is that, following the argument that disability, like perishing, can have both negative and positive aspects, we are not pushed into a binary choice of seeing the alterity of disability as in all respects bad or in all respects good. Rather, Atonement-as-participation opens up a hospitable space for saying that the alterity of disability provides much to celebrate as a gift (and which we anticipate being in some way preserved through the resurrection) along with aspects which are part of the alienating experience of life (which God in Christ will take to himself and deal with by virtue of the cross).

Access and presence

Another movement which is under way in writing on the theology of access is towards expressing participation in terms of the significance of presence: that it is the presence itself of those with disabilities that lies at the heart of access to, and participation in, worship. As Block puts it succinctly, with the emphasis of her work on hospitality: “The identity and mission of the church are explicitly tied to who is present and who is absent.” Block’s theological framework for access, which was reviewed in chapter 3, is based on Jesus, as the “copious host”, being willing to be present to the marginalised and his invitation to them to be present with him and not excluded. Wolfensberger makes that connection explicitly in his 2001 article on what constitutes “the good life” for those with cognitive impairment. For all people, he suggests, the good life must include, among other things, God’s grace and the mediation of God’s presence by others. This cannot properly be achieved by means of segregation, where those with or without particular disabilities participate only with those in similar circumstances. It requires full participation in human experience by all, where none is protected from the joys, sorrows and expectations of the other. Wolfensberger proposes that it is through

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373 Block, *Copious Hosting*, p.121.
this truly valued full membership of the Christian community that that mediation of God’s presence occurs.374

A significant part of the challenge in carrying through such a proposal lies in whether those without disabilities have any expectation of the divine being mediated through those with disabilities. Brock, in a more recent article on the theology of inclusion, makes that point in a sharp challenge to the church. Rather than the church wanting people with disabilities to be present so that they can point them out and feel good about their presence; or seeing their presence as a reminder of human vulnerability, Brock challenges the church to expect that every member of the body is ‘an active giver or conduit of divine love.’375 On this account, participation begins with presence rather than activity, and it may be that presence, properly understood and without excluding the activities that might flow from being present, may represent the essence of a theology of access.

Again, there is a presumption that must stand behind this argument for understanding presence as the essence of access and participation. It is the presumption that those with disabilities should neither have to demonstrate their contribution to be valued and included by the church, nor have worship extended to them by concession, but a presumption that they will be present as a matter of course (or, conversely, that their absence would be unexpected and protested). This requires that our main account of God (in the present case of the Atonement) naturally incorporates all of humanity, in all of its variety. None is included as a special case. The purpose of Atonement-as-participation is to present a main account of the Atonement that shares this presumption. To the extent that it succeeds, it enables the Atonement to act as a basis for this account of access in terms of presence. Indeed, the fact that participation in the Eucharist (the celebration of the Atonement) is often taken in the literature as a test of inclusion

in worship also indicates how crucial it is that that access and presence grow out of our main account of the Atonement.

Participation and disability-perspective hermeneutics

Atonement as a foundation for hermeneutics

From the review of this theme in chapter 3, the overall objective of disability-perspective hermeneutics could be said to be one of moving away from normate presumptions (both ours and those of the biblical authors) about disability in our reading of Scripture, to a way of reading that encompasses and affirms the perspective of those with disabilities. The normate presumptions in question are particularly those that portray, or read, disability in a negative light, whether as a sign of bad or weak character, as resulting from sin, as representing conflict or decline, or as something fulfilling a merely functional or illustrative role in the workings of the text. Mitchell and Snyder observe that the portrayal of disability in the Bible is complex, but that it is also congruent with their much wider thesis on the manifestation of normate presumptions, that: ‘disability pervades literary discourse, first, as a stock feature of characterisation and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.’

The earlier discussion identified one aspect of pursuing this objective as seeking hermeneutical guidelines that help to identify those with disabilities in the text as dramatically significant characters, finding greater depth in them through careful reading. To that one could add the aspect of focusing on those readers of Scripture with diverse embodiments, whose perspective in reading is informed by

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378 In the context of this thesis “readers” is used as a summary term to encompass the various ways in which people of diverse embodiment and ability might encounter Scripture. The idea of the reader of Scripture also points to wider studies of the relationship between text and reader which are not the focus of this thesis.
their life experience. A foundation is sought for saying that the text welcomes such readers, asking with whom in the text they should identify, and what the text seems to say about their own situation. The reading of the healing narratives in the gospels were identified as particularly relevant here, where an emphasis on a social construction concept of disability, and on healing as social reintegration, is often encountered.

These are all positive contributions to the hermeneutical discussion, but as with anthropology and access, it seems that behind the overall objective of Christian disability-perspective hermeneutics there is the need for a more fundamental assertion to be drawn out. Hermeneutics is concerned with how we read the account of the drama of God, including his revelation of himself, his relationship with creation and humanity, and the outworking of his intentions and promises. If we remain consistent with the work in chapter 1 on a hermeneutical key for this study, the focal point, or pivot, of that drama is the Atonement. For all its variety and richness, the drama finds its central, definitive meaning in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The greatest revelation of Jesus and his work is found as the drama passes through the locus of the cross and resurrection. Therefore, the way in which we perceive humanity in all its variety to be addressed and treated at that focal point should shape how we read the rest of the drama.379

If, for example, we understand the Atonement to be only about God’s dealing with moral sin, then those aspects of the lived experience of disability that one might expect God to address through the cross either have to be linked to and expressed in terms of sin; or incorporated as some sort of special case; or left as an unanswered mystery. Atonement-as-participation, on the other hand,

379 This is not the only suggestion as to where such a foundation might be located. Sarah Melcher proposes an approach in terms of the sovereignty of God. In a paper on metaphorical references to disability in the Old Testament Prophets, she suggests that a basis for disability theology and a related approach to reading the text could lie in God’s challenge to those who question how he fashions creation, for example in Isaiah 45:9-12. However, as with other attributes of God, it is through the Atonement, and the cross in particular, that the nature of God’s sovereignty (displayed in vulnerability) is fully revealed. See: Sarah J. Melcher, ‘With Whom Do The Disabled Associate? Metaphorical Interplay in the Latter Prophets’, in This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies, ed. by Hector Avalos and others (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 115-129 (p.128).
understands the Atonement as addressing all that alienates us from God, from others and from ourselves as we believe we could be, without an insistence on a binary sin/not sin dichotomy. It also understands the Atonement as meeting the challenges of disability, such as a diversity of hopes. The point of this for hermeneutics is that it provides as a starting point the confident assertion that the focal point of the cosmic drama encompasses all of humanity, in all its diverse embodiments, as principal characters.

Disability in the biblical text

With that in mind, the question of the role of those characters in the biblical text who have disabilities can be revisited. Disability theologians such as Black and Yong propose hermeneutical principles for reading the text in a way that encounters such characters as narratively significant figures. Their aim is to avoid the pitfalls of perceived normate presumptions that those characters (at least to the extent that they have impairments) act as mere cyphers, illustrations, or thin narrative devices used to progress the plot. The positive hermeneutical disciplines they propose were summarised in chapter 3 above. In a slightly different approach, Carter suggests a postcolonial hermeneutical strategy to combat the problem of people with disabilities in the biblical text becoming, as he puts it, “invisibilized”. In his postcolonial reading they could be seen as symbolising a nation suffering under foreign rule, but Carter prefers to read them as actual individuals who have been disabled by the effects of foreign rule (for example the imposition of food rationing, or punishments). In this way they can become “visible” as significant individuals whose particular life experiences, and the causes of those experiences, are being addressed by Jesus.

Despite these strategies, it remains the case that (i) a character in the biblical text with a disability is generally presented as atypical, and that atypicality contributes

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380 Page 64.
something specific to the narrative, which we would not wish to smooth over or ignore; and (ii) the extent of involvement of those characters in the narrative, and hence the depth we are able to find in them, varies considerably.

Taking the first of these points, adopting a participative understanding of the Atonement certainly does not remove disability from the text. Nor does it obviate the fact that the text often appears both to use disability metaphorically and to exhibit presumptions about disability from within its own temporal and cultural frame. These aspects of the text are drawn out in great detail in Mikeal Parsons’ studies of body and character in Luke and Acts. For example, he examines the account of the man lame from birth in Acts 3-4 and the significance of his disability.\(^{382}\) Parsons explores what he calls the “physiognomic consciousness” of the time by reference to physiognomic handbooks which informed current medical theories, and which assumed that signs of character could be read in physical attributes. Impairments to feet and ankles, as well as the need to be carried daily to a place to beg were signs of weak, or soft, moral character.\(^{383}\) When healed, the handbooks would point to a robust character being (re)-established. Parsons goes on to suggest that Luke in fact usurps the normal application of those theories, putting them to his own use by recording the man’s jumping and leaping (Acts 3:8). Some have viewed this effervescent rejoicing as representing the restoration of Israel, foretold in Isaiah 35:6 to involve the lame leaping like a deer.\(^{384}\) However, Parsons suggests that because this was definitely not the dignified gait of ‘a man of courage and vigorous character,’\(^{385}\) the healing emphasised the disruptive enthusiasm of the new body of God’s people. Tackling such physiognomic assumptions of the time, though they are uncomfortable to our ears, remains an unavoidable part of engaging with the text.

The second point, about the extent of each character’s involvement, can be illustrated with two examples from one gospel writer. The first is the man with the

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\(^{383}\) Parsons, *Body and Character*, p.113.

\(^{384}\) Parsons, *Body and Character*, pp.118-119.

\(^{385}\) Parsons, *Body and Character*, p.121.
withered hand in John 3:1-6. The only information given about the man is his condition. His hand is restored, but it appears very much that his disability is used as bait by those trying to trap Jesus, then in a counter-move by Jesus as an illustration of the rightness of his doing good (in this case healing) on the Sabbath. The man himself is neither named nor developed and does not appear again in the narrative. It is hard to see that the text does other than make use of this character and his situation to serve the plot and say something about others. A contrasting example is the man born blind, about whom the ninth chapter of John’s gospel provides a wealth of background detail. Though he is not named, it seems convincing to speak of him as a rounded, significant character in his own right, who engages in lively, challenging conversation. Even then Black rightly points out that we still need positive principles for reading to avoid seeing the blind man principally as an illustration of Jesus’ power to heal, or as a metaphorical critique of the spiritual blindness of those around him, adding to John’s picture of Jesus as the light of the world. Nonetheless, the relationships between these men, their disabilities and the text seem very different.

What these points illustrate is that while the hermeneutical strategies noted above provide positive methods for reading Scripture, they do not provide a foundation for applying those positive methods. They can leave the impression that they are tools for wrestling with the Bible as a whole, and with the God represented therein, both of whom in fact have a negative view of disability. What is proposed here is that the whole interpretation of the Biblical drama should be shaped, or underpinned, by our understanding that its central action of God at the Atonement inherently includes all humanity, in its diverse embodiments, as principal characters. On the one hand this provides a sound basis for applying the hermeneutical proposals of Black, Yong or Carter. On the other hand, it allows the approach of the biblical authors to be examined in the context of the presumptions

386 Weiss-Block makes the general point that those in the healing narratives, apart from Bartemaeus, are generally not named, which she interprets as reducing them to figures without status and adding to the challenges of disability perspective hermeneutics. See Block, *Copious Hosting*, p.111.
and conventions of their time without the fear that these may lead to the conclusion that the Bible as a whole disparages disability.

**The person with a disability as a reader**

In considering how those readers who themselves have experience of disability encounter the text, there is the question of how their world interacts with that presented by the Bible, and the question of how their insights as readers are received. These questions are illustrated well by an article by John Hull, who became blind during his adult life. He points out that blind and sighted people live in very different worlds and have different knowledge as a result. As he puts it, ‘Blindness is not just something that happens to one’s eyes; it is something that happens to one’s world.’ Following Hull’s lead we can ask what place there is for the person who is blind in the world that the Bible presents to them, when as Hull claims, the Bible presents predominantly a sighted person’s (or more broadly, an able-bodied person’s) view of the world. This he illustrates with the case of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants Jesus to do for him. According to Hull the answer seems obvious to us: that his sight should be restored. But it is only obvious, either in the biblical world or in our own, to “us” who are sighted. Other responses are possible in Hull’s world. He describes himself as having been given a ‘strange, dark and mysterious gift from God.’ It is not a gift he would have asked for, nor suggest others should desire, yet along with much trouble it has brought him insights and experiences, including experiences of God, he would not otherwise have had. For Hull, Jesus’ question is more complex than it appears. Hull’s perspective affects our reading of the text both in highlighting its able-bodied frame of reference (not to denigrate the text,

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389 Clark-Soles, examining the range of ways that Mark’s gospel uses disability rhetorically, particularly its use of blindness as a metaphor as in this passage, admits that use of disabilities by the text in this way raises all the discomforts about exclusion that the disability rights movement has so effectively puts its finger on. See: Jaime Clark-Soles, ‘Mark and Disability’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 70 (2016), 159-171 (p.161).
but to be honest about it), and in suggesting that there are more subtle questions
about disability that without his insight we would not ask.

A further instructive, as well as moving, contribution to these questions comes
from Holly Joan Toensing’s examination of the “demoniac” in Mark, chapter 5, in
the light of mental illness and tragedy in her own family. Toensing is critical of
rather one-dimensional interpretations that see this man only as a symbol of
Jesus’ intention to extend the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles or as a human
corollary to his calming of the storm at the end of Mark chapter 4. She finds depth,
significance and connections with the world of the man who lives among the
tombs, close to the dead, and in how Jesus responds to him. Examples of that
are: the sheer scale of the condition he is dealing with (a whole herd of pigs could
not sustain it and resist self-destruction); the community’s on-going struggle to
understand and help him; his own feeling of being overwhelmed by his condition;
and his unusual commission from Jesus to share his story when Jesus had told
others not to do so.391

What emerges here is a two-way movement. What is needed is a principle for
reading that both (i) affirms that a disability-perspective reading is not peripheral to
a “main” reading of the text; and (ii) takes seriously the levels of complexity that
emerge when the world of the biblical text (often portrayed in only a few
sentences) is illuminated by insights from those with disabilities in the present.
Certainly, as discussed above, Atonement-as-participation affirms those with
disabilities (both reader and biblical character) as principal players in the drama to
which Scripture bears witness, and therefore their perspective as essential to a
“main” reading. It also, by providing theological space for a diversity of hopes and
a discussion of what is or is not alienating, does not insist on a simplistic binary
sin/not sin interpretation of the life experience of those with disabilities in the text
or reading it. However, just as importantly, it affirms the crucial importance of the

391 Holly Joan Toensing, ‘Living Among the Tombs: Society, Mental Illness and Self-Destruction in
Mark 5:1-20’, in This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies, ed. by Hector Avalos
and others (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 131-143 (pp.140-143).
insights of disability-perspective readers in arriving at the theological protocol of Atonement-as-participation in the first place.

Reading the healing narratives

The healing narratives in the gospels present a particularly sharp challenge within disability-perspective hermeneutics. Chapter 3 identified the objective of finding a way of reading these passages that dissociates sin from either disability or illness. Yong’s approach was given as an example, challenging what he identifies as an assumption arising from a normate reading, that only the able-bodied can be legitimate followers of Jesus, or have access to the benefits of the Atonement. Kathy Black offers a similar hermeneutical strategy comprising, in summary: care over loose use of metaphor found in the text; a focus not on the ailment, but on the social exclusion of the person who is sick or has a disability and their subsequent reintegration; emphasis on Jesus’ willingness to cross boundaries of taboo; and attention to the response of the crowds.

These strategies are undoubtedly helpful in broadening our reading of the text and in questioning normate interpretations. However, they give the impression overall that a reading with an emphasis on inclusion and re-integration is an alternative, replacing a reading that links the healing with the cosmic reconciliation to be wrought by God in Christ and that correspondingly links illness or disability with sin. The question which seems to remain is on what basis one reading should take precedence over the other, or whether there is any way of holding them together.

A single, consistent answer to this is unlikely to be found within the confines of the healing passages themselves. Examples even from one gospel writer display considerable variation in how the healing accounts proceed and in how Jesus

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392 Page 66.
393 Black, A Healing Homiletic, p.183.
394 It is worth noting that Carter’s postcolonial reading interprets the healings as a prefiguring of Jesus rolling back imperial power and exposing its false claims to bring health and prosperity, which will happen at the cross. However, that reading again has the issue of treating disability as illustrative and healing as a metaphorically dealing with sin, albeit that it is the sin of the empire, not of the individual. See: Carter, ‘The Blind, Lame and Paralyzed’, p.145.
himself seems to perceive their purpose. Sometimes there is a clear emphasis on a link between faith, salvation and healing: Jesus tells the leper in Luke 17:11-19 that his faith has healed him, and the word for "healed" (σήσωκέν) also carries the meaning “saved”. Sometimes there is an emphasis on re-integration: another leper is instructed in Luke 5:12-115 to show himself to the priest and make an offering as a public testimony to his healing. Sometimes there is no mention of re-integration, but another emphasis, such as the prioritising of compassion over religious regulations, as in the case of the man healed of dropsy in Luke 14:1-6. Only on one occasion does Luke record Jesus asking the sick or disabled person what they would like to happen, as he does of the blind man begging near Jericho in Luke 17:11-19.

Again, how these various accounts are read should be shaped by how we understand all of varied humanity to be included and addressed at the focal point of the scriptural drama, the Atonement. As well as treating people of diverse embodiments equally as principal characters in that drama, Atonement-as-participation provides theological space to explore what it is about the illness or disability (and society’s response to it) that is alienating. It allows the particular healing event to draw out how Jesus addresses that aspect, without suggesting that other aspects, including moral sin, cannot also be present and dealt with. In this way, by avoiding a binary analysis that attributes everything to sin or not-sin, Atonement-as-participation allows the healing accounts to prefigure the Atonement in a more constructive and inclusive way.

**Participation and disability-perspective soteriology**

**Soteriology in the context of disability**

Given the focus of this study on the relationship between Atonement and disability theology, chapter 3 also identified and explored the particular theme of disability-perspective soteriology within the literature and considered the accounts of the Atonement that are evident there currently. In this discussion “salvation”, the
concern of soteriology, is functioning as a summary term for the benefits secured by God in Christ through the Atonement. It was noted above in relation to the healing narratives that the term can also draw in ideas of healing. Indeed, the term salvation can be taken to encompasses the whole witness of Scripture, played out through God’s relationship with Israel and with the world through Israel, Christ and the Church, not just within the confines of Christ’s passion and resurrection. Here, however, the focus in talking of salvation or soteriology is specifically on how we can speak of the effects of Christ’s Atonement in the context of disability.

Following the pattern of the sections of this chapter so far, the overall objective of disability soteriology could be identified as arriving at a soteriological account that avoids normate assumptions and that particularly addresses how disability is included in the process of salvation. Various approaches to this objective were identified in chapter 3. Pailin and Yong dealt with the question by placing the emphasis of salvation on the revelation of God’s identification with humanity, with all its impairments, and the achievement of subjective change in personal and societal attitudes and behaviours as a pneumatologically-enabled response. Frances Young dealt with the question mainly through God’s presence at the cross: Jesus is present as our representative to offer a sacrifice for sin, and God is present to take responsibility for life as it is, including the experiences of disability. Gould dealt with the question by linking disability directly with sin and the Fall and insisting that an account of salvation must include the elimination of all disability.\(^395\)

Each of these soteriological accounts appears to have behind it a particular concern, arising for good reasons, about what is being said of the Atonement. Pailin and Yong are concerned, among other things, to dissociate sin and disability, to reaffirm the value of the human being and indeed the value of all that is positive in the life experience of disability. Gould is concerned to avoid slipping away from a thoroughly objective Atonement that deals with all the effects of the

\(^{395}\) Page 67.
Part 3: Chapter 8: Atonement as a foundation for Disability Theology

Fall. However, both approaches in their different ways seem to betray an underlying assumption that talk of an objective Atonement can only be talk of moral sin. One approach finds that unacceptable in the context of disability and so moves away from it. The other approach embraces it, but correspondingly insists that all the phenomena and experiences we judge not to be good must stem from the Fall. Both approaches also give the impression of imposing what they, the writer, already know God “ought” to address, or need not address, through the Atonement. For Pailin and Yong little need be addressed but attitudes and behaviours. For Gould, all that in his own estimation is limiting about disability must be put right by God. In something of a contrast, Young’s underlying concern, though arrived at from the perspective of her experience of disability, is wider than disability itself. It is that the assertion that there is hope within despair should be credible. This leads to her to an emphasis on God’s presence demonstrated at the cross, but leaves rather open what objective change that brings about beyond Jesus’ representative sacrifice for sin.

The picture that emerges is of a disparity of soteriologies, pushed in very different directions by the concerns that drive them. The question this raises is whether the proposed account of Atonement-as-participation provides a better foundation for addressing these concerns without arriving at seemingly irreconcilable soteriological accounts.

**Atonement-as-participation as a foundation**

A principal feature of Atonement-as-participation is that it moves away from an assumption that to speak of an objective Atonement is only to speak of dealing with moral sin. Instead the Atonement is God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation, encompassing the whole complex mix of moral failure and the contingent nature of life. Within that understanding, at the Atonement God addresses all that alienates us from himself and each other. This allows the recognition that there are elements of the lived experience of disability that are alienating, and elements that certainly are not. It also allows us to speak of sin and disability together without conflating the two. As a result, the concerns of
Pailin and Yong, that the subjective impact of salvation should emerge as a move away from sinful attitudes and behaviours in society can be held together with the idea that God will also address the alienating aspects of the lived experience of disability. Gould’s concern that the negative effects of disability on a particular life should not be left unresolved by God through the Atonement is addressed, without the need to identify all of disability and its implications with the Fall of humankind.

In taking this approach, there is also recognition that the interaction of moral sin and contingent life (here disability) is complex and often difficult to analyse into its component parts. This suggests (following Swinton)\(^{396}\) that in many cases it will only be those intimately involved in a particular life who might have a full sense of what is alienating. It also allows for the diversity of hopes to be acknowledged in our soteriological account, moving away from the need to pre-define what aspects of a life lived with disability ought to be addressed by God through the Atonement.

As regards Frances Young’s account, although the concept of Atonement-as-participation began with some of her insights, it has moved away from her conclusion that the Atonement should be understood primarily as God’s presence at the cross (and correspondingly in life). Interpreting it instead as God’s initiative of participating intimately in the moral and contingent risk of creation allows the objective achievement of the cross to encompass not only Jesus’ sacrifice for sin, but also the broader question of what has changed for all of varied humanity, come Easter Sunday.

Atonement-as-participation does therefore provide an approach which retains a full account of the Atonement and allows the concerns behind the various soteriological proposals to be given due weight without the need to drive them apart.

The soteriological vocation of disability

A further aspect of disability-perspective soteriology that emerged, albeit from the discussion of anthropology, was the role that disability itself plays in the drama of

\(^{396}\) Page 174.
redemption. For all the caution that might be felt about demanding a functional value from disability, the idea of a “vocation” of those with disabilities was found in Frances Young’s comments about her son, Arthur. She suggested that his disabilities reveal the true vulnerability of humanity. In addition, they evoke at best an ambivalent reaction from society, demonstrating its need for Atonement of some sort, the conviction of which is an aspect of God’s judgement. In this way Arthur participates not only as a recipient of the benefits of the Atonement, but as one through whom an aspect of the judgement leading to Atonement is mediated.

Pia Matthews, reviewing Catholic social teaching, in particular the body theology of Pope John Paul II, places this idea even more firmly within a soteriological scheme. She draws out Pope John Paul’s emphasis that those with disabilities are not merely recipients of care, and by extension revealers of wider human vulnerability. Instead, they participate in humanity by being who they are as unique individuals. Not only might they teach us how to love, Matthews concludes that ‘God has taken up those with disabilities into his plan of salvation.’ She cites the likes of Moses and the man born blind in John chapter 9 and their roles in the drama of Scripture to underline her point.

As they stand, these are attractive suggestions. However, they do open up questions about whether we are looking for a functional value to “justify” disability; whether the existence of disability has somehow become a necessity in the soteriological scheme; and what this Atonement, elements of which are thus mediated, achieves for those people with disabilities through whom that mediation has come. These questions all have a sense of “us and them” about them, since they ask how God uses “them” for the soteriological benefit of “us”. Atonement-as-participation contributes here in two ways. On the one hand, it provides an account that is consistent with the notion that salvation, though profoundly significant for the individual, remains a corporate affair in that we are all dependent on one another for our apprehension and response to God’s initiative of

397 Page 134.
Atonement. On the other hand, the recognition that there are aspects of disability that are alienating and aspects that are not is again significant. It provides the theological space for disability to play a positive role in God’s soteriological purpose without the need to insist that it has that role by virtue of being inherently a negative or positive phenomenon. It also, as discussed already, allows a more open discussion of what aspects of disability are eliminated, changed, or retained through the soteriological process.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that adopting the theological protocol of Atonement-as-participation enables the Atonement, as a fundamental element of Christian theology, to play a more foundational role in pursuing the objectives of disability theology than it has to date. The reason for this lies in three features of Atonement-as-participation: (i) that the Atonement is God’s deepest participation in all of the risk of creation, which involves both moral failure/culpability and the contingent nature of life, and recognising that these are often deeply intertwined; (ii) that what is addressed at the Atonement is whatever alienates us from God and others, acknowledging that, particularly in relation to disability, there can be a diversity of hopes in that regard; and (iii) that apprehending and responding to the Atonement is not a narrowly conceived individual or intellectual process. These features generate an account of the Atonement that is inherently inclusive, rather than one that has to be extended to disability as a special case. To summarise, in relation to the objectives of each of the themes of disability theology:

- The Atonement can play a foundational role in disability perspective theological anthropology because the Atonement is the point at which humanity and the human condition is most deeply participated in and addressed by God. The manner and extent of that participation makes such an Atonement inherently inclusive, naturally addressing the challenges of disability.
- As regards a theology of access, since any theological argument for physical, social or ecclesial access should be predicated on spiritual access to God, an inherently inclusive Atonement (the basis of full access to God and inclusion in the body of Christ) becomes its best foundation.

- As regards hermeneutics, the focal point of the biblical drama, which should shape a Christian reading of the rest, is the Atonement. The fact that there is a sound basis for that Atonement being inclusive and addressing the challenges of disability provides a theological foundation for applying the positive hermeneutical strategies in the literature.

- As regards disability-perspective soteriology, Atonement-as-participation provides a theological foundation for moving away from an assumption that an objective Atonement is confined to addressing moral sin. This allows for a soteriological account that is objective as well as looking for the subjective experience of change; and that does not demand that everything dealt with at the cross is expressed in terms of sin.

This chapter has led to an overall positive conclusion that Atonement-as-participation is a sound theological foundation for pursuing the objectives of disability theology. A further stage, going beyond the scope of this thesis, would be explore in detail how the systematic theological argument here would work out in practical terms in pastoral and ecclesial settings.
Chapter 9

Conclusions

Proposals and conclusions

This study set out to explore the interaction between current disability theology and Christian ideas of the Atonement achieved through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the language used to express those ideas. This has been undertaken as a systematic theological response, having paid attention to the testimony and the theological challenges raised by those with disabilities and those who care for them. The conclusions arising from the study can be stated briefly as responses to the three components of the research question, as well as to the overall concern out of which the focused research question arose:

1. To what extent does current writing on disability theology take account of understandings of the Atonement?

   - The major themes in current disability theology literature do interact with some elements of an account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The interaction is partial, however. In the terms of the hermeneutical key that has been applied, it mostly relates to the revelation of God’s solidarity with humanity through the particularity of the bodily disabling and suffering of Jesus and the marks of that suffering that remain on his resurrected body. There is much less interaction with the large claim of a universal cosmic reconciliation involving God’s dealing effectively with sin.

2. To what extent are understandings of the Atonement within the Western Christian theological tradition challenged by insights from current disability theology?

   - The prevailing ways of describing the Atonement through ideas of sacrifice, justice and victory show little evidence of interaction with
the insights of disability theology. Disability theology presents significant challenges to those accounts of the Atonement, particularly in terms of: the relationship between sin and disability; what aspects of disability God addresses at the cross; and how human beings interact with the Atonement in situations of intellectual impairment.

3. Do those understandings of the Atonement need to be developed or enriched, both to better account for disability and to allow the Atonement to play a more foundational role in disability theology; and if so, in what way?

- The central proposal of this thesis is that if the nature of the Atonement event is re-visited and understood as God’s deepest, once for all participation in the risk of creation, this opens up the theological space for an account of the Atonement that is inherently inclusive of humanity with its range of impairment. Such an Atonement addresses not just moral sin, but everything about the contingency of life that gives rise to alienation from God and each other. This Atonement-as-participation provides a positive response to the challenges raised by disability theology and it enables the Atonement to act as a foundation for pursuing the objectives identified in disability theology, which to date it has not.

- Atonement-as-participation is proposed not as an Atonement model, but as a “theological protocol”, being an underlying feature of the type of event that the Atonement is. It therefore should guide the deployment of any of the models of the Atonement and the metaphorical resources they provide.

The overall concern out of which the specific research question, in its three components, arose, was that of what place there is for disability in the week by

399 It was observed earlier that Christian charismatic healing ministries do adopt something of a victory model of the Atonement in relation to disability, although the way they do so is criticised within disability theology scholarship (page 116).
week presentation of a gospel founded on the cross and resurrection, in a local church setting. The most important response to this concern emerging from the thesis is that an understanding of the cross and resurrection as Atonement-as-participation provides a theological foundation for approaching that gospel account with the confidence that it is inherently inclusive of all humanity. Such an account of the Atonement encompasses the concerns that disability raises without having to be extended to those with disabilities as a “special case”.

A number of subsidiary steps and conclusions in the study have led to this proposal and these conclusions. These can be summarised as follows.

**Themes, models and metaphors**

The study began with an analytical part having two main components. The first, in chapter 3, was to identify what account of the Atonement is evident within current disability theology literature, or what understanding or interaction with ideas of Atonement appear to inform or shape it. This review looked at that literature in its own terms, recognising that proposing a systematic account of the Atonement has not been a discrete or principal concern within it. The literature was approached through the main themes, or objectives, that it seems to have in its sights. Although not watertight compartments, the themes identified for this review were, each from a disability-perspective: theological anthropology, theology of access, hermeneutics and soteriology.

Consistency was brought to the interrogation of the literature by applying a hermeneutical key to each theme. The key had been derived in chapter 1 from Vernon White’s work on Incarnation and Atonement. White focussed on what constitutes a full account of the Atonement, concluding that it must combine the universality of the claim of a cosmic reconciliation with God through sin being effectively dealt with, with the fact that that claim turns on the particularity of the event of the cross. A full account should not slip away from either. The conclusion at that stage was that some aspects of the particularity of the Atonement, such as the embodied life of Jesus, his wounding, and the wounds visible at his resurrection, do play a distinctive role in disability theology, though
mainly in terms of a revelation of God’s solidarity with humanity and its impairments. However, interaction with the universal claim of dealing effectively with sin (indeed any discussion of disability and sin together) was found to be limited.

The second analytical component, in chapter 4, considered ideas of Atonement and what language is used to give an account of these, since it is the interaction of disability theology with that account that is the focus of the study. This involved reviewing the ongoing debate about the nature of the Atonement and about the value of models, or theories, which are typically used to describe and explore it. At first sight, this debate presents an unwieldy field of ideas and competing views on what constitutes such a model or theory, and their relationship to the drama that unfolds through Scripture. However, by bringing to bear some discipline from wider scholarship on the way in which metaphorical language operates and of what is meant by a “model” in such a context (for example, whether it is a scale, analogue, or theoretical model) it was proposed that the seemingly disparate ideas used in describing and explaining the Atonement can usefully be marshalled into three groups of ideas, here called theoretical models, being sacrifice, justice and victory. Alongside these models sits the additional subjective question of how the past event of the Atonement might connect with and transform a life in the present, with reference in that case to what has been called a moral influence understanding of the Atonement.

Is the answer already here?

Using those two analyses, it was then possible for chapter 5 to undertake the next level of investigation, comparing the metaphorical language of the Atonement models both with the elements of the Atonement found in disability theology and with the way similar metaphorical language is used in that literature more generally. The purpose was to determine whether such a comparison would bring to light a sufficient sharing of metaphors or concepts such that one or some of these might be developed or exploited as a means of opening up a much richer conversation between the two fields.
Part 3: Chapter 9: Conclusions

It was found that on the face of it there are some significant ideas and metaphors seemingly common to both fields. Examples include: embodied theology, identification with the other, vulnerability, justice as a calling to account, vindication, oppression and freedom. However, the comparison demonstrated that, while there appeared to be several shared metaphors, these were operating quite differently in the two fields, such that their meanings glanced off one another rather than providing direct or strong connections. The conclusion drawn was that the deeper interaction sought would not arise directly out of existing shared ideas, but would require a prior step of re-visiting, in light of the particular challenges raised by disability theology, the type of event the Atonement is, that the models are describing.

Elements of an inclusive Atonement account

As well as enabling this comparison of language and ideas, the work to this point also established some of the significant challenges from disability theology in arriving at an account of the Atonement which ab initio incorporates all of humanity with its full range of ability and disability. These include that such an account: must enable disability, sin and Atonement to be addressed constructively together; must allow for some diversity in our hopes for our bodies and minds in the age to come, and resist an assumed homogenisation to a “typical” pattern; must address what sin and Atonement mean in situations of profound intellectual impairment; and must be meaningful both in relation to disability in general, and in the context of particular situations of disability.

This last point also related to a discussion in chapter 2 of what range of disabilities should in principle be included in the study. There it was suggested that as well as being considered in general, the applicability of any conclusions would be tested against three representative particular (albeit hypothetical) situations: (i) a person who had become a wheelchair user in the course of their life; (ii) a person with Down Syndrome; and (iii) a person with profound intellectual impairment. It was comparison of the first two that had given rise to the question of what aspects of the phenomenon or experience of what we call disability “should” be retained,
eliminated or restored in the age to come as a result of the Atonement. Acknowledging that these individuals might give at least in part rather different answers was part of what gave rise to the need for a “diversity of hopes” to be recognised. The third ensured that any general solution was not, for example, limited to physical impairment.

Exploring participation

As a first step in response, the work of Frances Young was considered in some detail at the end of chapter 5. Young has worked on Atonement theology and has also approached theology from the perspective of caring for her disabled son, Arthur. An important proposal of Young’s in this regard is a “double reparation” at the cross, where Jesus offers a perfect sacrifice for sin, and God is present and accountable for what she calls the complex “gone-wrongness” of the world. Young recognises that much of the negative experience of life cannot be identified with moral sins. Much arises from the inherent risk, or contingency of life, and yet the interaction of contingency and moral failure itself has a complex “gone-wrongness” about it. Young’s willingness to allow the Atonement to address something more complex and contingent than just a matter of moral sins is potentially helpful. However, my interpretation of Young is that ultimately she arrives at Atonement-as-presence: that what matters most is that God is present in moments of despair and ‘Atonement is effected by the very presence of God.’

This conclusion does not seem to answer the question of what objective change is wrought by God, through the cross and resurrection, for that gone-wrongness of life. What is different for humanity, inclusive of disability, as a result?

Pursuing a different line, this thesis proposes that within Young’s work God’s willingness to be involved in sacrifice and to be accountable for this wide gone-wrongness could be interpreted as revealing God’s participation in the moral and contingent risk of creation. Participation, whether in society or ecclesial life, is also

400 Young, Can These Dry Bones Live?, p.62.
an active idea across disability studies and disability theology and should therefore find some natural connections there as a shared metaphor.

Chapter 6 began to develop this by drawing insights from Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel and Paul Fiddes as to how both the moral and contingent risk of God’s act of creation might be conceived, in terms of the threat of a return to the *nihil* out of which it arose. A number of steps built on this. God as creator is responsible and accountable for the part that nothingness, perishability and contingency play in creation. God is open to the risk of things befalling him, including suffering and evil. God is willing to take that which is alien to him (sin, death) and make it intimately his own, without being diminished by it. Through the incarnation, God in Jesus Christ is open to the consequences of nothingness, perishability, contingency, and indeed moral sin, befalling him. At the Atonement all of these aspects of the manner of God’s participation find their deepest expression, once for all.

It was also proposed that what Atonement-as-participation addresses is all that alienates us, or separates us, from God, from others and even from our sense of our own selves as we might otherwise be. This includes sin as moral failure, but also much of the experience of life and suffering that seems to fall outside of an explanation just confined to moral sin. A further suggestion from Jüngel here was that death has a negative, hostile aspect (that which annihilates and has no potential) and a positive aspect (as a boundary to life, which has some potential out of which life might come). At the cross God takes away the negative aspect of death by giving it a place in his eternal being, and preserves the positive through the resurrection. This concept was carried over to disability as having both alienating aspects and positive aspects, opening up theological space for a discussion of a “diversity of hopes” for what might or might not be eliminated, transformed or preserved in the age to come.

An important aspect of this proposal is that Atonement-as-participation is not being put forward as another theoretical model or metaphor alongside sacrifice, justice and victory. Although initially arising from work on a possible shared metaphor, it
is proposed instead as a “theological protocol”, a prior step of saying what sort of event the Atonement is, that should then govern how any model is deployed to describe and explore it.

The question of how the Atonement is apprehended and becomes connected with life in the present, especially in situations of intellectual impairment, was also examined. It was found that the idea of Atonement as God’s participation works particularly well with ideas emerging in the disability theology literature of different ways of knowing and responding to God.

The conclusion to chapter 6 reviewed the challenges set out in chapter 5 and concluded that Atonement-as-participation provides a positive response for each. In particular, having taken account of both the general concerns and those arising from considering three specific representative situations, Atonement-as-participation operates effectively in the specific as well as the general context. It was also observed at this point that the hermeneutical key from White, though it had provided useful discipline as an interrogatory tool, was ultimately shown itself to have too narrow a frame of reference in its concept of God’s initiative of Atonement being defined in terms of dealing effectively with sin.

Putting participation to the test

With this proposal established, the study asked of it two further questions. Chapter 7 asked how well, or poorly, the prevailing models of Atonement can function as models of Atonement-as-participation. It was found that all three function well and provide a rich account and creative insights for Atonement-as-participation. The fact that they do so is taken as an affirmation that the participatory approach is reasonable. This test also emphasised the importance of intentionally recognising the limits of correspondence between the models and the Atonement they describe. Where one model reaches such a limit, another must be allowed to take over. For example, all three provide rich resources for a participatory understanding of what it means for God to deal with the alienation of moral sin, but the justice and victory models provide more than does sacrifice in
terms of broadening that to alienating or oppressive experiences arising from the contingency of life.

Chapter 8 then asked whether understanding Atonement as God’s participation would enable the Atonement to play a more foundational role across disability theology than it has to date. This was found to be the case. It provides an inherently inclusive understanding of the Atonement that recognises that what alienates us from God and others is more complex than a binary sin/not sin dichotomy. It is also consistent with the assertion that responding to God’s initiative should not be regarded as confined to a narrowly conceived intellectual process.

An inherently inclusive Atonement can be a foundation for a disability perspective theological anthropology since it is the place at which all of humanity is addressed by God and its worth affirmed. It can be a foundation for a theology of access, since any argument for societal or ecclesial access can be founded on inclusive access to God, secured through such an Atonement. It can be a foundation for hermeneutics because the whole drama of Scripture passes through, and can be interpreted through, that Atonement. Lastly, of the themes identified, it can be a foundation for disability perspective soteriology because it allows a full discussion of objective and subjective aspects of salvation without the awkwardness over speaking of disability, sin and the cross together that has tended to push these apart.

**Significance for wider theological questions and research**

The principal areas of theological discussion with which this thesis has engaged have been: (i) the construction and use of theoretical models and their metaphorical language; (ii) the nature of the event of the Atonement; (iii) the theological significance of the phenomenon and lived experience and testimony of disability. As well as the particular conclusions drawn in the thesis with respect to
each of these, the project also has potentially wider implications in each of these areas.

**Theoretical models and metaphor**

Two particular points emerged in relation to defining and deploying theoretical models of the Atonement. The first was the importance of intentionally identifying the limits of correspondence between the model and the subject it is being used to describe. It became clear that this was necessary both to avoid misinterpreting the extent to which the model itself is effective, and to benefit from the negative analogy. This is the assertion that recognising where a model reaches the limit of its correspondence (and therefore where another should pick up the descriptive and explanatory work) in itself adds to our understanding of the subject. The second point was the recognition of protocols or underlying ideas about the subject that operate behind the models and that shape the way the models are deployed. In the present case that was a matter of the type of action God was taking at the Atonement and the nature of his presence within that action.

The study suggests that wherever models and the metaphorical resources they provide are to be applied theologically, both of these points should be examined critically. A good theoretical model can be seductive. Where the model itself is rich in imagery and logic, and where the correspondence with the subject appears extensive, there is a temptation to think either: (i) that if the model is good enough we have in fact discerned and described the subject as it actually is, losing sight of the metaphorical nature of almost all descriptive language; or (ii) that it is possible to find the perfect, or ideal model, or the one which must have primacy with regard to the subject.

An example of a situation that seems to illustrate the dangers, and which happens to be close to the subject of this thesis, was the debate within the Evangelical Alliance around 2005 concerning a penal substitution understanding of the Atonement. The publication of a book by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost* 401 Page 91.
Part 3: Chapter 9: Conclusions

*Message of Jesus*, criticised penal substitution as signally failing to present the cross as God’s act of love. This prompted vigorous responses, resulting in a symposium in London, the papers from which make instructive reading. David Hilborn’s paper setting the debate in context is clear that penal substitution had come to be assumed to be ‘the “controlling model” [...] - the *sine qua non* of evangelical soteriology.’ Any other models or metaphors had come to be regarded as subsidiary. The various responses reflected this and in some cases treated the critique as an attack on the very nature of the underlying Atonement itself.

What appears to be missing both from Chalke’s and Mann’s critique and throughout the debate is a critical engagement with the methodological discipline of applying metaphorical language, a recognition of the relevance of other models or an acknowledgment of the importance of limits of metaphorical correspondence. This present study suggests that such engagement would have been a positive, and possibly significant, contribution.

An example of work in a different area that does engage with the points raised by this study is Sallie McFague’s writing on models of God (her work on metaphor was referred to in chapter 4). McFague expressly recognises that we need a collection of models for God, as all metaphorical language about God is ‘inappropriate, partial, and inadequate.’ She also emphasises that any such models should have ‘demonstrable continuities’ with what she calls the Christian paradigm, what have here been called theological protocols. Admittedly, McFague takes issue with ideas of an objective Atonement, and locates her Christian

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404 Hilborn, pp.20-23.
405 Page 90.
paradigm mainly within liberation theologies, but her approach to metaphorical language is thoughtful and rigorous.

The nature of the Atonement

Although the cross is part of the complete biblical drama from creation to new creation, this thesis has placed the emphasis of a participatory approach to the Atonement more on the cross than, say, the incarnation, resurrection or ascension. It is interesting to observe that this emphasis echoes comments from both Frances Young and NT Wright. Young insists on not rushing on from the cross. It matters that we are not ushered away, but can remain to appreciate that God can be present to us in times of despair in the same manner as he is present to Jesus on the cross. For Wright, a focus on the cross is important, while not obscuring the other parts of the story, since the question of what had changed for the world by the end of the first Good Friday remains vital in its own right.

It is in the nature of Christian theology that it involves holding ideas in tension. Whether what is observed here is part of a necessary re-emphasis on the cross itself, with all of its scandal, offence and despair (and a full assurance of God’s intimate participation in our predicament before moving to our participation in his victory of resurrection) is worthy of further consideration. It may also simply point to the importance of commending a deliberately slow reading of the biblical accounts.

The theological significance of disability

It has been observed in this study that the disability theology literature contains considerable discussion of disability in relation to the revelation of God’s solidarity with humanity inclusive of its impairments, and of vulnerability as the true human situation. One of the great strengths of that literature has been that, right from Eiesland’s pioneering work on the idea of the disabled God, it disrupts our presumptions about ourselves and God.

This thesis has argued that disability forces us to re-evaluate the fundamental Christian doctrine of the Atonement: both the models used to describe it and the underlying ideas that guide what we think those models are describing. The approach in doing so has not been to develop a version, or part, of the Atonement account, or to identify a particular Atonement model, that “works” for those who find themselves in the “exceptional” context of disability. It has been to seek a revised main systematic account of the Atonement that is inherently inclusive. The out-working of this, particularly in the discussion in chapter 8 above, suggests broader theological challenges in two directions.

On the one hand, in undertaking systematic theology in general, the challenge is to re-examine the frame of reference from which the theological argument is constructed. As Brock has put it in relation to doctrines of humanity, that systematic work has tended to be based on ‘best case anthropologies’, which have not (in relation to disability) examined their presumptions as to who is within or without the frame. In the present case the question was whether our frame of reference incorporated those with disabilities and, as a result, expected the Atonement to encompass them and their concerns. Other studies might ask the same question, whether about disability or about other groups who find themselves theologically invisible. On the other hand, the challenge in conducting disability theology is, as well as considering the particular issue that is the focus of inquiry, to ask whether that inquiry ought also to press for a re-examination of the main account of core elements of systematic theology.

This also relates to the place that disability theology as a field occupies within Christian theology as a whole. It seems to be necessary, indeed desirable and effective, to have an identifiable “disability theology” as an interim measure in the theological process. Having such a field has given rise to work of the highest quality. However, this study has been undertaken on the assumption that the true objective should be a main account of Christian theology that has allowed itself to

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be disrupted and re-formed taking full account of humanity as humanity is, with its full range of abilities, vulnerabilities and impairments.

The contribution of this thesis to that objective has been to demonstrate that if we understand the Atonement not just as God’s dealing with sin, but as God’s intimate participation in the whole complex riskiness of life, then we have a main account of the Atonement that meets the theological challenges of disability, that is inherently inclusive, and that is a solid foundation for Christian disability theology.
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