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Robert C. Roberts

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VIRTUES AND THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST: ANALYSIS AND SOME PASTORAL PROPOSALS

Robert C. Roberts

What is the relation between the perfection that Christians have in Christ, by dint of his substitutionary Atonement for sinners, and the virtues to which we are called as believers? How does the Atonement affect the moral life of Christians and how are we to understand our virtues in the light of what God has done for us in Christ? This paper identifies three interactions between the Atonement and our virtues: the generative aspect, the dual attitude aspect, and the pervasion of Atonement aspect. Each of these aspects suggests a proposal for how moral and spiritual nurture should be pursued in the church.

Introduction

Christians have been as involved as anyone else in the recent revival of concepts of virtue in ethics; indeed, the two chief instigators of the revival are Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. Furthermore, conceptual exploration of Christian virtues would seem to be a “natural” strategy to employ, as pastors and other Christian teachers try to draw others into a deeper understanding and practice of the Christian life. Yet one might wonder whether talk of the virtues is compatible with fully orthodox Christianity, or at any rate what particular shape the virtues must take in a community that acknowledges that the work of salvation has been accomplished once and for all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. How can the kind of effort and education and human self-pre-occupation that seems to go with virtues-discourse proceed alongside the affirmation that our virtues, pathetic little twitchings that they are, are laughable as a ground of salvation, and that our righteousness and sanctification are in Christ alone? I realize that the concept of orthodoxy is itself subject to disagreement, so those who think that what I call orthodoxy is not in fact orthodox may treat this paper as a thought experiment exploring what virtues would look like under a certain conception of salvation. The view that I am here calling orthodox makes the atonement a matter of substitution or exchange in which Christ took our sins on himself, especially on the cross, and conferred on us sinners his righteousness and holiness. It also conceives that salvation, once conferred, as absolute and irrevocable.

As my subtitle suggests, I conceive this paper not only as contributing philosophically to the discussion of the virtues, but also as a possible con-



tribution to the work of the church. Conceptual exploration of the Christian virtues is indeed an excellent way to build up congregations and individuals, but it needs to be done in a properly Christian way, and this can be difficult to discern. Here the philosopher may be able to help, offering what I have elsewhere called “pastoral philosophy.”

Substitution and Exhortation

A theme that is arguably at the theological center of the New Testament is that of a moral substitution, effected by God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, on behalf of the rest of humankind. Some of the most striking formulations of this teaching are found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. He says to the Corinthians that “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Cor.5.21). And he tells them that God “is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom (σοφία), our righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and sanctification (ἀγιασμός) and redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις)” (I Cor. 1.30). “But you were washed (ἀπελούσασθε), you were sanctified (ἡγιασθητε), you were justified (ἐδικαιώθητε) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6.11). And he says to the Romans, “If, because of one man’s [Adam’s] trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness (δικαίωμα) leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience (ὕπακοή) many will be made righteous” (Rom.5.17-19). And a little later, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit, of life in Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom.8.1-4). In the Gospel of John Jesus prays, “Make them holy (ἀγίασον αὐτούς) in the truth; thy word is the truth. As thou sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And for their sake I make myself holy (ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν), so that they may be made holy (ἡγιασμένοι) in truth” (John 17.19). The book of Hebrews comments that “In the will [of God] we have been made holy (ἡγιασμένοι ἔσμεν) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all” (Hebrews 10.10). And Peter says, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...” (I Pet.3.18).

Another New Testament theme, more often explicit (though not more pervasive) than the declarations that our righteousness, holiness, wisdom, eternal life, obedience, and glory have already been created for us in Jesus Christ, is that of moral exhortation to that very sort of thing. “Be not conformed to this world,” writes the Apostle Paul, “but be transformed by the

renewing of your mind" (Rom.12.2). "Love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus (John 13.34). "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live (περιπατεῖτε) in him" (Col.2.6). "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4.22-24). "Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other. As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful" (Colossians 3.12-15).

Virtue language pervades New Testament exhortation; the passages I have just quoted are typical. Disciples are less often exhorted to types of actions than to such virtues as love, humility, compassion, kindness, self-control, gentleness, long-suffering, forbearance, hope and thankfulness. We are urged not just to *do* this or that but, to use Paul's expression, to be "transformed" as persons, to "put on" a whole new self or nature. Virtue language is also used in proclamation of the Atonement, but with a difference. The terms for the personal attributes that believers are said to have by dint of Christ's substitution are, as far as I can tell, all quite general terms such as 'life' (ζωή), 'righteousness' (δικαιοσύνη), 'holiness' (ἀγιασμός, ἁγιοσύνη), 'wisdom' (σοφία), 'obedience' (ὕπακοή), and 'glory' (δόξα). We never hear that Christ is our gratitude, humility, compassion, gentleness, thankfulness, or long-suffering. But I don't think this fact of usage has any deep significance. On the contrary, earlier in chapter 3 of the Colossians letter from which I quoted, Paul prefaces his exhortation to "put on" the various particular virtues by saying, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life (ζωή) is hid with Christ in God" (Col.3.1-3). This suggests to me that Paul thinks of all those particular virtues as *already attributes* of persons who have accepted the gospel and become members of Christ's body. They are virtues of the new anthropos that people are in Christ, even though such virtues are "hidden with Christ in God." That is why the proper expression for acquiring these virtues in a way that is *not* so hidden is "put on" (ἐνδύεσθαι): it is as though these virtues already belong to the believer by dint of Christ's substitution and, like pieces of ready-made clothing, only need to be donned.

I shall not propose any explanation of how it is possible for one person's righteousness or virtue to be imputed to or infused into another. But for the purpose of this paper I suppose that Christians believe the following: Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter and preacher of first century Palestine, was and is the unique Son of God who during his historical existence lived a human life of perfect obedience to God the Father — of perfect human virtue (righteousness, wisdom, holiness). In interaction with the people of his generation he loved God with his whole heart, mind, and strength, and

his neighbors as himself. He is the perfection of justice, compassion, humility, generosity, patience, forgivingness, gentleness, and whatever other human virtues there may be (with the possible exception of virtues that presuppose and correct for moral failing). Because of the inevitable friction created by the interaction of his perfection with the moral perversity of humankind, he was executed as a criminal by us sinners, in accordance with the will of the Father. The Father raised him from the dead and then drew him back to himself, with whom Christ is in constant fellowship. This historical sequence of incarnation, morally perfect life, death at the hands of sinners, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father is an act of God by which we sinful human beings are rescued from sin and death. By faith and by incorporation into Christ's body, the church, and by the continuing intervention of his Holy Spirit, we partake of his virtue: despite our sins, God gives Jesus' righteousness to us, and we look forward to a time when we will be completely free of sin, completely righteous and completely holy.

The biblical doctrine of salvation in Christ seems to imply the following moral distinctions and considerations. The excellence that we have in Christ is an "alien" but real excellence. That is, it is "proper" to him, but alien to us; but it is real in us because God has the power to effect the exchange that he has effected in Christ. To say that Christ's righteousness and holiness are proper to him is to say that he possesses his excellences in the "ordinary" way, directly, as his *own* dispositions to act, feel, and judge. Thus he gets moral credit for the excellences because they are his in this primitive and direct way. When his traits are imputed to us or infused into us,¹ we do not get properly moral credit for them, but we do get mercy because of them: our status in the kingdom is that of righteous and holy brothers and sisters of Christ. (We do not get moral praise, though we do get a kind of artefactual praise on account of them; we have taken on a beauty or glory that is worthy of praise.) On the other hand, when we are exhorted to "put on" or "walk in" or "be transformed" in conformity with the excellences that we already have in Christ, the traits in question are to be ours "properly," that is, they are to become spontaneous dispositions of our own hearts. Thus the sequence of substitution and exhortation results, in the best case, in the believer's approximating his or her alien righteousness with a proper righteousness. By 'approximating' I do not mean getting very close to proper perfection; I simply mean moving really in that direction. In another aspect, the distinction between alien and proper righteousness is the distinction between hidden and empirical righteousness. The first is the distinction vis-à-vis the *primary residence* of the virtue; the second is the distinction vis-à-vis the detectability or *epistemic availability* of the virtue. I do not deny that our proper virtue is sometimes hidden. For example, we may have more courage or humility "in us" than anyone thought, including ourselves. But this is an accidental hiddenness: circumstances may bring it out; it may become observable to everyone, or to the discerning. By contrast, when Paul says "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col.3.3), he is speaking of a hiddenness that is structured into the present order of things that will prevail until "Christ who is our life appears" (Col.3.4).

Questions

I aim in this paper to explore the implications of the Atonement for the moral and spiritual life of believers. How does accepting or acknowledging Christ's atoning work affect the character of the serious Christian? This question has two kinds of import:

1) How does belief in the Atonement affect the general moral life? Does it obviate the development of personal virtues or make moral striving into a venture of dubious spiritual worth — or worse, into a sinful venture expressing mistrust of God? Or does it encourage and facilitate such striving and development? *How* does it do the one or the other and what is the status or character of moral striving under the canopy of the Atonement?

2) How does the Atonement relate to particular virtues? How does it affect the acquisition of the Christian's proper virtues? Does it imply any ranking or other ordering of the proper virtues? How does it affect the internal character of the proper virtues — that is, the Christian agent's understanding of herself and her situation when she best exemplifies the virtues?

I shall now schematically describe three attitudes that can be taken towards the atoning grace of God by a believing moral agent. It will be already clear from my account of the biblical presentation of the Atonement, combined with what I have pointed out about moral exhortation in the New Testament, that the first two of the attitudes I am going to describe are heterodox and perverse, while the third is biblical and right and holy and good. But it is important to get the perverse attitudes before our minds for three reasons: First, each of them possesses an element of truth that must be preserved in a healthy Christian moral outlook; second, they are instructive because they highlight the correct attitude by contrastive juxtaposition; and third, it is helpful to specify them since they are attitudes that bedevil even the most serious and well-taught Christian. Clarity about these attitudes might help us in our pursuit of the Christian life. Let us call the first two attitudes the antinomian and rigorist perversions.

The antinomian attitude. Christ is my wisdom, righteousness, and holiness; I need not and cannot have any such virtues of my own. Virtues (or so-called virtues) are a pagan thing; it is both futile and impious to strive for them. By striving for righteousness and being morally fastidious about my actions and motivations I only betray Christ, attempt to usurp his place and set myself up as my own Christ. Because we humans are sinful, we can have only glittering vices that parade as virtues; Christ's righteousness is the only righteousness that we can have and depend on. The concept of virtues is born of a failure to appreciate the corruption of the human heart and the sovereign grace of God and the alien character of the only true righteousness and sanctification.

The rigorist attitude. Christ calls us to a responsible life that glorifies him and transforms our world. Christ's righteousness is a serious and real righteousness that is conferred on me by God's grace, God working in me that which is pleasing to himself, so this grace should be discernible in my life. A grace that is cheap and ineffectual cannot be truly the grace of Christ. So I have Christ's righteousness to the exact degree that it is actual

in *my* life and in *my* character. If it is not discernible there, I have good reason to think I do not have it. (To deny that I have Christ's righteousness and holiness is not the same as denying that it exists.) If that grace is weakly discernible in my life, I have good reason to think that I participate only weakly in Christ's righteousness.

The orthodox attitude. Christ's righteousness, insofar as it is mine, is alien and thus not directly or proportionately discernible in my character. Indeed, it is not proportionate to anything I can detect in myself, not even my faith, though it is by faith that I know myself to be righteous in Christ and begin the struggle to be conformed to his holiness that is in me. My true life is hid with Christ in God, and that hidden life of mine with God is *perfectly* righteous, *completely* acceptable to God. Still, God intends my empirical character to be affected by the character, the true self, that I have in Christ. A project that God gives me, when I become a member of Christ's body, is that of putting on my new self, conforming my empirical character to my true character, the character that God has created in me in Christ and imputes to me for Christ's sake. These proper and empirical virtues are not to be taken lightly, because even in their own halting and imperfect way they are good for me and good for my community and glorifying of God and pleasing to him, and thus required by him. In the judgment I will be judged both on my empirical character, giving an account of myself to God (Rom.14.12), and on my perfect righteousness in Christ, Christ giving an account of himself to God on my behalf — but ultimately only on the latter, because Christ, and not I, is my Savior.

Proper Christian Virtue Under the Atonement

I want to explore in greater detail the moral psychology of this third attitude. I will examine it with respect to 1) the need and sense of justification, 2) moral self-concern, self-examination and striving for self-improvement, and 3) the character of virtues in the Christian moral life.

The need and sense of justification. People are highly susceptible to shame, and in a somewhat lesser degree, to guilt. These are painful emotions involving a sense of oneself as deviant from some important excellence or other and they often involve a sense of being viewed by a judge (human or divine) as having deviated from or fallen short of such excellence. They manifest a self-concern to be excellent and so acceptable or even admirable. Some people may be "shameless," not caring, or seeming not to care, about their excellence or how they are evaluated; but arguably such people have been damaged and / or are not really as shameless as they seem. The susceptibility to shame and guilt is the concern for justification, the concern to be and seem "right" (δικαιος). The Christian psychology emphasizes that this is not merely a concern to be justified in the sight of fellow human beings, but more fundamentally (though perhaps less obviously) a concern to be justified in the sight of God. (That some people do not recognize this concern in themselves, or do not recognize it as the concern to be justified before God, does not show that they do not have the concern.) In the pious mind this concern can become manifest in extremely intense emotions, especially when the subject has doubts about his acceptability to God.

The concern for justification is an important place where the Christian teaching about the Atonement bears on moral psychology. This need, combined with the fact of human sinfulness, is a source of considerable self-deception, self-opacity, sloth in self-examination, dishonesty towards others, and destructive self-righteousness. This is so because, being corrupt, we nevertheless have a deep compulsion to think of ourselves as excellent, at least basically acceptable, "even if we make a few mistakes." Some people's need for justification is satisfied, provisionally or partially, by the sense of *appearing* acceptable to some important others, but I think this is never entirely satisfying; the need is really to *be* "just" in the sense of δίκαιος, to have *virtue*. The Christian proclamation and the substance of faith is that by Christ's substitution we have that virtue, that δικαιοσύνη and ἁγιασμός, in a full and perfect way. This belief can quiet the anxiety for justification, thus opening the way for greater self-transparency. We can admit and see our corruption because we are really perfect in Christ. This self-transparency is an important aspect of several Christian virtues such as humility, contrition, and gratitude.

The fulfilment in Jesus Christ of our in-built desire for justification can contribute in a second way to the formation of empirical virtues in us. Despite our tendency to false self-justifications, we are aware in varying degrees of our need for a better status; some of us sometimes do "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt.5.6). Thus a natural and spontaneous response to the generosity of the Father in bestowing on us the holiness and life of his Son, and to the Son for giving himself to us, is first gratitude to God for this unspeakable gift, and then a kind of generosity and courage of our own, a self-disregarding abandonment to love which we see exemplified, however imperfectly, in the Apostles and in some Christians of our own day.

Besides this spontaneous development in response to God's goodness in Christ, intentional efforts to conform ourselves to what has been created in us in Christ are facilitated by the gospel message. The news of the great Substitution makes us serene in the midst of unpleasant self-transparency and touches something in us that elicits an almost automatic return of love; and these movements can free us to *labor* for greater justice, chastity, and compassion in ourselves, in accordance with the ideal that we know to be already realized in us "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph.2.6). These passive events in our lives put us in a position to exert ourselves more effectually to walk in the paths of righteousness.

In at least these three ways — by freeing us for self-transparency, by inspiring us to love, and by calling us to and facilitating moral effort — belief in the Atonement can be a spur and liberation to the formation of virtues. When these virtues are fostered by the proclamation of the Atonement, the Holy Spirit working in us, they, unlike the proclaimed virtue, are "proper" (however imperfectly formed they may be) and are aspects of the virtue of faith. These are dispositions (however tenuously and tentatively rooted they may be) directly *in us*, exemplified in our own emotions, behavior and thoughts. This, then, is one kind of connection between alien and proper righteousness: Let us call the first aspect of the Atonement's effect on proper virtue the *generative relation*.

But now, we might ask, how do the proper virtues affect the sense of justification that we started with? If alien righteousness can give one a sense of justification, satisfying one's need for justification and quieting one's yearning for righteousness, surely proper righteousness can do so even better? I look at myself and I see, perhaps, some spiritual improvement; I have deeper faith than when I first began, there are signs of a livelier love, and I may even have shown some courage in my Christian witness. Shall I take satisfaction in *this* righteousness? Shall I feel good about myself? Shall I trust in what I have become? I may be quite aware that I have a long way to go, that my little improvements are nothing in comparison with the perfect righteousness of Christ with which I am clothed in heaven. But still, for a sinner as bad as I am, this is significant improvement and cause for rejoicing and patting myself a bit on the back. Well done! say I to myself, much as the piano teacher praises the young student for her improvement, though by comparison with Horowitz the performance was a perfect embarrassment.

The Apostle warns about "works righteousness": "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph.2.8). Is this sense of satisfaction in my own spiritual improvement a case of boasting because of works? What is the boasting that is excluded (Rom.3.27)?

Boasting is the presentation of some aspect or accomplishment of oneself, or of something associated with oneself, with the aim of eliciting approval for oneself. It is thus an expression of the concern for justification. If the boasting strategy appeals to one's own "works" as the ground of boasting, then it may appear to be slighting the work of God — taking credit oneself where the credit is due to God. If it is slighting the work of God, or if the work of God is such as to show the ground of boasting to be inadequate as a ground for the boast, then the boasting is "excluded." Boasting as such is not excluded, since Paul quotes Jeremiah 9.24, "Let him who boasts boast of the Lord" (II Cor.10.17). The person who boasts of the Lord presents his Lord with the aim of eliciting approval for himself. He too thereby expresses the concern for justification, but does so in such a way as to make a legitimate claim for it, one that neither slights the Lord nor appeals to an inadequate ground. Boasting in the Lord is both an expression of the need for justification and an expression of proper humility.

But let us go back to the boasting that appeals to one's own works. Is it *always* excluded? Is it never OK so to boast — that is, to desire justification in some sense on the basis of one's own works? I have suggested that the two reasons for which a boasting might be excluded are that it slights the Lord or claims an inadequate ground. The latter defect is particularly evident when someone bases his boast on something about himself that is sinful. And the former would be a defect of all boasting in one's own works were it the case that any such boasting slights the Lord. Any such boasting would slight the Lord only if the Lord always gets credit for everything and human beings never get credit for anything. But this does not seem to be Paul's view.

The Apostle may not be a paragon of impeccable empirical virtue, and he admits that he may "boast a little too much of our authority" (II

Cor.10.8), but he is a very discerning Christian, and we find that he sometimes allows for boasting. At times he boasts utterly without apology about his own works. He points out that he has not made use of his right to be supported by others while doing evangelism and says he has refrained from exercising this right because "I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting" (I Cor.9.15). In II Cor.11-12 he gives a long list of grounds of his excellence, including some attributes for which he cannot take moral credit such as being a Hebrew and being a servant of Christ, but also for some actions and sacrifices he has made on behalf of the gospel; in this last kind of case again the ground of boasting seems to include at least an element of his own contribution, though he also says "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11.30), thus exemplifying, presumably, boasting in the Lord. Further evidence that Paul allows credit-taking boasting is that just before the quotation about boasting of the Lord, he makes comments that seem to honor the common sense criterion that one should boast not "in other men's labors" but in one's own. Further, Paul clearly seems to think that people contribute, by their efforts and their voluntary actions, to the production in themselves of what I have called their proper or empirical virtues. He frequently exhorts the members of his churches to "put on" their new nature, to "walk" in the Spirit, to "yield" their members to righteousness, to "put to death" their old nature, to "set their minds" on the things above, etc. These are all responses to the great Substitution, the bestowed alien virtue of Christ. But they are things that people can do to promote their own proper virtue in response to the gift of alien virtue, and such actions seem to Paul to be worthy of *some* kind of praise for doing them, as those who are slovenly in doing them seem to merit some reprimand. To say that the believer is responsibly active in fostering his own proper virtues is not to deny that the Holy Spirit is also active in him, urging, encouraging, supplying, and supporting him; and the fact that the Spirit makes such contributions, often in ways that cannot be sorted out from the believer's contributions, is all the more reason to temper boasting with humility, as the Apostle also does.

The boasting that is excluded by the Atonement is the exemplification of an impurity, a vicious strand in the soul, even if it is in close association with genuine virtues (boasting about *them*). If in feeling good about my moral improvement, if in admiring the work of God in myself, I slight in any way the enormity of Christ's sacrifice for me or take credit where no credit is due me, then I sin and the right response is contrition and a return to the self-ignoring praise of God. And this illicit credit-taking is no doubt very easy to slide into and an ever-present spiritual danger in the Christian life. But I think our reflections on Paul's understanding of boasting and the place of the believer's self-improving action in response to God's grace lead us to see a place for a conditional or parenthetical sense of justification by works: If I keep in mind how miserable my own contribution to my virtue is, and how overwhelming and perfect God's is, then I may be allowed a certain pleasure or pride in my moral improvement. If I have made a tiny bit of progress in putting on compassion and the other virtues, I am like the beginning piano student who has done pretty well with her

lesson, made her own little contribution to her improvement by her effort, self-discipline, and perseverance, and had a good lesson; it is OK for her to take some pride in her accomplishment as long as she does not lose sight of Horowitz and the contributions of her genetic endowment and parental nurturing. Such a parenthetical sense of justification is not only permissible, but seems positively honest and healthy in its modesty. And the ability to “boast” in this (and only this) thoroughly evangelical way would seem, itself, to be a Christian virtue. When the orthodox Christian takes credit in this way for some of his moral improvement, it is utterly far from his mind that this credit is a saving credit. He too can pray, week after week and year after year until his dying day, Cranmer’s prayer of confession, “there is no health in us” if he means, with Cranmer, that there is no *saving* health in his *proper* virtues.

Self-examination and moral self-concern. We have examined proper Christian virtue as a basis for the believer’s sense of justification or positive self-construal. But just as often if not more often, serious self-examination tends to draw the believer, not in the direction of boasting and pride and improperly high self-esteem, but toward agonizing shame, guilt, self-recrimination, depression, and moral despair. Indeed, we began our earlier discussion by noting people’s susceptibility to emotions like shame and guilt. The call to be perfect (Matt.5.48), the call to imitate Christ, and the standards of righteousness and holiness and purity of heart and loving self-sacrifice of which our Lord is the prototype are so strenuous for us sinners that, unless we have some moral protection against discouragement, the ideal may more debilitate than encourage. That moral protection is the Atonement, but the spiritual difficulty is getting the right attitude toward it. The rigorist approach, if it takes seriously the moral life of Jesus as prototype, seems destined to lead us inevitably into a despair which is clearly not the intention of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the antinomian approach, which reacts to the rigorist error by closing the door on self-examination and moral striving, is just as clearly contrary to the purposes of God in Christ as revealed in Scripture. In particular, it is out of synch with the whole hortatory dimension of the New Testament.

The New Testament speaks of two bases for God’s judgment of us: On the one side, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (II Cor.5.19); righteousness “will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom.4.24-25). On the other side, “he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom.2.6-8). Clearly, God’s judgment of sinners on the basis of Christ’s righteousness precedes and dominates his judgment on the basis of our empirical righteousness; the whole purpose of the New Testament is to bear witness to this gracious preceding and superceding act of God. But it is equally clear that God is very interested in our empirical righteousness, and that he is interested in our being interested in it and in our being actively involved in pursuing it.

What then is the role, in the Christian character, of moral anxiety, efforts at greater holiness, self-examination, and guilt and shame at moral failure? What dispositional attitude is prescribed by the biblical combination of Atonement proclamation and moral exhortation? Let us focus on moral anxiety as a way of addressing this issue.

Moral anxiety is a construal of oneself as under threat of moral failure, of doing wrong or being the morally wrong sort of person. It is an emotion that both motivates and demotivates moral self-examination. The morally anxious person cares about being upright and so is drawn to assess himself, but construes himself as significantly likely to get bad moral news about himself, and so he is also disinclined to look carefully.

In the Christian who takes the Atonement with biblical seriousness, moral anxiety is focused in a special way and enclosed within the parenthesis and protection of God's forgiving love. In some religious outlooks closely related to Christianity, and in some heterodox versions of Christianity, *one's salvation* — one's acceptability to God — is at stake in one's proper moral rectitude. The Christian who takes the Atonement seriously does not so conceive his moral rectitude. Salvation has been accomplished wholly apart from him by Jesus Christ. Before God, he is perfectly holy and wise and glorious and alive because he is in Christ, and nothing about his proper character, not even the quality of his faith as a virtue (since, after all, faith is in a way the totality of the Christian's proper virtues) is the ground of his righteousness. Christ alone is the ground of his righteousness. This magnificent news is the larger sentence in which the parenthesis of moral threat — the threat of personal moral failure, the bad news that is likely to result from careful self-examination — is enclosed.

So when the orthodox Christian examines himself morally, with anxiety, his anxiety is not about his salvation. And when he strives for greater empirical righteousness, he is not striving to be accepted by God. And when he fails and falls and feels guilt and shame, he does not feel abandoned by God. And so he is emboldened, if he really understands the good news in all its goodness, to examine himself and to strive for greater holiness. And in his boldness he will experience moral anxiety, and guilt and shame. If he did not, he would have abandoned, with respect to desire, one whole side of the New Testament teaching, the institution of Christian moral exhortation, and would thereby have distorted the other side and made the Substitution into an excuse for moral laxity. What then is he anxious about?

He is anxious about himself, about the quality of his empirical character, about the degree to which his proper character is an approximation of his righteousness in Christ. He is anxious about the implications of his character and behavior and feelings for his relationships with others and for the effectiveness of his service of God. He is anxious about the quality of his present life. These are perfectly legitimate moral concerns that need not be identified with one's acceptability to God. Indeed, they are more than legitimate; they are part of moral seriousness. I suspect that both the antinomian reaction to the rigorist error and the rigorist reaction to the antinomian error turn on failing to distinguish healthy Christian moral striving and the healthy anxiety, shame and guilt that so often accompany it or fol-

low on it, from the offensive, ungrateful, and ill-conceived striving to achieve one's salvation and the spiritually disastrous anxiety, shame, and guilt that follow upon that. And similarly, both of these perverse orientations fail to distinguish the assurance and peace and joy which the Christian rightly has in the alien righteousness that God has bestowed on him in Christ, from the moral complacency and false security that is found in giving up moral striving and the concern for one's proper righteousness.

Trust is a contrary of anxiety, and something analogously dualistic must be said about it. Trust, like anxiety, is oriented upon some "object," and trust differs from trust depending on what is trusted and what it is trusted for. Trust is an attitude, not necessarily conscious, of non-anxious dependency. It is a sense that the thing one depends on can be depended on for whatever one depends on it for. Trust is an important aspect of the empirical virtue of faith. In this aspect, Christian faith is trust in the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ for one's salvation, one's acceptability by God. But it seems unavoidable that the Christian also trusts his own proper virtues. If I make an ordinary promise that is not heroically difficult to keep, I will most likely unreflectively trust myself to keep that promise. I do sometimes experience some anxiety here; in particular I sometimes worry that I will forget to carry out my promise. But I would be quite a mess if I became deeply anxious about my reliability every time I agreed to do something; and in fact I don't. And the same thing can be said, in one degree or another, of my other moral dispositions. But such trust in my proper virtues is not at all the same thing as trusting in them for my acceptability before God. I know pretty well that they cannot bear that kind of weight, and I would be anxious indeed if I had nothing but them to bear it. And the same thing goes for the virtue of faith; it is Jesus Christ who saves, not my faith in him, which may be more or less reliable, but certainly not reliable enough to rest my salvation on. This is why, in trusting him, I must not at all check to see how strong my faith is, whether it is strong enough to trust; for not my trust, but he and his righteousness are the right object of my trust.

So we have uncovered a second implication of the Atonement for the proper character of the Christian. It is that the Christian develops a dual attitude toward the two kinds of virtue that are in him: an attitude of trusting only his alien virtue for his salvation and trusting it without reserve, while trusting his proper virtue *with* reserve for various purposes of his interactions in the world. Similarly, he feels guilt and shame and moral anxiety with respect to his proper virtues and vices, but does not take his guilt as alienating him from God, nor is he anxious about God's accepting him, because he trusts in the righteousness of Christ that God has bestowed on him. Let us call this aspect of the Christian's character *the dual attitude aspect*.

I say that the orthodox Christian does not confuse his empirical righteousness with the righteousness he has in Christ, which is the ground of his salvation. But that formula states the ideal. Orthodox Christians in the real world often confuse these things, if not in an outright intellectually theological way, then in a kind of emotional confusion which is like an intellectual mistake. Even if they know the distinction I have just

expounded, they may feel their anxiety *as* about God's regard for them, their guilt and shame *as* alienation from God's grace, their trust *as* trust in their faith. And to get out of this confusion, the troubled Christian will need to be reminded of Christ's sacrifice and of the distinction between the righteousness that saves and the little approximation to it that he might achieve, with the Spirit's help, in his own proper character. The difference, which he may already know, needs to be hammered home. It might be hammered by good preaching or by the wise counsel of a fellow Christian; or he might have it in himself to hammer it into himself when he veers off into ill-aimed anxiety or trust. It seems to me that it is one of the chief pedagogical challenges of pastors to keep this distinction clearly before people's minds in their preaching and counseling; this distinction-making is itself spiritual nurture and a contribution to the formation of real Christian virtues in the congregation. For the goal of ordinary Christian nurture is to form persons in accordance with the spiritual logic of the New Testament — in other words, as people full of joy and assurance and confident hope in Jesus Christ their savior, yet appropriately concerned about their Christian character and actions, and thus susceptible to the negative emotions that manifest such concern in contexts of failure and possible failure.

The character of Christian virtues. We have been considering how, in general, belief in the Atonement affects the believer's proper virtues and vices and his or her attitudes toward them. Such attitudes are themselves part of the believer's proper virtues and affect both the configuration of those virtues in the character of the mature Christian, and the nature of his particular virtues. I turn now to consider these effects.

I'll start with the configuration of the virtues and that discussion will lead us naturally to the nature of the virtues. Because the Atonement is the foundation of the Christian moral life, the virtues that are most directly a response to the substitutionary work of Christ have a kind of priority. Clearly, faith is pre-eminent among the proper Christian virtues. Faith is acceptance of the work of Christ on one's behalf, acceptance of the alien righteousness and holiness and life and glory that God has given us in Christ. Acceptance here is not "belief" in some bare sense of assenting to this truth, but is a response of trust and joyful gratitude for Christ's substitution and a disposition not to make one's proper virtue or the actions that do or would issue from such virtue the ground of one's acceptability to God. And as trust and joyful gratitude, faith is also love of God; it is a kind of love of the child for the Parent. And insofar as faith has its eye on the eternal future, this attitude of trust is also hope.

A couple of the proper Christian virtues — forgivingness and humility — are presented in Scripture as imitations of Christ's work. "[A]s the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive" (Col.3.13b). Someone who denies Christ's substitutionary work might well have a virtue of forgivingness, in case he is disposed not to hold grudges nor to harbor a punitive interest against those who have offended him, and is motivated to this by something like love for them. But such a trait would not be the Christian virtue of forgivingness because a major consideration motivating the Christian forgiver is that he himself was made righteous and holy and alive, when he was dead in his sins, by God's free imputation to him of Christ's virtue.

His forgiving response to his offender arises out of his gratitude to God in Christ, and thus out of his faith.

In his Philippians letter Paul instructs the church not to insist on their privileges or status, but to honor and defer to one another, "in humility count[ing] others better than yourselves" (2.3b). And he refers this disposition immediately to Christ's condescension to sinful humanity in his incarnation and substitutionary death. Our humility is an imitation of the Son of God, who did not insist on his status as God, but humbled himself as a servant, even to an ignominious death for our sakes. Again, it is not unknown for non-Christians to forfeit their rights for the sake of others or for some cause in which they believe; their concern for the others or the cause may be the chief element in their disposition. But Christian humility, as Paul describes it, is rooted in faith — that is, in love and gratitude to God for the alien righteousness that he has conferred on us in Jesus Christ. Here is a very clear "unity of the virtues," centering in Christian faith.

The New Testament refers to many virtues in addition to the ones we have mentioned. Just as a sample, consider the ones Paul lists as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22-23: love [for neighbors, presumably], joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. I think that most of these virtues are a bit less directly related to belief in the Atonement than faith, love [of God], hope, gratitude, forgivingness, and humility. (Joy may be an exception, supposing that it is joy in the good news of salvation.) But Paul clearly intends that these traits, being fruit of the Holy Spirit, are proper human dispositions that are (however imperfectly realized) outworkings of the alien righteousness that God has conferred on humanity in Jesus Christ and which becomes especially accessible when accepted by the human heart, the Holy Spirit working in that heart through the Word of proclamation.

Take love of neighbor. How is this disposition related to the acceptance of the alien life and holiness of Christ? The answer is that love of neighbor is a dimension of that holiness: Jesus' love of his neighbor has become the believer's by imputation and infusion. In him, despite our sloth and wickedness, we are already loving with his love: the love expressed in his prayer for those who crucified him and his compassion for the poor and lepers and cripples and sinners and outcasts and those who were like sheep without a shepherd. When we know that this man's righteousness is, by God's decree and spiritual work, our righteousness, we are animated, out of gratitude and holy shame, to put on that love that is ours but perhaps still hanging, too little worn, in our closet. That, at least, seems to be Paul's idea of the relationship between alien and proper righteousness with respect to what we might call the moral virtues in the Christian life.

What shall we call this last aspect of the relation between the Atonement and the Christian's proper virtues? Let us call it *the pervasion of the Atonement*, for the work of Christ does not merely jump-start a life of virtues that then are indistinguishable in their thought-content from the virtues of a Stoic, a secular humanist, a Muslim, or an Enlightenment Deist. The Christian virtues are one and all dimensions of a relationship to a God whose identity is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a relationship defined in the first and last instance by the narrative of God's incarnation, perfect human

life, crucifixion at the hands of sinners, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. The pastoral consequence of this fact about the Christian virtues is that instruction and nurture in them is always to be done, as it is in the New Testament, in the framework of that story of salvation, with the virtue of faith as the hub around which the other virtues revolve.

Conclusion

I have tried to outline an account of the interaction, in the Christian moral or spiritual psychology, between two pivotal themes in the New Testament — the substitutionary Atonement of God on behalf of sinful humankind in Jesus Christ, and the call to a transformed life of purity, holiness, and obedience. I have identified three aspects of that interaction. The *generative relation* is that the good news of the Atonement frees the believer for self-knowledge, inspires her to love, and calls her to moral effort. Pastorally, it seems that this relation would be fostered by intensive conceptualization of both the Atonement and spiritual exhortation in terms of virtues: The alien righteousness and holiness that we have in Christ is the excellence of Christ's person, imputed and infused into us sinners; and the proper righteousness and holiness to which we are exhorted are a reflection of and response to the excellence that we already possess in Christ. The second aspect of the relation between alien and proper righteousness I call the *dual attitude*. Here the key to holding together these aspects of the New Testament witness is the common sense idea that mental states like pride, shame, and anxiety can have opposite spiritual values depending on what they are about. We must distinguish cases in which these attitudes are taken towards one's salvation from ones in which they are taken towards one's moral standing without reference to one's salvation. Salvation is by alien righteousness, so it is never spiritually right for a believer to be anxious, for example, about her salvation; while it is often right for the believer to be anxious about her proper righteousness. A spiritual formation in which these are kept attitudinally distinct is the orthodox and healthy one characteristic of proper Christian virtues. My pastoral proposal is that this dualism of attitudes should be a constant theme of preaching and teaching, since we are very prone to detrimental emotional confusion of the two kinds of righteousness. A failure to hold clearly to this dualism is behind the errors of antinomianism and rigorism. The third aspect of the relation between alien and proper righteousness, which I call *pervasion of Atonement*, can be thought of as a dialectical counterpoise to the dual attitude aspect. It is that the Atonement enters into every Christian virtue, inasmuch as every proper Christian virtue, in its full Christian distinctiveness, is an elaboration of the virtue of faith, by which our alien righteousness is grasped and its effectiveness in our character is made thematic. My pastoral advice here is simply that this hierarchical ordering should provide a framework that informs the moral teaching of virtues in the church.²

NOTES

1. I use the language of both imputation and infusion because, while these words may suggest different ways to possess alien righteousness and holiness, it seems to me they both reflect biblical thinking. Sometimes the suggestion is that we have a new legal standing before God because of Christ's work, and sometimes it is that our persons have actually been transformed. The second suggestion seems to me to dominate, and to be associated with such words as 'alive' (Eph.2.1) and 'washed' and 'sanctified' (I Cor.6.11).

2. I am grateful to Richard Olmsted and Nathan Roberts for discussion of issues in this paper, and to Steve Evans, John Hare, Richard Olmsted, and an anonymous reviewer for *Faith and Philosophy*, for helpful comments on an earlier draft.