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Keywords

art, atonement, substitution, Trinity, wrath, mercy seat

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The Mercy Seat: An Artistic Grammar for Substitutionary Atonement

Justin Ariel Bailey and David M. Westfall

Abstract:

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The cross was not a major Christian symbol until the fifth century, yet since that time it has become one of the most painted subjects in art history. After its rise in the Christian imagination, crucifixion art multiplied, embodying various theological and cultural currents throughout history. These artifacts offer us oft-neglected visual traditions that complement written reflection on key doctrines. This essay attempts to bring the resources of atonement art to bear on atonement theology: specifically, the resources of a particular artistic motif, the *mercy seat* for theories of substitution. The *mercy seat* (which is how we will render the German term *Gnadenstuhl*)—identifies one of the most well-known visual traditions that renders the Trinity.[1] While there is diversity in depiction, the motif visualizes God the Father holding forth God the Son (usually dead) while God the Spirit hovers as a dove.

The *mercy seat* belongs to a devotional tradition of images intended for liturgical contemplation. This essay further explores this tradition as visual commentary. In it we seek a visual grammar (boundaries for what we should and should not say) that apprehends the complexity of trinitarian agency present in the atonement, while also respecting the triune mystery. Our essay proceeds in three movements: first, a reflection on how visual art illuminates (rather than merely illustrates) verbal doctrine; second, a discussion of the difficulties and desiderata for theories of substitution; and finally, an assessment on how the *mercy seat* motif might guide reflection on the atonement, as a case study in how visual art might guide Christian reflection and spirituality in general. Our argument is that the *mercy seat* tradition is not simply one more method of conveying the unity of divine action, but rather that it adds something unique in its medium, drawing out aspects of the doctrine with imaginative force that are difficult to hold together with written descriptions alone. As it engages the imagination, the mercy seat motif can shape the spirituality of Christian believers, illuminating the triune God's unified nature, loving character, and gracious initiative in history.

<A>The Relationship of Visual Art and Verbal Doctrine

The question of the legitimacy of religious images—especially those that depict God—is the subject of long debate in Christian history. Iconoclasts have emphasized the second commandment; iconophiles the incarnation. We cannot rehearse the full debate here. Yet our argument is that when viewed properly, visual images can offer an imaginative grammar to guide verbal descriptions. As theologians working within Protestant traditions, we feel the imaginative deficit acutely. And thus, a discussion of images as visual theology is necessary, especially given the sensitivities within our particular stream.

The Calvinist tradition is well known for its suspicion of the visual and its celebration of the verbal. John Calvin's critique of images in the *Institutes* is well known; despite a keen appreciation for the arts, he rejected their liturgical use.[2] Thus, in contrast to early Lutheran churches, Calvinist churches discontinued use of (and in some cases destroyed) the *mercy seat* image in particular. The Calvinist tradition's suspicion is grounded eschatologically: while "seeing" will be the primary reality in the eschaton (1 Cor 13:12), in this age "faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17). In the absence of Christ's physical presence, Christians hear and trust the promises of the gospel, embodied in the sacraments. The use of images in worship, it is argued, represents a premature grasping for certainty or the fashioning of a god transparent to human understanding, when what is called for is faith in God's Word.[3]

Edward Muir argues that the Calvinist rejection of images was emblematic of a larger liturgical shift. Late medieval rituals were attended with a rich but troubling "ambiguity of meaning," drawing the participant into the central event of the Mass. By contrast, wary of superstition, Protestant ritual sought to provide "clarity of meaning through the declaration of seemingly unambiguous words at the cost of visual impoverishment."[4] This visual impoverishment created an imaginative vacuum, meant to be filled through the painting of rich mental pictures through gospel exposition. So Calvin writes: "Let those who would discharge aright the ministry of the gospel learn, not merely to speak and declaim, but to penetrate into the consciences of men, to make them see Christ crucified, and feel the shedding of his blood. When the Church has such painters such as these, she no longer needs the dead images of wood and stone, she no longer requires pictures."[5]

This doubling down on verbal "painting" opened up new possibilities for language, what Regina Schwarz has called a "sacramental poetics," among Protestant playwrights and poets.[6]

But while the literary and musical arts have often flourished in Reformed settings, the suspicion of religious images has sometimes contributed to an austere aesthetic in Reformed churches. At the popular level, this is sometimes carried to regrettable extremes: following a strict reading of the Reformed catechisms on the second commandment, some in our acquaintance insist on scrubbing the face of Jesus from their children's Bibles!

It should be noted that the Reformed catechisms clearly situate the commandment's prohibition in terms of *worship,* a corrective merited if not overdetermined by the excesses of the late medieval church. The heart of Reformed iconoclasm remains in its insistence that the Word of God must "continually cast down our images of God," governing and guiding all human imaginings.[7] All images—whether mental or pictorial—must continually submit to a purgative process, seeking greater coherence with God's revelation in scripture and in Christ.

But the crucial question is whether in the process of imaginative purgation, the true face of Christ *replaces* all human imagining, or whether there is also space where Christ might rather *fulfill* them. Is it not possible for the spectacles of scripture and sacrament to purify the imagination, enabling us to appreciate and appropriate religious images in non-idolatrous ways? And is it not possible for images, which so often linger longer than words, to hold together mysteries of faith with imaginative force, inviting greater participation? The antidote to vain imagination is virtuous imagination, allowing fragmentary but fertile images to give rise to faithful reflection.

Indeed, the link between images and idolatry is not a necessary one. To view an image such that one's gaze terminates on the image is almost always a failure of the viewer. Consider an example: without a photograph of my parents, it is inevitable that I carry some image of them in my mind. Their photograph on my fridge instantiates their presence in a particular way, even

as it flattens the image into two dimensions. Though the photograph guides my mental image, imaginative participation—not precision—is the primary purpose of both images, the one on the fridge and the one in my mind. To be clear, precision is not at odds with imaginative participation, but the two should be distinguished, at least when it comes to my purpose in looking at the photograph. I am aware that neither my mental image nor the flattened photograph exhausts my parents' physical presence. Looking at the picture does not satisfy the desire to see them; if anything, it stirs up and intensifies the desire to see them face to face.

The photograph analogy breaks down, of course, since believers have not seen Christ face to face. For that, they do await the eschaton. And yet religious images need not be faulted for their inability to depict the divine with the analytical precision of verbal accounts. Nor should we assume that any particular image will replace without remainder the image of God—formed by scripture, culture, and experience—people invariably carry around in their minds.[8] As Robin Jensen writes: "Faith is not dependent . . . on the precision of our images. What is important to believe about Jesus . . . is that he had an image: he had a face and he had a body."[9] Images of Christ remind believers—whether in children's Bibles or historic Christian art—that in Jesus Christ God has a real human face. Christians anticipate the day when they will see him, no longer "through a glass darkly," but face to face (1 Cor 13:12). To imagine the face of Christ is not to displace the eschatological longing but to express and intensify it.

The clear prohibition against making images as objects of worship does not rule out the use of religious images for other purposes. Even such a zealous defender of the Reformed tradition as Jochem Douma writes: "To the question about what may and what may not be represented, we would answer that art may portray whatever Scripture shows us."[10] Garrett Green further outlines four ways that art may serve theology: (1) *hermeneutically*, as an

interpretation of the biblical witness; (2) *doxologically*, as an act of worship, "the exuberant response of the grateful creature to his glorious Creator"; (3) *analogically*, as a visual metaphor for that which is supersensible; and (4) *eschatologically*, as the advance radiance of the new creation.[11]

The Calvinist gift is the reminder that humans are always in danger of allowing images of God—which can include cherished faith formulations—to become idols, which allow us to stay in control. It is certainly possible to approach theology, worship, or art in this way. But the best spirituality, like the best art, requires surrender, not control. Rather than closing down the imagination, it breaks it open. To reject the value of visual traditions in training the imagination is to work with an unnecessary handicap. Since most articulations of Christian doctrine depend on symbolic or metaphorical language, attempts to explain the images found in scripture can be aided greatly by artists, whose work represents genuine theological contributions and should be dealt with as such.[12] As Katie Kresser writes: "word-knowledge must be supplemented by the kind of relational wisdom that the thing called art can best facilitate."[13] The goal is that verbal and visual commentaries would work together in service of both theological precision and imaginative participation. But believers should be wary of believing that *either* images or words will satisfy the desire for encounter with the living God.

Indeed, it may be that the Protestant search for unambiguous words and clarity of expression, if unattended by the generative ambiguity of art, will lead to a mechanical and overly systematized faith that leaves no space for imaginative spiritual participation, only intellectual assent. When it comes to understandings of atonement, this tendency has sometimes led to transactional accounts of substitution that fail to respect trinitarian unity and agency. Language strains under the tension, and often fails—if not in describing what is happening, in allowing us

to apprehend multiple tensions with imaginative unity. Where language is limited, other resources are needed. This brings us to our case study: substitutionary atonement.

<A>Substitution and Its Discontents

In its everyday use, the word “substitution” simply denotes any sort of functional replacement. This language is used in diverse settings, from classrooms to athletic fields to recipe books. While this term is most typically applied to a particular subset of atonement “theories,” the language can therefore appropriately describe almost any account of Christ’s saving work at some level. Normally, however, atonement theology has employed the language of substitution to refer specifically to a relationship in which Christ replaces sinners, bearing the judicial *punishment* they are due on account of sin.

This theory of atonement, typically known as “penal substitution,” finds a partial antecedent in Anselm’s “satisfaction” theory (classically articulated in *Cur Deus Homo?*), but the degree of difference between these theories is not always appreciated. Whereas Anselm’s account concerns the satisfaction of God’s *honor* and represents Christ’s self-gift to God expressly as an alternative to sin’s punishment, the penal theory concerns the satisfaction of God’s *justice*, understood in retributive terms: Christ fulfills the just demand of God’s law by willingly sustaining the full penalty of sin in the place of sinners.[14] As a result, he “propitiates” God, appeasing his holy indignation by nullifying the sin that evokes it. Consequently, sinners are free to enjoy full acceptance with God despite their continued unworthiness. The basis of their condemnation in God’s sight has been removed because Jesus satisfied God’s just demands on sinners’ behalf.

Following its rise to prominence during the Reformation era, this way of understanding

Christ's saving work has been the focus of intense criticism from various quarters.[15] The acceptance of an innocent person's suffering in place of the guilty strikes many as logically incoherent, a "legal fiction" that would not plausibly be admissible in any court, human or divine.[16] Concerns over the transferability of guilt notwithstanding, however, the debate's core issue is really the character of God: the penal theory, it is argued, misrepresents God as bloodthirsty and irrationally angry with the human race, able to be mollified only when given occasion to vent his anger, and on none other than his own Son! "Divine child abuse" has become the mantra thus characterizing the theory, and a great deal of apologetic energy in the past few decades has been devoted to invalidating this charge.[17] Indeed, addressing these concerns is not merely a matter of correcting doctrinal imprecision. It is more fundamentally a crisis in devotion, which has the potential to produce a confusing and ambiguous view of God that dampens love and increases ambivalence among believers.

Recent efforts on this front have concerned themselves with refining the understanding of the trinitarian dynamics at the heart of atonement. Of particular note is the work of Thomas McCall and Adonis Vidu, who draw in complementary ways on classic trinitarian theology to establish appropriate "guidelines" for an account of Christ's substitutionary role in redemption.[18] Both stress that there can be no division or antagonism within the Trinity; therefore any account of atonement that pits an angry Father against a merciful Son is sub-Christian at best. Not only that, but trinitarian orthodoxy should even preclude any strict "division of labor" in the Trinity, whereby one member acts in wrath toward sin and another in mercy toward humanity. Rather, "The actions of Father, Son, and Spirit must be mutually involved in each other, such that the common action of the Trinity cannot be broken into simpler constituent actions."[19] The trinitarian operations are inseparable: *omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. This is not to

say that the roles of each person are indistinguishable, only that the whole Trinity is engaged in an interdependent and mutually reinforcing way in any single action of the triune God.[20]

This assessment also dovetails with a traditional account of God's metaphysical simplicity, according to which God cannot be regarded as a composite or sum total of distinct attributes that might conceivably exist in tension with one another. Rather, "in any divine action all divine attributes are present as its ground. The full divine character is constantly exhibited in everything God does," and the impression that only certain attributes are in effect owes only to the contingencies of a particular situation.[21] "Wrath" is neither essential to God's being, nor in competition with other dimensions of his character; rather, it is a contingent expression of God's unchanging and essential goodness in conditions determined by sin.[22]

When we correlate the divine simplicity and the inseparability of the trinitarian operations, we are led to conclude that even sin's punishment in the death of Jesus is an expression of the essential *unity* of Father and Son in the Spirit within the conditions of a fallen creation and violated relationship between God and humanity. It is therefore misleading at best to speak of God the Father as being "angry" with God the Son, an image that naturally suggests discord and disunity between the two; rather, we must speak more precisely of *sin* as the object of God's displeasure, and the *Son* as the object of God's unbroken, undiminished delight, even as he experienced the forsakenness of the cross.[23] At the cross, we encounter the unified action of Father, Son, and Spirit in carrying out sin's judgment, and accomplishing salvation.

While these considerations bring helpful clarity to the discussion from the vantage point of trinitarian theology, more remains to be said specifically concerning the Son's role in this unified trinitarian act, particularly as regards his *human* activity on behalf of sinners. What is the relationship between the Son's substitutionary place-taking and this trinitarian unity? Does our

account of the latter merely provide "guard rails" for containing the potential excesses of the former, or is there a more fundamental point of contact between the two? Here one of McCall and Vidu's conversation partners points us in a helpful direction.

Among modern theologians of the recent past, few have articulated this inner-trinitarian unity's fundamental importance to the work of atonement with greater profundity than P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921), who offers a helpful account of the unified triune activity in atonement, specifically from the vantage point of the incarnate Son's human activity.[24] This activity does not consist only in the Son's passively enduring the judgment that would otherwise fall upon sinners, but in his fitting *human response* in their stead to this judgment. Forsyth writes:

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Christ submitted with all His heart to God's holy final judgment on the race. He did not view it as an unfortunate incident in his life. He did not treat it as though it happened to drop upon Him. But He treated it as the grand will of God, as the effectuation in history of God's holiness, which holiness must have complete response and practical confession both on its negative side of judgment and its positive side of obedience.[25]

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In short, according to Forsyth, the Son's achievement was to carry out, in sinful humanity's stead, *a practical confession of God's righteousness and holiness in his judgment concerning sin*—"practical" in that by his suffering and death he embraces and confesses God's judgment in *deed*, and not in word only. In Christ's obedient death, sin's judgment "fell where it was perfectly understood, owned, and praised, and had the sanctifying effect of judgment, the effect of giving holiness at last its own. God made Him to be sin in treatment though not in feeling, so that holiness might be perfected in judgment, and we might become the righteousness of God in

Him."[26]

In other words, Jesus takes the place of sinners, not simply in the bare fact of undergoing the judgment they are due, as its passive object, but by the *manner* in which he does so, as its active *recipient* and respondent. By his obedient submission to sin's judgment, Christ embraces his Father's will concerning sin, responding to the divine judgment in a way that realizes his perfect unity with God within the condition of guilty humanity. The death of Jesus on the cross is his perfect, faithful, and practical human "Amen" to the judgment of God. It is an act that is pleasing in God's sight, not merely because sin thereby receives its due, but chiefly because in Christ's self-giving submission to the judgment, the human will is thereby conformed to God's will concerning sin and God's claim upon sinful humanity is duly acknowledged. To borrow the language of C. S. Lewis, Christ takes the place of sinful humanity in order to become "the perfect penitent" on their behalf.[27] His righteousness within the conditions of sin's judgment and condemnation stands in for their incapacity, in a prideful and corrupted state, to submit wholly and unreservedly to the God who is implacably opposed to sin and evil.

Accordingly, the inner-trinitarian unity is itself the very basis of Christ's substitutionary role in atonement. Whereas humans in their guilt are alienated and estranged from God, the Son assumes the conditions of human guilt into the wholeness and integrity of his relation to the Father, and in doing so embraces the "collateral necessity" of sin's judgment in his incarnate person.[28] By the appointment of the Father, the Son's eternal "Amen" to the Father becomes, on the cross, his temporal "Amen" to God's judgment concerning human sin. In this way the Son's self-gift to the Father also becomes, simultaneously, the Father's gift to us: in Christ, he provides us with the atoning and reconciling response that he seeks from us, in order that we may become partakers in the sonship of the incarnate Son. In the "vicarious humanity" of Jesus Christ, sinful

humanity's union with God is restored.[29]

Such an account of God's gracious provision in Christ's self-substitution for sinners is surely a far cry from the caricatures that have garnered so much controversy. But it must also be admitted that a nuanced portrayal of this kind is not what one normally encounters in the pews or even in most pulpits of evangelical churches that espouse penal substitutionary atonement. This owes, in part, to the impoverished imagination of much evangelical preaching and teaching on the atonement, which often betrays a deficient understanding of the Trinity precisely along the lines noted above. We can see this deficiency in at least two ways, the first of which McCall observes: there is a tendency to depict the Trinity as being "broken" in some sense at the cross, the relationship between the Father and Son rent in two as Jesus experiences the dereliction of divine abandonment.[30] This peculiarly modern tendency stands in contrast with the rest of the Christian tradition, which has always stressed the unity of the Father and Son, even (and however paradoxically) in the Son's dereliction and abandonment.[31]

Second, among penal substitution's proponents there is also a widespread neglect of the incarnate Son's human will in atonement—a problem to which Forsyth's account provides a helpful corrective. Rather, the tendency is to represent Christ's substitution in a way that treats him simply as the passive object of God's judgment, and not as an acting subject whose wholehearted *acceptance* of this judgment on behalf of sinners accounts for his death's reconciling force. The unity of Christ's human will with the will of God is not typically highlighted as the decisive factor in his substitutionary role, and the "collateral necessity" of sin's punishment instead becomes *the* explanatory mechanism that must now bear the weight of the whole theory and account for all its features. Rather than describing God's radical provision of a new humanity in Christ to stand in for their own in relation to himself, substitution becomes

simply a matter of sin's penal consequence needing somehow to be transferred away from its proper recipient to someone else who can "take it." The incarnate Christ becomes less obviously God's gift to humans in a hopeless condition, and instead appears to function as little more than a "wrath receptacle," an alternative location for God to offload the anger that impedes their forgiveness. It is in this context, where God's "need" to condemn sin eclipses humanity's need to embrace and accept this judgment in order to be in right relationship with him, that Christians find themselves prone to the truncated and impoverished views of atonement that have justly received criticism. Christ is no longer the one who does something in place of someone else in perfect unity with God. He is merely the one *to* whom *God* does something, instead of doing it to someone else.

While the above considerations do provide a helpful vantage point from which to identify and evaluate these tendencies, such trinitarian "guidelines" are of limited value in addressing what ultimately lies behind such tendencies: a sub-trinitarian *image* of God and God's saving activity. What is needed, we would argue, is not simply a refinement of the theories, but alternative ways of imaging the divine action that compellingly illuminate the truths to which the best theories point—preferably, counterimages drawn from the well of the historic church's imagination down through the centuries. This desideratum brings us, finally, to the *mercy seat* motif, which we believe may hold just such potential.

<A>The *Mercy Seat* throughout History

As mentioned above, the *mercy seat* motif is bound up in the history of trinitarian art. Early attempts to render the Trinity avoided visual depictions of God the Father, representing God by a hand emerging from the heavens (*dextera Domini*). We can see this in images such as the one

found on the back of the Cross of Lothar (ca. 980). The hand of God the Father holds the victory wreath above the crucified Christ; in the center of the wreath is the dove that represents the Holy Spirit. The image connects the crucifixion to the visual tradition that displayed the hand of the Father and the dove of the Spirit at Jesus's baptism. Taken together, the images depict the crucifixion as a trinitarian event, and signify God's offering and acceptance of the sacrificial gift.[32]

As the taboo against depicting the first member of the Trinity began to relax over the next two centuries, the human form of the Father replaced the hand. Indeed, the *mercy seat* was an important part of the Western tradition that legitimized artistic depictions of God the Father. For a thousand years, Christian artists considered artistic representations of the Son permissible because of the incarnation, but images of the Father remained forbidden by the second commandment.[33] By the late medieval period, however, artists would regularly paint the Father as the white-bearded "Ancient of Days" (Dn 7). It was argued that since Daniel had seen the Father and recorded the vision, artists could reproduce the image. From the twelfth century onward, the *mercy seat* motif begin to multiply. As Sarah Coakley has shown, some of these images manifest the sensibilities seen in Anselm's account of satisfaction in *Cur Deus Homo* (1094–1098). In such images, the Father sits on a throne; His face is impassible—if not stern—emphasizing the gravity of humanity's sin.[34] Here we can see the complexity of rendering the layers of trinitarian agency at work in theories of substitution. Referencing a piece from the fifteenth century, Gesa Elspeth Thiessen points out the placement of the Father's hands, illustrative of the Father's dual role, as the one who offers Christ as well as the one who accepts the sacrifice.[35] Although the Son's eyes are closed—signifying his death—he also raises a nail-

printed hand to show his wounds, signifying the free offering of his life for the redemption of humanity.

These images often went out of their way to emphasize the unity of the Trinity in the offering. The Spirit's blessing remains over the Son; indeed, in several of the images, the wings of the Spirit join the mouth of the Father to the mouth of Son.[36] The Father often mirrors the Son; he is clearly distinct insofar as he receives the offering, but also suggestively similar in visage. In other images, Father and Son share a single set of hands: the hands holding forth the Son and the hands nailed to the cross are the same.

By the end of the fourteenth century the *mercy seat* acquired a sense of paternal sorrow, evoking the pathos of the *pieta* motif, where Mary holds the body of Jesus in her arms. Kristin Zapalac connects the conflation of the two motifs to the increased liturgical focus on the body of Christ in the Mass, which was meant to provoke a sorrowful and repentant response in the worshipper. She writes: "The interest in the 'pathetique' touched even the image of the Trinity, transforming the [*mercy seat*] depiction of God's display of his son's sacrifice for humankind into a depiction of a father mourning the dead son in his arms."[37] This iteration, which could be considered either a variant or derivation of the *mercy seat*, would be called the "Pain of God" (*Not Gottes*).[38] The suggestion is that while only the Son is crucified, the pain and sorrow of the crucifixion is felt by the whole Trinity.[39] This development was not without detractors, however. David Brown notes that the overtone of a passible Father contributed to the image's censure in the Eastern Church. Still others rejected the image for choosing to render the Father at all, extending the earlier taboo.[40]

By the fifteenth century, however, the Father was frequently found in scenes from the life of Christ, representative of a "popular theological climate increasingly interested in [the

Father's] paternal relationship to Christ." This paternal relationship was of particular importance to Martin Luther, who taught that because of Christ, believers should relate to God not as fearful subjects but as beloved children. Luther thus advocated for painting the Father, writing: "God has neither beard nor hair, but we nevertheless depict him accurately in this image of an old man. We must paint such a picture of our Lord God for the children, and even for those of us who are learned."[41] Appropriated among Luther's followers, the *mercy seat* motif still carried the overtone of satisfaction, but it was controlled by the larger theme of Fatherly love, for the Son as well as for God's adopted children.[42]

We can see this by briefly comparing two trinitarian images from the early Lutheran tradition. The first is a woodcut by Peter Dell the Elder, in which the traditional *mercy seat* image is displayed (and the word *Gnadenstuhl* is inscribed). But the Spirit has been relocated, resting not over Christ but over the preacher who proclaims the gospel just to the left of the cross.[43] In a related image by an anonymous artist, God the Father reaches down from heaven to put the bread of life into the hands of humanity even as Christ lifts their hands to receive it.[44] The artistic suggestion is that the work of Christ enables believers to enjoy the paternal love of the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, whose presence as a dove signifies the pleasure of the Father in his children. These images make explicit the emphasis that believers are invited, via their adoption in Christ, to enjoy the benefits of the triune offering, made present in Word and Sacrament. Rather than leading viewers away from these means of grace, the image pushes us toward them.

Members of Calvinist traditions have been and will be unlikely to assent to the visual depiction of God the Father. Thus, we offer two further *mercy seat* images that may be able to work within that tradition's taboo. The first is a painting from the high renaissance, "Holy

Trinity" by Lorenzo Lotto (ca. 1523). In an image that both derives from and departs from earlier images, the risen and exalted Christ stands in the center of the frame, holding forth his wounded hands as the sign of his suffering. The Spirit hovers as a dove, and the bright shadow of the Father stands behind both, his hands raised in benediction parallel to the hands of the Son. The image of the Son as risen highlights his agency, his supererogatory obedience rather than his passivity.[45] The image would not have been acceptable to iconoclastic Calvinists of the sixteenth century, and yet it is possible that its apophaticism in rendering the Father, along with its emphasis on Christ's exalted status, may be more acceptable to Calvinists in our own context.

The second image is William Blake's sketch of the Trinity, which gives an outline of the bodies of both Father and Son but does not depict their faces.[46] Here the figure of the Father kneels, embracing the Son. No physical cross is present, and yet the Son's arms are stretched out in cruciform offering. Hovering over Father and Son is no mere dove but a bird with enormous wings that mirror the outstretched arms of the son in blessing and offering. Coakley's description of the image is worth repeating:

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It is as if, on the one hand, the dispassionate Father's gaze of the original Gnadenstuhl . . . has been transmogrified into the anguished parent of the dying child; yet on the other hand, and in contrast, the turned-around Christ is veritably leaping into the Father's arms, in an ecstasy of simultaneous joy and costly gift. And because the vibrant presence of the Spirit . . . so exactly emulates the shape of the Son's outstretched arms, the viewer experiences the moment of death precisely as a leap into life.[47]

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In this image we begin to see how visual art can hold together so many overlapping themes in an imaginative whole, offering a symbol that both grounds and gives rise to greater theological reflection and spiritual contemplation.

<A>Appropriating the *Mercy Seat* Motif

Kevin Vanhoozer writes, “The challenge for theology is to “theorize” the cross (i.e., in a doctrinal formulation) while simultaneously respecting it (i.e., as an ‘other’ that eludes our conceptual grasp).”[48] Indeed, much of the difficulty in depicting substitution is a corollary of the difficulties of speaking about the Trinity in general. Graham Cole puts this well: “The analogies and illustrations fail at crucial points because the Trinity and its involvement in the atonement is *sui generis*.”[49] Substitutionary models understand the members of the Trinity engaged in multiple overlapping layers of agency—giving and receiving, blessing and bruising—and yet inseparably united in purpose. Great care is needed when speaking about substitution, especially when concepts like “punishment” are involved, lest the impression is given that trinitarian unity has been lost. It is therefore unfortunate that while many evangelical preachers and theologians respect mystery when speaking about the Trinity, they do not always extend that same care to speaking about the work of the Trinity in the atonement.

On the other hand, it is possible to describe the meaning of terms with analytic accuracy, offering us a grammar to guide language when discussing substitution. And yet analytical descriptions fail to capture the imagination, which is the reason why the art of the cross exists in the first place, and why the sacrament offers us not a theory but a meal. In other words, what is needed—in addition to analytical precision—is an imaginative grammar to guide us, one that

endeavors to hold multiple tensions together with dramatic force, while respecting the fundamental mystery.

As artistic depictions try to hold trinitarian agencies together with imaginative force, it is possible to misunderstand artistic intent and read something into a painting that may not be there. David Brown argues that traditional criticisms of trinitarian art of the Trinity raise the question of "whether the fault did not also lie . . . in the failure to allow other than a very literal reading, and if so, whether the attack should not be seen as a part of a much wider cultural change, the retreat to a more literalist interpretation of Scripture that foreclosed the more multivalent possibilities of the past."[50] In other words, accusations that artistic depictions of God the Father simply naturalize the first person of the Trinity unfairly miss the care that artists took to avoid this error, and insist on a literalism that is foreign to the artist's intention. Brown points to no less than seven alternative *mercy seat* depictions of the Father that attempt (with varying degrees of success) to prevent the viewer from "reading any of the images too literally."[51] The point is that visual images contain within themselves a grammar for talking about the Trinity that does not cause anyone to think that God the Father or God the Holy Spirit are incarnate; only that they are inseparably involved in the incarnation.

Indeed, this shared involvement is one of the significant themes that the *mercy seat* image helps us to grasp. Coakley points out that occasionally the dove of the Spirit is absent from *mercy seat* images, deemed "unnecessary to the immediate text and context."[52] Contemporary substitutionary schemes often make the same mistake: the Spirit has disappeared, rendering the cross a mere transaction between the Father and the Son. Such a flattened account of substitution neglects the fact that the Son comes in the power of the Spirit (Lk 4:18) and offers himself "through the Eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14). When the Spirit's agency is omitted from accounts of

substitution, it runs the risk of setting God against God, saying that the Father hated the Son, or that the Trinity has been broken on the cross. But the presence of the dove, hovering over the cross, reminds us that Christ is always the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. Intra-trinitarian strife in the Atonement is the furthest thing from the artists' minds; rather, the aim is to show the whole Trinity united in redemptive purpose.[53] In this way the best *mercy seat* images, in consonance with the verbal tradition, provide us with a grammar in keeping with the concerns noted above: here is what should be said and here is what should not be said. They hold the potential to discipline and guide the imagination with appropriate trinitarian constraints, demanding that believers conceive of Christ's substitutionary self-giving as an expression of his essential oneness with the Father in the unity of the Spirit.

Furthermore, to the degree that these images also depict the wounded Son as an active participant in the process, they help us avoid the tendency to reduce his role to that of "wrath receptacle." Rather, the motif invites Christians to imagine Christ as *doing* something in their stead that unites us to God. His substitutionary role inheres in his human activity on their behalf in relation to God the Father, not simply undergoing the judgment of sin, but willingly embracing this judgment by his obedient, cruciform confession of God's righteousness and thereby assuming sin's judgment into the integrity of his relations within the Godhead. In this respect, the motif's indebtedness to Anselm's "satisfaction" theory, which more strongly emphasizes Christ's active self-giving than many accounts of penal substitution, may provide a safeguard against some of possible distortions to which penal accounts are prone.

The same could be said with respect to the theme of God's wrath, which features more prominently in the penal theory than it does in satisfaction. None of the *mercy seat* images explicitly depict the outpouring of God's wrath on the Son. While some may view this as a

problematic omission rather than as an asset, it coheres well with the insights we have discussed. Wrath is not an essential attribute of God, nor is its expression limited to the Father; rather, it is a contingent manifestation of God's essential goodness and holy love, and its object is *sin* rather than God's Son. In the *mercy seat* motif, the wrath of God is seen, not in the Father's face as he looks upon his Son's wounded body, but in the Son's wounds themselves, which carry the wages of sin. In this way, the motif possesses the capacity simultaneously to depict two realities that mind and heart find difficult to reconcile: it shows us the Son as "bruised by Yahweh" and "beloved of the Father" *at the same time*.

Similarly, in keeping with the concerns we have outlined, many iterations of the motif depict the Father as simultaneously the recipient *and* provider of the Son's self-offering. He not only embraces the wounded Son, but also holds him forth to the viewer, for whom the offering is made. The motif renders any coercive notion of God's appeasement unthinkable, because it locates the origin of the Son's self-substitution in the will of God to redeem sinful humanity. But it also captures something of the fundamentally substitutionary character of God's grace itself as it is revealed in Christ. God himself freely provides humans with the very thing he demands from them—the due acknowledgment of his righteousness in the willing acceptance of his judgment—so that they might be restored to him.

Thus, the *mercy seat* motif holds the potential not just for framing thinking about substitutionary atonement in terms that more adequately reflect the trinitarian heart of Christian faith, but also for opening up a space for imaginative participation: the Father's embrace of the Son becomes, for those who view the image, his embrace of them. Viewers find themselves caught up into the sonship of the Son even as they witness the Son acting in their stead.

<A>Conclusion: A Visual GrammarThat Directs Devotion

No single image will perfectly capture the intricacies of trinitarian action; nor is that desirable. What is desirable is an exploration of a visual tradition that offers a surprisingly powerful grammar for speaking about substitution: the dual agency of the Father in giving and receiving, the complexity of fatherly love mingled with fatherly sorrow, the obedient surrender of the Son, and the blessing of the Spirit instantiating and inviting the believer into trinitarian love.

This essay has been an exploration of the value of visual art in the apprehension of a difficult religious doctrine. In what ways might these doctrinal and artistic reflections direct Christians in their everyday devotion and discipleship? First, for Christians, human images of God (present in art as well doctrinal formulations) still need to be healed and corrected by the Spirit according to the glory of God "displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Mystery requires respect for the limits of language as well as imagination, which is a word of caution both for substitution's detractors and its purveyors. These limits notwithstanding, engaging images that resonate with the unified nature of God described in this essay should lead to the appropriate response of attraction, confidence, and gratitude rather than confusion, anxiety, and foreboding.

Furthermore, engaging a variety of artistic approaches to depicting the mystery of the atonement may loosen the hold of a single image or text on one's imagination. Part of the practice of Christian spirituality might involve believers offering their imaginings to God, lest they too become idols. Nevertheless, for the doctrine of atonement, illumination by artistic reflection suggests that whatever is imagined, the united work of the Trinity in atonement and the true story of God's love is even better. This can lead believers to cultivate patience, hope, and joy, even amid the difficulties of life. Finally, art allows believers to feel grasped by and to marvel at mysteries that they cannot fully comprehend. The best art moves those who view it

from wonder to worship, the telos of the spiritual life. How trinitarian agency fits together in substitutionary atonement may be ultimately mysterious, but mystery does not require silence; it invites praise. To recall the words of the apostle: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom 11:33).

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[1] Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, vol. 1. (London: Lund Humphries, 1972), 108; Schiller, vol. 2, 122–24. The term *Gnadenstuhl* originates with Luther but this was applied to a tradition that had been going on for four hundred years. See Berthold Kress, “A Relief by Peter Dell (1548) After a Drawing by Paul Lautensack, and the Origins of the Term ‘Gnadenstuhl,’” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73 (2010): 181–94.

[2] See for example John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeil (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1.11. For an assessment of Calvin’s views, see Christopher Richard Joby, *Calvinism and the Arts: A Re-Assessment* (Dudley, MA: Peeters Publishers, 2007).

[3] See David VanDrunen, “Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2): 130–47.

[4] Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 208.

[5] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians,* trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 80-81.

[6] Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

[7] Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments,* trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 71.

[8] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[9] Robin Jensen, "Early Christian Art and Divine Epiphany," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 125–44.

[10] Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments,* 66-67.

[11] Garrett Green, *Imagining Theology: Encounters with God in Scripture, Interpretation, and Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 120–21.

[12] For a discussion on art as a theological text, see Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God Through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 123–64.

[13] Katie Kresser, *Bezalel's Body: The Death of God and the Birth of Art* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 19.

[14] See Katherine Sonderegger, "Anselmian Atonement," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 175–93.

[15] On objections to the theory, see Stephen R. Holmes, "Penal Substitution," in *Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 295–314.

[16] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6:72. Cf. Holmes, "Penal Substitution," 297–99.

[17] The phrase "divine child abuse" first appears in Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1–30. For several

responses to this and other objections, see Holmes, "Penal Substitution"; Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

[18] See Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 13–91; Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 235–72.

[19] Adonis Vidu, "The Place of the Cross among the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Bruce McCormack, Michael Horton, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 24.

[20] Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), with specific reference to the doctrine of atonement, 217–46.

[21] Vidu, *Atonement*, 256; cf. McCall, *Forsaken*, 80.

[22] See McCall, *Forsaken*, 79–86; Vidu, *Atonement*, 269–70.

[23] See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.11. Thus, Vidu and McCall respectively argue that it is misleading to say that "God punished Jesus" (Vidu, *Atonement*, 261–62); or "God killed Jesus" (McCall, *Forsaken*, 122).

[24] Forsyth features at several points in the discussions of McCall and Vidu: see McCall, *Forsaken*, 90; Vidu, *Atonement*, 260–62; "Place of the Cross," 41.

[25] P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1910), 83. For the language of "practical confession," see 134–35.

[26] Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, 83.

[27] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 53–59.

[28] Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, 135. "Collateral necessity" is language that Forsyth utilizes when articulating the events of the Cross.

[29] We draw this language particularly from the work of the Torrances, who articulate a theory of "radical substitution" that extends the substitutionary character of Christ's death to describe the totality of his incarnate existence on behalf of sinners in relation to the Father. See James B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, AD 381*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), 127–47.

[30] McCall, *Forsaken*, 15–22.

[31] McCall, *Forsaken*, 22–29.

[32] Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol 2, 122.

[33] Hilarie Cornwell and James Cornwell, *Saints, Signs, and Symbols: The Symbolic Language of Christian Art*, 3rd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

[34] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 211.

[35] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, "Imaging the Dogma of the Trinity," *Communio Viatorum* 51, no. 1 (2009), 12–13. Thiessen is referencing the piece by the Master of Sankt Lambrecht, *The Holy Trinity*, ca. 1430.

[36] Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. 2, 122–123.

[37] Kristin Eldyss Sorensen Zapalac, *In His Image and Likeness: Political Iconography and Religious Change in Regensburg, 1500–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 62–63.

[38] Jusepe de Ribera, *The Trinity*, ca. 1635; compare with his *Descent from the Cross,* ca. 1637.

[39] Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. 2, 220. See the discussion in Susie Paulik Babka, "The Trinity in the Gnadenstuhl Motif: Illustrating the Cross as an Event of the Triune God," in *God's Grandeur: The Arts and Imagination in Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 17–37.

[40] David Brown, "The Trinity in Art," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 343.

[41] Zapalac, *In His Image and Likeness*, 60–61.

[42] For more on the Lutheran appropriation of the *mercy seat*, see Andrew Spicer, *Lutheran Churches in Early Modern Europe* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 88–96.

[43] "Throne of Grace," Peter Dell the Elder, 1548.

[44] "God the Father Distributes the Bread of Life," Anonymous, ca. 1561.

[45] Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 209–10.

[46] William Blake, "Sketch of the Trinity," ca. 1793.

[47] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 255–56.

[48] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill, Roger R. Nicole, and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 369.

[49] Graham A Cole, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 255.

[50] David Brown, "The Trinity in Art," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 343.

[51] David Brown, "The Trinity in Art," 344.

[52] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 211–12. In other images, the Spirit is replaced by Mary.

[53] Babka, "The Trinity in the Gnadenstuhl Motif," 19.