

## THE SON IN THE HANDS OF A VIOLENT GOD? ASSESSING VIOLENCE IN JONATHAN EDWARDS'S COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

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“The great and angry God hath risen up and executed his awful vengeance...”<sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

Among laypeople Jonathan Edwards is best known for his hellfire and brimstone sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Because of this sermon Edwards is often caricatured as an angry Puritan. This is unfortunate for Edwards, since in last several years there has been a backlash toward those who see any anger or violence in God; one need only do a quick search on any theological library’s database to see that this is so. This backlash is especially articulated in many contemporary atonement theologies. For instance, several prominent Anabaptist and feminist theologians have put forth their own non-violent theologies of atonement. Even among evangelicals one can find atonement theologies that try to avoid the problem of violence as much as possible.<sup>2</sup> The evangelical hesitancy toward violence in the atonement is especially seen in the recent questioning of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA). According to Oliver Crisp, opponents of PSA claim that it “paints a picture of God as a bloodthirsty tyrant who must visit retribution upon sinners, as well as depicting God as committing unspeakable abuse upon his own Son in visiting the punishment for human sin upon the innocent God-man.”<sup>3</sup> The problem with PSA is that it depicts God as an angry and violent God, especially toward the Son.

As I pointed out above, Jonathan Edwards has been read as painting a picture of an “angry God.” However, we might want to ask, “Does Edwards depict God as being a ‘violent God?’” Some of the most interesting arguments against depicting God as a violent God have come from feminist theologians. If we put these accusations under careful scrutiny, it becomes evident that they can also be made against Reformed understandings of the Covenant of Redemption. In this paper, I would

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (ed. John Smith; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 101.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011); Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Crisp, “The Kaleidoscopic Model of Atonement: Reading Green and Baker’s *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*.” Unpublished paper for TH569 – The Doctrine of Atonement, Fuller Seminary (Fall 2012) 1.

like to answer the question: “Is the Covenant of Redemption in Jonathan Edwards’s theology a form of violence by the Father against the Son?”

In order to answer this question, we must begin with some preliminary definitions. We will begin by defining the Covenant of Redemption (COR); then we will define violence. Having put forth these important definitions, we will look at one feminist essay which brings up objections to various theories of atonement. By looking at these objections to these atonement theories, we will be able to highlight a possible problem in the COR. Following this section we will turn to Edward’s primary treatise on the Trinity and the COR: “Observations Concerning the Scripture Economy of the Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption.” By examining this treatise we will see that in Edwards’s understanding of the COR the Father is not guilty of perpetuating violence against the Son. Thus the Son is not in the hands of a violent God.

## II. DEFINITIONS

1. *The Covenant of Redemption defined.* The Covenant of Redemption is one of several covenants in Puritan thought that are located outside of human history. It has its beginning in pre-temporal divine history. Edwards’s most succinct definition of the COR is found in *Miscellanies* entry number 825. In this entry, Edwards distinguishes between two covenants, the COR and the Covenant of Grace (COG). Edwards believes that these covenants can often be confused with one another.<sup>4</sup> Edwards is correct in pointing this out. Most Puritan treatments of these two covenants end up conflating them. It is often the case that these two covenants are treated as one covenant with one of these covenants being subsumed under the other. Although he sees them as being intimately related, Edwards is unique in so clearly delineating both of these covenants and treating them separately.<sup>5</sup>

According to Edwards, the COR is “the covenant of God the Father with the Son, and with all the elect in him, whereby things are said to be given in Christ before the world began, and to be promised before the world began.”<sup>6</sup> There are several key things to note in this definition. First, it is primarily a covenant between the Father and the Son. Second, this covenant is made between the Father and the Son before the world began. Third, it is made between the Father and the Son for the sake of the Son and all the elect in him.

In contrast to the COR, there is the COG. This covenant is the covenant in marriage “between Christ and the soul ... whereby the soul becomes united to Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike the COR, this is not a covenant involving the Father; it is a covenant between the Son and the elect that are united to him.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies 501–832* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000) 148.

<sup>5</sup> “There is doubtless a difference between the covenant that God makes with Christ and his people, considered as one, and the covenant of Christ and his people between themselves” (Edwards, *The Miscellanies 501–832* 148).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 536.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 537.

In *Miscellanies* entry 617 Edwards gives an in-depth explanation of the differences between the COR and the COG. Although this entry is mainly focused on the COG, it provides some helpful insights into details of the COR. According to Edwards, the COR has certain conditions. For instance, the condition of the COR between the Father and the Son is that Jesus must suffer to procure redemption.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the suffering, which is a condition of the covenant, includes the Son's incarnation and death.<sup>9</sup> The COR also contains certain promises that the Father makes to the Son. For instance, the Father promises the Son a reward for undertaking the task of redemption. Specifically, the Father promises eternal life, perseverance, justification, regeneration, giving faith, and all things necessary to faith such as the means of grace<sup>10</sup> as parts of the Son's reward. The elect receive these things in virtue of their communion with Christ. However, the most important promise that the Father makes to the Son in this covenant is the promise of a "bride." By using the analogy of a father giving his son a wife, he says that the Father gives the Son his bride, namely the church or the elect that have been redeemed and united to him in under the COG.

For the sake of this paper, the most important aspect to remember about the COR is that it is a pre-temporal covenant between the Father and the Son in which the Son is promised a reward under the conditions of his incarnation and death.

2. *Violence defined.* There have been massive amounts of ink spilt on the subject of violence. The fact that so much attention has been devoted to the topic of violence makes it difficult to find one definition upon which all parties involved in the discussion can agree. For this reason I have chosen to highlight three different definitions of violence coming from three different traditions.<sup>11</sup> By doing this I believe that we can find a common thread among these definitions.

The first definition of violence is found in the Anabaptist theologian J. Denny Weaver's book titled *The Nonviolent Atonement*. In this book he uses a definition of violence put forth by Glen Stassen and Michael Westmoreland-White that he wholeheartedly endorses. Weaver says that these authors describe two dimensions of violence: (1) destruction to a victim; and (2) overpowering means. Combining these two dimensions, violence is defined as "destruction to a victim by means that overpower the victim's consent."<sup>12</sup> According to Weaver, the destruction done to a victim can include physical harm or injury, but it also includes actions that damage a person's dignity or self-esteem.<sup>13</sup> Thus violence comes in psychological, sociological, and physical forms. As examples of psychological violence, Weaver cites in-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 148.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>10</sup> I.e. God's Word preached, baptism, and the Eucharist.

<sup>11</sup> Two of these definitions come from within Christianity; the other falls outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

<sup>12</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

stances of parents who belittle their children, or teachers who brand a child a failure, or even a husband who continually puts down his wife.<sup>14</sup>

A second definition of violence comes from the Reformed theologian Hans Boersma in his book *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*. In this book, Boersma takes on the challenge of defending PSA in light of critiques that see violence as its major problem. In it he argues “we need to affirm the paradox of redemptive violence in order to retain the vision of eschatological unconditional hospitality.”<sup>15</sup> In his discussion of violence he points out that many theologians fear implicating God in violence because they understand violence as only being a negative thing. Boersma says that:

The underlying assumption in many discussions of divine violence appears to be that violence is inherently evil and immoral...I suggest however that we need to test our sensibilities. In particular we need to ask whether violence is, under any and all circumstances, a morally negative thing.<sup>16</sup>

In attempting to offer a value-free definition of violence, Boersma appropriates Donald X. Burt’s definition of a violent act as: “any act which contravenes the rights of another. It can also be described as an act which causes injury to the life, property, or person of a human being, oneself, or others.”<sup>17</sup> Like Weaver, Boersma also highlights the fact that violence is not limited to physical acts; violence can also be emotional, psychological, or social. We should note two important aspects of this definition. First, in order to be a violent act, an act must contravene the rights of another; it must be coercive. In order for an act to be violent, coercion is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The second aspect of this definition is that a violent act must cause injury. Once again, injury is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an act to be considered violent. In order for an act to be violent, it must involve both coercion and injury.

Our final definition of violence comes from outside of the orthodox Christian tradition, namely the Unitarian-Universalist tradition. Professor Emeritus at SUNY Galen K. Pletcher addresses the issue of violence in an essay titled “A Value-Free Definition of ‘Violence?’” In this essay, Pletcher takes issue with Gerald Runkle’s definition of an act of violence. Runkle defines a violent act as “an act in which a person employs physical force directly against a living being for the purpose of harming them.”<sup>18</sup> Pletcher critiques this definition on several grounds. First, he critiques the fact that Runkle limits violence to physical harm. Pletcher argues that there is indeed such a thing as psychological violence. Pletcher also critiques the fact that Runkle’s definition relies upon intention. Pletcher believes that it is impos-

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<sup>14</sup> This last example of psychological violence is a typical example used by many feminist theologians who argue that patriarchal structures in society enact violence against women by “putting them down.”

<sup>15</sup> Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>18</sup> Galen K. Pletcher, “A Value-Free Definition of ‘Violence?’” *Journal of Politics* 39.4 (November 1977) 1055.

sible to determine “intent to harm.” Despite these criticisms, it is evident that Pletcher agrees that with two aspects of Runkle’s definition: (1) use of force; and (2) harm. Violence for Pletcher involves force or coercion as well as physical or psychological harm.

A quick overview of these definitions of violence coming from various traditions reveals a common thread among them. First, all three definitions include harm as a necessary condition for violence. Weaver calls it “destruction,” Boersma calls it “injury,” and Pletcher calls it “harm.” All three writers recognize that harm cannot be reduced to physical harm; rather it can be (and often is) psychological, emotional, or social harm. Second, all three definitions include coercion as a necessary condition for violence. Weaver uses the phrase “overpowering means” to highlight the coercive nature of violence; Boersma speaks of “contravening the rights of another”; Pletcher speaks of “employing force.” It should be noted that coercion need not always be by means of physical force. One can imagine various non-physical types of coercion. For instance, there are good reasons to believe that blackmail is a form of non-physical coercion. If a person X threatens to shame another person Y before their peers unless Y performs a specific act for X, this would be a form of coercion which might constitute violence. There are also good reasons to believe that coercion might happen without one of the parties involved even knowing that it is happening. Consider the following imaginary example. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century New England, there was a school for boys that had a schoolmaster who had a reputation for being very strict and angry. The boys at this school were terribly afraid of what the schoolmaster might do to them if they disobeyed his commands. Although the schoolmaster never acted violently against the boys, they were afraid that if they were to disobey him, they would be beaten. Because of their fear of the schoolmaster these boys never disobeyed him, even when they did not desire to obey him. This imaginary situation is an example of non-physical psychological coercion based upon fear; these boys were coerced to act against their own desires because they feared his authority or because they feared what would happen to them if they did not obey him, even though the schoolmaster did not intend to coerce them into acting against their will.

These two elements, (1) coercion and (2) harm, make up the necessary and sufficient conditions for violence. Using these two necessary and sufficient conditions for violence we are now in a position to ask the question: Does the Covenant of Redemption, as articulated by Edwards, between the Father and the Son involve these two elements of violence? If the COR involves both coercion, namely the Father coercing the Son into entering this covenant, and harm, namely the Son being harmed as a result of the covenant, then Edwards is guilty of placing the Son in the hands of a violent God.

### III. ACCUSATIONS OF DIVINE VIOLENCE

Some of the most vocal opponents to divine violence have been feminist theologians. Feminist theologians have often gone after what many consider to be the

heart of evangelical theology: the atonement. Feminist criticisms of various atonement theories (especially PSA) have often fallen along three lines:

- (1) It makes violence acceptable (since God did/does it Himself), (2) it disempowers victims (who are encouraged to suffer patiently as Jesus suffered patiently), and (3) when linked to Father-Son language it makes it look as if the core of the gospel story is an act of child abuse leading to infanticide.<sup>19</sup>

These three feminist criticisms, which have often been made against satisfaction theories of atonement, could also be made against the Covenant of Redemption.<sup>20</sup> In this section I would like to examine one feminist treatment of atonement theories which might shed light upon the COR. By examining these feminist theologies we will be in a position to clearly articulate a possible objection to Edwards' COR, namely that the COR subjects the Son to divine violence.

1. *Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker*. "Feminist theology rejects the dominance of men over women and advocates equality of women and men. . . . Feminist theology thus gives voice to and is shaped by the experiences of women who reject a subservient status vis-à-vis men."<sup>21</sup> This description of the feminist theology fits the project that Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker are engaged in via their essay titled "For God So Loved the World?" This landmark essay presents feminist critiques of three classical and three contemporary atonement theories. Although it would be a worthwhile task to engage in each of these critiques in an in-depth manner, for the sake of brevity I will briefly summarize their arguments against the traditional atonement theories.

Brown and Parker begin by making the claim that "women are acculturated to accept abuse."<sup>22</sup> They believe that women have come to believe that it is their place to suffer and that their suffering is justified. Then Brown and Parker make the bold claim that "Christianity has been a primary—in many women's lives *the* primary—force in shaping our [i.e. women's] acceptance of abuse."<sup>23</sup> They go on to say that the "image of Christ on the cross as savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive."<sup>24</sup> Not only do they locate the reason for women's acceptance of abuse in the symbol of the cross, they argue that the message that women's suffering is justified is further reinforced by theology "that says Christ suffered in obedience to his Father's will."<sup>25</sup> They proceed to name the process by

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross* (London: Paternoster, 2007) 107.

<sup>20</sup> One might want to classify these objections into two categories. The first and second objection might be classified as subjective objections because they are objections about the effect that divine violence has upon human actions. The third objection might be classified as an objective objection because it is directed at the act of divine violence itself regardless of the moral effects that it might have upon human beings.

<sup>21</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 151.

<sup>22</sup> 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 Bohn; New York: Pilgrim, 1989) 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

which the Son suffers obediently to his Father's will "divine child abuse." Divine child abuse is then "paraded as salvific," in turn "the child who suffers without even raising a voice is lauded as the hope of the world."<sup>26</sup> The fact that the Son who suffers obediently at the hands of the Father is worshipped and admired for his obedience leads to a culture within the church that encourages women to submissively accept abuse at the hands of their male oppressors. Thus the church becomes a place of oppression.

According to Brown and Parker, the church will continue to be a place of oppression for women unless it condemns the glorification of suffering, especially the glorification of suffering in atonement theologies. In this essay, Brown and Parker condemn the three traditional atonement theories for perpetuating violence against women. First, they critique the Christus Victor theory of atonement on the basis that it teaches women that suffering is a prelude to triumph. In this theory of atonement they locate God as the source of the Son's suffering which will eventually lead to triumph. However, in their opinion victimization never leads to triumph.

After critiquing Christus Victor on the grounds that it teaches women that victimization will lead to triumph, they proceed to critique satisfaction theories of atonement. According to them satisfaction theories portray God as a tyrant. They paint a picture of God the Father as a God who desires the death of his son. They also paint a picture of what obedient submission is supposed to look like. In this picture of what the Son does, the Son is "crowned for his willingness to be perfectly obedient to his father's will."<sup>27</sup> In their opinion, this is the worst of the traditional atonement theories because "the image of God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression."<sup>28</sup>

The third traditional theory of atonement that Brown and Parker critique is the Moral Influence Theory. According to them, the Moral Influence theory is based upon the claim that the barrier between God and human beings is not located in God; rather it is located in human beings. The problem that human beings have is that they are not convinced of God's mercy towards them despite their sins. Humans need to be persuaded to believe in God's overwhelming mercy. God the Father persuades humans of his mercy by sending his son to die for them. This theory of atonement is founded upon "the belief that an innocent, suffering victim ... has the power to confront us with our guilt and move us to a new decision."<sup>29</sup> This belief, when applied to women, can be extremely harmful. It encourages women to accept the abuse they suffer at the hands of men because their willingness to suffer submissively will confront men with their guilt and move them to repent of their abusive actions. Thus this theory of atonement, like the other two traditional theories of atonement, leads women to accept abuse.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 12.

By examining Brown and Parker's critiques of traditional atonement theories it is clear that their primary critique of these theories, especially the satisfaction theory, is that they lead women to accept the abuse they suffer at the hands of men. This acceptance of abuse is grounded upon two aspects of atonement that are common to these three theories. First, these three theories emphasize that the Son suffers willingly and submissively at the hand of his Father. This leads women to submissively accept abuse at the hands of men because Jesus suffered submissively. Second, these three theories locate the impetus behind the atonement in the Father. It is the Father's will that the Son suffer at his hand. In *Christus Victor*, it is the Father's will that the Son will undergo suffering which will eventually lead to triumph. In satisfaction theories, it is the Father's will that the innocent Son will suffer and die to appease the Father. In the Moral Influence Theory, it is the Father's will that the Son will die to persuade humanity of the Father's love and mercy for them. The fact that the impetus behind the Son's suffering is located in the Father's will teaches women to accept the will of authority figures (especially male authority figures) even though it might lead to their suffering or abuse.

Although Brown and Parker's primary critique of atonement theology is that it has a bad effect on women, it is apparent that there are two distinct objections being put forth by these theologians. That is, there is a subjective objection and an objective objection. The subjective objection is concerned with the influence that divine violence has upon human actions. The objective objection is directed at the act of divine violence regardless of the moral effects it might have upon human actions. Although these two objections are directed toward atonement theories, it is also possible that they be directed toward the COR. Thus it would be helpful to examine both of these objections and see if they are successful objections to the COR.

The subjective objection is based on the premise that the violence perpetrated by the Father against the Son who willingly suffers leads women to willingly accept abuse. This premise claims that just as Jesus suffered willingly, women ought to suffer willingly as well. This premise can be understood as a "fact" that leads to a "value," or it could be understood as a premise about what "is" leading to a premise about what "ought to be." The "is" is that Jesus suffered willingly, the "ought" is that women should suffer abuse willingly. For the sake of argument, we might grant Brown and Parker the fact that Jesus suffered willingly; however, we should question whether the "ought" is implied by the "is." This is/ought distinction is one that has been questioned by various philosophers, most notably David Hume. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume objects to moral philosophers who attempt to draw "ought" or "ought not" statements from "is" or "is not" statements.<sup>30</sup> If we believe that Hume's objection is correct, then we have good reason to believe

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<sup>30</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 469. Whether Hume believes that we should simply be cautious about making a leap from "is" to "ought" or he believes that "ought" statements can never be derived from "is" statements is beyond the scope of this paper. However, even the weaker reading of Hume's position still deals a devastating blow to this feminist objection.

that the objection that feminist theologians use, namely using the leap from “is” to “ought,” is an unacceptable move. The “is” does not imply the “ought.” The fact that the Son willingly suffers does not imply that women ought to willingly suffer. Because Brown and Parker ground their subjective objection upon the use of a false premise, namely that “is” implies “ought,” it seems as though this objection falls flat on the ground.

The second objection put forth by Brown and Parker is an objective objection. They want to claim that the fact that the Father wills the suffering and death of his Son is a violent act, regardless of how it affects human behavior. Because it is a violent act, it is morally wrong. Once again, like the subjective objection, this objection, which is aimed at atonement theories, also applies to the COR. However, for a theologian who argues in the spirit of Brown and Parker to make the claim that the COR is morally wrong, she would have to show that the COR is an act of violence committed by the Father against the Son. This specific critique will hold if and only if the Father’s actions meet the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a violent act. These conditions are that the Son must suffer harm as a part of the Father’s will and that the Son must be coerced into entering the covenant. The first condition is certainly met in the COR; Edwards says that the incarnation, death, and sufferings of Christ are “conditions of the covenant of the Father with his Son.”<sup>31</sup> However, we should ask whether or not the second condition is met in the COR: is the Son coerced into entering the covenant? In order to answer this question we must turn to Jonathan Edwards’s most detailed account of the COR: “Observations Concerning the Scripture Economy of the Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption.”<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. “OBSERVATIONS”

Amy Plantinga Pauw has argued that for Edwards, there is an eternal covenant within the life of the Trinity that underlies all of God’s redemptive dealings with human creatures.<sup>33</sup> This eternal covenant is entered into in the life of the immanent Trinity and sets the way of action for the economic Trinity, thus this covenant, the COR, bridges the gap between the immanent and economic Trinity. However, the COR is not the only covenant in Edwards’s theological framework. Edwards inherited three primary covenants from his Reformed tradition: the Covenant of Works, the COG, and the COR. These last two covenants, which we defined above, are not two completely separate covenants; “the covenant between the Father and believers was only an expression of the eternal covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son.” For this reason it can be said that for Edwards the COR is the foundation of the COG.

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<sup>31</sup> Edwards, *The Miscellanies* 501–832 149.

<sup>32</sup> Hereafter, we will simply refer to this treatise as “Observations.”

<sup>33</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 92.

In "Observations," Edwards explores the trinitarian nature of the COR. He dives deep into the trinitarian nature of this covenant and draws the conclusion that there is a fittingness between the pattern of life in the immanent Trinity and the pattern of action that the economic Trinity engages in. He draws this conclusion by exploring three interconnected levels of the trinitarian relationship.<sup>34</sup> The three levels are: (1) the ontological relations between the persons of the Trinity; (2) the economy of the immanent Trinity; and (3) the economy of the Trinity in the COR. Exploring these three levels of trinitarian relationships will help us to answer the primary question posed in this article.

If divine violence will be found in the COR, it must be located at one of these three levels. Once again, the necessary and sufficient conditions for violence between the Father and the Son are harm and coercion. In the COR, we can certainly point to harm. Pauw rightly points out that as a part of the conditions of the COR Christ takes on human flesh and suffers the horrible agony of rejection on the cross. Although it is evident that we can point to the harm that Christ suffers, can we point to coercion? If there is coercion within the COR, it is certainly not physical coercion.

At this point it is helpful to recall our discussion of coercion earlier in this article. We had mentioned that there are various forms of non-physical coercion. One possibility for non-physical coercion within the COR would be a form of psychological coercion. Consider the example of the schoolmaster and the students. This example might serve as an analogy for the type of coercion that might be occurring in the COR. We had said that the schoolmaster never intended to coerce the students to act contrary to their will. Nevertheless, the students were coerced into acting simply because the schoolmaster was an authority figure who due to his position had the ability to influence their actions. In this example, the COR would be something like the contract that exists between the schoolmaster and the students when they are enrolled in the school. The schoolmaster would be like God the Father, unintentionally coercing the students or the Son. Or consider another example, which is more in line with the feminist critiques outlined above: imagine a Christian husband and a wife who get married in a culture that believes in complementarian marriage relationships.<sup>35</sup> The husband does not hold a complementarian position but the wife believes that the husband does. Thus the wife submits to her husband and does whatever her husband asks of her even though she does not want to do it, simply because he is a man and she perceives that he expects her to obey him due to his position of authority over her. In this case, it is her perception of her husband's position of power or authority over her that forces her into acting the way she does despite her desires not to act this way. The husband does not intentionally force her to act the way she does, but in virtue of his position she feels forced to act this way. This imaginary situation is an example of unintentional non-

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

<sup>35</sup> Although this type of marriage relationship has a biblical basis, many feminist theologians would see this as a harmful form of patriarchy.

physical psychological coercion based upon perceived power or authority; the wife was coerced to act against her own desires because she perceived that the husband expects her to act in such a way by virtue of his authority over her. If it can be shown that the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity is like this marriage relationship, then we can properly call the Father's actions psychologically coercive, thereby proving that the COR is an instance of divine violence.

1. *The ontological relations between the persons of the Trinity.* Let us turn to the first level of trinitarian relationships within "Observations," the ontological relations between the persons of the Trinity, and attempt to locate where coercion might be occurring. Edwards's ontological account of the Trinity begins with the notion that the Father is in some sense the head of the Trinity. Edwards says that

the other two person [the Son and the Holy Spirit] are from the Father in their subsistence, and as to their subsistence naturally originated from him and are dependent on him...the Father with respect to the subsistence is the fountain of the deity, wholly and entirely so.<sup>36</sup>

However, despite the fact that there is a priority of subsistence and despite the fact that the Son is "wholly from the Father and begotten by Him"<sup>37</sup> the Son is not ontologically inferior to the Father. The persons of the Trinity are "not inferior one to another in glory and excellency of nature." In other words, there is no ontological subordination between the persons of the Trinity. There is an ontological equality between the Father and the Son because the Son is the very image of the Father, "the express and perfect image of His person."<sup>38</sup> Because the Father is the fountainhead of deity and there is no ontological subordination within the Trinity, it is more accurate to speak of the relationship between Father and Son in terms of priority rather than superiority.<sup>39</sup> Edwards makes it very clear that he believes that despite a kind of dependence of the Son on the Father, there is no inferiority of deity in the Son.

Having laid out the ontological relations between the Father and the Son within the Trinity we can ask the question, "where is coercion located at this level of trinitarian relationships?" The answer appears to be: "nowhere." Edwards has made it clear that although there is a sort of priority of the Father, there is no superiority of the Father. Coercion implies that there is some sort of inequality between persons (a person cannot coerce someone else unless she holds some sort of superiority<sup>40</sup> over that person), but because there is no ontological superiority between the persons of the Trinity, we cannot say that there is any coercion occurring at the ontological level.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings* (ed. Paul Helm; Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971) 78–79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> For instance, power or authority.

2. *The economy of the immanent Trinity.* Let us turn to the second level of trinitarian relationships within “Observations,” the economy of the immanent Trinity, and attempt to locate where coercion might be occurring. The economy of the immanent Trinity is the “general order of acting established in eternity.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike the prior level where there is no superiority of the Father, this level can be thought of in terms of superiority in action.

Edwards says that the persons of the Trinity have formed themselves into a society in which the Father is first in the order of acting. The Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit is subordinate to the Son. However, his arrangement is arrived at by means of a “mutual free agreement, whereby the persons of the Trinity, of their own will ... have established a certain economy of order and acting.”<sup>42</sup> Edwards believes that there is a “natural decency or fitness” in this order since it follows the ontological pattern of the first level. According to the first level, the Spirit and Son originate from the Father; the Father is the fountain of the deity. Just like the Father is the fountain of the deity, he is the fountain of all the acts of the deity.<sup>43</sup> However, it should be noted that while there is a “natural decency or fitness” to this economy, this “natural decency or fitness” does not entail the persons of the Trinity must come into this order or economy. The persons of the Trinity freely enter into this agreement because the “natural decency or fitness” is suitable and beautiful; hence the persons of the Trinity naturally delight in the fitness and agree to enter into this agreement.

Having established that the Father has superiority in action within Edwards’s understanding of the Trinity, we should note several ways in which this superiority in action plays out in Edwards’s understanding of the Trinity apart from the establishment of the COR. First, we must note that it is God the Father who determines whether there will be such a thing as the redemption of sinners.<sup>44</sup> When sin occurs, God the Father is the offended party; thus he is the one who can determine whether redemption shall be allowed for humans. Second, prior to the establishment of the COR the Father chooses and appoints the person who shall be the Redeemer.<sup>45</sup> The Father has the authority to do this because the Father is the head of the Trinity. Third, even after the undertaking of the task of redemption, the Father will still act as the head of the society of the Trinity and the Son and the Spirit shall be subject to him. In other words, this “economy remains after the work of redemption is finished.”<sup>46</sup>

Having laid out the economy of the immanent Trinity, we can ask the question: Is coercion possible at this level of trinitarian relationships? If it is possible, it would be a case of psychological coercion. If the Son enters into this economy simply because the Father has authority by virtue of being the fountainhead of the

<sup>41</sup> Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 106.

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings* 78.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

Trinity and the Son does not consent to this economical order, then we have an instance of coercion. Edwards could be read as saying this. At times Edwards seems to say that this economy is established because it fits the pattern established by the ontological level; after all, it is a “naturally decent and fit” arrangement. However, it is simply not the case that that coercion is involved. The fact that this arrangement is naturally decent and fit results in the persons of the Trinity seeing this arrangement as suitable and beautiful, therefore entering into this agreement by consent and establishing it by agreement.<sup>47</sup> Since this economic subordination is established by mutual free agreement, we can say that there is no coercion at this level.

3. *The economy of the Trinity in the Covenant of Redemption.* So far we have seen that at two of the three levels of trinitarian relations there is no instance of coercion. Thus we must ask if there is any coercion occurring at this, the third, level of trinitarian relations. To answer this question, we must once again turn to the fact that the Father is the first mover in this covenant.

The Father is the first mover in the COR, and he “acts in every respect as head in that affair.”<sup>48</sup> The Father decides that there should be redemption and also decides for whom it shall be.<sup>49</sup> The Father proposes to the Son what he should do, giving the Son the terms of humanity’s redemption and directing the Son in the work that he should perform so that the reward would be given to the Son.<sup>50</sup> Hence, in acting as the head of the COR, he is acting in the way appropriate to the agreement which was established at the second level of trinitarian relationships.

It is extremely clear from Edwards’s writing that the initiative for the COR is in the hands of the Father and that the Son is subordinate to the Father. Does this mean that there is coercion in the COR and hence there is violence in the COR? There are two possible ways to answer this question. If the Son acts simply because of the Father’s authority over him and does not consent to this economical order, then we have an instance of coercion, and the necessary and sufficient conditions for violence are met. So the first possible answer is “Yes.” However, the answer might be also be “No.” If the Son is free and consenting and is not under subjugation to the Father, then we do not have a case of coercion. The answer to this question is clearly the latter. According to Edwards, the Son indeed freely enters into the COR and consents to the economy of the COR.

Edwards says that there are many things that the Father by virtue of his position in the divine economy can direct and prescribe to the other persons of the Trinity, but the Father cannot prescribe actions to the other persons of the Trinity which are below their dignity.<sup>51</sup> Thus if the Son is going to enter into the COR, the Son must do it by his own consent. Although the Son acts on the proposal of the Father, the Son “acts as one wholly in His own right, as much as the Father, being

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 85.

not under subjection or prescription in His consenting to what is proposed to Him, but acting as of Himself."<sup>52</sup> Thus the Son freely decides to subordinate himself to the Father, in such a way that is "naturally decent and fit" with the pattern established at the level of the economy of the immanent Trinity. Simply because the Son is subordinate to the Father in the economy of the immanent Trinity does not mean that he is coerced into subordination in the economy of the COR. As Edwards says, "the Son acts altogether freely and as of His own right" and he "becomes obliged to the Father with respect to it by voluntary covenant engagements, and not by any establishment prior thereto."<sup>53</sup> Thus there is no coercion whatsoever at this, the third level of trinitarian relationships.

4. *Coercion?* It is very clear that for Edwards no coercion is exercised in the COR. The Son voluntarily undertakes the role of mediator, accepting all the suffering and humiliation that it entails. Edwards did not portray the covenant as a commandment from the Father to the Son to which he must submit and which he must obey.<sup>54</sup> This view can be contrasted with the view held by Isaac Watts. For Watts the Son did not freely consent to the undertaking of the COR. According to Watts, the "covenant of redemption was made with a person that was not *sui juris*, and not at liberty to act his own mere good pleasure, with respect to undertaking to die for sinners; but was obliged to comply."<sup>55</sup> Edwards simply could not claim that the Son did not enter the COR freely. There are at least three reasons why Edwards could not make this claim. First, although Edwards wanted to assert the Father's authority, he was concerned to protect the equality of the Father and Son. Second, the meritorious nature of Christ's work depended upon his free consent to enter into the covenant.<sup>56</sup> Third, and most importantly for us, the Son must enter the COR freely or else the COR would be an instance of violence committed by the Father against the Son.<sup>57</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

We began by asking this question: does Jonathan Edwards's understanding of the Covenant of Redemption place the Son in the hands of a violent God? By examining several definitions of violence we were able to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for giving an affirmative answer to that question. We then

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Pauw, *Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 107.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings* 88.

<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that in addition to the fact that the COR is not undertaken under coercion, another reply to the objection that feminist theologians pose regarding the possibility of divine violence is that feminist critiques fail to be grounded in a robust trinitarian theology. Feminist theologians often speak about the Trinity as though there are multiple distinct (and possibly contradicting) wills within the Trinity. However, there are not separate wills within the Trinity, and hence there is not a possibility of contradicting wills. The whole notion that the Son's will could ever be contrary to the Father's will is absurd in a strict monotheistic version of the Trinity. The fact that feminist theologians argue in this way reveals that they are in fact theologizing about a tritheistic God rather than a trinitarian God.

turned to a feminist critique of atonement theology to clarify the problem of violence in the Covenant of Redemption. Finally, we turned to Edwards most detailed work on the COR. By examining what Edwards had to say we saw that the Father's actions in the COR do not meet the necessary and sufficient conditions for violence. According to Edwards, the Son freely consents to entering into the COR; thus Edwards does not place the Son in the hands of a violent God. The fact that Edwards does not make the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son violent is extremely important. If Edwards were to draw violence into the heart of God, he would be undermining the Father's heart of hospitality which through the covenant between himself and Christ has "flung the door of mercy wide open" for sinners.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 103.