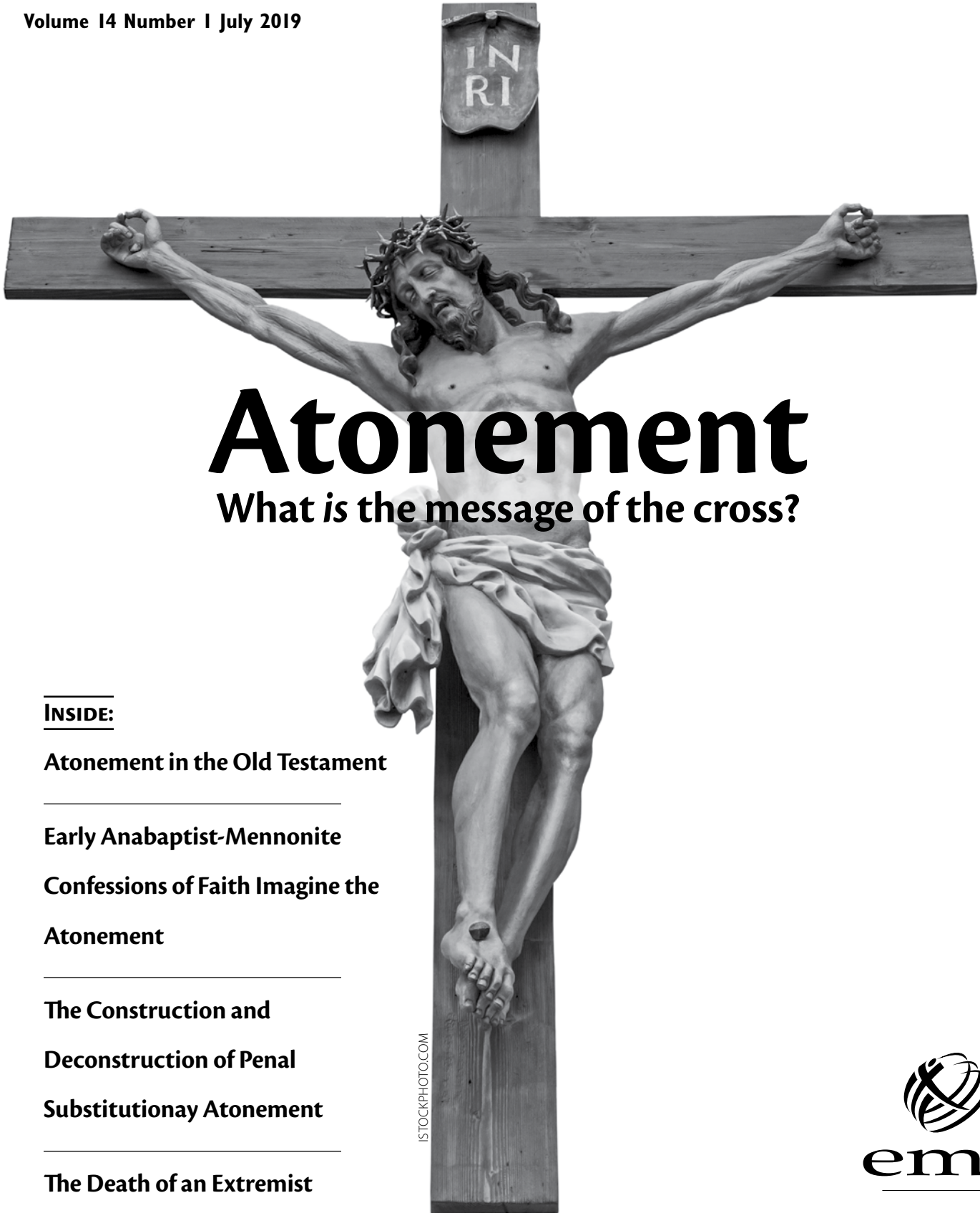


Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Atonement

What is the message of the cross?

INSIDE:

Atonement in the Old Testament

Early Anabaptist-Mennonite

**Confessions of Faith Imagine the
Atonement**

The Construction and

Deconstruction of Penal

Substitutionary Atonement

The Death of an Extremist

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Editorial

The Meaning of Atonement

FROM A CURSORY POINT OF VIEW, the question “Why did Jesus have to die?” begs a simple answer. Jesus died to save us from our sins. You don’t need a seminary degree to answer that question.

But the Sunday School answer does not satisfy for very long. As we mature in our Christian walk, we begin to think a little harder about the meaning of our faith and doctrines like the atonement. We want to have a firmer grasp of the importance of the cross of Christ for our own understanding. Some may shrug it off as a mystery that we will one day understand in the eschaton; others want to go deeper.

Why did Jesus have to die? What does his death mean for the world today? This doctrine is central to our understanding of salvation.

As Anabaptists, you may wonder what theory of atonement we subscribe to among the many. There are seven classic theories of atonement that scholars have identified:

The Moral Influence Theory: Jesus came and died in order to bring about a positive change to humanity through his example and teachings.

The Ransom Theory: When Adam and Eve sold out humanity to the devil (the Fall), justice required that God pay the devil a ransom for humanity.

Christus Victor: Jesus Christ dies in order to defeat the powers of evil (sin, death, the devil) to free humankind from bondage.

The Satisfaction Theory: Anselm’s theory (12th century) sees Christ’s death as a way to satisfy God’s need for justice. It was a mending of what was broken, the paying of a debt. Sin is the injustice that must be balanced.

The Penal Substitution Theory (PSA): This theory adds a forensic element to the Satisfaction Theory. With PSA Jesus dies to satisfy God’s wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished in the place of sinners (substitution) in order to meet the demands of God’s justice.

The Governmental Theory: Another variation of PSA, this theory views Christ’s death as the punishment for our sin and the propitiation of God’s wrath. However, Jesus does not take the exact punishment we deserve, but dies on the cross to demonstrate the displeasure of God towards sin.

The Scapegoat Theory: A form of nonviolent atonement, this theory sees Jesus as a victim, not a sacrifice. Jesus was killed by violent men who believe he is guilty; Jesus is proven innocent and the true Son of God; the crowd is thus seen as the guilty party.

Given the milieu in which Anabaptism was birthed, the Radical Reformers did not have a lot of time to formulate their own doctrine of the atonement. They were too busy being persecuted for their baptism practices. Atonement was an important doctrine, but it was not a unique formulation that separated them from others. It may be fair to say that Anabaptists possessed an eclectic mish-mash of the theories, landing mostly on PSA like other reformers.

In the past year or so, Bruxy Cavey and Greg Boyd have emerged as spokespersons for the Anabaptist faith. Which is funny because I don’t remember voting for them. Apparently, Boyd teaches that atonement is subsidiary to his commitment to nonviolence. God is nonviolent, he says, and therefore rejects any interpretation that proposes a God of wrath. Basically, PSA is out.

Atonement was an important doctrine, but it was not a unique formulation that separated them [Anabaptists] from others.

Paul Carter, a Baptist pastor and podcaster with The Gospel Coalition – Canada, has taken issue publicly with Cavey and Boyd identifying all Anabaptists with these two popstars. Carter has written an article entitled “Why I must respectfully disagree with my Anabaptist friends,” in which the position taken by Boyd and Cavey are suddenly yours and mine.

I responded to Carter telling him that these two men do not represent all Anabaptists and our views of atonement. But that begs the question: What do we believe about the atonement as Anabaptists? What does the cross of Christ mean to you and I?

This issue offers a response to that question, not in finality, but in hopes of starting the conversation within our circles. Three Anabaptist writers speak about atonement in the following pages. And we at Theo would like to know what you think in response. *Θ*



Dr. Darryl G.
Klassen

1 Daniel Liechty, ed. *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994, 18.

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Atonement in the Old Testament



Dr. August H. Konkel

August Konkel (PhD, Westminster) was ordained in Mennonite Church Canada, then the General Conference of Mennonites in Canada, in 1972. He served as pastor of the Bethel Bergthaler Mennonite Church in Hochfeld from 1971–1982. He began as professor of Old Testament at Providence Theological Seminary in 1984, then served as president of the University College and Seminary from 2001–2012. Konkel is currently professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario.

THE CONCEPT OF atonement under the first covenant given to Moses must begin with the Hebrew idea of holiness in which absolute holiness belongs to God alone. As an understanding of God, holiness does not have to do with morality but with the unique Hebrew belief about the nature of God.

In ancient times, it was only the Hebrews who considered God to be separate from the entire material order. God is not subject to time and space but

is the creator of time and space. The idea that separation is the key component of holiness is conveyed in Genesis 1 by the Hebrew verb *bdl*, when God created separations resulting in time and space.

The first separation occurs in Genesis 1:4 where light is distinguished from darkness; the second is in Gen. 1:7 where space becomes a reality. The primary function of the sun, moon, and stars is not to give light, which is present without them, but to enable the discernment of time since it is these heavenly bodies that

create a separation (*habdil*) between day and night (Gen. 1:14).

There is no way of describing what might have been before time and space. It is metaphorically referred to as “waters,” which are further described as “*tohu webohu*.” This combination of words, used only in relation to the pre-creation state, conveys a sense of being “unordered and worthless,” which is just another way of saying that nothing was present from the ordered world of space and time as we know it.¹ God is solely responsible for bringing about a material order of space and time. In all other ancient Near Eastern religions of which there are

¹ August Konkel, “*bhu*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 1:606–609.

creation accounts, the gods emerge from a material world and are extensions of that material world.

It is this specific concept of the holiness of God that must be represented in the material world created by God if he is to make himself known to humanity. The Hebrew God is present and active in the material world, though he is not in any sense a part of it or dependent on it.

The task of representing a holy God in the material world fell to the priests. This fundamental duty of the priesthood is given following the ordination of Aaron and his sons as the first priests in Leviticus 8–9. The importance of properly maintaining the confession of divine presence in the order of the common is the topic discussed following the ordination of Aaron and his sons. Nadab and Abihu violated the incense offering on the golden altar in front of the curtain of the most holy place, bringing in coals from outside the holy place (Lev. 10:1–7).² Fire immediately consumed them as punishment from Yahweh, explained with his declaration: “It is through those near me that I show myself holy. I will be honored before all the people” (Lev. 10:3b).

Following this, the priestly responsibility is stated unambiguously: their perpetual regulation is “to separate (*habdil*) between the holy and the common, between the clean and the unclean” (Lev. 10:10). The association with creation here is unmistakable since the tabernacle is a replica of the created order, representing the presence of God within it. The “holy” is everything that represents God in the created order; the common is the order of creation as we know it and live in it. Within the order of

The task of representing a holy God in the material world fell to the priests. This fundamental duty of the priesthood is given following the ordination of Aaron and his sons as the first priests in Leviticus 8–9.

the common, then, there are two states: the first is that of being clean, which means contact with the holy is permitted; the second is that of being unclean, which means contact with the holy is not permitted and which then results in death.

Holiness is the source of life. Life is not inherent within the common but is a gift to the common from the holy. The entirety of the common derives from the holy and is dependent on it. Once life within the common is separated from the holy, it moves towards the realm of death and extinction. Only the pure within the common has contact with the holy, so that life itself is dependent on maintaining a state of being clean.

This aspect of maintaining cleanliness is pertinent only to humans because they are the representation of God within the common. This is made explicit in the creation account, where humans are declared to be the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). Images represent, and the function of this representation is to care for the creation God has made. This lofty status is celebrated in Psalm 8, and this status establishes humans as persons. Human persons have life that is distinct from all other life because of their peculiar relationship to the holy. But because this is a tenuous relationship

with the holy, atonement is a means of maintaining purity, and therefore life, that is designated to humans alone.

The confessions in the covenant of Moses are made through declared words and prescribed activity. Affirmation of the presence of holiness is made through precisely ordered ritual; it is the means of showing cleanliness so contact can be made with the holy that is present in the tabernacle.

The symbolism of the tabernacle is elaborate. In the wilderness it is erected as a portable tent. The whole is symmetrical: an outer court forms the boundary, measuring 100 in length and 50 in width facing east; the tent structure measures 30 in length, 10 in width, and 10 in height, with its east end at the midpoint of the court. The tent structure is further divided by a most holy place, which serves as the divine throne room; it is a perfect cube of 10 x 10 x 10. The holy place measures 20 in length, twice that of the most holy place.

The holy place represents the garden of Eden or creation with lights, bread, and engravings of trees and cherubim.³ The throne of God in the most holy place is represented by two giant cherubim, common throne symbols of the ancient Near Eastern world.

The ark contains the words of the covenant and serves as the footstool, representing the covenant relationship



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Aaron depicted by Jacques Bergé

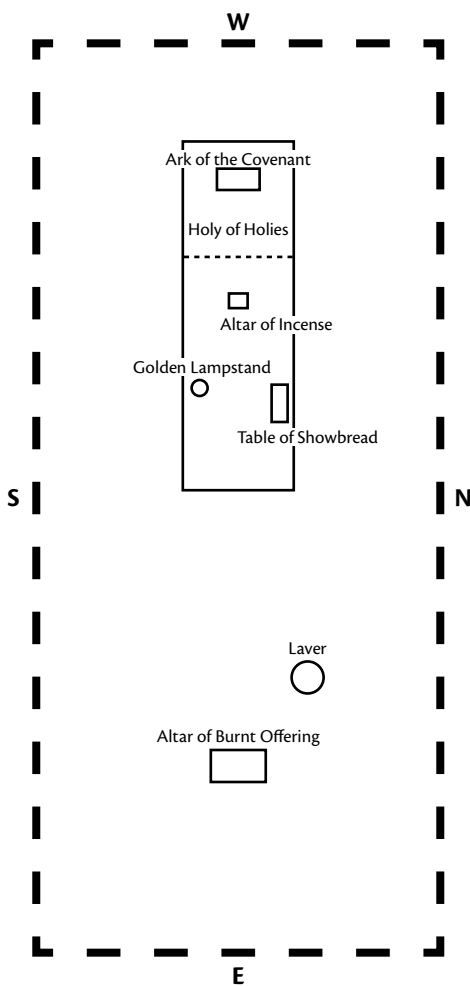
2 Baruch Levine, *Leviticus: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 58–59.

3 For a biblical theological exposition of the temple as a representation of creation see August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 134–47. A pictorial review may be found in Lawrence E. Stager, “Jerusalem as Eden,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 26:3 (2000).

between the holy God and the humans representing him in the common. The top of the ark is commonly referred to as the “mercy seat” because it is the place where atonement must be made for humans to maintain cleanliness and to represent the holy.

A heavy curtain separates the most holy place from the holy place, with its total darkness distinguishing the holy from the common. A golden incense altar represents the fragrance of divine presence and life-giving power. An altar for offerings is present in the courtyard, along with a laver for ceremonial washing.

The symmetry of the whole is evident in the sketch below. The “tent of meeting,” as it is called in the Hebrew, is positioned so the center of the most holy place containing the cherubim and the ark



are in the mid-point of the back half of the court. The center of the throne room is exactly 25 measures from the midpoint of the court. The distinction of the throne room is also provided through the materials associated with it, in that everything is gold and the woven materials are a unique, finely-integrated pattern. All of this is important to establish the danger of the holy, which must always be respected with utmost care.

The function of ritual in maintaining relationship with the Holy One may be illustrated by the following diagram. The tabernacle represents the order of creation as formed by God. Since it also represents the presence of God in creation, it is sacred space, which is what creation was meant to be. Life is dependent on access to this sacred space from which the Holy One exercises his rule. Anything that is unclean does not have access to this sacred space. The unclean are cut off from the source of life and are left to the realm of disorder, death, and extinction. The people of the covenant must maintain their relationship with the Holy One. They must preserve their status of being clean, which requires

through the mediation of the priests, and ritual permeates every part of Israelite life. They are constantly made aware of their transient status, the distinction of their calling, and their need to maintain the state of being clean, a state of being that might be described as the normal or proper condition of life in the world.

Sacred			Profane
God	Priesthood	People	Nations
Temple		Camp	Wilderness
Life			Death
Being	Transient Existence		Nothingness
Order	Ritual		Chaos

The order of the temple and the function of ritual was a way in which the Hebrews could deal with the inevitable tensions inherent in their concepts of life and holiness. On the one hand, God is transcendent and incomprehensible. Isaiah expressed this candidly in his sermon on the incomparable God in Isaiah 40:12–31. Twice the prophet asks the question: “To whom will you liken God? With what will you compare him?” (v. 18); “To whom will you liken me, that I may be compared?” says the Holy One” (v. 25). The questions are obviously rhetorical. We are creatures within time and space, and any comparisons we

The people of the covenant must maintain their relationship with the Holy One. They must preserve their status of being clean, which requires they be purified from all sin and failure, particularly inadvertent and unknown sin.

they be purified from all sin and failure, particularly inadvertent and unknown sin.

Purification is accomplished through the rituals of sacrifice, which are called “atonement.” These are all conducted

make must be in terms of time and space. Therefore, we cannot compare God to anything we know, but we can hear him speak.

On the other hand, the prophet says again, “Do you not know? Have you

not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?” (vv. 21, 28). Israel’s knowledge of God came through the experience of his revelation, since the transcendent God was at the same time very active and everywhere present in creation. This tension of immanence and transcendence was confessed in the temple; it was not something that could be explained or understood. It also created a danger, since a holy life-giving God could not be compromised. But again, Israel’s experience was that compromise of the covenant was inevitable. The golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai was an incontrovertible example of this danger. Mount Sinai was important in revealing the presence of the one whose name is I AM (Ex. 3:12, 14). The second revelation was in God’s declaration at the golden calf that I AM merciful (33:19; 34:6). The reconciliation of mercy when the covenant was violated in this manner required reparation of the relationship. That reparation is called atonement, a provision given through the tabernacle and priestly work.

The tabernacle was endowed with the glory of God upon its completion, with this representation of the divine presence declared with the cloud covering the tent and it being filled with glory (Ex. 40:34). This did not define God’s presence, however; as Solomon would say, “the heaven of heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built” (1 Kings 8:27). God cannot be compared to space or time, but he can be represented in space and time. The most holy place

remains a mystery, but it declares that the transcendent God is immanent in the common through his rule. The ritual of atonement takes place in the context of that representative presence.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus explain some of the ritual that takes place in the covenant confession. It specifies five sacrifices: a daily burnt offering, a grain offering, a peace offering, a sin offering, and a guilt offering.⁴

For God to be present among the Israelites, as manifested by the presence of the tabernacle, it was necessary to make the confessions that would restore the covenant relationship and the provision of life-giving power from the Holy One.

Three of these offerings have to do with atonement. The burnt offering is said to make atonement for the person making the offering. The sin offering is discussed in the greatest detail and is mainly concerned with making atonement for unintentional mistakes and sins of omission. The distinction of the sin offering is in the use of the blood; it may be smeared on the main altar, the altar of incense in front of the curtain, or on the top of the gold cover of the ark inside the most holy place, depending on the circumstances of the ritual. The guilt offering was exclusively for sins of sacrilege, specific offenses against God. These could include the failure to fulfil a

vow or the taking of a false oath, both of which are violations of God’s name, or it could include a transgression against temple sanctity, which is a violation of delegated holiness.

For God to be present among the Israelites, as manifested by the presence of the tabernacle, it was necessary to make the confessions that would restore the covenant relationship and the provision of life-giving power from the Holy One.

The procedures for all these rituals are given in substantial detail. For example, only a ram could be used in a guilt offering to make atonement for offenses directly involving God. Why should this offering be limited to a ram? The significance of all these procedures was well known to those who practiced them, but that knowledge is not preserved for us living in another time and place. The procedures may have even changed over time.

By the time we get to Jesus and pharisaic law, however, it is evident that the notion of keeping the covenant had very little to do with the original intention, and often their laws specifically violated that intention, as Jesus clearly proved. Activities within a culture that seem strange to another must not diminish the function of that ritual for those practicing the rites. This is convincingly demonstrated by a study of Mary Douglas in which she examines practices of contemporary cultures and in her analysis of food laws within the Israelite context.⁵ Her study has proved to be a helpful guide in understanding the many regulations of Leviticus concerned with purity and ritual.

The concept of atonement is, however, unique. One point must be kept clear in the discussion of the role of ritual. There is no power in the ritual itself; cleansing is possible only through the will of God. This is the reason it is permissible for sin offerings to be eaten by the priest.⁶

4 An excellent introduction to the Pentateuch and to the whole sacrificial system is Gordon J. Wenham, *A Guide to the Pentateuch*, Exploring the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003). Interpretation of the sacrifices is found on pages 84–89.

5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1966).

6 Jacob Milgrom, “Two Kinds of Khattat,” in *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) 74.

There was no special power within any of the procedures or the animals involved. Ritual was a way of clearly articulating the nature of the wrong done, the repentance of the one making an offering, and the merciful forgiving character of God.

Blood is important in the ritual of offerings which make confession of sin. It is this confession which makes atonement possible. The principle of blood is stated in Leviticus 17:11: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life.” This must not be interpreted to mean that the life blood of the animal is a substitute for that of the human. This is not an example of vicarious atonement; the blood of bulls and goats could never take away

sins (Heb. 10:4). Animal life is not on the same order as human life. It is therefore impossible even in ritual confession to think that somehow the life of the animal was a substitute for the human. Such an interpretation is a contradiction, so the meaning of this passage is to be found in its context.⁷

Two laws are present in Leviticus 17:10–14; the first law deals with domesticated animals (vv. 10–12), the second with wild animals that are hunted for food (vv. 13–14). Leviticus 17:11 does not concern itself with all sacrifices, but only with the one sacrifice that may be eaten for food by the lay person, which is the peace offering that is only to be offered at the temple (17:3–4).

The regulation concerning this offering is clear: when the meat is eaten,

it must not include blood. The verse is not talking about separate treatment of the blood as food, such as the Philippine practice in cooking *dinuguan* which is made with pig’s blood. The prohibition concerns eating meat that contains blood, the standard test for kosher food to this day. The stipulation prohibiting blood concerns sacrifice that can be eaten, usually translated peace offering, that is never about atonement. The atonement of the animal’s blood does not pertain to the human but to the animal slaughtered for food.

The covenant is always clear that the life of an animal is not the property of humans. God grants life to all living creatures, expressed as *nephesh*, which is often wrongly translated as “soul.” The word *nephesh* is explicitly used of animals when they are created in Genesis 1:24. The life in view for which atonement is made in Leviticus 17:11 is for taking the life of the animal. Humans are permitted to eat animals, but in the original design of creation this appears not to be the case. Animals used for food is a later concession; it is part of creation regulations given following the flood (Gen. 9:2–4). Human and animal conflict is not the ideal of creation and is a compromise within the present order. This Leviticus reference does not help us understand atonement in relation to human life.

It is true that blood represents life in any living creature, including humans. It is also true that animal blood plays a very important role in signifying the atonement of humans. Of all the sacrifices, the use of blood is most important in the sin offerings of *yom kippur*, the Hebrew expression used to describe the ceremonies that took place annually in the seventh month for the cleansing of all Israel. This “day of atonement” on the tenth day of the most sacred of months involved the cleansing of the priests, the tabernacle, and the people. Failures that required a

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7 Jacob Milgrom, “A Prolegomenon to Leviticus 17:11,” in *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) 96.

sin offering were inevitable due to human limitations in relation to the holy.


No one knows enough to avoid all mistakes or inadvertent omissions of duty. Since the tabernacle represents the presence of the holy, especially within the divine throne room, the failures of such sins tarnish the physical object that represents the holy within the common, namely the tabernacle. The ark is the object that contains the covenant terms and therefore is the specific place that represents the connection between the people and the Holy One. Cleansing from the pollution of covenant violations takes place on the ark. Atonement is made on the surface of the ark, usually called the “mercy seat,” using the blood of the sin offering.

The question remains: What is the significance of the blood in the act of atonement? What does the word “atone” signify in the removal of sin? This is the question that cannot be answered with precision because of the challenges inherent to the process of translation.

The Hebrew word translated as “expiate” or “atone” is *kipper*. The first difficulty is that this word is itself a homonym of four different words.⁸ One of these words means “to cover,” while a second, used only once, means “pitch” or “tar” (Gen. 6:14). A third word means “to wipe clean,” and the fourth means “to offer a bribe” or “to pay ransom money.” It is not possible to determine whether the representation of blood in a sin offering is to cover sin, wipe it away, or pay a

anger from the face of Esau by sending in advance a large gift to appease him (Gen. 32:21). The word *kipper* is used here with “face” as its object. It cannot mean, therefore, that the face is covered, but rather is a change of the appearance of the face as the anger of Esau is abated. The idea of wiping away or cleansing seems to be primary in the use of the blood on the day of atonement.

The ritual of the blood on the day of atonement was accompanied by a second ritual of the scapegoat in which sins were carried off into the wilderness. The day of atonement is for the expiation or removal of sin, and if this is the concept, it would seem that the blood on the mercy seat must signify a cleansing. In giving an account of the rituals of the day of atonement, the writer to the Hebrews refers to it as a cleansing (Heb. 9:13). In the rituals of holiness, “to atone” means “to cleanse”; it means to wipe away and remove sin from the presence of the Holy One.

The wrath of God against sin is a very prominent aspect of Old Testament revelation. The anger of God explains punishment for sin, but it never explains atonement for sin. The word “propitiation” should not be used as an explanation of atonement in Hebrew usage because the anger of God is never the concern in the removal of the stain of sin. The anger of God is against willful sins, ones that should not happen (Ps. 19:14). The sin offering is for those unknown sins for which the Psalmist asks forgiveness (Ps. 19:13). Such sins do not rouse the wrath of God; rather the mercy of God always prevails to wipe away the stain of such sin. This is the primary idea of atonement in the regulations of the covenant given at Sinai. 

It is not possible to determine whether the representation of blood in a sin offering is to cover sin, wipe it away, or pay a ransom in its place. Biblical references to atonement seem to use all three of these metaphors as ways of depicting atonement.

This is the one time of year in which there is contact with the throne room, though the veil is still in place through the cover of the smoke from the incense altar. There is no violation of the holy since the priest is clean through the sin offering and never comes in direct contact with the presence of the Holy One. This day is so sacred because it is the most comprehensive of all ritual acts of atonement. All the sins of Israel are atoned for on this day; the effects of their sins are also atoned for, namely the pollution of the tabernacle, the symbolic structure designated by God to represent his presence in the common.

ransom in its place. Biblical references to atonement seem to use all three of these metaphors as ways of depicting atonement, but there is no doubt that the action of sprinkling blood on the mercy seat of the ark on the day of atonement had a precise meaning.

It is obvious that sometimes the word means “to pay a price” for damages done. Exodus 21:28–32 deals with cases of homicide caused by a goring ox. If it is determined that the owner of the ox is not guilty of outright murder, then he may pay a *koper* to cover the damages of the death of another person. In another usage, Jacob removes or wipes away the

⁸ A summary of vast study of this word is provided by Richard E. Averbeck, “*kpr*,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:689–710.

Early Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith Imagine the Atonement



Dr. Terry G. Hiebert

Terry Hiebert (PhD, Baylor) has served at Steinbach Bible College since 1995 in the capacities as faculty, registrar and currently as Academic Dean. He teaches theology and ethics at the college, serves as chair of the Theology Committee of the EMMC, and church board chair at Gospel Fellowship Church, Steinbach, Man.

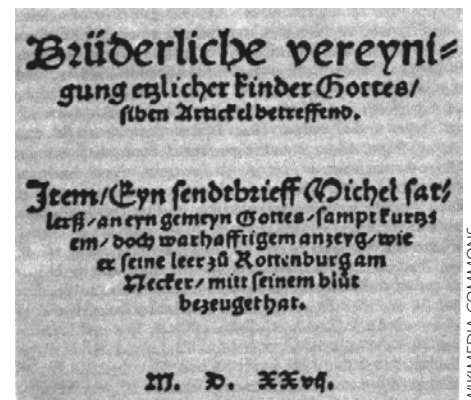
*What did the Lord Jesus finally do for us?
He died for our sins according to the Scriptures – 1 Cor. 15:3*
Elbing Catechism

AS THE EARLY ANABAPTIST movement developed beyond the first generation, Anabaptist-Mennonite (A-M) confessions of faith established doctrinal identity amid emerging divisions within and between churches.¹ Diversity of A-M confessional expressions is comparable to the diversity found in representative A-M confessions of faith today.² So in the context of recent debates on the atonement, it is time once again to explore what is core dogma and what is legitimate diversity.³

When expressing the diversity in early Anabaptist theologies and confessions, Karl Koop suggests, “for a tradition to be

useable, it must reflect some semblance of unity and have the capacity to orient and direct the church.”⁴ With this perspective in mind, is it possible to discern an underlying unity within the diversity of early A-M confessions of faith on the doctrine of the atonement? The answer has potential to inform and shape our doctrines of the atonement today.⁵

The A-M confessional era in the 16th and 17th centuries produced many confessional statements, most of which addressed the work of Christ for our salvation. This exploration will consider the confessions produced within the



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Title page of the Schleithem Confession

Swiss-South German, North German-Dutch, and Flemish traditions, and culminating in the Elbing Catechism (1778).⁶ While the early A-M confessions imply Reformation views of the atonement, they also take distinctive narrative approaches, with multiple images, and some notable silences, to describe Christ’s atoning work and its redeeming impact on the lives of believers.

This study will consider early Anabaptist views of the atonement as a background for exploring the unity and diversity what the A-M confessions said about Christ’s incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension for the atonement of sinful people with God.

Early Anabaptists

Early Anabaptists read the Bible in some common ways so that several atonement

1 Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 44, 52.

2 Terry G. Hiebert, “Six Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions on the Atonement,” (blog forthcoming).

3 Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2016), 23.

4 Koop, *Confessions*, 8.

5 For a recent Anabaptist work on the atonement, see Bruxy Cavey, *(Re)union: the Good News of Jesus for Seekers, Saints, and Sinners* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017). See also a definitive Anabaptist source in John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986).

6 The Elbing Catechism was published nearly 150 years after the Dordrecht Confession. The document shows a remarkable synthesis of Anabaptist-Mennonite confessional tradition. The Austrian/Hutterite traditions are beyond the scope of this paper. While the catechism is not strictly a confession, its significance is evident in the generations of baptismal candidates (myself included) who learned and memorized this summary of essentials in the A-M faith.

themes emerged. Thomas Finger claims that some early Anabaptist theologies of the atonement were *clearly substitutionary* especially in Menno, Dirk, and Hubmaier. But early Anabaptists linked Jesus's death more broadly to the events of his life, ministry, and suffering.

Finger argues that most early Anabaptist theologies of the atonement did not use substitutionary metaphors exclusively or even mainly. Rather, Finger argues, "among traditional models, then, Christus Victor can be called historic Anabaptism's primary expression of Jesus' work—providing we add that they experienced this as more present and participatory, and more specifically shaped by Jesus' life than most."⁷

Francis Hiebert says that, "there was much common ground on theological issues such as the atonement between Anabaptists and the other Reformers."⁸



The Thirty-Three Articles focuses the incarnation of Christ on his kingship, providing believers with spiritual armor and commanding enemy love that brings peace and reconciliation to human relationships (Article XIX).

This common ground was based on the merits of Christ's sacrifice being sufficient for salvation, and that salvation was by grace alone.

But early Anabaptists also demonstrated an "undeniable diversity" of views on the atonement.⁹ The critical difference between Anabaptists and Magisterial Reformers "was not so much about how Christ's sacrifice affected the Divine as how it accomplished liberation and divinization for human beings."¹⁰ So rather than emphasizing the legal elements of penal substitution, Anabaptists *assumed* the divine-

human transaction, and focused on the *transformative* dimension of salvation. This dimension was understood as liberation from sin, death, and the devil resulting in new life and communion with God.¹¹

Arnold Snyder thinks that for early Anabaptists, "Christ's atoning work was assumed as a matter of course. What inspired the devout... was what had *enabled* the human Jesus to accomplish his work and, by extension, how human beings might likewise be enabled to do the same holy work."¹²

What kind of atonement language would support a life of discipleship the way that Christ taught in the Gospels? Early Anabaptists spoke less of how Christ initiates salvation and expanded their vocabulary with diverse models, images, and metaphors of the atonement to inform salvation as discipleship or obedience to God. The A-M confessions of faith continued this pattern by connecting the rich images of Christ's atoning life and work to the life of regenerated believers.

Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions

Anabaptist-Mennonite (A-M) confessions beginning in the 16th century reveal more narrative confessional approaches, focusing attention on each phase of Christ's life as significant for the reconciliation of God and humans.¹³ The confessions narrate the **incarnation of Jesus** as the King of Kings *bringing* reconciliation. Exalted language describes Jesus as the eternal word made flesh,¹⁴ the divinity of the human,¹⁵ and eternal Son.¹⁶

7 Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 350.

8 Francis F. Hiebert, "The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology," *Direction* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2001), <https://directionjournal.org/30/2/atonement-in-anabaptist-theology.html> (accessed February 23, 2019). Karl Koop in *Confessions*, 144 says the Anabaptists implicitly held similar Atonement views as the Reformers.

9 Hiebert, "Atonement."

10 Hiebert, "Atonement," 128.

11 Hiebert, "Atonement." Hiebert says, "Divinization is defined as participation in the life of God.... It is the result of being liberated from sin and being transformed into a new kind of human being rather than the acquisition of legal merit."

12 C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 44.

13 Paul S. Fiddes, "Salvation," in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178. Fiddes notes the English translation by William Tyndale equating atonement with the Greek work for reconciliation (*katallage*) and the Hebrew term for the reconciling effect of the priestly sacrifice (*kipper*).

14 James Jacob Fehr, trans., "Concept of Cologne (1591)." In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 119.

15 Cornelius J. Dyck, trans., "Waterlander Confession (1577)." In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 126–27.

16 Cornelius J. Dyck, trans., "Short Confession (1610)." In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 126–27. See a very similar confession in Cornelius J. Dyck, "A Short Confession of Faith by Hans de Ries," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38 (January 1964): 5–19.

The Dordrecht Confession states, “there was yet a means for reconciliation. This was the unspotted Lamb, the Son of God...that his coming would save and free men and women from their sins, guilt, and unrighteousness and restore them again to God’s favour” (Article III).¹⁷

The Waterlander Confession claims that only God can save and that Jesus needs to be divine to effect salvation for the world (Article II).¹⁸ The Thirty-Three Articles focuses the incarnation of Christ on his kingship, providing believers with spiritual armor and commanding enemy love that brings peace and reconciliation to human relationships (Article XIX).¹⁹

The incarnation of Jesus brings reconciliation in important ways. In the Thirty-Three Articles, “the actual reason of His coming into the world has been in order to break the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8), to seek the lost (Luke 19:10), to deliver the whole human race (Acts 26:18) out of captivity of sin, (Eph. 4:8) the power of the Devil (1 John 2:2), and to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)” (Article XIX).²⁰

The Elbing Catechism summarizes that God gave his only begotten Son to redeem humanity. The Son “had to assume human nature; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Part IV).²¹

These statements narrate the purpose of Christ’s incarnation with royal, dramatic, redemptive, and liberating images.

Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions focus on the **life of Jesus** for *revealing* and *exemplifying* reconciliation. One of the most prominent themes relating to Christ’s life is the three-fold office of Christ.²² The Short Confession describes Christ’s offices, “therefore we confess him to be our only Mediator, prophet, priest, and king, a lawgiver and teacher whom God had promised to send into the world....Him we hear, believe, and must follow” (Article IX).²³

The Short Confession explains that Christ brought an end to the “unbearable

The Elbing Catechism explains that Christ is the Saviour of the world as shown by “doctrine and miracles: for he taught as one that had authority.”

burden of the law of Moses” and also brought an end to “the kingly office and all that belonged to it: the kingdom, sword, law of revenge, war” explaining that these were the “image, the shadow of him who was to come” (Article X).²⁴

The Dordrecht Confession devotes an article to the Law of Christ as revealed in the Holy Gospel or the New Testament “which he confirmed and sealed with his own precious blood” (Article V).²⁵ The preaching of Christ calls all people to faith, obedience, and practice of the “glorious inheritance of eternal salvation” (Article V).²⁶

The Elbing Catechism explains that Christ is the Saviour of the world as shown by “doctrine and miracles: for he taught as one that had authority” saying, “Repent ye, and believe the gospel” and demonstrating God’s power as “He opened the eyes of the blind, made the lame walk, cleansed lepers, unstopped the ears of the deaf, loosed the tongues of the dumb; be (sic) raised the dead; and did many other miracles” (Part VII).²⁷

The life of Christ in some confessions demonstrates the example of Christ’s suffering. The Schleithem Confession states, “Peter also says: ‘Christ has suffered (not ruled) and has left us an example, that you should follow after in his steps’” (Article VI).²⁸

The Thirty-Three Articles claim the Lord Jesus “set himself up as a holy, divine example for us, he has been looked up to by all believers (as the founder of the faith) (Heb. 12:2) who follow him through the rebirth (Matt. 19:18)” (Article XVI).²⁹ The Elbing Catechism explains the sufferings of Jesus in more substitutionary

17 Irvin B. Horst, trans., “Dordrecht Confession (1632).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 296.

18 “Waterlander Confession,” 126–27.

19 Gary K. Waite, trans., “Thirty-Three Articles (1617).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 213–15.

20 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 220.

21 Catechism, Elbing, “Elbing Catechism (1778),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 2019, accessed May 4, 2019. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Elbing_Catechism.

22 See the Short Confession, Jan Cents Confession, Thirty-Three Articles, and the Short Confession of Hans De Riess.

23 “Short Confession,” 142–43.

24 “Short Confession,” 143.

25 “Dordrecht Confession,” 298.

26 “Dordrecht Confession,” 298.

27 “Elbing Catechism.”

28 John Howard Yoder, trans., “Schleithem Confession (1527).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 31. Also Confession of Faith by Jörg Maler (Article II); and Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse (Article XI).

29 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 210.

terms: “The sufferings of Jesus were significant because, ‘the Lord had laid on him the iniquity of us all’” (Part VII).³⁰ The life of Jesus effects reconciliation in his offices, teachings, miracles, suffering, and example (Part VII).³¹

Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions focus on the **death of Jesus** for *effecting* reconciliation. The Jörg Maler Confession recounts Christ’s descent into death and hell and the resulting victory and redemption (Article II).³² The statement echoes Lutheran language saying Jesus was crucified to “redeem me, a poor sinner, with his innocent blood from sin, death and the eternal wrath of God” (Article II).³³ Maler explains that Jesus “overcame eternal hell, so that I was reconciled to God (through him), and in him became Lord over all my enemies through faith in him” (Article II).³⁴

The substitutionary nature of Christ’s death is clear: “I believe that without the death of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal.3 [:5]), I could not have come to God’s grace nor salvation, either through works or merits...I would have had to die

eternal death, if Christ had not come to my assistance” (Article II).³⁵ People are redeemed from sin, guilt, condemnation, God’s eternal wrath and hell through the cross.

“Through this unique sacrifice, which is of eternal value, he has fulfilled and completed the sacrifice of the law, and has found an eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12).”

The Short Confession uses priestly language to show Christ’s obedience, suffering, and “universal offering and gift of sweet savour and eternal worth” to the Father (Article XII).³⁶ This confession uniting English Baptists and Dutch Waterlanders teaches that Christ’s “unique sacrifice upon the cross is the reconciliation and satisfaction for all our

sins and the sins of the world....Therefore we have been reconciled with God and are at peace, having a certain high hope and assurance of entry into eternal life” (Article XIII).³⁷ The merits won by Christ on the cross are received by living faith active in love (Article XIX).³⁸

The Thirty-Three Articles relies on the priestly language of sacrifice to explain how the cross effects reconciliation. The confession explains, “regarding his High Priestly office, he has fulfilled and transformed the Levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:11, 12, 8:13) and through His unique sacrifice (Heb. 10:14) on the cross, he opened the closed entry to the holy of holies in heaven (Rev. 5:5; Heb. 10:10). Through this unique sacrifice, which is of eternal value, he has fulfilled and completed the sacrifice of the law, and has found an eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). Having thus reconciled the human race with the Father (1 John 2:2)” (Article XIX).³⁹

The Thirty-Three Articles speaks about God’s wrath and disfavor upon Adam and Eve so that they fall into death and eternal condemnation (Article VIII).⁴⁰ But this article shows how Almighty God is still rich in mercy and compassion. Later in the confession, an article culminates with “yet the good God...delivered again (Col. 1:13) the whole human race (without any regard for persons) out of love and mercy (1 John 3:16), choosing (Rev. 5:9) and freeing them from eternal damnation through the atonement of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Article X).⁴¹ The death of the Christ on the cross ends the dominion of death and leads to his rule as King of Kings (Article XVI).⁴²

The Jan Cents Confession relies on priestly language of purification to show how Christ’s suffering and death were a struggle and purification of his flesh. Referencing Jesus’ cry on the cross, the confession says, “We believe that we are reconciled with God...through the blood and death of his Son who accomplished cleansing of our sins in himself” (Article VII).⁴³

30 “Elbing Catechism.”

31 “Elbing Catechism.”

32 Victor Thiessen, trans., “A Confession of Faith by Jörg Maler (1554).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 39.

33 “Confession by Jörg Maler,” 39.

34 “Confession by Jörg Maler,” 39.

35 “Confession by Jörg Maler,” 39.

36 “Short Confession,” 144.

37 “Short Confession,” 144.

38 “Short Confession,” 146–47.

39 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 221.

40 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 182–83.

41 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 187. This confession uses terms like wrath (10x), judgement (31x), condemnation (24x), and justification (12x) more than the other A-M confessions. The statement assures universal *intent* of salvation and the redemption of innocent children before the age of accountability, but does not claim universalism. Compare with Article XXXII: Of the last judgment; of hell, and the damnation of unbelievers.

42 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 211–12.

43 Walter Klaassen, trans., “The Confession of Jan Cents (1630).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 274.



A French set of the Stations of the Cross in painted enamel.

The death of the Lord is an offering, perfection of the sanctified, taking our iniquities, redeeming us from the curse, and making sinners righteous by his obedience.

and all his posterity are subjected to sin, and death” (Part III).⁴⁹ This death is “spiritual and temporal...none is without sin, except the Son of God...by nature we are prone to evil, and are children of wrath; and hence being convinced of our misery, we must seek God’s grace and mercy” (Part III).⁵⁰ The catechism tells of God’s promise of atonement for sin through Christ. The death of the Lord “is an offering for the sins of the whole world by which he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified” (Part VII).⁵¹ Jesus suffered and was convicted to die on the cross, “thereby to redeem us from the curse; for it is written: Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Part VII).⁵² The catechism explains Christ’s representative work in redemption, “for as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Part IV).⁵³ So the death of the Lord is an offering, perfection of the sanctified, taking our iniquities, redeeming us from the curse, and making sinners righteous by his obedience.

Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions focus attention on the **resurrection of Jesus** for *assuring* reconciliation. The Jörg Maler Confession highlights the main themes, “I believe that Jesus Christ...my

Earlier in the confession an article poetically describes God’s response to human sin by evoking God’s compassion toward helpless creatures. The statement acknowledges that, “the righteousness of God required that the sin which was committed could not remain unpunished” but claims foremost “that his supreme and only goodness was expressed when he sought to reconcile human beings... with himself through sheer grace... and without any merit on their part” (Article III).⁴⁴ The Jan Cents Confession clearly portrays the work of God alone in reconciliation while highlighting the goodness and compassion of God.

The Dordrecht Confession with remarkable brevity explains the meaning of Christ’s death. “The Son of God also died, tasted death, and shed His precious blood for all men; in this way he bruised the serpent’s head, destroyed the works of the devil, cancelled the bond which

pledged us to the decrees of the law, and achieved forgiveness of sins for the entire human family. Thus he effected salvation for all” (Article IV).⁴⁵

Dordrecht as well describes the Fall of Adam and Eve as transgressing God’s high commands, incurring God’s wrath, and through sin becoming “estranged and separated from God” (Article II).⁴⁶ While nothing could assist them or “help them, redeem them, or reconcile them to God...God in compassion for His creatures, intervened in his love and mercy” (Article II).⁴⁷ While Dordrecht uses substitutionary atonement language, references to commandment, law, wrath and condemnation are surprisingly rare for the time.

The Elbing Catechism summarizes the death of Christ with the biblical phrase, “He died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (Part VII).⁴⁸ The catechism explains that because of Adam’s Fall “he,

⁴⁴ “Confession of Jan Cents,” 271.

⁴⁵ “Dordrecht Confession,” 297.

⁴⁶ “Dordrecht Confession,” 295.

⁴⁷ “Dordrecht Confession,” 295–96.

⁴⁸ “Elbing Catechism.”

⁴⁹ “Elbing Catechism.”

⁵⁰ “Elbing Catechism.”

⁵¹ “Elbing Catechism.”

⁵² “Elbing Catechism.”

⁵³ “Elbing Catechism.”

brother...is risen from the dead for the sake of my righteousness through him, and...has taken death and hell captive, that they can do no harm ever again” (Article II).⁵⁴

The Short Confession speaks of the resurrection of Christ “showing himself thereby as Lord and conqueror over death,”⁵⁵

and the assurance for believers of their final resurrection (Article XV). The victory image continues with the

Thirty-Three Articles, saying “he had the authority over the keys of death and hell (Rev. 1:18); that in three days he could raise up again the broken temple of his body (John 2:19)” (Article XVI).⁵⁶ This confession also explains that in the resurrection Jesus was “glorified again and made alive in the spirit. He perfectly received again his previous divine glory (John 17:5), and the likeness of his Father (Phil. 2:6)” (Article XVI).⁵⁷ The resurrection means that, “he became to all believers a comforting assurance of their redemption and final resurrection from the dead” (Article XV).⁵⁸ The resurrection applies to believers, “for our renewal, new birth, justification and sanctification” (Article VI).⁵⁹

The Elbing Catechism provides assurance in Christ’s resurrection with the answer, “that we are justified through his blood: for he was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Part VII).⁶⁰ So the confessions teach that the resurrection

The Short Confession explains the power of the ascended Lord, “thus he led captivity captive, establishing a glorious triumph over his enemies. Seated at the right hand of the majesty of God... He has been made both Lord and Christ, glorified in his body, exalted, crowned

The Short Confession explains the power of the ascended Lord, “thus he led captivity captive, establishing a glorious triumph over his enemies.”

means Christ assuming divine glory, conquering the powers of death and hell, giving new birth, victory, justification, and hopeful assurance of our final redemption.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions focus attention on the **ascension of Jesus** for *continuing* reconciliation. The ascension is a notable declaration of the exaltation of Christ as Lord. At the ascension, the Son of God “has perfectly received his previous divine glory (John 17:5), and the likeness of his Father (Phil. 2:6). And he shall no longer die, nor shall death have sovereignty over Him (Rom. 6:9. But he shall live and rule as a ruling (Luke 1:19; Ps. 45:7) king of all kings, and lord of lords” (Article XVI).⁶¹

with praise and honor, remaining priest and king over Mount Zion in all eternity” (Article XVI).⁶² As the ascended one, “this glorious, almighty, and heavenly king stands by the faithful believers in every need, delivering and freeing them from the hands of their enemies, conquering the enemy and winning the field of battle, thus preparing for his own a crown of righteousness in heaven” (Article XVIII).⁶³ The result is that believers now exchange their carnal weapons and live peacefully.

This confidence in Christ as heavenly ruler and protector also relates to Christ as heavenly priest who guides the church and serves as mediator and intercessor. The Jan Cents Confession says the Holy One, “visibly ascended into heaven as the disciples watched. He entered the Holy of Holies as a true high priest... mediator...and advocate...between God and humanity, and took his seat at the right hand of the majesty on high. There he appears constantly before face of his Father to pray for his believers” (Article VIII).⁶⁴

In his holy office, the glorified Christ enters the most holy place of the heavenly tabernacle, becomes the final mediator with the Father, provides the Holy Spirit and heavenly gifts, and celebrates the spiritual supper with the soul, and so applies the work of the cross to communion with the believing soul (Article XVII).⁶⁵ On the ascension, the

54 “Confession by Jörg Maler,” 39.

55 “Short Confession,” 145.

56 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 211.

57 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 211.

58 “Short Confession,” 145.

59 Cornelius J. Dyck, trans., “The Thirteen Articles (1626).” In *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition: 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener: Pandora, 2004), 161.

60 “Elbing Catechism.”

61 “Thirty-Three Articles,” 211–12.

62 “Short Confession,” 145.

63 “Short Confession,” 146.

64 “Confession of Jan Cents,” 275.

65 “Short Confession,” 145–46.

Elbing Catechism simply states, “By his own blood, he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (Part VII).⁶⁶

Analysis

An analysis of A-M confessions reveals language common to the Magisterial Reformers but with some notable distinctives. The confessions focus most often on Christ’s high priestly *sacrifice* as purification of sin, expiation or covering of sin, but they are more silent on the propitiation of God’s wrath.⁶⁷ The confessions then speak of Christ’s work in establishing a living *communion* or reunion with God

through new birth, restoration, and imputed-imparted righteousness.⁶⁸ The confessions talk about *redemption* as Exodus-like salvation, ransom, and liberation of people in bondage to sin.⁶⁹ The confessions then declare Christ as *victor* who is Lord over sin, death, and the devil, as well as ruler and protector of his people.⁷⁰ The confessions also speak of Christ as the revealer of God’s rule and love through his life, teachings, miracles, and example of suffering.⁷¹

For many North American evangelicals where PSA or penal

substitutionary atonement is promoted as *the* main view of the atonement, the A-M confessions would appear conspicuously silent. The Short Confession treats the Law as a schoolmaster, a shadow, and something to be abolished (Article X).⁷² The Jan Cents Confession talks about the righteousness of God punishing sin, but the solution involves cleansing rather than legal action (Article VII).⁷³ The Dordrecht Confession defines sin as transgressing the high command of God and incurring the wrath of God (Article II),⁷⁴ but the solution involves redemption, liberation,

For many North American evangelicals where PSA or penal substitutionary atonement is promoted as *the* main view of the atonement, the A-M confessions would appear conspicuously silent.



Billy Graham in Duisburg, Germany, 1954

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66 “Elbing Catechism.” A-M atonement theology is also found in the doctrines of Baptism (cleansing, new life), the Lord’s Supper (sacrificial blood, communion), and the Return of Christ (king and judge) as well.

67 Sacrificial imagery is used 127 times in the confessions. While God’s wrath is mentioned in A-M confessions, propitiation of wrath is not an explicitly stated concept. Still the sacrifice is objective, or something only God’s grace can do to save his people.

68 Communion-reunion imagery is used 82 times in the confessions.

69 Redemption imagery is used 60 times in the confessions. While the Old Testament Law is often mentioned, redemption was not directly related to freedom from the guilt of the Law as penal substitution theories hold.

70 Victor imagery is used 47 times in the confessions.

71 Revelation imagery is used 30 times in the confessions with the concept of example used only 12 times.

72 “Short Confession,” 143.

73 “Confession of Jan Cents,” 274.

74 “Dordrecht Confession,” 295.

75 “Dordrecht Confession,” 296–97.

76 George, 270.

77 Snyder, 52.

and the forgiveness of sins (Articles III, IV).⁷⁵ The Catechism uses substitutionary or representative language but employs dynamic terms like redemption and destroying the power of the devil more than legal terms. Why?

Menno’s interaction with Luther’s theology may provide a clue to the silence of legal imagery in A-M atonement confessions. Timothy George notes that Menno was “disturbed by the antinomian tendencies which he felt were latent in Luther’s doctrine of justification.”⁷⁶

Arnold Snyder adds that the doctrine of salvation by faith alone as taught by Luther meant that righteousness was legally imputed while “human beings remained essentially and unredeemably sinful, this side of eternity.”⁷⁷ So, for Menno and the Anabaptists, an

atonement theory focusing exclusively or even mainly on the penal or legal aspect of redemption was considered woefully inadequate for a life of *Nachfolge* or following Christ in discipleship.

While Thomas Finger states that some Anabaptists did use substitutionary language, they tended toward the dynamic, participatory, and transformative aspects of the atonement. Snyder concludes, “the Anabaptists believed, emphatically, that Christ must be born in the heart of every believer (by grace through faith), and that this birth was a transforming power that produced actual (not imputed) righteousness.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

The Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions tell the story of the life of Christ with many rich biblical images referring to the work of Christ in reconciling humanity with God and with each other.⁷⁹ The confessions reflect the themes of the Apostles Creed, and employ victory (classical), satisfaction (Anselm), and example (Abelard) themes known in the Reformation.

With these three models in the background, the A-M confessions explore the biblical images of Christ’s work for their context. The three-fold office of Christ is implied or stated in most confessions.

Jesus the final *prophet* and teacher, through his life, teachings, and miracles has revealed God’s loving will for our salvation and set an example of *suffering* servanthood for his people to follow.

Jesus the great High *Priest* and Mediator, on the merits of his broken body and shed blood, has offered the final substitutionary *sacrifice* for sin to fulfill God’s covenant, resulting in cleansing,

78 Snyder, 52.

79 John Driver, *Atonement*, 243–47 sees the biblical images as contextual and missional in orientation. See his chapters on the ten atonement images as an example of one Anabaptist interpretation.

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
remission, satisfaction, and forgiveness of sin.

Jesus the Messianic *King* and Lord, by his incarnation, resurrection, and ascension, has destroyed the power of sin, death, and the devil, to give believers victory over their spiritual and physical enemies.

Jesus the *redeemer*, has delivered the human race from captivity to sin, paid the

ransom, and provided eternal salvation.

Jesus the *Son of God* became incarnate to reconcile the world to God the Father, to make sinners righteous by justification, and restore communion with God through the new birth or regeneration.

Is there an image that captures the early Anabaptist confessions on the atonement? With all the diversity of images available the catechism settled on the life transforming word *redemption*. 

The Construction and Deconstruction of Penal Substitutionary Atonement



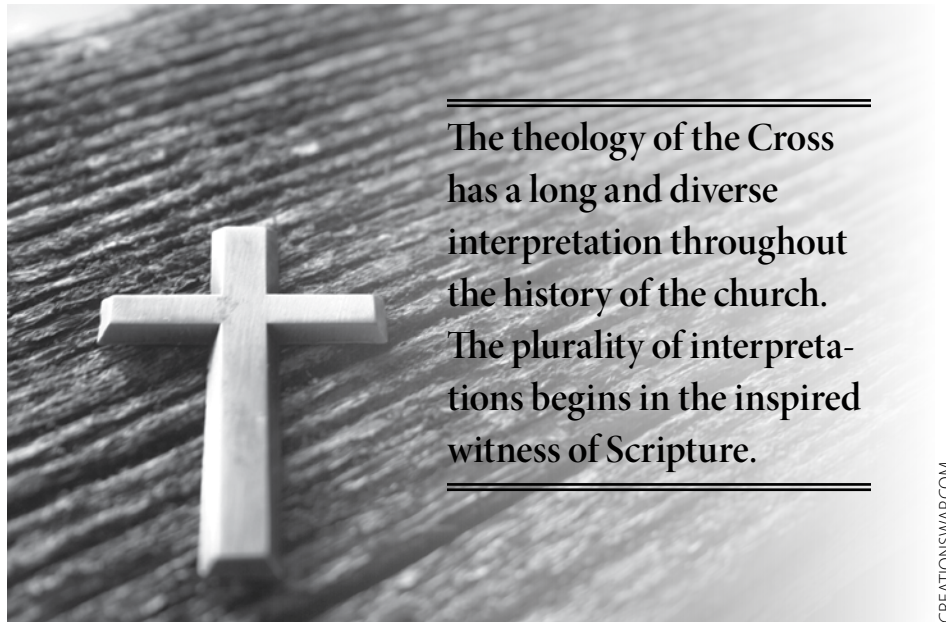
Paul D. Walker

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THE DEATH OF CHRIST is the epicenter of our faith.

The Cross is the culmination of the incarnation, life, and teachings of Jesus—whose victory is announced on the third day of the resurrection. The death of Jesus is literally the *crux* of our faith. As Jürgen Moltmann rightly suggests, “the theology of the cross is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology.”¹

It should be no surprise then that the theology of the Cross has a long and diverse interpretation throughout the history of the church. The plurality of interpretations begins in the inspired witness of Scripture. The authors of Scripture resolutely refuse to speak of the death of Christ in a monochromatic way. Throughout the witness of Scripture, we see the bright colours and polyphonic images that illuminate the mystery of what is taking place in the crucifixion of Jesus. We read of diverse images such as the ‘Mercy Seat/*hilasterion*’ (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:5); the Passover Lamb (1



The theology of the Cross has a long and diverse interpretation throughout the history of the church. The plurality of interpretations begins in the inspired witness of Scripture.

Corinthians 5:7); Redemption (Colossians 1:13–14); Ransom (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:5–6); a conquering King who triumphs over the powers (Hebrews 2:14, Colossians 2:15) and many more.²

Beyond the witness of Scripture, the meaning of Jesus’ death began to take

shape in church history through the development of atonement theories. Atonement theories are the attempt to collect the various Biblical images and data into a system of explanation and narration. Atonement theories are not factual recreations of the Biblical data, but rather creative riffs that draw inspiration from the text of Scripture. As Anabaptist Pastor Bruxy Cavey helpfully states, “They are our best human attempts to understand the deeper theological implications of the fact and images of the atonement. We are now leaving behind a

1 Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 76.

2 John Driver suggests the biblical witness offers a manifold of ten different motifs for understanding atonement. For more on this see: John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

simple restatement of what the Bible *says* and beginning to do theology about what the Bible *means*.³

Some of the atonement theories include *Christus Victor*, Ransom theory, Recapitulation theory, Moral Influence theory, Satisfaction theory, Penal Substitution theory, Governmental theory and Mimetic theory. Each of these theories has had its moment of popularity in preaching, teaching, and proclaiming the death of Jesus. Yet none of these theories fully capture the Biblical witness or can be given priority over the other. As Leon Morris states, “the atonement is vast and deep and we need all the theories.”⁴

The Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) theory is one such attempt to capture what Scripture is teaching. This theory in its simplest expressions suggests that Christ *endured punishment* (penal) *on behalf of* (substitution) his people. However, the theory of penal substitution as we know it today, came into full conception and prominence through Calvin and the Reformed tradition a mere five hundred years ago.

Some Reformed writers have suggested that the PSA theory, as we know it today, was original to the patristic era by citing a litany of supposed quotations from the early church fathers

Some Reformed writers have suggested that the PSA theory, as we know it today, was original to the patristic era by citing a litany of supposed quotations from the early church fathers to their defense.

to their defense.⁵ Further examination of such claims reveals this to be an interpolation upon church history. Certainly, there are Biblical images of punishment and substitution to be found within Scripture, but as N.T. Wright has noted, “penal substitution...received a new boost *and a new spin* from the Reformers’ rejection of purgatory.”⁶

Earlier in Wright’s work he described what he believes is happening in post-reformation conceptions of PSA when he writes:

It abstracts certain elements from what the Bible actually says, elements which are undoubtedly there and which undoubtedly matter, but then places them within a different framework, which admittedly has a lot in common with the biblical one, but which, when treated as though it were the biblical one, becomes systematically misleading.⁷

In his latest and most seminal work on the Cross, Wright has pulled no punches

in diagnosing the ‘new spin’. He writes:

In much popular modern Christian thought we have made a three-layered mistake. We have *Platonized* our eschatology (substituting “souls going to heaven” for the promised new creation) and have therefore *moralized* our anthropology (substituting a qualifying examination of moral performance for the biblical notion of the human vocation), with the result that we have *paganized* our soteriology, our understanding of “salvation” (substituting the idea of “God killing Jesus to satisfy his wrath.”)⁸

This ‘new spin’ that Wright speaks about is of critical importance to our task. The thrust of this article is to suggest that the theory of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) as it has been constructed during and after the Reformation is problematic and needs to be reconstructed in order to be faithful to the witness of Scripture. In this article we will both examine the construction and deconstruction of PSA.

The Construction and Deconstruction of Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory

How is the theory of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA) being constructed that suggests it requires a significant deconstruction? What is PSA saying that it should not be saying? This has been the subject of plethora of books, articles, symposiums, and conferences over the last twenty years.⁹ We will suggest two ways that PSA theory has been improperly constructed. (1) Trinitarian Violence; (2) Wrath Appeasement.

3 Bruxy Cavey, “Understanding Atonement.” Bruxy.com. April 13, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2019. http://www.bruxy.com/other/understanding-atonement/?fbclid=IwAR0nPOoZpigxlnFbzHS7WtlxEzfHBqG3VX_Nat3kLMUMMQRPzJlu_EZ_4U; emphasis in original.

4 Leon Morris, “Theories of the Atonement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 102.

5 See Jeffery, Steve, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach. *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008.

6 N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016), 64; emphasis in original.

7 N. T. Wright, “The Cross and The Caricatures.” Fulcrum Anglican. January 10, 2014. Accessed April 27, 2019. <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-cross-and-the-caricatures>.

8 N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 147; emphasis in original.

9 I would encourage the curious reader to begin to journey of studying the Cross. No greater topic has the potential to transform our teaching and preaching than the mystery of the Cross of Christ. This is time well spent!

Trinitarian Violence

A key feature of some post-reformation PSA theories is the imagining of the violent punishment of God the Father towards God the Son. This theory was a direct counter to Medieval Catholic notions of further punishment in purgatory.

Calvin et al wished to communicate the finality and ‘once for all-ness’ of the Cross, and therefore our standing before God. So in PSA, God is said to be unable to satisfy the demands of justice or wrath by any other means that the extraction of torment by an innocent victim. Jesus steps in and suffers *not only* the violence of Roman crucifixion and the condemnation of the religious authorities but *also* Divine violence. Jesus is said to suffer the violent punishment of God the Father, who *must* drain and satiate his wrath in order to be the God of peace and new creation.

In PSA, violence is placed as separable actions within the heart of Trinity. John F. MacArthur Jr. provides a modern framing of such a view when he writes,

Here’s what was happening on the cross: God was punishing His own Son as if He had committed every wicked deed done by every sinner who would ever believe. And He did it so that He could forgive and treat those redeemed ones as if they had lived Christ’s perfect life of righteousness.¹⁰

Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides

the depiction of intra-Trinitarian violence when he writes,

Jesus died the death of the goddess; he was stricken by God’s wrath and vengeance. His blood is the blood which God’s righteousness required for the transgression of his commandments.... God’s vengeance is extinguished upon Jesus...who was stricken by God’s vengeance for our salvation.¹¹

We should notice here the key features of MacArthur’s and Bonhoeffer’s Trinitarian construction of PSA. Rather than the Nicene and Constantinople creedal confessions of the Trinity as “one in being” or “of the same essence” or “consubstantial” (*homoousion*); in

Rather than the Nicene and Constantinople creedal confessions of the Trinity as “one in being” or “of the same essence” or “consubstantial” (*homoousion*); in both MacArthur and Bonhoeffer we have members of the Trinity acting *in opposition* to each other.

both MacArthur and Bonhoeffer we have members of the Trinity acting *in opposition* to each other.

Belousek comments on this division saying, “The penal substitution model implies a Trinity comprising not only distinct but separable, even conflicting, persons—quite contrary to the ecumenical creedal affirmation of Nicaea and Constantinople.”¹² Similarly, Paul Fiddes highlights this odd feature of PSA’s suggestion of intra-Trinitarian violence when he writes, “One of the problems of a theory of penal substitution is that it depends for its logic upon a strong individualization of Father and Son as independent subjects, which makes it hard to speak of the one personal reality of a God who becomes vulnerable to love’s sake within his own creation.”¹³ This is a serious claim against the theory of PSA.

Notably PSA advocates such as Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, have attempted to respond to this objection by rightly suggesting “that a particular action can be done by one person of the Trinity (the subject of the action) to another (the object).”¹⁴ We agree. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. The Father is faithful to the Son and the Son is obedient to the Father. However, there is a subtle shift by Jeffery’s et al to the depiction of ‘particular actions’ that deny the mutuality of the Triune God. As Belousek suggests,

The former involve a relationship of mutuality between giver (subject) and recipient (object), but the latter (of PSA) implies a status of subjection of recipient (object) to giver (subject)... the voluntary kenosis of Christ is not to be understood as the subjection of Son to Father within the Trinity...Christ denied himself the privileges of deity and subjected himself to the conditions of humanity in sin and death for our sake, all the while retaining essential “equality with God.”¹⁵

10 John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Murder of Jesus* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 219.

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, trans. and ed. David M. Gracie (Cambridge, MA: Cowley publications, 2000), 82–83.

12 Darrin W. Snyder. Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012), 293

13 Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), 108.

14 Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 130–31.

15 Belousek, 294.

Ultimately, any construction of what is taking place in the Cross of Christ that suggests that Jesus is somehow less than fully God must be seen as a radical departure from creedal Orthodox Christianity. Here, *some* proponents of PSA have completely agreed. No less than John Stott has spoken to the aberrations of popular constructions of PSA that have pitted the Father against the Son. Stott writes,

We must not, then, speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus persuading God, for to do so is to set them over against each other as if they acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with each other. We must never make Christ the object of God's punishment or God the object of Christ's persuasion, for both God and Christ were subjects not objects, taking the initiative together to save sinners... Any notion of penal substitution in which three independent actors play a role—the guilty party, the punitive judge and the innocent victim—is to be repudiated with the utmost vehemence. It would not only be unjust in itself but would also reflect a defective Christology. For Christ is not an independent third person, but the eternal Son of the Father, who is one with the Father in his essential being.¹⁶

Wrath Appeasement

Post-Reformation Penal Substitution

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 151.

¹⁷ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*, (San Bernardino, CA: Timē, 2016), 51–52.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II.xvi.2, 505; emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 833; emphasis mine.

²⁰ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3:20–4:25, Atonement and Justification* (London: Banner of Truth, 1970), 70; emphasis mine.

²¹ Extracts take from the song "In Christ Alone" by Keith Getty & Stuart Townsend Copyright © 2001 Thankyou Music; emphasis mine.

²² Belousek, 79.

Wrath is said to be the primary problem to which humanity is inflicted. The 'divine solution' is a transaction in which wrath is satisfied, appeased, and exhausted on Jesus upon the Cross.

theory has at its heart the satisfaction of wrath as the vehicle from which our redemption is secured. Wrath is said to be the primary problem to which humanity is inflicted. The 'divine solution' is a transaction in which wrath is satisfied, appeased, and exhausted on Jesus upon the Cross. Jayson Georges describes it like this,

Our sin merits eternal punishment. But Jesus steps into our place as a sacrifice for the wrath due to us. As a propitiation for sins, the cross appeases God anger against us and pays the debt of our transgression. Jesus' death pacifies God's wrath against guilty sinners by satisfying the legal requirements of justice.¹⁷

Georges is not alone in his suggestion of the appeasement, pacification, and



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satisfaction of Divine wrath. Georges is joined by a long tradition of Reformers who have suggested as much. For example Calvin writes, "[Christ] as intercessor he has *appeased* God's wrath."¹⁸ Millard Erickson sketches PSA writing, "By offering himself as a sacrifice, by substituting himself for us, actually bearing the punishment that should have been ours, Jesus *appeased* the Father and effected a reconciliation between God and humanity."¹⁹ Lloyd-Jones taught that inference of Romans 3:25 meant that, "God's wrath has been *appeased* and that God has been placated as the result of the work which our Lord did there by dying upon the Cross."²⁰ Even among one recent hymn it is communicated that, "On the cross, when Jesus died, the wrath of God was *satisfied*."²¹

Why does wrath appeasement need to be deconstructed? Before we proceed at an attempt to answer the question, it is important to note here that the language of satisfaction is drastically different than earlier conceptions of satisfaction found in Anselm and elsewhere. As Belousek observes, "there is explicit divine violence in Calvin's theory, for God the Father punishes God the Son, there is no actual divine violence in Anselm's theory: God is satisfied, not by a penalty of death, but by the restitution of obedience."²²

In a similar vein, Fleming Rutledge describes the novel approach of Post-

Reformation PSA views when she writes, “The preacher teachers of penal substitution forced the biblical tapestry of motifs into a narrowly defined, schematic, rationalistic—and highly individualistic—version of the substitution motif derived in part from Anselm, whose rationalistic approach...had ill effect.”²³

The observation that Post-Reformation PSA constructions of wrath appeasement are a novel development is, perhaps for some, admissible evidence to return again to the Biblical motifs and images. Yet for others, wrath appeasement is precisely the unavoidable teaching of the Bible. While there are mountains volumes of literature that attempt to grapple with this problem of wrath needing to be appeased through the violent punishment of an innocent victim, I offer to you my dear reader two points for us to briefly explore:

- (1) Wrath appeasement goes beyond what the Bible clearly and plainly says.
- (2) Wrath appeasement suggests God is changed.

Wrath appeasement goes beyond what the Bible says

Nowhere in Scripture do we find the phrase “the wrath of God was satisfied” or that “wrath was vented upon Jesus.” This is self-evident in the need for a construction of the *theory* of PSA. This explains why vast sections of the church, such as the Eastern Orthodox, have failed to conceive anything even approximating PSA. PSA *theory* has always been an attempt to say more than what the Bible is explicitly saying. As Bruxy Cavey helpfully reminds us, “God discharging his wrath upon Jesus is simply never

stated in Scripture. And if it is not stated in Scripture, and never preached publicly as the gospel, there is likely a very good reason why God has decided not to offer us that mental image.”²⁴

While the Bible never explicitly states “the wrath of God was satisfied,” many have suggested that the statement is implicit and narratively true of what Scripture is suggesting. The strongest case historically for such an argument comes from Romans 1:18–5:9. The Apostle Paul begins this narrative with the declaration that, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18).

We should note here that this PSA reading of Romans 1:18 suggests that the issue to be solved is wrath, rather than “godlessness and wickedness.” This reading suggests that the weight of transformation is found through a satisfaction of wrath within the Godhead rather than the triumph over sin, death, and the powers (more on this later).

The Romans narrative continues in 3:24–26 where “God presents Christ as a propitiation”²⁵ and thus the Apostle Paul can make the declaration in Romans 5:9 that “we are saved from wrath.” The movement from Romans 1:18–5:9 is for many the implicit validation of wrath appeasement. After all, as PSA proponents suggest, does not the text say as much in its use of the word propitiation? This line of reasoning has had powerful rhetorical staying power in the many years of atonement debates that have occurred in the church. But is it true? Is this what the Apostle Paul meant?

Here, I commend to you the following lengthy rebuttal of this typical reading of Romans from Wright:

First...the word in context is far more likely to refer to the “mercy seat,” the place in the tabernacle or Temple where God promises, as the focus of his covenant, to meet with his people and to that end provides cleansing for both the people and the sanctuary so that the meeting can take place. Second, it is simply a mistake to assume, as the “usual” reading has done, that a reference to the Bible’s sacrificial system indicates that a sacrificial animal is being killed in the place of the worshipper. Third, when Paul sums up the effect of the present passage in 5:9, he says that if we have been “justified by his blood,” we *shall* be saved from the future wrath. He cannot therefore intend the phrase “justified by his blood”—the summary of 3:24–26—to mean “being saved from wrath,” or 5:9 would be a tautology (“being saved from wrath, we shall be saved from wrath”). Fourth, at the heart of this passage Paul says that God has passed over former sins in his forbearance. This is the very opposite of “punishment.” It could be of course (and many have suggested this) that God had previously “passed over” sins in order to save up the punishment until it could be vented on Jesus. But there is no indication that this is what Paul has in mind.²⁶

So what does the Apostle Paul have in mind? For many who have been raised in the cradle of Evangelicalism it is difficult to imagine anything other than wrath appeasement through the punishment of the Son. Here we need to pay close attention to what the Apostle Paul is actually saying. If God is not punishing Jesus, what is God doing in the Cross? The Apostle Paul provides us a multitude of answers in his writings, but perhaps

23 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 488.

24 Bruxy Cavey.

25 Note: this term “propitiation” is taken from the ESV translation.

26 N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 302–303; emphasis in original.

none is more specific than Romans 8:3–4. “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so *he condemned sin in the flesh*, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”²⁷ What or who is being condemned here in this passage? Once again, I submit to you Wright’s explanation:

Equally, it is certainly *substitutionary*: God condemned Sin (in the flesh of the Messiah), and therefore sinners who are “in the Messiah” are not condemned. The one dies, and the many do not.²⁸

While much more can and has been said, the reader should note that though, “wrath appeasement through the violent punishment of an innocent victim,” has been deconstructed here, the images and motifs of substitution and punishment remain intact.

forgive sin without punishment would make God unjust. Because God is righteous, God always does what is right and gives humans what they deserve. Our sin merits eternal punishment. But Jesus steps into our place as a sacrifice for the wrath due to us... Jesus’ death pacifies God’s wrath against guilty sinners by satisfying the legal requirements of justice.²⁹

Georges’ vivid sketch of how our redemption is secured takes place completely as a transaction within the Godhead. The reader should take note that nothing is said here in this sketch about the conquering of sin, death, the powers, or humanity. There is no mention of resurrection, sanctification, new creation, or identification in Christ. What Christ’s death achieves, according to Georges, is the pacification of “God’s wrath against guilty sinners by satisfying the legal requirements of justice.” To this we can offer the following two brief responses.

Firstly, by suggesting a divine settling of accounts, Georges has suggested that God is the one who is reconciled to Creation rather than “God reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19). While making light of the hypostatic union, this view has the serious effect of saying that atoning actions are directed to God in order to *change* God. Why must we not say God is changed? Fleming Rutledge explains:

We need to be clear that *the change effected* by Christ’s self-oblation *does not occur within God*. This is of primary importance. If we do not emphasize this, we end up with a dangerously capricious God who is indeed open to the critiques brought by those who think of the wrath of God as an emotion that must be appeased. In all our discussions of reconciliation, this underlying point is fundamental. It is not God that is changed. It is the

While much more can and has been said, the reader should note that though, “wrath appeasement through the violent punishment of an innocent victim,” has been deconstructed here, the images and motifs of substitution and punishment remain intact.

The punishment is on Sin itself, the combined, accumulated, and personified force that has wreaked such havoc in the world and in human lives. Here is a point that must be noted most carefully. Paul does not say that God punished Jesus. He declares that God punished Sin in the flesh of Jesus. Now, to be sure, the crucifixion was no less terrible an event because, with theological hindsight, the apostle could see that what was being punished was Sin itself rather than Jesus himself... But theologically speaking—and with regard to the implications that run through many aspects of church life, teaching, and practice—it makes all the difference. The death of Jesus, seen in this light, is certainly *penal*...

Wrath appeasement suggests God is changed

Post-Reformation PSA constructions tend to suggest the main problem that Jesus’ death solves is the need for wrath appeasement within the Godhead. The violent torture of an innocent victim secures the necessary payment in order that God may forgive, redeem, and ransom a fallen humanity. In this view, the Cross is what God inflicts upon Christ in order to forgive without violating either God’s holiness or justice. Jayson Georges puts it like this:

God is perfectly holy and just, so He must punish transgression of the law. While God loves us, justice demands a payment for wrongs. To arbitrarily

²⁷ Romans 8:3–4; emphasis mine.

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 287 [emphasis in original].

²⁹ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*, (San Bernardino, CA: Timē, 2016), 51–52.

relationship of human beings and the creation to God that is changed.³⁰

Rutledge provides a needed reminder about what is being affected in the death of Christ. To put it another way, in Romans 1:18 when the Apostle Paul reminds us that “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people,” we need to put the emphasis of change on “godlessness and wickedness” rather than “wrath.” We are saved from wrath precisely, as Wright observes, “with the corollary that sins are expiated.”³¹

When sin is dealt with, wrath is removed. Thus, the need for punishment as payment is rendered obsolete if sin as a power has been defeated in the flesh of Christ. This is to view justice holistically and ontologically, as God acts in covenant justice (*dikaiosynē*) by destroying sin and death and restoring to God all of creation. When viewed through this lens, justice is restorative rather than retributive. God saves us from wrath precisely because God’s creation is transformed into that which God desires it to be.

Secondly, by suggesting a divine settling of accounts, Georges fails to take into account just how serious sin is. In Georges’ account, sin is largely restricted to individualized offences that require moral performance rather than the biblical notion of the human vocation. This fails to see the gravity of sin as a power that has corrupted and broken all of Creation. In other words, Georges describes sin in the typical western legal fashion— as crime to be punished, rather than a sickness to be healed. This is unfortunate, as Scripture is replete with

If sin is removed, then condemnation is removed with it. Therefore, any view of the atonement that fails to address sin as a power and corruptor, fails to properly contend with the damage that sin has wrought upon creation.

medicinal metaphors of the cleansing, healing, and repairing of sin by the Great Physician.

As Joel Green reminds us, “Scripture as a whole presumes the intertwining of salvation and healing...the larger Roman world of Jesus’ day conceived of salvation as healing.”³² To put it another way, sin is like a cancer. If the cancer is gone, the diagnosis is changed. You cannot punish the patient to remove the cancer. If sin is removed, then condemnation is removed with it. Therefore, any view of the atonement that fails to address sin as a power and corruptor, fails to properly contend with the damage that sin has wrought upon creation. This creates difficulty for the view that sin is a problem to be solved within the Godhead. As Derek Flood explains:


The irony then, is that it is in fact penal substitution that ends up ignoring sin because it understands salvation as a mere legal acquittal. According to this model, once a substitute is punished in our place, God can then justly overlook our sin. Nothing changes in us, nothing is restored for the one who was hurt. All that happens is that someone is punished, and with that it is declared that the demands of justice have been satisfied. Case closed. This amounts to

what many have called a “legal fiction” where the harm our sin does to us and others is simply ignored via a legal loophole.

To put it a bit more boldly, a God who settles accounts by appeasing his wrath against sin without acting to destroy the powers of sin, death, and Satan, would be unjust. Why? This is because justice in the Biblical conception is God’s covenant faithfulness and righteousness to Israel, and through Israel to the world. A justice that does not bring healing to the *cosmos* is merely a reworking of Gnosticism.

Conclusion

In this brief overview of the construction and deconstruction of the Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory, we have attempted to suggest that that Post-Reformation constructions of this theory failed us in properly conceiving Trinitarian operations, and *how* we are saved from wrath.

What then can be said of Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory? Should we abandon this theory? Do we dare say that Christ *endured punishment* (penal) *on behalf of* (substitution) his people? As we have noted throughout this article, the motifs of punishment and substitution remain intact. The difference, then, is in how we properly understand and construct these theories. The task of such a construction is properly the work of the church. And it is this task that I now commend to you. 

³⁰ Rutledge, 163; emphasis in original.

³¹ N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 393–770, 476.

³² Joel B Green, *Salvation*, (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 35–36.

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Feature Sermon



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Luke 23:26–49

The Death of an Extremist



Robert J. Dean

Robert Dean (Th.D., Wycliffe College - University of Toronto) is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Otterburne, MB. He is the author of several books, including “Leaps of Faith: Sermons from the Edge,” and previously served as a pastor in Scarborough, Ont. This sermon was part of a Lenten preaching series entitled “The Big Story” which was accompanied by daily Scripture readings and Lenten devotionals written by members of the congregation designed to take the reader through the arc of Scripture over the course of the season.

There seems to be a developing consensus among theologians and biblical scholars that the various ways the Bible speaks about atonement is not ultimately an obstacle to be overcome, but a gift to be received. Fleming Rutledge, for instance,

in her celebrated volume *The Crucifixion*, argues that the various themes and motifs used by the New Testament to expound the crucifixion must be understood in their narrative context and not forced into what she calls “one narrow theoretical tunnel.”¹

Good Friday preaching, then, is not the opportunity to serve up helpings of one’s favourite atonement theory, but rather presents the invitation to attend carefully to the text, in order to discern how the aroma and flavour of the biblical passages under consideration intersect with the lived reality of faith within a particular congregation.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 208.

The sermon that follows is not easily classified in terms of atonement motifs or models. A strong case could be made for seeing it as an exemplar of preaching in the *Christus Victor* tradition. However, the case is complicated by the prominent place given to the *munus triplex*—the threefold office of Christ—in the sermon. This strange brew is then seasoned by a dash of Irenaean recapitulation, and a further pinch of what could be called a participationist or new covenantal understanding of the atonement. The reader will have to decide whether the result of this strange mishmash of ingredients is merely culinary confusion or something resembling the feast for the senses offered by Luke the Evangelist himself.

THIS MORNING WE

come to the climax of the Big Story. The thousands of years of human history on either side of the original Good Friday find their fulfillment in the events of this day. But the events of this day are not merely the culmination of the human story; they are also the climax of a drama of cosmic dimensions. For human beings are not the only actors with parts in this screenplay, nor are they even the primary actors.

The leading role is played by the God of Israel who desires to liberate his good creation which is held in bondage by the cosmic terrorists Sin, Death, and the Devil. Good Friday marks the decisive campaign in God's cosmic War on Terror.

There is evidence of this impending cosmic confrontation right from the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Right near the beginning of Luke's Gospel in the second chapter, a celestial invasion force is shown to be amassing along the border of heaven and earth when the host of heaven appears in the sky above the shepherds in the fields on that first Christmas Eve (2:8–14).

The story takes an unusual twist because what comes next is not a full scale angelic invasion, but the entrance

²⁶As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰Then

"they will say to the mountains,
"Fall on us!"
and to the hills, "Cover us!"

³¹For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar

³⁷and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." ⁴⁸When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

into the world of a single extremist. There is a preliminary skirmish in the wilderness between the extremist God has sent and the prince of darkness (4:1–13). The extremist, whom we know by the name of Jesus, takes the first round and returns from the wilderness embarking upon an offensive against the terror of the rule of darkness as he travels throughout the land preaching the dawning of God's reign, driving out demons, healing the sick, and stilling the wind and the waves.

Then the narrative begins to slow down.

Whereas the events of the opening chapters of the book of Luke spanned years and then months, the story begins to slow to a crawl as Jesus "set his face to go Jerusalem" for the final showdown (9:41 NRSV). The story comes almost to a halt as the events of a single week occupy the final quarter of the Gospel and then our gaze is ultimately focused upon one particular day, one particular event, and one particular moment.

The story comes almost to a halt as the events of a single week occupy the final quarter of the Gospel and then our gaze is ultimately focused upon one particular day, one particular event, and one particular moment.

As we reach this point in the story, we are told by Jesus, that this is the hour, the hour when darkness reigns (22:53). The devil enters Judas Iscariot and prompts him to betray Jesus (22:3). Satan sifts Peter and the rest of the apostles like wheat (22:31). The religious and political establishments of the day align themselves with the diabolical powers and Jesus is arrested.

Ironically, Jesus, God's ambassador of peace in a world ruled by terror, is labeled a terrorist by the superpower which occupies his country. Like those labeled as terrorists in all times and places, Jesus is subjected to ritual dehumanization.² He is arrested by an armed mob, mocked, scourged, bound and led out to meet his death at the place called Skull. It is in these final moments as Jesus is bound and led out like an animal to the slaughter, as he is stripped of his clothes and dignity and nailed to the tree as some type of

sub-human creature, that the final battle is fought.

When the one who is the object of scorn and humiliation opens his mouth, it becomes apparent that the one they sought to dehumanize is himself the most authentic human being of all. When the one whose body is broken and bound speaks, it becomes apparent that he is the one who is truly free. The words of the extremist who suffers the cruel fate of the cross, reveal him to be God's true prophet, priest and king.³

This morning we will direct our attention to those last words uttered by Jesus before his death. This morning we will focus on the words which pierced the darkness.

The first utterance occurs after Jesus had been handed over to be crucified as he was led out of the city to the place of execution. A large crowd followed behind him, including many women who were mourning and wailing for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (23:28–31).

This utterance affirms Jesus' status as the true prophet of God. It is permeated

throughout with prophetic language, from the opening words of address, "Daughters of Jerusalem," through the blessing of the barren women, to the quoting of the words of the prophet Hosea, "They will say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" (10:8). Essentially, Jesus is saying to the mourners who follow him, "If these things have been done to me who am innocent, what will happen to you, the people of Jerusalem, who are guilty?"

As God's final envoy, Jesus showed the people of Jerusalem in his life and ministry the things that would make for peace and he called them to repentance.⁴ Jesus longed to gather together the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but they would not have it (Luke 13:34). Jerusalem did not recognize the time of its divine visitation in the person of Jesus Christ and it stubbornly continued along the path to its own destruction.⁵ Having definitively rejected the way of God's extremist of peace, less than 40 years later the people of Jerusalem took up the sword against Rome and were slaughtered by the thousands. Those who survived were made to swallow the bitter pill of seeing the Roman general Titus standing in the midst of the rubble and flames of a burning and demolished Temple.

Sin, or the rejection of God's ways, carries with it its own consequences. By rejecting the way of peace presented by God's true prophet, it was inevitable that sooner or later those living by the sword would die by the sword. God desires our healing, our wholeness, and our good. When we rebel against God we are like little children reaching out to put their hand on a glowing element on top of the stove.

To reject God's ways is not to find freedom, but to find oneself still enslaved under the terror of the tyrannical rule of Sin and Death. The consequences of sin fall not only upon the sinner, but also upon other human beings and

2 Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 340.

3 In the introductory paragraph to his sermon, "The Dying Thief," Alexander MacLaren makes the fecund suggestion that the three sayings of Christ in this passage can be correlated with threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king. Alexander MacLaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 458, Adobe PDF eBook.

4 The phrase "God's final envoy" is the title of a book by New Testament scholar Marinus de Jonge. Marinus de Jonge, *God's Final Envoy: Early Christology and Jesus' Own View of His Mission* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

5 According to Tannehill, "This scene in the passion narrative caps the series of statements about Jerusalem's resistance to the things that make for peace and its coming destruction (13:33–35; 19:41–44; 21:20–24). Tannehill, *Luke*, 339.

beyond that impact the entire creation. The person who hops into their car after having too many drinks takes not only their own life into their hands, but also all who happen to be on the road at the same time. We have recently observed how the corruption of a few executives and the greed of several banks can contribute to an economic recession that sees some people's life savings disappear and others lose their jobs.

The earth groans under the burden

As we look upon this man on the cross, we see the terror of sin and the ugliness of humankind's enmity towards God overcome as it is swallowed up in the eternal love and life of the Triune God. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34).

of an economy built upon the premise of ever-increasing consumption by a society of people brought up from a young age to be shoppers. Sin carries with it its own consequences. Jesus' death is a consequence of sin, although certainly not his own. Jesus knew that death was awaiting him from the moment he set his face toward Jerusalem, for as he himself said, "No prophet can die outside of Jerusalem!" (13:33). Jesus was not surprised by the opposition he faced in Jerusalem which ultimately culminated in the cross, for Jesus is the true prophet. We must listen to him.⁶

As we await Jesus' next words, we observe the execution party arrive at the place called Skull. Jesus is stripped and nails are driven through his hands and

feet affixing him to the cross like an insect pinned up for display in a bug collection.

Beaten, bruised, and naked, Jesus hangs upon a cross between two criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Here we see the crucified extremist taking the full brunt of humanity's hatred and violence and bearing it in his body on the cross.

We strain to hear his first word from the cross: "Father." The word "Father" is an important reminder that this extremist is no ordinary man. He is someone who stands in an utterly unique relationship to God. He is the God-man, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of the Father.

As we look upon this man on the cross, we see the terror of sin and the ugliness of humankind's enmity towards God overcome as it is swallowed up in the eternal love and life of the Triune God. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34).

Nailed to the cross, surrounded by tormentors, Jesus utters words of love, words of life, words of forgiveness. When Jesus taught his disciples, saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you," it was not just idle talk (6:27-28). Here under the most extreme and adverse of circumstances, Jesus practices what he preached, he intercedes before the Father on behalf of his enemies.

Not only did Jesus intercede for all who have wandered far from God as he died, the Scriptures tell us that in his glorified resurrection life, Jesus now lives

to intercede for us.⁷ Jesus is our great high priest.

Jesus' cry of intercession from the cross only seemed to incite the mockers. The Romans placed above Jesus' head an inscription which read: "This is the King of the Jews" (23:38). The inscription was intended to declare to all those passing by in no uncertain terms that this man was *not* "the King of the Jews." It was intended to serve as a warning of what would happen to anyone who would dare to make such a claim or was tempted to think about questioning the sovereign power of Rome.

Picking up on the charge displayed on the inscription, the Roman soldiers engaged in a grotesque skit, mocking Jesus by pretending to be royal servants bringing the King his royal cup of wine. However, the wine they offered him was sour, fulfilling the words of the Psalm 69, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst" (69:21).

In the midst of the mocking, one man is granted profound insight into the true order of things. It is not a priest or a rabbi, a ruler or a general, or any other respectable or upstanding member of society, but rather it is a most unlikely outsider who through the eyes of faith is able to see things as they truly are. It is one of the criminals upon the cross, who recognizes the King of the Universe in the disgraced rabbi crucified next to him.

In beholding the crown of thorns upon Jesus' head, the thief perceives the Prince of Peace crowned with suffering. The condemned criminal calls out to the Lord, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). Jesus turns and looks at him and replies, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:43).

The response confirms that Jesus truly is a king, but not only is he the King of the Jews, as the inscription on the cross ironically declares for all to see, he is in fact the Lord of heaven and earth, the One who has dominion over the living

6 An echo of the message of the divine voice at the transfiguration: "This is my Son, who I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35).

7 Alexander MacLaren, "Words from the Cross," in *Luke*, 456.

and the dead. The response also confirms that with King Jesus today is the day of salvation and a condemned criminal becomes the first to enter into the kingdom. “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

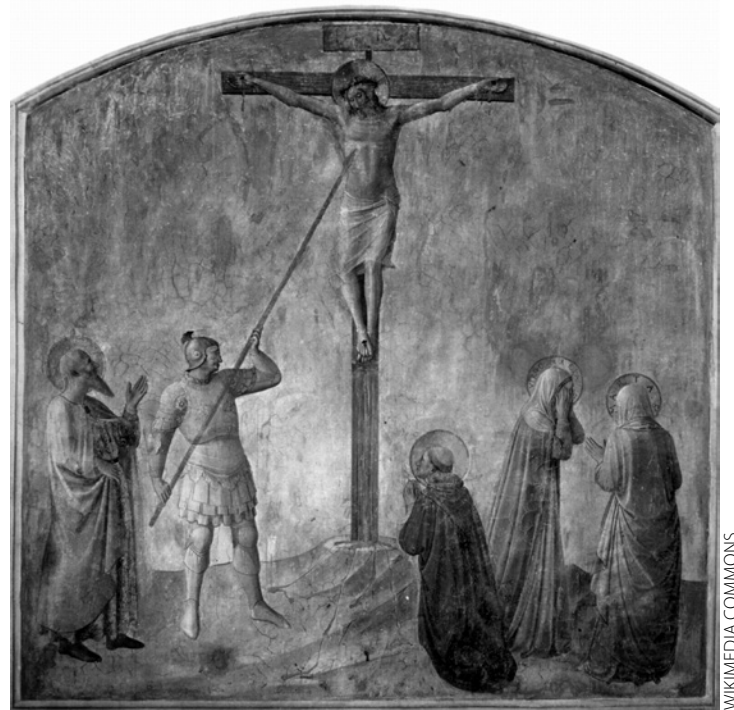
The promise of paradise stands in stark contrast to the scene unfolding on Calvary. As Jesus’ confrontation with forces of darkness moved towards its climax, Luke tells us that the land itself was engulfed in darkness (23:44).

At the end of his account of Jesus’ encounter with Satan in the wilderness in chapter four, Luke writes, “When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left Jesus until an opportune time” (4:13). The opportune time had arrived.⁸ Just as the devil had challenged Jesus to prove his identity in the wilderness with three temptations, Jesus is now tempted once again with three successive challenges or temptations from the mocking bystanders.

The first temptation comes from the upper echelon of society, from the rulers who sneered at him saying, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One” (23:35). Their language echoes the pronouncement made at Jesus’ transfiguration by the voice from within the cloud which said, “This is my Son, the Chosen One” (9:35—translation mine). The phrase “Christ of God” was the answer Peter had given at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus had asked him, “Who do you say I am?” (9:20).

Next the Roman soldiers came forward, mocking Jesus with their own Romanized form of the temptation saying, “If you are the king of the Jews,

A centurion who was nearby, when he saw what had happened, praised God saying, “Surely this was a righteous man.”



Longinus pierces the side of Jesus with the Holy Lance. Fresco by Fra Angelico (1395–1455), San Marco, Florence.

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save yourself” (23:37).⁹

Finally one of the criminals, representing the lowest dregs of society, contemptuously challenges Jesus saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us” (23:39).

This is the last temptation of Christ, the third and final part of a three-fold temptation challenging Jesus to prove his identity by saving himself and coming down from the cross. However, if Jesus were to come down from the cross, the only thing it would prove would be that He was not God’s Chosen One, for as Jesus himself had preached, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (9:24).

With his final words Jesus quotes from Psalm 31, a psalm describing the plight of a righteous person who suffers unjustly yet ultimately trusts in God for his vindication. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (23:46; Psalm 31:5). After pray-

ing this prayer, he breathed his last.

A centurion who was nearby, when he saw what had happened, praised God saying, “Surely this was a righteous man” (23:47).

The centurion’s statement functions on several levels. On one level it says something along the lines of, “Surely this man was innocent.” This man was an innocent sufferer; he did not deserve the punishment that was inflicted upon him.

On a deeper level, it is an affirmation that this crucified extremist was righteous. He was rightly related to God. In fact, in the book of Acts, ‘The Righteous One’ becomes a title by which the apostles’ refer to Jesus in their preaching (3:14, 7:52, 22:14). Jesus Christ is the Righteous One, the One who has fulfilled all righteousness and stands in a right relationship to God.

From the time of our first parents onward, human beings have struggled to trust God and have fallen again and again into unrighteousness through distrust and unbelief, but Jesus took the Father at His word. He had heard the pronouncement at his baptism, “You are

⁸ Tannehill, *Luke*, 342.

⁹ Green, *Luke*, 821.

my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (3:22) and again at the transfiguration, “This is my Son, the Chosen One” and he was prepared to stake his life on it (9:35). He did not need to prove his identity to anyone. Because he trusted completely in His Father, he could leave the success of his ministry and his very life in the Father’s hands.

It was on account of a tree that the first Adam fell and it was here upon a tree that Jesus Christ the second Adam triumphed, remaining faithful to God even unto death.¹⁰ Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the decisive victory over Sin has been won.¹¹

Although the cross marks the climax of the story, it is not the story’s conclusion. The decisive battle has been won at Calvary, but God’s War on Terror continues.

On the third day after the crucifixion rumours began circulating that the one who had been executed was alive and had appeared to various people showing them the nail marks in his hands and feet and the wound in his side (Luke 24). A short time later there was a disturbance in Jerusalem during the Festival of Pentecost and some people were saying that the pouring out of God’s Spirit that was promised for the last days had happened (Acts 2).

Then sleeper cells started popping up throughout Palestine and around the Mediterranean. These sleeper cells were like gardens of hope planted and nurtured by the Spirit of the Crucified Lord in the midst of territory occupied by

Although the cross marks the climax of the story, it is not the story’s conclusion. The decisive battle has been won at Calvary, but God’s War on Terror continues.

the oppressive regime of Sin and Death. The gardens started bearing fruit—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23)—in the very midst of hostile territory controlled by fear and terror. These sleeper cells became the site for the multiplying and nurturing of other extremists, whose words and deeds, in fact the very shape of their lives, bore unmistakable witness to the crucified prophet, priest, and king.

It is from the Greek word for witness that we get our English word martyr. It wasn’t long before the witnesses following the way of Jesus in the world became martyrs.

The first martyr was a man by the name of Stephen, who in his very death bore witness to the extremist who had walked the way of faith before him, almost echoing Jesus’ words as he prayed while he was killed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59–60).

The faithfulness of Jesus has made it possible for other extremists for God’s Kingdom to follow in his steps. Over the centuries these pockets of extremists have

continued to advance under the sign of the cross, nurturing to maturity many other men and women whose lives bear the unmistakable marks of Jesus.

This past Monday as part of our schedule of Holy Week events, we watched the movie *Dead Man Walking* and considered the life of Sister Helen Prejean.¹² Sister Helen has devoted her life to advocating for prisoners and serving as the spiritual advisor for various inmates sentenced to death. She has been the face of love to those whom the vast portion of society deems to be unlovable. She has accompanied men who have committed the most heinous and violent of deeds through the last days of their lives and spoken out as she has witnessed other innocent men go unjustly to their deaths.

Extremists for the Kingdom like St. Stephen and Sister Helen are not limited to the pages of the Bible and the big screen. In various places throughout the world today sleeper cells are giving birth to extremists who disrupt the reign of terror wherever they are by living lives of profound faith, hope, and love inspired and empowered by the life of Jesus.

Maybe there is even one such sleeper cell here in Scarborough. After all, I didn’t have a sermon for this morning until I had the opportunity to pray with Zach Oulton, one of the members of our youth group, at the prayer service this past Wednesday evening. Don’t get me wrong, I had been earnestly studying this passage in Luke’s Gospel and praying over it for some time, but I had no idea how all of the different ideas were going to come together, until during a time of prayer for the nations of the world, Zach prayed, “Lord, we live in a world of many extremists of violence and terror, make us extremists of love.”

What a wonderful prayer. Another way of saying it would be, “make us like Jesus,” but Zach’s turn of phrase is so much more poetic. The other thing about

10 The contrast between the tree of Eden and the tree of Calvary is a recurring theme in the writings Fathers. For example, see Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures” 13.2, 13.31, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 252, 269, Adobe PDF eBook; and Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 34, ed. Armitage Robinson (New York: MacMillan Co. 1920; repr. Grand Rapids: Christian Classic Ethereal Library), 62–63, Adobe PDF eBook.


11 I have become increasingly convinced by the arguments for the ‘christological interpretation’ of *pistis Christou*, which interpret the phrase as a subjective genitive. The seminal contribution to the development (or, perhaps better, recovery) of this interpretation is found in Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

12 *Dead Man Walking*, directed by Tim Robbins (MGM Home Entertainment, 1995), DVD.

Zach's prayer is that only an extremist-in-the-making could utter it. Only one whose imagination has been captured by Jesus and who is being formed in his image would think to say such a prayer.

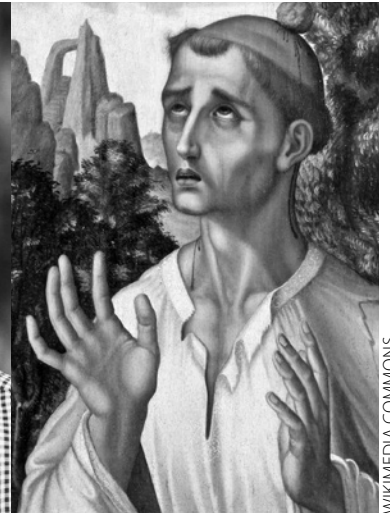
So we may have an extremist in our midst, but let me offer you a warning. Extremists are like cockroaches, if you see one, there are probably others lurking nearby. Extremists don't just one day pop into existence, they have to be nurtured and mentored within sleeper cells. So keep your eyes peeled, there's a good chance that you may be this very morning surrounded by extremists and extremists-in-training. And if that's not the case, let us pray that God will make it so.

For what the world needs now is extremists whose lives are built not on the violence and terror of this world, but on the grace and truth of God's eternal Kingdom that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. What the world needs now is extremists of faith, hope, and love whose lives point to the Prophet, Priest, and King whose blood was shed on Calvary.

Today we have more than enough politicians, activists, and terrorists, each trying to change the world in their own way, what the world desperately needs now is a people who bear witness to the fact that the world has already been forever changed in the death of one extremist. 



Sister Helen Prejean



Saint Stephen by Luis de Morales

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Extremists for the Kingdom like St. Stephen and Sister Helen are not limited to the pages of the Bible and the big screen. In various places throughout the world today sleeper cells are giving birth to extremists who disrupt the reign of terror wherever they are.



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The Final Word

“**A**TONEMENT THEORIES... TRY TO HELP US understand why Jesus, the son of God, had to die. We think it is really very simple: Jesus had to die because we needed and need to be forgiven. But, ironically, such a focus shifts attention away from Jesus to us. This is a fatal turn, I fear, because as soon as we begin to think this is all about us, about our need for forgiveness, bathos drapes the cross, hiding from us the reality that he we first and foremost see God. Moreover, as soon as these words from the cross are bent to serve our needs, to give us a god we believe we need, it is almost impossible to resist entertaining ourselves with speculative readings of Jesus’ words from the cross. For example we think what a wonderful saviour we have in Jesus, who, even in his agony, kindly offers us forgiveness. Of course we are not all that sure what we have done that requires such forgiveness, but we are willing to try and to think up something. Ironically, by trying to understand what it means for us to need forgiveness, too often our attention becomes focused on something called the ‘human condition’ rather than the cross and the God who had there.”

Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 27–28.

Send editorial inquiries and submissions to Editor, *Theodidaktos*, 440 Main St, Steinbach, MB R5G 1Z5; darrylklassen89@gmail.com, 204-346-2358; kevin.wiebe@yahoo.ca, 519-437-5428; or loewen.chris@gmail.com, 204-392-3392. Writing guidelines are available. Submissions should be accompanied by a photo and autobiographical information. View *Theodidaktos* online at www.emconference.ca/theodidaktos.