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Editorial

God and Violence

When we think of violence our thoughts run through countless scenarios that can be depicted by the word. War is the ultimate eruption of violence. Armies array their forces and throw at one another their latest inventions for killing. In this scenario it is not only the willing soldiers who get hurt and killed but also the innocent, those which have lately been termed as collateral damage. We have found that there are countless ways to be wounded or to die.

Violence is all around us and is felt not just in war but in homes, in schools, in our neighborhoods, and in society in general. Wikipedia defines "violence" as "the expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt." The Oxford dictionary concurs, saying it "involves great physical force resulting from external force" and may be unlawful but is surely intense, vehement, passionate, furious, impetuous and vivid.

The problem, as I see it, is that we so often want to project our own thoughts onto God's. If God uses violence in the OT context, is he allowed to use it in the NT or even our contemporary context?

As Anabaptists, we are committed to a life of peace and the promotion of peace among nations and individuals. Our theology reflects this commitment. God is often pictured as the God of peace. At the same time, the image of Yahweh as a God of war is rejected or excused or relegated to the old covenant. Something is amiss here.

The NT tells us that God does not change. We read in Hebrews 7:21 "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind…." And James says that God "…does not change like shifting shadows. Wait a minute—are they not quoting the OT (Ps 110:4), that old covenant stuff? But that's right, God does not change so why would his word? If God does not change then what are we Anabaptists to do with the God of War in the OT?

I was reading in Jeremiah during my quiet time recently when I came across this: "His cry of judgment will reach the ends of the earth, for the Lord will bring his case against all the nations. He will judge all the people of the earth, slaughtering the wicked with the sword. I, the LORD have spoken!" (25:31). I was struck with the passion and the ferocity of these words and wondered how we can reconcile our peaceful inclinations to a God who would utter these words. Here is our God hurting over the sins and outright adultery of his bride, the people of Israel.

The problem, as I see it, is that we so often want to project our own thoughts onto God's. If God uses violence in the OT context, is he allowed to use it in the NT or even our contemporary context? Did God use it, or permit it? And then the question of penal substitution arises because we can scarce think that God used violence to punish his own Son on our behalf. This is the crux of the question: Was the violence of the cross planned by God or was it an unfortunate but expected consequence of God sending his Son into the world? Did Christ take the punishment we deserved for our sins? Did Jesus step into the path of God's wrath so that we would be spared? If God is love, how could he plan our redemption through a violent act?

When I attended Steinbach Bible College we were taught a simple theological stance that has never left me. God is a God of righteousness and he is a God of love. God's righteousness demands that sinners be punished for violating his commands. God's love demands that he send his Son to take that punishment we so deserved. "For the wages of sin is death…" (Rom 6:23) tells us what was in store for us. Jesus stood in for us and took the penalty, as it says "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him" (Rom 5:9). Yet what was once a simple theology in my understanding has now become in some circles a subject for debate.

I am not condoning violence by any means or by any person here on earth. Together as followers of Christ it is right that we abhor violence and do everything we can to make peace between people. I do believe, however, that true peace between individuals is only possible through belief in the shed blood of Christ. Jesus said that the world would hate us because we follow him, so peace is only possible when we each have Christ. God calls us to live peacefully with all. However, it is entirely possible that God, who is infinitely wiser than all of us, knows how to use violence for his purposes without being evil. If you question this, write to me, but study the OT first.

I also invite you to read our lead article in this issue. It deals with the debate over penal substitution and its ramifications. Consider it thoughtfully and prayerfully. It is easy to get angry over things we do not agree with but I implore you to think this one through. Enjoy the issue. ϴ

Darryl G. Klassen

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Striken by God?[1] A Review Article

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Telling the story of Jesus is a significant part of the gospel, but we do not all tell that story in exactly the same way and one area of very significant difference is in regard to the meaning of Jesus' death. Why did he die and what was God's intention, if any, regarding his death? What did his death accomplish and how do we participate in its benefits? How does the truth concerning the life and death of Jesus impact our own lives in the world?

We live in a violent society and in a violent world but our Lord has pronounced us blessed if we are peacemakers. The editors of this book are concerned that some portrayals of God's saving work foster violence, particularly the model of penal substitution. In this regard, the book sounds a thoroughly postmodern note. As Kevin Vanhoozer observes, "'Violence' is the operative concept in the postmodern criticism not only of the conceptual form of the penal substitution view but also of its very content."[2] I believe that any theology that stimulates violence is defective, so we need to examine our theology of the atonement very carefully in terms of the perception of God and of the behaviour that it encourages. This book will assist us in that task and so I am grateful to Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin for having pulled together their valuable collection of essays.

I will summarize the proposals contained in the 20 essays in this book and then assess their contribution, raise some questions and suggest ways in which I believe the proposals to be faulty. My thoughts may lead some to read the book but I'm hopeful that even for those who go no further, my essay will stimulate better understanding of Christ's work.

I. A Restatement of the Book's Proposals

A. The Editors' Intention

Brad Jersak sums up what he considers to be shared convictions among the authors of the essays in this collection (19). They recognize that "a shift in our understanding of the atonement is both necessary and well under way." Most of them "do not believe that the Cross saves us through the satisfaction of God's wrath by the punishment of Jesus Christ." Their essays repeatedly bring to the fore three

1 Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin. *Stricken by God? Non-violent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Abbotsford, B.C.: Fresh Wind Press, 2007). References to articles in this book will be parenthesized rather than footnoted.

2 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historial & Practical Perspectives*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 371.

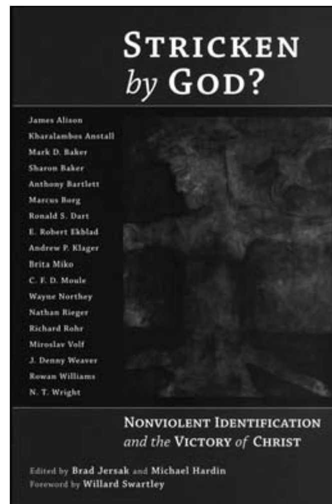
common themes: God's nonviolence in Christ at the cross, his "total identification with humanity in his incarnation and his call for us to identify with him in his life, death, resurrection and glorification," and the victory of Christ over Satan, sin and death.

Jersak then relates how he came to believe that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement which he had affirmed is unbiblical. This explains why he and Hardin have "gathered voices, past and present, to suggest that we see nonviolent identification and victory as a table around which Orthodox, Anglican, Anabaptist, Evangelical and Mainline theologians can rally" (53).

B. The Book's Structure

In Part I, Jersak and Hardin "lay the table," describing the issues with which the book will deal and stating their own understandings of the atonement. Part II addresses "the cross and the historical Jesus." Anglican bishop N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg have often been paired in panels and discussions because of their different perspectives, Wright being much more conservative than Borg.

The penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement is directly challenged in Part III by three essays (James Alison, E. Robert Ekblad, and Richard Rohr) on "Atonement and Sacrifice." In Part IV, three more essays (Rowan Williams with comments by Mark Baker, Sharon Baker and Brita Miko) address the issue of forgiveness in connection with the atonement. The role played in the atonement by justice is examined by three essays in Part V (C. F. D. Moule, Miroslav Volf and Mark D. Baker). Nonviolent victory is presented as the primary purpose of the atonement, in Part VI (by J. Denny Weaver, Wayne Northey and Nathan Rieger). Finally, atonement is considered within the framework of rebirth and deification that predominates in the eastern Christian tradition, in Part VII, by Anthony Bartlett, Andrew P. Klager, Kharalambos Anstall, and Ronald S. Dart.



Many of the essayists observe that biblical writers use numerous metaphors to describe Jesus' atoning work but most of them are explicit in rejecting penal substitution as one of the metaphors Scripture warrants.

C. The Models of Atonement Presented

I will take a more thematic approach to my own representation of the work of the various essayists. To some extent this overlaps the original structure, but rather than attempting a summary of each of the 30 essays, I want to zero in on the main thesis of each essayist as she or he describes why Jesus died and what God accomplished thereby. As noted above, it is the intention of the editors to present a compelling case for a nonviolent understanding of the atonement and, to that end, to demonstrate that penal substitution is not a model that Scripture teaches.

Many of the essayists observe that biblical writers use numerous metaphors to describe Jesus' atoning work but most of them are explicit in rejecting penal substitution as one of the metaphors Scripture warrants. Despite the editors' intentions, I found a few essays that did not serve their purpose well and which, in my view, actually cohere well with a penal substitutionary understanding and not necessarily with a nonviolent model, although I consider it a mistake to equate penal substitution with violence, for reasons I will spell out later in my critique.

Of the various models of the atonement that have been seriously proposed and appropriated in the history of the church's theological reflection, I was intrigued that just one gets no mention either positively or negatively, namely the "governmental theory" that was developed by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and that has been much favoured by Arminians. Its absence in this book is not something I regret but, given that the governmental theory was developed in the context of early post-Reformation objections to penal substitution, the lack of interest in it within these essays caught my attention. I'm guessing that the lack of interest in that model derives from a concern that, though the governmental theory was opposed to satisfaction or penal substitution, it taught that God specifically intended that Jesus should die, in order to preserve the moral order of God's governance of the world, and so it is deemed no less an instance of "divine violence."

1. Alternatives to satisfaction or penal substitution

Aspects of the following metaphors for the atonement are frequently accepted by believers in penal substitution but in the case of the essays putting forward these models, they are offered as alternatives, rather than supplements, to penal substitution.

a. Deification and recapitulation

Since deification or theosis[3] has been the dominant understanding of salvation within the Eastern Church, it is fitting that an essay should be reprinted from the work of a Greek Orthodox theologian. Kharalambos Anstall writes very disparagingly of what he calls "the western juridical justification theology of redemption" (482) which he sees as initiated

3 Becoming by grace what God is by nature.

by Augustine and later extended by Anselm and Aquinas, in an interpretation of the cross "informed by the heretical doctrine of 'original sin'" (486).

Instead, Anstall presents a redemptive work in which the incarnation is central rather than the cross. "The old (first) Adam is… replaced through the Incarnation by the new (second) Adam in a recapitulation of human nature, and thus becomes deified" (489). We were "made perishable by Adam's fall from grace" (490) and our own mortality and "eternal bondage to the lord of this world (Satan) through wrong choices could not be overcome by a mere act of our human will" (490). In order to accomplish a recapitulation, the second Adam had to "share the daily woes and anguish of ordinary human beings even while He Himself remained in a perfected state" (490). By putting on human flesh, the Word was able to defeat death "by (His) death in a single, magnificent display of co-suffering love" and then, through his resurrection, to extend "the potential for eternal life to all of humanity" (490).

From Anstall's Orthodox perspective then, the cross is "a symbol of life eternal through Christ's sacrifice" (491); it definitely does not "symbolize death nor does it imply an act of atonement for everlasting human guilt. Rather, the cross and resurrection represent for all mankind the same potential for 'sonship' with God that is enjoyed eternally by Christ" (491). We can realize that potential by entering into a cooperative relationship with God, in which we extend our love to the Saviour, pray "to receive God's love," keep the commandments of God and endeavour "to accomplish the truth path of Christ within the limits" of our capability (499). "Theosis is only possible through absolute, unswerving faith and trust in our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ" (502).

Andrew P. Klager expounds Irenaeus of Lyons' theory of recapitulation with particular attention to the nonviolence of Christ in the atonement narrative that Irenaeus gave us. Through the incarnation, which is central in Irenaeus's atonement chronology, the kingdom of God is personified in Jesus who embodied divine perfection, but that perfection included nonviolence so that it is inconceivable that God could be "implicated in violence in his strategy for redeeming humanity" (445).

J. Denny Weaver argues that theology should begin with the narrative of Jesus. Jesus confronted injustices and alleviated suffering but without violence.

Klager posits that "Irenaeus envisages justice holistically and ontologically as appeasing God by destroying death and restoring to him what is rightfully his, that is, all of creation—including humanity. In this fashion, justice is restorative rather than retributive; God is appeased since his creation is transformed into that which he desires it to be, while humanity also receives justice by its new-found capacity for ontological affiliation with the Incarnate Christ" (449) through instruction and empowerment (452). "Atonement is humanity's comprehensive identification with Christ whose objective is the reinstatement of *shalom*, and this through his own identification with humanity by means of incarnational instruction, nonviolent obedience and victory over death" (480).

"Christ was obedient not in the sense that he allowed his Father to kill him, as penal substitutionary models espouse, but because he aligned his response to his political execution with what the kingdom of God expected of him" (464). Christ "must suffer a violent execution because he *retained* the divine within the context of an earthly empire that rejected him, while humanity must suffer because it is invited to *reclaim* the divine in its confrontation with the socio-political opposition to which it is already accustomed. Both scenarios demand nonviolence if Christ and humanity wish to obediently affiliate themselves with the kingdom of God" (477).

b. Christus Victor

In various ways, Christ's victory is affirmed in many of the essays, but it is the central theme in some of them. Nathan Rieger proposes that "the Christus Victor motif, dominating the Lucan Kerygma, should be repopularized in the church's evangelism of the postmodern world" (379).

In a fine piece of exegesis, Rieger identifies six motifs common to the Christus Victor theory: (1) humanity under the bondage of evil powers, (2) the devil's claim to authority, (3) the recapitulation of sin at the cross, (4) the deception of the coalition of darkness into their murder of Jesus, (5) the disqualifying from authority of the powers of darkness, and (6) the exaltation of Jesus to authority (399). Rieger particularly appreciates the Christus Victor motif because he sees it as "an agenda for action, and not just explanation" (400). It is "not the exclusive way that Christians should see the atonement" but it is a major one and "perhaps one that is large enough to contain the others" (403).

J. Denny Weaver's construction takes issue with classic Christus Victor approaches because they do not avoid divine violence. Weaver argues that theology should begin with the narrative of Jesus (317) and that "integral to this narrative of Jesus is his rejection of violence" (318). Jesus confronted injustices and alleviated suffering but he did so without violence (322).

c. Atonement from the perspective of the mimetic anthropology[4] of René Girard

Anthony Bartlett offers a perspective that makes use of the idea of

4 Mimetic anthropology holds that: a) imitation is an aspect of behaviour that not only affects learning, but also desire, and imitated desire is a source of conflict; b) the scapegoat mechanism is the origin of sacrifice and the foundation of human culture, and religion was necessary in human evolution to control the violence that can come from mimetic rivalry; c) the Bible reveals the two previous ideas and denounces the scapegoat mechanism.

recapitulation but the framework for his proposal is primarily the mimetic anthropology of René Girard, although he also takes an important cue from Abelard's moral example theory. Bartlett argues that "the violence experienced in the cross…is not a matter of changing God or paying off the devil, but of entering the murderous cancer tissue of humanity to make possible a re-programming for the sake of life" (406–7).

As a result of the Word's becoming flesh and living, dying and rising again, "the whole human situation has *already* changed" (407) because of the "abyssal compassion" of God (408).

> Unless Jesus humanly refused and forgave every violent provocation, then true disclosure of the victim would never have taken place. Rather the cross would have been swallowed up immediately in the cyclical logic of offense and revenge. . . But in fact Jesus endlessly, abyssally, suffers with and forgives our violence while even so revealing it, and thus, at the all important personal level (saving grace), evokes in us an answering sorrow, love and conversion, a compassion reciprocal to his (408).

Michael Hardin also favours a mimetic approach, arguing that the purpose of Jesus' subjecting himself to human violence was to challenge and bring to an end the sacrificing of victims. Christ's resurrection is thus "the good news that God does not retaliate" (71). Similarly, James Alison writes: "God was occupying the space of *our* victim so as to show us that we need never do this again" (175). We need to see ourselves as being approached by our forgiving victim (177).

E. Robert Ekblad attends very carefully to the differences between the LXX[5] and the MT[6] readings of Isaiah 53 and he argues that the differences were "theologically motivated. They seek to disassociate God from the servant's (Israel's) suffering in verses where the MT could be (wrongly, I believe), and often has been, interpreted to support a notion of atonement through penal substitution" (204).

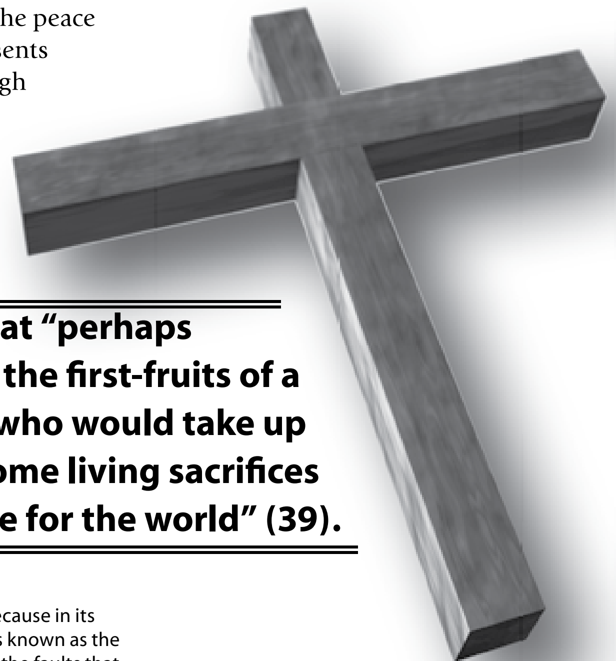
What results from the LXX reading, as Ekblad interprets it, appears to be an understanding that fits well with the mimetic approach. Ekblad describes Isaiah 53 as "clearly the first place in the entire Old Testament where a human being is described as carrying/bearing sin on behalf of others. In the LXX of Isaiah, the servant displaces the sinner and priest by becoming himself the carrier or bearer for sin—just as the servant corresponds with the priest who brings/carries 'our sins' corresponds with 'ewe lamb' or the 'two doves' which are carried for sacrifices" (187–88).

What Ekblad finds in the LXX of Isaiah 53 is substitution but not of a penal sort: the servant suffers for the sins of others but not in order to bear their punishment. He suffers as a righteous one who suffers unjustly at the hands of oppressors but he does not suffer God's wrath. The purpose of his suffering is pedagogical rather than expiatory. "The servant embodies in his suffering the Lord's training of the people. The servant's education through suffering achieves the peace for the people. The LXX presents the servant as the one through whom the Lord deals with human sin, voluntarily suffering and dying on people's behalf" (203).

The servant is righteous but "he demonstrates total solidarity with the people by suffering pain for them (53:4)" and his "persecution results in his death" (53:8). Thus, "the servant's total solidarity with sinful Israel and suffering for their sins gives meaning to persecution and suffering experienced by the innocent (53:9)" (204).

d. Christ as our example

Contemporary descriptions of Christ's work in terms of his victory and of his victimization frequently stress the exemplary value of his work, in echoes of Abelard's approach, but some writers are particularly explicit in this regard. Brad Jersak identifies three ways in which the killing of Jesus by wicked people, after he had come to give us good news of love, sets us free and gives us life. (1) We are set free "because rather than replying to our vengeance and violence in kind, Jesus lives out his own message of love by forgiving us for his murder." (2) "He sets us free from death and the fear of death when we join him in a kind of death that nullifies death." (3) Jesus saw his death as an hour of glory for the Son of Man because he became "the first seed of



Jersak suggests that "perhaps Christ's sacrifice is the first-fruits of a whole movement who would take up the Cross and become living sacrifices of co-suffering love for the world" (39).

5 MT (Masoretic Text): The Hebrew text of the Old Testament is called the Masoretic Text because in its present form it is based upon the Masora—the Hebrew textual tradition of the Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (or Masorites). The Masoretes were rabbis who make it their special work to correct the faults that had crept into the text of the Old Testament during the Babylonian captivity, and to prevent, for the future, its being corrupted by any alteration.

6 LXX (Septuagint): The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) is the name given to the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint has its origin in Alexandria, Egypt, and was translated between 300–200 BC. Widely used among Hellenistic Jews, this Greek translation was produced because many Jews spread throughout the empire were beginning to lose their Hebrew language.

many in a harvest movement that finds eternal life by giving our lives to God's kingdom-dream" (29).

Later, Jersak suggests that "perhaps Christ's sacrifice is the first-fruits of a whole movement who would take up the Cross and become living sacrifices of co-suffering love for the world" (39). "Christ is the new Passover feast which brings liberation as we opt in to the New Covenant" (41).

In this depiction of the death of Christ and its saving function, the instrument of our salvation appears to be our own sacrifice, as we follow the example of Jesus. Jersak describes it as a therapeutic rather than a juridical model of the Cross. God was not punishing Jesus for our sin (33) but "modeling perfectly his own call to love one's enemies and to pray for them, forgiving them from the heart," so that the Cross is a "manifestation of God's love rather than his wrath" (34).

Christ appears to die *with* us rather than *for* us, in this perspective and it often sounds as though justification (though that term is scarcely ever used because of its juridical association) is by works rather than by faith. Thus Jersak quotes with favour Borg and Crossan's statement that salvific "at-one-ment" with God as loving Parent is "only by participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus" (45), but this is presented as an alternative to atonement by Christ's substitution which leaves the impression that the work of reconciliation comes about through what we do rather than through what Jesus did for us.

The same impression is given by Jersak's discussion of Galatians 2:17–21. He argues that we cannot interpret the statement that Christ gave himself *for me* as *instead of me*. Rather, Jersak proposes, Jesus became a servant and endured death "in service of" me. Consequently, "As I join myself to him as his servant, I die with him and live for him" (47).

Mark Baker describes the saving work of Christ as it might be proclaimed in the context of a Filipino barrio, in a fine example of contextualized theology. Baker's construction of the gospel emphasizes the revelatory work of Jesus and calls upon hearers to follow Jesus' example. "The resurrection validates the life Jesus led. In a sense, through the resurrection God says to us, 'This is the life to imitate.' It is an invitation to live in freedom from the voices and powers that tells us we must mask our true humanity" (298–99).

Jesus also reveals God as "accepting and forgiving, a God whose ultimate solution is not to destroy through awesome power, but to heal and restore by shouldering suffering that is not rightly his" (299). The rage that killed Jesus was not God's but ours (302) and we need to see ourselves not just as the crucified who are oppressed by others but also as the crucifiers who participate "in the human dispositions and actions that nailed Jesus to the cross" (303).

The rage that killed Jesus was not God's but ours.

Jesus died "for us" in the sense that "he entered into our situation and shouldered the ultimate consequences of an alienation that was not his but ours. He suffered in our place to save us from suffering the ultimate consequence of our sin" (305). But the consequence Jesus bore was not the punishment required by God's justice, it was the enmity of sinners.

Yet, Jesus' participation in the life we live in a sinful world brings liberation in three ways: (1) it stops the cycle of violence (cf. the mimetic understanding) (306–7), (2) it provides forgiveness by demonstrating how relationships can be destroyed (307–8), and (3) it exposed "the fallacy of the supposed dominance of the powers" so that we can be "freed from their influence" by coming "to recognize and to treat the powers as the mere 'things' they are" (309). The "salvific significance of the cross and resurrection is not grounded in a divine adjustment of people's legal status in record books in heaven. Jesus through the cross and resurrection provides us the possibility of living differently today, and God's presence with us through the Holy Spirit enables us to live out this possibility" (311).

2. **Proposals that are coherent with penal substitution**

   a. ***Jesus as the representative of Israel in exile, suffering for their sins in order to bring redemption***

The longest essay in the book is a reprint of fine work by N. T. Wright on "The Reasons for Jesus' Crucifixion." His work on the reasons why the Romans and the Jewish authorities killed Jesus is very helpful but we are primarily interested in gaining an understanding of God's intentions in this event. Wright identifies the Last Supper as "the central symbolic action which provides the key to Jesus' implicit story about his own death" (92). It was some kind of Passover meal (93) which recalled God's deliverance of his people from Egypt but, "To a first-century Jew, it pointed to the return from exile, the new exodus, the great covenant renewal spoken of by the prophets;" it was the meal "which said that Israel's god was about to become king" (95).

Thus the meal "brought Jesus' own kingdom-movement to its climax. It indicated that the new exodus, and all that it meant, was happening *in and through Jesus himself*" (95). Jesus was informing his disciples that those who shared the meal, not only then but subsequently, were the people of the renewed covenant, the people who received 'the forgiveness of sins,' that is, the end of exile (101). They constituted "the true eschatological Israel."

Wright believes that the mindset of Jesus himself, which a first-century Jew could understand, was that "YHWH would act through the suffering of a particular individual in whom Israel's sufferings were focused; that this suffering would carry redemptive significance; *and that this individual would be himself*" (131). Jesus "announced the end of the present age; …and the reconstruction of the people of YHWH on a basis that would leave no future role for the Temple" (132). It was Jesus' vocation "as Israel's representative, to lose the battle on Israel's behalf" (133). Jesus "took upon himself the 'wrath' (which,

as usual in Jewish thought, refers to hostile military action) which was coming upon Israel because she had compromised with paganism and was suffering exile. He also took upon himself the 'wrath' which was coming upon Israel *because she had refused his way of peace*" (134).

Wright proposes that "Jesus saw his own approaching death in terms of the sacrificial cult," with Passover, rather than the Day of Atonement, as the controlling metaphor for his crucial symbol (143). It was also a "battle against the forces of darkness, standing behind the visible forces (both Roman and Jewish) ranged against him" (143). He fought this battle throughout his ministry but particularly at his death. "Through his work, YHWH would defeat evil, bringing the kingdom to birth, and enable Israel to become, after all, the light of the world" (147). Jesus "went to Jerusalem not just to preach, but to die." He "believed that the messianic woes were about to burst upon Israel, and that he had to take them upon himself, solo" (147).

b. Divine forgiveness as paradigmatic for ours

In a brief and very helpful meditation on the forgiveness of sins, Rowan Williams urges us not to confuse forgiveness with acquittal. He notes that "if we have been badly hurt by someone, then whatever happens the scars and memories will still be there, even if we 'forgive' them" (214). Real forgiveness cares deeply about what has been done but loves the wrong-doer with a love that is "strong enough to cope with and survive the hurt we have done" (215). Such forgiveness is creative and hopeful for the future. Only the victim has the right to forgive and this is why God has the right, for he is "the ultimate victim of all human cruelty" and yet his love is inexhaustible (216).

These truths are proclaimed in the gospel by the cross, where we see the depth of human rejection of love but see also that "not even *that* can destroy God: with the wounds of the cross still disfiguring his body, he returns out of hell to his disciples and wishes them peace" (216). Mark Baker appends a few comments that aim to differentiate the thrust of Williams' meditation from that of penal satisfaction but nothing in Williams' own presentation is inconsistent with penal substitution.

Miroslav Volf posits that "to offer forgiveness is at the same time to condemn the deed and accuse the doer; to receive forgiveness is at the same time to admit to the deed and to accept the blame."

c. Divine forgiveness and reconciliation that does not ignore the demands of justice

Miroslav Volf's essay is extremely helpful theologically, particularly for the ways in which it informs our own relationship with those who wrong us. His goal is "to contest the claim that the Christian faith, as one of the major world religions, predominantly fosters violence, and to argue, instead, that it should be seen as a contributor to more peaceful social environments" (269). Very cogently, he demonstrates that "when it comes to Christianity, *the cure against religiously induced or legitimized violence is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, more religion*" (269).

Volf suggests that one "wrongheaded way to relate justice to forgiveness and reconciliation goes under the name of 'cheap reconciliation'" (274). It is wrong because "cheap reconciliation sets 'justice' and 'peace' against each other as alternatives" and thereby betrays those who suffer injustice, deception, and violence (275). But Volf wisely cautions that we need to be careful because "the imperative of justice, severed from the overarching framework of grace within which it is properly situated and from the obligation to non-violence, underlies much of the Christian faith's misuse for religiously legitimizing violence" (275).

Volf seeks "an alternative both to forgiveness and reconciliation outside of justice and to forgiveness and reconciliation after justice" and he finds it in the narrative of the cross where God shows himself as one who "offers grace—not cheap grace, but grace nonetheless—to the vilest evildoer" (280). Volf posits that "to offer forgiveness is at the same time to condemn the deed and accuse the doer; to receive forgiveness is at the same time to admit to the deed and to accept the blame" (283).

Forgiveness presupposes that full justice has not been done and "strictly cannot be done" (284). It "involves self-denial and risk" for "one is not fully certain whether one's magnanimity will bear fruit either in one's inner peace or in a restored relationship" because "full-fledged and complete forgiveness is not unconditional." When repentance does not follow the offer of forgiveness, its absence amounts "to a refusal to see oneself as guilty and therefore a refusal to receive forgiveness as forgiveness. Hence an unrepentant wrongdoer must in the end remain an unforgiven wrongdoer" (284).

II. Assessment of the Models of Atonement Presented

A. Ways in Which These Essays Make a Valuable Contribution

At the beginning of the essay written by C. F. D. Moule in 1965 and republished in this collection, Moule acknowledges that many, "perhaps most," readers of his essay would "find themselves in disagreement with the radical thesis" he was about to present (254). But then he says: "My hope is that time will not have been wasted—whatever the conclusions reached—because the thesis leads us in any case to ponder, once more, the very heart of the Gospel" (254).

That is the attitude with which I recommend we approach this whole collection of essays. I do find myself in disagreement with the radical thesis of most of these essays but pondering their proposals has been worthwhile. A few positive features strike me as particularly worthy of note.

1. Clear assertions of the peaceful nature of the life to which God calls all followers of Jesus

We who follow the Prince of Peace are naturally troubled by the violence that is so prevalent in our own society and in much of the world. Having been called upon to deny ourselves and to take up our cross and to follow Jesus (Mt 16:24), we know that we will suffer at the hands of the unrighteous as he did but that vengeance is not our prerogative (Rom 12:19). Whenever possible, and so far as it depends upon us, we must live at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18), and we must never use force in proclamation of the gospel or furtherance of God's kingdom.

So, the strong commitment to non-violence that inspires most of the essayists in this volume is commendable. I believe that many of the essays have misconstrued the nature of God and of the atoning work of Christ, in order to counteract violence, but I appreciate the challenge to reconsider essential aspects of our theological formulation to be sure that no distortions have resulted in the violence in our environment.

2. Affirmation that Christian life is a call to costly discipleship

The essayists frequently remind us that the call to follow Jesus is not an offer of cheap grace, it is a call to take up a cross and lose our life in order to find it. Following Jesus will bring suffering, as those who reject God and his righteousness turn that rejection upon us. We must suffer with Jesus if we are to be glorified with him. This is a message clearly taught in the New Testament but too little preached in western evangelicalism.

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Michael Hardin suggests that a nonviolent mimetic approach to the death of Christ "will mean a costly understanding of discipleship. It will mean the active choice to live a life of non-retaliation, non-retribution or vengeance; a life grounded in forgiveness, reconciliation and peacemaking. Discipleship as 'cross-carrying' is life lived as Jesus died" (72). This is well said and can be equally well affirmed by proponents of penal substitution. God's forgiveness of us, accomplished through the satisfaction of his justice on our behalf, now puts us under obligation to be forgiving. Hardin is right to see this as essential to the stopping of violence (75) but we need not take a Girardian approach to get there.

B. Questions and Concerns about the Proposals Put Forward

1. Non-violence as the defining hermeneutical criterion for a theology of the atonement

a. A narrow definition of violence

Whether or not we believe that God ever acts violently will depend to some extent on how we define "violence." English dictionaries generally indicate that the term can be used in a couple of senses that differ from one another importantly. Violence can refer to the use of great physical force but its legal sense is "the unlawful exercise of physical force."[7]

From the standpoint of many of the essayists in this collection, there appears to be no lawful exercise of force. Sharon Baker provides a fine description of the ways in which Scripture speaks of justice. She begins with the observation that "justice is often set in opposition to violence" so that "when violence takes place, justice is absent" (229). This would be true, if "violence" had the sense of the *unjust* use of force but Baker does not consistently use the term in that way.

If violence is, by definition, always negative, it is obviously inappropriate for God. However, it is extraordinarily difficult to understand the biblical narrative if such is the case. To use "violence" to describe any exercise of force (lawful or unlawful) leads to unfortunate statements like this: "If justice is not present in violence, how then can we conceive of a God who executes justice through violence, especially through the violent murder of an innocent man on the cross?" (229).

In addition to the problem caused by too negative a concept of "violence," the manner in which divine and human agency work together in the biblical narrative is overlooked here, so that God becomes culpable for the evil of all human violence that serves God's purpose without thereby absolving human wrongdoers. A number of unfortunate theological consequences follow from the over-restrictive sense in which "violence" is used.

b. Agenda driven interpretation of Scripture

Michael Hardin is right when he asserts: "How one uses the Bible is a key as to how one will understand the atonement" (60). It is precisely here that the consequences of making nonviolence the primary hermeneutical lens for reading Scripture become problematic, particularly when "violence" is defined as intrinsically evil.

The place of the Old Testament and its depiction of God in the construction of Christian theology is a very important issue. Hardin reminds us that the Anabaptists were deemed guilty of Marcionism[8] by other Reformers and he suggests that in their "rediscovery" of the Sermon on the Mount in the mid-twentieth century, "One could say that Mennonites were all but practical Marcionites!"

This is a concern that rose in my mind frequently as I read these essays, and I was struck by how little the narrative of the Old Testament informed the reflections on the life and death of Jesus. Given the

7 E.g., the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

8 Marcionism is an early Christian dualist belief system that originates in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope at Rome around the year 144. Marcion affirmed Jesus Christ as the Saviour sent by God and Paul as his chief apostle, but he rejected the Hebrew Bible and Yahweh. Marcionists believed that the wrathful Hebrew God was a separate and lower entity than the all-forgiving God of the New Testament.

conscientiousness with which Jesus pursued his mission as one who fulfilled the promises of the old covenant (being a prophet greater than Moses, a priest greater than Aaron and a king greater than David), it is cause for concern that a pre-commitment to God as nonviolent produces such disjunction between the Old Testament scriptures which were Jesus' own Bible and the New Testament scriptures, which unpack for us how God's old covenant promises were realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

If one starts with the presupposition that violence is always wrong, peculiar readings of Scripture are often necessary in order to absolve God of any involvement in the use of force.

Sharon Baker considers it our "responsibility to reinterpret the character and heart of God, from that of violent to anti-violent" (226), but from where does this "responsibility" arise and how will we tell when such reinterpretations become invalid? Baker's goal is "to reinterpret the tradition by reading scripture through the lens of a peace-loving, anti-violent God" (227), but from what canon is that lens derived as the essential hermeneutical criterion for the Bible and its interpretation?

Weaver writes: "While the entire canon is important and relevant and may be made use of in developing the context of atonement theology, the canon or the entire biblical text is not a norm for atonement theology on the same level as the narrative of Jesus through which the entire canon is read and interpreted" (320). If preserving the absoluteness of nonviolence requires us to ignore the old covenant context of Jesus, too great a price has been paid and the Trinity itself may be at risk, for YHWH of the Old Testament comes to look very unlike the Jesus portrayed in these nonviolent constructions. Certainly, Jesus is the supreme self-revelation of God but the God he reveals to us is essentially continuous with the God who revealed himself to Israel in his great acts of deliverance from Egypt and later through judges and kings and by powerful direct acts, such as interventions of the Angel of the Lord (e.g. Isa 37:36).

c. Diminishment of the wrath of God

If one starts with the presupposition that violence is always wrong, peculiar readings of Scripture are often necessary in order to absolve God of any involvement in the use of force. Such an approach, for instance, leaves no room for the wrath of God which is viewed as antithetical to divine love. Steve Chalke, a British objector to penal substitutionary atonement is cited favourably by Brad Jersak on this point: "If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetuated by God towards humankind but borne by the Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to pay evil with evil" (34, citing *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 182–83). This follows, of course, only if any use of force by God in expression of his righteous wrath is evil.

Coupled with the contention that divine justice is always restorative and never retributive (S. Baker, 234), these commitments to nonviolence require us to reject much biblical teaching concerning God's attitude and action toward sin. It removes the possibility of any divine punishment of sin, particularly of the eternal divine punishment that is generally understood by Christians to be at work in the assignment of unrepentant sinners to hell, and so it could lead to complete universalism (236–37).

To maintain an experience of hell for unrepentant sinners, some scholars propose that "God's wrath refers to his handing people over to the (natural) consequences of their unfaithfulness."[9] But Henri Blocher aptly points out that "the creator God is not simply working 'outside' the processes of nature, for they execute his sovereign decree."[10]

d. Misconstrual of divine violence as justification for human violence

Sharon Baker aptly expresses the concerns of many who wish to disassociate God from violence, namely, that divine violence fosters human violence. "Christians who view God as warrior, commanding armies of people to fight and kill, may also believe that God commissions nations and people to go to war, killing others in order to protect the innocent…. On the other hand, Christians who focus on God as loving, forgiving, and reconciling, see God as nonviolent, as a God who rejects violence and killing. As a result, killing others for any reason, even in war, is inappropriate" (222).

Thankfully, Baker later acknowledges that "connections between atonement theory and social violence cannot be established with certainty, for causes and their effects are often difficult to prove" (223). One can affirm penal substitution as God's way of redeeming sinners and still take a Christian pacifist approach in regard to non-involvement in police and military action, or in civil government, because of a particular theology of the Christian role in society. The two doctrines are not inextricably related; they should cohere but coherence does not determine one's position on either the Christological or the social moral issue.

We do well to examine the impact of our theology on every aspect of our lives, so the challenge is constructive, but the moral theology that undergirds the Christian traditions of justified war and just police-making cannot simply be correlated with theories of the atonement.

On the other hand, it is difficult to

9 E.g., C. H. Dodd, as cited by Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," (376).

10 Henri Blocher, "The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ: The Current Theological Situation," *EuroJTh 8* [1999]: 32; as paraphrased by Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 376 n 23.

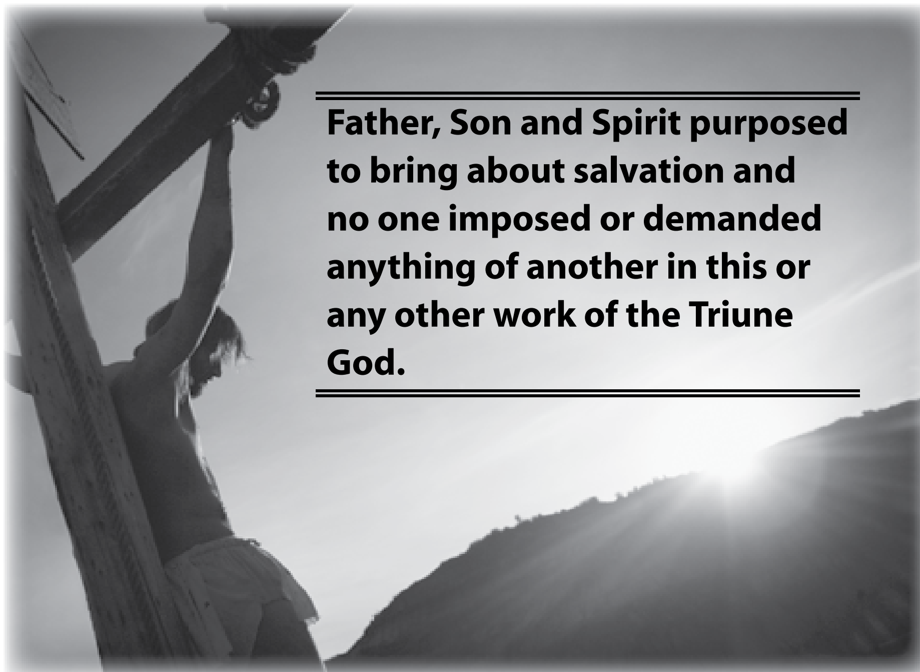
see how the testimony of the whole of Scripture concerning God's nature and action in the world, particularly in Christ's atoning work, can be properly understood when one starts from the following perspective: "Mixed within the atonement language of scripture we see a God that is both just and merciful, producing a tension between justice and mercy. God forgives freely yet at the same time demands a substitute to take away the debt, compromising the nature of forgiveness as complete pardon" (224).

Much work has been done in the Christian tradition on the way in which these attributes of God cohere, so that love and wrath, mercy and justice are seen within a larger framework of divine attributes that allows both to be vigorously affirmed without tension. Irresolvable tension follows only from a prior decision that force is always inappropriate for God, not from a careful reading of the whole narrative of Scripture. With respect to the human plane, Miroslav Volf's essay very helpfully describes the truly Christian way of living graciously and forgivingly, without violence, while taking seriously the demands of justice.

Although C. F. D. Moule aims primarily to demonstrate that God's justice is not retributive, his treatment is nuanced and includes much that penal substitutionists can affirm. In regard to the particular point we are examining here, for instance, his comments on Romans 12:19–21 are very helpful. Moule writes: "It is perfectly clear that, while Christians are here forbidden to vindicate themselves by retaliation (*me heautous ekdikountes*. v. 19), this is not because vindication, as such, is deemed undesirable, but because the proper person to achieve it is God himself. The phrase *dote topon the(i) orge(i)* is extremely difficult to interpret in any sense except 'give *God's* wrath room'—stand aside and let God wreak vengeance" (262). This is well said and it provides a perspective that is missing in many of the other essays, which are single-mindedly focused on portraying a God without wrath or vengeance.

In the end, however, despite the value of Moule's careful exegesis of many important texts regarding God's justice, his objection to penal substitution is explicit and it is unclear *why* Jesus died and *how* that accomplished salvation.

If the unstated conclusion is that God's purpose in Jesus' death was either reform or deterrence, the case has not been persuasively made. Moule grants that sin has consequences which God respects but I was left wondering: "Did Jesus bear those consequences on behalf of sinners?" If so, substitution is at work, but the penalty is passive and self-inflicted rather than the wrath of God against sin. In that construction, there is still a place for hell but not as eternal divine punishment of unrepentant sinners.



2. Caricatures of penal substitutionary atonement

When one disagrees with someone else's theology it is important that the position one rejects is accurately represented. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in these essays. In commending the superior understanding of the Orthodox Church, for instance, Anstall writes: "One is moved to question what sort of love would require a supposedly adoring father to demand the agony, torment, and bloody sacrifice of his only son to accomplish the fulfillment of his own selfish satisfaction" (488).

No significant believer in penal substitution would portray the Father's act as done for selfish satisfaction. The description falls into the common error of ignoring the Trinitarian unity in the willing and execution of the Son's atoning work. Father, Son and Spirit purposed to bring about salvation and no one imposed or demanded anything of another in this or any other work of the Triune God.

Wayne Northey cites a statement from Eastern Orthodox writer Alexandre Kalomiros that seriously distorts the understanding of God's saving work in western theology and does so in rather nasty terms:

> The 'God' of the West is an offended and angry God, full of wrath for the disobedience of men, who desires in His destructive passion to torment all humanity unto eternity for their sins, unless He receives an infinite satisfaction for His offended pride.
>
> What is the Western dogma of salvation? Did not God kill God in order to satisfy His pride, which the Westerners euphemistically call justice? And is it not by this infinite satisfaction that He deigns to accept the salvation of some of us?
>
> What is salvation for western theology? Is it not salvation from the wrath of

> God? Do you see, then, that Western theology teaches that our real danger and our real enemy is our Creator and God? Salvation, for Westerners is to be saved from the 'hands of God!' (361).

The animosity portrayed here is disturbing, particularly if it represents a serious assessment by Kalomiros arrived at through careful reading of western theologians, rather than a polemic aimed at keeping Eastern Orthodox Christians from paying any attention to the theology of the western church.

Rejection of penal substitution is sometimes put in terms of a choice between either/or when those who affirm penal substitution characteristically affirm both/and. For instance, Brad Jersak comments on Christ's "modeling perfectly his own call to love one's enemies," and posits that the Cross is therefore "a manifestation of God's love rather than his wrath" (34, cf. 53). This is a false disjunction from the standpoint of penal substitution, which sees God's work of appeasing his own wrath against sinners as the supreme demonstration of his love. In responding to caricatures such as these, Vanhoozer remarks that "it is important not to assume that punishment presupposes an emotionally unstable deity who flies into fits of rage. Penal substitution does not require such caricatures."[11]

Marcus Borg states that "the way of the cross is about discipleship, not believing in the blood of Jesus as a substitute for our own" (159) but we need not choose between these two. Being justified by faith because of Christ's righteousness on our behalf does not exclude but necessitates our faithful following of the way of Jesus.

Wayne Northey claims that "penal theorists set God as object, not agent, of reconciliation" (365) but this is a false disjunction. Although we do believe that the primary problem brought about by sin is that it alienates us from God so that we experience his love as wrath, the wonder of the gospel of grace is that God himself brought about reconciliation through Christ by bearing his own wrath in the place of sinners. God is *both* object and agent of reconciliation. Northey goes on to state that redemption is "a change of lordship, not decree of punishment" (365) but, once again, we must insist that it is both. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we are liberated from *both* the guilt and the power of sin.

3. God's specific intention for the cross

Even authors in this book who admit that Christ died according to a divine purpose are quick to reject any suggestion that suffering the wrath of God against sin was Christ's purpose. Brad Jersak, for instance, acknowledges that Scripture indicates that the crucifixion of Jesus "happened according to God's sovereign plan and knowledge (Acts 2:23, 3:18)," but he argues that God delivered up or handed over Christ and that Christ gave or delivered himself (citing Jn 10:17–18) "to and for us." Jersak posits that "God did indeed purpose to offer his Son in love to us, for our salvation, and this included the foreknowledge of our violent rejection of him. God did this, not because he required penal satisfaction, but because our redemption would require Jesus' journey through the valley of suffering and death (at the hands of wicked men) that he might emerge in resurrection and victory (by God's power)" (28 n 15; cf. also Weaver, 352).

Marcus Borg speaks very similarly when he suggests that, like the storyteller of Genesis who recounted the story of Joseph, "Early Christians looking back on what did happen ascribed providential meanings to Jesus' death. But this did not mean that it had to happen" (160).

Jesus came to die not simply out of a will to be obedient to the Father but because he was as committed to the redemption of a great host of human beings as was the Father and the Spirit.

Borg grants that the story of Joseph "affirms that God can use even the evil deed of selling a brother into slavery for a providential purpose," but he understates the divine intentionality to which Joseph testified (Gen 45:5–8). In the case of both Joseph and Jesus, God did not simply take an act of human evil and bring good out of it, after the fact, God purposed that Joseph should get to Egypt and that Jesus should die an accursed death on the cross. The evil that was done in bringing these things about was morally chargeable to the account of human sinners whose motives were evil, but God did not instigate them to that evil, he simply chose not to prevent it because it served his good purposes (cf. Acts 4:24–28). Proper understanding of the way in which human and divine agency operates simultaneously in the events of history is critically missing at this point.

Any description of the atoning work of Christ that portrays the death of Christ as anything less than God's intention for the Son's coming into the world is seriously flawed. Even as Jesus agonizes over the approach of his death he prays: "And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (Jn 12:27).

The death of Jesus was not simply a tragedy perpetrated through acts of human violence; it came about by God's intention.[12] We can identify various reasons why God intended Jesus to die but that he did so is unquestionable. In regard to that intention, it is essential that we always keep in mind the

11 Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 375–76. As an example of such a caricature, Vanhoozer cites Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 53.

12 Within the book, Anthony Bartlett rightly objects that "it is impossible for Weaver to lose God's active purpose in Jesus' death" (412). Bartlett says: "Weaver of course calls on the resurrection as part of the triumph of God over the powers of oppression, and it's hard to conceive such a transcendent event without divine intentionality.... In respect of the historical Jesus it seems to me implausible that such an extraordinary figure would go to his death without some willed, future, divinely authored meaning" (419).

unbreakable harmony between the three persons of the Godhead. Jesus came to die not simply out of a will to be obedient to the Father but because he was as committed to the redemption of a great host of human beings as was the Father and the Spirit.

The Father loved Jesus because, as the Good Shepherd, he laid down his life for the sheep, but Jesus did this of his own accord, no one took his life from him (Jn 10:17–18). Too often, objectors to the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement complain that it was abusive for the Father to inflict such suffering upon the Son (e.g. Jersak, 34) but this completely misconstrues the mutual commitment on the part of Father, Son and Spirit to every aspect of the Son's work.

4. Humans as the object or direction of Christ's atoning offering

Theories of the atonement have frequently been subdivided according to their understanding of the direction of Christ's atoning work, whether he offered himself up to the Father, to Satan, or to us. In their effort to avoid implicating God in the violence of the cross, many of the essayists in this volume argue for the last of these. The consequence of this move is most often a narrowing of the purpose of Christ's life and death to the work of revelation and the setting of an example for us to follow.

James Alison is explicit about what he takes to be the human direction of God's work in Christ. "God is propitiating *us*. In other words, who is the angry divinity in the story? *We are*. That is the purpose of the atonement. *We* are the angry divinity. *We* are the ones inclined to dwell in wrath and think we need vengeance in order to survive" (175). In Alison's portrayal, God "was giving himself entirely without ambivalence and ambiguity for *us*, towards *us*, in order to set *us* 'free from our sins'—'our sins' being our way of being bound up with each other in death, vengeance, violence and what is commonly called 'wrath'" (175).

This is an issue that gets at the heart of God's purpose in Christ's death and why and how it was effective for the redemption of sinners. If the atonement is directed at us as sinners, the problem of sin must be understood in terms of our animosity toward God rather than God's just wrath against us and our sin. For reconciliation to occur, it is therefore our attitude toward God that needs to be changed rather than his attitude to us.

Constructions that stress the importance of following Christ's example contain a necessary truth but lose something critical in the process. In Mark Baker's essay, for instance, Christ's identification with us is clear, and the call for us to follow Jesus and live out the liberating effects of his example, through the power of the Spirit, is inspiringly described.

Similarly, Denny Weaver argues stirringly for discipleship as intrinsic to the motif of the atonement, but the outworking of this tends toward saving ourselves through that discipleship. He writes: "One experiences the salvation it [i.e., narrative Christus Victor] offers by living within the narrative of Jesus that it presents" (337). But the risk is great that Jesus will be seen as no more than an example, leaving the impression that no justification of guilty sinners is needed, or that reconciliation is cheap (cf. Volf's concern), or that justification is by works. Any of these outcomes distorts the good news of what God did in Jesus because we could not save ourselves, particularly not from the consequences of sin that alienates us from a holy God.

Constructions that stress the importance of following Christ's example contain a necessary truth but lose something critical in the process.

Those who follow Girard's lead and view the cross as God's way of ending the cycle of violence that human societies address ineffectively through identifying and excluding a scapegoat, also construct a doctrine of the atonement that addresses Christ's work at sinful humans rather than toward God himself. William Placher, though no proponent of penal substitution himself, "wonders whether Girard's account provides sinners with the forgiveness they really need."[13] Vanhoozer sagely asks: "Is salvation simply a matter of the cessation of scapegoating? Will the problem of guilt (not to mention the problem of bondage) really go away once the scapegoat mechanism has been exposed?" Vanhoozer thinks not,[14] and I share his scepticism.

5. Divine justice and grace

Opponents of a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement frequently argue that it is problematic because it makes grace conditional rather than believing that God is able simply to forgive sinners without demanding satisfaction of his justice as a condition.

Marcus Borg, for instance, claims that, with the rise of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, "Radical grace became conditional grace. And conditional grace is no longer grace" (157). The principle Borg cites here is valid; grace is, by definition, giving good to those who do not deserve it. Puzzlingly, Borg appears to have misunderstood the way in which penal substitution operates. It is true that if God justified us and forgave us for our sin against him, based upon our compensatory good deeds, then salvation would not be of grace but of merit. What he fails to see is the central truth propounded in the doctrine of penal substitution which is that, though God's justice must be satisfied, God graciously fulfills its requirements on behalf of sinners. This preserves the absolute graciousness of God's saving work.

In a strange misconstrual of penal

13 "Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement," *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 9; cited by Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 390.

14 Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 390.

We are not freed from concern about our guilt by coming to understand that scapegoating is wrong and refusing to continue victimizing others. We are set free by the knowledge that Christ Jesus has died, has ascended to the right hand of God and there "intercedes for us" (8:34).

substitution, James Alison suggests that it "always presupposes that it is *us* satisfying God" (175). This is very peculiar because the tradition has always taught that nothing we do (neither the act of faith nor any acts of obedience) merits our redemption; God in Christ graciously fulfills the law on our behalf and declares us not guilty because of our union with Christ, which union is realized through faith that is itself God's gift (Eph 2:8–9). In this way, God remains just even though he justifies sinners (Rom 3:24–26) because he is not guilty of the injustice that God hates in other judges, namely, the justification of the unrighteous. By virtue of the union of sinners with Christ, God's declaration that believers are righteous is not a legal fiction, it is reality by virtue of Christ's righteousness.

When James Alison reads Romans 8:31–32 ("What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"), he hears Paul "struggling to find language about the divine generosity. That is the really difficult thing for us to imagine," Alison proposes. "We can imagine retaliation, we can imagine protection; but we find it awfully difficult to imagine someone we despised, and were awfully glad not to be like—whom we would rather cast out so as to keep ourselves going—we find it awfully difficult to imagine that person generously irrupting into our midst so as to set us free to enable something quite new to open up for us. But being empowered to imagine all that generosity is what atonement is all about" (179).

We certainly do need to be amazed at the generosity of God's grace, but the classical understanding of penal substitution much better grasps the extent of God's gracious generosity than does the mimetic theory that Alison presents. Paul is indeed impressed with the generosity of God but, in the context of Romans 8, he is responding to the question "who will bring any charge against God's elect?" (8:33). The answer is that "it is God who justifies." That context of justification is evaded in mimetic constructions and much is lost in the process. We have sinned against God; we know that, and the adversary of our souls reminds us of it and accuses us before God.

We are not freed from concern about our guilt by coming to understand that scapegoating is wrong and refusing to continue victimizing others. We are set free by the knowledge that Christ Jesus has died, has ascended to the right hand of God and there "intercedes for us" (8:34). Christ's intercession is effective, not because he pleads our merit in forgiving others who wrong us and in refusing to take vengeance upon them, but because he himself has fulfilled the law on our behalf and died in our stead and now intercedes for us as our great High Priest who was himself the sacrifice for our sin.

The role of Jesus as the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45–49) gives us an important window on the saving work of Jesus as the one who obeyed the commandment and lived. Through one man's disobedience, sin had come into the world and all had become sinners (Rom 5:12), but through the obedience of the second Adam, the head of a new race, justification and life came for all in him (Rom 5:18–21).

The righteous life of Jesus was essential to his saving work because it recapitulated the testing of the first Adam. Jesus fulfilled the law, having lived a life of continual obedience to the Father, so death had no claim on him as it does on those who break God's law. The death of Jesus was therefore not for his own sins, nor was it simply an act of innocently suffering injustice inflicted upon him by sinful human beings, it was the offering up of a perfect life in a death that was an act of covenant solidarity with his people, the head dying for the body and establishing the new covenant in his blood.

On the cross, grace was supremely demonstrated and justice was fully satisfied. The blessings of the old covenants (with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David) were all secured for God's people through that new covenant that brought blessing to the nations and to all of creation. God's mission to bless the world was ultimately accomplished in and through Jesus.[15]

N. T. Wright's construction of Jesus as representative of Israel, bearing the punishment of exile and restoring it to God's favour, is helpful. It fits well with Kevin Vanhoozer's argument that "the biblical framework for interpreting the saving significance of Jesus' death is *covenantal* rather than merely legal." He sees this as important because "neither the Abrahamic, nor the Sinaitic, nor the new covenant was founded on an originary act of violence. In the context of God's covenant with Israel, *the law served the purpose of regulating relationships, both within the covenant community and between the covenant community and God*." Vanhoozer therefore suggests that, "from a biblical perspective, God's justice is a matter of his preserving *right covenantal relationships*, and of doing so with integrity (i.e., as a holy, just and loving

15 A brief but very fine description of the covenantal nature of salvation is found in Christopher Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story* (Nottingham, InterVarsity Press, 2008), 58–121.

God)."[16] Vanhoozer beautifully sums up Jesus' self understanding:

> Jesus' seminal interpretation of his own death enables us to understand its saving significance as the inaugurating event of a newer and more wonderful covenant. Jesus' death on the cross is a new exodus, a new Passover supper, a new return from exile, an entry into a new kind of Promised Land, a building of a new and better temple. God reconciles the world to himself by providing his own Son as a substitute for the exile that should be ours. Jesus is God's gift, the goat that bears our guilt—the covenantal curse, separation from the promises of God—who in doing so enables our covenant restoration. *Jesus' death on the cross is at once an exodus and an exile, the condition of the possibility of our entry to the promised land of the Holy Spirit*.[17]

In the rejection of penal substitution as an aspect of Christ's atoning work, many of the essays in this collection fail to address the problem of human guilt, of the sin that alienates sinners from a holy God, and that must be addressed for reconciliation to occur.

Miroslav Volf's essay makes a splendid contribution in regard to justice and forgiveness and his proposal coheres well with a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement. He acknowledges the legitimate demands of justice but provides a framework in which God foregoes those claims on *our* part but does not simply overlook our guilt. Rather, he satisfies the demands of justice in his own action, so that not only does forgiveness result when it is received in repentance and faith, but guiltlessness is obtained, what Paul calls "justification."

Volf describes God's act of forgiveness and reconciliation as a model for human relationships but not one that we can completely copy. We are unable to discern accurately what is wrong and what justice entails; we are ourselves guilty (unlike God who was the purely innocent victim of our offences). Yet, having been forgiven purely because of God's grace, we are called to offer grace ourselves, to seek to embrace and to offer forgiveness. In our case, this may well entail repentance and *receiving* forgiveness as well.

Volf's attendance to the removal of guilt in God's forgiveness draws our attention to a critical feature that is lacking in so many of the essays where fear of the juridical element in Christ's atoning work because of its perceived violence, causes justification to be largely unmentioned. Volf writes:

> Only divine forgiveness actually removes guilt. When human beings forgive they (1) forego resentment, (2) refuse to press the claims of justice against the other and therefore also (3) bear the cost of the wrongdoing. As a result of human forgiveness, the guilty is *treated* as if he or she were not guilty (to be distinguished from *defining* forgiveness itself as treating the other as if he or she had not committed the offense). But unless forgiven by God, he or she remains guilty, human forgiveness notwithstanding" (283 n. 34).

In the rejection of penal substitution as an aspect of Christ's atoning work, out of fear of portraying God as violent, many of the essays in this collection fail to address the problem of human guilt, of the sin that alienates sinners from a holy God, and that must be addressed for reconciliation to occur.

Volf does not explicate the doctrine of the atonement that underlies God's costly forgiveness but what he describes is thoroughly coherent with a penal substitutionary understanding. God dares not simply overlook the terrible offenses we have committed against him, and so he bears them himself and suffers the consequences on behalf of sinners. Only in this way is the guiltlessness that is necessary for divine forgiveness achieved. Those who reject the doctrine of Christ's vicarious suffering of the wrath of God against sin, on behalf of undeserving sinners, leave unexplained the critical question of how it is that God can forgive sinners and be reconciled to them, because of Christ's death on the cross.

6. Christ's victory over Satan accomplished by penal substitution

Nathan Rieger suggests that Christus Victor might be a metaphor "large enough to contain the others" (403). Certainly, the victory of Christ is clearly taught in the New Testament as essential to our redemption from all that once bound us. Christ destroyed death (2 Tim 1:10) along with the law and sin (1 Cor 15:55–57). He overcame the hostile spiritual forces and stripped them of their power (Col 2:15). But Christ's victory over the powers of evil will not suffice as the overarching metaphor for the atonement, because it was, in fact, achieved by means of his penal substitution. This has been expertly demonstrated by Henri Blocher.[18]

The Lamb wages his war in a way that is adapted to his adversary. Satan's power is twofold: seductive temptation and accusation. Twice Satan is called

16 Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 380–81.

17 Ibid., 399.

18 Henri Blocher, "Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment." Address at Regent College Theology Conference, Oct. 19, 2001.

"tempter" in the New Testament and it is only when humans believe his lie that they go the way of death.

Adam sinned freely, with nothing in his nature that tended him to it but, after the fall, the tempter's power is reinforced by human nature, our "flesh." Nevertheless, people continue to sin willingly. Once the lie is believed it becomes more firmly entrenched, but temptation is not the last secret of Satan's hold on us. He is also engaged in accusing us before God (Rev 12:10), an activity that also belongs in the law court (cf. Zech 3:1). Satan, the accuser, on that occasion was able to appeal to justice, for the high priest Joshua was unclean and the righteous Judge could not ignore that fact. Similarly, in the case of all God's people, the weapon of the accuser is God's own law to which Satan can appeal and demand that sinners die, for the power of sin is the law (1 Cor 15:56) and the fear of death is fear of condemnation.

Christ's victory is also twofold. First, Christ, as second Adam, remained obedient in truth against all seductions of the tempter and he used Scripture against Satan during the confrontation in the desert (Lk 4:1–13). The truth is also important in our own spiritual struggle against the powers of darkness and anti-Christ (1 Jn 2:18–28; 4:1–6). But against Satan's use of the law of God in accusation against God's people, Christ's work on the cross was critical. Colossians 2:14–15 connects the triumph of the cross to the cancelling of the bond against us. God made us alive with Christ when he forgave us all our sins, "erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it."

This is why the victory of Christ, delivering us from the bondage of sin and the curse of the law, from death and exile and the power of Satan must be seen as integrally related to his satisfying the demands of the law and the sanctions of the covenant on our behalf. It was by the blood of the Lamb that the saints overcame (Rev 12:11) because that blood cancelled the claim of the law against them, wiped out their sin and brought deliverance.

It was by the shedding of his blood that the Lamb overcame Satan and this was neither a ransom paid to Satan, as the earliest proponents of Christus Victor claimed, nor was it a demonstration to us that the cycle of violence must be brought to an end; it was the fulfilment of all the righteous demands of God that Adam and all of his descendants failed to fulfill, so that Christ could become the head of a new race, the community of the redeemed of the new covenant.

The victory of Christ, delivering us from the bondage of sin and the curse of the law, from death and exile and the power of Satan must be seen as integrally related to his satisfying the demands of the law and the sanctions of the covenant on our behalf.

Because of Christ's victory, believers in him are transferred from the power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son (Col 1:13). We have had our eyes opened so that we could turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that we might receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 16:18). Because Christ has overcome the devil, believers can also overcome the evil one (1 Jn 3:6, 9; 5:18), by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony (Rev 12:9, 11). We have now been set free from the fear of death (Heb 2:14–15) and set free from the snare of the devil who held us captive to do his will (2 Tim 2:26).

III. Conclusion

Since Roger Nicole had devoted much attention to the doctrine of the atonement during his long career as a theologian, it was fitting that a *Festschrift* in his honour should be devoted to that theme.[19] Nicole had the opportunity to write a "postscript on penal substitution" and he sums up nicely why it should be considered "the vital center of the atonement, the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation and flies off the handle so to speak."[20] His words describe why I believe that the project undertaken in *Stricken By God?* is fundamentally flawed.

> When substitution is acknowledged, the courage and obedience of Christ in his suffering and death are exemplary. The spectacle of God's immense love for us melts the fear and hostilities of our hearts to God and exercises a wholesome moral influence on us. The work of Christ induces in us a spiritual renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that in union with him we are increasingly delivered from the attachment to and smudge of sin and renewed into his image (2 Cor 3:17). Victory replaces defeat, and justification, condemnation (Rom 5:18). The interests of God's justice and holiness are safeguarded, and the ineffable greatness of his mercy is evidenced (Rom 5:8).

When the cross is properly understood as the unimaginably great gift of God's grace to undeserving sinners, as the work of the Triune God to restore to fellowship with himself sinners who were actively in rebellion against him, we can celebrate the death of Christ as our sin bearer, whose blood instituted the new covenant into which we have been brought as the people of God led by the Spirit of God. We should not shrink from affirming this truth out of mistaken fear that it portrays God as violent in a way that will foster violence by God's people.

"To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (Rev 1:5–6, NRSV). ϴ

19 Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement: BIblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

20 Nicole, "Postscript," in Hill and James III, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 451.

Mark 12

A Walk-on Role in the Kingdom

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Did they get you to trade a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?

(Pink Floyd, *Wish You Were Here*)

Introduction

"From the first chapters of Genesis, God not only initiates abundance—calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals—but promises continued abundance by commanding them to 'increase and multiply' (1:22)."[1] The creation texts beat the metronome good, good, good, good, *very* good (1:30–31).

The rhythm of the Hebrew text[2]—in terms of word choice, meter, structure and theology—reach their climax with the image bearers, male and female together, in a formed and filled land. The Hebrew people have a word for this theology of abundance, *dayenu*, "in God's goodness, there is enough."[3]

As one who teaches Genesis at a college level, I am well aware that the creation texts are complex and have been the locus of many theological and existential battles. As the foundation for the point I wish to develop, however, I wish to focus on one aspect: The Genesis texts are not to be read *only* in the past tense as if they just intend to tell us the details of how things got started. They are worldview shaping texts[4] which intend to tell the *qahal* (people/community of God) who they are and, in turn, how they are to live as image bearers carefully tending and preserving the land and its abundance.[5]

Many passages within the Pentateuch function in the same way. For example, consider the somewhat unusual instructions (at least unusual to us in developed countries) in Deuteronomy 22:6–8.

The point here is simple enough. If one were to take the young or the eggs but leave the mother, the mother will, presumably, breed again and produce more young and eggs—a source of food for others in the community and even for the next generation. If, on the other hand, one were to take not only the young or the eggs but also the mother, it would cut off a source of food for others in the community and the next generation. This is what North Americans are, rightly, accused of on the current world stage: hoarding supplies and hoarding wealth.[6]

This dynamic is what lies at the core of many racial, national, or geo-political disputes. There are the obvious examples of oil, and of exploitative labour practices which dehumanize people for profit.

Consider also how a failure to live according to the *principles* of Torah in general and Deuteronomy 22:6–8 in particular was at the core of the dispute between the Federal Fisheries department and the residents of the Burnt Church reserve in New Brunswick in 1999–2000. This dispute involved acts of violence including the destruction of traps and nets and the intentional destructive ramming of boats. Put into theological terms, the foundational (worldview) issue, which did not make the nightly news, centered around Biblical concepts of justice, stewardship of land and resources, love of neighbour and the keeping of agreements/covenants.[7]

1 Brueggemann, Walter. "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side*. Vol. 37 No.5 (November/December 2001).

2 It is delightfully apt that Hebrew scholar and Genesis commentator Bruce Waltke refers to Genesis 1 as "the libretto for all of Israel's life" (quoted in Peterson, Eugene. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. Eerdmans, 2005: 68).

3 There is a liturgy, the celebration of *Tu B'Shevat* which happens every winter (on the 15th day of the month of Shevat) and in which the people of God celebrate the fact that, all appearances to the contrary since it is still the dead of winter, new life is starting to emerge and *dayenu*—"there will be enough." See the liturgy in Brueggemann, Walter. *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*. Augsburg Fortress, 1999:122. For more on *Tu B'Shevat* (a celebration which I've reenacted in certain classes) see http://www.virtualjerusalem.com/jewish_holidays/tubshvat/index.htm.

4 For a detailed explanation of the concept of worldview, as well as its importance, I recommend a reading of Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Fortress Press, 1992: 38–44, 122–131 and /or Middleton, Richard J and Brian J Walsh. *Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be*. IVP, 1995.

5 "…this Genesis text is not just about how things got started but about how things are going *right now*." (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. Eerdmans, 2005: 76, emphasis mine.

6 At this point it might be worthwhile to re-read Exodus 16 and the repeated commands to take only what is needed for the present as well as the frequent admonishments against hoarding. This text is thematically linked to the instructions of Deuteronomy and both reflect the worldview of the creation texts. As for the comment about North American hoarding I would recommend that the reader visit www.globalrichlist.com and learn about the distribution of wealth (measured, in this case, simply in terms of dollars not food or natural resources). Consider also a quote from a PBS documentary entitled *Merchants of Cool*: "In much the same way that the British Empire tried to take over Africa and profit from its wealth, corporations look at [teens] like this massive empire they are colonizing. And their weapons are films, music, books, CDs, Internet access, clothing, amusement parks, sports teams."

7 The cavalier breaking of covenants made with First Nations people is the subject matter of two powerful, prophetic songs by Canadian singer/activist Bruce Cockburn. The first is entitled "Red Brother, Red Sister" currently available as a bonus track on the album *In the Falling Dark*. True North, 1976/2002: Track 11 (a cover version of this song is available on Steve Bell's *My Dinner With Bruce*. SignPost, 2006: Track 3). The second is entitled "Indian Wars" from the album *Nothing But a Burning Light:* True North, 1991: Track 10.

As Wendell Berry has written, "Our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy."[8] Why blasphemy? Simply because it is a failure to love God in so far as we are failing to reflect His image to creation and to tend His creation as the Genesis texts describe. It is also a failure to love neighbours in so far as we are putting our needs and wants ahead of theirs.[9]

Coming back to Genesis, we know that a minor chord screeches through the story a few verses later and the theology and praxis of *dayenu* no longer dominate. Dissatisfied with what they've been given, God's creatures want more. Instead, they get less. The bountiful earth becomes stingy; even bread won't abound without sweat. The myth of scarcity sets in, bubbling under the narrative of the text, breaking through the surface here and there in the bitter tears of human need. We all know, both historically and existentially, where the myth of scarcity leads. "Whether at the level of nations or neighborhoods, this widening gap is polarizing people, making each camp more and more suspicious and antagonistic toward the other."[10] If we read the prophets in their historical and literary context we discover much the same sentiment. Micah 6 can serve as an example.

Many of us know part of the Micah 6 text because of the familiar words of 6:8 which we have either memorized or remember from the praise chorus based on this verse. The text, however, may not be as simple or innocuous as we might think. Look at the setting. In terms of genre, Micah 6 is what is known as a covenant lawsuit (behind the NIV translation "to love mercy" in vs. 8 is the Hebrew word חֶסֶד, a metonym often used to indicate the love of, and consequent living out of, the cause and effect of the covenant).[11]

Dissatisfied with what they've been given, God's creatures want more. Instead, they get less.

Covenant Lawsuit in Micah 6

The Hebrew (in fact much of the ANE) law court system during biblical times was very different than what we are used to from watching *Law and Order* re-runs. For instance, it was not considered necessary to divide the function of prosecutor and judge. It was acceptable and common for the plaintiff to also act as the judge as YHWH is clearly doing in Micah 6.

Checks and balances were provided by the defendant's advocate (i.e. kinsman redeemer) and by the presence of witnesses whose role was active and hortatory rather than passive and silent (until and unless they are specifically "on the stand" to answer questions) as in Western law courts. If the witnesses did not agree with each other the case was generally thrown out, but if the witnesses agreed with each other and with the defendant, the defense was successful.[12] Further, as specified in Torah[13] if the evildoer turns out to be the plaintiff—who is either bringing a false charge or exaggerating his losses the plaintiff receives the punishment that he was asking the judge to give to the defendant.

We can discern, therefore, from genre and terminology that Israel is on trial for failure to keep the heart of the covenant *despite her elaborate outward "religious" displays*.[14] Israel (the defendant) is about to be judged and Yahweh (Prosecutor and Judge) first pleads His case in the law court.[15] In verse 1, He calls the mountains as witnesses because in Hebrew law the testimony of two to three witnesses is needed as stated in Deuteronomy. The question naturally arises, "why *mountains*? How can mountains testify?" The answer is also in Deuteronomy in chapter 11:26–32, then 27:4–8, 12–13. The mountains were specifically called as witnesses when the covenant was made, they will therefore be called as witnesses when the people are judged according to the terms of the covenant.[16]

With that background, we can see how the mountains are called as witnesses to hear Israel's defense and YHWH's accusations (Micah 6:1–2). Next we see YHWH defending His righteousness (6:3–5, 11–13, 16). The point of the lawsuit is this: Israel has broken the covenant and so Yahweh is just in His judgments. He is *not being unfaithful to the covenant if/when He punishes Israel*. Israel's failures are specific; lack of justice, lack of mercy, lack of humility. She has cheated people with dishonest weights and measures (6:10–11), she has given false witness designed to benefit the rich (6:12) and the context of 6:13–17 suggests that she has been hoarding food at the expense of the poor and, in fact, has likely been

8 Berry, Wendell. *The Gift of Good Land*. North Point Press, 1981: 273.

9 Of course this phrase should set Philippians 2:4 running through our heads, thus demonstrating that the concern about greed and hoarding runs through the New Testament.

10 Brueggemann, Walter. "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side*. Vol. 37 No.5 (November/December 2001). See also the chapter "Learning the Truth of Abundance," in his book *The Covenanted Self*. Augsburg Fortress, 1999. I find it ironic that this article was written and published just before the 9/11 attacks which were aimed at buildings commonly seen to represent the "widening gap" between rich and poor, strong and weak as seen in geo-political terms.

11 Smith, R. L. (2002). *Vol. 32*: *Word Biblical Commentary: Micah-Malachi*. Word Biblical Commentary (50). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

12 We understand this from the Gospels. In Mark 14, when Jesus was on trial, the prosecutors could not get the witnesses against Him to agree, but in 14:62 Jesus cited the testimony of Daniel and Psalm 110 in His favor.

13 Deuteronomy 19:15–21. The apocryphal book of *Susanna* is a classic story the plot of which turns on exactly this point. N. T. Wright believes that the principles illustrated by *Susanna* are behind some key NT texts.

14 We must keep in mind, however, that verses 6–7 are rhetorical and hyperbolic questions.

15 For further information on the Hebrew Law court system and it's symbolic use in Scripture, see R5ken, Leland et. al, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. IVP, 1998:504-505.

16 When the covenant is renewed in Joshua 8, Ebal and Gerazim are again called as witnesses. When Shechem is referenced in Joshua 24, the reference is likely to a sanctuary outside the city which is closely associated with Ebal and Gerazim.

using the poor as a source of cheap labour in this exploitation.[17]

Finally, the reference to the "statutes of Omri" and "the practices of Ahab's house" (6:16) reveal that idolatry is the root sin which has lead to all the misbegotten fruit listed in the chapter. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmatt argue at length, and in detail, that any community of God (in biblical times and currently) which is seduced by, then entranced by, an idolatrous worldview will eventually become captive to that very worldview. This is idolatry. In this whole process, often slow and insidious, these communities forget their own identity and their own calling as the "people of God."[18]

As Walter Brueggemann puts it, "True religion…is to undo the bonds of injustice that are *deep and systemic*. The alternative to oppression is sharing, not sharing as isolated acts of charity, but as *public policy*."[19] If the community claiming to represent God neglects something as basic as food and justice for the "least of these" (strangers, orphans, *widows*) it ceases to be the people of God and "reinvokes the practices of Pharaoh and becomes a community that breeds scarcity and violence."[20] According to all three of these writers, and many more besides, it's pretty clear that our society, and many of our churches and religious institutions, are more and more defined by the oppressive and dehumanizing worldview of power and Empire than by חֶסֶד or any other aspect of imaging God.[21]

If the community claiming to represent God neglects something as basic as food and justice for the "least of these" it ceases to be the people of God.

The Temple Sermon

To set the stage for a brief discussion on Jeremiah's sermon, it will be helpful to turn to Mark 11—a passage in which part of Jeremiah's sermon is famously quoted. Notice the last half of verse 17: "You have made [the Temple] a σπήλαιον λῃστῶν (literally a "robbers cave" translated "a den of robbers" in NIV and NLT, "den of thieves" in NLT and KJV, "robbers den" in NASB and "hangout for thieves" in *The Message*).

There are a few things we must notice here. To begin with, this passage has so often been taught (and I probably used to teach it this way myself!) as if the money changing, the actual business done at the Temple, was the thievery.[22] A little reflection shows the inadequacies of interpreting the text in that manner. The selling of sacrificial animals and the conversion of pagan coins into Temple currency were necessary social services in an occupied country. You could not enter the Temple with Roman coins bearing pagan images. If you don't have the unblemished animals necessary for sacrifice, you cannot offer sacrifice.[23]

As Craig Evans notes, "His complaint was not directed against the purchase of animals as such and certainly was not directed against the practice of sacrifice; nor was it directed against money-changing. All of these things were necessary for Israel's religion to be practiced, as commanded in the law of Moses."[24]

Unfortunately, Evans goes on to suggest that the "thievery" had to do with doing the selling and changing in an inappropriate place—namely the Court of the Gentiles and, in addition to that, there was something wrong with certain aspects of the money changing, most likely fraud or usury.

While there *may* be hints in this text to support this conclusion (e.g. 11:16), I am constrained to note that if the problem had to do with an inappropriate location inside the court of the Gentiles or even *inside the precincts of the Temple*, "thievery" would seem to be a very unusual charge for Him to prophetically condemn. "Blasphemy" or something similar having to do with defilement would, it seems, suit the context of the offense more clearly.[25] There is no direct or indirect mention of fraud or usury in the context of Mark 11.[26] Further, it

17 A close comparison of this passage with the book of Amos reveals that the sins of the Samaritans condemned by Amos are almost precisely the same as what is listed here.

18 Walsh, Brian J. and Sylvia Keesmatt. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*. IVP, 2004. Note, as Walsh and Keesmatt point out, that Deuteronomy 4:23–28, 6:10–15 and 8:11–19 warn about this exact series of events.

19 Bruggemman, Walter. *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*. Augsburg Fortress, 1999: 119 (emphasis mine).

20 Ibid., 118.

21 "I understand covenant in our own time and place to be a radical alternative to consumer autonomy, which is the governing ideology of our society and which invades the life of the Church in debilitating ways" Brueggemann, 1. It can, I believe, be argued that the premise of Eugene Peterson's collection of essays entitled *Subversive Spirituality* is that idolatrous ideologies have infiltrated church and society so far that anyone who wishes to live a life reflecting the Lordship of Christ must find creative new ways of doing so and will run the risk of being called a "subversive." As Peterson said to me in personal conversation several years ago, "We are defined and in a sense 'created' by what and how we worship; if we worship badly, we will live badly." *Subversive Spirituality* closes with a brief essay/interview in which we find this definitive sentence: "I think we are in a unique time in this North American culture. We're in a bad time and the church is not healthy, it's not mature."

22 Zuck's *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, commenting on this verse says that "the insensitive Jews have made it, the court of the Gentiles, a den of robbers. It was a refuge for fraudulent traders (cf. Jer. 7:11) instead of a house of prayer."

23 It obviously wasn't practical to bring a sacrificial lamb from, say, Northern Galilee to Jerusalem—especially when it wasn't permitted to take the short route by passing through Samaria!

24 Evans, C. A. (2002). *Vol. 34B*: *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27–16:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (182). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

25 For this reason, some commentators (Nineham and Sanders among them) maintain that σπήλαιον λῃστῶν, with it's evocation of Jeremiah 7 is a late and inaccurate textual emendation. This is, however, a grasping at straws for which there is no manuscript evidence. If there are problems with Jesus' invocation of Jeremiah, (and I maintain that there are none) the answers must be found elsewhere.

26 Contrast, for example, Luke 3:13–14 and context. It is common in Christian scholarship to see Luke's gospel as the "gospel of inclusion," the gospel which speaks for and to the marginalized and oppressed. We need to be very careful not to overemphasize this as if Luke's is the only gospel which does this. As the passage currently under consideration shows, not to mention "Legion" in Mark 5, also gives voice to the marginalized.

would seem logical that if the problem was unscrupulous *sellers*, Jesus would have just cast out the sellers, not the buyers who, after all, would not have done anything wrong.

Therefore, in my opinion, fraud, extortion or usury, if present at all, are not the crux of the argument Mark is making in this section of his Gospel.[27] When Jesus performs His actions of Temple judging and overturning tables, He alludes strongly to Isaiah 56:7. His house will be called a house of prayer for all ἔθνεσιν (nations, Gentiles, peoples). He adds that, instead, it has been turned into a σπήλαιον λῃστῶν—a phrase variously translated as we have seen.

It is unanimously granted that the phrase is a more or less direct quotation from Jeremiah 7:11, the passage known as Jeremiah's scathing "Temple Sermon." It is, therefore, quite appropriate to consider Jesus' use of the phrase in Mark 11:17 as a "repreaching," to some degree, of Jeremiah's sermon. No matter how exactly σπήλαιον λῃστῶν is to be translated, the nuances are very much the same. Again, we need to reflect on this verse. As Mr. Spock would say, "Simple logic will suffice."

What exactly *is* a "den of thieves" or a "robbers den"? A "robbers den/cave" is *not the place where the robbers commit the crimes and do the robbing.* Generally speaking, people don't go to a gang's headquarters, line up and wait their turn to be ripped off. It's unlikely, therefore, that, in Jeremiah or in Mark, we are to imagine Priests or other religious leaders holding people at knife-point and mugging people who have come to the Temple for worship—

The leaders of the Temple are using it as a place to hide, protect, and even bless the riches they have ripped off from everywhere else.

especially at Festival times such as Passover! No, a "robber's den" is where thieves hang out, their headquarters, "chop shops" like those we see on *CSI: Miami*. It is the *protected place* where the thieves *return* and divide up all of the stuff they have stolen from all the other places.

So, simple logic suggests that the problem is not with the Temple, nor is the problem the *practices* of the Temple such as money changing. In Jeremiah 7, the problem is much the same as we saw in Micah. People are failing to live out the covenant, failing to do justice to live a life of חֶסֶד; in fact people are "oppressing the stranger, the fatherless ***and the widow***" (7:6), a lifestyle to which they have been led by their idolatry (7:9). Worse, they do all of these things and then run back to their "hideout," the Temple, assuming that in their headquarters they will be safe because surely YHWH will not judge and destroy the Temple! The remainder of the Temple sermon assures them that unless there is an abrupt and clear reformation in their thinking, their worship, their lifestyle and society, the Temple will be destroyed as surely as Shiloh hade been destroyed in the Northern Kingdom (7:12ff).

As indicated above, Jesus is *not* saying that the robbery is taking place at the Temple. The money changing is not the problem; it is, in fact, a necessary service, although perhaps distasteful and messy. The problem is that the leaders of the Temple are using it as a place to hide, protect, and even bless the riches they have ripped off from everywhere else. But from where? Who are they ripping off?

You don't have to look very far. The use of the phrase σπήλαιον λῃστῶν echoing Jeremiah 7:11 tips us off that the problem is both societal and systemic. Once again, the people are oppressing the stranger, the fatherless and other vulnerable members of society and then coming to the Temple to offer their sacrifices in the belief that this will keep them safe. Malachi 3:1–5 and 3:8–9 also identifies the real thievery for us.[28] This is class oppression, this is systemic evil.

As Leonard Cohen puts it "The rich get rich and the poor get poor, that's how it goes—everybody knows."[29] Image bearers are being commodified, used as objects to line other people's pockets. Some things never change. If you think I'm misreading—or over reading—Mark, take a good hard look at 11:18. The High Priest and scribes have heard Jesus loud and clear (note the similarity between 11:14 and 11:18) and realize that He has prophetically condemned them and the system they have constructed.[30] They see very clearly that Jesus has exposed the "man behind the curtain" or, to change the metaphor, has revealed that the shepherds who were supposed to lead and protect the powerless people in their care have instead been rapaciously making money by the way they have structured society.

At its heart, the issue involves the myth of scarcity, whether there is enough to go around—enough food, water, shelter, space. An ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough, so hold onto what you have. In fact, don't just hold onto it, hoard it. Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, *even if that means others (vulnerable others) must do without*.

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27 As an important side note, it might bear mentioning that many commentators, writers and Christian lyricists speak of Christ's "anger" and "shock" when He came to the Temple for worship and instead saw this "thievery" going on. This is a little hard to countenance when you consider that the Temple had operated this way for years, in all likelihood for Christ's entire life, *and* when you consider 11:11 which directly tells us that He had already been to, carefully examined, and took full stock of the Temple the day before!

28 Ched Meyers maintains that the language and the tradition of Malachi 3 lay just beneath the surface of Mark 11. "This tradition clearly condemns those who "cheated' in the older agrarian economic system…which resulted in class oppression." Meyers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Rereading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Orbis, 1988: 302–303.

29 From the album *I'm Your Man*, Sony, 1988, Track 3.

30 The fact that Jesus has directly (Luke 13:31–34, Matt 23:33–38) and indirectly (the parable of the Tenants) lamented the fate of the prophets sent to Israel is pregnant with meaning and adds nuance to the "Temple encounter" we see in Mark 11:1–13:3. The prophecy of the Temple's destruction, of course, once again connects Mark's pericope and Jeremiah's Temple sermon.

A Walk-on Role in the Kingdom[31]

Now we are ready to look at the walk on role of the widow in Mark 12:41–44. This story has come to be known as "the Widow's Mites" due to the way the KJV translates λεπτὰ δύο (two very small coins).[32] NIV updates the heading by calling it "The Widow's Offering" but I believe strongly that this heading misleads us and misdirects our focus.

After the eventful portentous morning which included the prophetic event of the cursing of the fig tree,[33] the acted and spoken prophetic judgment on the Temple, Jesus καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου (sits down over against—facing—the treasury). This phrasing is significant, as we shall see. As if that were the cue she'd been waiting for, a poor widow comes hobbling in for her big part. She deposits two λεπτὰ, two small coins which together add up to a κοδράντης (1/64 of the daily wage paid to common agricultural workers). To give a further sense of the kind of money we are talking about, "it has been said that two lepta could buy one a handful of flour or the equivalent of one meager meal."[34] The widow places this monetary sliver into the Temple treasury and then shuffles off out of the scene and out of the story.

A lot of churches have official Stewardship Sundays and, on these days, the widow's cameo performance becomes a starring role. She is taken out of storage from somewhere in the back corner of Mark's gospel, dusted off and trucked out for seasonal display. On Stewardship Sunday, the message of Jesus provoked by the widow's brief appearance is, obviously, "give more, give sacrificially, be more like the old widow."[35] She's held up as an example of almost angelic piety and devotion.

One commentary gets downright lyrical and, in a good example of stained glass writing, rhapsodizes "Hers is an action of the lowliest beauty, a modest flower, O Hebrew piety blooming in the vast desert of formality."[36] We are exhorted that surely if this poor widow can give so generously, in fact can *give everything she has to live on*,[37] surely we can give a little bit more than we are giving or have been giving. And so the thumb screws are gradually tightened until our guilt finally forces our wallets open. We don't see her again until the next time we need to badger—sorry, I mean "encourage"—people to give to the church.

Surgically removed from context and taken on its own (which is the way we usually hear it), the story lends itself *so* easily to this kind of Aesop moralizing and *using of* the heroic sacrifice of this poor woman in this way. I'm not at all convinced by this common devotional and spiritualized interpretation. I'll go further. I think by pointing this widow out to us, Jesus is *not* giving us a nice sweet Kodak moment of stewardship. I think He's mixing us up in raw gangrene politics at its worst. This story is *not sweet*, it is *toxic* and when we spiritualize it, we are using this widow as a religious veneer for our pre-conceived agenda—just like the people in the Temple used her while she was alive.

I warn you: when you put this little incident with the widow back into its context, it suggests a very different reading, one which isn't so tame. This text is going to turn on you, and this sweet old widow has a bite to her. I'm convinced that this story is nothing less than a condemnation of the use of religion and/or the name of God to victimize those who are powerless. This story is about what happens when the people of God/Church (*qahal* in the Hebrew Bible, ἐκκλησία in the New Testament) starts to think like Empire and starts to treat people like the Empire.[38]

Every time she's brought out, this widow has been *trying* to teach us. For 2,000 years she has been trying to teach us. But I want to say something very clearly now although I don't think anyone's going to like it—particularly anyone involved in leadership. What I want to say is that even though she's been *trying* to teach us for 2,000 years, *we have not been listening*. In fact, not only have we not been listening, we've added insult to injury by pretending to honour her while we've in fact been

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31 There is not enough space to discuss a few passages which contribute to the overall theme being developed. A thorough study comparing and contrasting the two feeding miracles in Mark (6:30ff in Jewish territory, 8:1–10 in Gentile territory) with each other and then with the Exodus narrative (particularly Ex. 16) will reveal some fascinating connections. Brueggemann contends that the disciples' question "How can you feed these people with bread in the *erhmon* (a word meaning empty, inhospitable, unfriendly and unpromising to life)—in the empty place, the desert?" (8:4), betrays a worldview of scarcity. You can sense the resistance in the disciples' question. It's the resistance of pragmatism, of efficiency. Jesus, on the other hand, "well schooled in the transformative generosity of God" has a worldview of abundance so he doesn't even answer their question. Instead he moves on, asking a question of his own: "How many loaves do you have?" (8:5). They answer, "seven." *Dayenu*. It's enough. There will be plenty to go around as there was in the wilderness of Exodus 16. The disciples therefore can recline and relax but, more importantly, they can live a lifestyle of compassion—the same compassion (8:1–3) which drove Jesus to action. See Brueggemann, Walter. "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side*. Vol. 37 No.5 (November/December 2001). In addition, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide*. Trinity Press, 2002: 44–53 provides a nice, accessible overview to the many issues a comparison of these texts reveals.

32 "Widow's mites" always disturbs me—it makes it sound like the old gal needs to get downtown and pick up some medicated shampoo or something.

33 I have avoided the fig tree pericope in this article but when teaching Mark, that text is so rich it takes two class sessions to adequately exegete it.

34 Evans, C. A. (2002). *Vol. 34B*: *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27–16:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (283). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

35 With characteristic candor, Struthers-Malbon says "She is not an example for a stewardship campaign and I hate it when she is cast in that role."

36 Chadwick, G. A. *The Gospel according to St Mark*. The Expositors' Bible. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887: 344.

37 With the translation "all she had to live on," the English versions might be leading us astray by thinking of this in purely economic terms. The text literally says that the widow ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς ("cast or deposited her whole *bios*=life"). *Bios* is, obviously the root of our word *biology* and this seems to focus on more than just the economic level and the "sacrificial giving." Struthrs-Malbon sees this as a call to discipleship: "She is a model for what Jesus is in the process of doing—giving His whole life—what disciples must be prepared to do." While I agree with the direction to which Struthers-Malbon is pointing, it must be noted that ὅλον τὸν βίον can be taken to mean "her whole livelihood" (as translated in NASB margin).

38 Walsh, Brian J. and Sylvia Keesmatt. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*. IVP, 2004.

using her to meet our own budgets and further our own agendas. In the GenX words of Alanis Morrissette, "isn't it a little too ironic." In treating her story the way we have, we have used her the same way the Temple system Jesus has just condemned in Mark had used her. And another image bearer has been commodified, and used by the people of God.

Let's let go of your presuppositions and assumptions (as far as possible) and listen again. Look carefully at Mark 12:41–44. I hear a *question* lurking around in this text just begging for someone to ask it out loud. Ready? Here goes, listen carefully: *Why is this widow so poor in the first place?* How has it come to be that she only has two λεπτὰ, less than one-hundredth of a day's wage? What has produced a society in which so many people have ostentatious wealth (and many of these rich people are religious leaders) and gather at the Temple treasury to make sure that everyone notices the large amounts being given, but this woman can only scrape together two λεπτὰ?

It's clear throughout Mark that human need is always to take precedence over religiosity (e.g. Mk 3:1–5, 7:10–13). So what exactly is going on here? Why would the Temple system take precedence over a starving widow?

The Torah (the Hebrew Bible) makes it abundantly clear that one of the main responsibilities of the people of God is to care for those who can't care for themselves, specifically orphans and widows. In this text we should be hearing echoes of the Torah's constant concern for widows (token examples include Deut. 10:18, 24:17–22, Psalm 146:9) as well as the voices of Hebrew prophets like Isaiah and Amos, who condemned the religious establishment for exploiting the vulnerable. These texts, and literally hundreds of others, make it clear that to reflect God's image accurately we, as His people, are also to defend the needy (often personified by widows), care for them, provide for them and refrain from exploiting them and using them for gain. This theme is also prevalent in the New Testament as even a cursory reading of Acts 6:1–7 and James 1:26–28 and 5:1–6[39] reveals.

As with any passage of Scripture divorced from its context, when we read and/or preach the story of the "Widow's offering" on its own, we miss the connections between this story and the pattern woven throughout the entire narrative of Mark and the narrative of Scripture as a whole.[40] In closing off this regrettably brief exegesis, I would like to draw your attention to two such often overlooked connections.

In Mark's gospel, this story is placed just a few verses after Jesus has cursed both the fig tree and the Temple (for which the fig tree episode was something of an acted parable).[41] Mark 11:1–13:3 is a literary unit revolving around the hub of the Temple. As Meyers opines, "There are close parallels in which the first and second campaigns [of Mark] are organized round particular narrative sites. The first [1:16–3:35] is structured around the sea of Galilee and the Capernaum synagogue; the second around two opposing mountains, the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount."[42]

The word "opposing" in this sentence is not arbitrary. The narrative of the unit is driven by confrontations and opposition between Jesus (and, to a lesser degree, His followers) and the religious leaders at the Temple. The main cycle of conflict stories take place within the Temple precincts in chapter 12, much like an earlier cycle of conflict stories took place in or around Capernaum (1:40–3:6, note that this earlier cycle ends with a portentous foreshadowing of the later cycle and its outcome).

The narrative of the widow is set in a context in which Jesus has been confronting the abuses of the Temple system and the corruption of the religious leaders who wield power over the weak and defenseless and use that power in violation of God's will. Mark 11:18 picks up the thread left dangling in 3:6 and leaves us in no doubt as to the seriousness of what is going on here.

But here is the part we somehow miss when we trot the widow out, prop her up and put on her stage make-up for her big part on Stewardship Sundays: Look very carefully at 12:38–40—the words Jesus speaks just a few minutes before the widow hobbles into the story. Speaking to a large crowd, He says "βλέπετε ('watch out for', 'be aware of', 'think carefully about') the γραμματέων (literally 'scribe' but often extended to 'teachers of the Law'…"[43]

The Torah (the Hebrew Bible) makes it abundantly clear that one of the main responsibilities of the people of God is to care for those who can't care for themselves.

39 Significantly, this is the only time in the NT where the phrase κυρίου σαβαὼθ (LORD Almighty, LORD of Hosts, LORD of the Heavenly Army) appears. This is a phrase favored by the OT prophets in contexts having to do with issues of misuse of power, exploitation, etc. It is very often used in connection with YHWH's war against injustice. As James Adamson notes, "the title 'LORD Sabaoth'… emphasizes that the cause of the poor is now to come before the supreme Sovereign whose justice will now be visited upon the rich." *The Epistle of James*. NICNT Eerdmans, 1976: 186.

40 William O'Brien offers a helpful analogy: "In describing Scripture's intertextuality, I sometimes think of the modern technological phenomenon of hypertexting on the Internet. Many words, phrases, and images in Scripture function like hypertext, linking the hearer or listener to other passages and narratives and meanings…when studying Jesus' feeding of the thousands, we might fail to see what would have been starkly obvious to the early listeners: These stories of 'feeding in the wilderness' explicitly evoke the Exodus 16 account of manna, which is both a tale of divine provision and the beginning of divine instruction on economic principles and practice of the covenant community." William O'Brien, "Wrestling with the Bible," www.forministry.com first accessed June 23, 2005.

41 I am aware that this is an understatement and that the fig tree pericope has many more nuances but for our purposes here I believe that the understatement can suffice.

42 Meyers, *Strong Man* 293.

43 Note carefully that this sentence, warning the large crowd to βλέπετε (watch out for) the religious leaders, is itself echoing the warning given to the disciples in 8:15. This cycle and this escalation is quite deliberate.

The Kingdom of God is about our daily lives, our way of being in the world, the way we treat one another and, more importantly, *the way we treat those who don't seem to fit anywhere*. Those whom society, sometimes even the society of Churchianity, kicks to the curb.

From there He proceeds to list off specific ways in which the religious leaders live a life of benefit, privilege and affluence. The scribal affluence is, in large part, due to the practice of "devouring widow's houses" (12:40). Not only do these severe words connect to the coming story of the poor widow and her offering, they make it clear that Jesus is not just condemning scribal hypocrisy and vanity and then using the widow to illustrate proper humility and piety. The stakes are larger than that. Jesus is, like Isaiah (58), Ezekiel (34 echoed in Mark 8:34), Micah (6) and other prophets before Him, excoriating the religious leaders for feeding off of the very ones Torah calls them to defend and protect.

Take a look at where Jesus is when drawing the disciples' attention to the widow and her two λεπτὰ. After speaking the words accusing the religious leaders of "devouring widows," 12:41 tells us that "Jesus καθίσας κατέναντι (*kathisas katenanti*='sat down opposite', 'over against' or 'facing') the Temple treasury and began to watch the crowd putting their money in."

As noted earlier, this phrasing is very important. The next time we see Jesus sitting "opposite" or "over against" or "facing" it is in chapter 13:3—on a different mountain at the very end of what Meyers calls "the second campaign." In the words of Meyers, when facing the Temple treasury, Jesus notes that "the temple has robbed this woman of her very means of living. Like the scribal class, it no longer protects widows, but exploits them. As if in disgust, Jesus "exits" the Temple—for the final time."[44] It is crucial for us to notice that while leaving Jesus speaks words of judgment utterly rejecting not only the Temple but the socio-economic structure it represents, a system which, parasitically, feeds off of and (ultimately) destroys it. He then goes to the Mount of Olives and sits "over against" the now judged and doomed Temple preaching "a vision of the end of the temple-based world, and the dawn of a new one in which the powers of domination have been toppled."[45]

Conclusion

Far from being a spiritually uplifting little story about piety and how "even our meager contributions go a long way"; far from being an exhortation to "give more, learn to be like the widow and give sacrificially," Mark 12:41–44 is a condemnation of a rapacious religious-economic system feeding off the very ones it was called to protect. It is much closer to a prophetic lament about the theological concept of *dayenu* rooted in Genesis than it is to a praise chorus about stewardship or discipleship.

If we were more attuned to the flow of narrative and the broad biblical story, we would see how this account fits into the pattern Mark has been weaving throughout his Gospel. We would hear echoes of the Torah's constant concern for widows, as well as the voices of Hebrew prophets like Isaiah and Amos, who condemned the religious establishment for exploiting the vulnerable.

The Kingdom of God is about our daily lives, our way of being in the world, the way we treat one another and, more importantly, *the way we treat those who don't seem to fit anywhere.* Those whom society, sometimes even the society of Churchianity,[46] kicks to the curb.

If we were more attuned to what Mark is doing, we would also hear a warning. Our treatment of the so-called outcasts and write-offs of our society—the poor, the people of different races, the addicted, the sexually broken, the homosexual—will reveal a) whether or not we are reflecting God's image accurately to the world and b) whether our churches are "houses of prayer for all people" or whether they are, in fact, nothing more than a den of robbers—or at least a den of the terminally self-righteous.

This is how Bono put it when he preached at the President's Prayer Breakfast:

"God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill. I hope so. He may well be with us as in all manner of controversial stuff. Maybe, maybe not. But the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. *God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.*"[47]

If this is truth, it begs the question: What if we are *not* with those people? What if we are, in fact, *exploiting* those very people by the things we have and by the way we live? The Gospel of Mark gives every reason for us to think that κυρίου σαβαὼθ (The LORD of Hosts) will continue to defend the poor and the vulnerable, even if He has to protect them from those who claim to be His followers. Θ

44 Meyers, *Strong Man*, 322.

45 Ibid., 323.

46 Unfortunately, in my experience and observations, the Church can be the harsher of the two.

47 Bono's words reflect the language of Isaiah 58—a passage from which he quotes verbatim later in his sermon.

Feature Sermon

How Low Can You Go?

Peter Ascough

Peter Ascough is associate pastor of Kleefeld EMC, where this sermon was presented on November 16, 2008.

Jerry was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was always in a good mood and always had something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!"

When asked about his positive attitude, Jerry answered: "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'Jerry, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life."

"Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live life."

Some time later, Jerry did something you are never supposed to do in a restaurant business: he left the back door open one morning and was held up at gunpoint by three armed robbers. While trying to open the safe, his hand, shaking from nervousness, slipped off the combination. The robbers panicked and shot him. Luckily, Jerry was found relatively quickly and rushed to the local trauma center.

Jerry remembers, "The paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the emergency room and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read, 'He's a dead man.' I knew I needed to take action."

"There was a big, burly nurse shouting questions at me," said Jerry. "She asked if I was allergic to anything, 'Yes,' I replied. The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, 'Bullets!' Over their laughter, I told them, 'I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead.'"

Jerry lived thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude. I learned from him that every day we have the choice to live fully. Attitude, after all, is everything.

How's your attitude this morning? Is it positive or negative? Selfless or self-centred? Maybe you're excited because of someone you are going to see. Maybe you're angry at someone and can't wait to give them a piece of your mind.

Or did you come this morning with Philippians 2:5 in your mind? "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

We spoke last week of being one with God and being in unity with each other. This week, Paul reveals to us the perfect example to help us accomplish this. Obviously, it's Jesus. Paul reveals to us two things about Jesus which we are called to imitate and three responses.

Philippians 2:5–11 (NIV)

[5]Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
[6]Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
[7]but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
[8]And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
[9]Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
[10]that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
[11]and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Attitude

Our attitude affects everything we do in life—great and small. It affects the way we do our jobs, the way we treat our loved ones, the friends we have—it even affects our relationship with God.

When life is going smoothly, almost everyone we meet seems to have a pleasant disposition. We smile, we're courteous, and we're willing to go out of our way for others. But when the road gets a little bumpy—things go crazy on the job, we're treated unfairly, we get stuck in the company of others who have rotten attitudes—that's when

our true attitude is revealed.

Attitude is a choice. No one forces it on you. You choose every day what your attitude will be. It reveals our priorities and dictates our responses to those around us.

Charles Swindoll once wrote:

> The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company…a church…a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past… We cannot change the fact that people will act a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have and that is *ATTITUDE*…

Paul reminds the Philippians their attitude should mirror that of Jesus, which he then goes on to explain: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (v. 6–7).

It's important to remember that Jesus did not have his beginning in a lowly manger here on earth. John 1:1-3 reminds us that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that was being made."

Jesus is full of the divine nature of God. Everything we speak of when we speak of God is true about Jesus. He was really and truly God in every way in his nature, yet Jesus chose to take an attitude of humility. He chose to take his divine nature and set it aside in an act of obedience to the will of God.

With a humble attitude, Jesus chose to be recognized as a man, to the point where others did not see anything special in him. "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" they asked. Nothing of the divine was recognized in Jesus. All of the miracles and teaching which Jesus performed during his ministry on earth he attributed to his Father in heaven: "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me" (John 6:38).

Although he and the Father are one, Jesus lived a life that displayed humility and obedience toward the Father—an attitude we are all called to imitate.

The Path of Downward Mobility

Author and scholar Henri Nouwen coined the phrase "downward mobility" when describing the life God calls us to live in the presence of Himself and of others. Henri Nouwen was a priest and scholar who taught at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard. He was well respected, looked to for insight and leadership, had reached the top, and yet was unfulfilled and lonely.

Through a time of depression and struggle he made contact with Jean Vanier who led the L'Arche communities, which ministered to the severely mentally and physically handicapped. Henri became chaplain at the L'Arche community in Toronto and many of his writings are from when he was there. He describes his downwardly mobile journey from academia to servant of the "least of these" as the greatest move in his life, bringing spiritual awakening and deepening of his relationship with God.

The society in which we live suggests in countless ways that the way to go is up. Making it to the top, entering the limelight, breaking the record—that's what draws attention, gets us on the front page of the newspaper, and offers us the rewards of money and fame.

Unfortunately, along with the rise to fame, reaching the top brings the temptation of power. We claw and climb over others to get our way, to stand up on top and say, "Hey look at me, listen to me, I know best."

Although we say this is the way of the world, this is what society values, we in the church get caught up in it as well. Throughout the history of the church, people are again and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, and forcing

Although he and the Father are one, Jesus lived a life that displayed humility and obedience toward the Father.

their way over another's way. Why? I think at times it is more natural to follow the world's pressure to climb to the top than it is to take the road that leads down to the ultimate expression of humility and servanthood. Our sin originates in our grasp to become greater. Satan told Eve that if she ate the fruit she "would be like God." That's why Jesus came, to break the power of that prideful sin.

Look at our passage again as Paul documents Jesus' steps downward.

From being God to being human: "Being made in human likeness" (v. 7).

We have already talked about this, so I won't repeat all these points.

From being human to being a servant: "Taking the very nature of a servant" (v. 7).

Jesus served others. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus did not come as a superstar. He came as a lowly carpenter. Jesus was never too proud to do whatever it took to glorify His Heavenly Father.

Jesus demonstrated how to serve with a towel and basin. Jesus took on the role of a servant to his own disciples. At the last supper in the upper room his disciples were sitting around the table. Their feet were dirty and smelly from walking all day on dusty roads. Jesus took a towel and basin and went to each one and washed their feet. When Jesus finished he said: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

We are to be servants to one another. When we ask people to lead or assist we are looking for servants, not volunteers. What's the difference? Volunteers dictate their involvement whereas servants do the bidding of another. Servants quietly exalt another without looking for their own recognition. Servants don't up and quit when it doesn't go their way. Servants are always at the ready to be of assistance to another.

Jesus demonstrated how to serve with a towel and basin. Jesus took on the role of a servant to his own disciples.

From a servant to being obedient to death: "Became obedient to death" (v. 8).

The immortal chose to die. Jesus humbled himself to the ultimate point of obedience. Nothing was held back, all had been given up. Death did not take Jesus. Jesus chose to allow death to claim the required sacrifice. Up until now all sacrifices for the cleansing of the people's sins were reluctant sacrifices. I doubt too many of the animals enjoyed their fate. I'm sure their instincts to survive kicked in and they fought death. But Jesus didn't fight; he didn't resist and in the end he became the perfect willing sacrifice for all of humanity.

From being obedient in death to dying on a cross: "Even death on a cross" (v. 8).

Jesus' ultimate sacrifice held the sting of being the worst possible way to die that men of his time had come up with. The Romans had a law against crucifying any Roman citizen without the emperor's consent because it was considered too cruel a death.

Gene Wilkes in his book, *Jesus on Leadership*, writes:

> "Jesus did not come to gain a place of power. He did not come to defeat his human enemies. He did not come to overthrow an unjust government. Jesus came to show us the heart of God. His entire message and ministry on earth was to show selfish, power-hungry people like you and me what love looks like. As he knelt before Judas, Jesus showed us a love that no human can conceive on his own: a love that is brutally honest about what is going on but still kneels before us to lay down his life so we can be free from the sin that infects us. Jesus loves you as he loved Judas. If you miss that, you have missed eternal life" (p. 168).

"But I deserve to have it my way because I have been in this church for so many years, or I hold such and such a position." We struggle to have control over what happens here, which program gets precedence, which music gets sung, which area gets the money, who gets to make which decisions.

Power and control can quickly become the signature of a church, yet it goes against everything Jesus' attitude displayed in his journey of downward mobility. Jesus is not asking us to die for a cause or to die for a theology or an ideology; Jesus is asking us to die to ourselves, to become the servants

of all and to join him on the journey of humility. We need to recognize that whether that journey requires physical death for the sake of Jesus or death to our own rights and agenda, it is the path that leads to freedom.

In communion, we are reminded of the lowest of places Jesus traveled to because of his willingness to be humbled for the sake of love. God himself gave up his rights and privileges. He lived as a servant and willingly went to the deepest, darkest place that humans have ever come up with—death on a cross. It's important that we take the time to reflect on the significance not only of Jesus' death but on the manner in which he laid down his life for us. The ultimate humiliation, willingly accepted.

The Responses

In our last few verses Paul makes us aware of three responses to this journey of downward mobility Jesus has modeled for us.

God's response: "Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (v. 9). It is important for us to note that God's response to Jesus is not based on his actions on the cross. It is based on his character, his principles, and his attitude of humility.

Jesus tells us the same thing. "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:11–12).

Again, in 1 Peter 5:5–6: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

Notice what happens when our goal is to build up ourselves. We will crumble and fall. Instead, humble yourself and allow God to be the one to lift you up. What that will look like can vary. It may happen in this life or it may happen in the next. The point is that we need to be patient and not force God to make things happen by pushing our agenda of what we think that should look like. There's nothing humble about that.

Look at the examples of Sarah, Hagar and Hannah. Abraham was promised descendants beyond the number of the stars but Sarah couldn't wait for God. She gave her servant Hagar to Abraham to try and raise a family through her. It was God's plan to give her a child all along (son Isaac), but he did it 14 years after Hagar's son Ishmael was born.

Compare that to Hannah, who also could not bear children. She prayed and she waited, she did not force God's timing and, as a result, Samuel was born.

Our call to humility includes allowing God to take care of the rest. It was God who exalted Jesus to the highest place.

The unbeliever's response: "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 10–11a).

All of us, believers or not, will one day kneel before Jesus. For some, it will be a joyous submission before their Saviour but for others it will be grudging acknowledgement that they chose to ignore the truth and a final understanding of what is to come. All will submit, all will confess, but not all will be saved.

The believer's response: For the believer, this exaltation of Christ ought to bring mixed responses. On the one hand we will kneel with joy and anticipation of the great glory that awaits us in heaven which we will spend with Jesus. On the other hand it reminds us that our time of evangelism, our time of sharing the good news to the world is limited. A time will come when these opportunities will cease and when all those who have denied the truth of Jesus' life, death and resurrection will be held accountable for their decision.

It ought to motivate us to humble ourselves in order to share the love of Jesus with everyone we come in contact with.

The exaltation of Jesus by God reinforces the point at which we started. Jesus was exalted because he never ceased looking up to the Father, seeking his approval, and outwards to others seeking their eternal welfare. Jesus held nothing back so that he might more fully obey God and save the lost.

I'd like to finish with the words of Henri Nouwen as he reflects on this journey of downward mobility:

> Our true challenge is to return to the centre, to the heart, and to find there the gentle voice that speaks to us and affirms us in a way no human voice ever could. The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, an acceptance so full, so total, and all embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and frees us for Christ, who leads on the road of service.
>
> This experience of God's acceptance frees us from our needy self and thus creates new space where we can pay selfless attention to others. This new freedom in Christ allows us to move in the world uninhibited by our compulsions and to act creatively even when we are laughed at and rejected, even when our words and actions lead us to death. ⊖

Notice what happens when our goal is to build up ourselves. We will crumble and fall. Instead, humble yourself and allow God to be the one to lift you up.

The Final Word

It is central to the Christian faith that Jesus is, in actual fact, God among us. As hard as it is to believe and as impossible as it is to imagine, Christians do believe it. The entire and elaborate work of salvation from "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4) is gathered up and made complete in this birth, life, death, and resurrection—a miracle of unpredented and staggering proportions. We acknowledge all this when we, following the example of St. Peter, add the title "Christ" to the name Jesus: Jesus Christ. Christ: God's anointed, God among us to save us from our sins, God speaking to us in the same language we learned from our mother's knee, God raising us from the dead to real, eternal life.

You would think that believing that Jesus is God among us would be hardest thing. It turns out that the hardest thing is to believe that God's work—this dazzling creation, this astonishing salvation, this cascade of blessings—is all being worked out in and under the conditions of our humanity: at picnics and around dinner tables, in conversations and while walking along roads, in puzzled questions and homely stories, with blind beggars and suppurating lepers, at weddings and funerals. Everything that Jesus does and says takes place within the limits and conditions of our humanity. No fireworks. No special effects. Yes, there are miracles, plenty of them. But because for the most part they are so much a part of the fabric of everyday life, very few notice. The miraculousness of miracle is obscured by the familiarity of the setting, the ordinariness of the people involved.

– Eugene Petersen
Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places,
(Eerdmans, 2005), p. 34

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