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Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Ann Parker, and Governmental Atonement Theology

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ABSTRACT

RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK, REBECCA ANN PARKER, AND
GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

by

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Adviser: Denis Fortin

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

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Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK, REBECCA ANN PARKER, AND
GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

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The writings of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker have perspicaciously highlighted challenges that atonement theology faces in its interface with the experiences of abused women and children. These thinkers have alerted the theological community to the fact that an atonement model which commends or valorizes the divinely-mandated suffering of an innocent victim (Jesus) can nefariously encourage domestic abuse victims to accept their own abuse, as if it were God's will. Brock and Parker therefore recommend abandoning language which attaches any salvific significance to the Cross in atonement.

This thesis explores and recommends an alternative form of theological language—called “governmental atonement theology”—which may ameliorate the problems noted by Brock and Parker. This study briefly examines the history and

evolution of the governmental view from its early moorings in the theology of Hugo Grotius, up to its contemporary adaptation by René Girard. The focus then shifts to selected biblical expressions of the governmental view. Finally, this thesis demonstrates ways in which the governmental view can present the Cross as a saving event for abuse victims, while not implicating God in abuse.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK, REBECCA ANN PARKER, AND
GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Problem

The rise of feminist theology in the late twentieth century placed an embarrassing spotlight on numerous areas of Christian thinking which, according to feminist thinkers, undergird violence and oppression of women.¹ Gender-stratification within the church, the use of gender roles to inhibit female involvement, and the sexual demonizing of women are all chronic ills which have pervaded the church throughout history, and have begun to be addressed by the theological community.² Most theologians, even among the critics of feminist theology, have recognized these problems.

However, in recent times feminist theologians have been speaking not only to issues of ethical or administrative importance, but have also begun taking shots at one of the central doctrines of Christian theology—the atonement. Darby Kathleen Ray, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Anne Parker, and Denny Weaver have all contributed scathing critiques of traditional atonement theologies.³ These thinkers allege that the

¹ For an overview see Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 2007).

² Anne Carr summarizes these various phenomena by claiming that, historically, “women were envisaged theologically as naturally inferior and a source of sin and pollution” (Anne Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology: Method” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna [New York: HarperCollins, 1993], 21).

³ See Rita Nakashim Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim

death of Jesus as portrayed in atonement theology (especially in what has become known as the “penal-substitutionary” form) portrays Jesus as the victim of a God who, as the all-powerful, unquestioned paternal figure, parallels precisely the type of human male abuser who victimizes helpless women and children for his own satisfaction.⁴ According to these thinkers, teaching the traditional substitutionary atonement model “glorifies victimization”, influencing abused women and children to accept their status, rather than actively oppose it.⁵ Consequently, they have advocated serious, comprehensive revisions to atonement theology, at both the theoretical and conceptual/imaginative levels.⁶

Granted, as Ray notes, “the critique of this atonement orthodoxy is not new.”⁷ Many theologians have found problems with the traditional substitutionary doctrine—and some have been non-feminist evangelicals, such as Darrin Snyder Belousek, who recently published a massive tome criticizing substitutionary atonement on the grounds of biblical

Press, 1998); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁴ Brock and Parker spare no words: “Do we really believe that God is appeased by cruelty, and wants nothing more than our obedience? It becomes imperative that we ask this question when we examine how theology sanctions human cruelty. If God is imagined as a fatherly torturer, earthly parents are also justified, perhaps even required, to teach through violence. Children are instructed to understand their submission to pain as a form of love” (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 30-31).

⁵ Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 80.

⁶ “It is argued that many of the concepts and images that have traditionally been used to talk about the redemptive significance of the life and death of Christ do more harm than good because they contribute to an ‘erotics of domination’ that can work to justify violence against women and children” (ibid., 3). By the phrase “erotics of domination” Ray refers to a conception of relationships in which power and force serve as key connecting elements. She borrows the term from Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 114.

⁷ Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 32.

exegesis.⁸ Others have argued that while there may be a place for the traditional atonement models, they are not nearly as significant as they have been made out to be.⁹

Nevertheless, feminist theologians have been perhaps the most vitriolic toward traditional atonement theories, and in their campaign against them they have been willing to sacrifice much of Christian tradition, including the Bible, which they often find incorrigibly problematic.^{10 11} Denny Weaver, for example, argues that the death of Jesus must not be seen as something “needed,” for “it accomplishes nothing for the salvation of sinners, nor does it accomplish anything for the divine economy.”¹² He writes this in the face of biblical testimony that strongly indicates that Jesus’ death was, in some sort of

⁸ Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Belousek argues that the New Testament teaching of Jesus indicates a comprehensive rejection of retributivism, which directly undermines the logic of penal substitution: “Therefore, because the cross of Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of the kingdom of God, and because renouncing retribution is essential to Jesus’ proclaiming and enacting God’s kingdom, any theology that interprets the cross of Jesus as the ultimate satisfaction of retribution obscures rather than reveals God’s kingdom of justice and peace” (ibid., 16).

⁹ See, for example, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011); Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

¹⁰ As Sandra M. Schneiders notes, “much of the sexism that marginalizes and oppresses women in family and society as well as in the church is based on the interpretation of the Bible that legitimates patriarchy” (Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Bible and Feminism,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catharine Mowry LaCugna [New York: HarperCollins, 1993], 46). Ray writes that early in her career as a feminist theologian she was at times tempted “to view Christianity as irredeemably complicit in structures of violence and evil and thus to leave it altogether” (Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 4).

¹¹ A significant exception to this would be Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who argues for “a critical, emancipatory hermeneutics” which “calls for transformative and engaged biblical readers” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013], 15).

¹² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 89.

sense, a purposeful act, and also redemptive (see John 12:27).¹³ Although Scripture may be ambiguous on the precise meaning of Jesus' death, it is not ambiguous about the fact that his death was incredibly important for the forgiveness of sins. There seems to be something missing in feminist accounts of atonement. The all-encompassing revisionism of much feminist theology may inadvertently discard the importance of historical forgiveness and reconciliation, and in so doing detach theology from its historical moorings in the real life and purposes of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁴

Because of feminism's brash rejection of the forgiveness/reconciliation element of atonement, more conservative scholars have written proportionally vituperative responses to them. Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach provide a staunch defense of traditional views, and are willing to assert that, quite obviously in their view, "God *caused* Jesus' suffering and death."¹⁵ J.I. Packer and Mark Dever argue that substitutionary atonement forms "the heart of the Gospel" and make the further claim that it must be seen as a placation of the wrath of God for our forgiveness.¹⁶ Hans Boersma,

¹³ Ray also highlights the fact that the significance of Jesus' death as atonement is an inescapable part of the Christian tradition, and that "the same organ that has diminished the well-being of some has enabled the very survival of others. To opt for amputation without considering the life-saving function of the organ is perhaps too hasty a move" (Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 71).

¹⁴ Belousek is on point here: "We affirm that the suffering and death of Jesus were integral to his messianic mission, necessary for fulfilling God's purpose in redeeming humanity from the power of sin and gaining victory over death" (Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 74). Note, however, that Belousek says this without affirming that the death of Jesus was an act of divine violence, or a way of satisfying God's justice.

¹⁵ Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231.

¹⁶ "What has happened? The wrath of God against us, both present and to come, has been quenched. How was this effected? Through the death of Christ" (J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 34).

while not overtly vindictive toward critics of penal substitution, writes in favor of the doctrine, claiming that it provides an example of God's exclusionary punishment, which makes possible genuine "hospitality" or reconciliation. He argues that the Cross is "a historically dated expression of God's hospitality, accompanied by the type of violence (punishment) without which such hospitality cannot materialize."¹⁷ These evangelical scholars address the issue of sins and reconciliation in their theories, but they miss (or at least do not directly address) the entire point of their feminist counterparts—that satisfaction theories seem to justify abuse.

Problem

Feminist theologians, while thoroughly rejecting traditional satisfaction models of the atonement, have generally attempted to replace such models with the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement, which has made a gradual resurgence in the past century since the pioneering work of Gustaf Aulén.¹⁸ This model enables feminists to show a way for abused and marginalized women to reject their oppressed status and find empowerment through the resurrection of Jesus. However, the problem with this approach is that it is

¹⁷ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 171. I would explain here what Boersma attempts to do with his hospitality-based argument, were it not that I find it perplexing, contradictory, and highly susceptible to misunderstanding.

¹⁸ According to Ray (who calls Christus Victor simply the "Patristic Model"), "The central image of this model is liberation from bondage, the result of a dramatic and surprising confrontation between the forces of good and evil. Human beings are understood to be held captive by the devil, to be bound by sin and evil, and atonement is the process by which our release is won" (Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 120). Quite differently, Denny Weaver appropriates this model by calling it the "narrative Christus Victor" model, which he says "is not the classic image of cosmic beings in conflict. It is rather the event of Jesus and the church around Jesus unfolding in the realm of history as depicted in the biblical story" (Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 85). See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

incomplete, for it does not adequately articulate how the life and death of Jesus can serve as the foundation for a new order in which redemption is found for both victims and their abusers. In their emphasis on the tragic nature of abuse (which is correct and necessary), feminists can forget the necessity of possible reconciliation between the parties in the abuse situation. For such reconciliation to occur, there must be forgiveness and a reconstruction of justice between the parties. Feminist atonement theology does not answer the question of how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection can establish this new justice—which, biblically speaking, seems to be an aspect of the atonement (Rom 3:26; Col 1:20).

Purpose

In this research project I will respond primarily to the works of feminist thinkers Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, with limited reference to more traditional theologians such as John Stott,¹⁹ with whom the feminists disagree. In order to answer the question, “How does the crucifixion of Christ serve to create justice for abused and abusers?” I will appeal to what has been called the “moral government” model of the atonement, the origins of which go back at least to Hugo Grotius.²⁰ This model has been further developed in later centuries by Ellen G. White, and vivified more recently by René Girard. Although, as James McClendon points out, this model seems to

¹⁹ See John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986).

²⁰ See Hugo Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, trans. Frank Hugh Foster (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1889).

be a variant of the satisfaction tradition,²¹ I believe it can be modified to capture the essence of what Jesus has done to create justice for the abused and their abusers. This new moral government perspective would concur with *Christus Victor* in suggesting a Christology in which Jesus' death is the logical result of his identification with and struggle for the abused (so that he did not choose or valorize abuse but merely accepted it as the outcome of his struggle against it). But it would move on to show how his abuse then functions as the foundation for his ability to restore the abused to an equal and empowered position in a new moral government, as well as forge a pathway to forgive abusers as they are also restored in the new earth (only the victim can justly forgive). I will argue that this type of interpretation of the governmental tradition is especially aided by the work of René Girard. Hence, by the conclusion of this study I hope to show how Jesus's death accomplishes three tasks governmentally: (1) it places him in a position to restore victims as their representative, (2) it enables him to justly restore abusers, since he is their victim, and thus no one can impugn his decision to forgive them, and (3) it gives him the right to condemn and exclude any unrepentant abusers, since his public victimization has made it impossible for anyone under his governance to dispute the justice of his case.

Limitations

Although the works of several feminist thinkers, such as Darby Kathleen Ray and Denny Weaver, have contributed enormously to the current atonement discussion, this study will focus primarily on the work of Brock and Parker. Also, although the issue of

²¹ James William McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 208.

penal-substitution looms large in this field of debate, I will not address the merits of this doctrine here, for the simple reason that doing so would require much more space than this study will allow.

Methodology

First I will survey the projects of the above-mentioned feminist theologians. Then I will provide a biblical and then philosophical critique of their work, with an eye to the question of justice. I will then overview the tradition of moral government atonement by examining three of its primary proponents—Hugo Grotius, Ellen G. White, and René Girard. Finally, I will attempt to articulate how a governmental model of the atonement can meet the feminist challenge by meeting the needs of victims.

CHAPTER 2

THE ATONEMENT THEOLOGY OF RITA NAKASHIMA

BROCK AND REBECCA ANN PARKER

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, whose parallel insights on atonement are the main focus of this work, have numerous commonalities. Notably, neither of them has attempted to form a fully systematized theology of atonement; instead, their approach has been largely polemical and reactionary.¹ For this reason, it is better to outline the central arguments which emerge in the writings of these theologians, rather than examining each theologian individually—a task which would require more space than this work will allow. Where individual differences become prominent, further discussion will be necessary. In this chapter, I will lay out the foundational notions of these theologians, and will then provide an appraisal.

Prolegomena in Brief

At the risk of oversimplification, I posit the following ideas as cornerstones of the approach which Brock and Parker take to the atonement.

Beginning with the Victim

Brock and Parker begin their autobiographical exposition of atonement theology by appealing to the needs of victims: “When violence has fractured communities, isolated

¹ This does not mean, of course, that neither of them aims for coherence. However, neither has written a sizable “prolegomena” outlining specific presuppositional grounds for theological work.

people and broken hearts, how can life be repaired? We ask these questions not to arrive at final answers, but because asking them is fundamental to living.”² The world of human beings, and especially that of women, is constructed in the face of violence and victimization.³ In *Proverbs of Ashes*, as the title suggests, Brock and Parker demonstrate how their own views of the atonement have been born out of their struggle to mentally and emotionally survive the abuse that each experienced.⁴ Their theology does not simply

² Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 8.

³ Here begins one of the great difficulties of all forms of dialogue on the atonement and theology in general. Phrased interrogatively: What is the precise meaning of the word “violence”? The word is used frequently in common parlance, but a definition that distinguishes it adequately from similar behaviors that we do not call “violence” is hard to come by. Is shoving a child swiftly away from a speeding train “violent”? Yes, we may say, but we would not call a parent who does so a “violent parent.” Thus, according to Glen Stassen and Michael L. Westmoreland-White, violence is not merely the exercise of force, but “destruction to a victim by means that overpower the victim’s consent” (Glen H. Stassen and Michael L. Westmoreland-White, “Defining Violence and Non-Violence,” in *Teaching Peace: Nonviolence and the Liberal Arts*, ed. J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Biesecker-Mast [Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003], 18). Denny Weaver follows this definition in his work on the atonement (*The Nonviolent Atonement*, 8). Some theologians, such as Peter Leithart, are very broad in their definition of violence, including in it all manner of coercive behaviors (see Leithart’s lecture on violence at the Wheaton Theology Conference: [wheaton.edu/WETN/All-Media/Lectures-and-Conferences/Wheaton Theology Conference](http://wheaton.edu/WETN/All-Media/Lectures-and-Conferences/WheatonTheologyConference) [accessed April 7, 2014]). A good account of the minimalist and maximalist definitions of violence is found in Vittorio Bufacchi, “Two Concepts of Violence,” *Political Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (2005): 193-204. The ultimate maximalist definition of violence is found in Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008). Žižek argues that violence is so woven into the fabric of reality in its various forms that “the lesson of the intricate relationship between the subjective and systemic violence is that violence is not a direct property of some acts, but is distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity. The same act can count as violent or non-violent, depending on its context; sometimes a polite smile can be more violent than a brutal outburst” (ibid., 213). While there is much to recommend in Žižek’s analysis of the origins of violence in societies (as well as much to be confused about, given Žižek’s idiosyncratic style), his definition of violence is too broad for the purposes of my own arguments regarding divine violence in atonement. Part of the problem with his definition is that it limits the extent to which “violence” is a word with a useful meaning. Brock and Parker, to my knowledge, provide no concise definition of violence, but it also appears that their definition would be more narrow than that of Žižek.

⁴ Both suffered from physical and emotional abuse, as well as racism (see Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 23, 53).

address the suffering of victims, it presupposes this suffering as its fundamental criterion (this will become clearer below).

This emphasis on beginning theological work with the victim connects Brock and Parker to broader streams of liberation theology, which promote the concept of conducting spiritual reflection as an outgrowth of the experience of oppression.⁵ For some liberation theologians, there can be no Christian theology without it being grounded in the experience of poverty and oppression, for, as Jon Sobrino argues, in the poor “the mystery of reality breaks through” and God is “scandalously present.”⁶ Because God sides with the poor in their struggles, the best way to discover the working of God in human affairs is to examine it from the testimony of those who are poor and oppressed.

Furthermore, in reaching out to the oppressed and taking their side, one finds oneself aligned with God. This is why, in one of the foundational essays of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez argues that theology needs to be based on the church’s mission to the poor, rather than on a doctrinal basis.⁷ The doctrines arrive as a result of reflection on the needs of the poor and what might be necessary to meet those needs.

⁵ See, for example, Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010); James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012); Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976).

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 19.

⁷ Gutierrez writes, “The Christian community professes a ‘faith which works through charity.’ It is—at least ought to be—efficacious love, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step. What Hegel said about philosophy can be said about theology: it rises only at sundown” (Gustavo Gutierrez, “Toward a New Method: Theology and Liberation,” in *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996], 123).

Therefore, theology's truth is in its significance, for if the church cannot rouse itself to face the reality of the world as the poor experience it, than God is shown to be absent and the mission of the church is nullified.

Feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have taken this same concept of beginning with the victim and localized it further, by applying it to the experience of women. According to Fiorenza, if the church wishes to consider the needs of the oppressed, it should start with women, since they are "the oppressed of the oppressed."⁸ Not only the experience of the poor, but that of poor women, should become the criterion under which theology is done. For, throughout much of history, "the least of these" about whom Jesus cared and of whom the church was formed, were women. In this sense, by identifying with "the least of these" Jesus became a woman; and to properly understand theologically the church's mission for the world, theologians today must "become women" to see the world through women's eyes.⁹ This same perspective finds expression in Rosemary Radford Ruether, who makes the needs of women the central interpretive key for appropriating the Christian tradition.¹⁰ According to Ruether, "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of

⁸ "Not only do women and children represent the majority of the 'oppressed,' but poor and Third World women suffer the triple oppression of sexism, racism, and classism. If liberation theologians make the 'option for the oppressed' the key to their theological endeavors, then they must become conscious of the fact that 'the oppressed' are women" (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics," in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, ed. Brian Mahan and Dale Richesin [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981], 92).

⁹ Fiorenza thus argues that all theology must take an "advocacy stance." Theology cannot be detached, objective observation, because "intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation and oppression" (ibid., 93).

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18-19.

women. . . . What does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community.”¹¹

Brock and Parker’s method, as well as Denny Weaver’s, takes this perspective of victimized women and children as a cornerstone. Weaver, recognizing the implications of postmodernity for theological reflection (specifically, that each model of the atonement has a “context”),¹² attempts to respond to the needs of the victimized while keeping in mind that various types of victims together must be able to understand the significance of the atonement. This creates a struggle between the universal (the understanding of the church) and the particular (the needs of women, Blacks, the poor, etc.), which Weaver’s work seeks to overcome.¹³ Rather than dabbling in the debate over who is more victimized (women vs. minorities vs. the poor), Weaver simply posits as a presupposition that which all victims can relate to: the experience of violence.¹⁴ Weaver writes:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 6.

¹³ Weaver writes: “Encountering the array of critiques from contexts different from my own also presented an important challenge to my work, namely, whether the understanding of narrative *Christus Victor* that I was formulating could respond to the sets of problems raised by the writings of black and feminist and womanist theologians. The challenge was twofold. One the one hand, since Christian faith confesses that God’s reign encompasses every person, an understanding of the work of Christ had to make sense to black and feminist and womanist theologians. Stated in terms reflecting postmodernity, did each context have its own atonement theology, or was there a way to talk about the work of Jesus Christ so that Christians in different particular contexts could understand the death of Jesus as an event with universal significance? At the same time, any reconstruction of atonement had to respect the particularity of these contextual theologies and not merely claim to incorporate and co-opt pieces of them into someone else’s supposedly wider and more general understanding” (ibid., 7).

¹⁴ “The working assumption in development of this model is that the rejection of violence, whether the direct violence of the sword or the systemic violence of racism or sexism, should be visible in expressions of Christology and atonement” (ibid., 8).

“Feminist writers on atonement and Christology have observed additional elements of violence in traditional atonement imagery.”¹⁵ Women have, throughout history, experienced not only relegation to second-class status in terms of rights and privileges, but also physical, sexual, and mental abuse springing from their supposed inferiority to men. Aware of this reality, a feminist theologian approaches the death of Christ with a different mind-set than a traditional, male-oriented theologian like Anselm, because feminists see the similarities between the brutal mistreatment of Jesus and the mistreatment of women and children. This different lens for viewing the atonement results in a vastly different understanding of Christology, which is another hallmark theme of feminist atonement theology.

Re-Evaluation of Atonement Christology

Brock and Parker find problems with traditional atonement theology because of the way it portrays Jesus’ role as the object of divine wrath. Their atonement theology thus seeks to re-affirm Christ’s *innocence*, especially in opposition to what they find portrayed in the doctrine of penal substitution.

The New Testament repeatedly affirms that, despite being fully human, Jesus was without sin.¹⁶ Yet, according to Brock and Parker, through certain interpretations of the doctrine of penal-substitution, much of Christian theology has implied that Jesus accepted the real guilt of sinners upon himself, in order to make his death a substitute punishment

¹⁵ Ibid., 189.

¹⁶ See, for example, 2 Cor 5:21, Heb 4:15.

for them.¹⁷ Once Jesus' bearing forensic guilt has been accepted, it is logical to posit God the Father as playing an active role in carrying out the death of Jesus, as if God were the executioner.¹⁸ Brock and Parker are examples of Christians who, when learning the doctrine of penal substitution, find that it is hard to understand this doctrine without viewing God as a divine punisher. Thus, even I. Howard Marshall, despite testifying that no serious evangelical theologians have ever posited that God was angry with Jesus on the cross, admits that "popular preachers may err in this respect."¹⁹ Marshall is technically correct here, in the sense that—if pressed—most evangelical theologians would assert that God and Christ cooperate in the process of redemption, rather than being antagonistic. However, the subtle technicality of scholastic evangelicalism sometimes seems to conceal a harsher teaching. Some theologians, like Wayne Grudem, are more blunt: "God . . . poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world."²⁰ For Brock and Parker, it seems hard to say

¹⁷ See Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 29. One sees this vividly in the work of John Stott, who begins his defense of penal substitution by describing the need for our own recognition of responsibility and the guilt that goes with it (Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 96-110). He then shifts to describing how Jesus' death resolves the problem of human guilt (ibid., 111). This leaves the uneasy impression that somehow Jesus bore responsibility for the sins of humanity, given that there is a certain equivalence between "guilt" and "responsibility."

¹⁸ Brock and Parker cite Calvin's view as one which emphasizes God's active role in the death of Jesus: "He bore the weight of divine severity, since he was 'stricken and afflicted' by God's hand and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God" (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 29).

¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (London: Paternoster, 2007), 63.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 63.

such things and then turn around and pontificate on the Father's love for the Son, and anguish at his death.²¹

Hence, Brock and Parker emphasize that Jesus was an innocent victim whose death was, rather than a manifestation of the wrath of God, a disclosure of pure tragedy. This leads to their famous depiction of penal substitution as "divine child abuse":

Do we really believe that God is appeased by cruelty, and wants nothing more than our obedience? It becomes imperative that we ask this question when we examine how theology sanctions human cruelty. If God is imagined as a fatherly torturer, earthly parents are also justified, perhaps even required, to teach through violence. Children are instructed to understand their submission to pain as a form of love. Behind closed doors, in our own community, spouses and children are battered by abusers who justify their actions as necessary, loving discipline.

This reasoning may seem far-fetched to some, like I. Howard Marshall, who find it preposterous to allege that within the workings of the Trinity there could be a "fatherly torturer."²² Trinitarian oneness seems to undercut the notion that God could be acting against Christ on the cross. This critique is particularly trenchant when based on Jürgen Moltmann's conception of the whole-Godhead suffering on the cross.²³ Nevertheless, to

²¹ According to Brock: "The emphasis is on the goodness and power of the father and the unworthiness and powerlessness of his children, so that the father's punishment is just, and children are to blame" (Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* [New York: Crossroad, 1988], 56).

²² Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 62. "The charge of cosmic child abuse is totally misplaced. It fails to recognize the points that have just been made which emphasize that it was God who initiated the cross, it was God himself who suffered on the cross and bore the sin of the world" (ibid.).

²³ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

many Christians this appears to be fundamentally illogical.²⁴ This view has, no doubt, influenced Brock and Parker's thinking.

It is not my purpose to evaluate the legitimacy of Brock and Parker's revolt against penal substitution. Rather, the important point is to notice the theological undergirdings of this revolt. As noted above, feminist atonement theology is based on praxis, not theory. The goal is to show how a theology can be worked out in favor of the oppressed, namely, women and children. The question is, What does thinking along the lines of penal-substitution do for the abused? According to Brock, because it fails to recognize the tragic reality of Jesus' innocence, it results in a Christian praxis which regularly blames the victims, by justifying top-down authority.²⁵ The tragic element of Jesus' death is thus lost. Therefore Jesus' supposed submissiveness to his father's will (portrayed in the garden of Gethsemane, prior to Jesus' crucifixion) seems, to feminist

²⁴ For Marshall, this whole theology is "paradoxical and incomprehensible, and we have to recognize that fact, but that is what Scripture says. It is part of the mystery of the incarnation" (Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 62). Marshall's method here is not as bad as it might seem. Mysteries abound within the scheme of salvation, and no decent theologian would find it preposterous to accept what appear to be contradictory data as representing what human minds are simply unable to comprehend. The question, however, is whether these contradictions are necessary, and whether accepting them has negative consequences for Christian praxis.

²⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock describes the social effects of penal-substitution on victims of abuse: "The shadow of omnipotence haunts atonement. The ghost of the punitive father lurks in the corners. He never disappears even as he is transformed into an image of forgiving grace. Hence the experience of grace is lodged, I believe, not so much in a clear sense of personal worth gained from an awareness of interdependence and the unconditional nature of love, but in a sense of relief from escaping punishment for one's failings. Paternalistic grace functions by allowing a select group to be in a favored relationship with the powerful father, but the overall destructiveness of the oppressive systems of the patriarchal family is not challenged by such benevolence. . . . Such doctrines of salvation reflect by analogy, I believe, images of the neglect of children or, even worse child abuse, making it acceptable as divine behavior—cosmic child abuse, as it were. The father allows, or even inflicts, the death of his only perfect son. The emphasis is on the goodness and power of the father and the unworthiness and powerlessness of his children, so that the father's punishment is just, and the children are to blame" (Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 56).

theology, to be an exact depiction of the process that abused children go through while dealing with their abuser: “The child projects the image of an ideal parent onto an outside figure who is always right and who is the source of both love and righteous punishment.”²⁶

Rejecting this “submissive Christology” in favor of one which recognizes the innocent victimhood of Jesus is an attempt by Brock and Parker to highlight the innocent victimhood of women and children in abusive relationships—to re-emphasize the tragic nature of Christ’s death.²⁷ Part of this theological praxis is the rejection of notions of self-sacrifice as the ideal of Jesus’ character. The “surrender of the will,” in Brock and Parker’s understanding, can lead to abuse victims cooperating with abusers. Thus, Brock and Parker express disdain for any theology that advocates Christ-like surrender of the will to God.²⁸ They tell stories of abuse victims who, although profoundly disturbed by

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown affirm this point poetically: “The cross is a sign of tragedy. God’s grief is revealed there and everywhere and every time life is thwarted by violence. God’s grief is as ultimate as God’s love. Every tragedy eternally remains and is eternally mourned. Eternally the murdered scream, Betrayal. Eternally God sings kaddish for the world” (Rebecca Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown, “For God So Love the World?,” in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune [New York: Continuum, 1995], 57). This seems to entail a dismissal of the redemptive capacity of God to put all things to rights. Such a critique would need further development elsewhere.

²⁸ “Christian theology presents Jesus as the model of self-sacrificing love and persuades us to believe that sexism is divinely sanctioned. We are tied to the virtue of self-sacrifice, often by hidden social threats of punishment. We keep silent about rape, we deny when we are being abused, and we allow our lives to be consumed by the trivial and by our preoccupation with others. We never claim our lives as our own. We live as though we were not present in our bodies” (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 36).

the suffering they experienced, were led to tolerate it and even approve it since they saw themselves as imitating Jesus' submissive death on the cross.²⁹

Furthermore, according to Brock and Parker, what is needed is a break from the model of love as control: "When control and love are confused, the faithful must believe even the most horrible and painful things are allowed or inflicted by God, that violence is supposed to happen, for the moral education of the victim or for a future reward."³⁰ This rejection of control and submissiveness as characteristics of the human relationship to God forms the basis for another central theme of Brock and Parker's work on atonement: their process perspective of God's action.

A Process Understanding of Divine Action

Brock and Parker are perhaps more clear on what they are *against* than what they are *for* when it comes to atonement. They are against penal-substitution, and pretty much every other traditional model of atonement.³¹ However, critical openings into their positive understanding of atonement appear in Brock's reliance on process theology in *Journeys by Heart*. What follows is a brief explanation of how this process perspective appears to relate to atonement.

²⁹ Ibid., 27. The most traumatizing of these stories is that of a girl who, although her father sexually abused her, refused to tell anyone, because he was in the place of God for her and must not be questioned. This led the girl to re-interpret her own abuse as her own fault, and to chastise herself for what she thought was her own sexual desire for her father.

³⁰ Ibid., 157.

³¹ Including, surprisingly, moral influence (ibid., 30-31). Their opposition to this model is based on their belief that it encourages abuse victims to believe that enduring their abuse will persuade their abusers to reform (ignoring the existence of genuine pathology which cannot be cured by such influence). This is hard to argue against. Whether this truly abolishes all forms of moral influence thinking in atonement is more disputable, however.

According to Brock, a key distinction between patriarchal society's and women's approaches to problem solving is found in women's desire for "fusion": "Instead of wanting to impose their will on others to keep them outside the self and controllable, women seek to push for greater interaction and fusion with others and a sense of importance by participation in their lives."³² Brock admits that desire for surreptitious political influence might have much to do with the dominance of men and the need to "fly under the radar" of this dominance.³³ Nevertheless, Brock believes that this desire for relationality is a fundamental solution to the abuses of power that arise from male-dominated regimes. The only problem with "fusion" is that it creates victims who have no "clear sense of self."³⁴ They have become subsumed under the identity of the dominating power they serve, and thus are unable to exert force for change.³⁵ If the abused view their only hope as power through *fusion*, the paradigm of power as control remains unchallenged.

The solution to this problem, according to Brock, is recognition of the ultimate reality of *erotic power*. Brock's use of the word "erotic" does not refer to purely sexual attraction, as might be assumed by some. This misconception may arise from an improper understanding of the feminist employment of the word *Eros*. Brock explains:

³² Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ "Power is structured as benevolent paternalism in Christianity. In examining the paternalistic structure of love in my own life, I saw the limits of such a view of love and power. Paternalism inhibits intimacy and maintains inappropriate forms of dependence. Adults are asked to surrender their lives passively and obediently in exchange for salvation" (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 156).

In our male-dominant society Eros is often equivalent to lust or sexuality. This confusion may come from the lack of intimacy accessible to males so that one of the few forms of embodied intimacy available to men is sexual. But the feminist Eros, especially as found in works by Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, is far more than sexuality, passion, or an intellectual or spiritual quest for ideal beauty. Feminist Eros is grounded in the relational lives of women and in a critical, self-aware consciousness that unites the psychological and political spheres of life, binding love with power.³⁶

Hence, Brock defines erotic power as a power that works through love—a “drawing” power rather than a forceful or dominative power:

Erotic power is the energy that produces creative synthesis, and is enhanced by the relationships that emerge from creative synthesis. It produces not fusion and control, but connectedness. While various forms of dominance exist in society, if we can begin to experience them differently, we will begin to break down the damaging power hierarchies that destroy heart. We can then begin to see power as the fluid product of a highly interactive process that begins with birth and buoys us throughout life.³⁷

This power of connectedness implies that there is no top-down hierarchy in which the strong dominate the weak and the weak discover their identity by being dominated by the strong. Rather, each person is empowered in connecting to others in relationships of mutuality, which form the basis of activism against oppression.³⁸

³⁶ Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 39.

³⁸ “The erotic compels us to be hungry for justice at our very depths because we are response-able. We are able to reject what makes us numb to the suffering and self-hate of others. Acts against oppression become essential to ourselves, empowered from our organized centers. Through the erotic as power we become less willing to accept powerlessness, despair, depression, and self-denial. The erotic is what binds and gives life and hope. It is the energy of all relationship and it connects us to our embodied selves. The empathetic sharing of any pursuit with another person helps us understand what is not shared. Hence differences become less threatening as we are empowered to affirm all persons in our lives, and to see through the faint, fearful broken heart of patriarchy” (ibid., 41).

Brock draws her theology of erotic power largely from the conceptual framework of process theology. Process thought sees reality—all the way down to the level of “soul”—as essentially a community.³⁹ In process thought, the competitive impulse founded on individualism is ultimately an illusion, since being exists insofar as it relates to others, not separates from them. This means that God’s own being is not separate from us, but rather “cocreates” with us in the formation of the world. God is not the ultimate authority above us, who delivers commands and expects obedience, like a general directing troops or a programmer operating with a computer. Rather, God is a companion—just as much a part of history’s vicissitudes as we are.⁴⁰ Thus, process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne reject the idea of God’s “omnipotence” as it has been classically understood (as a God who controls from the top down).⁴¹

Process theologians who have paved the way for Brock and Parker’s analysis of atonement have also argued that the process view is essential for moving safely into an age in which human power begins to usurp what were previously considered divine prerogatives. Sally McFague puts it succinctly: “If our situation is one in which we know that we have the power to destroy ourselves and other forms of life, then power

³⁹ See John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 47. “Perhaps the most striking differentiating feature of Whitehead’s doctrine of the soul is that it is a society rather than an individual actual entity” (ibid.). See also Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

⁴⁰ “If the world is viewed as a complex machine, then the correlative doctrine of God is likely to be that of a creator who stands outside of his creation. But if the world is viewed in organic terms then the principle of life, order, and growth must be immanent to the organisms” (Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 173).

⁴¹ See Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984).

understood as domination and control, as absolute mastery and sovereignty, is counterproductive.”⁴² In the context of human relationships, it is even more counterproductive, and downright dangerous. Brock notes that this conception of power takes hold of us as children, and causes us either to embrace domination (as we have been dominated) or induces us to become too dependent.⁴³ This prevents us from being grounded and confident: “The need to dominate or be dominated is the reactive stance of a fearful, defensive self, rather than the centered activity of a confident self.”⁴⁴ At a basic level, therefore, in order to facilitate the proper development of the human person, theology must recognize that God is not the all-powerful controller.

Nevertheless, for the process-view predecessors of Brock and Parker, this does not mean that God is powerless. Although God does not use force, God is ever present as a leading “lure” who draws human beings through “self-transcendence” which enables them to experience love in freedom.⁴⁵ In contrast to some theologies which find salvation

⁴² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1987), 16.

⁴³ “The earliest childhood task is to make order out of the chaos of immediate perceptions so that the world begins to make sense and to respond to intentional acts. A child requires a validating presence and the agreement of others—people it can trust for their wisdom and affectionate support so it can grow toward its own wisdom and generosity. If a child’s relationships do not make its acts of receptivity and accommodation worthwhile, it either develops a stronger need for willful assertion into its world or it stays too dependent” (Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 27).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “God’s activity does not impose change on a person from outside of the person but enables her to love the other. God’s acceptance frees a person to love without being made to love” (John Culp, “Coming to Salvation: A Process Understanding,” in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman [St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006], 67).

in God's limitation of human freedom (Calvinism), process theology sees the salvific act as perfecting freedom by drawing persons into awareness of mutual, loving relationships.

This leads process thinkers such as Bernard Loomer (whom Brock draws upon heavily) to argue that the typical understanding of power relations must be suspended: "If power always means the exercising of influence and control, and if receiving always means weakness and lack of power, then a creative and strong love that comprises a mutual giving and receiving is not possible."⁴⁶ For Brock, this critique of traditional power conceptions has immense implications for atonement theology. In much atonement thinking, Christ's submissive death serves to fulfill the purposes of an all-powerful deity, whose law has been violated. This deity demands absolute obedience, and since human beings have failed to deliver such obedience, Jesus arrives as the perfect human being who can fulfill all of the deity's demands, the ultimate of which is that someone must die. Jesus' life and death is in this way *sacrificial*—it propitiates the all-powerful deity who must maintain his authority at all costs. But what if this deity is not "all-powerful" in the classically understood sense?⁴⁷ If, as the process perspective argues, God works not through force but through feeling—the divine lure of love—then it appears that the entire edifice of traditional atonement must be re-evaluated. Atonement, or "at-one-ment," is not the means by which a divine hierarchy is preserved through power and submission,

⁴⁶ Bernard Loomer, "Two Conceptions of Power," *Process Studies* 6, no. 1 (1976): 19.

⁴⁷ Brock calls this a move to a "nondualistic" understanding of power: "In moving to a nondualistic relational understanding of power, a number of process thinkers—those who believe that relationship and change are ultimate principles of reality—have attempted to replace coercive power with persuasive power. This is an important move away from control and from religious discussions of power as coercive or as the benign paternalistic interactions of God with the world" (Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 34).

but the way in which Christ creates a community of interconnectedness through his life and teachings.⁴⁸ This inadvertently means that, although Brock and Parker renounce “moral influence” theories of the atonement in *Proverbs of Ashes*, their positive atonement theology—at least that of Brock—is a variant of moral influence. This confuses the meaning of another one of their main emphases, concerning notions of sacrifice.

Rejection of Sacrifice

Brock and Parker also re-evaluate the typical Christian idolization of sacrifice.⁴⁹ They notice that, notwithstanding Jesus’ bold assertion that “I desire mercy, not a sacrifice” (Matt 12:7), Christian tradition, as noted above, has interpreted Jesus’ death

⁴⁸ Ibid., 69. Brock refers to the entire event of atonement as “Christa/Community”: “Christ—the revelatory and redemptive witness of God/dess’s work in history—is Christa/Community. The Christa/Community in the biblical texts, in the stories of Jesus and other figures, is the church’s imaginative witness to its experiences of brokenness and sacredness of erotic power in human existence.” See also Rita Nakashima Brock, “Communities of the Cross: Christa and the Communal Nature of Redemption,” *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 1 (2005): 109.

⁴⁹ Speaking on the tendency of Christians to valorize the process of sacrifice as a way of salvation, Brock and Parker write: “What if nothing, or very little, is saved? What if the consequence of sacrifice is simply pain, the diminishment of life, fragmentation of the soul abasement, shame? What if the severing of life is merely destructive of life and is not the path of love courage, trust, and faith? What if the performance of sacrifice is a ritual in which some human beings bear loss and others are protected from accountability or moral expectations?” (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 25). Unfortunately—and this could be a significant weakness in Brock and Parker’s approach—neither theologian defines what is precisely meant by the term “sacrifice.” This word is rather nebulous in theological studies today. (See René Girard, *Sacrifice*, trans. Matthew Pattillo and David Dawson [East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011].) One can assume, from the context of Brock and Parker’s work, that they mean by “sacrifice” the arbitrary death of a victim who suffers to appease the wrath or sadism of a powerful figure. However, other definitions of this word can be formulated, none of which require notions of “appeasement” or hierarchical authority. We regularly use such definitions when we speak of “sacrificing” our time in order to accomplish a task, or “sacrificing” sleep in order to study. Brock and Parker would do well to specify a nuanced meaning of this term, in order to preempt confusion and “straw man” style criticisms.

primarily, if not exclusively, as sacrificial.⁵⁰ In their book *Saving Paradise*, Brock and Parker argue that this Christian obsession with sacrificial death is not an integral element in early Christian thinking, but one that developed later, as the church became more accommodating to violence.⁵¹ They claim that Christian art is a revealing indicator of how the church moved from life-celebration to morbidity very gradually in the centuries after the apostles.⁵² Christian liturgy, as well, demonstrated a shift from “this-worldly” celebration of life to a valorization of sacrificial death. Employing an evocative phrase, Brock and Parker describe how “the Carolingians inflicted their eucharist on the people they conquered.”⁵³

Viewing sacrifice as essential to Christianity implies that the fundamental problem addressed by Christian theology must be guilt, since sacrifice exists to placate the one offended by guilt. Brock argues against this view, claiming that it makes “sinfulness” an extremely patriarchal concept:

Sinfulness, as a category within Christian analyses of humanity, is tied to the reinforcement of patriarchal theology. That reinforcement is hooked to the structure of the patriarchal family with mothers at its center. Sinfulness is aligned with blame, punishment, and guilt, and blame has usually been assigned to woman as the originator of sin, or to our maternal, organic birth which must be transcended by a higher, spiritual birth. While such assignation of blame may absolve individual believers of guilt, it carries undertones of both misogyny and self-hate for it puts persons in utter conflict with themselves.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ And, I might add, to a certain extent, understandably so, since the Bible clearly speaks of Jesus’ death as a type of sacrifice (see Heb 10:1-18).

⁵¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

⁵² This was a very slow process, according to Brock and Parker. “Jesus’ suffering on the cross and his corpse did not appear in Christian art until the tenth century” (ibid., 50).

⁵³ Ibid., 237.

⁵⁴ Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 6.

This self-hate which has resulted from traditional Christian ideas about sin can lead to the perpetuation of abusive situations, in which battered persons are led to believe that whatever happens to them is deserved, since they are sinful. Brock recognizes this point, but does not deny the reality of original sin. Instead, she turns it around, making original sin the rejection of “original grace.”⁵⁵ Human beings are born graced by God with innate beauty. Sinfulness is the element of patriarchy which degrades the grace of God, and in so doing degrades itself. Sinfulness is thus not guilt, but the havoc that guilt wreaks in rejecting original grace.⁵⁶ Sinfulness exists only insofar as grace exists first—it is not a primordial condition which defines human identity.

This process-based approach to guilt and sinfulness makes sacrifice unnecessary for grace. Sacrifice still exists, but only as a by-product of love. “Love is not without pain,” Brock and Parker write. “Love involves change and to change involves risk. . . . The more we love the more loss carves into our souls. Pain is the risk of loving, not the basis of love.”⁵⁷ There is a distinct tension here in Brock and Parker’s thinking which is not resolved. If love must involve pain, how can we not say that sacrifice—to some

⁵⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁶ “Original grace is this healing gift, a reality that begins at birth. I search for theological images and ideas that will help us embrace the fullest possible life through the ultimate claim relationships make on our very being. I will explore, in the context of original grace, the damage to self, to heart, that is a consequence of patriarchy, damage that can be understood theologically as one major violation of original grace. I believe it is our damage—in which one major factor is patriarchy—that has produced a doctrine of sin as a description of our original human state” (ibid., 8-9).

⁵⁷ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 158.

extent—lies at the foundation of love? Still, the main point is clear: Any love which *demand*s sacrifice is not founded on a proper view of the relational structure of humanity.

Evaluation

A number of positive points can be drawn from the various emphases of Brock and Parker's atonement theology. First, one does not have to identify as a "liberation theologian" to recognize the legitimacy of the first point highlighted in Brock and Parker's work. "Ivory tower" theology which is made in the absence of real-world needs cannot—even if theoretically unassailable—be proven useful to the church's proclamation to people in the midst of struggles. Even among evangelicals, as D. Bruce Hindmarsh has noted, social concerns have not always been absent from soteriology.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, some evangelicals, in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the "social gospel," have over-emphasized the "other-worldly" aspects of salvation at the expense of concerns about victimization here and now. This is not an ideal approach—a more delicate balance between the two emphases should be attempted. Thus, we can clearly embrace Brock and Parker's methodology of "beginning with the victim," even if we are hesitant about adopting a 'thoroughly' revisionist approach to theology which throws out doctrine in favor of praxis.

Another important positive point to be drawn from Brock and Parker's work concerns their rejection of theologies which emphasize God's sovereign control and manipulation. These theologies clearly appear to be damaging to minorities, women, and

⁵⁸ See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "'Let Us See Thy Great Salvation': What Did It Mean to Be Saved for the Early Evangelicals?," in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. Jr. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).

children, as some parenting books based on these types of theology demonstrate. For example, Sally Hohnberger, an Adventist writer on parenting, features as a hallmark of her parenting philosophy that children as young as toddlers must learn “surrender of heart.”⁵⁹ Both Sally and her husband, Jim, lead a teaching and writing ministry which focuses on making God the ultimate authority in one’s life and submitting to God’s will absolutely. In Sally’s parenting advice for young toddlers, she points out that toddlers can learn absolute submission to God only by absolutely submitting to their parents. Thus, “Our voice (the parents’) needs to be the same as God’s voice and spirit. In this way, our child hears God’s directives in an audible way.”⁶⁰ In other words, the relationship between parent and child is such that the parent is “vicar of God on earth” and must be obeyed at all costs. Any sign of lack of submission must be rooted out of the child immediately. This leads Hohnberger to advocate spanking children for misbehavior as miniscule as refusing to eat vegetables and failing to pray on command (since not praying is a sign of lack of surrender).⁶¹ “Give a spanking in Christ—not in self,” Hohnberger cheerfully explains. “Gain a full surrender—not a partial surrender. Our toddlers need to be convinced that they are not in charge. . . . When they are convinced, they cease to long for their way and will yield to yours, bringing peace to the home.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Sally Hohnberger, *Parenting Your Infant/Toddler by the Spirit: Yes, You Can Lay the Foundation for a Godly Character* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 204-219. In one passage, Hohnberger extols her husband for spanking a child who, although praying when commanded to, prayed “with his heart not in it” (*ibid.*, 211).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 209.

The Hohnbergers are not alone in combining a view of a sovereign God who demands absolute submission with a tendency toward violent child-rearing. Such violence has been made vivid to the public through the media response to another parenting book with a similar philosophy to Hohnberger's: *To Train Up a Child*, by Michael and Debi Pearl. The Pearls, who are avid Christian believers, recommend, as a means to subduing the defiant will of children, beatings with plastic tubes and tree branches and hosing down children with cold water.⁶³ Although the book has not had extremely wide circulation, it has been blamed for the deaths of at least three children, one of whom was beaten for hours.⁶⁴ The parents of all three claimed to be following the principles of the Pearls' book, of which the most salient is the need for absolute submission of children to parent's demands, as if to a deity.⁶⁵

These woeful incidents could be curtailed, according to Brock and Parker, if the christological backdrop to atonement theology recognized the implications of the

⁶³ Michael Pearl and Debi Pearl, *To Train up a Child* (Pleasantville, TN: Michael and Debi Pearl, 1994), 48-49, 70. The Pearls derive their parental methods from a view of God in which God demands from us absolute submission. This must also be demanded from children, as expressed in a particularly disturbing passage from their book: "Never reward delayed obedience by reversing the sentence. And, unless all else fails, don't drag him to the place of cleansing. Part of his training is to come submissively. However, if you are just beginning to institute training on an already rebellious child, who runs from discipline and is too incoherent to listen, then use whatever force is necessary to bring him to bay. If you have to sit on him to spank him then do not hesitate. And hold him there until he is surrendered. Prove that you are bigger, tougher, more patiently enduring and are unmoved by his wailing. Defeat him totally. Accept no conditions for surrender. No compromise. You are to rule over him as a benevolent sovereign" (ibid., 46).

⁶⁴ Alicia Bayer, "Another Couple Found Guilty of Murder for Parenting by 'To Train Up a Child,'" *The Examiner*, www.examiner.com/article/another-couple-found-guilty-of-murder-for-parenting-by-to-train-up-a-child (accessed January 21, 2014).

⁶⁵ "As the child relates to the figurehead of authority (his parents), in like manner he will later be prone to relate to God. If, when the parents say, 'No,' they do not mean 'No,' then the 'though shalt not' of God will not be taken seriously either" (Pearl and Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*, 33).

complete innocence of Jesus as victim, and the genuine evil of his victimization.⁶⁶ More generally, rejecting a mandatory conception of God as a manipulative controller would also be beneficial. Brock and Parker also note that extolling the death of Jesus as divinely enacted makes punitive suffering an essential aspect of the right ordering of the universe. Jesus' submissiveness to punishment becomes the model that endorses the practices of the Hohnbergers and Pearls, allowing the abused no venue for questioning their abusers.⁶⁷ Whether or not we follow Brock and Parker in rejecting the doctrine of penal substitution is not the issue here; the important thing is to recognize the legitimacy of their concern regarding theologies of divine control. This theology can quickly become a pretext for abuse. As we will see in chapter 3, moral government theology as framed by Ellen G. White also rejects a theology of divine control and manipulation.

However, despite these positive points in Brock and Parker's work, there are a few negative points (or ones which reflect insufficient theological development). I have decided to list them briefly here.

⁶⁶ A similar case is made by Carol Delaney, who mentions several instances in which an authoritarian, abusive view of God is used to justify similar authoritarian treatment of children (Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of a Biblical Myth* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], 238). She also makes a broader case that the authoritarian hierarchy of criminal justice in many emerging democracies is based on the foundation of a despotic view of God, in which "breaking the will" into submission is the prime goal.

⁶⁷ "Persons we love evoke our compassion, and to claim anyone's premature death is necessary leads us to thinking suffering is something we cannot protest. To make claims that any person's tragic, painful death is divinely willed or necessary for others to be saved mutes our ability to be angry about unnecessary suffering. Such claims dull the acuteness of our caring. We lose our rage at injustice and our passionate desire to eliminate the structures that produce brokenheartedness. We lose heart" (Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 94).

Ambiguity on the Necessity of Christian Atonement

Neither Brock nor Parker delves extensively into the problem of religious pluralism, although, given their explicit reliance on multiple religious symbols from a variety of cultures, one can safely assume they are quite pluralistic.⁶⁸ In light of their dramatic critique of nearly all of traditional atonement theology, this causes one to wonder why they maintain the Christian label at all, especially since there appears to be nothing in the Christian tradition (Bible, Church fathers, creeds, etc.) which holds normative authority for them.⁶⁹ As with other feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, their only criterion is “women’s experience.” Yet why not “get another God” as they themselves heard a friend ask?⁷⁰ All their atonement woes would cease if they openly advocated a rejection of the incorrigible system of Christian theology.

The earliest Christian tradition interprets the death of Jesus as “for us” in some way.⁷¹ One doesn’t need to be a “fundamentalist” or accept penal substitution to recognize this as a fundamental element of Christianity. Although certainly Christianity has offered a source of liberation to many people, if one finds it necessary to excise one

⁶⁸ Parker, at least, seems to be quite so. In another one of her coauthored works (with Joanne Carlson Brown), she and Brown claim rather bluntly that “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering” (Parker and Brown, “For God So Loved the World,” 56.) Throughout this work, there is a deep ambivalence about the whole of the Christian tradition, leading the two theologians at the end to ask “Can we call our new creation (Christianity *sans* atonement) Christianity even with an asterisk?” (ibid.).

⁶⁹ Amy Hannon seems to have picked up on this problem as well. See Amy Hannon, “Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us,” *Cross Currents* 52, no. 3 (2002): 416-418.

⁷⁰ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 195.

⁷¹ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 114.

of the main points out of the entire history of Christianity, namely, that Jesus “died for our sins” in order to accomplish liberation, then it seems more handy to simply trade in Christianity for another religious/therapeutic perspective.

Historical Distortions

As Joel Green and Mark Baker have pointed out, Brock and Parker have a tendency to distort both New Testament teaching and theological history in their effort to renounce violent streams of atonement theology.⁷² The atonement theory of St. Anselm, for example, is not the same penal-substitution atonement theory preached in most evangelical churches today.⁷³ Also, although it has been mentioned above, the technical theological understanding of penal-substitution, if understood in a Trinitarian sense, does not permit the charge of “divine child abuse.” If the three persons of the Trinity (who are not three separate individuals) collaborate in the self-offering of the Son (who is not the “Son” in the same sense that I might have a biological “son”), the result is not parallel to human child abuse. It is still open to the charge of “arbitrary enactment of violence”—since the Trinity is, in a sense, punishing itself, but it does not compare to human abuse, which is based on levels of hierarchy not present in the Trinity. However, notice that this is the “technical theological understanding.” It is the view of technical theologians. The vast majority of laypersons and preachers in the evangelical churches might very well hold to a version of penal-substitution that could rightly be called “divine child abuse.”

⁷² Ibid., 117-123.

⁷³ Ibid., 117.

Still, Brock and Parker, as technical theologians, should critique the best of the theology they oppose, or at least make it clear when they are not doing so.

Furthermore, Brock and Parker's brief discussion⁷⁴ of *Christus Victor* atonement theology is deeply unsatisfying. As shown in Denny Weaver's work, *Christus Victor* holds immense potential for understanding the significance of Jesus' death for oppressed minorities (Weaver shows how his narrative version of this model even enhances Brock and Parker's work).⁷⁵ Yet Brock and Parker dismiss it as glorifying the suffering of those who resist injustice: "The violence directed against activists and revolutionaries must evoke grief, not adulation. Making the pain of backlash and repression positive cloaks perpetrators."⁷⁶ Well, possibly. But it seems rare for anyone to extol the suffering of revolutionaries *in itself*. We honor Martin Luther King not because he was slandered and shot (that has happened to many people), but because he endured these things for a reason. The suffering is only a means to an end, and since that end is positive, we think about the suffering positively.

Failure to Address the Problem of Relationship to God

Recently, biblical scholar Friederike Nüssel has emphasized that in the New Testament, God is unambiguously always the subject of reconciliation, not the object.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 39-40. Brock and Parker do not mention the historical doctrine as described by Aulén. Instead, they outline only its employment by liberation theologians.

⁷⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 174.

⁷⁶ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 40.

⁷⁷ Friederike Nüssel, "Die Sühneverstellung in der Klassischen Dogmatik und Ihre Neuzeitliche Problematisierung," in *Deutungen Des Todes Jesu Im Neuen Testament*, ed. Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter, Wunt (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

Yet, for Brock and Parker, it is unclear how God orchestrates reconciliation at all, whether by being its subject or object. They are very clear that God must not be the object of reconciliation (as the angry, patriarchal figure), yet what does their understanding of atonement say to how God, as a character of relational love, can act to restore that love in human relationships? Biblically, God does this through Jesus in his death, somehow. But since Brock and Parker have rejected the efficacy of Christ's death to accomplish anything, they leave unknown how Jesus fulfills the role of savior. This may be an example of how their process theology may be inadvertently neutering the potency of a concept of God to be useful for anyone.⁷⁸ For the God of Christianity to be truly God, such a God must actually *do something*.

Localization of the Meaning of Atonement

Both Brock and Parker insist (as the cover of their book states) that they are in search of "what saves us." That is certainly accurate, in the sense that their book is about what saves them in particular (as female abuse victims). But it does not allow for a doctrine of atonement which can be preached to the whole church.

Churches are filled with people who represent every level of society, both of the abused and the abusers. One of the most difficult tasks in pastoral leadership is appealing to both of these groups in a way that is both winsome toward the abusers and uncompromising in defense of the abused. In the New Testament, we see this balance

⁷⁸ Brock and Parker themselves hint at this problem, while critiquing Moltmann's work: "On the cross, God dies. This theology describes a merging of selves in pain and annihilation. What hope is there in this? If God dies on Good Friday because love is the total identification of one being with another, what power will free human beings from being locked in death with God?" (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 47).

delicately maintained, with some New Testament writers veering more to the side of the abused, and others being more obsequious to abusers.⁷⁹ The same gospel applies to both, even though both are not saved in the same way. “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill brought low.”⁸⁰ The abused are saved through faith in the Messiah who elevates their status from society’s refuse to kings and priests, while the abusers are saved through faith in the same Messiah who leads them to repent of their

⁷⁹ The best examples of these two approaches are Paul and James. Paul, while certainly a revolutionary leader, has often come under scrutiny for his apparently non-revolutionary approach to slavery. In his letter to Philemon, Paul attempts to preserve peace with the slave-owner Philemon by sending his escaped slave, Onesimus, back to him, with the injunction that Philemon “receive him forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—a beloved brother” (Phlm 1:15-16). Behind Paul’s friendly language is a theology that undermines traditional notions of slavery (e.g., that slaves are property), yet his confrontation of Philemon is generous and appealing—likely to elicit a cooperative response. Paul also does not attack the institution of slavery as a whole. Contrast this with James, who, although he does not oppose slavery specifically, rails against wealthy oppressors who fail to deliver proper wages to their workers: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted . . . indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth” (Jas 5:1-4). James unambiguously takes the side of the abused, and does so with no mercy in mind for their abusers, unlike Paul. The point to be derived from both of these biblical authors is that both approaches are needed: Hard, blunt, honest confrontation of abusers, and more merciful personal preaching to those abusers who might be persuaded to change their ways.

⁸⁰ Isaiah 40:4. John the Baptist used this passage to describe the coming of the Messiah, with whom good news would be given to the poor (valleys exalted) and the rich would be condemned (mountains brought low). See Luke 3:5.

crimes, and to step down from their position as oppressors.⁸¹ There is one gospel and one savior, but different ways of experiencing that gospel and salvation.⁸²

Moreover, notwithstanding the different ways in which people are saved, the same gospel message of atonement must be preached to both—that is, it must contain the seeds of liberation for both. From a feminist perspective, this point is demonstrated in Jesus’ discussion with a (supposed) sexually immoral woman and the Pharisee Simon in Luke 7. As Jesus reclines at Simon’s table, a woman approaches him and begins caressing and kissing his feet with her hair and fragrant oil, weeping. This act, provocative as it sounds today, was no less so in Jesus’ culture.⁸³ Simon, rather than quietly dismissing what appears to be a bold seductress, openly slanders her character, telling Jesus that if he were a prophet, “he would know who and what manner of woman

⁸¹ Ruether highlights this point: “In contrast to this separation of salvation from real social transformation, Luke suggests that God’s redemption is experienced differently by rich and poor. The poor and oppressed experience themselves being restored to their humanity, entering a new age in which the rod of oppression is broken. Those who are privileged in the present age initially experience God’s liberation as wrath, as the breaking of their systems of privilege and the shattering of their ideologies of righteousness. Only after they accept the judgment of God on their state of unjust privilege is it possible for them to join the liberated poor in the new age of God’s peace and justice” (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 155-156).

⁸² In Jesus’ life and work we see both types of salvation occurring. Jesus’ ministry to lepers (Luke 5:12-14), demon possessed (Mark 5:1-20), and women (Mark 5:25-34, John 12:7) illustrates the salvation of the abused and rejected as empowerment. Meanwhile, the results of his preaching to the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-22) the rich tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and men who attempted to abuse women (Luke 7:40-50) demonstrate his insistence that salvation is possible for abusers, if they are willing to repent and be brought low (as Zacchaeus was, both literally and figuratively).

⁸³ Commentator David Neale claims her act has “erotic overtones” and compares it to “public nudity” (David A. Neale, *Luke 1-9*, New Beacon Bible Commentary [Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011], 177). Joel Green claims that “within her cultural context—especially with women readily viewed as temptresses and/or sex objects, and all the more given her apparent reputation as a prostitute—her actions on the whole would have been regarded (at least by men) as erotic” (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 310).

this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” Simon fulfills the role of the righteous abuser, unmoved by the plight of this woman, who was probably a prostitute, forced into such a career by poverty, in an economy which had no respectable role for unmarried lower-class women.⁸⁴

Jesus responds, interestingly, to Simon as well as to the abused woman. He recites a parable about how one who is forgiven much loves much (vv. 40-43). He then turns to the woman and says to Simon,

“Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’” (vss. 44-48)

The story rather abruptly ends after this, with Jesus telling the woman “your faith has saved you; go in peace.” It is as if Luke were trying to cause the reader to imagine what Simon might say, or to place the reader in place of Simon. Jesus has lifted up the humble woman, whom he forgives without her even asking for it. At the same time, the message of forgiveness is an explicit rebuke of Simon’s abusive behavior, because he had failed to recognize her full humanity. To him, she is “that kind of woman.” But for Jesus, she has been forgiven and placed at an equal level with Jesus’ other companions, including the men. However, notice that the message of forgiveness for the woman is also for Simon. If Simon repents and accepts Jesus’ forgiveness for his haughty judgmentalism, he will be as overflowing in his love as the immoral woman. We can see here one gospel—the forgiveness of sins preached by Jesus—but two different applications. For the abused

⁸⁴ See Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 309.

woman, this message means empowerment; for Simon it means repentance. Despite its dual applications in this narrative, however, it is preached to both persons at the same time.

The problem with Brock and Parker's view of the atonement is that it does not capture this duality in the Christian message. Jesus is not merely interested in empowering abused women and children. Rather, his ministry—and, by extension, that of the church—aims to restore wholeness to all of humanity, by empowering abused women and children as well as restoring their abusers to loving relationships. Brock and Parker argue in *Proverbs of Ashes* that erotic power draws human beings in to mutual relationships of respectful *presence* to each other: "The more present human beings can be to each other, as the fullest selves they can be, the more complete the love. Presence comes when vulnerability is acknowledged and valued, when respect for the other as separate is maintained."⁸⁵ But if male chauvinists, child abusers, sex offenders, and violent spouses are not *atoned* somehow, a good moral government in which such relationality pervades cannot exist. Brock and Parker are correct in criticizing atonement theologies that harm marginalized women and children, but they are deficient in formulating a path to wholeness that will include such abused individuals along with their oppressors.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed major themes in the atonement theology of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, and provided several critiques of elements in

⁸⁵ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 158.

their work. We have seen how methodologically Brock and Parker take victimization as their theological starting point, and present Jesus as the ultimate victim of unjustified abuse. We have surveyed how Brock understands divine action in Jesus as *erotic power*—the drawing power of relationality based not on control but on love. This leads both Brock and Parker to reject the model of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice.

These criticisms of Brock and Parker’s work—brief as they are—have highlighted a few weaknesses in their view of the atonement. They are ambiguous on why they assent to Christian theology of the atonement in the first place (given their complete rejection of any historical Christian explanation of the death of Jesus). They appear to distort the basic facts regarding the theories of the atonement that they oppose. They do not explain how human estrangement from God can be overcome through atonement. Most importantly, however, they do not provide an understanding of atonement that speaks to all members of the church, both of victims and victimizers. Thus, their goal of forming relationships of mutuality through erotic power is undermined. In the next chapter, I will present an alternative view of the atonement which, in a revised form, might accomplish this goal.

CHAPTER 3

HUGO GROTIUS, ELLEN WHITE, AND RENÉ GIRARD: A FRAMEWORK OF GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

Introduction

In an effort to articulate what is missing in the atonement theology of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, I will turn to what is commonly called the “moral government theory” of the atonement.¹ This chapter will provide the background for governmental atonement, followed by a concise summary of how such an atonement theology might work. The history of governmental atonement theology is rich and complex. In order to maintain both depth and conciseness, I will not be able to discuss, except briefly, many important theologians in the moral government tradition (including Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Samuel Hopkins, and John Wesley) since their atonement theories are largely variations on that of Hugo Grotius. Hence, this chapter will focus primarily on Hugo Grotius, Ellen White, and René Girard. The latter two, as will be shown, significantly alter and augment the moral government tradition.²

¹ This theory may be called the “governmental theory” instead of the “moral government theory” since the former is shorter. For further typology of atonement theories see Philip L. Quinn, “Theories of Atonement,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Since the first part of this chapter charts the general history of governmental theology in what I hope is a partially unbiased manner, this chapter will have a somewhat dialectical “Thomistic” feel to it (hopefully without the stodginess of Aquinas). The reader who feels disturbed by my account of Grotius’s views on the atonement should keep this in mind.

Admittedly, it seems odd to focus on such an eclectic catenation of thinkers. This trio, from the sixteenth, nineteenth, and twenty-first centuries, could not be more disparate both in their cultural settings and in their philosophical and theological projects. Nevertheless, all three expound certain views of the significance of the death of Jesus that, received critically, can coalesce to form a unique perspective. Of course, that is not to say that they are in agreement on everything—especially the atonement—and it would be foolhardy to attempt to forcefully reconcile their widely varying theological systems and methodologies. Rather, my purpose in this chapter is to highlight a few points of common emphasis among these three which can be drawn together into a new proposal for a governmental atonement theology which will be beneficial to abuse victims.

Hugo Grotius

The governmental theory of atonement is rooted in the seventeenth-century Dutch reformed jurist and theologian Hugo Grotius, whose single work on the matter, *A Defense of the Satisfaction of Christ Against Faustus Socinus*, paved the way for all further developments of the theory.³

Grotius's theology of the atonement is explicated in a polemical context—as, indeed, many important theological works are. His opponent, Faustus Socinus, was a leading heretic of Grotius's day, paralleling the likes of Michael Servetus, to whom Socinus bore resemblance by denying the Trinity. Not content with attacking Trinitarianism, Socinus also had taken aim at the notion that the death of Christ

³ Grotius did address atonement in other works, but never to the extent of his *Defense*, and never, to my knowledge, with any variation. See, for example, Hugo Grotius, *The Truth of the Christian Religion in Six Books*, trans. John Clarke (Cambridge: J. Hall & Son, 1860).

constituted a “satisfaction” to God⁴—a doctrine which had taken firm root in Protestantism, to the point where some “Lutherans would review the entire life of Christ as a series of satisfactions rendered to the violated justice of God.”⁵ Notwithstanding Martin Luther’s re-emphasis on the idea of *Christus Victor* atonement theology, in which the purpose of Christ’s death is to defeat the powers of evil,⁶ the Reformation as a whole had not moved away from the satisfaction metaphor of Roman Catholicism, but instead gripped it more firmly.⁷ Thus, when Socinus, in an attempt to demolish what he saw as an unbiblical metaphor for atonement, began to argue that the death of Christ was merely a moral influence reconciling humans to God (rather than God to humans),⁸ Grotius believed a response was necessary. In his answer to Socinus, Grotius set about to accomplish two main tasks: Showing how Christ’s death was a punishment, and showing how that punishment was just.

⁴ This model of the atonement was made lapidary within Roman Catholicism by St. Anselm. See Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, trans. Joseph M. Coleran (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969).

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 360.

⁶ See Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

⁷ Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 360.

⁸ See the principal Socinian work, *The Racovian Catechism*, trans. Thomas Rees (London: Longman, 1818), 311.

Christ's Death a Punishment

Grotius begins his explication of the atonement by stating a proposition which sets him distinctly in opposition to Socinus. Atonement, he says, is about forensic penalty:

The Catholic doctrine, therefore, is as follows: God was moved by his own goodness to bestow distinguished blessings upon us. But since our sins which deserved punishment, were an obstacle to this, he determined that Christ, being willing of his own love toward men, should, by bearing the most severe tortures, and a bloody and ignominious death, pay the penalty for our sins, in order that without prejudice to the exhibition of the divine justice, we might be liberated, upon the intervention of a true faith, from the punishment of eternal death.⁹

A justice system preserving society, for Grotius, depends upon the right allocation of punishments for crimes.¹⁰ A ruler who does not punish adequately (both by punishing the right individuals, and doing so with proper severity) loses the respect and devotion of his subjects by either being seen as a tyrant or as a negligent ruler.¹¹ If God, therefore, is to be seen as a just ruler, he must punish sin.

⁹ Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 2.

¹⁰ Elsewhere Grotius describes “the right to punish men who deserve it” as central to “all law which is properly so called” and therefore essential to the preservation of society (Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, trans. Louise R. Loomis [Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1949], 5).

¹¹ This is because, in Grotius's thought, punishments are part of a contractual scheme in which it is the right of the authority to punish and the right of the criminal to be punished: “For just as a seller, even though he makes no special statement to the effect, is understood to have bound himself to perform all the acts natural to a sale, so, punishment being a consequence of serious crime, the criminal seems to have voluntarily subjected himself to punishing” (ibid., 207). Therefore, not to punish is just as much of an injustice as to punish too severely.

Grotius attempts to prove that the cross was a punishment by pointing to a plethora of biblical data.¹² His exegesis often appeals to comparisons between Latin phrases and their biblical equivalents in order to make his point.¹³ As one might expect, Isa 53 features prominently in his approach, with an emphasis on the apparent punishment aspects in that chapter (“stricken by God,” “by whose stripes we are healed,” etc.).¹⁴ Grotius seems to be aware that Isaiah 53 does not explicitly identify Christ’s sufferings as punishments for human sin. Nevertheless, Grotius’s logic is to show that, since clearly Christ’s suffering resulted in liberation for others in this passage, punishment must be implied, since the only type of suffering “for” someone else that involves their being liberated is suffering associated with punishment.¹⁵

If the various streams of exegetical data Grotius employs to convince the reader that Christ’s death was a punishment are not enough, Grotius points to what he thinks is obvious: The simple fact that Jesus died is enough to prove that his death was a punishment by God, since all death is punishment.¹⁶ This is based on the way Grotius

¹² Heb 9:12, John 10:18, Rom 5:9, Eph 1:7, etc. See Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 11.

¹³ For example, in order to show how Christ’s “bearing sin” constituted a punishment, he writes: “The Hebrews have no phrase in more frequent use to express that which is expressed in Latin by *poenas pendere*, than *to bear sin*. This is like the Latin expression *luere delicta*, that is, suffer the punishment of crimes” (ibid., 13).

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ “For to bear sins by suffering, and in such a way as to liberate others thereby, can only mean to receive another’s punishment” (ibid., 19).

¹⁶ “To all these things we may add also this; that death, i.e. the destruction of that person which the body and soul constitute, since it is inflicted by God, always has some reference to punishment. As the Hebrews say, without sin there is no death” (ibid., 27). Grotius claims that this is certain orthodoxy: “It would be very easy to show, if it were pertinent, that this has been the constant opinion of ancient Jews and Christians, that the death of man, of any kind whatever, is the punishment of sin” (ibid., 31-32).

reads passages like Rom 6:23 as depicting divine enforcement of law: The “wages of sin” are not automatically occurring, but happen as punishments from God.¹⁷

What is the significance for Grotius of the fact that Christ’s death is a punishment by God? He explains:

Once, when God passed over very many sins unpunished, his retributive justice did not sufficiently appear. At length, therefore, he showed how he was a just retributor when he determined that his own Son for this cause should shed his blood to become a propitiation for the human race, and to redeem all those who had ever believed, or should ever believe, in God. So the apostle has put the open demonstration in close connection with the grace, i.e. the divine goodness which is bestowed upon creatures, and with the justice of him who is the guardian of right order and also of retribution.¹⁸

For Grotius, God’s punishment of Jesus through the cross provides a vindication of God’s justice—not simply a satisfaction of God’s wrath, but a demonstration that God is a “guardian of . . . retribution” in the universe.¹⁹ This involves presenting a different portrait of God’s character.

The Divine Governor

Grotius’s objective is to move the focus of atonement away from the problem of God’s personal anger against humans to the problem of humans’ sinfulness and God’s justice. To accomplish this task, Grotius emphasizes a different image of God; that is, as

¹⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹ This is where Grotius moves beyond Anselm in his understanding of the atonement. Anselm, too, had seen atonement as a matter of justice. But his Teutonic feudal context had prevented him from connecting this with universalized justice as order in the cosmos. For Anselm, the fundamental problem facing humanity is sin, defined as “nothing else than not to render to God His due” (Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 84). God’s honor is what needs preservation, according to Anselm’s scheme, and punishment fulfills this need. For Grotius, on the other hand, atonement rectifies the actual objective order of the universe.

one occupying the office of governor. In Grotius's words, "in all this subject God must be treated as Ruler. For to inflict punishment . . . is only the prerogative of the ruler as such, primarily and *per se*; as, for example of a father in a family, of a king in a state, of God in the universe."²⁰ Our plight is not due to the fact that God is angry with us (however true that may be), but simply that we have, by our sins, put God in a situation in which he cannot forgive us without failing to be a responsible ruler who punishes sin. God must be impartial and fair, as a good public servant,²¹ and if God offers negligent forgiveness, he fails to meet his own standards.

This view of God's role in the atonement is markedly different from that of Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm had alleged that Christ's atonement satisfied the debt that sinners owe to God for their sins because God and humanity are in an economic relationship, in which humanity takes away from God by sinning, and God takes away from humanity by punishing.²² In other words, God plays the role of creditor. This would imply that the punishment directed toward Christ would need to equal God's wrath directed towards humanity, in order for the latter to be satisfied. Grotius, in contrast, objects strongly to the notion that God is a creditor to humanity. Rather, the debt we owe as sinners is not to God,²³ but to justice itself, for God is simply the administrator of

²⁰ Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 51.

²¹ Grotius compares God to a "magistrate" (*ibid.*, 37).

²² "And in this matter, we must observe that just as man, by sinning, plunders what belongs to God, so God, by punishing, takes away what belongs to man" (Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 89).

²³ Or, more precisely, "to God strictly" since Grotius would probably admit that our sinful behavior does put us in a state of obligation to God.

justice in the universe.²⁴ God's goal is to "put to rights" the mayhem of the world. It is not as if sin is merely a vexatious provocation to God's sensitivities, provoking him to capricious acts of rage culminating in hellfire. On the contrary, God's wrath is simply the display of his justice, which does not permit him excessive leniency. Therefore, Christ's death, it seems, only "satisfies" God's wrath in the round-about sense that God no longer needs to exercise it against sinners as a result of the atonement.²⁵

The Nature of God's Justice

Even if Christ's death does not satisfy God's personal wrath, however, the question remains as to how it satisfies God's justice. How does Christ's death abrogate the imperative that God must punish sinners with death? Grotius is clear on this point—it does not: "And, first, since God, as we have proved, is to be considered here as a ruler, it follows that his act is an act of the administration of justice, generally so called. From this it follows that we are not treating here of acceptilation,²⁶ as Socinus thinks, for that is not an act of the administration of justice."²⁷ If God had set aside the command of the law

²⁴ "And hence it comes to pass that while in other causes a judge gives a hearing to two parties, in criminal causes the defendant appears, but frequently no plaintiff; for order, or the public good, is, as it were, in the place of the plaintiff. Scripture seems also to intimate this when it says that sin cries out against the sinner" (Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 67).

²⁵ "We may add that in certain way punishment may be said to be owing to a man; not properly, because no one is here truly a creditor, but because of a certain similarity. For as a creditor has the right of exacting that which is due to him, so the ruler has the right of punishing and the accuser of demanding punishment. Again, by a bold figure, we are sometimes said to owe punishment either to a ruler, as God, or to an accuser, as the devil. Yet if punishment is not inflicted on the man no injury is done to the devil. On the other hand, it is not consistent with the justice of God that he should remit all punishment forever. Of these considerations neither can have place in true creditors" (ibid., 71).

²⁶ By this Grotius means a removal, abrogation or cancellation of punishment.

²⁷ Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 72.

through the death of Christ, that would not be good moral governorship. Instead—and this point is vital—the death of Christ becomes the way by which God no longer needs to *execute* the law.²⁸ Grotius calls this a “relaxation” of the law.²⁹ Sinners still deserve punishment, but, because of Christ’s punishment, God is free to forgive without appearing to show total disregard for God’s own law.

Christ therefore does not take the place of all sinners (in the sense that he bore all their punishments combined), but rather, he bore their punishment as a representative head.³⁰ How does this work? Grotius seems to argue that punishments can be justly leveraged on innocent parties that make themselves *responsible* for guilty parties. He points to the Roman practice of punishing prison guards for the crimes of any of their inmates who escaped.³¹ Christ, who is the human of all humans (“son of man”), is therefore punished for their sins, as the one who takes responsibility for their sins. Once

²⁸ “Again, this act is not an abrogation of the law; for abrogated law has no binding force. But unbelievers are still exposed to the penalty of the same law. Thus we find written that the wrath of God abideth upon them that believe not, and that the wrath of God is come upon them to the uttermost” (ibid., 74). Grotius’s argument here avoids the difficulty inherent in many forms of satisfaction/substitution, that is, how, if Christ has paid an infinite penalty, he can be just in *not* redeeming all sinners, including unbelievers (since his death has cancelled their just penalty as well). Calvinist soteriologists have a way out of this problem (without resorting to universalism), by positing “limited atonement” (the death of Christ has saving significance only to the elect). But Grotius, being an Arminian, cannot utilize this resource. Thus, this is a helpful theological explanation for Arminians seeking to confute claims that their substitutionary view of the atonement must entail universalism.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Grotius makes an inverted comparison to support this point, arguing that if innocent people can be punished for the sins of their representative (as in the case of David and the census), then certainly an innocent representative could be punished for the sins of the people. (ibid., 86).

³¹ Ibid., 95.

again, note that this does not mean it is unjust for God to punish also those sinners.

Rather, it simply means that God is free not to do so, should God so decide (presumably on the basis of repentance and faith). This ensures that God's redemption of every sinner in every time period is totally a free, deliberate act on God's part.³²

What then does Christ's representative death accomplish? It is a "weighty example," against which no one can allege injustice, "that God, whose is the supreme power in respect to all things not unjust per se, and who is bound by no law, determined to employ the tortures and death of Christ to set forth a weighty example against the great crimes of all of us with whom Christ was very closely connected by his nature and kingdom and suretyship."³³ As an analogy, Grotius tells of the righteous ruler Zaleucus, who, when his son was convicted of adultery—the punishment of which was the gouging of the offender's eyes—under great vexation plucked out one of his own eyes and then one of his son's, in order that they both could see.³⁴ Although Zaleucus did not follow the stipulation of the law in this case, and instead "relaxed" it, his citizens were made unalterably aware that law-breaking was serious, and thus no one could allege that

³² Later, in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards Jr. would use this point as a centerpiece for his own moral government theory of atonement. For Edwards, it became clear that God's forgiveness of each individual sinner runs contrary to the notion that all sinners' punishments, or debts, had been removed at the cross. The cross could not be the cancelling of the penalty against sin, or else sinners could not reasonably speak of being "forgiven" of their sins at any varied moment: "If we be, in the literal sense, forgiven in consequence of a redemption, we are forgiven on account of the price of redemption previously paid. How then can we be truly said to be forgiven; a word which implies the exercise of grace?" (Jonathan Edwards Jr., "Three Sermons: The Necessity of the Atonement and the Consistency between That and the Free Grace in Forgiveness," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises* [Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1863], 3).

³³ Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, 100-101.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

Zaleucus had no respect for his law. Similarly, none can deny, having observed God's sacrifice of Christ on the cross, that God does not pass over sins lightly, and that God's mercy is not based on lenience.

Grotius inaugurates the governmental atonement tradition by presenting the view that God's action in the death of Jesus serves to vindicate and preserve a divine moral government. This is his clear, central point. Whether his arguments against Socinus for the actual justice of the substitutionary death of Christ succeed is not to be considered here. After all, they are not his novel contribution, given that numerous other theologians have made them as well. But Grotius's broad outline of a divine governor who must establish public justice is certainly unique, and it makes good sense. It is the prominent element I seek to draw from his thought in forming my own governmental view.

What Grotius leaves somewhat mysterious, however, is the audience who needs and receives the display of justice in the cross of Christ, and the effect it has on them. This aspect of the governmental theory is explored more adequately by one of Grotius's successors, Ellen White, to whose theology we now turn.

Ellen White

Although Ellen White never references Hugo Grotius, his theological descendants had a clear influence on her. White's first religious development was in the Methodist church.³⁵ John Wesley, Methodism's founder, had been influenced by Grotius, who had been read and appreciated by John's father Samuel.³⁶ As a probable consequence, the

³⁵ Arthur L. White, *Ellen White: Woman of Vision* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 17.

³⁶ See Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *Diary of an Oxford Methodist: Benjamin Ingham, 1733-1734* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

Wesley brothers' conception of God included the notion of God being a "king who oversees the restoration of wholeness in our lives."³⁷ This traditional way of thinking influenced Ellen White. In addition, later on, Ellen White began using the works of Albert Barnes, a Presbyterian commentator who emphasized heavily the moral government of God in atonement, having derived this theology from his predecessors Nathaniel Taylor and Jonathan Edwards, Jr.³⁸ White was apparently delighted with Barnes's works, including them among her "best books."³⁹ From her grounding in Methodism (as well as New School-Presbyterianism), Ellen White adopted the moral government theology—with a twist.

A Moral Government of Love

It is interesting to read Ellen White and John Wesley side by side, for the similarities between the two authors, even in points of style, are noteworthy. However, in one of Wesley's sermons, titled "Of Hell," we can see by contrast how White diverged immensely from Wesley, specifically in her concept of God as moral governor. Wesley begins his sermon by emphasizing God's justice in punishing the wicked, because he is

³⁷ Randy L. Maddox, "Theology of John and Charles Wesley," in *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 29.

³⁸ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1963). To give just one example of the governmental atonement thinking in this work, in Barnes's comments on Gal 2 he writes that "the Lord Jesus has accomplished by his death the same happy effects in regard to the law and the government of God, which would be accomplished by the death of the sinner himself" (ibid., 931).

³⁹ Ellen White, as quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australia Years* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1983), 448.

the “governor of mankind.”⁴⁰ To this Ellen White would have lent her full agreement. But toward the conclusion of Wesley’s solemn work, he begins describing the nature of the hell to which God, as moral governor, sends the wicked: “Surely it would be torment enough to have the flesh burnt off from only one finger. What then will it be to have the whole body plunged into a lake of fire burning with brimstone . . . and of this duration *there is no end!*”⁴¹ God’s governorship, in Wesley’s mind, involved being an executor of retribution as a sadistic pyromaniac.

Although White had herself held such beliefs early in her life, she soon renounced them in favor of a more loving view of God. Only Satan, she said, would “hold up God before the people as a revengeful tyrant—one who plunges all those into hell who do not please Him, and causes them ever to feel his wrath.”⁴² For White, God must not be seen only as a governor, but as a governor of *love*, because this is the view that Satan is trying to caricature.

This notion that Satan tries perpetually to slander the justice and love of God, and that God’s goal through revelation is to counter such slander, is central to Ellen White’s thinking. In fact, it is the dominating theme in her work, as is seen in her massive series *The Conflict of the Ages*. The term “great controversy,” which is also the title of White’s most celebrated historical work, is often used as a generic title for this dispute.⁴³ The

⁴⁰ John Wesley, “Of Hell,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40, 42.

⁴² Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1945), 219.

⁴³ See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1939).

great controversy paradigm fits into White's understanding of atonement, giving it a certain *Christus Victor* element, since the point of the death of Jesus is to conquer the devil by silencing him.⁴⁴ However, punishment is necessary in the atoning work of the great controversy, White says, because without it God's character as both loving and just would be tarnished by Satan and "the unfallen universe" (other beings watching the situation on earth):

Satan deceives many with the plausible theory that God's love for His people is so great that He will excuse sin in them; he represents that while the threatenings of God's word are to serve a certain purpose in His moral government, they are never to be literally fulfilled. . . . The unconditional pardon of sin never has been, and never will be. Such pardon would show the abandonment of the principles of righteousness, which are the very foundation of the government of God. It would fill the unfallen universe with consternation.⁴⁵

Thus, in the theology of Ellen White, Satan appears to have two major allegations against God—which seem to contradict each other somewhat (not surprising, considering Satan's dubious idiosyncracies): (1) That God is a brutal tyrant, who punishes people forever in hell (as seen above) and (2) that God doesn't really punish anybody, and is only bluffing when saying as much. An initial reading of White's work suggests that the second of these two allegations is the one dealt with by the death of Jesus. In her

⁴⁴ In describing Christ's prayers and temptations in Gethsemane, White uses language strongly reminiscent of *Christus Victor*: "Now the tempter had come for the last fearful struggle. For this he had been preparing during the three years of Christ's ministry. Everything was at stake with him. If he failed here, his hope of mastery was lost; the kingdoms of the world would finally become Christ's; he himself would be overthrown and cast out. But if Christ could be overcome, the earth would become Satan's kingdom, and the human race would be forever in his power" (Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1898], 686-87).

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1958), 522.

description of the cross in *The Desire of Ages*, White explains why the brutal event was necessary:

In the opening of the great controversy, Satan had declared that the law of God could not be obeyed, that justice was inconsistent with mercy, and that, should the law be broken, it would be impossible for the sinner to be pardoned. Every sin must meet its punishment, urged Satan; and if God should remit the punishment of sin, He would not be a God of truth and justice. When men broke the law of God, and defied His will, Satan exulted. It was proved, he declared, that the law could not be obeyed; man could not be forgiven.⁴⁶

Through the death of Christ, however, God finally and totally disproved the allegations of Satan. God had been a *just* moral governor by punishing sin in Jesus, but he had also been a *loving* moral governor by mercifully paving the way for humanity's redemption.⁴⁷ Since all who watched the scenario unfold could see God's justice and love clearly, God's character was exonerated, and atonement was accomplished.

It is important to note that White's conception of justice in atonement—as with Grotius's—also involves active divine violence, possibly retributive in nature.⁴⁸ This is

⁴⁶ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 761.

⁴⁷ “Through Jesus, God's mercy was manifested to men; but mercy does not set aside justice. The law reveals the attributes of God's character, and not a jot or tittle of it could be changed to meet man in his fallen condition. God did not change His law, but He sacrificed Himself, in Christ, for man's redemption” (ibid., 762).

⁴⁸ It is hard to determine whether White uses the term “retributive” or “retribution” in the same way that we use them. For example, she could mean by “retribution” any sort of punishment, even for corrective purposes. But she does describe Jesus as being guilty, or bearing guilt needing punishment, and since she sees Jesus as being innocent, it of course does not seem possible that she saw his punishment as constituting a corrective measure. See ibid., 753: “Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. The guilt of every descendant of Adam was pressing upon His heart. The wrath of God against sin, the terrible manifestation of his displeasure because of iniquity, filled the soul of His Son with consternation.” Of course, punishments can also be “corrective” in the deterrent sense, in which they fall under the “consequentialist” category discussed above (see footnote 7), rather than purely “retributive.” On this point, it is impossible to tell where White stands. Research beyond the scope of this paper may be necessary.

seen most clearly in her account of the Gethsemane prayer session.⁴⁹ According to White, as Jesus experienced the agony of anticipating his death, the physical pain of death was basically peripheral to his suffering. The ultimate angst of Christ was moral: “The sins of men weighed heavily upon Christ, and the sense of God’s wrath against sin was crushing out his life.”⁵⁰ In the *Great Controversy*, White specifically describes Jesus’ death as a form of “retribution”: “The death of the spotless Son of God testifies that ‘the wages of sin is death,’ that every violation of God’s law must receive its just retribution.”⁵¹ This is a difficult aspect of White’s theology that we do not have space to explore here.⁵² What we must recognize is that this is not the only aspect of the atonement in White’s writings, and that it fits within the broader paradigm of moral government vindication.

White’s Variegated View of Atonement

Because of her emphasis on the vindication of God’s character government in the context of the great controversy, we may say that governmental atonement forms the framework for White’s writing on the death of Jesus and its relationship to salvation. Of course, for White, it is important to note that the atonement is still fundamentally mysterious: “Not in this life shall we comprehend the mystery of God’s love in giving His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The work of the Redeemer on this earth is and

⁴⁹ See the chapter “Gethsemane” in *ibid.*, 685-97.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 687.

⁵¹ White, *The Great Controversy*, 540.

⁵² Graham Maxwell has addressed the issue, although not definitively. See Graham Maxwell, “Why Did Jesus Have to Die?,” Pineknoll Publications, accessed at www.pineknoll.org/all-writings.

ever will be a subject that will put to the stretch our highest imagination.”⁵³ Thus, it is impossible to synthesize her thought on atonement into a mechanistic system, as readers of any theologian are often wont to do. Indeed, in her pamphlet on “The Sufferings of Christ,” White is able to combine language reflecting moral influence,⁵⁴ penal substitution,⁵⁵ *Christus Victor*/ransom theory,⁵⁶ and *theosis*.⁵⁷ This may seem confusing, but it need not be so, if we remind ourselves that, when writing about a mystery, human

⁵³ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 128, 129.

⁵⁴ “Who can comprehend the love here displayed! The angelic host beheld with wonder and with grief Him who had been the Majesty of heaven, and who had worn the crown of glory, now wearing the crown of thorns, a bleeding victim to the rage of an infuriated mob, fired to insane madness by the wrath of Satan. Behold the patient Sufferer! Upon His head is the thorny crown. His lifeblood flows from every lacerated vein. All this in consequence of sin! Nothing could have induced Christ to leave His honor and majesty in heaven, and come to a sinful world, to be neglected, despised, and rejected by those He came to save, and finally to suffer upon the cross, but eternal, redeeming love, which will ever remain a mystery” (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2 [Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1948], 207).

⁵⁵ “Christ consented to die in the sinner’s stead, that man, by a life of obedience, might escape the penalty of the law of God” (ibid., 2000-201).

⁵⁶ “He was about to ransom His people with His own blood. He was paying the just claims of God’s holy law. This was the means through which an end was to be finally made of sin and Satan, and his host to be vanquished” (ibid., 209).

⁵⁷ She does not give a full expression of the Eastern view, but she uses its language, giving it a nod, so to speak: “In Christ were united the human and the divine. His mission was to reconcile God and man, to unite the finite with the infinite. This was the only way in which fallen men could be exalted through the merits of the blood of Christ to be partakers of the divine nature” (ibid., 201). Although Adventist scholars have sometimes been wary of Eastern perceptions of atonement, it seems hard to deny that White employed Eastern terminology plainly, whether or not she intended to endorse the entire doctrine of *theosis*. (For further explication of the Eastern doctrine of atonement and *theosis*, see chapter 4 of this work.) Denis Fortin, in describing the contents of Ellen White’s pamphlet “The Sufferings of Christ,” writes: “What is most fascinating is to discover that within the sixteen pages of this pamphlet Ellen White embraced all the major theories of atonement and supported a broad understanding of the reasons for Calvary” (Denis Fortin, “The Cross of Christ: Theological Differences between Joseph H. Waggoner and Ellen G. White,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, no. 2 [2003]: 135).

language (even the inspired kind) is insufficient to encapsulate the comprehensive entirety of truth. Nevertheless, what is clear in White's presentation is that divine love is the central unifying factor in the various types of language she uses about atonement.⁵⁸

In studying White's nuanced atonement theology, the reader must not get hung up on those aspects of her theology which may appear unhelpful for abuse victims. As we have seen from her statements on the punitive wrath of God, selective reading could certainly produce a detrimental theology based on these aspects. However, it is more respectful to the legacy of White's work to withhold from making them the centerpiece of her theology, and also to refrain from excising these portions of her theology altogether. Such revisionism would historically decontextualize the author's thoughts. Instead of evaluating White's work this way, a more advanced approach would be to seek for unifying continuities within her writing. In other words, we should embrace and focus on the whole framework of White's teachings, rather than cherry-picking individual statements within that framework as representative of her complete theology. Most importantly, we ought to look for movements, or "trajectories" within her writing, that signify change and development toward more holistic expressions of doctrine.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ "The most basic aspect of Ellen White's theology centers on the death of Christ as a demonstration of the love of God for lost humanity" (ibid).

⁵⁹ Alden Thompson evaluates Ellen White this way, particularly with regard to the doctrine of hell. See Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy, and Helped Me Do It Too* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005). As noted above, Ellen White initially accepted an eternally burning hell, but later moved away from such a view, as a result of her further understanding of the love of God. White, like all theologians, took time to gradually recognize the implications of her own theological tenets (in this case, the love of God). Another well-known developmental "change" in the theology of Ellen White had to do with the "shut door" understanding of the heavenly sanctuary. For an account of this change see Ron Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 71-72.

What, then, is the main trajectory, or the overarching framework, for White's work on atonement? As we have seen, it is governmental atonement. But furthermore, it is the depiction of a governmental atonement which seeks to vindicate God's character as a loving governor, who operates in an entirely different manner from governors of earthly regimes. Although both Grotius and White emphasize satisfaction of retributive justice as essential for vindicating the divine government, let us lay that point aside and focus on the concept of governmental vindication in itself. This is an intensely enlightening concept, for it gives us a framework for grasping how atonement can assist those who suffer from abuse. What such persons need is justice—freedom from domination and manipulative control. God's new government—which establishes perfect, unassailable justice—can provide what such victims need.

What is more, White indicates that this new government which Christ vindicates through his death is based on the renunciation of divine control and manipulation. In the chapter "It Is Finished" in *The Desire of Ages*, we read:

God could have destroyed Satan and his sympathizers as easily as one can cast a pebble to the earth; but He did not do this. Rebellion was not to be overcome by force. *Compelling power is found only under Satan's government.* The Lord's principles are not of this order. His authority rests upon goodness, mercy, and love; and the presentation of these principles is the means to be used. God's government is moral, and truth and love are to be the prevailing power.⁶⁰

In sharp contrast to popular conceptions of God in which God possesses "absolute dominion," which authorizes God to punish as an example of God's "compelling power," White affirms that God does not persuade anyone of God's justice by forceful

⁶⁰ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 759. Emphasis mine.

punishment.⁶¹ This is the way of Satan. God defeats Satan not by demonstrating God's power to slaughter, but by showing the "goodness, mercy, and love" which are distinctly absent from Satan's attempt at government.⁶² Christ, by identifying with those who have been victimized by violence, vindicates God's government, by showing that God is a governor who can be trusted.⁶³

The cross thus stands as a testimony to God's goodness and Satan's wickedness. White is quite clear that it was not God who was behind the crucifixion. Instead she calls

⁶¹ This fundamental principle is found elsewhere in White's work. For example, in an essay on "Christ's Method of Imparting Truth" she writes: "The kingdom of Christ does not and cannot bear any resemblance to the kingdoms of the world. In the kingdom of Christ there is no instrument of coercion. In it force has no place. The gospel of Him who gave his life for the life of the world is a gospel of peace. It is the Saviour's grace, His love, His tender compassion, that breaks every barrier down. The gospel is a power of itself, above all and encompassing all" (Ellen G. White, "Manuscript Release No. 1531," in *Manuscript Releases*, ed. Ellen G. White Estate [Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1902]). White also argues that, in reference to this principle, the church of God must never utilize force or coercion, for these are the sole works of Satan: "To punish those who were supposed to be evildoers, the church has had recourse to the civil power. Those who differed from the established doctrines have been imprisoned, put to torture and to death, at the instigation of men who claimed to be acting under the sanction of Christ. But it is the spirit of Satan, not the Spirit of Christ, that inspires such acts. This is Satan's own method of bringing the world under his dominion. God has been misrepresented through the church by this way of dealing with those supposed to be heretics" (White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 74).

⁶² This point is especially highlighted by veteran White interpreter Graham Maxwell. In most of his lectures, Maxwell highlights the necessity of the atonement for demonstrating God's loving character, specifically by showing how "God can be trusted" (Graham Maxwell, *Servants or Friends? Another Look at God* [Redlands, CA: Pineknoll, 1992]).

⁶³ On the basis of his reading of John 15:15—where Jesus announces to his disciples that he wishes for them no longer to be servants but "friends" Graham Maxwell (who is building on Ellen White's theology) uses the analogy of a doctor (representing God) who seeks to assure her patients of her efficacy at treating their illnesses. The first thing such a doctor must do is demonstrate that she can be trusted. What would be the value of such a doctor inducing his patients to say, "What I was going to tell you, doctor, is that some people say that if patients won't take their medicine, you punish them severely. Even torture them. Even kill them. They say that you do this to discourage other patients from wasting your precious time" (ibid., 122). As Maxwell writes, "Doctors don't kill patients who won't cooperate. But sometimes they have to watch them die" (ibid.).

it “the frenzied work of Satan.”⁶⁴ Of course, she may have been thinking that Satan was actually doing God’s work unintentionally.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is her emphasis that is important. White’s goal is to show that God as moral governor was shown to be “in the right” through Jesus’ confrontation with the powers of evil on the cross. This does not mean that White rejects a penal understanding of the cross, but only that this penal understanding must be placed in the broader context of governmental vindication.

The vindication of God’s government in White’s theology also has much to do with the concept of justice. Specifically, White points to the cross as a place which transformed the very concept of justice.⁶⁶ Examine the following passage:

Through the cross, man was drawn to God, and God to man. Justice moved from its high and awful position, and the heavenly hosts, the armies of holiness, drew near to the cross, bowing with reverence; for at the cross justice was satisfied. Through the cross the sinner was drawn from the stronghold of sin, from the confederacy of evil, and at every approach to the cross his heart relents and in penitence he cries, ‘It was my sins that crucified

⁶⁴ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 760.

⁶⁵ Or, possibly, one might argue that although God caused the death of Jesus, Satan caused the brutality and viciousness of the death. Thus God would not be responsible for the crucifixion itself (Satan would be), and yet God would still be the executor of Jesus. Such an interpretation might appeal to Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28, both of which assert that Jesus had been handed over to be crucified according to God’s foreknowledge and predestination. The problem with this view (aside from the fact that it frustrates the imagination to visualize how God and Satan could cooperate in such a harmoniously sinister way) is that it runs into contrary biblical information in the context of those passages cited. Acts 4:26 claims that “The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ.” Whatever the authorities did to Christ, they did “against the Lord.” This might have occurred according to God’s plan and foreknowledge, but that does not mean that God was responsible for the confrontation that took place. God only willed it in the sense that it was necessary for the evil conduct of the powers who crucified Jesus to display their own wickedness. Thus, by no means could we say that God was “responsible” for the death of Jesus, at least not in the sense that responsibility would be owned by the executor of a punishment.

⁶⁶ Note that this is much more than standard moral influence. Christ, through his death, accomplished something very objective—the unambiguous undermining of Satan’s government. Of course, in a certain sense Satan’s doom is not complete until he is entirely ousted from his pretentious position of authority by the complete revelation of his illegitimacy at the *parousia*.

the Son of God.’ At the cross he leaves his sins, and through the grace of Christ his character is transformed.⁶⁷

Note how here the several models of atonement (specifically penal and moral influence) are brought together smoothly in the context of God’s moral government being juxtaposed with the “confederacy of evil.” Note also the connecting points in White’s thinking. Humanity is drawn to God. This corresponds to “justice” being satisfied somehow, or “moved from its high and awful position.” If we read this passage in light of what White says about the government of God needing to be vindicated by showing God’s “mercy, goodness, and love” in contrast to Satan’s ways of force and retribution, it appears that White is saying that justice is satisfied by showing that Satan’s government of supposed “justice” is illegitimate.⁶⁸ Satan, not God, had orchestrated the crucifixion. Satan had also alleged that all sins deserve punishment, even though God’s transforming grace can make the sinner righteous. Thus, Satan had argued that God must exercise punishment, and that therefore God has no right to forgive. The cross demonstrates the untruthfulness of these claims, by showing that Satan’s vile government which relies on violence, brutality, vengeance, and retributivism ultimately results in the ultimate horror—the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God. This event thus satisfies justice, for it shows that the violent claims of Satan are not necessary for—and in fact harmful to—

⁶⁷ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 349.

⁶⁸ This is also the view of Maxwell. For him, the great controversy fundamentally springs from the problem of trust. Satan has led human beings and the rest of the universe to mistrust God’s system. Therefore, “the purpose of the plan of salvation is to restore that trust, to bring the rebellion to an end, and thus to establish at-one-ment once again in the whole universe” (Maxwell, *Servants or Friends? Another Look at God*, 164). The cross finally vindicates God’s case for his love and the illegitimacy of Satan’s system.

peaceful government, and therefore it shows that God has a right to forgive without exercising further violence. Governmental atonement, therefore, “satisfies” justice by overturning worldly, retributive justice, and replacing it with divine love.

This same point is also made in White’s pamphlet on “The Sufferings of Christ.” White writes that “the sword of justice was now to awake against His dear Son. He was betrayed by a kiss into the hands of His enemies, and hurried to the judgment hall of an earthly court, there to be derided and condemned to death by sinful mortals. There the glorious Son of God was ‘wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities.’”⁶⁹ Notice the curious phrase “the sword of *justice*.” In the paragraphs before, White has been depicting how the Father strengthened the Son to face his suffering.⁷⁰ Then, in his commitment to his Father, Jesus faces “the sword of justice.” The question is, whose sword is this, and what type of justice does it reflect? White seems clear on this: The sword of justice is what Jesus faced in the legal courts of justice run by “sinful mortals.” Jesus faced their justice in order to undermine it and replace it with a better justice, reflecting God’s moral government.⁷¹ Because Jesus faced this sword, it is no longer available to afflict humanity with the perversities of violence.

⁶⁹ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 2 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1958), 207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷¹ Thus, we may also say that the sword of justice used by Jesus’ enemies was, in a round-about way, the sword of divine justice. This of course does not mean that God controlled or manipulated the Sanhedrin and the Roman government into crucifying Jesus. That was Satan’s job. But it does mean that God utilized their “sword of justice” to defeat itself.

This is why White repeatedly emphasizes that a correct understanding of the death of Christ “will awaken tender, sacred, and lively emotions in the Christian’s heart.”⁷² For abuse victims especially, the recognition that Christ, as the ultimate human victim, is constructing a government based on the overpowering of the forces of abuse, can be a source of great empowerment, and it can lead such victims to accept this divine government.

So far, it seems that Ellen White and Hugo Grotius have much in common. Here are a few points of emphasis: (1) Both emphasize divine rectoral justice. In contrast to previous models in which God’s honor or wrath served as the motives for the death of Jesus, both Grotius and White demonstrate that restoring justice is a central—if not primary—motive in the death of Jesus. (2) Related to this is the notion of Christ’s death as restoring order and well-being in the universe. Both Grotius and White see God as a magistrate or governor who seeks to create the best outcome for God’s people, and the universe. (3) Finally, both Grotius and White believe that satisfying the necessity of retributive punishment is somehow essential to restoring justice and proper order in the cosmos. The latter point clearly signals a belief in penal substitution in both thinkers. I do not wish to address the issue of penal substitution in this chapter, mainly because it is too broad an issue to evaluate reasonably here, but also because I wish to focus on how governmental theology can be constructed to assist abuse victims and their abusers. For Grotius and White, the penal element is closely connected to the issue of divine justice and governmental restoration. Nevertheless, it is possible to show how these ends can be met without recourse to penal substitution, as will be shown in chapter 4. Thus, in what

⁷² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:212.

follows in chapter 4 I will focus on how the first two points of common emphasis in Grotius's and White's theology lay a groundwork for a theology which can address the needs of victims. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider the vital contribution of a third key figure in the governmental atonement tradition.

René Girard

Having derived a governmental view of the atonement from the theologies of Grotius and White, I am prepared to emphasize that through the atonement Jesus shows himself the leader of a government based on nonviolence and the overcoming of abuse. Surely, by the standards of the world—in which governments are run by those who either perpetrate or are blind to abuse—this is a scandalous type of government. Raymund Schwager emphasizes that throughout Jesus' life—not least in his various meals with unclean persons and “sinners,” of which the last supper was the ultimate—Jesus demonstrated the complete mercy of God in restoring fellowship with lost persons, in a very scandalous way.⁷³ Jesus' claim to be able to forgive sins, which aroused the ire of his religious peers, was a basic tenet of his new government. Grace was made possible through Jesus' death because, having experienced the worst of human violence in himself, Jesus no longer is required to exercise it.

If we accept Grotius's basic governmental paradigm, which White builds into the framework of a great controversy in which God's moral government is vindicated, we find that it harmonizes quite well with the anthropological paradigm of René Girard, which he applies to the cross, and which is also greatly applicable to the needs of abuse

⁷³ Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 37.

victims.⁷⁴ Girard's paradigm presents violence based on "mimetic conflict" as the underlying current of human society. As each member of a group desires what he/she sees another member desiring, a type of rivalry develops, into which more and more members of the society are gradually enveloped. The only way to diffuse the conflict without a "war of all against all" is to find a substitute sacrifice—hence, the social function of sacrifice in various religious rituals.⁷⁵ This victim is arbitrarily chosen, even though society effortlessly deceives itself into believing in a genuine justification of the victim's sacrifice. The victim (or victims) becomes a grand, yet secret catharsis for the war of all-against-all. A cycle of mimetic violence followed by sacrifice and subsequent peace thus develops, operating covertly under the guises of religious ritual and criminal justice.⁷⁶ Interestingly, it is important to note that the violence many domestic abuse victims suffer also reflects this type of mimetic sacrifice, in the sense that their being objects of masculine control is essentially arbitrary. The mimetic violence which does not

⁷⁴ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

⁷⁵ "Sacrifice plays a very real role in these societies, and the problem of substitution concerns the entire community. The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

break out in the man's professional world is re-directed into his intimate life, in an intentionally cathartic way.⁷⁷

This account seems dismal, yet Girard—notwithstanding his personal tendencies to French intellectual atheism—finds the one solution to the problem of mimetic sacrifice in the cross. Girard argues that the purpose of Jesus' death is to expose the evil foundations of mimetically violent human society, and to provide a way to undercut them.⁷⁸ For Girard, Jesus dies not to extol sacrificial death and victimization, but to unmask the evil of innocent sacrifice.⁷⁹ Retributive violence upon innocent victims,

⁷⁷ Carol Adams observes that men who batter women are not necessarily violent generally or violent to outsiders: "They decide where, when, under what circumstances, in what way, and at whom they will act violently. . . . They batter their wives or partners, not their bosses or their friends" (Carol J. Adams, *Woman-Battering*, ed. Howard Stone and Howard Clinebell, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 21).

⁷⁸ This idea is found throughout Girard's work. See especially Girard, *The Scapegoat*; Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*.

⁷⁹ One might object, "What about the God-ordained sacrificial system of the OT sanctuary?" It might seem as if God has authorized the sacrificial mechanism which Girard claims is the intent of the gospel to overthrow. While this may appear to be a significant difficulty for those ascribing to Girard's theory, it fails to recognize two points about Girard's theology: (1) Girard utilizes what might be called a "progressive" understanding of biblical revelation, in which "the Bible tells us the story of a gradual exit from mythological religion" (Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, Rene Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 43). The Bible does this by taking the side of the victim. The OT sacrificial system shows us this process of de-victimization taking place, as human sacrifice (which was the norm in communities around Israel) is replaced with animal sacrifice (Gen 22). Nevertheless, the sacrificial mechanism is not completely subverted until the Christ event. (2) Although much of the sacrificial violence in the OT may be related to mimetic violence and scapegoating, others aspects of it may have been simply culinary. Animal slaughtering, for most of human history, has had nothing to do with manifesting judicial violence, and everything to do with mere eating. In the ancient Near-East, when one wanted to have fellowship with someone important, one slaughtered a cow, roasted it, and ate it. This was not necessarily mimetic violence; it was merely the culinary practice of the time (which continues in some places to this day). Thus, the sacrifices of animals in the sanctuary may have been entirely devoted to restoring fellowship with God by having a meal with God. As Belousek argues, "Rather than rendering compensation, offering sacrifice concerned restoring relationship with God," (Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 183-184). This explains why in the Levitical system animal death was not always required for sin offerings—poor people were allowed to bring flour as a sacrifice, serving the exact same purpose as an animal (Lev 5:11-13). From a substitutionary violence perspective, this sin-offering option

according to Girard, is part of society's cultural history, in which it has come to be viewed as necessary for justice.⁸⁰ However, Girard writes, "once exposed, as it is in the Bible and the Gospels, the mechanism of victimization can no longer function as the model for would be sacrificers. If the term *sacrifice* is used for the death of Jesus, it is in a sense absolutely contrary to the archaic sense."⁸¹ The death of Jesus finally vindicates the government of God, because it signals the doom of the incessant calls for blood and torture that have, throughout history, been seen as manifestations of "justice." Mark Heim, who follows Girard's understanding of the cross, highlights how in non-Christian myths, the sacrificial mechanism is kept hidden, providing an underlying "ontology of violence" (Milbank's term) which cloaks perpetrators of violence.⁸² For example, in the myth of Oedipus, as Girard notes, the dual expulsions of King Oedipus are portrayed as

makes no sense, for flour cannot be "killed" in place of a human being. But if we understand the sacrifice as a way to create mutual fellowship between God and humanity through a meal, it is understandable.

⁸⁰ Girard portrays this as the founding "myth" of cultural history (Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 53, 54). According to Girard, chaos emerges in human groups as individual persons model each other's desired objects ("mimetic contagion"). As the chaos increases, the violent tension is finally diffused by focusing the aggressive urge onto one victim (the "scapegoat"). Once this victim has been sacrificed, peace emerges and the society is tentatively grounded, since the members of the society have caused themselves to coalesce by distinguishing themselves from a common enemy. This process of mimetic contagion followed by sacrifice continues over and over, although some cultures have found ways of diffusing it without human sacrifice, by using rituals such as animal sacrifice, or through entertainment or war. However, in times of intense crisis it may be induced to involve human sacrifice, such as during the Black Plague in Medieval Europe, when Jews were targeted for arbitrary persecution.

⁸¹ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 12.

⁸² "Myth is on the one hand a record of this sacrificial practice and a prescription for its future repetition. It is a literary account that remembers the pharmacy of antidotes to be applied when the community faces crisis. But as a record it is also, necessarily, a lie. Myth is an account of a murder that routinely obscures the fact that it was murder at all. It describes collective killing that was completely justified, entirely necessary, divinely approved and powerfully beneficent" (S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 52).

necessary and legitimate—his victimization is not given explicit portrayal.⁸³ The mythological mind-set as a whole did not take the perspective of victims or recognize their inherent rights. If one were to anxiously ask a Roman leader why he could crucify barbarians or kill their children, he would be perplexed or even amused at the question, since the perspective of victims was not part of his mind-set. But in the Gospels, all this is overturned. The cross shows that the evil of such violence must be seen for what it is.

Girard writes:

From an anthropological standpoint I would define Christian revelation as the true *representation* of what had never been completely represented or what had been falsely represented: the mimetic convergence of all against one, the single victim mechanism with its antecedent developments, particularly “interindividual” scandals. Mythology falsifies this mechanism to the detriment of victims and to the advantage of persecutors of the victim. The Hebrew Bible frequently suggests the truth, evokes it, and even partially represents it, but never completely and perfectly. The Gospels, taken in their totality, *are* this representation, precisely and perfectly.⁸⁴

In other words, the writings of the hegemonic governments of the “principalities and powers” cloak the victimization of the innocent with mythical obscurity. The gospel, however, is the ultimate “anti-myth.” The victimization process is finally exposed and rendered powerless (although it is still possible to ignore the gospel and cling to the old myths). This, for Girard, makes Christianity fundamentally unique in its impact on the world, because in Christ alone (along with the Hebrew tradition that prefigured him) do we find an unapologetic support for victims.⁸⁵

⁸³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 109.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸⁵ “The theme of human rights has become a major sign of our uniqueness as far as the protection of victims is concerned. Nobody before us had ever asserted that a victim, even someone who was unanimously condemned by his or her community, by institutions with legitimate jurisdiction over him or her, could be right in the face of the unanimous verdict. This

This explains the paradox that the cross presents to us: “The Cross saves, and it ought not to happen.”⁸⁶ Just as the public beatings of Southern Blacks during the civil rights movement contributed to their liberation (without those beatings being good things in themselves), the crucifixion of Jesus liberates us more broadly from the mechanism of mimetic sacrifice. Therefore, understanding the significance of Christ’s death must involve overcoming the associative mode of thought in which if something has positive effects, it must be morally positive. We can forthrightly condemn the death of Jesus and yet recognize that if it were not for that death, we might not have the capacity to condemn it (this point is one that is not clearly recognized by Brock and Parker, as will become clear in the next chapter).

Girard thus extends and deepens the governmental paradigm of Grotius and White. Grotius gives us a picture of a government whose justice could be questioned, and therefore which must be vindicated by a public display. White adds to this framework an account of how the government is one which professes to be loving, but does not use force to accomplish its ends. It must then demonstrate to the world how a non-forceful, loving government can be justified in juxtaposition with the government of Satan. Girard shows one way that this happens: The cross unmasks the mechanism of violence which forms the foundation for Satanic, worldly governments. Because of this unmasking of false justice at the cross, God has a “right” to forgive without violence, because his empire of forgiveness has been shown superior to the competing empire of retribution.

extraordinary attitude can only come from the Passion, as interpreted from the vantage point of the Gospels” (René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill [East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014], 81).

⁸⁶ Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 89.

Using technical language, therefore, we can say that this governmental atonement theology has both “objective” and “subjective” elements.⁸⁷ From the subjective standpoint, there is a sense in which governmental atonement theology is very similar to moral influence, in that the purpose of the death of Christ is to influence persons to reject the government of Satan, and accept the government of God. But from an objective standpoint, governmental theology also portrays Jesus as having accomplished something definite and irreversible for our redemption, regardless of human response: He has permanently made his governmental methodology immune to legal critique. This follows naturally from the Girardian paradigm: Scapegoating is simply no longer possible, because the Satanic mechanism behind it has been exposed and rendered useless.⁸⁸ The cross shows that Satan’s claims are invalid, even if anyone still believes that they are (and many do). Christ’s forgiveness of sinners through the cross is thus firmly established.

This governmental atonement theology also harmonizes perfectly with concerns of Brock and Parker, particularly with the former’s insistence on “communal redemption.”⁸⁹ If the purpose of the atonement is to install Jesus as a just moral governor,

⁸⁷ This applies also to the “narrative Christus Victor” approach of Denny Weaver. See J. Denny Weaver, “Violence in Christian Theology,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit A. Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

⁸⁸ See Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 134-164.

⁸⁹ See Rita Nakashima Brock, “The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006). In this work, Brock describes an image of a cross in a chapel in El Salvador, decorated with conflicting images. In one part, Oscar Romero stands as if raised from the dead, next to a green plant. Around the cross and in the background, however, images of death and torture abound. Brock argues that the resurrection image ought to take precedence over the images of death, and that, unfortunately, the church has for many centuries emphasized death more than resurrection. This resurrection, for Brock, signals a community raised to life for justice and peace. “And this, too, is the sacred work of the church: to shelter truth and accurate, integrative memory, to raise prophetic voices against injustice and violence, and to

the obvious product of this atonement will be a community which upholds Jesus as such a governor. As persons are “included” into Christ, they begin to operate as if this government had taken over the world, renouncing violence and seeking just peacemaking.⁹⁰

Furthermore, also in line with Brock and Parker, this governmental model of the atonement places victims at its center. Following the method of beginning with the victim (outlined in chapter 2) the atonement model I have sketched here makes a principal effort of understanding how Christ’s death on the cross works to meet the needs of victims. In contrast to Brock and Parker, who assume too quickly that any theology highlighting death and suffering will be detrimental to victims, this approach suggests that possibly Christ’s suffering can be seen as beneficial, if portrayed as Christ’s way of defeating (not supporting) the competing government of violence and suffering. However, it is only through the model of a Great Controversy, in which God’s government is under intense suspicion, that this can make sense.

organize communities to resist the principalities and powers of this world” (ibid., 251). Brock is, essentially, describing a moral government that arises from the ashes of suffering.

⁹⁰ This also removes the passivity often associated with penal substitution or satisfaction atonement, in which Jesus simply placates the Father, thus rendering us saved, apart from any real-world activity we are involved in. This can cause individuals to see their personal salvation as something entirely outside themselves, and outside their control. There is some truth in this. It is certainly true that human beings do not earn their salvation or contribute to it in any way. But they do get to participate actively as members of the new government in which Jesus rules. Denny Weaver writes: “The sinner’s complicity with the powers that oppose the reign of God and the sinner’s repentance, the genuineness of which is identified by active participation in the reign of God, is in contrast with the passive role for humankind in satisfaction atonement. The paradox of free will and predestination also involves the active participation by the individual in a transformed (saved) life, which is again unlike the passive role of humankind in satisfaction atonement. Narrative Christus Victor pictures humankind actively involved in history as sinners against the rule of God, and as actively involved in salvation as the transformed individual participates in witnessing to the presence of the reign of God in history” (Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 98).

Naturally, this approach also falls in harmony with Brock and Parker's rejection of a sovereign, controlling deity, and acceptance of a process approach to God. If one denies the reality of God's *kenotic* willingness to enter into relationships of mutual trust—that is, if one views God's government as beyond the scope of human (or demonic) evaluation, on the premise that God's government *must be right*, and therefore merits no scrutiny from “lower” creatures, then of course the death of Christ will seem to be an act of horrific abuse perpetrated by a sovereign and violent deity. But if one seeks to understand the ways of God from the perspective of the unjust victimization of Jesus, and does not align oneself prematurely with the stiff categories of classical theism, the idea that a humble, open God must sometimes work through death and suffering to accomplish God's ends makes more sense.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a unique paradigm for understanding the death of Jesus as creating the foundation for a divine moral government. I have traced the history of this paradigm from Hugo Grotius through Ellen White. I have sought to portray the way in which, by viewing the cross as a justification of God's non-coercive, loving government, it can make sense.

In positing this sense of “moral government,” I have arrived at a definition of “governmental atonement” which follows Grotius and White in recognizing the purpose of Jesus' death in showing the legitimacy of God's government in the context of the great controversy, but claims that this governmental validation comes not through satisfying the devil's calls for violence, but in unmasking them. One might define this version of governmental atonement as the process by which God reconciles the world to Godself, by

demonstrating the justice of God's governmental rulership and the injustice of Satan's, via the cross and resurrection of Christ. I have made the claim that this definition harmonizes with a position Ellen White could be said to be moving toward in her theology of the atonement (without necessarily denying the other aspects of her atonement theology, such as penal-substitution). Girard's perspective on Christ's death as the final sacrifice of all attempts to use redemptive violence for peacemaking is essential for this approach, because it depicts the mechanism through which Christ's death becomes effective. Girard and his colleagues (especially Mark Heim) show how the process through which violence and abuse are kept hidden under the auspices of a supposedly righteous human society is revealed and conquered by the cross of Christ.

However, I still have not explicitly and directly addressed all the concerns of Brock and Parker. Specifically, how does governmental atonement address the needs of victims, without luring them into continual cooperation with abuse? This question deserves close investigation. The next chapter will provide it, with an aim to showing how the diverse implications of governmental atonement theology can meet the needs of victims as well as "atoning" for their victimizers.

CHAPTER 4

GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

FOR VICTIMS

Introduction

Before bringing a revised form of the governmental theory into conversation with the feminist concerns of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, it is helpful to be reminded what those concerns are. As set forth in chapter 1, Brock and Parker are concerned with the glorification of sacrifice portrayed in traditional atonement theology that bears striking resemblance to child abuse (notwithstanding Trinitarian objections). From a praxis-based standpoint, they argue that women and children find themselves in abusive situations which are reinforced by theologies of atonement that find innate value in the innocent suffering of Jesus, and portray God as a manipulative controller. Finally, they are interested in an atonement theology that “works” for victimized women and children. Unfortunately, as noted in chapter 1, Brock and Parker do not chart such an atonement theology, but are content to deconstruct traditional models.

My approach is to posit that the atonement event involves Christ’s constructing an alternative moral government to that of Satan, based on relationality and love (Brock’s “erotic power”), and renouncing rule-based ethic of retribution and force. In what follows, I will posit three ways in which a revised moral government model based on these principles can be formulated in such a way as to assist Brock and Parker’s needs. These three aspects of my revised moral government model of the atonement are: (1)

christological identification, (2) forensic justice, and (3) representative empowerment. In describing these three aspects, I hope to elucidate how speaking of the atonement in moral government language assists in overcoming some of the deficiencies of Brock and Parker's approach pointed out in chapter 1.

Christological Identification

Central themes in several recent approaches to atonement theology include the concepts of "identification" and "representation."¹ These concepts suggest that Christ died for the primary purpose of being "one of us" in order to experience the worst of human suffering and thus to conquer it. This idea of a necessity of a suffering God has received its most extensive treatment in Moltmann's work.² However, as we have seen, in Brock and Parker's theology, any notions of positive identification with suffering and abuse are forthrightly rejected.³ Speaking of Moltmann's theology: "This theology describes a merging of selves in pain and annihilation. What hope is there in this?"⁴ Such an approach, for Brock and Parker, nurtures a masochistic attitude which keeps victims from recognizing the evil of what is being done to them. Thus, Brock and Parker reject

¹ This is a hallmark of N.T. Wright's work. See especially N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 604-611. Wright convincingly argues that Jesus' death "for" Israel refers to his leadership of Israel as one who faces Israel's foes "for" them. This is similarly argued in Belousek's work (see Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 331-361). See also Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of the Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

² See Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243.

³ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 46, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

any approach that sees Jesus' suffering as something he sought after, or believed was necessary.

While their critique of Moltmann is not unfounded (for he does advocate redemptive suffering in a way that embraces many of the perils of some traditional theology),⁵ they neglect to consider that Moltmann does address the problem of inappropriate interpretations of the cross which legitimize suffering.⁶ I find Brock and Parker's rejection of identification in Christ's death to be an unnecessary theological move. It also seems unbiblical because, as mentioned in chapter 2, it is hard to reject the idea of the usefulness, or necessity, of Jesus' death for our salvation, without appearing to contradict the entirety of the Christian tradition and biblical testimony in all its forms. Perhaps Brock and Parker are content to do this. But, as I mentioned in my critique in chapter 2, their doing so makes it seem unnecessary for them to adopt the Christian label at all. It is also unnecessary because, as I will argue here, the moral government tradition

⁵ See especially Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 242: "Because God 'does not spare' his Son, all the godless are spared. Though they are godless, they are not godforsaken, precisely because God has abandoned his own Son and has delivered him up for them."

⁶ Moltmann seems to anticipate the critique of Brock and Parker: "Of course the mysticism of suffering can easily be perverted into a justification of suffering itself. The mysticism of the cross can of course praise submission to fate as a virtue and be perverted into melancholy apathy. To suffer with the crucified Christ can also lead to self-pity. But faith is then dissociated from the suffering Christ, seeing him as no more than a replaceable pattern for one's own sufferings, as the patient sufferer who provides the example for one's own endurance of an alien destiny. . . . It does not change anything in it, nor does it change the human being who suffers" (ibid., 48-49). Arnfriður Guðmundsdottir also highlights how Moltmann sees the suffering of Christ as a call to action, rather than passivity (Arnfriður Guðmundsdottir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 100). Nevertheless, Brock and Parker are right in that Moltmann does not always take care to present his message of the suffering Christ in a way that protects God from the charge of complicity in suffering. Moltmann's theology has many tensions.

provides a way to visualize the death of Jesus as identification without positing it as masochistic or suicidal.

Identification=Victimization?

The first question we must ask is, “Must identification as a victim always produce more victimization?” Brock and Parker clearly believe it does, and they are right in some cases. These are typically cases where, in an interaction between two individuals, one plays the victim while the other plays the oppressor. The victim applauds herself/himself for being a victim, and thus authorizes the abuse (“I deserve it”), doing nothing to escape victimization.⁷ A supposed “savior” for such victims who simply puts himself in their place does nothing for them besides encouraging them to accept their victimization (like someone who cannot swim jumping into a lake to save a drowning person). However, in other cases, identification as a victim can equal a condemnation of that victimization. In sex abuse cases, this is especially true, since many rape and molestation victims seek to preserve their internal integrity by denying that they have been victimized, and thus avoid seeking help.⁸ Identification with Jesus as one who has gone through unspeakable abuse can help such victims to recognize their own dignity while also being honest with themselves and others about their traumatic experiences.

⁷ This is common especially in child sex abuse cases, where the last thing the victim thinks is that he/she is a victim. Rather, a guilt response is commonly found, wherein the child accepts responsibility for the abusive act. “A child who has been sexually abused tends to introject the aggressor and the guilt feelings of the perpetrator to cope with the abuse” (Nicky Ali Jackson and Gisele Casanova Oates, *Violence in Intimate Relationships: Examining Sociological and Psychological Issues* [Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998], 39).

⁸ See John Briere, “Treating Adults Severely Abused as Children: The Self-Trauma Model,” in *Child Abuse: New Directions in Prevention and Treatment across the Lifespan*, ed. David A. Wolfe, Robert J. McMahon, and Ray V. Peters (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 195.

Furthermore, from a governmental atonement perspective, this process of highlighting abuse can “rewire” a society’s understanding of justice, placing shame where it belongs (on the abusers), and lifting victims into a position of hope. Identification with the abused can show that “a better world is possible” if a different system of governance is authorized. When a distinguished governmental leader identifies with an abused person, the case for justice for that person and other persons in similar cases can be greatly strengthened.⁹

Jesus performed this type of identification through his crucifixion, specifically when he said “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Initially, this may appear to be the most vexing passage for Brock and Parker, to whom it may sound like a passive acquiescence to abuse. However, upon closer examination, this pronouncement is incredibly subversive. First, notice that Jesus highlights the injustice of what his abusers are doing—their government’s violence is the type that *requires* forgiveness. One cannot forgive a violent act that was justly inflicted; hence, this statement of forgiveness is also a strong rebuke. Second, he asserts a governmental authority higher than that of the abusers—that of his *father*.¹⁰ In the midst of his mistreatment Jesus announces the future inauguration of a governmental style led

⁹ A classic example of this was U.S. President Barack Obama’s briefing room speech on the criminal case involving the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager assaulted while walking at night through a gated neighborhood. Obama identified with Martin by explaining how he, along with most Black men, had experienced the suspicious gaze of White people in public areas. His testimony increased awareness of how such gut-level discrimination exists widely in the U.S. See www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹⁰ Of course, the title “father” is no more precise or necessary than “mother” and is thus interchangeable.

by a parental figure who not only stops abuse, but also forgives the worst types of abusers.¹¹ This contrasts sharply with the punitive mentality of the Roman Empire which, like the parenting style of the Hohnbergers and Pearls discussed in chapter 2, demands absolute submission through absolute force.¹² Jesus thus proclaims through his abuse that a restorative, non-abusive government is on the way. His governmental approach does not identify with the abused just for the sake of arbitrary suffering.

The reality that identification does not always contribute to victimization is also demonstrated by the New Testament's portrait of Christ as one who, through his death, goes into exile for Israel. This biblical theme has been highlighted by N.T. Wright.¹³ Wright argues that the Passover meal, which recalled return from exile and slavery, forms the foundation for Jesus' self-understanding of his mission in death.¹⁴ Exile and exodus, Wright argues, were the fundamental categories through which first-century Judaism understood the process of redemption.¹⁵ Jesus, who identified with the suffering Jewish

¹¹ Arthur Just points out that this proclamation highlights the "now/not yet" element of Jesus' preaching: "By praying for the forgiveness of all those responsible for his crucifixion, Jesus anticipates in his words what is about to happen with his death: atonement for the sins of the entire world, alienated from and hostile to God" (Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture [St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1997], 234).

¹² Walsh and Keesmat describe the Roman Caesar as one whose government "restored order" but who did so via oppressive force (Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004], 90).

¹³ See, especially, along with Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which contains an expansive development of this theme, N.T. Wright, "The Reasons for Jesus' Crucifixion," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of God*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵ "The overarching category within which first-century Jewish reflection could handle the whole question of present suffering and future vindication, of present woe and future redemption, and of the means by which YHWH might bring his people from the one to the other,

people, went “ahead” of them into the death they would experience, in order to circumvent this death. As the new moral governor—the rival “King of the Jews”—it was necessary for Jesus’ style of governance to meet head-to-head with that of the prevailing system. Jesus did so, and, although succumbing to the abuse the system placed on him, thus ultimately and permanently unmasked it. Jesus did not identify with the suffering Jews in order to die; he identified with them in order to chart a distinct government.¹⁶ But, as we all know, when governments clash, someone’s death is inevitable. Those who oppose oppressive governmental systems can identify with the one who clashed against the same power structures, and not only died, but was resurrected, demonstrating complete victory.

This sort of positive identification of victims with Christ has been portrayed in the work of James Cone, particularly in his recent work *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In this work, Cone presents the history of lynching in postbellum America, highlighting the stark parallels between the fates of thousands of innocent Blacks and the fate of Christ. According to Cone, even though African Americans faced the threat of crucifixion daily,

was that of exile (‘the present evil age’) and restoration (‘the age to come’) . . . for the bulk of first-century Judaism, the exile was simply not yet over. The promises of Isaiah and the rest had not been fulfilled. As long as Pilate and Herod—and, for that matter, Caiaphas—were ruling, the kingdom had not yet come. Pagan oppression was the sign of the present evil age; the age to come would bring freedom and peace, when YHWH vindicated his people after their long period of suffering” (ibid., 114-115).

¹⁶ Wright provides a concise summary of how the Jewish mind would have understood the death of Jesus, and it is clearly governmental: “The key to it all, as the earliest Christian writers saw clearly, is the belief that, as Israel’s Messiah, Jesus did indeed *represent* his people. The life of the nation is bound up in the king. As, once more, with David fighting Goliath, the one stands in for the many, so that his victory becomes theirs. The representative is thus the only fitting *substitute* (despite generations of theologians playing those two categories off against one another)” (N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* [New York: HarperCollins, 2011], 188).

they celebrated the cross of Christ.¹⁷ At first glance, this would seem appalling, for if Brock and Parker are correct, such positive identification with suffering and death would make Blacks more willing to accept their abused condition. But such was not the case. Cone explains that Blacks found a message of liberation and activism in the cross of Christ:

A symbol of death and defeat, God turned it (the cross) into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the 'least of these,' the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.¹⁸

How, exactly, did this "work" for oppressed Blacks, given what we have learned from Brock and Parker? According to Cone, Black southerners embraced the cross because through it they identified with the one who overcame the cross, highlighting their own innocence.¹⁹ The fact that they, too, were being crucified like Jesus did not squelch their enthusiasm for liberation, but galvanized it, because through the cross they could see vividly the injustice of their situation and the hope for a new government of justice to be created:

Though the pain of Jesus' cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless. God's loving solidarity can transform ugliness—whether Jesus on the cross

¹⁷ "That God could 'make a way out of no way' in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross" (Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2).

¹⁸ Ibid., 156.

¹⁹ "The cross places God in the midst of crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured. Seeing himself as a man crucified like Jesus, Isaiah Fountain (January 23, 1920), insisted 'he be executed wearing a purple robe and crown, to analogize his innocence to that of Jesus Christ'" (ibid., 26).

or a lynched black victim—into beauty, into God’s liberating presence. Through the powerful imagination of faith, we can discover the ‘terrible beauty’ of the cross and the ‘tragic beauty’ of the lynching tree.²⁰

Naturally, this type of catalyzing appropriation of the cross was possible only because oppressed Blacks understood that the Christ who was crucified was a moral governor of a new social order, who took their side and promised justice. Governmental atonement was the only means to make positive sense of the abuse and marginalization of Black people.

“The Crucified Woman”

Abused and marginalized women in today’s society also can see themselves as identified with the crucified Jesus, who has become the legitimate moral governor. Black liberation theology’s quest to find God’s existence in the suffering of victims can be furthered to include women who suffer, as is seen in womanist theology.²¹ To the question “Where is Christ today?” we can answer, “In the broken wife, beaten by her husband, and in the woman raped daily as part of the sex slavery industry.”²² Looking at

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jacquelyn Grant provides an example of how womanist theology appropriates the cross of Christ. Speaking of the experiences of Black women, she describes how “as Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they. His suffering culminated in the crucifixion. Their crucifixion included rape and babies being sold” (Jacquelyn Grant, “A Womanist Christology,” in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church, and Theological Education*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010], 172).

²² This answers Rosemary Radford Ruether’s famous question, “Can a male savior save women?” (Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christianity and Cultural Criticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1989], 45). The answer is, no—unless that male savior is so completely kenotic that he can identify genuinely with the ultimate forms of suffering, which would include the suffering of women. This might not satisfy more radical feminist theologians, perhaps because they might have too tightly-fixed conceptions of gender. If one believes that gender is always dipolar (one is either male or female, and one’s status as male or female constrains one to only understanding experiences limited to either male identity or female identity) then yes, Jesus’ biological maleness will be a problem for understanding how he can be a savior for women. But if Jesus’ gender is understood more fluidly, such that the biological traits of Jesus are “incidental” rather than essential, the problem disappears. The reality of transgender

the identity of Christ this way shatters the illusions of patriarchalism, for which Jesus' maleness is the central feature.²³ And it also provides a venue for active resistance to oppression, because, since God is identified with women and children who suffer, their future includes resurrection from abuse. Furthermore, through the lens of a governmental atonement perspective, the Christ who suffers becomes the victorious governor of a new world order.²⁴ Sexist structures are renounced in this new order, because the governor is one who has experienced the evils of such structures.²⁵ Those who have been oppressors

persons should lend credence to this fluid conception of gender. One theologian who disagrees with this assessment is Daphne Hampson (see Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 51). Hampson holds that Christ is a religious symbol which is "necessarily male" and that some theologians fail to recognize "the crucial nature of symbolism." A different perspective, which avoids the problem of Jesus' maleness by focusing on Jesus' teachings and deeds rather than his identity, is found in Carter Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989). An approach which affirms both Jesus' identity as divine and his identification with women along the lines I have mentioned in this footnote is found in Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Maleness of Christ," in *The Special Nature of Women? Concilium* 6, ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991).

²³ Deanna Thompson makes this same point: "In the spirit of Luther, I propose that resistance to idolizing Jesus' male identity be presented in the strategic reassertion of the image of the crucified woman as the *location* of Christ today. Because the imaging of Christ has become dangerously synonymous with male identity, the image of the crucified woman has potential to critique the "inherent" link between maleness and divinity" (Deanna A. Thompson, "Becoming a Feminist Theologian of the Cross," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2006], 85).

²⁴ Guðmundsdottir makes this point well: "As the cross becomes the locus of our knowledge of God, we are reminded that the embracing of those who suffer is at the center of Jesus' mission and identity. In the Gospels, we see how Jesus identified with the outcast of his society: the poor, the sick, the ritually unclean, and the morally derelict. . . . By identifying with the Samaritan woman, the widow, the woman with the flow of blood, and the prostitute, Jesus revealed the true nature of the Reign of God, in which the last will be first and finally all injustice and suffering will be overcome" (Guðmundsdottir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 135-36).

²⁵ "The crucified woman yells a resounding 'No!' in the face of maleness of God, in the face of sexist structures erected in the name of Christ that are too common, too expected. The image of a crucified woman startles us into understanding God's presence hidden *sub contrario*. But the image of the crucified woman stands alongside the full account of the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The promise that must be pronounced to and with the crucified woman is that the resurrection offers hope to the crucified, that suffering and abuse do

see in Jesus the forgiving face of the one they have oppressed. And those who have been oppressed see in Jesus a governor they can trust, who forgives the oppressors, leading them to do so also.

Did Jesus Choose Abuse?

What we have said so far paints a picture of Jesus' identification with abused persons that shows its efficacy in actively combatting evil. However, for Brock and Parker, this still might not be enough, because they have argued that *any* depiction of Jesus' suffering and death as somehow necessary is objectionable.²⁶ If Jesus deliberately chose to suffer and die, does this not valorize suffering and death for abused women and children, much as it did for martyrs in parts of the second-century church?

This criticism remains trenchant, and I doubt that it will ever be fully resolved. Brock and Parker's disturbing account of the church's gradual embracing of violence and death as fundamental human goods (the "morbid obsession"), along with Carol Delaney's account of the patriarchal appreciation of violent sacrifice within the church that started with Abraham, indicates that we will always have reason to be suspicious of theological odes to blood and gore.²⁷ Still, with great reservations, Brock and Parker admit that victims' enduring abuse has at times accomplished liberation.²⁸ Perhaps a more careful

not, will not, ultimately have the final word" (Thompson, "Becoming a Feminist Theologian of the Cross," 86).

²⁶ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 157.

²⁷ Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

²⁸ "As a strategy to call oppressors and unjust systems to account, the practice of nonviolent resistance can be effective. Important changes have resulted from people's willingness to take risks to confront and transform injustice. But the violence endured during the civil rights

clarification of what we mean by “the necessity of Jesus’ death” could help resolve things.

As we have seen in chapter 3, my version of moral government atonement (read through a Girardian lens) argues that instead of accommodating Satan’s demands for death, the work of Christ sets up the platform for demonstrating that these demands are themselves illegitimate. Christ thus sets up a government with principles of justice that are entirely different from those of Satan.²⁹ The point of Jesus’ abuse is thus to fundamentally renounce abuse as an element in moral government, not to extol it. So we may speak of Jesus’ suffering as *intentional*, not because Jesus chose suffering for its own sake, but because the suffering was an inevitable by-product of Jesus’ coup of Satan’s government.³⁰ In this sense it is both *through* and *in spite of* violence that Jesus’ government is established.

movement, including Dr. King’s assassination, is anguishing” (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, 41).

²⁹ Willard M. Swartley makes the case that this idea of a new government replacing that of the “Powers” (Walter Wink) formed the basis for the early church’s approach to the rest of the world. See Willard M. Swartley, “Jesus Christ: Victor over Evil,” in *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System*, ed. Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 108.

³⁰ Marcus Borg supports this interpretation: “He (Jesus) was killed because he sought, in the name of power and of the Spirit, the transformation of his own culture” (Marcus Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 183). Thus, he was not suicidal, but he recognized that the pattern of actions he was taking toward a new government would inevitably entail his death. L. Oberlinner highlights this point by distinguishing between Jesus’ “readiness for death” and his “certainty of death” (L. Oberlinner, *Todeserwartung und Todegewissheit Jesu*, *Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge* [Stuttgart: KBW, 1980], 56-78). Jesus may have had the former (as evidenced by his statements regarding it), but he may not have had the latter. For further discussion of Jesus’ passion predictions see Scott McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

This means that God's activity in Christ on the cross was truly non-violent, just as Martin Luther King's sacrifice of himself in the civil rights movement was non-violent. This undermines the criticism of Hans Boersma, who claims that any type of atonement theory must include divine violence in some form.³¹ God does not become a violent deity through the atoning work of the cross, and neither does God exemplify passivity toward violence—God struggles against it, and through the struggle both succumbs to it and overcomes it. Part of this struggle against abuse involves intentional employment of forensic justice.

Forensic Justice for Victims

The second element relating to the needs of victims in my modified governmental view is forensic justice. By the term "forensic justice" I do not necessarily refer to the categories of penal substitution, although my purpose here is not to deny or replace those categories. Instead, more generally, I refer to the need for legal action in order to address and counteract abuse.

Although it is nice to think about atonement in purely personal, relational terms, we cannot forget that forensic justice is essential for a thorough response to abuse. Miroslav Volf, in his extended argument for the necessity of "embrace" as the ultimate culmination of justice, admits that without recognition and remembrance of wrongs done, such embracing justice can never emerge:

³¹ Boersma argues that attempts to remove divine violence from atonement theology run into trouble when they face the fact that biblically, the death of Jesus was clearly intentional (Hans Boersma, "Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View," in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006], 53). My approach counters this by proposing that intentionality of acceptance of violence does not entail active violence.

There can be no redemption unless the truth about the world is told and justice is done. To treat sin as if it were not there, when in fact it is there, amounts to living as if the world were redeemed when in fact it is not. The claim to redemption has degenerated into an empty ideology, and a dangerous one at that.³²

According to Volf, wrongs must be righted, but they must be identified first. This is the task of forensic justice, without which all attempts at a new government are merely facades hiding what Volf calls a “cosmic terror.”³³ Hans Boersma makes a similar point, emphasizing the need for “boundaries” to divine and human hospitality.³⁴ It is simply not possible to openly accept abusers into fellowship with the abused, not only because abusers may still be dangerous, but also because their victims may not have the capacity to forgive and forget what they have done.³⁵

³² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 294. For an account of the importance of remembering in this process see also Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

³³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 286.

³⁴ Boersma’s work highlights the importance of God’s responding actively to identify and exclude evil. He argues that acts of exclusion are necessary in order to create a harmonious, hospitable community, which by its very nature requires boundaries: “The refusal to use coercion and to inflict harm or damage is really a refusal to enforce boundaries” (Boersma, “Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View,” 61). Thus, God’s forensic, “wrathful” activities are essential for founding a moral government based on love: “Love, it seems, requires passionate anger toward anything that would endanger the relationship of love. God’s hospitality requires violence, just as his love necessitates wrath” (Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, 49). See also Hans Boersma, “On the Rejection of Boundaries: Radical Orthodoxy’s Appropriation of St. Augustine,” *Pro Ecclesia* 15, no. 4 (2006): 34-52.

³⁵ Jennifer Erin Beste has pointed out that for many victims of abuse, it seems that their own volitional abilities have been compromised by trauma to the point where they may not be able to make the choice to respond to God’s grace (see Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]). This implies that attempting to create a community of forgiven abusers and their victims collides with the basic psychological capabilities of the latter. This problem, I will argue, is resolved through the cross.

The question is, how does the cross enable Jesus to embrace perpetrators of abuse, while concomitantly identifying with the victims? In other words, what gives God a “right” to forgive, in spite of God’s concomitant need to judge in favor of victims?

The Cross as Divine Judgment on Abusers

The cross is a forensic event. We know this because Jesus declared that his death would constitute an act of divine judgment (John 12:31). In the context of this passage, the judgment is not that of God upon an innocent victim. Instead, Jesus says, “Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.” John comments that “he was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which he was to die” (v. 33). The type of judgment that occurs in the cross is therefore judgment on Satan, or judgment as *exposure of evil*. Leon Morris is concise and clear: “The world will condemn itself by its treatment of the Son.”³⁶ The type of atonement we see in Girard’s thought is clearly suggested by this passage.³⁷ The cross is a judgment, Girard says, and a triumphal one at that. But it is not a judgment of domination, but “an extraordinary event offered to the view of all humankind, a public exhibition of what the enemy had to conceal in order to

³⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 531.

³⁷ Girard’s understanding of atonement as the unmasking victory over the single-victim mechanism is a particularly appropriate lens through which to view this passage. Girard comments: “Christ does not achieve this victory through violence. He obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage to its heart’s content without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal, without suspecting that its fury will turn back against it this time because it will be recorded and represented with exactness in the Passion narratives” (Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 141).

defend itself.”³⁸ In the cross, evil turned on itself, essentially providing its own public judgment.³⁹

To see how this public forensic judgment of evil on the cross is so helpful to abuse victims, consider the relationship between abuse and publicity in domestic intimate partner violence (IPV) contexts. Experts on IPV and child abuse highlight the importance that publicity plays in combating abuse, for rarely does abuse stop unless it is exposed somehow, preferably by the victim her/himself.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Haddon, Merritt-Gray, and Wuest describe how publicly displaying one’s status as an abuse victim in many cases is terrifying and nearly impossible.⁴¹ The humiliation associated with being a victim causes many victims to prefer silence about their abuse rather than letting their own private problems be known to outsiders.⁴² A burden of shame and disgust cloaks many victims. Hence, many abuse victims do not access the help they need to escape

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The idea of a victory won by an enemy turning on itself would not have been new to the Hebrew mind of Jesus’ day. The Old Testament provides several examples of Israel’s enemies being defeated by YHWH, and yet doing all the violence themselves. In Judg 7:19-25, Gideon’s unarmed army descends upon the camp of the Midianites, who subsequently begin slaying each other and fleeing. Second Chronicles 20:14-25 records an even more epic incident, in which Jehoshaphat leads Judah’s army against three combined armies, who, before Judah even appears, turn on themselves violently. When Jehoshaphat arrives at the lookout from which to survey the enemy armies, he discovers that they are all corpses and that “no one had escaped” (20:24). Hence, there is much precedent for viewing divine judgment as an event in which God plays no active role at all, except to watch God’s enemies destroy themselves. Something like this seems to be what Jesus has in mind regarding his atoning death.

⁴⁰ See David Howe, *Child Abuse and Neglect: Attachment, Development and Intervention* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴¹ Arlene Haddon, Marilyn Merritt-Gray, and Judith Wuest, "Private Matters and Public Knowledge in Rural Communities: The Paradox," in *Understanding Abuse: Partnering for Change*, ed. Mary Lou Stirling et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁴² Ibid., 260. Victims also experience the fear of retaliation if they make allegations regarding an abuser who is part of a tightly knit community.

from the coercive control of partners or family members who rely on their victim's secrecy to continue the abuse. In much of contemporary culture, victims may face blame for their own responses to abuse, especially when it is sexual in nature.⁴³ Thus, sexual abuse is often massively underreported.⁴⁴

Jesus' death provides access to justice for these victims, because through the publicity of his death Jesus defeats the shame these victims experience in coming forward about their experiences. Carol Adams observes that victims of abuse often need help in order to name what has happened to them.⁴⁵ Abusers construct a story which describes the victim as the one who bears the fault for the abuse; the shame for it is thus transferred to the innocent victim.⁴⁶ Jesus, by publicly bearing the mistreatments of mimetic violence, can become an identifying point for such victims of abuse who are afraid to bear the public shame of naming what has happened to them. In essence, Jesus judges the empire of abusers by transferring the shame of victims onto the empire of abuse. Jesus thus becomes a moral governor who judges all forms of domination and humiliation by enduring them with world publicity, becoming a refuge for all victims of violence who seek sympathetic compassion and a listening ear (see Heb 2:9-18).⁴⁷

⁴³ See Monica Coleman, *The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 14.

⁴⁴ "While as many as 30% to 40% of girls and 13% of boys are sexually abused in childhood (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999), only a small number of these children are identified each year" (Rebecca Morris Bolen, *Child Sexual Abuse: Its Scope and Our Failure* [New York: Kluwer Academic, 2001], 219).

⁴⁵ Adams, *Woman-Battering*, 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Adams highlights another way in which other people (particularly fellow victims) can help a victim find judgment on what has happened to them: "Another benefit of naming the

The Cross Creates God's "Right to Forgive"

However, this still does not explain how God is able to forgive these abusers whom God has publicly judged on the cross. A governmental atonement theology which aims to be "non-retributive" (such as the one promoted in this study)⁴⁸ still argues that God's right to forgive is grounded in the cross. But how does this work? I argue that governmental atonement presents two ways that God is able to forgive: (1) through the cross God destroys the governmental system which relies on retribution (this I established above) and (2) through the cross God becomes a victim of the world's violence and therefore able to forgive (for only victims can truly forgive).⁴⁹

Here all the forensic concepts of penal-substitution and "bearing sins" in various NT passages come together in a unique way. Jesus forgives sinners because he bears their sin and "becomes sin" (2 Cor. 5:21), but not because he bears and extols divine violence. This distinction is vital. If we perceive atonement as an act in which punishment and

violence is gained when such naming is affirmed by the stories of other victims of violence. . . . One of the most empowering events occurs in shelters and support groups through such contextualization. By this collective naming, other battered women and battered women's advocates remove the burden of the problem from the victim" (ibid., 44).

⁴⁸ This raises the question of whether there are not some instances where we might describe God as utilizing "retributive" justice. The Bible contains several literary genres in which appeals are made for divine punishment upon enemies, in which the word "retribution" or its synonyms (like "recompense") could be used. (This is frequently seen in the Psalms and in Revelation 6.) These types of biblical texts may not describe "retribution" in the contemporary philosophical sense, or the sense utilized by proponents of penal-substitution. Nevertheless, depending on the interpretation of any given passage, it may be fair to ascribe the term to divine activity. At least, it is not the aim of the present work to resolve such exegetical difficulties.

⁴⁹ Although some philosophers have argued that non-victims can forgive (as in the case of a parent of a person killed by a drunk driver who forgives the driver) Margaret Holmgren makes a clear case that forgiveness occurs only as an action of victims. "As autonomous moral agents, we are ultimately responsible for determining our own attitudes. No one can legitimately choose for us whether we will hold an attitude of resentment or an attitude of forgiveness" (Margaret Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 36).

legal demands are maintained, we reinforce the retributive system of the government which atonement overthrows. But if we see Jesus as the victim of that very unjust retributive system, we have a picture of a Christ who overthrows that system by bearing its sin. The ever-annoying dichotomy between “Christus Victor” and “penal” models of atonement is thus overcome. Jesus was the penal victim who speaks for all victims, who has a right to forgive.

Jesus, as the representative of all victims can thus also speak words of forgiveness and embrace to abusers, because as a victim, he evades the scrutiny of critics who would allege that he is being “soft on crime.” Critics who would scrutinize Jesus’ government are left with nothing to criticize.

Biblical Depictions of the Right to Forgive

This understanding of the cross-event as the representative victim’s right to forgive provides a new way to piece together the biblical images of forensic atonement in a way that, as will become clear below, is especially helpful for victims of abuse seeking personal transformation. A number of biblical passages are salient here.

Romans 3:21-30

Romans 3:21-30, which is a rather complex passage, shows how modified moral government theology makes sense of Paul’s testimony. The passage reads as follows:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is not distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

One way to read this passage is to see it as highlighting God's retributive justice by using Jesus as a substitute victim. Jesus dies as a demonstration of God's justice, and God "displays" him as such. This is certainly a possible interpretation, but it misses the more broad import of the book of Romans as a whole, and the practical meaning of this passage in particular. Much of this meaning hinges on the word "propitiation" (*hilasterion*).

Given the scope of this work, and the detailed exegetical work done by numerous scholars, I will not here venture into the debate over whether the Greek word *hilasterion* ought to be translated "propitiation" (as in the NASB translation I used above) or "expiation."⁵⁰ However, it is important to note that both sides of this debate can come together on a crucial point: *hilasterion* clearly recalls the image of the "mercy seat" in the Old Testament sanctuary service. The LXX translates the Hebrew *kapporet* (cover/mercy seat⁵¹) as *hilasterion* in both Exodus and Leviticus.⁵² The purpose of the *hilasterion* in the sanctuary service was to create a place for atonement, where sacrificial blood could be sprinkled and sins washed away.⁵³ Paul's intent in Rom 3, accordingly, is to posit Jesus as the place where mercy happens, where free grace is offered.

⁵⁰ For a thorough account of this debate see J.M. Gundry-Volf, "Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 279-284. See also James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 214-215.

⁵¹ The translation "mercy seat" is, of course, not a translation, but an interpretation. The focal point of the sanctuary service, where Israel received "mercy," was on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, hence the name "mercy seat." See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1014.

⁵² See, for example, Exod 25:21-22, Lev 16:15-16.

⁵³ According to Lev 16:15-16, "He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain . . . sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before

Furthermore, the purpose of this grace is “justification” (*dikaiosune*). This word and its cognates, translated as “justification,” “justice” and “justify,” bring to mind in English images of abstract representations such as “imputation” and “declaring righteous.” However, as James Dunn and other scholars of the “New Perspective on Paul” note, *dikaiosune* in Paul’s Jewish context would have been a relational word: “In each case Paul is dealing above all with the question: How is it that Gentiles can be acceptable to God equally as Jews? Paul’s teaching on justification by faith is formulated precisely as an answer to that question.”⁵⁴ The context of Romans is reconciliation between two groups—Jews and Gentiles—who were supposed to be part of one faith, but could not always get along.⁵⁵ Justification was God’s pronouncement of inclusion of both groups into one covenant community. This, of course, involved forgiveness of their sins, in a forensic sense. But, from a Jewish perspective, what “right” did God have to forgive the Gentiles, since they were not originally part of the covenant community, and were without the Torah? Romans 1 and 2 answer this question: Both groups are alike sinful. Romans 3, however, announces that Jesus has taken their sin upon himself, receiving the

the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions.” Darrin Belousek comments, “The ‘mercy seat’ within the inner sanctum is, therefore, the divinely set-aside place where God’s holy presence (veiled by the cloud of incense) dwells among his people, where God speaks the divine word for his people through his prophet, and where God deals with the sins of his people through his priest, cleansing the sanctuary because of the people’s uncleanness. All this comprises the canonical background of Paul’s depiction of Jesus as God’s ‘mercy seat’ (*hilasterion*) in Rom 3:25” (Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 257).

⁵⁴ James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 200.

⁵⁵ For a further explanation of this social context see Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 84. See also William S. Campbell, “Why Did Paul Write Romans?” *The Expository Times* 85 (1973-74): 78-95.

abuse of their iniquities. Therefore God can forgive both equally, because God is a victim of both. The new government is founded on the recognition that Jesus as the ultimate victim can forgive his abusers from both camps, reconciling them together. This is what we mean by forensic atonement. It does not necessarily (at least in this passage) have anything to do with Jesus satisfying God's wrath, although that is a possible interpretation. Instead, it is "forensic" in the sense that it demolishes the law of retribution which perpetuates enmity between human beings. Paul echoes this same point later in Rom 8:3, when he refers to God's "condemning sin" in Jesus. As N.T. Wright helpfully notes, the passage does not speak of God "condemning Jesus."⁵⁶ It involves Jesus reconciling two opposing groups by going before them as one who has been victimized by them both, and yet is forgiving. The same dynamic expressed in Luke 7 is revealed in Rom 3—by being a victim God is able to forgive, and by forgiving draws people together.

This also fits perfectly Mark Heim's Girardian interpretation of this passage.⁵⁷ Heim shows how, if the purpose of Jesus' death is to fully expose and undermine the mechanism of retributive violence, this text points to Jesus being a "sacrifice to end sacrifice."⁵⁸ Heim shows how it also forms the foundation for God's forgiveness of sins.

⁵⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans (Pt. 1)* (London: SPCK, 2004), 138.

⁵⁷ See Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 140-45.

⁵⁸ "God enters into the position of the victim of sacrificial atonement (a position already defined by human practice) and occupies it so as to be able to act from that place to reverse sacrifice and redeem us from it. God steps forward in Jesus to be one subject to the human practice of atonement in blood, not because that is God's preferred logic or because this itself is God's aim, but because this is the very site where human bondage and sin are enacted. God 'puts forward' the divine Word into this location as part of the larger purpose of ransom, of transforming the situation from within. The text immediately points out that the effectiveness of this act lies not in the blood or the violence; it relates to faith" (ibid., 143).

If Jesus is the ultimate victim of the satanic mechanism scapegoating sacrifice, Jesus then has the right to forgive those who have participated in forming this mechanism.⁵⁹ Here Heim echoes the work of Markus Barth, who argues that when Paul talks about forgiveness of sins in a forensic context, he is talking about “acquittal by resurrection.”⁶⁰ Barth points out that, if Jesus Christ has been killed because of the scapegoating violence of which we all have played a part, then Jesus’ resurrection ought to be horrible news, because it means that Jesus has every right to come back and take revenge!⁶¹ However, it also means that, if we see in Jesus’s death the ultimate unmasking of our collective sacrificial violence (the “sacrifice of sacrifice”), and repent, Christ has every right to forgive, because in a murder case, if the victim is found alive, the case is thrown out.⁶²

Ephesians 2:12-19

This same theme of governmental atonement resulting from Jesus’ right to forgive is announced in Eph 2:12-19:

Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were far away, and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁰ Markus Barth and Verne H. Fletcher, *Acquittal by Resurrection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

⁶¹ Barth points out that this was probably Paul’s precise reaction during his conversion experience (ibid., 78).

⁶² Ibid., 76-77.

peace to those who were near; for through him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household.

This is clearly a passage which depicts governmental atonement. The purpose of the death of Jesus in this context is to create peace, by breaking down the "enmity" between them and establishing a "citizenship" (or "government") which he calls "God's household" (government). How does this happen? There is a forensic work happening here (obvious from the legal language). But this is not the type of forensic work which satisfies retributive justice, as Belousek convincingly argues.⁶³ Instead, it is a re-working of the governmental structure of society such that laws which promote enmity (such as the law of retribution) are discarded. In the context of this letter, the law which promoted the enmity and separation overcome by Christ was the distinctive Jewish law which isolated Jews from Gentiles, especially through circumcision.⁶⁴ Self-righteous superiority had developed among Jews and engendered corresponding resentment from Gentiles.⁶⁵ How would the death of Jesus create a moral government in this situation? By presenting

⁶³ See Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 542-49. Belousek points out that the action here is that of "putting to death" hostility—which is clearly different from satisfying it or placating it. To satisfy enmity, God would need to be in combat with humanity, which is what happens in penal-substitution (where the God-human suffers God's violence). But the dynamic in this passage is quite contrary: "How, then, does God make peace in Christ through the cross? By *making war*, but *not* against humanity. Even though humanity has put itself at enmity with God by its rebellion against God's rule (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21), human beings are not the real enemy. The real struggle in this war 'is not against enemies of flesh and blood' (Eph 6:12). Instead, the *real enemy* that must be dealt with decisively is the dominion of *sin* that works *death* through the war of humanity with itself and against God (Rom 5-6; 1 Corinthians 15)" (ibid., 543).

⁶⁴ For strong evidence supporting this position see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 354-59. See also Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 115-119.

⁶⁵ See Ulrich Mauser, *The Gospel of Peace: A Scriptural Message for Today's World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1992), 157-60.

Jesus as the ultimate victim (of both Jewish and Gentile violence), his gracious forgiveness of both groups was made possible (the right to forgive), leading them to forgive each other as well.⁶⁶ Jesus thus “destroyed division” between one group and another.⁶⁷ More broadly, the overcoming of enmity between God and creatures (that is, enmity on the part of creatures toward God, and not vice versa), in effect overcame the enmity amongst the creatures themselves.

Luke 15:11-32

Another biblical passage depicting God’s right to forgive by virtue of victimization is the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In this story the father becomes the perfect example of an ultimate victim. Of all the humiliations that could befall a father in Jesus’ culture, what happened to this character in Jesus’ story is perhaps the worst. Being rejected by a son who declares his father worthless for everything except his money was to be victimized by a crime punishable by death, according to the Torah.⁶⁸ In the sight of his family and friends, this father becomes a disreputable failure as a domestic leader, an utter embarrassment; and the grief and anger wrenching his soul would have been immense. Yet, the father performs a stunning act of

⁶⁶ Paul makes this point more explicit later in Ephesians where he exhorts the believers to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (4:32).

⁶⁷ Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 548.

⁶⁸ To Jewish hearers, the parable of the prodigal son would have no doubt brought to mind the passage in Deut 21:18-21, which declares that if anyone has a “stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother” then this son should be brought before the council, whereupon “all the men of his city shall stone him to death.” By asking for his inheritance from his father before his father’s death (which was the same as wishing his father would die), only to spend it frivolously, the son in the parable certainly qualified for the type of punishment outlined here.

kenosis—emptying himself through his victimization to run and meet the wayward son as he returns home. Without reference to forensic payment or settling of accounts—as would be absolutely necessary in a penal-substitution understanding of this parable—the father forgives the son and welcomes him into complete fellowship with the family.⁶⁹ Understandably, however, his brother questions the father’s right to forgive in this situation (v. 28). The father, as noted by Belousek, had violated key norms of the ordering of households.⁷⁰ The father, however, as both the ruler of the household and the victim of one of its subjects’ crimes, is able to assert his right to forgive. He does this governmentally, by restructuring the order of the household, as Volf comments:

Far from completely discarding the order of the ‘household,’ the father continues to uphold it. What the father did was to ‘re-order’ the order! . . . What is so profoundly different about the ‘new order’ of the father is that it is not built around the alternatives as defined by the older brother: either strict adherence to the rules or disorder and disintegration; either you are ‘in’ or you are ‘out’ depending on whether or not you have broken a rule. He rejected this alternative because his behavior was governed by the one fundamental ‘rule’: relationship has priority over rules.⁷¹

Here is moral-government atonement at its best. The father takes the shame of the son’s misbehavior upon himself, not in order to punish it, but to establish a new governmental

⁶⁹ Belousek argues that this passage is a key place where Jesus exemplifies “retribution-transcending justice” which, of course, undermines penal substitution (Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 382.) In order for this story to “work” from a penal-substitution framework, some sort of punishment needs to be levied. The fact that this is not the case speaks volumes about Jesus’ own understanding of the atonement process.

⁷⁰ In our story, the younger son—by dividing the family estate and squandering his share, and by his shameful way of life—has broken the traditional rules of the household and dishonored his family. Having made himself “an enemy of the domestic peace,” he is subject to retribution at the father’s hand and thus is to be ‘reproved by a word, or by a blow, or any other kind of punishment that is just and legitimate’” (ibid., 385).

⁷¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 164-65.

ordering of life based on loving relationships. Brock's "erotic power" is clearly in view. The father is not a governor of fearsome force or burdening stipulations, but a governor whose power comes from his own magnetic drawing through love.

Most importantly, the father in this story acquires the right to forgive by being a victim of the son's rejection. Because he is the direct recipient of his child's violence, he has a right to do what he wishes with his son—that is, to forgive him. If the son had injured someone else, the father would have no right to forgive his son. But since he "bore the iniquity" of his child, he became capable of forgiveness.⁷²

Hebrews 2:9-18

Perhaps the most explicit teaching regarding the "right-to-forgive" in the Bible comes from the epistle to the Hebrews, specifically in 2:9-18. Here, in language reminiscent of Phil 2:5-11, the writer describes Jesus' *kenosis* into human suffering as the means by which Jesus might "taste death for everyone" (v. 9). Once again, a traditional Protestant reading may be inclined to see penal substitution here. Although it is not my purpose to dispute such a reading here, I must note that penal substitution does not quite make adequate sense of the verses that follow:

For it was fitting for him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. . . . Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death he might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

⁷² This, I think, is the best appropriation of the message of Isa 53. The message of all the parables of Luke 15 involves the concept of "going astray"—either as a sheep, coin, or son. This may be a direct reference to Isa 53:6: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him." The immense personal and social cost of Israel "going astray" literally did fall on Jesus, both throughout his life and especially in his crucifixion.

Here, clearly, the death of Jesus does not serve as a substitute punishment for the death of human beings. Rather, the death of Jesus “perfects” him to render powerless the devil, by demolishing death.⁷³ This is basically a classic *christus victor* passage. But it also contains distinct elements of governmental theology. The writer continues by elaborating on how the “perfecting” of Jesus prepares him to be a savior:

Therefore, he had to be made like his brethren in all things, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since he himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

The logic of the passage is plain: Jesus had to become like a human being, in order to suffer the sins of human beings, so that he could provide a “propitiation” (once again, the root is *hilasterion*/mercy seat) for those sins. The result is a salvific moral governor who has a right to forgive sins because he has experienced the effects of sins, but also has the capacity to sympathize with those who have been “tempted” (other possible translations are “tried” or “tested”) by those sins.⁷⁴ To the question *cur deus homo?* We can answer, with the writer of Hebrews, “to conquer the devil by demonstrating his right

⁷³ The verb “make perfect” here in Greek (*teleioo*) does not always refer to moral perfection. Commentators believe it has a “vocational” quality to it in this passage, such that “prepare” would be perhaps a better translation. See David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 215; E. Mason, “You Are a Priest Forever: Second Temple Jewish Messianism and Priestly Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 22.

⁷⁴ Moral government atonement is actually suggested by the text’s use of the word *archegos* “pioneer” to describe Jesus’ activity in v. 10. The pioneer, in the thought of the hearers of Hebrews, probably would have evoked images of a mighty hero who “goes before” his people as a dashing leader or governor. “The word translated ‘pioneer’ is used in classical Greek to refer to the ‘hero’ of the city, the individual who founded the city, gave it his or her name, and became its guardian” (Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004], 70). Jesus thus goes before both abusers and abused as a “pioneer” of a new community, in which he orchestrates reconciliation.

to provide forgiveness of sins, by experiencing the effects of human sin.” Thus, for both abuse victims and for abusers, there is forgiveness, since the ultimate abuse has fallen on Jesus.

A Court Scene with the Moral Governor

If Jesus has the right to forgive abusers as a moral governor, this helps to resolve another problem abuse victims may have with the concept of God as judge. To some readers of the Bible, the concept of judgment evokes images of an all-powerful governor solemnly levelling a heavy sentence on trembling sinners. The depiction of Jesus as judge in Daniel (Dan 7:9-10) might suggest such images. Understood this way, the image of a controlling judge/deity is particularly damaging for abuse victims, especially female victims of IPV, since much of such abuse is based on male perceptions of themselves as enforcers of rules.⁷⁵ Yet, interestingly, the primary passage in Jesus’ life in which he acts as governor-judge paints a very different view. This passage is the section of John 8 in which the woman caught in adultery is thrown at Jesus’ feet, her accusers demanding that she be stoned, as required by the law (John 8:2-11).⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Angela Hattery describes how male abusers in IPV contexts often believe it necessary to punish their partners as part of an effort to “train” them: “In the context of these relationships, men described having to shape their female partners to be the way that they wanted them to be” (Angela J. Hattery, *Intimate Partner Violence* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009], 137).

⁷⁶ As any New Testament scholar would point out, it is unlikely that this passage was included in the original edition of John’s work (see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1987]; Gerald L Borchert, *John 1-11*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], 369). However, it has all the marks of a genuine historical record, and its counter-cultural depiction of Jesus would have kept it out of the cannon unless its veracity was overwhelmingly persuasive. According to Beasley-Murray, “there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline of the early church” (Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143).

This scene clearly has all the features of a rigged trial. As many commentators have noticed, it is disturbing precisely because, although the men accusing the woman allege that she was “caught in the act” (v. 4), no accomplice in the crime is mentioned.⁷⁷ This raises the significant possibility (even probability) that the event is “likely to be a framed affair, probably through the connivance of the husband.”⁷⁸ The perennial sexual double standard is fully at work, posing female sexual expression as innately more condemnable than that of a male. The very fact that the accusers of the woman were trying to set a trap for Jesus from which they thought he could not escape indicates that they saw their sexist behavior as culturally permissible and theologically justifiable.

Furthermore, this scene is technically also a trial of Jesus’ character as governor. The accusers are testing Jesus’ governmental style—whether he can back up his claims to be just. They assume that justice requires death, and that, if Jesus’ claims of lordship are just, he will have to stone the woman. However, they also know that stoning will place Jesus at odds with much of the general populace, along with the Roman authorities for causing a riot.⁷⁹ Hence, this is a profound legal and governmental dilemma. If Jesus maintains the government of sexism and retributive violence, he has no option but to stone the woman. If he refuses, he looks weak and passive as a governor. The only way out for Jesus is to overthrow the governmental system presupposed by his opponents and replace it with another. And that is exactly what Jesus does. He suddenly reveals himself

⁷⁷ See Borchert, *John 1-11*, 372.

⁷⁸ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 146.

⁷⁹ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335.

as a governor who identifies with the humanness of his subjects (who are not really “subjects” in the traditional sense) and preserves that humanness even at the expense of the law.⁸⁰ Although it is unclear what Jesus writes in the sand that causes the accusers to walk away (v. 6), it is evidently a verdict which entails that only one who has no sin can “throw the first stone” (v. 7). When the accusers have one by one disappeared, the tension in the story reaches its peak. If the principle of the new government is that one who has no sin can throw the first stone, the woman is not out of trouble, for Jesus, as the just moral governor, is clearly the one without sin! Yet Jesus reveals another key aspect of the divine moral government: It does not involve retribution. Has the woman sinned? Perhaps. More likely her accusers are the ones most guilty. But Jesus doesn’t throw stones at them either. Violent punishment of evil is excluded in Jesus’ moral government, being replaced with divine identification—Brock’s “erotic power.”

Accusers are condemned through confronting in Jesus the crucified woman who highlights their own evil behavior, and conversely the abused woman is elevated as Jesus identifies with her in her plight. Yet, this can happen only as Jesus takes the vantage point of the abused. Just a short while later, Jesus will be in the same position as the woman, undermining publicly the power of abusers. At the same time, this is good news for abusers, too, since the same forgiveness given to the woman is available to them.

⁸⁰ According to Leonard Swidler: “Yeshua, of course, avoided the horns of the dilemma by refusing to become involved in legalisms and abstractions. Rather, he dealt with the *persons* involved, both the woman herself and her accusers. He spoke to the latter not as a lawyer, nor as to lawyers, but rather as one who was concerned with their humanness, their mind, spirit, and heart” (Leonard Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal About His Revolutionary Perspective* [Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007], 67).

This court scene thus reveals what it looks like when Christ functions as moral governor. There is forensic justice here—the abusers are revealed for who they are and justly condemned, but the violence of the abusers is excluded, and the cycle of scapegoating sacrifice is stopped. As the epitomical abuse victim, Jesus has the ultimate freedom to play the role of forgiving judge.

But Jesus' role as governor is more than merely legal and forensic, it is also transformative. This leads us to the final element in governmental atonement theology for abuse victims.

Victims Empowered to Be Forgivers

If the new government created by Christ involves ultimate harmony and restoration of wholeness (*shalom*), we are faced with an immense challenge—how can victims go on living with abusers in such a transformed environment? The point made above regarding forensic justice presupposes that “only the victim can truly forgive.” This makes sense from a logical perspective, since if one is not victimized in some way, it stands to reason that one will not be able to coherently “forgive” anyone for anything.⁸¹ However, it leaves two important issues unaddressed, one technical, and the other

⁸¹ This presupposes, to my knowledge, all standard definitions of forgiveness. Such definitions include forgiveness as forgetting wrongs done, not holding wrongs against someone, forbearing punishment of wrongs, and/or refraining from being negatively influenced by wrongs done to oneself. These are all very different conceptions of forgiveness, yet they all presuppose that, if one is to practice them, one must have been wronged in some sense. One possible exception to this rule is when one forgives a person for doing something to someone else that one may be associated with; for example, when one forgives the abuser of one's daughter. However, even in such cases, it is still necessary to say that the forgiver has been wronged by the abuser, since the forgiver has been associated with the victim and has, to some extent at least, experienced the pain of the abuse. This is actually the case with Jesus, since he has obviously not experienced the direct pain of every act of abuse in human history, yet has shown himself through the cross to be associated with all victims of such abuse (see Matt 25:42-45).

experiential: (1) Should victims forgive abusers? (2) How do victims become able to forgive? In essence, one wonders how victims so thoroughly harmed by horrific acts of evil can be transformed in such a way so as to live harmoniously with their abusers. This final section will address these two questions.

Should Victims Forgive Abusers?

Domestic abuse situations, especially those involving intimate partner violence (IPV), involve significant imbalances of power.⁸² The abuser takes advantage of a higher position in the hierarchy of power, dehumanizing the victim. Frederick Keene, in an important paper on forgiveness in the New Testament, argues that in Jesus' teachings oppressed persons are not required to (and indeed cannot) forgive persons who are higher on the power hierarchy than they are.⁸³ Keene claims that Jesus' many injunctions to forgive apply only to persons in equal relationships (such as two friends) or persons higher on the social scale dealing with persons who are lower (such as a creditor forgiving a debtor).⁸⁴ This is mainly because, in the society in which Jesus taught, an offer of forgiveness from an inferior on the social scale would have been considered absurd, or at least an insult.⁸⁵ Hence, Keene claims that when Jesus hung on the cross, it

⁸² Marian Liebmann, *Restorative Justice: How It Works* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 284.

⁸³ Frederick W. Keene, "The Structure of Forgiveness in the New Testament," in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 121-134.

⁸⁴ "This model, based on the structure of forgiveness in the New Testament, is one where forgiveness occurs only when the parties involved possess equal power in the relationship where forgiveness is applicable, or else when the person with the grievance has the greater power within that relationship." (ibid., 129.)

⁸⁵ Ibid., 122.

is significant that he did not forgive his abusers, but only asked his father to do so.⁸⁶ Jesus was, as the inferior victim of violence, not capable of forgiveness. Keene concludes his argument: “Only when the patterns of power are reversed can the act of forgiveness be considered.”⁸⁷

While I do not dispute Keene’s contention that forgiveness can only flow down the power structure, I think a proper theological conception of forgiveness is even more nuanced than that. Forgiveness can be not only a sign of power, but also an act of empowerment. It can move someone up the power structure. This was my point regarding Jesus’ prayer on the cross. Although it is true that Jesus did not directly forgive his abusers, the fact that he prayed for their forgiveness means that in a certain sense he must have forgiven them, because in order to want someone’s forgiveness, it is necessary to already have ceased to hold their crime against them.⁸⁸ But of course, if Jesus had said “I forgive you” to his abusers, they would have laughed at him. Thus, Jesus, in the act of praying for forgiveness for his abusers, recognizes that he remains in an inferior position, but also declares boldly that he is aligned with a power superior to theirs. His prayer of

⁸⁶ “Surely the idea of a forgiving Christ would tell us that if he could he would forgive. But he did not, and thus no one should be asked or expected to forgive those who retain the power in a relationship where forgiveness might be applicable” (ibid., 130).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁸ This presupposes, of course, a personal account of forgiveness. In a purely legal context, for example, one might grant forgiveness to one’s enemy while still holding a grudge against that enemy. In the case of Jesus’ crucifixion, however, it seems clear that we are dealing with a prayer for forgiveness which is rooted in Jesus’ own disposition towards his abusers. This is indicated by the fact that Jesus takes on the role of a lawyer for his abusers, in effect wishing for their vindication. If Jesus were dealing disinterestedly with his abusers, a more appropriate prayer would be something like “Father, deal with them as is just.”

forgiveness is eschatologically subversive.⁸⁹ In effect, he says, “You are abusing me now, and though I cannot forgive you, the forces I work with will soon exalt me to a place where I can.”⁹⁰ The forgiveness of Christ on the cross brilliantly combines mercy with absolute defiance.

It must be emphatically clear: This type of forgiveness is starkly differentiated from excusing wrongs done. Society sometimes confuses the two actions, perhaps because when someone says “I’m sorry” we often respond with “no problem” or “that’s all right”—as if in the act of forgiving we were claiming that what they had done was not wrong. But genuine forgiveness highlights evil instead of cloaking it. I propose, then, that Christ’s forgiveness of his enemies was an act of self-empowerment, or, perhaps more accurately, a recognition of his own empowerment. By forgiving, Christ stated

⁸⁹ Frank J. Matera points out that the main emphasis of Luke’s passion narrative is the royal identity of Jesus, which he preserves in the face of death. See Frank J. Matera, *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies: Interpreting the Synoptics through Their Passion Stories* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 213-220. Luke portrays a distinct irony in the way that the Roman and Jewish authorities treat Jesus. Jesus is charged with taking the role of “Christ the King” (23:2), Herod dresses him in kingly apparel (23:11), and the mocking sign above the cross reads facetiously “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS” (23:38). The implication of Luke’s blithe account of these events is quite clear: In mocking Jesus’ kingly identity, Jesus’ abusers ultimately confirmed it. Jesus’s actions on the cross fall in line with this: He tells a fellow suffering convict that he will ultimately be restored by Jesus (23:43), which was, at the time, profligately bold, given that both Jesus and the criminal were practically dead. Jesus’ proclamation of forgiveness of his abusers only took this preposterous confidence a notch higher, showing that Jesus truly believed he was a king, even as he hung on the cross—and also foreshadowing his victory over his abusers that would take place three days later.

⁹⁰ Incidentally, as Keene would predict, the mimesis of Jesus’ action by Stephen in Acts 7:60 was probably received as an insult to his abusers as well. Stephen triggers their rage by first announcing that he sees God’s throne in vision, implying that he is on God’s side against them (7:56). At this, “they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse” (v. 57). As Stephen is being stoned, he calls for their forgiveness, which was the logical completion of his belief that he was on God’s victorious side. Rather than being an act of pious humiliation, his forgiveness prayer would have made him appear even cockier to his abusers.

unequivocally that his abusers were in the wrong, and that he was in the right.⁹¹ It was possible for Christ to express magnanimity toward his abusers because, through this act, he placed himself in a superior position to them in the hierarchy of power in his new government.⁹² Therefore, in line with Keene's observations, we may posit that victims should forgive their abusers because forgiveness moves the victim up the power structure, explicating the nature of the victimization, and confronting the abuser with his or her evil.

This account of forgiveness develops and strengthens Rita Nakashima Brock's concept of *erotic power* discussed in chapter 2, and it further explicates how erotic power can function in her atonement theology. Brock claims that "while various forms of dominance exist in society, if we can begin to experience them differently, we will begin to break down the damaging power of hierarchies that destroy heart."⁹³ She then explains how erotic power is the way to break down these hierarchies, by replacing the model of power as "control" with power as "connectedness," both with self and others.⁹⁴ From a

⁹¹ Everett Worthington highlights the point that the act of forgiveness actually "holds the offender responsible for wrongdoing" (Everett L. Worthington, *A Just Forgiveness: Responsible Healing without Excusing Injustice* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009], 74). This is because forgiveness must recognize the evil of what has been done. If a victim merely explains away what their abuser has done (as many abused spouses do toward their offending partners under the pretext of forgiveness), the victim has not forgiven, but only excused—dishonestly.

⁹² Jesus described the nature of this hierarchy in Mark 10:42-45: "Calling them to himself, Jesus said to them, 'You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'"

⁹³ Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 39.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

governmental atonement perspective, this is exactly what Jesus did on the cross. By forgiving those who abused him, Jesus undermined the powers of control and violence by “experiencing them differently.” He refused to accept his abuse, to allow it to weaken him and relegate him to meaninglessness.

Although Brock does not discuss forgiveness, here it seems that forgiveness is the key element in the proper functioning of erotic power in a violent world. Only through empowering oneself through genuine forgiveness of abusers (not false, excusing forgiveness) can victims experience relational connectedness and wholeness that are the hallmarks of erotic power. Far from being an act of subservience, then, forgiveness can exalt a victim above his/her status as victim.

Two Objections to Forgiveness as Empowerment

1. *The Danger of False Forgiveness.* The proposal that victims should forgive their abusers as an act of empowerment has challenges, however. As Liebmann cautions, attempts at reconciliation between abuse victims and their abusers can fall apart if the power structure that created the abuse is not carefully re-structured.⁹⁵ It must be clarified that what I am proposing here is not an immediate return to “normalcy” after serious abuse has taken place. Rather, the forgiveness I am promoting enables victims to take proper steps toward freedom from abuse. When a victim truly forgives, they recognize that what has happened to them is wrong, and that they can take proper steps to prevent recurrence. If the hierarchy of power is thus not upset through the act of forgiveness, then

⁹⁵ Liebmann, *Restorative Justice*, 283-285. Liebmann recommends using an approach for mediation between abuser and victim that lays careful ground rules for the process of mediation, and places proper restraints on the dialogue.

forgiveness has not truly taken place (because forgiveness cannot flow up a hierarchy). Just as Jesus' forgiveness of his abusers was validated only by his resurrection, so also the forgiveness offered by victims to their abusers can occur only in conjunction with physical and mental liberation from the oppressive context of abuse. If Jesus had died and stayed dead, his statements of forgiveness to those who crucified him would have meant nothing except meaningless excusing of their behavior.⁹⁶ Likewise, an abuse victim who remains in an abusive relationship and utters words of forgiveness is not truly forgiving, but only excusing. Empowering forgiveness, because it highlights the evil of what has taken place, mandates restorative action. Forgiveness seeks re-creation of positive relationships, and in an abuse situation, the most positive type of relationship between abuser and victim is one in which the former is removed from proximity to the latter and placed in a context where genuine repentance can occur.⁹⁷

2. *The Nietzschean Accusation.* Another potential problem with my claim that forgiveness empowers victims is that it may be a manifestation of what Nietzsche calls the phenomena of *resentment* and corresponding *decadence*.⁹⁸ Those without power, who are subjected to the "master class," according to Nietzsche, respond by resenting their

⁹⁶ See 1 Cor 14:17.

⁹⁷ This is essentially the proposal that Liebmann makes, although with the (necessary) addition that a proper relationship between abuser and victim does not require that the two exist in a detrimental state of mutual animosity. Removing this animosity is the purpose of mediation, with the ultimate possibility of a return to proximal relationship: "In cases where the abused person has made an informed choice to mediate, the mediator's responsibility is to ensure that appropriate arrangements are agreed which as far as possible guarantee that relevant safety issues are addressed and reviewed" (Liebmann, *Restorative Justice*, 286).

⁹⁸ For the full discussions of these terms see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans., Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008).

masters. Because they are unable to revolt, they choose to perceive their subjugated, abused status as a sign of moral superiority (the *ascetic ideal*).⁹⁹ From this perspective, Nietzsche argues that the adoption of the government of the loving *kenotic* God is a moral pitfall: “What would be the good of a God who knew nothing of anger, revenge, envy, scorn, craft, and violence?” Nietzsche asks.¹⁰⁰ Belief in this God is the result of a slave society in which strength and rulership—the qualities Nietzsche believes are truly virtuous—have begun to disappear, as people have given up hope of real liberation:

Of course, when a people is on the road to ruin; when it feels its belief in a future, its hope of freedom vanishing forever; when it becomes conscious of submission as the most useful quality, and of the virtues of the submissive self as self-preservative measures, then its God must also modify himself. He then becomes a tremulous and unassuming sneak; he counsels ‘peace of the soul,’ the cessation of all hatred, leniency and ‘love’ even towards friend and foe. He is forever moralizing, he crawls into the heart of every private virtue, he retires from active service and becomes cosmopolitan. . . . Formerly he represented a people, the strength of a people, everything aggressive and desirous of power lying concealed in the heart of a nation: now he is merely the good God.¹⁰¹

Obviously, Nietzsche is boldly attacking the entire Christian concept of God’s moral government of love (which is to be expected from the title of his book). At certain points in his writing, Nietzsche seems to sound much like Brock and Parker, especially when he castigates the cross as a religious symbol, arguing that it presents suffering as noble, and makes an apotheosis out of failure.¹⁰² For Nietzsche, the idea that forgiveness could be an

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 3:14.

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 1:16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² “God on the Cross—does no one yet understand the terrible ulterior motive of this symbol? Everything that suffers, everything that hangs on the cross, is divine. . . . All of us hang on the cross, consequently we are divine. . . . We alone are divine. . . . Christianity was a victory;

empowering act that sets the victim in a superior position to the abuser is preposterous—it would be a result of the “ascetic priest’s” subtle reinforcement of the subjugation of the victim to the abuser.¹⁰³

However, what Nietzsche neglects to consider is the reality and importance of resurrection in atonement. Jesus’ suffering on the cross was not sufficient to produce atonement. Jesus’ words of forgiveness to his abusers on the cross would indeed fall under the category of weak resentment—and would be quite meaningless—if it were not for the fact that Jesus’ humble forgiveness was coupled with the liberating power of resurrection.¹⁰⁴ Jesus did not stay on his cross, and those abused women and children who emulate Jesus will not stay on theirs either.

Paul emphasizes this point strongly when describing the importance of resurrection for atonement. In Rom 4:25, concluding a long discussion of what the Reformation would later call “imputed righteousness,” Paul claims that Christ was “delivered over for our transgressions, and raised for our justification.” Under some conceptions of the atonement, resurrection would seem to have nothing to do with our justification. But under a non-violent governmental model, it makes perfect sense.

a nobler type of character perished through it, Christianity has been humanity’s greatest misfortune hitherto” (ibid., 1:51).

¹⁰³ The “ascetic priest” in Nietzsche’s philosophy is one (clearly part of a religious establishment) who re-directs the flow of resentment of lower classes away from revolt against the established rulers. See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 3:17-18.

¹⁰⁴ This point is made well by Arnfriður Guðmundsdóttir: “The key here is the relationship between the cross and resurrection. If what happens on Good Friday is taken out of the context of Easter, then Christ’s suffering and death do not leave humanity with much hope, as Christ becomes just one more victim of evil. Easter, on the contrary, confirms the hope that the cross is not the end. In light of the resurrection, the promise is given that suffering and death do not have the last word” (Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 83).

Justification defined as inclusion into the new government of God (through Israel) cannot take place unless both Jesus and his followers are raised from the dead.¹⁰⁵

This also explains why elsewhere in Romans Jesus' death and resurrection are both described as activities human beings must participate in.¹⁰⁶ There simply can be no atonement, and no moral government of God, without those who have suffered abuse being resurrected into "newness of life." When a victim forgives her abuser based on this premise, she is not exercising resentment and reinforcing her own weakness, but is recognizing her resurrection into a new life. Nietzsche, therefore, is absolutely right—any situation wherein a victim of abuse blithely "forgives" her abuser because "that's the right thing to do," but does not recognize that the power hierarchy in her relationship with her abuser must be overturned, is simply exercising resentment. But if the victim is empowered to experience resurrection from the situation of abuse, then her act of forgiveness can be the final step in removing herself from the control of the abuser.¹⁰⁷

Thus, the type of forgiveness recommended by moral government atonement is a *confrontational* forgiveness. It requires both mercy toward the abuser *and* recognition

¹⁰⁵ Here we adopt a "new perspective" understanding of justification. That is, justification reflects not a transposition of some sort of numinous righteousness from Christ to the sinner, or a mere declaration of moral goodness (as in much of reformation thought) but an inclusion into the covenant community. For an account of the evidence supporting this definition of justification see N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ Romans 6:4, 5: "Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection."

¹⁰⁷ This is especially important because, if forgiveness does not at least begin to occur, a victim may find herself still under the control of the abuser by way of the bitterness she continues to feel toward him. Forgiveness can be the final step in putting the whole ordeal in the past, where it must remain.

that what that abuser needs most is a community to hold him accountable so that he can become responsible for his actions.¹⁰⁸ In God's moral government, justice and mercy are indissolubly linked to each other, and one cannot be had without the other. Taking the message of the cross into the context of abuse therefore means being willing to exercise a forgiveness which is tough and realistic—and demands a total overhaul of the dynamics of power in the relationship.

How Can Victims Forgive?

Forgiveness may be a way to liberate victims from oppression, but it is still problematic. Forgiveness can be challenging, even for minor offenses. Asking someone to forgive another person for doing something life-destroying and degrading is often asking too much. The prospect of living next-door to someone who has violently abused oneself in God's new moral government may be revolting. Conversely (and often more commonly), victims may be unable to forgive because they may struggle with self-blame—they find themselves unable to think outside a mode of self-deprecation.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Jennifer Beste describes victims of abuse who are categorically unable to exercise the freedom necessary to love either themselves or those around them because of the trauma they experience.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ See Adams, *Woman-Battering*, 60.

¹⁰⁹ This is especially common with child sexual abuse and IPV situations, wherein victims often feel guilt for what has happened to them. See Harvey Wallace, *Family Violence: Legal, Medical, and Social Perspectives* (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 76.

¹¹⁰ Beste writes against the traditional Western theological conception of the self which frames it as an autonomous entity capable of forming its own identity. She claims that severe trauma can impact this identity in profound ways which can take away autonomous freedom. "Such forms of corruption narrow the possibilities individuals have to choose good and ultimately say yes to God's self-communication" (Beste, *God and the Victim*, 32). She relies extensively on

Several considerations are relevant in showing how victims of egregious evils can forgive perpetrators. First, we must posit, with Jeffery Murphy, that forgiveness does not necessarily entail immediate reconciliation.¹¹¹ Murphy argues that forgiveness is primarily a disposition of the heart toward the offender.¹¹² While this proposal seems correct, Murphy is less accurate in his claim that this change of “heart” is also a change of “feeling.”¹¹³ If this claim were correct, it would necessitate that our duty to forgive entails a duty to change our personal feelings about certain persons. However desirable such an outcome might be, it seems that human beings simply do not have the capacity to do this. Just as I cannot freely change my visceral distaste for eating rotten meat, so also severely traumatized individuals may not be able to freely change their deeply-rooted feelings of hatred toward those who have abused them. For this reason, Everett Worthington nuances his definition of forgiveness to include “emotional” forgiveness and “decisional” forgiveness.¹¹⁴ The latter he defines as “controlling our behavioral intentions.”¹¹⁵ Although I cannot instantly change my desire to take revenge on someone

Karl Rahner’s theological anthropology for this claim. See especially Karl Rahner, *Grace and Freedom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

¹¹¹ Jeffery Murphy, “Christian Love and Criminal Punishment,” in *Christianity and Law: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 229.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹³ “[Forgiveness] involves a change in inner feeling more than a change in external action. The change in feeling is the overcoming, on moral grounds, of the intensely negative and reactive attitudes that are quite naturally occasioned when one has been wronged by another—the passions of resentment, anger, even hatred, and the desire for revenge” (*ibid.*, 226).

¹¹⁴ Worthington, *A Just Forgiveness*, 75.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

who has harmed me, for example, I can choose to behave in such a way as to avoid taking revenge, and to reduce my desire to take revenge. Likewise, severely traumatized victims can choose to think of their abusers in forgiving ways, even if they cannot arrive at the point where such thoughts are natural or easy.¹¹⁶

Or can they? What if the trauma they have incurred makes it impossible to rightly govern their own decision-making processes to the point where they cannot forgive? While this is a serious problem on which tomes could be written, I would like to suggest that the governmental atonement theology I have presented enables this to happen, via the element of inclusion into Christ.

The Effects of Victims' Inclusion into Christ

It is crucial to include the relational concept of *inclusion* in any understanding of atonement.¹¹⁷ This concept has been best highlighted by Eastern theology. It comes as a surprise to many Western Catholic or Protestant Christians to learn that the Eastern Orthodox Church has never gotten along very well with penal substitution or satisfaction theories of the atonement. Instead, following the lead of Irenaeus and Athanasius, Eastern Christianity has emphasized models of the atonement which revolve around Christ's incarnation and *recapitulation* in the form of humanity.¹¹⁸ Broadly put, Eastern thinking

¹¹⁶ "He [God] wants us to forbear, to experience and grant decisional forgiveness quickly and to replace negative emotions with the positive emotions of love, empathy, sympathy and compassion for the person who harmed us. God *requires* decisional forgiveness of us; God *desires* emotional forgiveness" (ibid., 78).

¹¹⁷ This section will certainly not be able to give full treatment of the various dimensions and implications of the concept of inclusion into Christ, or *theosis*. For a discussion of the wide variation in this theme see Vladimir Kharlamov, "Theosis in the Patristics," *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 158-168.

¹¹⁸ These rather awkward terms are given explication for modern Western ears by Robert S. Franks, *The Work of Christ: A Historical Study of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Thomas

has typically found atonement not only in Christ's death, but also in his life as a whole.¹¹⁹

In the incarnation, Christ's taking on human nature triggered an "exchange"

(foreshadowing Luther's famous employment of this phrase) in which Christ took our

human nature, and thus both received its faults and imbued it with the divine nature.¹²⁰

Thus, Irenaeus sums up his view of the atonement in a classic phrase: "He did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself."¹²¹

The term often used for this Eastern model of salvation is *theosis*, or deification.¹²² This view presents the impact of Christ's atonement as enabling us to

Nelson, 1962), 22-74. Franks notes that the Greek church has been more open to a nebulous mixing of doctrines of the atonement: "It must be admitted, however, that an absolutely perfect theoretical synthesis corresponding to this practical unity is far from being attained by the Greek theologians. The different views which they propound are most intricately entangled with one another, as is particularly clear in the case of John of Damascus, who in his anxiety to include all good doctrine and reject none, ends with a statement which is most involved, far more involved indeed than can be gathered from the above summary of his doctrine" (ibid., 71). Hence, I do not claim to propound "the Eastern view of the atonement" as if such a thing concretely existed. However, central tendencies in Eastern thinking can be identified.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

¹²⁰ Because of this logic, it has been claimed that the Eastern fathers actually taught penal substitution (basically the only proponents of this perspective are Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach). However, the passages cited in favor of this view are few, and usually taken out of context, as has been shown by Derek Flood, "Substitutionary Atonement and the Church Fathers: A Reply to the Authors of *Pierced for Our Transgressions*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2010): 147-151. As Flood makes clear, "substitution" does not necessarily mean "penal substitution"—a point not well understood by Jeffery et al.

¹²¹ See preface to Book V of Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

¹²² *Nota bene*, however, that this doctrine is not strictly confined to the Eastern church. In a lesser-encompassing form, it holds a reputable place in the history of Western Protestant theology as well, especially in the theology of John Calvin. See A.J. Ollerton, "Quasi Deificari: Deification in the Theology of John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, no. 2 (2011): 237-254.

“somehow become one with the God of the universe, thereby incorporating and transcending reality, a kind of reverse incarnation.”¹²³ As this doctrine developed in the first centuries of the Christian church, it provided a means to understand not only the immediate effects of atonement, but also the ultimate goal of the Christian life. Although the term *theosis* may seem to imply an ontological change in human existence (as indicated by the phrase “taking on the divine nature”), Stephen Clinton notes that the final destiny of the human as envisioned by the Eastern fathers is more accurately described as a relational change—a culmination of communicative growth in which complete “fellowship” with the divine is received.¹²⁴ Thus, from the perspective of the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*, atonement facilitates the restoration of relationships. Moltmann, who has, more than any other twentieth-century Protestant theologian, utilized the doctrine of *theosis*, extends it to the function of the church as a community of relationship-building, which prepares the way for the final culmination of *theosis*.¹²⁵ Given this focus on relationship-building as the core of salvation, it is not surprising that *theosis* aligns itself well with a non-violent approach to atonement.

Irenaeus’s thought is particularly interesting in this respect. As the practical inaugurator of Eastern theology of atonement, he exemplifies a type of theology which is expressly formulated in a way supportive of the needs of victims. While Western theology tends to emphasize human guilt and responsibility (particularly damaging for

¹²³ Stephen M. Clinton, “Conceptual Foundations for Theosis and Postmodern Theology,” *American Theological Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2009): 63.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans., Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

abuse victims), Irenaeus focuses on sin as a disease of captivity from which we need liberation. In his explication of the concept of Jesus as divine ransom, he makes the following point:

And since the apostasy tyrannized over us unjustly, and, though we were by nature the property of the omnipotent God, alienated us contrary to nature, rendering us its own disciples, the Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means, as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction. Since the Lord thus has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh, and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by his own incarnation, and bestowing upon us at his coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God,—all the doctrines of the heretics fall to ruin.¹²⁶

The relational uniting of God and humanity described in this passage is immensely vital for restoring victims. The experience of many abuse victims, even after leaving the immediate situation of abuse, is very much like a form of captivity.¹²⁷ The “giving His soul for our souls” described here might seem like a penal substitution phrase, but it refers, rather, to ransom—Christ’s giving of himself to free us from captivity (an integral concept in my form of non-violent governmental atonement). This liberation has objective and forensic aspects which I have already covered.

But, as we can see in this passage, it is also deeply personal and mystical. We do not need merely a governmental atonement which creates justice by unmasking and overcoming the devil’s forces of captivity—which is what I have described so far in this

¹²⁶ Irenaeus, bk. 5; chap. 1.

¹²⁷ See Beste, *God and the Victim*, 15.

chapter. Governmental atonement must also recognize that the moral governor is relationally connected with us—we take part in “union and communion with God,” as Irenaeus says. When Christ took on humanity, divinity and humanity became united, such that the victory of Jesus can be, literally, our victory.¹²⁸ Furthermore, for Irenaeus, this means that the resurrection is not merely resuscitative, but involves rising to experience a new life with God.¹²⁹

Athanasius develops this view further, presenting the case that atonement happens because Christ, having taken on human nature, conquered death by including the death of all in himself.¹³⁰ Thus, by being in Christ, we experience the benefits of Christ’s atonement. This, as Vladimir Lossky points out, challenges much of what the West has said about atonement, because in contrast to penal substitution, where atonement is merely an external transaction, Irenaeus’s and Athanasius’s views present union with Christ impacting real life as the foundation for the redemptive act.¹³¹

¹²⁸ See Irenaeus, bk 4; chap. 23.

¹²⁹ This happens, according to Irenaeus, through the impartation of the Spirit. It is a gradual process of which the full culmination occurs at the resurrection. “For if the earnest, gathering man into itself, does even now cause him to cry, ‘Abba, Father,’ what shall the complete grace of the Spirit effect, which shall be given to men by God? It will render us like unto Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God” (ibid., bk 5; chap. 8).

¹³⁰ Athanasius’s reasoning is fairly straightforward: “For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word’s indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honoured, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so it is with the king of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled, and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be” (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. A. R. C. M. V. [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996], 35).

¹³¹ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 99.

Although it may not be likely that Ellen White had much scholarly engagement with the church Fathers on the doctrine of *theosis*, it is interesting that she affirms much of what the church tradition has had to say on it. She approaches the doctrine from the trajectory of 2 Pet 1:4: “For by these he has granted to us his precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” In the *Desire of Ages*, White references this passage to tie Christ’s incarnation to his capacity to make us “partakers of the divine nature”: “Christ’s humanity was united with divinity; He was fitted for the conflict by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And he came to make us partakers of the divine nature.”¹³² A more substantive discussion of 2 Pet 1:4 is found in *Acts of the Apostles*, where White describes—in a style reminiscent of Irenaeus or Gregory—how “partaking of the divine nature” is the result of a gradual climbing of the “ladder” of sanctification, which takes us “even to the portals of heaven.”¹³³ The end result of this process is that all the virtues of Christ are added to the believer.¹³⁴ Elsewhere White emphasizes that the chief aspect of these virtues of Christ in which we partake is that of community-based love, rooted in unselfish service: “Through unselfish service we receive the highest culture of every faculty. More and more fully do we become partakers of the divine nature. We are fitted

¹³² White, *The Desire of Ages*, 123.

¹³³ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 533.

¹³⁴ “Having received the faith of the gospel, the next work of the believer is to add to his character virtue, and thus cleanse the heart and prepare the mind for the reception of the knowledge of God. This knowledge is the foundation of all true education and of all true service. It is the only real safeguard against temptation; and it is this alone that can make one like God in character. Through the knowledge of God and of His Son Jesus Christ, are given to the believer ‘all things that pertain unto life and godliness.’ No good gift is withheld from him who sincerely desires to obtain the righteousness of God” (ibid., 530-531).

for heaven, for we receive heaven into our hearts.”¹³⁵ White’s theology of *theosis*, therefore, works amiably with the Eastern doctrine, and emphasizes its love-based, relationship focus.¹³⁶

I don’t intend to endorse the entire atonement tradition of Eastern Christianity, for certainly, even with Athanasius, elements of divinely approved sacrificial violence might sneak in.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, the rightful recognition that the moral government created by Christ involves a unification in the divine Godhead as a result of the incarnation is immensely helpful for abuse victims, specifically in understanding how such victims could ever be reconciled with their abusers. Christ’s ability to overcome abuse by forgiving his abusers on the cross becomes a capability of those who have become united in Christ. Having experienced absorption into the divine life, we can claim the

¹³⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1903), 16.

¹³⁶ In order to observe the stark similarity between White’s theology of *theosis* and that of the Eastern tradition, simply read the first chapter of her *Education* and then read the second chapter of Gregory Afonsky, *Christ and the Church: In Orthodox Teaching and Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001). The parallels are obvious. This is not to establish any type of elaborate correlation between the two, or to argue that White would have approved of everything in the Orthodox scheme, but it does make a point that the doctrine of *theosis* (or however one might label it) plays a key role in White’s thinking.

¹³⁷ For example, Athanasius claims that God had promised to give humanity over to death if humanity sinned (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 50). Christ is given over to death instead of humanity. This seems like penal substitution, except that “death” is what demands Christ’s sacrifice, rather than God. Death is a very personal and real entity in Athanasius’s thinking, somewhat interchangeable with the devil. Death claims a right to all human beings, and thus, God, being truthful, must comply with it. The problem with this approach, in my view, is that death is illegitimate in claiming the lives of human beings, for God did not ever “promise” death anything. The death of Christ exists to prove the claims of death entirely unfounded, not to meet them on death’s terms.

accomplishments of Jesus as our own, both in rising above abusers, and treating them with love instead of contempt.¹³⁸

Essentially, this process by which inclusion into Christ restores even those who have suffered horrific abuse can be described as deep, ontological *healing*.¹³⁹ In contrast to models of atonement which emphasize sin as culpability (the only solution to which is punishment), the doctrine of unification with Christ allows for an understanding of sinfulness as being *sin-stricken*, as a type of disease, which must be cured. To use another, more classically common metaphor, in Irenaeus's and Athanasius's theology, sin seizes upon human nature, drawing it into a vicious chokehold. The victim cannot escape by struggle or violence. The ultimate solution is not punishment but release. Freedom can be obtained only when relationships are restored—between God and human, and thereby between abuser and victim.

Admittedly, this is not a sudden process (since the Eastern conception of *theosis* is not either). We will never experience entirely the union with Christ in relational wholeness until the resurrection.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, we can gradually take upon ourselves

¹³⁸ Mark Heim notes how this is essential for breaking the cycle of mimetic violence, in which the innocent victim can turn on an abuser, creating more violence: “‘God became as we are so that we might become as He is.’ Everything Jesus has and is, including above all his relationship with the Father, he offers to his disciples. It is a vision of shared fulfillment that quite transcends any rivalry or conflict, and yet proceeds by the thoroughly human process of awakening desires through a model” (Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 242).

¹³⁹ This is how Afonsky describes *theosis*. See Afonsky, *Christ and the Church*, 11.

¹⁴⁰ This is the “already/not yet” of the kingdom of God, which Jürgen Moltmann claims presents a living reality which cannot be denied, but must still be seen as incomplete (Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, trans. Margaret Kohl [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 19). This means that it is perfectly acceptable for abuse victims to struggle with feelings of resentment and anger for their whole lives, even though they have experienced inclusion into Christ. Their *theosis* is not yet complete, even though it increases continually.

the mind-set “which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), in which we appropriate Christ’s qualities in a step-by-step manner. We can gradually learn to see ourselves as following Christ in death and resurrection, and thus our attitude toward those who have thrust us into death will become the same as Christ’s. This is a process of re-visualization of the self, in which our life-story melds with that of Christ, and our perception of others in relation to self takes the form of a Christ-world relationship. To use another handy Lutheran phrase, we become “Christs” to society.

This process also extends the undercutting of mimetic violence which Christ’s death initiated. In the Girardian scheme, atonement is not, in a certain sense, finished on the cross. This is because the mimetic contagion which violence sought to dissipate has no outlet if scapegoating has ceased through the cross. Hence, Robin Collins observes that only through an “incarnational” element in atonement can violence and victimization truly cease.¹⁴¹ Christ’s “intentional states” of non-competitive love must replace the oft-violent mimetic contagion.¹⁴² Christ becomes, through our participation in the divine life, a model which harmonizes our desires with those of God, renouncing violence as a response to abuse.

This approach for abuse victims fits well with what Rita Brock advocates regarding her “Christa/community” conception of salvation.¹⁴³ Salvation is always

¹⁴¹ Robin Collins, “Girard and Atonement: An Incarnational Theory of Mimetic Participation,” in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 132-153.

¹⁴² Ibid., 143.

¹⁴³ “The Christa/Community of erotic power is the connectedness among the members of the community who live with heart. Christa/Community evidences heart, which is the conduit in human existence of erotic power” (Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, 70).

relational, and yet it does not involve the coercive types of relationships found in abusive contexts. We become included into Christ not because Christ forces us to do so or because Christ has taken the form of the benevolent paternalistic male savior-figure. Rather, we join Christ's body because—through unmasking and conquering the conception of governmental justice in which force, retribution, and abuse are at work—Christ has drawn us through erotic power into a community of relationships in which these qualities are absent.

I must be clear: Being included into the divine life through the incarnation of Christ does not immediately resolve all problems with forgiveness and self-agency. This is partly because, as Ron Clark points out, victims do not need to be “whisked away on magic carpets.”¹⁴⁴ Instead, they need to be empowered to take personal action both to remove themselves from the context of abuse, and to manage the emotional turmoil that follows such contexts. *Theosis*, therefore, is not about dissolving the victim's identity into that of the Godhead. Rather, it is about partaking in a communion which, as the doctrine of the Trinity so clearly exemplifies, involves not the annihilation of individual identity, but mutual support in displaying that identity.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, victimhood and its aftershocks do not vanish automatically in the salvation process. Instead, the communion of *theosis*, combined with the communion of the church (which is not altogether a

¹⁴⁴ Ron Clark, *Setting the Captives Free: A Christian Theology for Domestic Violence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 56.

¹⁴⁵ Thus, John Zizioulas argues that, indeed, individual personhood is possible only through communion with the personal God. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 43. For further clarification of this perspective, see also Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 83.

different thing), empowers the victim to regain the freedom to live with confidence and grace. Thus, absence of immediate transformation in a victim is not cause for alarm.¹⁴⁶

Through this concept of atonement as incorporation into the divine life drawn from Eastern Orthodoxy, I could augment my model of governmental theology by positing that the type of government being enacted by Christ through his life and death is fundamentally and intimately *relational*. The government is not merely concerned with an abstract contract or courtroom verdict (as it can quickly become via penal substitution). If it were, it would have nothing to contribute to the intimate well-being of abuse victims (just as law enforcement officials cannot restore wholeness to a victim's life, even though they may protect against an abuser). Instead, through the incarnation, Christ enacts a government in which subjects are united to each other through Christ, forming a bond of unity which is not based on *realpolitik* or Big-Brother style vigilance. Worldly governments require armed police forces, phone-tapping, and security cameras in order to preserve social cohesion. The word "unity" thus employed (as in "united we stand") is really a façade for deep social tension based on fear (the ultimate malicious outcome of abuse—what Milbank calls the "ontological violence").¹⁴⁷ But Christ's government creates real unity based on communion with the divine, rejecting fear-based authority and the hazy background of abuse that permeates worldly governments. The

¹⁴⁶ Indeed, such a dramatic change would be unexpected from a clinical perspective as well.

¹⁴⁷ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 278-326. See also John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003).

ultimate victory of this new government is thus the foundation for restoration of all abuse victims.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed three major themes which can be subsumed under the heading of governmental atonement theology. The first, Christological identification with victims, portrays Christ as the moral governor who, by having been victimized and thus identifying with victims, is able to construct a government which provides genuine hope for healing. The second, forensic justice, demonstrates that through the cross, Jesus as governor is able to definitively pronounce judgment in favor of victims in a law-court setting, while also being able to forgive abusers without controversy, since Jesus himself is the ultimate victim of abuse. The third, representative empowerment for victims, shows Christ as the relational leader of a government which is based on restorative community, ultimately grounded in communion with God. This government can permanently halt the cycle of violence, because in it abusers are made able to forgive their abusers, without reinforcing abusive tendencies.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

The second chapter of this thesis provided an overview of the insights and arguments of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker on the issue of atonement and abuse. I offered an examination of how Brock and Parker base their approach to atonement on the needs of victims, and thus reject a controlling, abuser-mirroring concept of God. I also showed how they reject sacrifice as an ideal for Christians to emulate, because it is based on this type of domineering view of God. Hence, these theologians (who are representative of many in the field) find classic depictions of the meaning of Christ's death damaging to abuse victims because they extol victimization, glorify violence, and do not provide a means of empowering victims to overcome violence. Instead, Brock and Parker instead envision atonement as a reality created through a community of "erotic power," which is defined as the power exercised in loving relationships, without the use of force. I further showed how, although Brock and Parker's approach makes several excellent contributions, it is incomplete, in that it does not consider how such a community can be brought together through the cross of Christ.

Chapter 3 outlined another way to appropriate the meaning of atonement, through the language of moral government. I explored the work of Hugo Grotius and Ellen White,

who present a model in which the purpose of Christ's death is to vindicate the character of God as a governor. I attempted to show how, through the lens of Girard's understanding of sacrifice, this model can demonstrate the vindication of a non-violent government of God, which would be ideal for victims of abuse.

In chapter 4, I developed more fully this concept of a moral government atonement for abuse victims, by highlighting three areas in which this frame of thought can be beneficial. First, I noted how it explains Christ's identification with abuse victims, without condoning the abuse, and how this can help abuse victims to recognize their own situation and the possibility of redemption. Second, I showed how governmental atonement provides forensic justice for victims, by judging the perpetrators of abuse, and also providing a legitimate way to forgive abusers without becoming complicit in their evil behavior. Third, I offered an explanation of how governmental atonement can construct a new community based on forgiveness, which is made possible by victims' inclusion into Christ, who, as the ultimate victim, was able to forgive his abusers.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

The model charted in this work is far from complete, in that there are many aspects of abuse which require "atonement" which I did not have the space here to address fully. No individual's response to victimization is the same, and the process of restoration for each will be different. Hence, the atonement will be experienced differently by each person. What I have attempted to do in these pages is simply outline a general framework in which the death of Christ might be meaningful to those who have suffered intimate abuse generally. Specific types of abuse, such as child abuse and neglect, sexual molestation, and IPV each deserve separate analyses, which, due to the

limited scope of this thesis, could not be given here. More research needs to be done at an expanded level.

Another direction in which this thesis points for further reflection and research is the arena of public preaching. It seems, at least from my personal experience, that few preachers in my own Adventist tradition take into consideration the abuse of women and children in their congregations when preaching. Unfortunately, this makes sense, because however terrible these realities may be, they are almost always carefully hidden from the eyes of even the most observant pastor. But they are still there. Every minister ought therefore to ask her/himself, “How will the gospel that I preach be received as ‘good news’ to those who are enduring (or have endured) the terrible trauma of abuse?” It is not enough for ministers to simply relay what the Bible says on a given topic; such content must be applied to the individual needs of congregation members. For example, when preaching about salvation, a pastor must be aware that there are a variety of sinful situations which congregants may need salvation from. Protestant pastors may have a tendency to emphasize the general problem of “sin,” while failing to address more specific issues, such as the question of how I am ‘saved’ from an abusive spouse. Therefore, being ‘saved’ does not always correspond to following an altar call to the front of the church. It could also mean dialing the number of a domestic violence hotline, or speaking to a counselor about one’s own violent tendencies in intimate relationships. There is nothing wrong with altar calls and general appeals, but more hands-on, practical appeals are necessary to address real needs.

Making this theology practical also raises another issue, which has been referenced in this thesis but has not been fully addressed. This “elephant in the room”

issue is that of penal-substitution. As noted in chapter 2, Brock and Parker find this doctrine to be one of the most damaging for victims of abuse. Because the veracity and applicability of this doctrine are outside the bounds of the limitations of this work, I have not here taken a stand on it. Nevertheless, I must note that even as large swathes of Christendom find this model to be the bedrock of their faith, many reflective thinkers have felt the imperative to dismiss it forthrightly. It seems to be a difficult doctrine to defend, especially in light of the concerns raised in this thesis. However, more work ought to be done to assess whether it can be salvaged from the theological rubble-heap in which many theologians have placed it, largely in reaction to the vociferations of over-zealous Calvinists. Specifically, the question may be raised as to whether Girard and Heim have given us a vocabulary in which to utilize the language of penal-substitution, without endorsing its violent and retributive understanding of God.

If such a course of research is taken, other problems would require investigation, such as how to read Ellen White's endorsements of penal substitution, including those statements in her pamphlet on "The Sufferings of Christ" in which she claims that the wrath of God was directed at Jesus. For many Adventists, White's testimony is taken very seriously, and it is not possible to brashly throw out these statements without considering ways in which they might be understood profitably. More research on White's "trajectory" of thought might be illuminating here.

Finally, a more comprehensive biblical/exegetical study of the concept of God's moral government is necessary. Because of the limitations of this work, what I have provided along the lines of biblical data in chapter 4 has been obviously insufficient. More exegetical research is needed on Jesus' statements about his death at the last

supper, as well as Paul's articulation of the atonement in Romans and Galatians. I think I have offered enough data to show that the concept of moral government atonement is clearly present, but I have not been able to provide a thorough examination of the relevant texts. Further research should focus on fleshing out their full testimony.

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