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Which Courtroom and What Narrative Shapes Your Atonement Theology?

Mark D. Baker

Over the last three years some within Mennonite Brethren circles have critiqued my writings on the atonement.¹ People seeking to help me have advised me to make brief statements to make clear that I affirm the Mennonite Brethren confession of faith and the necessity of substitutionary atonement. I have done so.² I have learned many things through being at the center of this atonement controversy. One of them is that the above approach does not work. It does not appear to have led my critics to better understand my position nor to be less critical of me.

*Jesus was our substitute in dying in our place, but also in
triumphing over death in our place.*

One person responded to a statement on the atonement by saying, "But Mark would not affirm this." Yet, I had. After a meeting dedicated to discussing the atonement a Mennonite Brethren pastor respectfully said to me, "You said that God did not have to punish Jesus in order to forgive, that God did not have to be appeased, yet you also affirmed that we are saved by the blood of Jesus. You are contradictory." In essence these people stated that I could not honestly mean it when I affirmed these words. In that meeting I should have spent less time trying to affirm as many of the same

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words and phrases that my critics affirm, and spent more time seeking to explain the framework within which I interpret those words

A similar dynamic is observed in use of Scripture. My critics and I both have lined up verses to support our positions—often the same verses. What, however, is the broader biblical framework we use to interpret the verses? What lenses do we use to read them? To use many verses and biblical phrases does not necessarily make a position biblical. N.T. Wright, in fact, makes just this point in evaluating a book that strongly critiques my writing. He states, “What then do I mean by saying that *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is deeply unbiblical? Just this: it abstracts certain elements from what the Bible actually says, elements which are undoubtedly there and which undoubtedly matter, but then places them within a different framework, which admittedly has a lot in common with the biblical one, but which, when treated as though it were the biblical one, becomes systematically misleading.”³ The question is not whether, in relation to the cross, the concepts “substitution” and “penal” are biblical. Rather, Wright argues, in order to have a biblical understanding of these concepts we must root ourselves not in an arbitrary law court, but within the biblical world, the story of Israel.

My thesis is that in relation to atonement theology many have made a double error. First, rather than allowing legal imagery of atonement to find its place in a broader foundational narrative of the atonement with other atonement imagery, they have turned the legal image into *the* foundational narrative. Second, rather than interpreting legal imagery of atonement through the lens of the biblical world and the biblical narrative, they have interpreted it through the lens of the Western legal system. Our legal systems have a retributive character, and an impersonal code of laws is foundational. No one is above the law, not a judge, prime minister, or president. A just judge is one who weighs the case and, if the person is guilty, punishes him or her as demanded by the law. Through the lens of this understanding of justice, God must punish the guilty in order to be just. What happens when the legal metaphor for atonement, understood in this way, becomes the foundational narrative of the atonement? All other biblical language and imagery of the cross is interpreted through this lens. So, for instance, sacrifices are seen as payment, like paying a fine in our legal systems, and Jesus’ death as sacrifice is understood to be paying the ultimate fine or penalty. To say we are saved by the blood of Jesus is understood to mean that Jesus’ blood, his death, paid the legal penalty that God as judge demanded. Through this lens, “substitution” or “died for us” means Jesus was punished in our place. What happens when people who understand biblical legal terminology through the lens of our legal systems and make

it the foundational atonement narrative hear Mark Baker's affirmations and critiques? They will sound contradictory or disingenuous.

Therefore, with the hope of creating a greater level of understanding, even if not necessarily agreement, I will do two things in this article. First, I will situate the atonement legal image in a Hebraic context and make brief observations about how that changes the image. Second, I will present an alternative foundational narrative of the atonement that seeks to be hospitable to the variety of biblical atonement imagery rather than be controlled by one image.

JUSTICE IN ISRAEL'S SCRIPTURES

The Hebraic concept of justice seen in the Old Testament has a relational foundation. The basis of judgment is how faithful one is to agreements, obligations, or covenants with other people and with God. To act justly is to be faithful to the people one is committed to by agreement or covenant. The relationship, not an impersonal law, is central. Old Testament law is relational in the sense that God gave it within a covenant relationship as an expression of God's intention for life and relationships within Israel. Therefore, a person would be seen as just by God if he or she lived in a way that demonstrated faithfulness to Israel's covenant with God. In a similar way God would be understood as being just by remaining faithful to covenant commitments.

Understood from the relational Hebraic perspective, the verb "to justify" includes a sense of making straight or straightening out or restoring relationships that have been twisted or broken. In the Old Testament God provided a system of sacrifices to restore and straighten relations between God and the people of God. According to the Western legal system the act of punishment is the very essence of "doing justice": to punish according to the law is to do justice. In contrast, in the Hebraic approach punishment may be inflicted, but as a means toward creating justice; it contributes to fixing, rectifying a situation. A Hebraic judge would not be considered just simply by punishing; rather, to do justice would mean working for restitution and restoration of relationships. God judges, punishes, disciplines, chastises in order to help bring about a right/just situation. A number of biblical texts highlight the contrast between a Hebraic and Western forensic view of justice.⁴Space permits just one brief example. Before he was told otherwise by an angel, Joseph naturally assumed that Mary had sex with another man. According to the law she should be stoned (Deut. 22:23–24). Matthew writes that because Joseph was a "just man," rather than publicly expose her, he was going to divorce her quietly (Matt. 1:19 KJV). Clearly Matthew is using the term "just" to mean something other than strictly following the legal code. Out of deep loyalty and respect for Mary, Joseph

sought a way to circumvent the law, rectify the situation and save her. Matthew considered this a just action, an illogical statement from a Western legal perspective.⁵

What happens then if we look at atonement legal imagery through the lens of the Hebraic “courtroom” rather than through the lens of a Western criminal court? Paul does use a legal metaphor for atonement, but not necessarily one that pictures God demanding punishment as a condition for salvation. For Paul, God’s justice or righteousness is nothing other than his covenant faithfulness (cf. Rom. 3), not his adherence to an abstract code of law that demands he punish those who break that law. As Paul makes clear, we have all sinned or failed to be just in our relationships with God and others (Rom. 3:23). Jesus, however, was obedient, faithful, and just at every point and in every way that we have failed—faithful even to the point of death. Paul proclaims that we are justified not by our actions, but by God’s grace through the faithful actions of Jesus (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:24–26). Therefore, in contrast to our failing to be just, God proves to be just by being faithful to God’s covenant commitment to bless and save Israel, and through them save others.⁶ Therefore it is possible to affirm the legal imagery of atonement and at the same time state that God did not have to punish Jesus in order to be able to forgive in a just way. The cross and resurrection, however, is about much more than just this one legal image. We will now turn to that broader narrative.

JESUS’ LIFE AS THE FOUNDATIONAL STORY OF ATONEMENT

In developing an alternative to the foundational narrative supplied by penal substitution theory of the atonement I have sought to put Jesus’ life at the center. Rather than developing a theory about the mechanics of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation, and then building a story to support that theory, I have sought to have Jesus’ life inform the way we understand the cross and resurrection. I am not seeking to privilege one image over others. This story will support a wide variety of images that highlight and proclaim aspects of the narrative.

God created the earth and cosmos and pronounced it good. Humans, lovingly created in the image of God, had a special place in creation and a special relationship with God. Humans, however, did not trust God and disobeyed God. Since Eden, God has lovingly taken the initiative toward humans. Yet, since Eden, humans have rebelled against God and refused to honor God as God. They sought security through a religiosity of human efforts rather than through a relationship with God. In this state of alienation and shame they grasped for status and security through putting others down—often violently.

God initiated a special covenantal relationship with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. God promised to bless them and through them bless others. God provided the people of Israel guidance in the form of laws and prophets. God also provided priests and a variety of sacrifices as means of restoring the relationship when they sinned and broke the covenant. The sacrificial blood was not described as a payment to God, but as a means to ratify covenants, to cleanse from impurity, and to wipe away the stain of guilt and shame.⁷ Israel, however, repeatedly rebelled against God and their covenant commitments and suffered the consequences of failing to trust and obey God. God, however, remained faithful to them, at times punishing them with restorative intent, and repeatedly bearing the pain of their rejection and forgiving them.

God sends his son Jesus to live out the covenant commitment that Israel had failed to fulfill. In contrast to other humans, Jesus maintains a relationship of trust and obedience with God the Father, whom he calls *Abba*. Through Jesus, God incarnationally continues communicating—through word and deed—love, forgiveness, acceptance, and grace. Jesus invites conversion. He invites others to trust and believe that God is a loving God who is for them, to repent and turn from their stance of rejecting and dishonoring God. Jesus then invites and challenges them to follow him in living according to the way of God. Some accept and some reject Jesus and his loving invitation.

Although the acceptance and mercy offered are unconditional, there are consequences for rejecting the invitation. It leads to people building their security walls of exclusion even higher. An elementary school playground analogy might help us here. Being part of the “in” group—those with the most status and privileges—requires dressing in certain ways, acting in certain ways, having a certain level of ability, and being friends with the right people. Imagine, however, if the most popular child comes out one day and says, “Things are going to be different on the playground now. We are going to let everyone play—no worries, even the nerds can join us.” What would happen if some said, “No, we don’t want to let others join in”? These excluders would have to work even harder to exclude and maintain their status. In the process they would become even more closed in. So it was with those who rejected Jesus. They closed themselves into a system of their creation. As they excluded others they lived under the pressure of, and became enslaved to, their rules and traditions. They lived with the God of accusation that they created. The walls that excluded outsiders and brought status to the insiders also created an environment of alienation lacking in freedom and authenticity.

Jesus confronts these systems and structures of exclusion through his actions and through his parables of judgment. He graciously continues,

however, a stance of open invitation to a different reality even to the oppressors. Jesus reaches out to and embraces the victims—those who have been excluded and rejected.

Jesus continues reaching out in loving acceptance. People, however, continue to reject Jesus' call to include all at the table. Instead they operate within a "tit-for-tat" system—always looking for the advantage and seeking payback and revenge. This spiral of violence and one-up-manship produces alienation, shame, and victimization.

Factions of society, usually in tension with each other, unify and attack Jesus. He does not, however, back off from stances that have incited the wrath of the people and powers that threaten him. He does not rescind his loving acceptance nor turn against the marginalized and excluded, but stands in solidarity with the victimized to the point of death. The gospel stories are so familiar to us we do not often stop to think it could have been much different. For instance, at the beginning of Luke 15 Jesus heard the Pharisees and scribes, with an air of superiority, criticizing him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. To save face, Jesus could vow to change his ways or offer some kind of excuse about why he had eaten with these people. Instead he invites the Pharisees and scribes to join him in tearing down barriers of exclusion and come to the table as well. When things got really tense and he was heading toward death, he could have abandoned his commitments and practices to try to save his life. He did not. He is so uncompromisingly for the marginalized and identified so closely with the victimized that he suffers the ultimate act of exclusion and victimization—a shameful death on the cross. Jesus also does not adjust the way he acts, nor the way he talks about God and God's Kingdom to fit more comfortably within the status quo of the day. In both his life and death Jesus willingly suffered shame and exclusion so that others would not have to. He also, however, suffered the judgment the excluders deserved to suffer. He bore the consequences of their sinful actions—consequences he had warned them of.⁸ At this moment of being thrashed by the violence at the vortex of this spiral of revenge, rejection, and victimization Jesus does not reciprocate with violence (1 Pet. 2:23).

A SAVING REVELATION

At this point in the story, looking at Jesus on the cross, a number of things become clearer to us. It is an act of revelation that has saving effect. The cross, through Jesus, reveals a God who loves us, who is committed to us and our salvation—even to the point of death. In contrast, although the principalities and powers may masquerade as pro-human forces necessary for the smooth functioning of society, the cross exposes them for what they are.

The cross also reveals the depth of human sin and alienation. The true nature of all those involved is exposed by the cross: Pilate, the priests, Roman soldiers, the disciples, and the crowds. The cross displays graphically the end result of our “tit-for-tat” approach to life, our religiosity of exclusion, and our seeking unity through victimizing others and finding a common enemy. Humans reject and kill God incarnate. Humans reject and kill a man who lived authentically as God created humans to live. How does God respond to this ultimate sin, this extreme dishonoring of God? Both Father and Son must have experienced great sadness, but also anger at this injustice, this murderous act against one who had consistently loved and offered inclusion to all. What would have happened if God had responded according to the law of retribution and revenge, according to the same logic of the “tit-for-tat” system that had lashed out and killed Jesus? What retribution would have restored God’s honor and balanced out this immense crime against God? Simply wiping out those who had actually killed Jesus would not be sufficient recompense. In fact, destroying all of humanity and the principalities and powers with them might be the only action, from an “eye for an eye” perspective, that might balance this act of killing God incarnate through such a shameful means.

Throughout the Bible, however, we see God seeking to rein in the human propensity for revenge and retaliation.⁹ God’s own actions go beyond simply moderating the retaliatory urge. God rejects the logic of retaliation and practices a radically different justice—a restorative justice. Therefore it should not surprise us that at the cross God does not follow the human way of “making things right” by responding with equal or greater violence and punishment against those who killed Jesus. Rather, God responded in ways consistent with Jesus’ life and words and reminiscent of examples of restoration seen in the Old Testament. Through looking at the Old Testament metaphor of standing in the breach I would like to highlight two ways that God responds in a non-retributive manner: forgiveness and representative righteousness.

On the cross Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34 TNIV). Jesus intercedes as Moses had in another moment when God had reason to be angry and threatened to destroy a people. As the psalmist writes: “Therefore he said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them” (Ps. 106:23 NRSV; cf. Exod. 32:11–13 and Amos 7:1–6). Jesus stands in the breach as Moses had and God responds with forgiveness and liberation from guilt. Forgiveness, however, is not free. In life we observe that the one who forgives absorbs the cost of the wrong done rather than demanding that the guilty party make amends or suffer. On the cross Jesus shouldered the cost of human

sin, absorbing the pain, violence, and shame into himself. It was a costly forgiveness.¹⁰

God responds to the offense of the cross not by lashing out with retaliatory punishment against humanity, but by resurrecting Jesus as a living forgiving presence. The resurrected Jesus did not go on a rampage seeking revenge, but followed through on the words of forgiveness he pronounced on the cross. Rather than shaming, scolding or disowning his disciples the risen Jesus embraced them and worked to restore relationships. They in turn carried this message of forgiveness to others in Jerusalem. They stated clearly, "You crucified Jesus," but the disciples followed that statement not with threats but with an invitation to repent and be forgiven.¹¹

In Jesus, God absorbs the worst of human sin-rooted violence and responds with forgiveness. God's action stops the spiral of violence and "tit-for-tat" reciprocity. We are saved from that cycle and through forgiveness saved from our burden of guilt for having participated in it. The cross and resurrection reveal the character of God and thus also save us from living with the concept of God that many imagine—an accusing and vengeful God. We are invited to trust in the loving God revealed through the cross and resurrection (John 3:16–17).

GOD INCARNATE

Jesus stands in the breach not just through interceding but through living justly and faithfully obeying and honoring God the Father. In Isaiah 58 we read that the one who lives justly, as described in that chapter, "shall be called the repairer of the breach" (Isa. 58:12 NRSV). In Ezekiel God laments that no one can be found to stand in the breach and keep God from consuming them with the fire of his wrath (Ezek. 22:30–31). God speaks through Jeremiah saying, "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth—so that I may pardon Jerusalem" (Jer. 5:1 NRSV; cf. Ezek. 22:30–31). Note that God is not looking for one to punish in the place of others, but with a calculus radically different than the law of an eye for an eye God will pardon guilt and restore the whole because of the righteousness of one who is willing to act on behalf of others. When that one is not found God sacrificially enters into the human situation, incarnate in Jesus, to be that righteous one.

In Romans 5 and 6 Paul writes of Jesus in a way that echoes the Old Testament idea of a righteous one repairing the breach. As Paul describes, through Jesus' faithful obedience we have been justified. We have been united with him and brought into new life and right relationship with God.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we

were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! . . . Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. . . . If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 5:9-10, 18-19, 6: 5 TNIV)

We see in Romans 5 and 6, and also in the narrative presented in this article, two strands of substitution woven together. Jesus, in our place, lived faithfully and justly as humans could not. Jesus, in our place, bore the consequences of our sin, death, so that we would not have to. Through our union by faith with his righteous life and his death, we share in his resurrection life. Retaliatory punishment claims to "make things right," but it does not heal or truly rectify. In fact it plants the seeds of further violence. In Jesus, however, God acts to truly change and rectify.¹²

At the cross the powers of sin and death were exposed, but through the resurrection they are triumphed over. Death does not have the last word. In the words of Jonathan Wilson, "In Christ as victor, we see God as . . . our liberator, who reveals our victimization and captivity, defeats our enemy, destroys our prison, shatters our chains to free us and bring us home to live for eternity."¹³ The resurrection is a victory, yet a victory in line with how Jesus lived and died.

Those who trust in Jesus are not only freed from guilt and shame and saved from hell, they are also called to a new way of life. The resurrection validates. It is God's seal of approval on the way Jesus lived and thus a call to us to live the same way. It is a call to conversion to trust the radically different God revealed on the cross and a call, in the security of that relationship with God, to follow Jesus' example and live as authentic humans. The resurrection not only calls but also enables. The victory, forgiveness, and validation of the resurrection form a new covenant community without walls of exclusion where all are invited to the table. Through being united with Jesus, not only in his death but also in his resurrection, the living Spirit of Jesus empowers us to join with others in this new way of life.

CONCLUSION

I have called this a foundational narrative rather than a metaphor of the atonement or a theory of atonement. It is broader and deeper than one metaphor; many metaphors can grow out of it. Unlike a theory of atonement, it does not present a single neat explanation of how the cross and

resurrection provide salvation. In fact the discerning reader will have observed elements from various atonement theories in the narrative and my interpretation of it. It is, however, a foundational narrative and not simply a collection of metaphors. Although I have critiqued trying to have one image or theory capture the full meaning of the cross, I do think there is value in presenting a unifying narrative. That does not mean, however, that I pretend to have captured the full meaning of the cross in these few pages. The true foundational narrative is the Gospels interpreted in the light of the whole Bible. Although I have worked to bring in various threads of that biblical narrative, some are understated and others are not even present. This is a telling of the foundational narrative, but not the *only* way of telling it. For instance, instead of, or in addition to, the emphasis on Romans 5 and 6 and Jesus' filling the breach for us, I could have interpreted the narrative in terms of honor and shame. Then, using the lens of 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Philippians 2, and Revelation 5, new insights would flow. Humans dishonored God, but God did not restore his honor and glory by following the honor codes of the day and demanding acts to satisfy the debt to his honor. Rather, through Jesus, God redefined honor and became honorable through what the world considered shameful—unselfishly dying on the cross for the benefit of others.

We will now return to where we began, the interpretation of phrases like “substitutionary atonement,” “died for us,” “saved by the blood,” and “sacrifice.” Seen through the lens of our criminal law courtrooms, “Jesus our substitute” means that God punished him in our place and satisfied justice so that God could justly forgive. If that interpretation of the legal metaphor is made *the* foundational narrative, that understanding of substitution becomes *the* explanation of substitutionary atonement without remainder. To place the phrase in a different “courtroom” and in the broader narrative described above does two things. The legal mechanics are changed and Jesus is no longer seen as a substitute payment to appease God. But he is still understood as substitute in a number of ways. We can still talk of Jesus bearing the cost of forgiveness in our place. But this foundational narrative does not lead us to understand that as a payment made to God the Father. Another aspect of substitution is that Jesus was faithfully obedient in a way that Israel had not been and we could not be. He was a substitute for us in order to renew humanity; his righteousness became ours. He also was a substitute as our sin and death became his. Jesus entered into our situation and shouldered the ultimate consequences of an alienation that was not his but ours. He saves us from suffering the ultimate consequence of our sin—death. Jesus was our substitute in dying in our place, but also in triumphing over death in our place. In addition he did in our place what we could not do by resisting Satan and the principalities and powers and by absorbing

and stopping the cycle of violence. In many ways, to say “he died for us” is the same as saying he was our substitute. The above narrative, however, also brings into focus the sense of Jesus’ death being an act of solidarity, of standing with the excluded and oppressed to the point of death.

Rather than simply interpreting language of sacrifice and blood through the lens of penal satisfaction and interpreting it as dealing with payment and appeasement, this alternative narrative invites us to interpret these terms through the lens of their Old Testament context. That lens leads us to think of Jesus’ blood saving us through covenantal renewal, and through wiping away the stain of guilt and shame.

We could continue observing contrasting interpretations of various phrases, verses, and statements related to atonement theology. The purpose of this article, however, is not to provide that sort of list, much less to pretend that doing so proves one set of interpretations is correct. Rather, the goal has been to highlight the significance of the legal context and foundational narrative used in formulating atonement theology. A secondary goal is that focusing on these foundational issues may enable some to better understand my position. They may still not agree with me, but I hope it will help them see how I can credibly offer the interpretations I do. Although, in the context of the current discussion about the atonement, these are important goals, more significant is the greater breadth of resources for ministry provided by this alternative narrative. Situating biblical legal imagery in a Hebraic context and using a broad foundational narrative of atonement rooted in Israel’s history and Jesus’ life have significant and wide ranging implications for evangelism, discipleship, worship, mission, pastoral care, and ethics. Surveying that breadth must be left for another time. I will end with just one example.

Last week, in the middle of a jail Bible study on forgiving others (Ephesians 4:25–5:2 was our text), an inmate interrupted and stated sorrowfully, “I find it harder to forgive myself and to believe that God has really forgiven me. I have done bad things.” I quickly reflected on what aspect of this foundational narrative might be most helpful to this inmate we will call Mike. I first asked the group, “What is the worst thing you can do to someone?” They mentioned a few things, but we quickly agreed that nothing could be worse than murdering a person. After pointing out that humans did exactly that to Jesus, God incarnate, I helped them see that this was a killing filled with suffering and especially with shame. I asked them, “If God had followed the logic of the street and the jail, what would have happened?” Mike stated, “Big time revenge.” Then we reviewed what actually happened: Jesus’ words of forgiveness from the cross and the return of the resurrected Jesus, not with “guns blazing,” but as a living, forgiving presence. We reflected on how this was a costly forgiveness, and on how

God bore the cost. Then I looked Mike in the eye and passionately proclaimed, "Whenever you doubt whether God has forgiven you, think of the cross. If God forgave that, he will forgive whatever you have done." ✨

NOTES

1. Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000; 2nd ed., 2011); Mark D. Baker, ed. *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

2. As an example, this is a statement I used at a meeting on October 9, 2010:

I fully affirm the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith article five on salvation.

I affirm that the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross was necessary for our salvation. Jesus suffered the ultimate judgment of sin so that we do not have to. He did for us something we could not do for ourselves.

I affirm that God worked through Jesus' death and resurrection to reconcile the world to Himself, forgiving, freeing from guilt, liberating from shame, empowering with the Holy Spirit, triumphing over death and the powers of evil.

I affirm that this calls for and requires individual response.

I affirm that God's work through the cross is richer and deeper than any of our explanations of it. Therefore I advocate following the New Testament in using a diversity of images and metaphors to proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection. I pray that through my writing and teaching contemporary evangelists will be even more effective in communicating the multi-faceted message of the cross and that more people will experience the transforming love of God, be called into discipleship and receive the gift of eternal life with God.

I critique presenting any theory or image of atonement as *the one* explanation of atonement.

Most, but not all, advocates of the penal substitution theory of the atonement present it as the one and only explanation. There are, however, articulations of penal substitution that I affirm both because they recognize the need for other images of atonement and because they avoid problems I see in many common articulations of penal substitution.

Appeasement: I affirm that God is angered by sin and injustice and that God judges and punishes, but I do not believe that the Bible portrays God as being obligated to punish in order to forgive. I do not believe the purpose of the cross was to appease God. I critique presentations of the atonement that communicate this.

3. N.T. Wright, "The Cross and the Caricatures: A Response to Robert Jensen, Jeffrey John, and a New Volume Entitled *Pierced for our Transgressions*," Eastertide, 2007, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=205>.
4. For a discussion of this theme that gives biblical examples and substantiation see Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 97–103. For a more in-depth explanation of this view of justice/justification see James D. G. Dunn and Alan Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:1129–33.
5. Many translations use the word "righteous" in this verse. The same Greek word lies behind these two English words. Kenneth Bailey drew my attention to the broader understanding of justice in this verse in his Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 43–44.
6. One might offer the challenge that although Paul was writing from a Hebraic perspective he was writing to a Greco-Roman context. Yet, both were honor/shame cultures. There was a much more relational sense to even the Greco-Roman law. There was a strong sense of obligation to others, and a sense of a public verdict: Do others think you are just? So it is not just that Paul's Hebraic background would contrast with our western legal reading of the text, but also his Roman/Hellenistic cultural context. There was much more overlap between these two than between ours and Rome.
7. There is great diversity in types of sacrifices in the Old Testament, more than even in this sentence. Leviticus provides detailed instructions on how to perform sacrifices, and very little information on the mechanics of how the sacrifices achieve the results they do. (See Elmer Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed. [N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 1998], 47–70; *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 2nd ed., 63–77.) The Old Testament gives scant basis for understanding sacrifices as payments to appease the wrath of God. "Wrath" is not even mentioned in Leviticus. This is not, of course, to deny or ignore the many references to the wrath of God in the Old Testament. Rather the point is that the sacrificial system is not presented as a means of payment to assuage God's wrath. "Old Testament texts document a series of reasons motivating divine wrath: idolatry, as we have seen, but also injustice, cultic transgressions and so on. Pervasively in the Old Testament, God's wrath is relationally based, not retributively motivated—that is, it is oriented toward the restoration or protection of God's people, not toward retaliation or payback. Finally, God might avert his wrath in response to repentance, prayer or mediation, but even this is a consequence of his own, gracious change of mind. The Old Testament never identifies Israel's sacrificial system as a means of averting or assuaging God's wrath" (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 2nd ed., 72).
8. I have found Raymund Schwagger's work especially helpful on this point: *Jesus and the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999).

9. Excessive retaliation and retribution is the way of sinful humanity (Gen. 4:23–24). God introduces the law of an “eye for an eye” as a limit, a way of reigning in retaliatory retribution. The “eye for an eye” law had significant qualifications and safeguards (Exod. 21:12–14, 23–24; Num. 35:9–15, 30; Deut. 19:1–7, 15; 17:6; 24:26) and Ezekiel qualifies it even further stating that if the criminal repents of his crimes and amends his ways, then his life should be spared (Ezek. 18:21–24; cf. 33:10–11). Jesus completes this trajectory fulfilling the intent of the “law and the prophets” in the Sermon on the Mount saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you . . .” and calling his followers to renounce retaliation and to love friend and enemy (Matt. 5:17, 38–48; Rom. 10:4).
10. Tim Keller, writing a popular apologetic, answers the question, Why did Jesus have to die? by portraying the cross as costly forgiveness yet making clear that it is not God demanding appeasement or payment, acting according to laws of retribution and retaliation, but absorbing the cost as one who forgives does. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 186–200.
11. Acts 2:23, 36–37; 3:15–19; 4:10; 5:30–31. It is noteworthy that as Stephen is being executed he follows Jesus’ example and states: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Clearly the disciples experienced the transformative effect of the cross and resurrection in a way that led them to reject the calculus of retaliation just as Jesus had.
12. We have looked at just one Old Testament image, standing in the breach, to underscore that the narrative of the cross is rooted in the narrative of Israel and to help illuminate our understanding of the cross. If space allowed we could weave many other Old Testament images and teachings into this foundational narrative.
13. Jonathan Wilson, *God So Loved the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 97.