



Adapted from "Christ Pantocrator,"  
the Cathedral of Cefalù

# God's Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No

God's justice is primarily social. The penal, substitutionary view is individualistic, egocentric, and contrary to Scripture.

by Charles Scriven

*"... the social gospel is the voice of prophecy . . ."*

—Walter Rauschenbusch<sup>1</sup>

*"Every truth . . . must be studied in the light which streams from the cross of Calvary."*

—Ellen White<sup>2</sup>

**E**ACH TEACHING OF THE CHURCH INTERPRETS God. When teachings go wrong, God is diminished, and when God is diminished, so are the children of God.

No means of diminishing God is more flagrant, and none more disastrous, than readings of the cross of Christ that turn believers inward instead of outward. Nevertheless, the inner life, largely abstracted from questions of community and justice, is today a besetting preoccupation for popular, especially conservative and fundamentalist, Christianity. Ac-

ording to resurrection faith, the cross—or better, the life that culminates at the cross—brings God's justice into perfect focus.<sup>3</sup> What popular devotion overlooks is that just this fact proves the gospel is social; just this fact shows that the Maker of heaven and earth wants above all things to build community and justice. In spite of this, many professed partisans of the cross, captive not just to conservative religion but also to modern individualism, settle into pious introspection, obsessed with guilt and zealous for self-esteem but indifferent, or at least disengaged, when it comes to justice.

## God and Social Justice

**R**ead through Luther's eyes, the biblical account of atonement has seemed to support the introspective, or privatistic, understanding of the cross.<sup>4</sup> Luther struggled with his conscience, and brought this struggle to his reading of the New Testament, and especially of Paul. For him the overriding issue

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was the resolution of personal guilt, and he thought that was the overriding issue for Paul. But it wasn't. Paul's passion was community. Nothing underscores this more than his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, where the whole point is to found a new covenant of fellowship on the fact and meaning of the cross. Yet these very letters are treated—or better, mistreated—as linchpins for accounts of atonement in which community and justice play very little part.

The fact is that Christ's atonement puts community and justice at the center. The gospel is social and the cross is the proof. Biblically speaking, any account of atonement that invites exclusive or primary attention to personal concerns is false. Any true account of atonement must—the necessity is absolute—*must* foster passion for community and social justice.

I say community and *social* justice because, as we shall see, writers on the atonement sometimes invoke God's justice without apparent comprehension of what it is according to the Bible. Anyone, however, who would truly illuminate the cross of Christ must honor the conception of justice central in the story leading up to the cross. That conception is unmistakably social.

Jesus' tradition was the Hebrew tradition. The Exodus was the definitive event in his people's history, and it recalled a God determined to build community and to meet human needs, especially the needs of the vulnerable. God was a champion of the weak. God's justice opened the doorway to joy for the oppressed, the hungry, the lonely, the afflicted. It amended inequities. It restored and enhanced the life that men and women share. It sought blessedness and peace. Justice was a standard for community, but it was no abstraction: it was covenant faithfulness, it was care and compassion, it was action to reclaim lives and renew relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Luke declares in his fourth chapter that Jesus put this very justice, the justice of the Hebrew tradition, at the center of his inaugural sermon. Jesus took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and identified his basic mission with chapters 58 and 61. In both chapters, social justice and loyalty to God are the themes. And in both chapters, the first is a condition of the second: a love of justice is a test of loyalty to God.

Donald Bloesch, an evangelical writer, argues that whereas this was true of the Old Testament author, it was not true of Jesus. Jesus did speak in Nazareth of "good news to the poor," "release to the captives," "sight to the blind" and deliverance to the "oppressed." But with him these words assure freedom from "sin and death rather than from political and economic bondage."<sup>6</sup> As proof, Bloesch cites Luke 7:22, where Jesus responds to a question about his mission and identity from two of John's disciples: "Go," he says,

"and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them" (RSV).

Bloesch thinks these words undergird his claim that Jesus focused on salvation for individual souls. But this is bizarre. The remark in Luke 7 also draws from the book of Isaiah, in this case from chapter 61 (again) and from chapter 35. In both the theme is sociopolitical, not merely personal, deliverance. Bloesch's claim that Jesus, unlike the Hebrew prophets, makes personal concerns fundamental, and social ones merely secondary, collapses under the weight of Scripture itself. Jesus was not the kind of political Messiah his contemporaries expected, it is true, but he certainly stood with the prophets on the question of social justice: to him it was central.

Overwhelmingly, recent studies of Jesus

support this.<sup>7</sup> Jesus was a Spirit-filled person, a man of mighty deeds and startling insight, who banqueted with outcasts, who challenged the established social hierarchies, who championed a just and fully inclusive form of human community. Of all the leaders in his tradition, he was “most like the classical prophets,”<sup>8</sup> most like the great Hebrew advocates of social justice. Indeed, Jesus’ death came about precisely because of this. As the Gospels declare, he indicted the dominant culture and was deemed a threat to its future. Therefore, Jesus, knowing at firsthand the hiddenness of God and the dark night of the soul,<sup>9</sup> was killed.

None of this, however, subverts God’s offer of personal forgiveness and his call to personal commitment. In religion, including Jesus’ religion, the personal is not a frill but a fundamental. As you cannot have peace without justice, you cannot have justice without the integrity of persons. Still, readings of Jesus’ life and death that make the social invisible or secondary are wrong. They are historically false. What is worse, they ratify egocentricity. Individualistic readings of Jesus’ life and death nourish an obsession with the introspective, with preoccupation over personal guilt and personal prospects. And this leaves questions of community and justice, central in Jesus’ tradition and in his own teaching, virtually ignored.

## Social Justice and Substitutionary Atonement

In the light of Jesus’ life and death, then, justice is social and justice is central. But as I have said, this is obscured in popular Christian piety. One reason, and surely one of the most important reasons, is that it is obscured in the penal, substitutionary view of the atonement, the interpretation of Jesus’ life and death most common among conservatives and fundamentalist Christians. Curiously, though, in

the penal, substitutionary view, God’s justice figures prominently. How so?

A long theological history, going as far back as Tertullian and Cyprian,<sup>10</sup> underlies the penal, substitutionary view. It is really one expression (the best-known expression) of what historians call the Latin or objective view of the atonement. After Luther, Protestant Orthodoxy, propelled by Melancthon and his theological adversary Osiander, crystallized the basic position that since then has had immense impact on the popular religious imagination. Today the prominent advocates include the evangelical scholar J. I. Packer and the celebrated evangelical pastor John R. W. Stott. Many Adventist pastors and teachers uphold doctrines of atonement similar to theirs.<sup>11</sup>

According to a penal, substitutionary view of God’s justice, God requires full obedience to divine law. Any failure to obey, any lapse into sin, must be penalized, and the penalty is death. God is implacably hostile to sin, and the death penalty expresses this fact. It expresses God’s consistency and integrity—both the reality of divine wrath and the holiness of divine love.



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Because no human being perfectly obeys God's law, no one of us measures up to the required standard. Everyone, therefore, deserves to die. But God is merciful. God loves us, and the love persists even when we disobey. So, in order to legitimate amnesty and save us from death, God initiates a plan of self-sacrifice. The premise is that the divine self-sacrifice makes more than adequate reparation for the guilt accrued by human disobedience.

The self-sacrifice involves the mystery of incarnation. God becomes flesh in Jesus, the Son of Mary. Jesus lives, uniquely so, a life of perfect obedience. Aware that through undeserved punishment his one case of perfection can win forgiveness in every other case, Jesus resolves to die and to bear the penalty deserved by others. By faithful and fearless obedience to the law, he enrages the (disobedient) authorities. Thus he invokes, he *purposefully* evokes, his own crucifixion, and thus he becomes our substitution.

God incarnate, Jesus the Son of Mary, dies *instead of us and so establishes the divine right of forgiveness*. This death, and this death alone, makes ample compensation for human wrong. The sinner may embrace this God in faith, may ask pardon and pledge commitment, and thereby benefit from the divine self-sacrifice. The death penalty, though fully deserved, loses its inexorability. God in Christ bears the punishment sin requires, bearing it for us and instead of us. In this way God propitiates God and now is able, in the

full integrity of holy love and holy wrath, to bestow acceptance and salvation on the undeserving.

A favorite way of expressing all this is to say that God in Christ bore the death penalty as our substitute in order to satisfy the demands of justice. According to Stott, justice requires punishment. Justice must be executed in a judgment upon sin, or sin is condoned. So God, by bearing the penalty others deserve, "defended and demonstrated" the divine justice.<sup>12</sup> Packer writes that "the retributive

principle," requiring punishment for wrongdoing, has God's "sanction" and expresses God's "justice."<sup>13</sup>

It now becomes clear why an interpretation of the cross can speak of justice yet obscure the fact that biblical justice is social. *The penal, substitutionary view assumes a different conception of justice from the one dominant in Scripture.* Retributive justice makes past wrongs right through punishment, but biblical justice

has, overwhelmingly, a different focus. To the Hebrew mind, justice is determined, compassionate faithfulness in the building of community and the meeting of human needs, especially the needs of the vulnerable.

Romans 3:21-26 is often said to prove the penal, substitutionary account, since Paul here writes that God gave up Christ Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) in order "to show God's righteousness," or as some versions say, to "demonstrate his justice."<sup>14</sup> But the background of the passage, as of the entire letter, is God's covenant with Israel. Paul is

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addressing the house churches in Rome where divisiveness between the Gentile majority and the Jewish minority is threatening community. His overall point in the letter is to lift up the cross as proof of God's commitment to connect all peoples into a single new humanity.

The distinctions that divide God's children make no sense in the light the grace embodied in Christ. Jesus' sacrifice of atonement demonstrates, not a lawyerly (and legalistic) retributive justice, but the compassionate faithfulness of God to the original community-building promises.<sup>15</sup> The point, as Paul writes in Romans 15:8, was to "confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (RSV). This letter to the Romans and the letter to the Galatians attest, from the beginning to end, to the promise to Abraham: that his seed would mediate God's blessing to *all* the families of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Stott writes in his book on the cross that the principle of substitution is the "foundation" of all the New Testament images of Christ's atonement. Whether "redemption" or "reconciliation" or "justification," each image of atonement "lacks cogency," he says, except in the context of penal, substitutionary doctrine.<sup>17</sup> The truth is the opposite. This doctrine is so individualistic that it projects modern, introspective consciousness even onto God, whose plan of self-sacrifice is essentially a self-propitiation, resolving issues of inner, divine integrity.

God thus becomes an individualist. Stott does suggest that the cross as "revelation of God's justice" should evoke our concern with "social justice." But the discussion is brief, and the leap from the retributive conception of justice to the social conception is unexplained. Social justice receives a nod, but remains extrinsic to the basic meaning of the cross. Once Stott, commenting on Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino, remarks that Sobrino's concern to end oppression and relieve injustice are fine if he "is not denying the fundamental, atoning purpose of the cross."<sup>18</sup> But

just these matters *are* the fundamental purpose of the cross. With respect to biblical justice, the penal, substitutionary doctrine does not illuminate, it obscures.

The cross puts *social* justice at the center. Christ represents the divine care and compassion for humanity, God's covenant-making, community-building faithfulness. The cross is God's perilous solidarity with those who by sinful disobedience injure themselves and one another as well as their Maker. The cross is God refusing to indulge disobedience, refusing to be indifferent to the harm it does. The cross is God bearing our sins, bearing them with such generosity and determination as to defeat resentments, heal the wounded, and renew community.<sup>19</sup> The cross is God fighting the powers of evil, struggling for the social justice that gives rise to joy.

All this is *for* us. The justice of the cross is not an abstraction in the mind of God; it is the attitude and activity of amending inequities, embracing the afflicted, welcoming the undesirable—in short, of making shared life both joyful and strong. But we dare not forget that Christ on the cross represents us as well as God. Christ represents the true destiny and mission of humanity as well as the true destiny and mission of God.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes: "The cross is laid on every Christian."<sup>20</sup> In New Testament light, this admits of no rebuttal. The Gospels, the various New Testament letters, the Apocalypse of John—all say repeatedly that Christ involves the believer in the sharing of his whole mission, the danger and the suffering as well as the eventual victory.<sup>21</sup> As Gustavo Gutierrez remarks, "To believe is to proclaim the kingdom as Christ does—from the midst of the struggle for justice that led him to his death."<sup>22</sup>

In one of her essays on language, Iris Yob remarks that metaphors are "semantically potent." They are not, in other words, mere

decoration: they have power, over and above prosaic speech, to shape the way we think and live.<sup>23</sup> That is why the alert community will always subject its metaphors, especially its favorite metaphors, to critical analysis. And that is why the penal, substitutionary doctrine again invites attention.

Substitution is a metaphor when applied to the atonement. The metaphor suggests, to invoke the familiar world of sports, that one person becomes involved while another rides the bench or stands along the sidelines. The suggestion is wrong. Christ on the cross acts for us and on our behalf, not instead of us. Christ represents true God and true humanity and is, as the first letter to Timothy declares, our mediator.<sup>24</sup> But Christ was not our substitute. We are, with Christ, a community of fellow sufferers.<sup>25</sup> The cross is laid on every Christian.

In the light, then, of Christ's atonement justice is social and central—and self-involving: for each believer and for the church as a whole, justice is a task to perform as well as a gift to receive. Knowing human sinfulness and divine forgiveness through the cross, true believers realize the equality of all before God



Adapted from "Throne of Grace," a manuscript illumination from Western Germany or Belgium

and lay aside the arrogance of self, class, race, and gender in order to embrace "the larger fellowship of life."<sup>26</sup> Through the church's task of social justice the promise to Abraham finds fulfillment today: God saves through partnership with people called for witness.<sup>27</sup> Instead of backing away from the struggle for justice, the community of Christ becomes by its participation the nucleus and vanguard of a new humanity of peace and joy.

## Justice and a Non-Violent God

The cross illuminates justice in still another way: by exposing and challenging the violence in human life. In his remarkable new book, Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly explores Paul's hermeneutic of the cross with a view especially to the way human rivalry and envy give rise to "sacred violence."<sup>28</sup> Typically, he writes, individual human beings deal with their competitive desires and their consequent rage at each other by uniting in a common hostility against someone else or some other group.

Human beings cannot survive a chaos of sheer conflict among individuals. Cooperation is required. But the energy that fuels cooperation is sacred violence, the fervor of the group against a common victim. This energy is what explains the in-group/out-group mentality so pervasive in human life.

Paul's critique of the Judaism of his day precisely aimed at sacred violence, at the human tendency to channel rivalry and envy into victimizing, or scapegoating, forms of group loyalty. At first when he came to know the story of Christ's atonement he resisted it, and resisted it violently. Gentiles were outsiders in his thinking; they—and those who relaxed the boundaries—were dangerous, were legitimate scapegoats. His conversion occurred, not in a paroxysm of introspective guilt, but as he was on a mission to persecute Christians in

Damascus. Paul was a religious man, zealous enough to seek out and harm the enemies of his people's sacred law, and confident enough to think he himself was blameless in honoring that law.<sup>29</sup>

But on the road to Damascus, Paul met the risen Christ and was converted. He began to regard the cross as an "epiphany" of the violence in the Judaism of his day,<sup>30</sup> and henceforth disavowed what he saw as Judaism's use of the Torah "to exclude the gentiles and to glorify itself." Through "the lens of the cross," he saw that his people's law had been "deformed to the service of violence." He saw that he himself had been infected with this violence.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus ministry and message was a reaching out to the victims of the human penchant for in-group/out-group thinking. He drew from his heritage the themes of sacrificial service and universal loyalty. He espoused nonviolence. He called for the love of the enemy. For all this, he was executed.<sup>32</sup> But on the Damascus road, Paul met Jesus resurrected, and embraced him as the Messiah, the Messiah of Jews and gentiles alike.<sup>33</sup>

From that day forward Paul became an advocate of a justice configured by the cross, a justice shaped by the universal love of

Christ and shorn of the distinctions and violence engendered by in-group/out-group thinking.<sup>34</sup> In light of Christ's atonement, justice is both radically inclusive and radically nonviolent.

Jesus was not the political Messiah his contemporaries expected, it is true. He rejected the group loyalties men and women so doggedly cling to and authorized not only a universal love but also a vision, rooted in Isaiah, of nonviolent, suffering service. This is an unexpected form of politics, but it is still politics, still a strategy to shape society. Mennonite theologian John Driver calls it "a new kind of power, the power of servanthood."<sup>35</sup> The cross, in short, illuminates the meaning—and the means—of justice.

According, then, to the light that streams from the cross of Calvary, the gospel is social and the cross is the proof. From this perspective, God's justice is social, his justice is central, his justice is self-involving, his justice is radically inclusive and radically nonviolent. All this follows from Christ's atonement, and all this condemns egocentric—and as we now also see, group-centered—readings of the cross. God's business, and God's joy, is community.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978 [first published in 1971]), p. 279.

2. Ellen White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1955), p. 221.

3. Two New Testament passages that link the Resurrection with the belief that Jesus is the revelation of God are Romans 1:4 and Colossians 1:18, 19. I borrow the "focus" metaphor from H. Richard Niebuhr, who in *Christ in Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 29, writes that Christ "exists . . . as the focusing point" of the movement of God toward humanity and of humanity toward God. Both divine and human being are illuminated by other means—by the prophets of old, e.g., or the church of today—but the focus is

imperfect in Christ.

4. Here the classic essay is Krister Stendahl's "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in the author's *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 78-96.

5. The relevant Hebrew words include *sedez/sedaqah* and *mispat*, with *hesed*, meaning "steadfast love," an important part of background. For a recent application, see Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). From the Bible consult, for example, Deuteronomy 10, Psalm 146, Isaiah 1 and 2 and 58 and 61. For a study of community-building as the basic impulse of the biblical tradition, see Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

6. Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical*

*Theology*, Vol. II: *Life, Ministry and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978-1979), pp. 156, 157.

7. For two summaries of 20th-century scholarship, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), and Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987); for studies of individual Gospels see Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), on Luke; and Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), on Mark; for an historical study of Jesus and social revolution, see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

8. So writes Borg, in *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 150.

9. On this see Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 169.

10. The classic, and much discussed, short history of the doctrine is Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan, 1969 [first published in 1931]).

11. Among them, Smuts van Rooyen, Desmond Ford, Norman Gulley, and Richard Fredericks. The latter's recent account appeared in "The Moral Influence Theory—Its Attraction and Inadequacy," *Ministry* (March 1992), pp. 6-10.

12. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 211.

13. J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" *Tyndale Bulletin*, XXV (1974), p. 30.

14. The KJV, RSV, and NRSV translations say "righteous" or "righteousness"; the NEB and REB translations say "justice."

15. For an essay connecting Paul's doctrine with the Hebrew idea of justice, or covenant faithfulness, see Sam K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XCIX (1980), 241-290. For a recent collection of essays on Romans, in which matters I am here discussing figure prominently, see Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate: Expanded Revised Edition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).

16. See Galatians 3: 6-9, 13, 14, and Genesis 12:1-3. For a similar world-embracing vision, see Isaiah 42:1-4.

17. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 168.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 292, 334.

19. The sentence reflects the analysis of forgiveness found in James McClendon's *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), pp. 224-229.

20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 99.

21. Besides *The Cost of Discipleship*, which cites numerous biblical passages in developing its theme of following Christ, consult the compendium in chapter 7 of John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*.

22. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 20.

23. The phrase is from page 2 of a manuscript on "Teaching in the Language of Religion," to be published in the journal *Religious Education*.

24. 1 Timothy 2:5.

25. See Philippians 3:10.

26. Rauschenbusch's phrase, from *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 273.

27. Consider Genesis 12:2, 3 and Luke 1:72-75.

28. Hamerton-Kelly's book, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), draws on the theory of the Durkheimian critic and sociologist Rene Girard, who argues that "sacred violence" is the energy that drives social systems.

29. See Philippians 3:4-6.

30. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p. 65.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

32. The works cited in footnote 7 all support these claims.

33. Hamerton-Kelly is taking issue in his book with those writers, among them J. Gager and L. Gaston, who, after Franz Rosenweig, argue that "Jesus is not the Messiah of Israel but only the Messiah of the gentiles" (p. 186). Paul actually broke with the Judaism he knew.

34. Hamerton-Kelly does (pp. 138, 139) raise questions, at the point of his doctrine of election, about Paul's consistency in rejecting in-group/out-group thinking.

35. John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1986), p. 91.