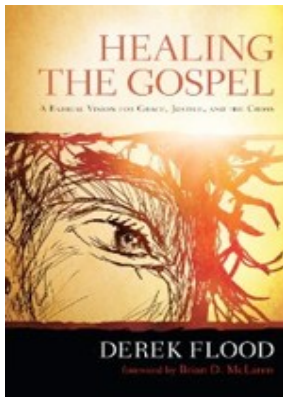


Penal Substitution vs. Christus Victor

Understanding the Cross from the perspective of grace rather than legalism

Derek Flood



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Introduction

As a Christian I had always understood the cross on a heart level—I understood deep down in my guts that the cross screamed out how much God loved me. It was something beautiful that spoke of how valued I was in the eyes of God as expressed in the simple and profound statement “*Jesus died for me.*” Moreover, I experienced in the depths of who I am the power of the cross working in my life—the love of God opened up to me, bringing life into the dark and broken places. Yet while I knew this saving power and reality of the cross as an experiential reality in my life, at the same time I didn't understand in my head how it worked. I was unable to communicate to others the radical love that I saw and experienced there at the foot of the cross, and found myself dissatisfied with the legalistic explanations I heard. Why did God need the cross to save us? How does it make anything better? These were the questions I asked myself.

For many with a hurtful understanding of Christianity this is vitally important. For them the cross is something terrible. It shows them a cruel God who accuses and condemns us for something we cannot help and then murders his own son to appease this bloodlust. They do not see love in the cross; they see something cruel, they see a God who frightens them. How can they open their hearts to the one who is Life, who is Love, with this hurtful and false image of God blocking them? Understanding how the cross shows us the radical love of God is crucial here because it affects how we can trust and open our lives to God's love. In this paper I would like to communicate what I see in the cross, so we can come to a fuller deeper understanding of its beauty and radicality. So those with a hurtful understanding of the cross can replace it with a life-giving understanding, and as we understand better with our heads, we can worship God better in our lives.

This hurtful image of God is largely based on a way of understanding the cross that is known as “Vicarious Atonement,” “Penal Substitution,” or “Satisfaction-Doctrine,” *Satisfaction-Doctrine* is the most wide spread view of the cross. In fact it is so common that many people think this is the *only* view of the cross, or that this is simply “what the Bible teaches.” Indeed, one can find passages that seem to support this view. One finds the words “atonement” or “sacrifice” and assumes that they are to be understood in the context of the Satisfaction-Doctrine. Instinctively we take this view we have been taught and project it onto the biblical passages rather than letting Scripture speak for itself in its own context. I would like to show this is simply *not* “what the Bible teaches” but is far more something rooted in man-made doctrines heavily influenced by western Medieval philosophy. There are better ways to understand the cross that fit with who we know Jesus to be in the inward experience of our relationship with God and with the witness of Scripture.

A note on the Scriptural references: Because this paper deals with our understanding of Scripture and challenges the traditionally held position and doctrines, I have made an effort to give biblical references where appropriate. This is not done as a “proof text” but rather to allow the reader to investigate further on their own. Each reference unless explicitly quoted contains a link to the full text. In my experience the people who most benefit from this are people with a negative experience of Christianity who find the message of grace attractive, but claim that seeing God from a perspective of grace is “not biblical.”

So these references are there to encourage the reader to challenge what they have been taught and to investigate on their own what Scripture really does say.

Part One: Satisfaction-Doctrine

You may not be familiar with the terms “*Penal Substitution*” or “*Satisfaction-Doctrine*,” but you surely know the basic theology behind it: It is a theology that can sound shockingly legalistic and cruel:

You have broken the law because it is impossible to keep it, and so you must have broken it. And because you cannot keep this impossible to keep law you will be charged with death because “the penalty for sin is death” and those are just the rules. God must have blood because the law requires it; there must be a penalty paid. The only payment that would have been enough is sacrificing someone who was the “perfect law-keeper,” someone who could live a perfect life without sin. So God decided to kill his own Son on the cross to appease his legal need for blood. Now that Jesus has been sacrificed God is no longer mad at us for not doing what we can't do anyway, so we can now come and live with him forever—as long as we are grateful to him for his “mercy” to us.

This may sound crass, but this is exactly how our presentation of the cross sounds to many people. The Gospel is communicated in a way that does not reflect a merciful, loving heavenly Father, but sounds like a horrifying picture of abuse, like a bloodthirsty tyrant we should be afraid of. We as Christians who know God to be a loving father, who have experienced God's overwhelming love breaking through to us need to step back and take a long look at how we have come to share the Gospel message with others. I do not mean to say that we should water down Scripture, nor do I want to try to sugar coat the cross to make it palatable to modern ears. The cross is about death, our death, and in a society that desperately tries to shut out the suffering of others and numb our own suffering with distractions, it is a hard pill to swallow. But when the image of God that we express in our presentation of the Gospel is not the God revealed in Jesus, but a God that seems an unjust and unloving tyrant, then we need to think long and hard about whether we are being true ambassadors of Christ. We as Christians know first-hand that the Father heart of God is a heart of compassion. The classic verse John 3:16 says “*for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*” The motivation was not bloodlust, or even a need for punishment, but *love*. Jesus said the reason he was going to die was to show us his love: “*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends*” (Jn 15:13). So if this is true then why do we present the Gospel in a way that makes God appear unloving and unjust? Where did we get such an idea?

SATISFACTION-DOCTRINE

Satisfaction-Doctrine, also known as “*Penal Substitution*” or “*Substitutionary Atonement*,” is usually credited to St Anselm of Canterbury who formulated the idea into a cohesive systematic theology around 1000 AD. It is not necessarily, as we will see later, a reflection of what the Apostles or the early church believed, but was primarily a theory developed in the Middle Ages—a thousand years *after* the Apostles. I have made an effort to refer to this teaching as *Satisfaction-Doctrine* rather than the more popular term “*Vicarious Atonement*” because *Vicarious Atonement* is a legitimate biblical concept where a parallel is drawn from the temple sacrifices to Christ's death for us on the cross. We will

explore this in more detail in part two. Satisfaction Doctrine in contrast is a systematic theory of the cross based in legal framework and centering in the idea that God must be appeased or satisfied before he can forgive. Satisfaction-Docctrine focuses on legal terms like *God's law, punishment, justice, payment, and debt*. Back in the Middle Ages rationalistic theories and judicial systems were considered the highest way of thinking, whereas relational issues like *love, passion, and sacrifice* were considered “weak” because they were connected with what were considered feminine qualities. Thus the early church's understanding of the cross as illustrating the drama of God's passionate love struggling to liberate us from the power of sin and death was considered too “emotive” and thus “inferior” and was replaced with their legal model.

Gustaf Aulen, the author of the classic work *Christus Victor*, writes, “There lies behind this criticism a particular view of theology: an implied demand that the Christian faith must be clearly expressed in the form of rational doctrine.”¹ Now, there is nothing wrong with rational thinking. We are commanded to love God with all of our heart, soul, and *mind*. But if we think we can express the full depths of the human condition solely through rational thinking, let alone fathom the depths of God's saving work through our tiny little theorems, we are seriously kidding ourselves. When we strip the human experience of the language of passion, of love, then we are left with a cold, soulless theology that does not express or address who we are as whole people. This is not a matter of emotions, but of a language that speaks to the heart, that transcends the rational mind's ability to categorize life into neat little compartments and systems. Love cannot be dissected into a formula without trivializing it. It can only be articulated in the language of the poet, the lover. The heights of theology are not found in a rational system, but in the language of song crying from the depths of a heart—deep calling to deep. This heart-song was found in the early Christian church's understanding of the cross as the drama of a loving God's search for man, a view known as “*Christus Victor*.” We will be taking an in depth look at regaining this heart-song of the early church in Part Three. This will require a major paradigm shift because in the rationally entrenched mindset of the Middle Ages (and in many ways of our mindset today), the drama, the poetry, the passion with which the early church understood the cross was deemed too “emotional” and replaced by their “superior” legal system.

Today we are still very much affected by this kind of rationalistic thought because of the influence of the Enlightenment. What was originally supposed to be liberating (through reason we could break free from the dogma of authority) has now largely turned into a dogma itself—an unquestioned “common sense” told to us from the “expert authorities” from above, where the *only* thing real is the material and the *only* way to approach life is through rationalistic “scientific” thought. In this spiritually oppressive environment the things that give life meaning and depth, that make us truly human and move us deeply are thought of polemically as “emotional” and “superstitious.” Science today has itself long since moved beyond this limited way of seeing the world, and thankfully as people move beyond outdated enlightenment *scientism* there is a new openness to the “things of the heart” emerging. In our postmodern era people resonate with the concept of story like never before. Thus the first century church's drama of Christus Victor as a way of understanding the cross is suited to this generation like no other. Perhaps we can even understand in some ways better today than they could. But there is at the same time a sense of detachment and relativism in the air of postmodernism. The task therefore is to understand the story as a “meta-narrative,” as our “Story” with a capitol S. Allowing through story for

¹ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of the atonement* (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1969). This is the classic book that defined the term “Christus Victor.”

the transcendent absolute to break into a limited relativistic perspective. To break away from the limited confines of the modernist rationalism and the post-modernist relativism towards a “theology of the heart.” This concept of meta-narrative and story will be covered in the end of Part 3 but I want to strongly emphasize as you read through this paper that the main goal is not to par one rational theology of the cross against another, but to switch from understanding the cross in the terms of a rational systemized transaction, and instead encounter it in terms of passion and depth—a theology of the heart.

JUSTICE AND MERCY

In *Satisfaction-Doctrine's* system God is seen primarily as “judge,” and since a judge must be *impartial*, and *detached*, this judicial image was projected onto God and we saw God's kingdom in these legal terms. This is the *opposite* of the image of God that we see reflected in Jesus. Jesus is not impartial but passionately defends the voiceless and the marginalized; he shows us that God is not distant and detached but *here*—Emanuel: “God with us”—close to the broken hearted, deeply caring about us. So the first problem with the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* is that since it sees life exclusively through a legalistic framework, it takes the love and the relational aspects out of the cross (which are absolutely essential to its understanding) and turns it into a calculated legal transaction. Reason-based rather than revelation-based. Rather than letting the revelation of who Jesus is as revealed in Scripture revolutionize our understanding of who God is, *Satisfaction-Doctrine* takes a medieval understanding of justice and projects this man-made image onto God.

Ironically, as we will see in this section, even in its attempt to champion justice, *Satisfaction-Doctrine* does not present a biblical picture of what justice is about, but a legalistic medieval one. Biblically to “bring justice” does not mean to bring punishment, but to bring healing and reconciliation. Justice means to *make things right*. All through the Prophets justice is associated with caring for others, as something that is not in conflict with mercy, but rather an expression of it. Biblically, justice is God's saving action at work for all that are oppressed,

Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

This is what the LORD says: “Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed.” (Jeremiah 21:12)

The way that we “administer justice,” the Prophets tell us, is by encouraging and helping the oppressed. In contrast to what the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* says, God's justice is not in conflict with his mercy, they are inseparable. True justice can only come *through* mercy,

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Administer true justice: show mercy and compassion to one another.” (Zechariah 7:9)

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. (Isaiah 30:18)

If we want to understand the concept of justice as the writers of the Old Testament did, then we must see it as a “setting things right again.” Thus when Christ comes, the way that he brings about justice is *through* mercy and compassion. Notice how in this next verse Christ does not bring justice with a hammer, but with a tenderness that cares for the broken and the abused.

“I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations... A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.” (Matthew 12:18-21)

The way that God brings about justice and “leads it to victory” is *through* acts of compassion—sheltering the “smoldering wick,” and the “bruised reed.” And what does Christ “proclaim to the nations” to bring about this justice?

“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

The justice that Jesus ushers in, the righteousness he brings, have to do with God pouring his love out on us, with God showing his compassion for the lost and the poor. With God meeting us in our need and liberating us from sin and oppression. With “setting things right”—that is what biblical justice is about. There is no dichotomy between a “God of justice” in the Old Testament and a “God of mercy” in the New. There is no split in God's character. God has always been a compassionate God, a God of love. Jesus reveals who God is and who God has always been. Justice is about mercy. Justice comes through mercy and always has.

An additional problem in our understanding is a worldly understanding of mercy as being the same as blind leniency. So we have a “judgement” which takes sin seriously and desires to get payment and punishment versus a “mercy” which wants to just say it is all fine and nevermind. This is of course neither a biblical picture of mercy or of justice. Mercy biblically is rooted in the idea of compassion and is not about closing your eyes in some form of denial, wishing that there was no conflict, but just the opposite: Compassion means truly seeing through the eyes of another and suffering with them. Jesus had mercy on sinners not because he was denying their sin, but precisely because he did see. The New Testament Greek word for compassion literally means to “have your guts wrenched.” It agonized Jesus to see people like this. It tore him up inside. And because of that compassion he longed to bring them justice, to release the oppressed, heal the afflicted, and forgive the condemned. Like mercy biblical justice is rooted in compassion and is a desire to see things made right, to see relationships restored, to see broken lives mended, to see hurtful people come to their knees in repentance and be made new.

There is a biblical concept of “judgement” or “wrath.” Jesus warned frequently that the people were calling judgement on themselves and called them to turn (repent) from the course they were on. Judgement or wrath is the consequence of sinful or hurtful action. It follows from sin like falling is the consequence of jumping off a cliff. Paul writes in the Romans that “the wages of sin is death.” The wage, the thing you get as a result, what you have coming to you, is death. “but the gift of God is eternal life.” God who is a God of love (compassion) and justice (making this right) desires not to see us die, but to give us life. God desires to break us out of the vicious cycle of consequence and to

therefore bring about justice—to make things right again, to restore us to where we were meant to be. Not by saying that it is of no consequence that we are bleeding and broken, but by taking us out of the treadmill of death, by liberating us from the tyranny of hurting and being hurt. That is what biblical justice is all about. It is not in conflict with compassion, it is rooted in compassion.

Despite man's concoctions of what justice “ought to be” the biblical picture of justice is about making things right again, about restoration, about liberation. In the biblical paradigm death is not what “justice requires,” rather death is the enemy that justice conquers through the cross (1 Cor 15:25-26,54-57). Man's picture of justice is to put people in prison; Jesus' vision of justice was to release the captives from their prison (Luke 4:18) We need to get away from narrow man-made concepts of justice and understand the godly life-giving justice that God sent Jesus to bring about. We need to stop seeing justice as the world does and see it as God does. This will require a major paradigm shift in our thinking.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55 :8-9)

“For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:9)

We should not take our human concepts of earthly justice and try to cram what God did through the cross into that small understanding, but rather let Jesus and the cross show us what God's radical and liberating justice is really about.

THE GRAVITY OF SIN

This is not to say that sin is not a real problem. There is real evil and profound hurt, injustice, cruelty, and oppression in our world. People are trapped in the vicious cycles of abuse, hurting and being hurt. Everything is definitely *not* fine. It is crucial that we not whitewash over evil. When Scripture talks about bringing justice by defending the poor, it also means that the oppressors are in some serious trouble. Jesus did not pull any punches when he confronted the hypocritical and oppressive religious authorities of his day. One of the main reasons that the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* is so widespread is that people have the mistaken notion that the only other alternative to its legalistic view is the liberal tendency to deny the reality of evil and the blackness of sin. They see it as an either-or situation: either one accepts the legalistic paradigm of *Satisfaction-Doctrine* or one denies the problem of sin altogether. It is a false dichotomy of law vs. anarchy, while the entire concept of grace is left out of the picture.

And exactly this is the problem: while the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* attempts to take sin seriously, in the end it fails to take it seriously enough because it deals with sin through a legal system instead of through grace. Because of its legal paradigm it only deals superficially with sin and can do nothing to really reform it inwardly. Punishment does not reform, it hardens. Compassion is what reforms a heart. God loves us while we are his enemies and it is this radical love which breaks the hard shell of our calloused hearts: “*it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance.*” (Romans 2:4) Moreover, to say that God is

satisfied by a payment does not take into account the gravity of sin's hold on us, of the blackness in our hearts, the reality of the real hurt there. A legal acquittal cannot heal a broken and hardened heart. Only love can do that.

It is crucial to understand that *Satisfaction-Doctrine* when it approaches the cross from a purely judicial perspective is not attempting to address these inner issues of reform and transformation. A legal theory, by its very nature, cannot address these things. From a legal framework the purpose of this “satisfaction” is not to heal us or restore us inwardly, but is rather a mere legal-social function: to satisfy society. It does nothing to reform or liberate the heart from the bondage of sin, but instead makes a public statement of: “*See how bad that was? Now you have to pay for it.*” In this legal mindset one pays the court a fine for a wrong done and the judge is then “satisfied” with this punishment and is able to declare everything settled. The demands of justice are declared satisfied; case closed. But does this punishment really make anything better? Does paying a fine undo the hurt that was done? It is never the intent of a legal theory to affect us inwardly; it is only a legal transaction. It does nothing to fundamentally change the human heart, nothing to make things right in the sense of biblical restoration and renewal. Thus the *Satisfaction-Doctrine*, although it prides itself on facing the gravity of sin, in fact treats sin superficially without dealing with its roots. *Satisfaction-Doctrine* addresses society's need for punishment, but does not address the sin lodged in our hearts.

This problem has traditionally been dealt with by separating the concepts of “justification” and “sanctification.” Justification is understood as our being declared “justified” (declared not guilty) and then we begin the process of sanctification (inner change). Justification is understood in legal terms whereas sanctification, since it deals with inner healing, is understood in more relational ones. But in this switching of paradigms midstream the whole concept becomes very awkward and unnatural. Questions arise, like: “*how can God declare me sinless when I still sin?*” A much better paradigm for understanding all of this is an entirely relational one. Just as in printing, type on a page that is “set in place” is referred to as being “*justified*” so also justification in our lives involves a positional change where we are brought out of darkness and into God's family. God takes us out of a world of hurt and hurting, out of our estranged state, and brings us into his family, reconciling us with life. We are not erroneously declared “innocent” , or “good” , but declared “loved by God” . And as Paul asks, if God has accepted us, who can condemn us? Who can separate us from that love? (cf. Ro 8:31-35) This love from God is not based on who we are but on who God is. We are justified (set right) by God's love, not by law. Likewise, sanctification comes through God's love—as we live in his love, that love helps us to learn to love others and ourselves too. Understood in this relational paradigm justification is a change of identity, a positional change of who we belong to. We are no longer slaves to sin, but are liberated out of that estranged identity, redeemed, bought back, and now belong to God. Thus understanding the concept of justification by grace in Paul's epistles from this relational framework fits much better with the entire thrust of his writing and terminology, whereas from a legal perspective the terms quickly become confusing and problematic.

A second problem with *Satisfaction-Doctrine's* focus on a purely legal paradigm, is that sin is seen as something exclusively individual. Only we as individuals can sin by stepping out of bounds of the system and its rules, but that system and those rules remain beyond question. Society and the world go unquestioned because they represent the perfect standard. Thus sin on a societal level—the corruption of authorities, corporations, communities, cliques, nations, and church—is institutionalized and

justified because the “authorities” and the system *must* be right since they represent the standard one can transgress from. The truth is, the fall has imprisoned and warped us, but it has also imprisoned and warped our society and systems as well. Christ came to break sin's hold over both us and our world, bringing all of life under the lordship of Christ both individually and corporately.

While conservatives tend to focus only on the individual aspects of sin and liberals tend to focus only on a societal aspect of sin, the Biblical model addresses sin both from an individual and societal level: We live in a fallen world with fallen systems and oppressive “powers and rulers and authorities” that are opposed to God's kingdom of love and justice. The church's mission of social justice thus means seeking to help the “poor”—that is people who have fallen under the grips of these oppressive systems, and working to reform our systems into the image of God's kingdom. That reform and liberation is not just about opposing a “worldly” inhumane society and systems however, but also about taking responsibility for our own complicity in those systems. This may be by our repenting of our taking advantage of power to selfishly lord over others, or it may be by our repenting of our acceptance of the inhuman role of the victim and taking hold of our humanity again—“dying to” the hold these worldly systems have over us, and through a change of allegiance being brought into God's care and rule. These concepts will be discussed in detail in Part Three, but the key point here is simply that in a legal paradigm like *Satisfaction-Doctrine*, since it is assumed that the society itself and its rules are beyond question, the entire social dimension of sin is lost. The call of the Gospel to reform our hearts and our world is replaced by us conforming our behavior to fit with the status quo.

As you can see there are a lot of problems with the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* which has come to be the dominant view today, both in the orthodox Protestant and Catholic church. But it wasn't always this way. The dominant view of the early church, of the Church Fathers, and of Scripture is not the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* which was a theory developed a thousand years later, but instead is a view known as *Christus Victor*. It is about how Christ is *victorious* over the powers of sin and death and frees us from their bondage through the cross. It focuses on the struggle between the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and the forces of the Domination System and its deluding and oppressive captivity. Thus it is a view of atonement (literally “at-one-ment” reunion, reconciliation) that speaks not only of our personal reconciliation, but also of the reconciliation of the powers and systems we live in.

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities...so that in everything he might have supremacy...For God was pleased...through him to reconcile to himself all things. (Colossians 1:16-20)

Thus *Christus Victor* entailed a radical critique of society as an inherent part of the Gospel. The reconciliation of every area of life. In the first-century church this view of the struggle of the power of Love to free us from the oppressive and corruptive System was a common theme as the church struggled under the oppressive powers of the Roman Empire. But with the conversion of emperor Constantine, Christianity became the religion *of* the Empire, and *Christus Victor* began to fall out of favour, since it is a symbol of liberation and revolution, in favor of more authority-based legal understandings, as Walter Wink writes, “not because of intrinsic inadequacies [in the Christus Victor view of the cross], but because it was subversive to the church's role as a state religion.”²

² Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers : Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (The Powers, Vol 3) (Fortress Pr, 1992). I cannot recommend Wink's book highly enough. It is absolutely brilliant. He really opens up the

Rather than seeing evil as a corrupting power to be confronted in our lives and in our societies, evil became something “over there” rather than “in here,” it became anyone who was not “in,” anyone who transgressed the system. Wink continues, “Atonement became a highly individualized transaction between the believer and God; society was assumed to be Christian, so the idea that the work of Christ entails the radical critique of society was largely abandoned.”³ Thus the oppressive system itself became the model of who God was. Rather than Christ liberating us from the powers as *Christus Victor* says, we were to be brought back under the authority of the powers, “When God is modeled as an authoritarian lawgiver then the highest virtue becomes obedience, an obedience required even when the laws that we obey deprive us of our essential being.”⁴

Bottom Line:

St Anselm often responded to critics of his *Satisfaction-Doctrine* by declaring “*you have yet to weigh the gravity of sin.*” But as we have seen in this section, the *Satisfaction-Doctrine*, although it sets out to do just this, because it is based on law instead of grace, fails to deal with the gravity of sin itself. It offers only superficial cosmetic solutions in our personal lives, completely ignoring and even institutionalizing sin on a societal level by assuming that society and its laws are beyond question.

depths of the New Testament writer's insights and worldview into the nature of evil and the hope of the Gospel. A good part of part 3 of this paper I owe to Wink's insights on the Powers.

3 Wink, *Powers*

4 Wink, *Powers*

Part Two: Legalism vs. Relationship

In Part One we looked at the biblical concept of justice as “making things right,” and how it contrasts with the perspective of *Satisfaction-Doctrine* which sees justice in conflict with mercy. In this section we will be exploring the purpose of the law and the sacrificial system from a first-century perspective (that of the Apostles and Church Fathers) and contrasting it with the medieval perspective of the *Satisfaction-Doctrine*.

This understanding is important because the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* sees the law as the granite foundation of God's dealing with humanity. In this legal paradigm, everything must be interpreted through the law, including salvation. Thus salvation is seen not as a liberation from the oppressive power of sin and death, but about fulfilling a legal requirement. Likewise sin in this legal paradigm is not about alienation or separation (which reflect a relationship model), but about missing the mark, transgressing from the law and from the system.

In *Satisfaction-Doctrine* love is not central, but viewed with suspicion. It is something that needs to be watched closely, lest it infringe on the demands of justice. In contrast to this, the book of Romans talks about the “double sidedness” of the law: it is something fundamentally good (Rom 7:7,12), but when it is outside of love the law can become a tyrant (Gal 3:23; Col 2:14), that “brings death” (Rom 7:8-11). Throughout the New Testament, it is love and not law that is central to how we understand God. Grace is the foundation of our faith, not law (Rom 6:14) Love is the essential quality that defines who God is—God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). Both Paul and Jesus say that to love is the summation of the entire law and the prophets (Gal 5:14, Rom 13:9, Mt 22:36-40). Love is the greatest of all virtues, (1 Cor 13:13). It is the mark that God is truly in our lives (1 Jn 4:8), the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). If love is absent, all other virtues such as wisdom, faith, sacrifice, miracles, obedience, you name it, become meaningless and worthless (1 Cor 13:1-5), but if we have God's love for us, then nothing—not Hell or sword or trouble or sickness—nothing can pull us away (Rom 8:31-39). So it is love that needs to govern the law, not the other way around. It is love that needs to rule in our lives and societies.

In contrast to this, Satisfaction-Doctrine makes the law central. God is seen as the lawgiver-judge seeking the “perfect law-keeper.” “The judge” in this view is not concerned here with relationship, but with obedience. Transgress the law at any point, and you are condemned and given the death sentence (“for the wages of sin is death”). If you have ever read an evangelistic tract, you have most likely heard this view expressed. The Chick tracts⁵ are a classic example of this, where in comic book form the characters always end up having a conversation similar to this one:

Bob the Sinner: “But I am a good person”
 Fred the Christian: “Have you ever lied, Bob?”
 Bob: “Well yes, hasn't everyone?”
 Fred: “Then God's word says you are headed for Hell”

⁵ Want to be told you are going to hell by a comic book? Then this is just the thing for you. You can see all of the infamous “Chick tracks” at www.chick.com. Don't say I didn't warn you though.

Bob: "I am frightened!"

Fred: "Will you pray this prayer with me then?..."

Tell a lie, steal a cookie, and you are condemned to Hell. Since no one can keep this kind of law, since "all have sinned," their theory continues, God requires that Jesus comes and lives a perfect life so as to be an acceptable sacrifice to God. That is a classic *Satisfaction-Doctrine* in its popular culture form. And it is allegedly based on the writings of the Apostle Paul. The problem is that Paul does not base his gospel in law, but in grace. And thus these Bible quotes are taken out of context to support something that Paul never would have—the creation of a new law. Paul says this in no uncertain terms, "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

Satisfaction-Doctrine begins with the assumption that God demands a performance of perfection. Paul in contrast says we can't come to God through law but only through faith. It is therefore absurd to say that Paul supports or advocates the *Satisfaction-Doctrine* because if there is one thing that Paul stressed over and over it is that God *never* wanted us to come to him through performance and works and law, but always from day one wanted to be in a relationship with us. When Paul speaks of "atonement," he simply means our reconciliation seen in relational terms, not legal ones. Similarly, Paul does not see sin in a legal framework as a "transgression," but in relational terms as "separation" (Eph 4:18), and "alienation" (Col 1:21). Sin means being estranged from a relationship with God, and salvation entails being restored into that relationship.

Paul does indeed say that all of us, including himself, have sinned. We are all in need, all flawed. Paul even characterizes himself as the greatest of all sinners (1 Tim 1:15), but he never claims that we are incapable of keeping the law. In fact, Paul claims that he kept it. He describes himself as "as far as legalistic righteousness—faultless" (Phil 3:6). Yet he goes on to say that he considers this accomplishment to be "rubbish" (v. 8). compared to being in a relationship with God in Christ through grace, and he does not try to encourage people to follow the way of law, but to enter into the freedom of the way of grace through the Spirit. Why? Because Paul knew from his own life that his zealous, flawless keeping of the letter of the law led him to be, in his own words, "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and violent man... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15).

His former religious legalism led him to being hateful and abusive. It "produced death" in him, he says, and "alienated" him from Life. Paul knew first hand the severe damage legalistic fanaticism could do in one's own life and in the lives of others, which is why he was so opposed to legalism later (cf. the entire book of Galatians which is a treatise on the dangers of legalism replacing grace). It took an encounter with the risen Jesus and a community that loved its enemies to turn him around, but once he (literally) saw the light, he became an outspoken champion of the way of grace over law.

Compare that picture of the results of legalism in Paul's life before his personal encounter with God, with the example of Jesus: Unlike Paul, and unlike us, Jesus was without sin. Yet from a legal perspective (unlike the "legally faultless" Paul) Jesus broke the law frequently. And what's more, he broke the law *so that* he would be without sin: he broke the law in the interest of love. He broke the Sabbath to heal the sick (Lk 6:7-11) the penalty for which is death (Exodus 31:15), he touched the

untouchables thereby making himself defiled according to the law (compare Lev 15:19 and Mk 5:25-43), and fellowshiped with sinners (Mk 2:15 Mt 9:10 Lk 5:29 Lk 15:2) thereby getting a reputation as a “friend of sinners” and a sinner himself (Lk 7:34 Lk 7:36-50). When the law required that a woman be stoned to death for committing adultery (Lev 20:10), he forgave her instead (Jn 8:3-11). He forgave people freely even though this was a direct affront to the temple priests (Mk 2:6-7 Mt 21:15, 23) who required a sacrifice to grant God's forgiveness (Heb 5:1-3). Jesus required none. Jesus does not side with the religious authorities but shocks and confronts the religious establishment as he defends the outcast, the rejected, the untouchable. He does not identify with a legal system, he identifies with the lamb, the victim. He is not by any means the model law-keeper, but instead models the perfect relationship with God—Father and Son. He models what it looks like to live by the Spirit of grace. He does not show us a lawgiver God who demands perfect obedience but instead reflects God's heart of compassion towards us, especially those marginalized and rejected by the System.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Understanding the cross from a legal perspective ignores the fact that the eternal model for God's dealing with humanity is relationship. Even the heroes of the Old Testament are not noted for their moral perfection but for their faith—for their trust (cf. Hebrews 11). The covenant promise that God makes with Abraham is not of law but of a trust relationship (Galatians 3:6-9). “The law introduced 430 years later,” Paul writes, “does not set aside the covenant previously established with God” (v. 17) “What was then the purpose of the law?” Paul asks (v. 19) He goes on to explain that the law was put there as a “caretaker” or a “tutor” to protect and lead us to Christ (v. 24) Just as a child needs clear rules and borders at first but later as it matures learns to be responsible, so the law by setting borders leads us into maturity and beyond the tutelage of a system of rules into a responsible relationship with God through a life of following the Spirit. The law thus acted as a transitional measure to restrain and curb a people's destructive and hurtful tendencies, and to lead them to maturity as they internalized the love and compassion that the law pointed to. “The entire law is summed up in a single command: “love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14)

The law was not an eternal blueprint from God for all time but a specific relational word spoken into the already existing sinful culture of the Hebrews to point them towards God's true way of compassion. As Gilbert Bilezikian explains,

God's word was applied to sinful conditions such as polygamy, patriarchy, adultery, and so on, not to condone or endorse such evils but to limit the damaging effects of those inevitable results of the fall. Likewise was violence curbed. By placing a limit on retaliatory practices (only one eye for an eye, one tooth for a tooth, only one life for a life, cf. Exodus 21:23-24 the Old Testament legislation attempted to bring under control the murderous tendencies of fallen human nature (cf. Genesis 4:23-24 without endorsing violence as a way of life among humans. Jesus and the text of the new covenant make it clear that the restoration of the creation purposes of God in the new community has invalidated many provisions of the Old Testament legislation by fulfilling their intent. In the community ruled by love, the law of the talion (Exodus 21:23-24) becomes superseded and is therefore abrogated (Matthew 5:38-39). The same is true for Old

Testament regulations limiting the evil impact of polygamy, patriarchy, adultery, and so on.⁶

It bears repeating: the law was not an eternal model but was a relational word spoken prescriptively into an existing fallen culture to curb their hurtful and abusive behavior and ultimately point them towards God's way of love in a personal relationship. The law was never intended as a substitute for a relationship with God, for "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Galatians 3:21) But rather the law points us to faith: "Now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (3:25).

Both Paul and Jesus in their criticism of the law were not attacking Judaism with which they both identified deeply, but how sin had taken that law and turned it into something that caused people to draw lines that kept others away from God and justified self-righteousness. They were speaking out against the deadly spirit of legalism. Paul explains that the law was intended to lead us into relationship, to prepare us for grace, yet for many of us, including Paul, the law led to legalistic "Phariseism"—a hurtful, self-righteous judgmentalism rooted in law not in love.⁷ Rather than seeing where the law pointed—towards love and a living relationship with God—Paul had mistakenly focused on the law as an absolute system, as an end in itself. By obeying this system, by performing, by doing and believing the right things, he hoped to be able to gain God's favor, but instead ended up with a toxic and abusive faith. "*I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring me life actually brought me death*" (Romans 7:10). Paul cries out then "*Who can save me from this death trap!*" (v 24) and the answer he finds is grace.

That is Paul's story, and the story of many of us as well. The irony is, we cannot perform our way into God's favor because we were never meant to function separated and estranged from God. Outside of a relationship with God we cannot be *right-eous*. We can only be truly ourselves together with God. The

6 Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles : What the Bible Says About a Woman's Place in Church and Family* (Baker Book House, 1985). Bilezikian bases his argument for biblical gender equality on a very sound contextual approach to interpreting Scripture, rather than the "plain meaning" approach common among many Christians, which inevitably results in the reader unconsciously projecting their own worldview and understanding onto the text. For those who hold a high view of Scripture, but wish to avoid the pitfalls of literalism it is a great resource to understanding the Bible as a whole.

7 It is easy to scapegoat the Pharisees as the "hypocritical bad guys" of the Gospels. But the Pharisees have much in common with Orthodox Evangelical Christianity: They believed in the resurrection of the good, the immortality of the soul, and eternal punishment. They focused on an internal reform within Judaism based on the Bible and oral traditions, very much like our focus on the Bible and orthodoxy. They emphasized a pure moral lifestyle, very much like our focus on personal morality and piety. Jesus never criticized their beliefs, just their practice (Mt 23:1-4), because in their effort to live a righteous and biblical faith - just as with us - there was a tendency to become legalistic, self-righteous, and judgmental which kept people away from grace. When Jesus said "your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees" (Mt 5:20) he meant that we should never focus so much on being orthodox and moral that we lose sight of the heart of the matter - love, compassion, caring for people, justice (Mt 23:22-23). We should obey the letter *and* the spirit of the law.

Just as it is unfair and inaccurate to portray all Christians as "hypocritical and legalistic" as Hollywood often has, it is equally wrong to portray all Pharisees in this way. Rather we should hold the mirror up to our own lives and be aware of the dangers of legalism there. It is easy to find someone to point a finger at - blame the Pharisees, blame the Fundamentalists, blame it on the catholic church, but we need to instead look at how these patterns of judgmentalism and lovelessness, how this "yeast", is operating in our own lives and break out of that game.

model that Jesus demonstrates for us again and again is not that we first repent and are then forgiven, but rather that *we are first forgiven, and then we repent*. We do not have to be good in order to be accepted and loved by God, rather we are accepted and loved by God and then we can be good. There, in that place of acceptance and safety with God, we have the freedom to change. Thus as Paul says, faith does not nullify the law, but rather it enables us to fulfill its purpose (Romans 3:31). Eugene Peterson, in his brilliant paraphrase of the book of Romans, writes,

God does not respond to what we do, we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade...God sets all right who welcome his action and enter into it, both those who follow our religious system and those who have never heard of our religion. But by shifting the focus from what we do to what God does, don't we cancel out all our careful keeping of the ways God commanded? Not at all. What happens in fact is that by putting that entire way of life into its proper place we confirm it. (Romans 3:27-31, MSG)

Bottom Line:

Jesus said he came “*not to destroy the law but to fulfill it*” Just as we need to be reconciled to God and put in a right relationship to him, so does the law. The law is a good thing, but it cannot replace a relationship with God, but must instead point us towards that. Whether it is the Jewish law, or the doctrines of the church, or our own striving to make sense of the world, these laws and principles and systems must be subordinate to God and to Love. They must point us to God rather than replace that relationship with rules. They must encourage us in our search for Truth rather than claim to have a monopoly on it. Many Christians have effectively done away with the Jewish law only to replace it with their own laws of behavior and doctrines of “right belief” derived from the New Testament. The problem is not with Jewish law as opposed to Christian law but with *any* law that acts as a replacement for our being reliant on God to lead and rule our lives. Every law needs to come under the lordship of Christ. Our relationship in God is rooted in entering into what God does, not in what we do with our plans and systems and principles. Love is central, and we and our systems and laws and all of life need to be reconciled to Love. And in that place of reconciliation, in that place of knowing our unconditional worth as human beings rooted in God's creating us in his image, we need to love others, and see that our institutions, our laws, and our systems work towards that as well.

THE TEMPLE SYSTEM

We now turn to the temple system which was the center of religious life for the Old Testament Jews. *Satisfaction-Doctrine* traces the need for sacrifice back to the temple sacrifices so it is important to understand them from a Jewish perspective rather than a Pagan one. We will therefore be looking at the

concept of temple sacrifice in the Old Testament and the temple as it is understood in the light of the New Testament. The book of Hebrews tell us that the temple was a reflection of the heavenly realms, but the real model is the heavenly one,

[The temple priests] serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven...But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. (Hebrews 8:5-7)

The cross is the fulfillment of the temple not in the sense of the ratification or sanction of the existing earthly temple system, but in the sense of its being raised to its original purpose which was to point to heavenly things. In the time of Jesus the third temple rebuilt by the infamous Herod the Great had become a corrupted institution. The Sadducees, a religious group of the wealthy, who collaborated with the Romans in order to keep their power base, now controlled the Temple. Bringing a sacrifice became something that could only be done by people who could afford an animal from the merchants. This is the scene where Jesus kicks over the merchant stands and money-changers' tables in the temple area and says "You have made the house of my Father into a den of thieves!" (Mt 21:12-13) The temple which had a monopoly on forgiveness through the required sacrifices had turned communion with God into a franchise shutting out the poor and dooming them to a life as outcasts and untouchables. The temple had strayed from its original purpose, just as all good things can stray from their purpose and become corrupted. Instead of pointing people to heaven and drawing them close to God it shut the door in the face of the poor. Just as with our lives, the restoration of the temple involves at the same time a repentance of where it has become opposed to God's purpose, and a restoration back into that purpose. The book of Hebrews says that the cross means the end of the entire temple sacrificial system which was only a shadow of the real thing (Heb 10:1) and is declared inferior (Heb 8:6-7) and obsolete (Heb 8:13). Now that the real thing had come there was no need for the model. On the cross the temple veil that separated us from the Holy of Holies was torn in two. The dwelling of God was now in the hearts of His people (Eph 2:21-22) Thus the fulfillment of the temple through the cross meant its subversion into God's Kingdom. By making forgiveness available directly through grace, the temple's monopoly claim on franchised forgiveness was subverted. Through Christ's "coup de grace" we now have direct access to the Holy of Holies.

Moreover, the cross is not a parallel to the earthly temple system where according to *Satisfaction-Doctrine* we must bring a sacrifice to appease God, but just the opposite. Instead of us bringing a sacrifice to God to appease him, *through the cross God brings a sacrifice to us to reconcile us*. Jesus led the way for us vicariously in the ultimate sacrifice, taking on the life of a servant, aligning himself with Love, and enduring suffering for the sake of the poor and the captive. Here we have a very different concept of what "offering" means in relation to Jesus—it is not about him offering his life to appease an angry God, but about his entire life being a fragrant offering of selfless servant-love as he cared for the least and the poor. The offering that God gave in Jesus was not just about his dying. The offering God gave the world in Jesus consisted of his *entire life*, of his example showing us God's way of love, revealing for us God's heart of compassion towards us. The life of Jesus is God's gift to us in order to draw us close to himself. Jesus' entire life was a sacrifice as he took on the life of a servant caring for the poor and the forgotten. We too are called to bring our lives as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) not only "negatively" by renouncing hurtful things in our lives, but also "positively" by

living the life of other directed love that Jesus embodied. Jesus death was not the offering, *his entire life was*. The cross was the culmination of this entire life of “cross bearing” as Jesus stood up for love even to the point of suffering and death.

It should be clarified that from a Jewish perspective the purpose of the sacrifices was *never* to appease God, which is a Pagan concept, but to cleanse us (cf. Heb 9:13-14) and draw us near to God. In Paganism there are many gods: the god of war, the god of harvest, the god of fertility and so on. These gods do not represent the embodiment of goodness (which is a monotheistic view of God) but were more like a heavenly counterpart of earthly kings and dictators—very powerful and just as ruthless, temperamental, and despotic. The Pagans presented offerings to these tyrant gods to appease their wrath so that the gods were kept happy and would not decide to wipe out their crops or send a plague when they are in bad humor. Sadly many people today have adopted a similar image of God as some angry authority figure in the sky who we need to appease lest we be punished. The Jewish concept of monotheism however says that there was only one God who was the embodiment of goodness, justice, and mercy. Yahweh is not a celestial tyrant like these other false gods who present a false image of authority based on oppression. Yahweh does not need a bribe to convince him to be just or merciful because he is the *very definition* of justice and mercy. God does not need an appeasement to forgive. On the contrary Jesus tells us that Yahweh is our model for loving our enemies,

“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Math 5:44-45, 48)

God is the initiator of forgiveness. God does not respond to what we do, we respond to what God does. Our repentance is in response to God’s love *not the condition for it*. The idea of appeasement is based on a pagan concept of god-like power—on a hurtful conception of what power and greatness are. Here, power means being big enough to crush the small. Thus the small need to appease the wrath of the powerful. The biblical conception of god-like power that we see both in Jesus and the prophets however is about justice, which means defending the small. Thus the prophet Isaiah writes,

“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats... Stop bringing meaningless offerings!... wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (Isa 1:11,13,16-17)

The true gift to God is to “wash and make yourselves clean” and to seek justice by defending the oppressed and the broken. The Hebrew word translated as “sacrifice” is *korban*. The root *karev* means to “draw close.” Sacrifices are to help us draw close to God. The New Testament understanding of sacrifice as an act of self-sacrificing love traces back to this Old Testament understanding of the *korban*. There is certainly here the concept of vicarious atonement, meaning that through the sacrifice we are reconciled to God, but not understood in the legal context of a requirement or an appeasement but as an act of communion.

Nachum Braverman, a Jewish Rabbi, describes the process, “You rest your hands on its head and you confess the mistake you made. Then you slaughter the cow. It's butchered in front of you. The blood is poured on the altar. The fat is put on the altar to burn. How do you feel? (Don't say disgusted.) I'll tell you how you feel. You feel overwhelmed with emotion, jarred by the confrontation you've just had with death, and grateful to be alive. You've had a catharsis. The cow on the altar was a vicarious offering of yourself.”⁸

There is certainly here the concept of vicarious atonement, meaning that *through* the sacrifice we are *reconciled* to God, but not understood in the legal context of a requirement or an appeasement but as an act of communion. This was a deeply moving experience for the person bringing the *korban*, and is very much a parallel to the profound mystical sense of communion with God that one experiences when taking part in the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Communion is not something that we understand with our minds but something we experience with our hearts. While most people could hardly articulate what it means to them to partake of the blood and body of Christ, there is an almost universal recognition of it being a profoundly moving experience. It is a communion that goes beyond words. If you have experienced this deep communion of the Eucharist then you have understood the meaning of sacrifice on a heart level. If anything I want to draw our attention here more to the passion of the cross, not lessen it. And the best way to get a hold of this passionate self-sacrificing love is through the language of the heart, through drama and story, through the act of worship in hymns and music, through the sacrament of communion we come in contact with the drama of the radical love of God in a tangible way that engages us on a heart level letting its reality take hold of us, and move and change us.

I want to also make it clear that when I am criticizing Satisfaction-Doctrine I am doing so solely on the aspect of it portraying the sacrifice as a legal appeasement, and not on it being a vicarious atonement. As we have seen both in the scriptural motifs of sacrifice in the Old Testament and the sacrament of communion in the New, there is definitely an aspect of vicarious atonement found in scripture. That is, we are reconciled to God (at.-one-ment) vicariously through Christ's blood. That means that the cross was costly—our salvation didn't come cheap. And it was messy—the cross is not tidy and neat. It is a shocking image covered in blood dirt and sweat, but what it shows us is love. Sacrifice in the New Testament speaks of the Divine Romance. “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” Taken in a relational sense instead of a legal one, the image of sacrifice can be something beautiful and moving. Like the passion of a parent who is willing to sacrifice anything to get their child to safety. Or to take a recent example, like the firefighters who sacrificed their lives in the World Trade Center. Self-Sacrificing love is not about “fulfilling the requirements” but is infinitely bigger than that. This model of sacrificial love is what inspired the nonviolent movements of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The model of this kind of devotion, this kind of sacrifice, is God himself. God calls us to die to ourselves, he calls us to serve, but he does this not by demanding it as a king would, but by serving us, bowing down and washing our feet, caring for the weak, giving all that he has, loving us first, and beckoning us to follow.

⁸ Nachum Braverman, “Animal offerings—Slaughter of the Beast” from the Jewish website www.aish.com
For a deeper study into the meaning of the sacrifices from a Hebrew perspective I would highly recommend the article by Rabbi Ari Kahn *The Mystery of the Sacrifices* also on aish.com.

As stated above what is significant about the New Covenant is that it is no longer man-to-God but God-to-man. Instead of us bringing a part of ourselves as a gift to bring us closer to God, God gave a part of himself as a gift to bring himself closer to us. It is not about us reaching out to God in a legal performance system, nor about the human Jesus performing in that legal system to appease God, but about God reaching out to us in grace. In keeping with Jesus' entire "upside-down kingdom" where the smallest is the greatest, where God values most those which society labels the least, where the greatest is the servant, the entire system of man reaching up to God is reversed as God reaches down to us. Not only is the cross not the upholding of the system, it is the subversion and restoration of the system into God's kingdom of compassion. *Satisfaction-Doctrine* has it backwards: it is not God who needs to be reconciled to us, but we who need to be reconciled to God.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you. (Colossians 1:21)

We are the ones who have enmity against God. And God's response is to love his enemies,

For if, when 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! (Romans 5:10)

God does not respond to what we do, we respond to what God does. God reconciles us and we have only to open our lives to it and welcome it in. God is not interested in our sacrifices, he wants our hearts, all of us. He is and always has been seeking a relationship with us,

"For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; And the knowledge of God, more than burnt offering" (Hosea 6:6).

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51: 16-17).

Thus the sacrifice on the cross is at the same time a subversive and revolutionary affront to the corrupted temple sacrificial system described by the Prophets, as well as a positive example of sacrificial love from a relational paradigm. God is not a distant judge in the sky, he is a God who has come searching for those who are lost. And in searching for us he is willing to break any rule, to endure any sacrifice, pay any price, endure any shame, just to get us back. The sacrifice was for us, not for God. Jesus did not die to appease an angry God; Jesus died for you and me, so we would finally wake up to the fact that God loves us and always has. Now that we have been reconciled to God through the cross, we are called by Jesus to "pick up our cross and follow" (Matthew 16:24) and the context in which this is said is not of us needing to appease God, but to join Jesus in the way of self-sacrificing love. Throughout scripture we are called to join Christ in his sufferings,

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13 see also Ro 8:17; 2 Thes 1:5).

What is significant here for our purposes is that the “suffering of Christ” referred to is clearly not defined as *Satisfaction-Doctrine* would say, as an appeasement to God, but as a way of life which we are also to embody. In the light of these passages it is impossible to view the cross in the terms of a legal appeasement. Taking on the “the sufferings and cross of Christ” is to follow the way of self-sacrificing love that we are called to participate in together with Christ. We do this by taking on the life of service that Jesus exemplified (Phil 2:4-8; 3:10) defending the oppressed and standing up for what is right (1 Pe 2:19; Ma 5:10) . In fact, Jesus told his disciples that if they followed him in his way that it would lead to suffering (Jn 16:1-4) because the way of love is opposed to “the way of the world” (Jn 15:18-19) . In this world we will have trouble, but Jesus tells us that he has overcome the world. In part three we will examine how the way of sacrifice that Jesus exemplified in his life and on the cross overcomes the world.

Part Three: Christus Victor

We have seen in Part Two that God's dealings with humanity are rooted on the model of relationship not law, and how sacrifice seen through a relational paradigm takes on an entirely different meaning of the drama of self-sacrificing love. In the following section we will continue to look at the cross from a relational perspective—that of *Christus Victor*.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE HEART

In the introduction of this paper I suggested that as a Christian I had always understood the cross on a heart level—I understood deep down in my guts that the cross screamed out how much God loved me. And I experienced in the depths of who I am the power of the cross working in my life—the love of God opened up to me, bringing life into the dark and broken places. Yet while I knew this saving power and reality of the cross as an experiential reality in my life, at the same time I didn't understand in my head how it worked. This is a very common experience among Christians. We find it reflected in the contemporary hymn *How Deep the Fathers Love*,

Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart—his wounds have paid my ransom.

He simultaneously states that he does not understand the cross from a rational perspective “*I cannot give an answer*” but at the same time that he *does* understand it from a heart perspective “*But this I know with all my heart*” Here he echoes—as songs often do—what many of us also feel about the cross. We get it deep down in our gut, but we cannot express it intellectually. Charles Wesley in his defining hymn asks,

Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

and concludes that it is beyond comprehension,

Tis mystery all: th' Immortal dies:
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.

We cannot sound the depths of this love with our limited rational explanations and theories. “*In vain the firstborn Seraph tries.*” I want to stress here that I am by no means advocating an anti-intellectual or non-critical approach. We should use the minds God has given us. But part of wisdom is realizing the limits of our human intellect, just as we should be aware of the limits and blind-spots of our emotions. Ultimately we want to approach understanding from the head and the heart together as full

people, both faculties working in tandem with one another, loving God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. Wesley is not making an anti-intellectual argument here, he is saying that the love of God revealed on the cross is just too profound to fit into a theorem or a formula.

Indeed we *shouldn't* try to squeeze it into a formula, to domesticate it, because in doing so—in explaining and categorizing—we automatically reduce it to much less than it is. We need to think of these things in analogies, we need to seek to understand and explain, this is good, but we need to also realize that these are always just two-dimensional pictures of something much bigger. We should never mistake our limited explanation of something for the reality itself. Modern science is fond of describing human beings by the things that determine us, whether those are psychological, sociological, or biological factors. But in explaining human beings as only the sum of these factors we make them less than human, we make them mechanical. All thoughts of character, responsibility, freedom, dignity, and morality are lost if we are just pre-determined systems. Human beings thus can never be fully “explained” because we cannot put freedom into a predictable system. And if this is true for us limited relative humans, it is all the more true of the ways of the unlimited absolute God. We cannot fit God into a box, we cannot understand exhaustively, but we *can* understand and know relationally, we can understand in the language of the heart. Thus Wesley in the last verse speaks of how he experiences the reality of the cross,

Still the atoning blood is near,
That quenched the wrath of hostile heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart;
I feel the Savior in my heart.

“I feel... in my heart.” It is something that can only be understood through the dramatic voice, through the pen of the poet, the artist, in the language of the heart, in the language of the lover. Most Christians, whether they realize it or not, understand the cross in this way—they have heard its message through story, through song, through drama, and they have “got it” deep down. Whether we see it dramatized in a hymn, or a passion play, in a painting, or in a film, we have seen the powerful imagery of a man, broken, carrying a cross through spit and mud, of nails hammered into flesh, of blood mingled with tears, and where deep speaks to deep we do in fact understand.

STORY

This is the power of story. Story is how human beings have always communicated what they value and what is meaningful. In the past the tribes would gather to hear the leader tell them their stories, today we have our culture's values communicated to us when we go to the movies or listen to the radio. Go to just about any film with Meg Ryan in it and you will learn the western cultural myth of romance as the way to true fulfillment. Go see an action film with Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger and you will learn the Western value of individualism, and how violence can overcome evil. The reason that President George W Bush's “war on evil” looks more like a Schwarzenegger film than it looks like the way that Jesus confronted evil is quite simply because he—like us—has had that story of the redemptive value of violence hammered into his head until it is the only solution he can imagine, the only solution we can imagine, until we half think it is the “Christian” response. The way of the cross, of

“loving your enemies” of “overcoming evil with good” is something that we are virtually illiterate in. And the way we learn it is by rehearsing it in story.

The Bible is about story. It is the story of God's people and his interaction with them in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament it is—as the gospel hymn states—“that old time Gospel story.” We as Christians have a part in that story—it is our story too. When we meet another Christian for the first time we will often ask them to tell us their story of how they came to Christ. We find commonality because we share the same testimony of how God has entered our lives, it is how we recognize one another—not by doctrine, but by story. We are all connected because we share the same story as the larger Gospel story—the story of redemption.

In contrast to this there has been a rationalistic tendency in theology to think only in propositional truths and doctrinal statements that we can mine out of the story. So instead of reading the Bible as story, Scripture is seen as a sort of “mother load” source of propositional truth—to coin a phrase from Roger Olsen—from which we can mine the golden propositional truths. So when we read our Bible rather than reading it as a narrative, as story, we look for proof texts, we do “concordancing” where we look up a key word in a concordance, string all the statements we find together, and conclude that this is what the Bible has to say about this topic. Scripture was written primarily as a narrative, the Gospels for instance are all written in narrative form. Yet we have been taught to see this as secondary, and that the “real” content was the propositional truths we can pull out of the narrative. Quite simply put: if the inspired writers of Scripture had wanted to give us propositional truths they would have. When they wrote in narrative form as in the Gospels, or in poetic form as in the Psalms, it is for a reason. If we want to understand fully what the Holy Spirit was communicating through them, then we need to understand it in the context that they are telling it—as story. To do anything else is to do violence to Scripture. Scripture needs to be read in the context that it was written.

This is something that I have had to learn myself. I had learned to think of story as something unnecessary, something to fill time until the person would get to the point. When I would listen for example to a pastor telling an anecdote about his child falling down on his bicycle to illustrate some point, I would find myself thinking “Oh please! just cut to the chase.” For that reason I had always related much more to the Nicene Creed than the Apostles Creed. The Nicene Creed tangibly defines who God is “*Very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...*” Now there, I thought, is something I can sink my teeth into! The Apostle's Creed on the other hand is more about what happened “*born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.*” and while I agreed that it all did in fact happen historically, I didn't understand what the point was, because I did not understand story. I didn't understand that the creed points to something much bigger—to the actual reality of what happened.

God's revelation of himself, was not in some facts *about* him, but an encounter *with* him in the person of Jesus Christ. God's communication to us of who he is was to send a real human being, Jesus Christ, to live among us, die, and rise from the grave. That is what the entire New Testament is about—a testimony of what they had seen and heard. These people had had an encounter with God almighty incarnate and wanted to have us get hold of what had gotten hold of them, so they told us the story of God come to earth, of “God in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” As C.S. Lewis argues in his

essay “Myth Became Fact,” any doctrines we may come up with to try to talk about this reality are only secondary reflection and interpretations of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate—that of the *actual* incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. That is the substance the Apostle's Creed points to. They were witness to an encounter with God in Jesus Christ that transformed their lives, and their *Message*, the *Gospel* they communicated was not mere doctrinal statements, but a life changing encounter with that same living Jesus. That's the real stuff! That's our story.

So the task for us here, if we want to put into words what we have already understood through story about the meaning of the cross on a heart level, is not to pull it out of that drama and into a calculated judicial theory, but to learn to speak and express these things of the heart in the language of the heart, with passion, with the poetic voice, so that we can understand with our heads what our hearts have already taken hold of. The early first century Church Fathers had a way of seeing the drama of the cross that is now commonly referred to as the “Christus Victor” view. *Christus Victor* is not so much a rational systematic theory as it is a drama, a passion story of God triumphing over the powers and liberating us from the bondage of sin. As the Church Father Irenæus writes,

The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil. (compare 1 Jn 3:8; Col 1:13; Heb 2:14)⁹

This was the predominant view of the early church until around 1000 AD. While the passionate drama of *Christus Victor* was rejected in the Middle Ages by a rationalistic judicial perspective, liberal theologians of the 19th century also rejected the view of the early church because they found the imagery of devils and powers too “primitive” and “mythological.” But in doing this they failed to understand the substance behind the powerful motifs and metaphors and only looked at them superficially. [As Gustaf Aulen](#) argues,

“It should be evident that the historical study of dogma is wasting its time in pure superficiality if it does not endeavor to penetrate to that which lies below the outward dress and look for the religious values which lie concealed underneath.”¹⁰

What they failed to see is that spiritual things must be spoken of in analogy because they are so much beyond our words to capture, and because we need the passion, the drama that these images evoke to get hold of the meaning and depth and gravity of the ideas. These are not just images: we are talking about real things: the reality of evil, the reality of oppression and its debilitating effects on the human heart. These are vital matters of life and death that cannot be expressed in a calculated, fixed dogma but must be articulated poetically as living ideas that move and touch us at the core of who we are.

So in an effort to recover the insights found in the first century church's understanding of the cross as a victory over the powers, the following section offers a sketch of what the drama of Christus Victor could look like in a language accessible for us today. Theology if it is at all meaningful must lead us to worship God better with our understanding. It must open our eyes to see the transcendent, the Eternal, the Real. It must lead us to turn our heads towards heaven and look up at invisible places. So as you

⁹ Irenæus, as quoted in *Christus Victor*.

¹⁰ Aulen, *Christus Victor*

read this next section I ask that you do so prayerfully and devotionally, with both your heart and mind.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

The Early Church did not have a set doctrine of the cross, it was more of a collection of images and dramatic metaphors. Their main focus theologically was on the incarnation and what they saw in the cross flowed out of their understanding of the incarnation. The Early Church saw Christ as God come among them. John writes in his Gospel,

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father full of grace and truth. (John 1:9,14)

This was the reason Jesus came—to reveal God's heart by what Jesus did and who he was. Jesus was Love's face and Love's hands. Or as the Church Father Gregory of Nyssa writes in his *Greater Catechism*,

Purity has stooped down to them that were dead, the Guide to them that had gone astray, that the defiled might be made clean, the dead raised, and the wanderers led back to the right way.¹¹

Love entered our world and went to the broken and the rejected, the “throwaways,” and told them they were loved. Purity touched the untouchable, and made them whole and clean again. In doing this Jesus directly subverted the societal and religious authorities of the time. By associating with those who were considered sinners and unclean he showed that these people did not need to let the authorities define their worth, because God had seen them, and called “worthy” what the world had called “the least.” This was extremely threatening to the people in religious and societal power because Jesus, in empowering and loving the small and the least, had directly undermined the Powers' own oppressive authority. So the Powers set out to shut him up. Hatred and Oppression set out to kill Love.

But Jesus would not back down. He stood up for love, for the small, for you and me. even though he knew that it would cost him his life. So the Powers stripped him naked, exposed him and shamed him. They crucified him as a common criminal to show that no one can oppose the System. But when the people saw that the Powers had killed Love, they realized what a travesty of justice this was. The people realized what a sham the oppressive System was. As Love hung on that cross the authorities were exposed, unmasked in their hatred. The illusion was lifted,

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15)

By the cross God triumphed over the System and crucified it, he nailed the law to the cross.

“Having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood

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opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14)

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:1).

He crucified what would condemn us and keep us captive, he took the monopoly away from the temple, tearing the curtain in two. He took away the power of condemnation to keep us oppressed. He broke the vicious cycle that death had us in. God in effect said to the Powers and Authorities: “*Death, this child is mine, you have no rights over her. You will not define who she is anymore. She doesn't belong to you.*”

It is often hard for our modern minds to understand the early Christians' focus on the “*victory over death, sin, and the devil*” as the earlier quote from Irenæus expressed—it seems so superstitious. But the focus is extremely important once we can get past the imagery and understand the substance. We tend to want to blame someone for our oppression, to project the problem onto some outside group rather than directly addressing the dominating power of abuse and oppression at work in our own lives: Blame it on the church, blame it on our parents, blame it on the Jews, blame it on the liberal media.—just don't look inside. But the real “enemy,” the New Testament tells us, is not any particular human, or group, or system, but *the power of evil itself* at work in all of our lives and our systems. Our real struggle is with our own images of false authority and power—with the spiritual and psychological power of lies to dominate and determine our identity and our worth. Thus Paul writes,

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6:12)

We are inclined to think that this view reflects a “devil made me do it” irresponsibility, but the opposite is the case. Seeing evil as separate and detached from our lives is a modern phenomenon which came as a reaction to Materialism's all-out denial of the spiritual. In reaction to this, theologians during the Enlightenment conceded the natural world to the sciences and conceived of the “supernatural” world beyond the natural and immune to the hands of science. In doing so they lost the integrated perspective of the ancients. In the worldview of the biblical writers (and of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, Egyptians, etc.) the spiritual realm of angels and demons were not seen as something detached from us, but as a parallel world connected to our own. The earthly realm and the heavenly realm interacted and influenced one another. What happened on earth was a reflection of the heavenly realm and vice versa. So a focus on the workings of evil and the devil did not reflect a “devil made me do it” irresponsibility, but a hard and honest look at the power of destructive lies at work in our lives and in our world, a naming of the systems of oppression and the power games we can get sucked into.

Likewise, when we frame this conflict in the terms of a struggle against the *system* and *oppression*, of a liberation against the *powers that be*, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of making a scapegoat out of that system—a monster to blame “over there,” so we can sit and feel superior or play the victim. The paradox of healing is that although we cannot help the environment that has made us who we are, we are still responsible for what we do with our lives now. Rather than blaming our oppression and

victimhood on the system, the New Testament calls us to acknowledge our own complicity in that system, our own identity in it, and break out of the cycle. We all play a part in the game, and so we also must face ourselves and deal with this in our lives.

EXPOSING THE POWERS

The language of the New Testament talks about a victory over “Death” and the “Powers.” This formulation is of course highly symbolic, so we need to ask *“What these symbols mean, what could such a victory look like in our lives?”* In this section and the next we will be looking at several illustrations of how this could take shape in our lives in contemporary language. For instance consider a girl who has been constantly told by her parents that she is worthless. In time she begins to internalize this and really believe she is. This is the cycle of abuse: She has come to accept the lies that have been told by the authority of her parents, the “Powers,” so to speak, as her reality. They now define her as a person. She may respond to violence not by identifying abuse as abuse and therefore as unjustified, but by thinking that she must somehow have deserved it. Or take for example the many people who are raised to believe that God is angry with them and demands a passive, unquestioning complacency in order to avoid punishment and Hell—a subservient denial of their dignity is required in order to avoid the disapproval and rejection of the detached authority figure. So they are taught to swallow their dignity, to disappear, to submit. As the authority figure of a judge in the sky is hammered into their head, a false image of a terrifying God is created. People's instinctive reaction to this hateful God-image is to respond in kind. They may be angry at life, their trust may be so damaged that they become incapable of receiving love from another, or they may internalize this hatred and develop destructive patterns of behavior. Whether the person becomes the abused or the abuser both are trapped in the same game, both are caught in the system. The salvation that *Christus Victor* illustrates is precisely a victory over the Powers that steal our lives and crush the human spirit. It is a liberation from the prison of our minds, from the living hell of an estranged identity.

It is not enough to simply expose these patterns and false authorities, to unmask the lies. Our liberation, our salvation, must involve the healing of the broken spirit that has adopted an identity of victimhood. There is a saying: *“you can take a girl out of the city but you can't take the city out of the girl”*. Abuse works the same way: you can remove someone from abusive surroundings, but their broken identity needs to be healed as well or it will continue to dominate their reality and define their experience. You can take a person away from the hurt, but the hurt needs to also be taken away from the person. So to escape that enslaving destructive “world” we are trapped in, we must mirror Christ's death and resurrection: we say to that old identity of hurtfulness and victimhood *“I am dead to you. I don't belong to you anymore”* and we are raised to a new identity as God's loved children. By dying to what has killed us we say to that abusive system, to that hatefulness in us, that we will no longer be its victim. Thus Paul writes,

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14).

Having died to the grip of that hurtful identity, we are then are “resurrected,” raised up into a new identity—born again. Practically, that means we let God's love into our lives in a personal relationship,

and as we grow in that relationship with God, learning to open our lives to his love, God's love forms how we see ourselves. Through experiencing and living in the love of God we replace the hurtful identity of estrangement and learn to see ourselves as God sees us: as his beloved child. This is what the New Birth is about—*being loved heals*.¹²

SIN AS ALIENATION

As illustrated in these examples, the cross declares spiritually and publicly that the things that killed us, the system, the law, our own destructive and hurtful behaviors, our own self-hatred, the whole vicious cycle of being hurt and hurting that is called *reaping and sowing* or “*justice*” in the conventional sense of “getting what we deserve” is broken, and grace comes in, liberating us from the hold of sin and death. When we were estranged and lost God reached out to us,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-10)

For many this sense of sin is something that is hard for us to understand today. Our generation is characterized instead by a feeling of emptiness. People's problems are with self-worth. People struggle with trying to learn to love themselves and often feel like they are so messed up, so broken, that they can never be well. God does not define us by our lack; he sees all of us, and he sees someone he loves dearly. God does not have a hard time loving us, but we have a hard time accepting love. A common thought is, “*Who am I that God would love me?*” That is the need of our day. In earlier generations their need was a deep sense of guilt. This is why in the writings of Christians of the time—Martin Luther being a primary example—the focus of salvation was on the forgiveness of guilt. They wanted to live moral lives and found themselves unable, and in their dilemma discovered God's grace. Just as our generation has a problem with really accepting that they are loved, theirs had a problem with really accepting that they were forgiven. That was the need of their day; it was what was blocking them from life.

Sin is ultimately not an issue of transgression but of identity. That is, it is not about doing a bad thing disconnected from who we are, it is precisely about who we are. To an alcoholic for example their addiction defines their whole life. It is not just something they do, it threatens to become them. It swallows them. This person is not helped by words like “its not so bad, you're a good person” because they know that it is not ok and that they are not good. What they need is what Martin Luther discovered—the “*trotz*” of grace. “*Trotz*” is a German word meaning “*despite*.” What broke through to Martin Luther as he struggled with his own moral failings was not that it was ok, but that *trotz* his darkness, *despite* his blackness, God did not turn away. God embraced him even though he was black as sin. And this defiant “*trotz*” is what is so powerful about grace. it doesn't matter how low we have sunk, how lost we are, how black our despair is, God's grace is stronger.

¹² This concept of the New Birth—learning to enter into and open our lives to trusting God in an intimate relationship—is a huge topic that goes beyond the scope of the paper. One possible additional resource is a free mini-book on this website [Intimacy with God](#).

The problem is that the church has tended to emphasize only moral guilt when speaking of sin. There are many other things that separate us from God, from life, and from love. For some people it is a deep seated sense of self-hatred, for others it is a sense of hopelessness and doubt. What they need to hear is that trotz their brokenness, despite their emptiness is the truth that they are loved. They need to fight the lies and hold on to the truth about them. What a person struggling with the sin of self-hatred does not need is to be told is that they need to work up some sense of self-loathing guilt in order to approach God. For the first person struggling with moral failure and addiction the big step for them is to face up to that, face up to their brokenness, and to realize that God loves them and died for them despite that. But to force the second person whose sin is self-hatred to do that is like making them swallow the wrong prescription medicine, and like taking the wrong prescription, what was healing to the one person, is poison to the other. Jesus did not have a formula, he encountered each person differently, looked into their heart and said to them what the Spirit told him to say so that they might find life. We need to do that too, not with a formula, but through the spirit meeting each person at the point of their need with the Gospel.

One result of Christus Victor's focus on a victory over death, sin, and the devil is that it expands our understanding of sin. Sin is not merely about how we individually hurt ourselves and others, but also about how our institutions, societies, churches, families, and communities can also become corrupted and hurtful. We need to be redeemed, but so do our institutions and communities. It is vital in seeing this institutional aspect of sin that we do not develop a victim mentality. When we do this we allow the powers to have dominion over us. We allow the system to dictate to us who we are. Forgiveness for moral debt is a very real and important aspect of this, but the victory over sin death and the devil that Christ purchased on the cross is much larger than that. He has secured a way out of anything that could separate us from him, from every prison. When we feel secure enough to be honest, we can all admit that we have need, that we do not have it all together. For all of us there is something that separates us from life that we need to boldly and honestly face, an area of our lives that we need to allow Jesus into.

In addition to struggling with self-worth, another equally common reaction to a hurtful environment is to react violently to it. Take the earlier example of a person raised in an oppressive religious environment: This person may "escape" from a repressive religious environment but still carry its scars. They feel extremely threatened by the hurtful image of authority and God they were taught, and to protect themselves they erect a defensive wall that keeps out hurt, but keeps out love as well. They become "strong" in order to survive. Weakness cannot be allowed, need cannot be admitted. They remain a victim, a captive, because the place has changed but their heart has not. In their struggle against the oppressive image of authority they come to see God as a threat, an enemy seeking to crush them, and in reaction to this they hit back in rage, hurting themselves and others. The term "sin" which is so problematic for our generation simply describes all these different kinds of alienation to Life.

I realize that this may seem threatening for some readers, so I want to clarify that these conditions can just as easily describe someone inside the church as someone outside. This is not a matter of being converted to a religion, but being reconciled to Life. Many people inside the religion of Christianity still are estranged from life and alienated from God's love, *often times precisely because of a toxic faith environment encountered in the church*. God seems distant to them; they feel condemned and unfulfilled. I know many people like this, people who are trying to break free from the yoke of legalism

and spiritual abuse and enter into a grace-oriented understanding of Christianity. Whatever religious credentials we possess, whatever our condition is, God looks at our hearts and encounters us individually, personally, just as we are.

Even if we are hostile to God, reacting destructively towards life, violently reacting to the authority images we struggle with—God's response as revealed in Jesus is not to crush us as we might expect, but to break the cycle of estrangement and rivalry with the transforming power of love. We see on the cross, in Richard Rohr's terms, "the naked God."¹³ God is made small, stripped naked, arms stretched out, so that our false image of a threatening judgmental God is taken away and God's heart of love for us is revealed. The threat is removed; we have nothing to fight against. God surrenders first so we can give up the fight too and come home. The cycle of rivalry and violence is broken through the weakness of God on the cross.

There is a temptation here to reduce the cross to a rational mechanism, to turn these illustrations into a formula of "how it works" that we can wrap our minds around. The illustrations given here are not intended to do that, but rather their intent is to draw our hearts up to the love story of how God entered into our world, entering into our suffering and sin, willing to do anything it took to get us back. The way that we take hold of salvation is not by following a formula, but through opening ourselves up to a relationship. We open our lives up to allow Christ to come in and rule in our hearts and lives, and as we live together with him at the center of our lives his love will transform and heal us. Our security does not rest in having it all figured out, but rather in belonging to the one who does.

God does not need the cross to forgive us or love us. Jesus forgave and loved people before the cross. But some of us needed the cross to be able to really accept that forgiveness. God does not need the cross to love us: God has always loved us. But many of us needed the cross to really grasp that. God does not need the cross to be reconciled to us. But many of us needed the cross to be reconciled to Life, to break the cycle of rivalry and to heal our estranged authority image. The cross speaks to us at the point of our need. And while these are not God's problems, but our alienation, still for us that alienation is very real. So to the one wracked with guilt God says through the cross, "*I take the blame. I pay the price.*" To the one who is locked in self-hate God says through the cross "*I love you so much I would give my life defending you.*" To the one in rebellion to life God says through the cross, "*See me here. I am not a threat; I am love.*"

In their context, each are beautiful statements that testify to God's radical grace meeting us in our need. But when taken out of that context and applied generally to all people, saying, "repent!" to one with no felt need of guilt, or "you are sick," to one who does not feel broken, the Gospel can seem like bad news instead of good news, bringing condemnation instead of liberation and grace. Jesus did not have a pat formula for salvation that he would recite to everyone, but encountered each person differently based on their need. In the same way we need to be sensitive to listen to what the Holy Spirit is wanting to speak into someone's life to bring them to grace.

Perhaps the major message of "the naked God" revealed on the cross, and that Jesus revealed with his whole life, is that when we see God so transparently and openly, we see that we ourselves can be real,

13 Richard Rohr, *Der nackte Gott. Plädoyers für ein Christentum aus Fleisch und Blut* (Claudius, 1998).

transparent, and unafraid. We can come as we are without need to pretend. When we are allowed to be honest, we all know that we have needs and dark places in our lives. Jesus was never about degrading people, but about restoring them to worth. There is no need for guilt trips or false humility here, just the freedom that love gives us to be real and honest. On the cross God in Christ took on our sin. That means he at once bore the weight of the harm that we have done, and also bore the pain of the victims. This was not, as *Satisfaction-Doctrine* would say, God punishing the human Jesus, but the incarnate Jesus revealing the compassionate heart of God to us. On the cross we see that God suffers with those who suffer, and always has. God carries the pain of every victim of rape, incest, torture and starvation. as Christ cries out “*my God my God why have you forsaken me*” God shows his solidarity with every person so overwhelmed with doubt they don’t have the will to believe anymore. On the cross God took on both the villain and the victim, both rapist and the raped, so that we would know, whatever our condition, that he knows it intimately. There is no need to hide or pretend. We can come as we are. Honestly, unafraid, unmasked.

On the night before his arrest, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and a shocked Peter refused. This kind of humility and servitude was not worthy of his Lord! Throughout the centuries people have reacted similarly to the God that Jesus reveals, the God who suffers with those who suffer, who bends down to serve, whose strength is revealed in weakness. That kind of openness and closeness is something that is at the same time wonderfully liberating, and terribly threatening. It is threatening because it unmasks our own weakness and vulnerability. We feel a need to present ourselves as if there was no lack, no need in our lives, no broken or dark places. We hide because we are threatened by the judge image of God. But the crucified God shows us a God who is not a threat to us. God became small, God in Christ was stripped naked, revealed, so we could finally see who God really is and come to him as we really are.

Bottom Line:

Jesus reveals to us who God has always been. God has always suffered with those who suffer, God has always intimately known our condition. God has always been close to the broken-hearted. The cross does not change God at all, but it demonstrates very vividly who God is and always was. It shows us his shocking nearness, his scandalous love for us. It is a window to heaven that gives us a glimpse of God's radical love sacrificing for us and conquering death. It is a vision of grace in action. If you want to know what God is like, then look at the human Jesus. Watch him as he kneels beside the empty faces and touches the broken, watch as he himself is broken. See the man dragging a half ton cross through spit and mud, and stick your fingers in the scars on his hands. That is what God is like. God was on that cross.

THE INCARNATION

In the above section I have attempted to illustrate in vivid terms how the cross is tied to the incarnation. The entire life of Jesus, which culminates at the cross revealing a radical transforming picture of who

God is. The incarnation is the story of God come into our world in Jesus, loving the forgotten, healing the wounded, and liberating those oppressed by darkness and oppression. The critical difference between the incarnation based view of Christus Victor and the legal based view of the Satisfaction Doctrine is that Christus Victor is God-to-man while Satisfaction Doctrine is man-to-God. While Christus Victor focuses on God in Christ come among us to save and reconcile the lost and the broken, Satisfaction Doctrine focuses on the man Jesus living a perfect life and thus bringing the perfect sacrifice to appease God's justice—a sacrifice offered from man to God and worked out in legal theory. In contrast to this the early church saw Christ as God come to them in their need—God to man expressed in passionate imagery and motifs of God's victory over evil. Furthermore while Satisfaction Doctrine is very anthropological, centering around man's problem and how it can be solved, Christus Victor is much more broad sweeping, focusing on God's victory on a cosmic scale over “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (v16) and as a result of that complete victory we have been redeemed into God's kingdom. The passage in the first chapter of Colossians that the above quote is taken from is a song of the deity and supremacy of Christ,

He is before all things and in him all things hold together...so that in all things he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things. (Colossians 1:18-20)

What does it mean to make Christ supreme? To make his way, who he was and what he embodied ours. The way is Christ. And having Christ as our image and revelation of who God is means a radical reformation of our fallen image of God into the image that God has revealed of himself in Christ. The point of the incarnation is not so much to describe the God-like qualities of Jesus but much more to describe the Jesus like qualities of God. God is like Jesus. Jesus reveals God's heart, the core of who he is. Jesus is the face of God. If you have seen him, you have seen the Father. What is God like? He is like Jesus.

This is crucial because there is a tendency to want to take Jesus and to squeeze him into our fallen limited images of God rather than letting him blow the roof of how we see God through him and begin a revolution in us. Jesus as the “image of the invisible God” is not merely a concept or an idea such as seeing God as justice or God as love. The revelation that Jesus gives us is of an entire life. So that in answer to the question what is love? We can say , Look at the life of Jesus—that is love. Similarly if we want to know what Godly justice is about, Jesus is our model of that. Moreover Jesus was not just a life long ago, but is alive now. He is not a static life trapped in a book but is the living Word of God. Jesus is a slippery, dangerous, and utterly remarkable reality who refuses to be captured and tamed, whether it be the Moral Majority or the Jesus Seminar scholars who wield the whip and chair. The reality of who He is defies any box we might wish to place Him in. Jesus is the Truth. We can never have a monopoly on Truth, but Truth should have a monopoly on us. And we do this by living in a constant relationship of openness and listening, continually letting the real living Christ transform us. You cannot tame this river.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

In contrast to *Satisfaction-Doctrine* which focuses so much on Jesus' death that it makes his life seem

almost irrelevant—as if Jesus came just to die. *Christus Victor* sees Christ's life and death in complete harmony with one another. Christ gave his life standing up for what he had stood up for his whole life—caring for the least. The first-century church's understanding of his death and resurrection was a parallel to his life: Love had stood up to Death and overcome it. His whole life he had stood up for the voiceless, touched the untouchable, loved the forgotten, the rejected, the abandoned. And as he had done this, the people had seen that it was really God touching them, loving them, defending them, seeking them. Jesus reveals for us the heart of God, in his life and on the cross. In seeing God's heart revealed, our upside-down world is set right—our estranged identity is reconciled to Life, our twisted image of authority is pointed back to God's way of compassion. We are liberated from the hold of an oppressive environment and our own self-hatred and reconciled into a loving, intimate relationship with the living God.

Jesus framed his entire ministry in the terms of the “kingdom of God” against the “kingdom of Satan” . Scholars universally agree that the message of the kingdom was the central theme of Jesus' teaching. Whether he was touching the untouchable, fellowshiping with the rejected, bringing hope to the broken, or healing the afflicted, all of these acts were framed in the terms of the kingdom—liberating people from Satan's grip. For example, Jesus diagnoses a crippled woman as one “whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years” (Lk 13:11,16) and says to her “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” (v 12) The word translated here as “infirmity” is *mastix* and literally means “scourging” or “whipping.”¹⁴ Whether Jesus is involved in exorcism, healing, or fellowshiping with the outcast, all of these acts are understood by him as a frontal assault on the “kingdom of Satan” to advance God's reign of compassion. He had come to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, freedom to those in prison. *Thus the early church's understanding of Christ's death and resurrection as “overcoming death, sin, and the devil” was parallel to how Jesus understood his entire life ministry. The cross was the culmination of Jesus' entire life ministry to advance the kingdom of Heaven.*

Although Jesus' life and death was not the fulfillment of a legal system, it was the fulfillment of the relational model of love. Jesus fulfilled the true law by modeling perfect humanity. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human by modeling what a life lived in submission to the God of love looks like. Jesus' way was the way of love, and Jesus knew full well that if he stayed on the road he was on, defending the poor and confronting spiritual corruption and evil, that this course would inevitably mean his death. The cross was no accident. God had a plan. God did not require Jesus' death. Hate killed Jesus when he stood up for love. But God used this tragedy to bring about life. Through the way of suffering, Life overcame Death. Jesus was not just a martyr for a cause, his death was the way that led to resurrection—the restoration of all things. It was the way of the cross that led to life and the resurrection and victory. In Aikido one uses the force of an attacker's blow to throw them, and God did exactly this on the cross. In God's economy, evil was defeated not with violence but with nonviolence, not with the power of hate but with the power of love. Life defeated Death. God raised Jesus from the dead so we could see that in the final analysis love is stronger than hate and death. It is this *way of the cross* that leads to our being liberated from the trap of the Powers—raised up out of a life governed by Death to a new identity ruled by Life. We enter this liberation as we embrace God's gift of grace and enter into Life by following *the way of the cross*—dying to what has killed us and being *raised to a*

¹⁴ Compare Mk3:10; 5:29, 34; Lk7:21 where it is translated as “sickness” and “suffering” in the NIV with Acts 22:24; Heb 11:36; Mt 10:17; 20:19; 23:34 where the same word is translated as “flogging.” I owe this insight to Gregory A. Boyd from his book *God at War : The Bible & Spiritual Conflict*

new identity—seeing ourselves through Jesus' eyes.

This *being raised up*, this *resurrection*, was the central focus of the early church. This was the victory. Sin was overcome, not through a payment to satisfy the Powers, but by God triumphing over the Powers. It is not a sterile transaction but a drama of rescue where the tyrant is robbed of its authority over us and God frees us from our prison of alienation. Hell and Death are not the punishment we receive in a legal system but the enemies that God fights against. The drama of the resurrection is of Life defeating Death—God fighting for us, and liberating us from Death's debilitating hold over us.

I will ransom them from Hell. I will redeem them from Death.
O Death I will be thy plague. O Hell I will be thy destruction. (Hosea 13:14)

Unlike *Satisfaction-Doctrine* which focuses on the death of Jesus, the pivotal event of *Christus Victor* is the resurrection. It was through the resurrection that death was overcome and where love emerged as victor. It was in the power and hope of the resurrection that the first-century church set their hope that they too would be raised up. That it was worth it to believe in love in a world that could be so loveless; to fight for justice and reform in a world that could be so unjust, to believe in yourself in a world that calls you the least. The resurrection was God's definitive *yes* to life. It said that in the final analysis love conquers all, and nothing, not death or hell or trouble or persecution or sword can separate us from that love. This is *Christus Victor*. It is about liberation. It is about revolution. It is about God's battle to break through to us with his love.

The biblical phrases “*the hope of salvation*” and “*the hope of the resurrection*” are used interchangeably to mean the hope of this liberation to Life, of being set free from the hold of sin. It is a language of empowerment, calling us to live “*on earth as it is in heaven*”; to see ourselves as Abba sees us, reconciled and loved. Today we tend to think of *resurrection* as only referring to a future heaven, but it meant much more in the worldview of the first-century Christians. Heaven was not some disconnected place in the future, but something that should inform how we live now. Resurrection is about being liberated in *every area of life* from a hurtful and destructive identity to one where we are truly free, truly alive. It is not simply that we have hope of life after death (we do), but that Life is alive and at work in us *now*, even as we are still in a world that is not redeemed and even as we ourselves are not fully redeemed. Thus the resurrection, rather than promoting escapism, tells us that it is part of ushering in God's kingdom to work for the reconciliation of *all things*—in every area of our lives, our relations, our societies, and our world.

But living in this fallen world, a person can get to feel so worthless, so powerless in an environment of abuse, in a world that seems to be filled with injustice. It can so cloud our vision and so completely define how we see ourselves that it's all we can see. Seeing life in this clouded way, though, does not reflect an empirical fact, but rather our own captivity to hurt. We have been taught to see this way, taught to identify as a prisoner, a victim, as worthless, as powerless. The resurrection acts like a window opened up in heaven letting God's Reality burst into our gray world. Just as Jesus led the captives out of Hell, Love grabs hold of us and pulls us out of that destructive identity. It does not change our situation: we may still experience a hurtful world of injustice and suffering. But we have hope in this dark world, like an anchor for our soul, holding us to Love, connecting our hearts with God's heart (cf Heb 6:19-20). We know that, in the final analysis, love is stronger than death, so we can

have the courage to risk loving scandalously in a dark world. Our eyes are opened to see the whole picture—enabling us to live fully and freely. It is not escapist but fully life-embracing. It is a faith that does not take us out of the world, but overcomes the world, and places us in that world fully engaged, daring to care for ourselves and others, working to alleviate suffering and fighting injustice. We live between the “already” and the “not yet” of the resurrection. We see in Christ the first fruits of the victory of the resurrection and have hope in a *world at war* still very much subject to sin and suffering. It is like a letter received behind enemy lines saying, “*You have not been forgotten. I love you. I am coming to get you out*” (compare Jn 14:18-20,27). We long for the resurrection of all things, the transformation of our lives and of society into God's reign of compassion, for an end to suffering and death. But we do this knowing the outcome is clear. Satan has been dealt the death blow on the cross. Love is stronger than death. That is the hope of the resurrection.

The hope of the resurrection is a protest, a declaration for life—and that requires courage. The courage to embrace life with both hands, to risk caring, loving, reaching out. It is a holding on to hope in spite of our brokenness, in spite of trouble or hardship or doubt, because we realize how incredible this love is that has taken hold of us. The hope of the resurrection is the hope that comes when all hope is gone. As Peter Gomes writes,

Genuine belief is maintained in spite of circumstances that would undermine belief and not simply because of circumstances that would confirm it. It takes a great deal of courage to believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, good in the face of evil.¹⁵

That is the bold hope of the resurrection. It is the courage that Jesus demonstrated when he, on the cross, abandoned by his friends, mocked and misunderstood by the onlookers, overwhelmed with pain and torn with sorrow called out in despair, “*My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?*” and heard nothing—the heavens absent of comfort, as black as night. And there, in that darkness, Jesus, in one final act of courage and trust, set his hope on grace and cast his spirit into the mystery of God: “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*”

It was that sacrifice, that faith, that holding on to love in the blackness of night that defeated death and raised Jesus from the grave. Sown in weakness, raised in power. This is the way of the cross, and there is power there. Nothing, not even death, can stop that kind of power. It is the power of love. The victory of God.

¹⁵ Peter J. Gomes, from the introduction of Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be* (Yale Univ Press, 2000).

Part Four: the Paradigm of Liberation

In part three we saw several dramatic illustrations of how God can meet us through the cross at the point of our need. Whatever it is that is separating us from life, the God that is revealed on the cross has overcome that barrier through the cross. Christus Victor is not just about our individual stories however, but of a much larger story of God triumphing over everything that could separate us from him. A story of a cosmic victory over evil where Jesus Christ emerges as Lord of all of life. The illustrations in part three are examples of how our stories can become part of that larger story of God redeeming all of creation. In this section we will be looking at that larger story. God and man are not the sole players in this drama, there is also the power of sin, death, the devil which must be overcome on the cross.

THE ACCUSER

Satan (whose name means literally “adversary” or “accuser”) has taken humanity hostage. Jesus has come to pay a ransom in order to liberate us from Satan's dominion (Mt 20:28). This is classic Christus Victor, that is, the way in which the church Fathers understood the cross. Here the image is not of appeasing the demands of justice, but of a tyrant demanding appeasement who must be overcome. The one who demands an appeasement is not God or even his justice, but the Accuser, the Satan. The false gods of Condemnation, Guilt, Legalism, Self-Hatred, and Abuse are the unmerciful taskmasters and judges who will not let go of their hold on us. The Accuser, the Father of Lies, the Condemner, is the one who demands satisfaction. To the extent that we have internalised the “god of this world,” our own “internal critic” is the one who will not forgive us, who constantly speaks condemnation in our ear. The “Accuser” inside will not allow love in. *“How could God love someone as sinful as you!?”* Through internalizing this inner judge, a person in an abusive and dehumanizing situation actually comes to see themselves as *deserving* of abuse and condemnation. *“You are worthless trash. This is all your fault”* This is not only true for the victims of oppression, but equally true for the criminal who through their own destructive, cruel, and selfish behaviour has sown the seeds of their own destruction and finds themselves consequently hated and condemned by others. Once they can take responsibility and face what they have done, they too hear the voice of condemnation and judgement – of the Accuser who whispers *“You can never change, you're rotten down to core. Why fight it?”* Both the victim of abuse and the criminal here are prisoners to Sin and Death. Both—either through their own hurtfulness or through the hurtfulness of others – are now trapped in the world's vicious circle of reaping and sowing, of hurting and being hurt. They are captives in their minds.

The image of Satan here is not of an independently evil being as in Dualism, but of a fallen Angel. Evil in the biblical sense is always a good thing that has fallen from its original purpose and become twisted and warped. The more potential a thing has for good, the more harm it can cause if it turns bad. Families for instance are meant to be the safe and loving places where we learn to love ourselves and others, but when twisted by sin they can be a profoundly damaging and abusive environment leaving lifelong scars. So the very things that have enslaved were originally good things that have become warped and twisted. Precisely because it began as good thing, we trust its authority in our lives and are thus taken captive by it. Conscience can turn to condemnation, fidelity twists itself into repression,

morality becomes legalism. Paul speaks about how the Law, a good thing which was intended to bring life, actually brought him death and condemnation when instead of pointing him to God it became an end in itself, a replacement for God. Similar to Jesus' analogy of ransom, Paul compares what Christ has done to that of purchasing the freedom of a slave from a relentless taskmaster. He speaks of how he had become “sold as a slave to sin” by the Law, but that grace “set him free” (cf Rom 7:14 & 8:2). Does this mean that the Law is itself bad? Paul asks. No, rather Paul had twisted the Law into something it was never meant to be, and through sin this good thing had become something oppressive and hurtful (cf Rom 7:7-14)

For this reason Scripture does not merely speak of “appeasing” this rebel tyrant through the ransom of the cross (as if God was blackmailed by Satan) but ultimately of the cross conquering and triumphing over Sin, Death, and the Devil. Jesus described his work in terms of a “ransom” being paid to Satan, but there is a trick to this ransom—like in Aikido where the attacker is thrown by the force of their own blow, through the cross, condemnation and judgement are “appeased” but *in that very action* they are defeated and made subject to Christ. Paul applies this principle to his own particular case of being enslaved by the Law saying that not only did *he* die to the Law that had enslaved him (Rom 7:4), but that the Law itself was nailed to the cross as well (Col 2:14). As we die with Christ we die to what has killed us and thus are freed of its power over us. We say to guilt or pride or self-hatred or fear “*I do not belong to you any more.*” We are freed from death and come under Christ's rule, but also the Law (along with all power authority and rule in heaven and on earth) itself was conquered and brought under the rule of Christ. Just as we must come under Christ's rule, so also must judgement, condemnation, and the Law and all of life be subjected to Christ. The cross means Condemnation and Death were overcome. Christ is victor.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. (Rev 12:10)

God's response to fallen humanity is not to give up on us, but to redeem and restore us back into our proper place inside of his kingdom. In the same way the Law, conscience, and the host of other things that have—like us—become fallen and hurtful are not to be declared bad and thrown away, but are in need of being reformed and redeemed. They are to be taken out of their hurtful and enslaving idolatrous positions *above* God and brought *under* God's rule. Instead of dominating us they are now to *serve us* and point us to God. On our own we are trapped on the treadmill of hurting and being hurt, but grace breaks into that world and places us, and the very Laws that had condemned us, under the reign of Christ; redeeming and restoring us both to the place where we belong inside God's kingdom.

Christ's work is for the “reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth” (Col 1:20). While Satisfaction-Doctrine only focuses on humanity appeasing judgement, Christus Victor is about putting *all of life* under the Lordship of Christ. The Law was meant not to enslave us, but to point us to a relationship with God, to serve us. In the paradigm of liberation the redemption is not only for us but for all of life. We are redeemed but so are the Laws and systems and rules. Judgement is not ultimately what needs to be appeased, (as if God was subject to it), but what we are liberated from by Christ and what needs itself to be subjected to Christ. Christ's kingdom is a higher rule than that of the “god of this world.” You are no longer under the Law of sin and death, but under the higher Law of the Spirit of

God characterized by grace (cf Rom 8:1-17).

We have been exploring the concept of “appeasing” from the perspective of the paradigm of liberation. It is important to stress though that the word “appeasement” is not found in scripture, rather Jesus speaks of a “ransom.” These two images of appeasement vs. ransom are fundamentally different. In appeasement the image is of a legal fine that the court demands which we cannot afford. So a merciful third party (in this case God) pays it for us. In this scenario it is the court who has a rightful claim on the fine and we who are in the wrong. In contrast to this the image of ransom is of someone wrongfully taking a hostage and demanding payment. When the ransom is paid it is not because the tyrant has a legitimate claim on a reward. On the contrary, the reason the payment is made is because God cares for the welfare and freedom of the hostages. Another way to think of this we also find in Scripture is of a person sold into slavery. God comes and buys our freedom from what has taken us captive – legalism, lust, pride, hate, etc. Paul speaks of the law enslaving him. Again the slave master does not deserve the money. Human trafficking is extraordinarily evil. God buys our freedom because he cares about us and wants to liberate us from the system that has brought us death.

To the extent that we have internalized the “internal judge” in our lives *we* are the one who demands payment. We are the ones who will not allow ourselves to be forgiven without a price, without pain. So God pays that price not because we are right to demand it, but because God wants to break us out of that “mind of death” and loves us so much that he is willing to endure suffering to see us set free. That means that what needs to be reformed is both ourselves as well as our twisted understanding of justice. We need to redefine our identity, how we see ourselves, and what justice is about, not based on the old system that has enslaved us and brought us death but based on God's way of seeing that brings life. Both we and our values and concepts of justice must bow before Christ. It is not only we, but also the system of judgement and death that also must bow before Christ. Jesus not only paid a ransom to the devil, but also to us. In so doing he conquered us and the devil, sin, death, judgement, and law. All of life is restored to its rightful place under Christ's rule of love.

A practical example of this is of the dynamic of a person's trust in an abusive environment. A friend of mine was in an abusive church environment where the leaders abused their authority to oppressively control the lives of the people. It was very hurtful and the “inner judge” in my friend set off warning bells that said “look out this is wrong, don't trust them.” This was a good thing in her that was there to protect her. Because of it she left that church. But there is still a lot of damage in her because of it that she is trying to work through. Her ability to trust and hope at all is very hurt. So now even though she is in healthy caring relationships, she finds it nearly impossible to open herself up, to believe in herself, to trust God and let love in. Why? Because there is this voice in her head that still says “don't trust. You'll just get hurt.” And so she is paralysed. She is a captive. The “inner judge” who before had protected her has become a tyrant that will not let love in.

What is needed is not only for her to break out of that debilitating identity of seeing herself as incapable of trust, but also for that “accuser” to be subjected to God who is love as well. Not only do we need to be saved out of hurtful mindsets that keep us from life but also our corrupted relationship to religion, to the Bible, to conscience that have become something condemning, a hammer over our head, also need to be brought back into a healthy relationship as something that is supposed to lead us to life not block us from it.

In that sense many people have an image of authority, an image of God that is of an “accuser”—of Satan. The God that they reject is really the Accuser, a false and hurtful twisted image of authority. It is a lie about who God really is. What they need to be “saved” from is from that oppressive identity, they need to be saved out of this system of accusation. That is what grace is about: God comes to liberate us from the prison of a hurtful identity and to bring us into the rule of Love.

Jesus understood his ministry of healing and forgiving and casting out demons all in the context of liberating people from the grip of Satan. Describing sickness as being “bound by Satan” and “tormented.” He described his task not in the terms of paying a sacrifice but in terms of liberating those in captivity, healing the blind, releasing those in prison. The central metaphor he chose to describe his death was not one of paying a penalty to the legal courts, but of *ransom* – a term from the ancient slave market where a payment is paid to release humans held in captivity. What this implies is that sin is not merely a matter of our choice, but that the power of sin holds us in its grip. The work of Christ on the cross is not merely of forgiving us (which God did before the cross) but of breaking sin's very real power and dominion over our lives.

A second image from Scripture is *redemption*. This is a particularly powerful image because it implies not merely being bought, but taking something that is considered to be used up and worthless and making it valuable and whole again. Jesus continually demonstrated this in the lives of those who came to him, the lepers and prostitutes, those who had been declared worthless and rejected and unworthy were transformed, made clean and whole again in God's embrace. Again the picture is not merely of sin being paid for in a legal sense, but of a life that was crushed by the debilitating effects of sin being healed and made new and whole again.

Satisfaction Doctrine says that God cannot simply forgive and forget. The reasoning being a legal-social one: if God would simply ignore sin then we would think that it does not matter, so there needs to be a price paid so that we can see sin is bad. It is true that God cannot simply ignore sin, but this reasoning misses the point: the reason he cannot ignore sin is that sin really is bad. Simply paying a fine does not change that. If sin is a sickness God cannot in love simply ignore someone who is tormented by it. If sin is bondage God cannot simply walk past us in our captivity and look away. If sin is hurting others a loving and just God cannot simply act like this does not matter. The healing of our soul needs to take place, hearts need to be changed. God cannot simply ignore our sin, he must heal and redeem us. And this is precisely how we see Jesus respond to sin when he comes to earth. Jesus does not come telling us that we need to pay a price so that God can forgive us. Rather he comes declaring war on injustice, oppression, and evil and the weapons he uses to combat this “kingdom of Satan” are acts of mercy – embracing the rejected, forgiving the condemned, confronting oppression, healing the sick, and freeing those bound by Satan. What we have here is a major paradigm shift. The way that Jesus thinks of salvation is not in the terms of appeasement, but in terms of liberation. As we will see in the next section Jesus' understanding of salvation as liberation traces its roots back to the central defining narrative of the Hebrew people—the Exodus.

THE MESSIANIC HOPE

Satisfaction-Doctrine explains the cross by beginning with the temple and the Law and reasoning that God required a legal sacrifice. As we have seen though in the previous sections, the New Testament declares quite strongly that neither the Law nor the temple in themselves were ever meant as the center point, rather both were meant to point us towards a relationship with God. The Law was intended to show us “the way of love through the Spirit” and the temple and sacrifices were there to bring us close to God, to take us “behind the veil.”

Just as we have looked at Satisfaction-Doctrine in relation to the Old Testament in the previous section, this section will present the biblical roots in the Old Testament for Christus Victor. We will begin by exploring the messianic hope from a Jewish perspective. We will then compare that with Jesus' ministry, and finally we will look at Satisfaction-Doctrine and Christus Victor as they apply to these roots working through some of the issues involved.

The central defining meta-narrative of the Jewish people is the Exodus. The Exodus symbolized the Jewish hope of a return from exile into God's reign bringing with it justice and restoration. It was the story through which the Jews understood who they were, who God was, and made sense of their world: They were a people who belonged to a God who had miraculously led them into freedom. Their hope was that he would again bring them out of exile and into the reign of God. This is not just one theme among many in the Jewish story—it *is* the Jewish story. It is the central defining event of the Old Testament from which everything else draws. It is echoed throughout the Jewish scripture as the Psalmists and Prophets cry out to God for justice and liberation. Continually the people remembered the time of the Exodus where God had freed his people against impossible odds from under the hand of oppression and looked for the God of the Exodus to free them from their trouble as well. The self-identity of the Jews throughout the entire Old Testament was one of a people longing to break free from oppression, of a people crying out for justice – for things to be made right. They were not just hoping for a ticket to heaven, they were hoping for the world to be set right, for an end to suffering and injustice.

A parallel in our world is the issue of suffering and injustice. We live in a world filled with broken lives and abusive relationships, we see on the nightly news images of war and starvation, genocide and terror and we cry out like the Psalmist “How long Lord? How long? Come set our world right! Pull us out of this mess!” This cry for justice and liberation is the central theme of the Prophets and the ground from which the Messianic hope sprang. The Messiah would come and set things right, restoring justice to the oppressed and forgotten. He would lead the people back from exile and into God's reign of justice and mercy. That is what the messianic hope is about.

REVOLUTION

At the time of Jesus the political climate had reached a boiling point. The Jews, even though they had returned to Jerusalem, still felt they were in exile because they lived under the oppressive pagan rule of Rome. Revolt and revolution was in the air. A bloody confrontation was immanent. The hope of the Messiah was the hope that one would come and overturn the oppressive rule of the ungodly and restore

justice and God's reign in the world. Into the middle of this time ripe for revolution, to a people longing to be free, comes Jesus, healing the sick, forgiving sins, casting out demons, and proclaiming “*Repent! The Kingdom of God is near!*” (Mt 3:2).

Scholars across the board agree that the Kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ ministry. By this we should not merely be thinking of Jesus’ teaching, The Kingdom of God was above all something that Jesus demonstrated and embodied – it is seen in *doing* and *being* not just in talking. Through miracles of compassion Jesus tangibly showed the people that God was among them, reaching out to save. His parables served as commentary to these miracles connecting them to the Kingdom of God so the people would look to the source of this love—God. Jesus inaugurated his ministry directly connecting his work with the promise of God liberating his people out of exile by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to release the oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk 4:17-21)

This is what the kingdom was about: Jesus was coming to restore justice, to liberate the captives, and to bring in God's reign to rule in our lives and world. The time the people had been longing for had come. God had come among them to set the world right, to bring liberation and restoration. By the miracles of healing and compassion Jesus pointed the people towards the same God who had delivered his people through the Exodus.

When Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, it fit perfectly with what the Jewish people of his time had expected the messiah to do – to liberate the oppressed out of exile and restore God's rule of compassion and justice. Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God was tied to the Jewish messianic hope of a return from exile. At the same time though Jesus' Kingdom agenda was unlike any of the agendas of the other Jewish groups of the time because of his *objectives* and his *methods*, that is, *how he defined the enemy, and the weapon he used in his revolution*. The enemy he took on was not the Romans, but the very roots of oppression and suffering itself. The weapons he used was the way of self-sacrificing love. We now turn to look at the message of the Kingdom in detail:

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Christianity has tended to focus so much on individual salvation that it becomes divorced from any

sense of social justice. Conversely, the Jews of Jesus time had become so focused on seeing salvation from their perspective of a return from exile that they had come to think of themselves as the “victims” and the Romans as the “evil ones.” It had become an “us vs. them” thing. Jesus' Kingdom message returned the focus to a biblical model of salvation which entailed the responsibility of the individual to deal with the sin in their lives, but also of a need to seek social justice and reform in society. Salvation is not just a personal affair, nor is it merely a “social gospel,” but is a total salvation both of our interior and exterior world. When God rules in our hearts this overflows into every area of our lives.

As long as the focus of our blame is on some outside group, we can safely avoid looking into our own hearts. This is equally true for us today. As they blamed Rome, so we manage to blame all the evils of the world on the “evil liberals,” or on the “evil Fundamentalists,” or on the “evil Capitalists,” or on the “evil terrorists” depending on which side of the fence we are on. But when we do this we are all part of the same game. Jesus by placing the focus on the “Kingdom of God” vs. the “Kingdom of Satan” was getting to the roots of the system of oppression, power, and violence that is behind all this blaming. His allegiance was not with any particular race or religion or nation, but with those who by their action and hearts showed that they belonged to God's Kingdom – that their lives reflected God's values. And he called for people to turn away from buying into the game of power and violence and instead to follow the agenda and way of God's Kingdom. It was about confronting the very roots of evil in our world and in our hearts, breaking free from its oppressive rule, and re-identifying ourselves with God's way of true compassion and justice. This was highly confrontational to the religious and political authorities of his time because it directly exposed them and threatened their power base by empowering those oppressed by the corrupt system – the poor, the sick, the unclean. So the first significant aspect of Jesus' Kingdom message is its *objective*: instead of a purely political liberation, Jesus sought to liberate people from oppression and evil itself—a total revolution from the inside out.

The second significant characteristic of his Kingdom message are the *methods* he used to accomplish this: Most Jews expected the Kingdom to come through power and violence – through military force. The Messiah would overcome oppression and evil Hollywood style—by beating the snot out of the Romans. Jesus had a radically different agenda which was confrontational to theirs. His message of the Kingdom taught that when you take the way of oppression and destruction you only become what you hate. His revolution was much deeper. It was not just a change in ruler but a change in the rules.

“You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies ... If you love those who love you, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-44 & 46-48)

Real victory is not about crushing your enemy, but about winning him over from the grip of evil – of breaking the vicious circle you are both caught in by reacting in the opposite spirit. If someone is arrogant respond with grace, if someone is panicked respond with calm, if someone is hostile respond with peace. The way of the Kingdom was not to try to overcome violence with more violence. Here there is merely a shift in power but the game stays the same. Rather Jesus taught us to “overcome evil with good” (cf. Romans 12:14-21). This is not just a shift in power but a redefinition of what power was about. Real greatness is not about having power over the small but about serving and valuing the small and the voiceless.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven...The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 18:1-4 & 23:11-12)

These two factors set the Kingdom agenda of Jesus apart from the other movements of his time. It was a revolution that revolutionized the revolutionary. It was the way of loving your enemies and turning the other cheek, of losing to win, of dying to live. This way is so shockingly different from our worldly concepts of power and greatness that even many Christians today cannot conceive of this “strength in weakness.” The wisdom of God seems foolishness to them. The fear is that loving one's enemies means being a passive doormat. In the false dichotomy of our worldly thinking we suppose that one either deals with things “like a man” through violence, or they stick their head in the sand as a passive coward. Jesus' Kingdom was about a third way. It is not about submitting to oppression but about actively combating and overcoming it with good. It is about breaking the back of evil with the power of love. We may think that we cannot do good to an evil man lest they think we approve of their evil deeds, but in God's economy it is precisely through pouring out of compassion and kindness that the power of evil over us is overcome and we are led to repentance. That is what forgiveness does. God loves us first, in the middle of our sin, and that undeserved embrace breaks the chains off of our heart and sends us to our knees in gratitude. As Christians we have experienced first hand how this kind of unmerited love has conquered our sinful hearts. While we were still God's enemies he loved us. We are witnesses to the power love of enemies has to overcome evil, and Jesus calls us to be ambassadors of this way now.

Many Jews of Jesus time expected the Messiah to overthrow their enemies through violence and force. Jesus showed quite clearly that this is not the way of the Kingdom but the way of the world. It is thus profoundly ironic that despite having the message of Jesus and the entire New Testament, despite knowing God's grace and redemption first hand, so many Christians still manage to think that when Jesus returns again that the way he will bring justice and redemption is through force and violence, like some outer space invader crashing through the clouds. We cannot fully imagine what a world of complete justice is like. We strain at the boundaries of thought and language to do so. But God has given us in Jesus a self-revelation of the nature and the way of that Kingdom in Jesus. Its nature is the nature of Jesus and its way is the way of Jesus. We need to learn to see the world and the Kingdom through the eyes of Jesus.

As stated previously, the most significant way in which Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom is not in what he said, but in what he did. *All of the actions of his ministry were actions of liberation*: He healed those who were afflicted and debilitated with disease, he freed those who were tormented by demonic oppression, he forgave those who were crushed with guilt, and through his fellowship with “sinners” he empowered those who were powerless by loving and accepting those the world and the religious authorities had rejected. What he said in his teachings and parables served to put these actions into perspective within the Kingdom, drawing people to connect what Jesus was doing with what their “Father in Heaven” was doing. Thus when Jesus touched the untouchables this meant God was touching them. It meant that God had come among them to seek and heal and liberate. This is why the

Temple priests were so offended that Jesus associated and fellowshiped with “sinners” – and especially that he freely forgave them – because they understood that by his association he was saying that God was not rejecting them but loving them. And he was doing this *outside of the temple sacrificial system*. Jesus did this on a personal individual human level, but it was at the same time an extremely political statement because it meant that the people did not need to go through the temple system to get to God. Because of this the priests in their role as the gatekeepers of the temple's monopoly on franchised forgiveness were directly challenged in their authority by Jesus. Not only did Jesus not require any temple sacrifice to forgive people, he also forgave people in God's authority *before* the cross, not after. Thus the entire argument of God requiring an appeasement of sacrifice before he can justly forgive is shot down simply by looking at what Jesus does.

Satisfaction-Doctrine bases its Messianic understanding on the temple system, but Jesus did not connect his ministry to the corrupted temple system (which he took a whip to) but to the Passover meal commemorating the Exodus (). On the night before his crucifixion he shared the Passover meal with his disciples connecting the meaning of the elements of the bread and wine with himself “*this is my body...this is my blood...Do this in remembrance of me*” (Lk 22:19). That is to say, when we remember what Jesus did, we should think of it in the terms of the Exodus, in the terms of God liberating his people.

Jesus came to liberate, to set the captives free, to break people out of the lies and trap of evil and hate, to empower people to take hold of their lives and turn towards the Kingdom of compassion, to bring the values of Heaven into our world. This is the heart of the Messianic idea of God sending his anointed one to liberate and restore. It is important to keep in focus that Jesus bringing in the Kingdom of God was not just about a new set of personal moral values, or a new way to deal with political reform (though we certainly are called to follow him in both of these), Jesus was not just a teacher with some radical and inspiring ideas about inner and outer reform, he was declaring war on suffering and oppression itself. He was declaring the coming of God's Kingdom on a total scale and its rightful rule in our lives and world.

PARADIGMS

We have seen that the overarching story, the meta-narrative that defined the Jews self-understanding and how they understood their world and God, was the messianic hope of being brought out of exile and into God's reign of love and justice. This “Liberation theme” is not just something found in a few isolated proof-texts but is the overarching theme of the entire Old Testament. We have also seen that this Jewish messianic hope for liberation from oppression and restoration into God's reign is the basis for Jesus' message of the Kingdom. Christus Victor, with its apocalyptic imagery of God triumphing over sin death and the devil, likewise fits into this classical Jewish understanding of the Messiah liberating the people from the dominion of evil and oppression. This is not surprising since Christus Victor originated out of a first century Jewish context, as opposed to Satisfaction-Doctrine, which originated out of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The two worldviews from which these theories spring are completely different ones, the first being Jewish the second being Latin.

The paradigm of Satisfaction-Doctrine is the judicial concept of *penance*, whereas the paradigm of the Jewish messianic hope of Jesus' kingdom message and of Christus Victor is one of *liberation*. These

two respective frameworks of penance or liberation form the lens through which everything else is understood. In the Latin paradigm of penance the reason the Messiah came was to pay a penalty. In the Jewish *paradigm of liberation* the reason the Messiah came was to liberate and restore. In the *paradigm of penance* the reason the Messiah needed to be sinless is to present a perfect offering. In *paradigm of liberation* the reason the Messiah needed to be sinless is to present a model of God's heart (his nature) and values (his Kingdom). In the *paradigm of penance* the reason the Messiah had to suffer is to appease authority – to do penance. In the *paradigm of liberation* the reason the Messiah had to suffer is to free us from the grip of false authority – to liberate us from sin, death, and the devil. In other words: Jesus died standing up for love. The chart below diagrams these two paradigms and how we can perceive the same information differently depending on which lens we view it through.

	Mission: Why did the messiah come?	Perfection: Why was the Messiah was sinless?	Suffering: Why did the Messiah have to suffer?	Focus: Where is the culmination of the messianic work?
Paradigm of Penance	To <i>pay penalty</i> so we can be justly forgiven	To present a perfect offering	To <i>appease</i> authority	Focus on <i>cross</i> where penalty was paid
Paradigm of Liberation	To <i>liberate</i> us from the hold of sin and restore us into the Kingdom	To model the values of the Kingdom	To <i>liberate</i> from false authority	Focus on <i>resurrection</i> where sin and death were overcome

If we want to understand what the Biblical writers meant by the concepts of *salvation* and *atonement* and *sacrifice* and *messiah*, we need to understand their worldview and way of thinking rather than projecting the worldview of the Middle Ages onto what they were saying. We need to think in the same paradigm they did – the paradigm of liberation.

What stands out in Satisfaction-Doctrine's portrait of the Old Testament's need for a Messiah is that it is a perspective revolving around the Catholic idea of penance that was firmly rejected by Martin Luther and the reformers as being a salvation by works. It seems strange then that the reformers having rejected the concept of penance and salvation by works would later retain a view of the cross that is rooted in this very concept. Luther was right to reject the idea of penance as unbiblical. Gustaf Aulen argues that Luther himself had a view of the cross closer to Christus Victor, but the reformers who followed Luther were not consequent in rejecting the view of Satisfaction-Doctrine that was rooted in this framework of penance.

Penance and appeasement are completely unbiblical concepts. God has never intended for people to come to him through a performance system. As we have seen in the previous section on the purpose of the Law, the Law and Judaism were never about performance and earning God's approval. That is not and never has been what the Law was about. Following the Law of love – living God's way – is a result of being in a relationship with God. Because we belong to the King we live like King's kids, not to earn love but because we are loved. Satisfaction-Doctrine revolves around the idea that justice must be satisfied. There must be a payment for, an earning of, forgiveness which man must provide. From a legal standpoint this seems logical, the court needs someone to pay the fine in order to balance its books. But this is not mercy, it is accounting. This legal paradigm is not scriptural, neither does it reflect the heart of the Law, nor does it reflect the nature of God that Jesus reveals. Forgiveness is not something that is deserved, grace is a gift. God's mercy is so incredible precisely *because* it was not

earned or bought but given *undeserved* out of God's heart of compassion.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

We now turn to take a deeper look at what the sufferings of Christ mean in light of the understanding of suffering as self-sacrificing love. Jesus himself says, “*How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ (Messiah) have to suffer all these things and enter into his glory?*” (Lk 24:25-27). Judging by all the times that the prophet Isaiah is quoted by the writers of the Gospels in relation to Jesus as the Messiah, it seems clear that they looked to Isaiah as a major source for these messianic prophesies. Of all the messianic prophesies quoted in the Gospels from Isaiah, half of them are from one chapter: Isaiah 53. The theme of the Suffering servant is found throughout all of Isaiah, the main emphasis of this particular chapter though is to describe the shocking way that the servant will bring salvation to God's people and the world. The prelude to this begins with chapter 52 verses 13-15:

See, my servant will prosper
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness (Isa 52:13-14)

Here Isaiah says, Look at the Servant now, lifted up to the highest place of honor! But it wasn't always that way. At first everyone was appalled by him. He was beaten down so low we could hardly tell he was still human.

So will he sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.(Isa 52:15)

But the powerful will clap their hands over their mouths and fall silent in shock at what they will see: What was unheard of they will see. What they never imagined will be right there in front of them.

Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (53:1)

Who can accept this way? Who would have ever thought that this is the form God's salvation would take? Who can comprehend it? here Isaiah has set the stage for what is to come. He is preparing us for a shock. The way of God's saving power is not at all what we have expected. As if to say “Forget what you think you know and listen to this...”

He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (v2)

Insignificant, unnoticeable, a little weed in a dry field. The Servant didn't have the usual attributes that we think of as being pretty or impressive, and so we didn't notice the beauty there. Like a wildflower in the forest, that we either walked past or trampled over him. We didn't recognize that there was a treasure among us and we treated it like trash.

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (v3)

He suffers, but we do not see, and do not care. He is the stranger in the night that we turn away. He is the least of these. *“I was hungry and you gave me nothing, I was in need and you sent me away.”* Like Job's friends, we figured it was his own fault and “considered him stricken by God.”

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted. (v4)

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. We have here the image of one carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, bearing in himself the suffering of a whole planet. A man broken—for us. Truly, he was kind to us! He carried our sorrows and mended our wounds. But we did not recognize this kindness. We didn't see it. He led the life of a servant, and because of that we thought he was nothing.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed (v5)

Here we come to a point of realization: We thought it was the servant who was to blame, but now we see that it is because of us that he is suffering. He was pierced because of my sins.

Many of you have probably heard the interpretation of this verse that the Satisfaction-Doctrine offers, i.e. the piercing and punishing of Christ as something that God ordered in order to be appeased. But as we will see in the following verses the suffering described here is anything but just. It is deeply tragic and unfair. The paradigm of legal appeasement simply does not fit with the tragic image of a miscarriage of justice that Isaiah is painting. I would like to suggest that we think therefore of the Suffering of the Servant in a paradigm more fitting to the text – in the context of self-sacrificing love. To illustrate this consider the following scenario:

A Wiccan girl is surrounded by an angry mob. Ugly faces spit self-righteous accusations and threats. *“we don't want you in our town, witch!”* The mood is violent and volatile. The crowd presses nearer. Someone shoves the girl and knocks her to the ground. Suddenly a man steps between her and the crowd and says *“if you want to hurt her you'll have to go through me*

first.” The man turns to her and says “*Go now, run!*” She begins to run and as she looks around she sees the man buried in a sea of fists and boots. He is motionless but they go on hitting him. Later as the girl goes to visit him in the hospital she finds his once gentle face beaten beyond recognition.

Some of us may find ourselves reflected in that girl – kicked down by hatred and abuse, made to feel worthless; treated like garbage until we start to believe we really are. *He suffered the punishment meant for us. He suffered standing up for the voiceless.* Others may see themselves present in the self-righteous mob—in the middle of a ruthless and ugly crowd, like Paul “we were there seeing it all and approving.” *He was pierced because of our hate. hatred is what made him suffer.* Hatred may have overtaken us like the girl or it may have consumed us like the mob. In either case what is needed is for us to be liberated out of this world of hate. Salvation in this context is about being liberated out of that reign of hatred and into God's Kingdom of compassion. What it is *not* about is God in the role of the mob demanding punishment. Most of all because as we shall see below in the next verse, the punishment that the Servant endures is undeserved and unjust – a miscarriage of justice not its fulfilment. The Servant did not suffer because God demanded a punishment, but because hatred did.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgement he was taken away. (v7-8a)

“*By oppression and judgement he was taken away.*” We get the sense here that we are witness to something tragic, something terribly unfair, and indeed we should. This was not a picture of justice, but of a travesty of justice. This was not about the “fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the Law” as Satisfaction-Doctrine would like to think, but about oppression and judgement crushing love. He was crushed by oppression and judgement, even though he was innocent, As the Servant stood up for the voiceless he incurred all the wrath of the System. Fear, hatred, and pride tore him apart. God let this wildflower be turned over to all the hatred and wrath of the world.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the Lord 's will to crush him and cause him to suffer (v9-10a)

Even though it was not just and he had done nothing wrong, even so, it was God's plan? Why? Not because God wanted to see his beloved Son suffer, or to see anyone suffer but because suffering is the result of radically loving in the face of oppression. God and Jesus knew that as he stood up for the least against the powers of the world it would mean his death. And God asked him to do that, to care enough to be vulnerable. So Christ, scorning the cross, endured it for our sake. For the sake of love.

But how does this unjust suffering make things right? How does his suffering result in our healing? We

have seen in the illustration of the girl and the mob how vicarious suffering for someone in need can save them—literally. But how does that suffering liberate the mob out of the hate they are consumed by? We can find some insight into this in the verse immediately following:

and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering,

Here a comparison is drawn between the unjust suffering of the Servant and the rite of animal sacrifice for sins in the temple. When you see the slaughtered animal before you you are confronted with your own sin – that dead ram is you. It allows you to step back and take a look at yourself and what sin has done to you. In the same way, when “*oppression and judgement*” took Jesus away and stripped him naked as a common criminal “*numbered among the transgressors*” even though “*he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth*” the injustice of the System was exposed. By killing the one who was love, the mob had their own sin laid in front of them like the lamb on the alter. This is the principle of nonviolence. E Stanley Jones writes,

He would match his capacity to suffer against the others capacity to inflict suffering and there by expose injustice. His soul force against physical force... Passive resistance is actively resisting evil not by inflicting suffering but by taking suffering on oneself. The opponent strikes you on your cheek and you strike him on the heart by your amazing spiritual audacity in turning the other cheek. You wrest the offensive from him by refusing to take up his weapons.¹⁶

The way of loving one's enemies, of caring for the forgotten, of self-sacrificing love characterizes Jesus' way. It is the picture not just of what he did on the cross, but of his entire life and witness, of who he was. It is a way that is diametrically opposed to the worldly understanding of power and force. It does not overcome the enemy by inflicting more suffering and oppression but by changing the game, by striking at the heart, taking on suffering and thus wining your opponent over to repentance. Christ's sacrifice was not only to rescue the afflicted, but to draw the afflictors to repentance as well. They too are under the dominion of hate and need to be set free from its grip. As the Church Father Irenæus writes,

The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil.

It is crucial in our attempt to understand the way of the Suffering Servant that we do not lose sight of the fact that Isaiah is presenting something to us here that is intended to be a shock. It is not meant to be reasonable and normal, but scandalous and jaw-dropping. The way of suffering is hard to grasp. It is something huge and wonderful. It cannot be understood in calculated legal theories. God pulls the rug out from under us with the cross and leaves us gasping for air turning our worldly concepts on their head and beginning a revolution in us. What seems at first to be weakness is the way of unremitting strength. What seems to be loss is the victory of God. If the cross does not knock the wind out of you, if it does not blow your mind, then you have not understood it.

¹⁶ E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (Abingdon-Cocksbury, 1958). This incredible book is what Martin Luther King Jr. read before starting his nonviolent civil rights movement. E Stanley Jones was an amazing missionary and friend of Gandhi's. The humility and depth of this book is incredible. A must read.

We must never lose sight of how radical this Way is. This is not merely some system or principle, but *who God is and how God works*. Christ does not illustrate nonviolence, nonviolence illustrates Christ. We must go beyond grasping the principle and grasp the Person. It is not just a method but living and active power, rooted in creativity. It is a revelation of God's saving power – of grace in action on a cosmic scale. Christ embodies this Kingdom and through looking at the Suffering Servant in action we see God in action. “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*” (2 Cor 5:19). On the cross Christ reveals the suffering God.

After the suffering of his soul,
 he will see the light of life and be satisfied ;
 by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
 and he will bear their iniquities. (v10-11)
 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
 and he will divide the spoils with the strong, (12)

Because of this servant-love God lifted Jesus up above all other names as Lord of the world. Not as some sort of prize to make up for the suffering, but because the way Jesus lived and embodied was the highest form of love. It is God's way. The Servant models who God is and how God acts. Thus God set up this way of the Servant as *the* model and *the* standard, as the height of humanity and the height of godliness.

The common Christian interpretation of the Suffering Servant is to see it as referring to Jesus. This is a view supported throughout the Gospels, and by Jesus himself

“It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’ and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.” (Luke 22:37. Jesus is referring here to Isaiah 53:12)

Yet throughout Isaiah we see the Servant identified as Israel,

Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel.
 I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. (Isaiah 44:21)

How do these two statements of Scripture work together? Throughout Isaiah we see that God has given his people a task to model God’s image and way to the world. They are to be “a light unto the world” reflecting God's image in their humanity, with God's Laws written on their hearts. God had given Israel a covenant to convey as a witness to the Nations reflecting to the whole world an understanding of who God truly is, and what it truly means to be human.

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isa 42:6-7)

This is not meant as a nationalistic statement of God favoring one nation of race above others, but rather that God has taken a people and showed them who he is and his ways, and they have been given

the calling to model that to the world. They are to display to the world what it means to be truly human – made in the image of God and thus reflecting God’s nature. This is a parallel concept to the Body of Christ, the church, who is to model God’s nature and way to the world. Whether we are part the original branches or have been “grafted in” we have a calling as his People, a special task entrusted to us to be light and salt, to model Christ the image of God. Jesus picked up on the theme of Israel’s call to be a “light unto the Gentiles” in the Sermon on the Mount,

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? ... “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl... (Mt 5:13-15)

In other words Israel is truly *Israel* when it is modelling and reflecting God’s image as a light to the world. A Christian is truly a Christian when they are reflecting Christ. God has called us to reflect who he is, this is what makes us “his People” because by this we shown that we are representing him. At its core the image of the Suffering Servant is a model of God. It shows us a radical picture of *who God is and how God saves*. The reason that Jesus better embodies the Servant than either the righteous remnant of Israel or the body of Christ is because Jesus as the truly human person is the perfect reflection of who God is. What Isaiah sets before us in poetry, Jesus sets before us in a living breathing flesh and blood life. Through Isaiah, God paints a picture of His nature and way in a poem. Through Jesus, God paints a picture of His nature and way in a human life. The words of Isaiah have become Jesus “the Word made flesh” (Jn 1).

Ultimately the identity of the Servant is God. The Servant reveals who God is and how God saves. Therefore we should not end our focus on the person of Jesus, but rather let Jesus point us to who God is. God is the Servant. God is the one who comes to us in our need, in the middle of our grief. God is the one who enters into the place where the world is hurting and through taking on suffering himself, overcomes it. And God is the one who calls us to follow him in the way of servant-love. The way of the Servant is our way. We are called to imitate the nature and way of the Servant. God sent Jesus to model this way of self-sacrificing love, to model the Kingdom, and as citizens in God's Kingdom, if we are part of the vine (whether we are grafted in or the original branches), then we are to follow him in that same way. We are to take on the life of the Servant as well. We are to be Christ in a hurting world, salt and light.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Ro 12:1)

We should no longer see in the categories the world sees people in, and how we once saw the Servant, but learn to see ourselves and others through the eyes of Jesus. We are called again and again in scripture to “share in the sufferings if Christ”. Clearly the context in which this is said is not of us needing to appease God (as if Jesus' sacrifice was not enough), but to join Jesus in the way of self-sacrificing love. Throughout scripture we are called to join Christ in his sufferings,

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so

that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13 see also Ro 8:17; 2 Thes 1:5).

It is clear in this context that the Apostles were not thinking of the suffering of Christ as an appeasement, because if it were an appeasement, to “participate in the sufferings of Christ” would in this paradigm conversely mean we should continually perform acts of penance to appease God as well—we should continually buy God's forgiveness. On the contrary, the “sufferings of Christ” are to be understood not as an appeasement to God, but as a way of life epitomized in Jesus which we are also to embody, aligning ourselves with love and enduring suffering for the sake of love and justice. Jesus stood up for love regardless of the cost. Taking on the “the sufferings and cross of Christ” is to follow him in this way of self-sacrificing love.

The apostles “participated in the sufferings of Christ” to a degree that few of us westerners can imagine. They were thrown out of their homes and communities, put in jail, tortured and killed. They certainly have more right than we to speak of suffering for righteousness. And yet all of them considered Christ's suffering to be in a category apart from their own suffering. Why is it that they saw Christ's suffering as having more weight than their own? Why was the suffering of Christ unique? Because Jesus was God incarnate. Jesus is God's direct revelation of himself and his Kingdom. Through Christ God was himself talking on suffering, God was himself coming to serve and sacrifice for us with ramifications on a cosmic level. God was in Christ taking on the suffering of the world to bring liberation and redemption to the whole world, defeating death and sin and liberating humanity from its grip. This is the message of Christus Victor.

Christ died once and for all, opening up the way for us to follow him. He is the source, the root of our salvation, but also the one whose way and likeness we are to take on. We do this by denying ourselves and surrendering our lives to God's reign, taking on the life of service and love that Jesus exemplified (Phil 2:4-8; 3:10) defending the oppressed and standing up for what is right (1 Pe 2:19; Ma 5:10). In fact, Jesus assured his disciples that if they followed him in his way, it would surely lead to suffering (Jn 16:1-4) because the way of love is opposed to “the way of the world” (Jn 15:18-19). In this world we will have trouble, but Jesus tells us that he has overcome the world. In the next section we will examine how the way of sacrifice that Jesus exemplified in his life and on the cross overcomes the world.

THE SUFFERING GOD

Christ shows us God's heart for the poor and the oppressed and the abused. But if there are the oppressed and abused among us there must also be those among us who are the oppressors and abusers. Often the abuser is one who was themselves abused. It is relatively easy for us to identify with the victim. What is truly radical is that God loves his enemies. Christ did not only die for the oppressed, he died also for the oppressor. On the cross he not only took on the pain and suffering and wounds of the raped, but also took on the weight of sin and darkness of the rapist. God sees past the inhumanity of the one we must truly call “enemy” and out of his love gives up his life for them while they are still inhuman and an enemy of love so that they may become human again and be conquered by love.

A Christian girl I met at a retreat a few years back told me that she had had an abortion. Even at the time she had doubts about it, but her mother had pressured her into it. Now she carried a deep sense of grief inside her. When she had tried to talk to her family about it they just pushed it aside telling her that she had done nothing wrong. And she had been around Christians long enough and heard them toss around words like “murderer” enough in casual conversation about abortion to know that she could not open her heart to them either. So she had nowhere to go with the grief. I asked her if she had anyone she could talk to about it. She told me that this was the first time she had told anyone in the five years since it had happened.

Her story is unfortunately typical of how our society tends to deal with guilt. We either deny it and push aside the feeling a person has, or we are so focused on the issues that we insensitively lash out on condemnation and judgement ignoring the person right in front of us. It is terrifying to face what is hateful and shameful in us. We want to run from our darkness and shut out our pain. But issues of guilt are even harder to face than our pain and doubt because we instinctively feel that to admit that what we did was bad is to admit that *we* are bad. The reality is that we all do things that are hurtful and things that are loving. That is who we are. Jesus desires to embrace us in the totality of who we are, but he can only do that if we will come to him with all of us, with our brokenness and our darkness. So God meets us at the cross, himself broken and condemned so that we need not fear.

On the cross God in Christ took on our suffering and took on our hatefulness. He was broken for us. He that was without sin became sin for us. Jesus experienced the terrible abandonment by the Father crying out “why have you forsaken me!?” And the Father too experienced the infinite grief of love suffering the loss of his Son and his fatherhood. For how can the Father be a father without a son? Yet right there at that point of loss and abandonment and the deep suffering of being godforsaken and accursed, at this point of utter despair as the skies above him turned black and the earth trembled, we see on that cross the truest picture of who God is. *God was on that cross*. As we look on the horror and ugliness of the crucifixion we see there the saving power and glory and beauty of God. As Jürgen Moltman writes:

God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.¹⁷

What the cross reveals to us is not so much who we are but rather who God is. We knew before that we were broken and hurtful. But in the cross we see that God in his love suffers with us under the weight of our sin. And we see the scandalous way out of a rebel God: His strength is in weakness, his victory is in surrender. If we want to find our life we must lose it. In the cross God stoops down to meet and save broken humanity. When we have the courage to face and to own our darkness and brokenness we can meet God at the foot of that cross.

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993).