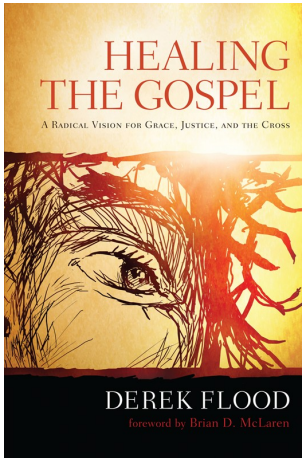


Contact Information:

Bob Todd Publicity
(612) 910-1468
BT@BobToddPublicity.com

[Healing the Gospel](#)

A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross



Why did Jesus have to die? Was it to appease a wrathful God's demand for punishment? Does that mean Jesus died to save us from God? How could someone ever truly love or trust a God like that? How can that ever be called "Good News"? It's questions like these that make so many people want to have nothing to do with Christianity.

Healing the Gospel challenges the assumption that the Christian understanding of justice is rooted in a demand for violent punishment, and instead offers a radically different understanding of the gospel based on God's restorative justice. Connecting our own experiences of faith with the New Testament narrative, author Derek Flood shows us an understanding of the cross that not only reveals God's heart of grace, but also models our own way of Christ-like love. It's a vision of the gospel that exposes violence, rather than supporting it—a gospel rooted in love of enemies, rather than retribution. The result is a nonviolent understanding of the atonement that is not only thoroughly biblical, but will help people struggling with their faith to encounter grace.

For Christians dissatisfied with traditional ideas of penal substitution, for those eager to get beyond typical cause-and-effect theology—God is wrathful and Jesus died to take up this wrath so we don't have to—*Healing the Gospel* will be a vital resource.

"This book combines the mind of a theologian with the eye and heart of an artist. Derek sees that meaning comes in images and narratives, not just formulas, theories, or models. So he combines the two, and in the process, presents us with something we thought we knew but didn't really."

—Brian McLaren, from the foreword

Derek Flood is a writer, artist, and theologian. He holds a master's degree in systematic theology from the Graduate Theological Union, and is a featured blogger for the *Huffington Post*, *Sojourners* magazine. Learn more at his website www.theRebelGod.com

Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross

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Praise for *Healing the Gospel*

In this readable and balanced book, Flood gently—yet firmly and provocatively—challenges and enriches our understanding of the cross. He shows how the New Testament writers (and their earliest interpreters) present saving death as God’s act of restorative rather than retributive justice, as an act of nonviolent, enemy-loving, reconciling, and healing love. Such amazing love beckons us to follow in the way of Jesus and justice. It is a book to read, mark, and digest.”

—**Michael J. Gorman**, author of *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*

“Quietly, deftly, brilliantly, Flood takes on the story of the Christian doctrine of atonement, turns that story on its end, and then lays out before us a beauty almost beyond theology. Read it for yourself and see.”

—**Phyllis Tickle**, author of *The Great Emergence*

“There has been a spate of books on atonement this past decade. None of them treat the salvific healing of Jesus’s death better than this one. It is well-researched yet easy to read, full of insight, and sure to be a go-to book on the subject.”

—**Michael Hardin**, author of *The Jesus Driven Life*

“*Healing the Gospel* brings the latest insights in biblical scholarship to the ongoing and lively atonement debate. Flood’s work is biblical, straightforward, and accessible for the lay reader. He surveys the restorative justice of the wondrous cross with fresh eyes, engaging many head-scratching texts with utmost clarity. A great contribution!”

—**Brad Jersak**, author of *Stricken by God?*

“In this provocative book, Flood exposes the grave deficiencies of the penal substitution model of atonement, pinpointing its shallow treatment of the depth and the gravity of sin . . . Armed with astute interpretations of Scripture, he focuses on the love of God and reinterprets justice as restorative . . . Finally, after centuries of suffering under a legal perception of atonement, Flood has shown us that the good news is truly good news!”

—**Sharon L. Baker**, author of *Razing Hell*

“On a cresting wave of reaction against violent atonement theory, *Healing the Gospel* charts a sea-change course back to Jesus’s ministry as a model of gracious restoration, moving far beyond the traditional, abusive contours of penal substitution as explanation of Christ’s death . . . Jesus dies to show us God’s enemy-love, which changes everything. A splendid, stirring, and essential book!”

—**Anthony Bartlett**, author of *Cross Purposes*

“Anyone concerned about the connection between theology and violence in American society will welcome Flood’s *Healing the Gospel*. In a readable format, he explains why we should abandon violence-accommodating, penal substitutionary atonement, and replace it with atonement imagery that reflects the restorative justice Jesus lived.”

—**J. Denny Weaver**, author of *The Nonviolent Atonement*



An excerpt from *Healing the Gospel*

Countless people filling our pews have internalized this hurtful view of God and themselves. Roberta Bondi recalls the revival meetings at Pond Fork Baptist Church in Kentucky she attended each summer as a child:

The goal of a revival was to create or revive in everybody the threefold conviction that each of us was so rotten to the core that we deserved to die and roast in hell forever; that God was enraged at us enough to kill us; and finally, that, in spite of everything, God loved us enough to rescue us by sending his son as a sacrifice to die in our place.


Bondi goes on to tell how this led her to internalize a sense of self-loathing that robbed her of joy. It is the kind of shame, she says, that “consumes you with anger, that renders you passive, that swallows you in depression, that keeps you from loving and knowing yourself to be loved.” Faith motivated by fear, threat, and feelings of worthlessness. Her story is, sadly, not uncommon.

How could things have gone so wrong? When did the good news become bad news? Behind all of this lies an image of God as a judge who is primarily concerned with satisfaction of punitive justice. This is the image of God that plagued sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther with the horrible sense that he could never be good enough. The weight of this became so pronounced that at one point he confesses bitterly, “I did not love, and in fact I hated that righteous God who punished sinners . . . I was angry with God . . . I drove myself mad with a desperate disturbed conscience.”

It is not insignificant that Luther’s own father and mother were both harsh disciplinarians, but regardless of the cause, Luther had clearly internalized a crippling image of God as judge that tormented him until he discovered grace. This message of grace and forgiveness has been a life-changing one to many people over the ages since Luther rediscovered it, but it has often been tragically accompanied by a message of fear and condemnation itself. Luther, for example, preached that one must face the horrors of wrath before one could come to grace. In other words, he believed that everyone needed to be forced to go through the horrible struggle he did before they could hear about grace.

Ever since then, there has been a long history of revival preachers who have proclaimed this “pre-gospel” of fear, threat, and condemnation—telling people the bad news so they could then receive the good news, wounding people first, so they could then heal those wounds. The philosophy behind this strategy is that people need to be shaken out of their complacency and made ready to respond to the gospel.

This may indeed be true for some, but for others it amounts to little more than abuse, and has resulted in a hurtful image of God being hammered into their heads that has estranged them from God, and driven them away from faith. For a person struggling with moral failure, facing up to their brokenness and realizing that God loves them and died for them despite it is a crucial step towards life. But to tell a person whose sin is self-hatred that they need to face how bad and worthless they are is like making them swallow the wrong prescription medicine—what was healing to the first person, is poison to the second.



For people like Luther, Bunyan, or Wesley (all of whom have deeply shaped the character of evangelicalism), I would suggest that their true struggle was not one of guilt at all. Their problem was not the petty infractions they would constantly accuse themselves of (Wesley, for example, after doing some good deed for the poor, would often condemn himself for feeling pleased about it). No, their real struggle was with the devastation done to their souls through self-loathing masquerading as piety. So they struggled with their feelings of shame and worthlessness, desperately longing for grace, longing for God's assurance and love, yet continuing to assume that their broken view of an angry, condemning, punishing God was the correct view, the biblical view. What I want to propose is that this is not in fact what the New Testament teaches at all.

Question and Answer with author Derek Flood

1. *Healing the Gospel* is focused on understanding the meaning of the cross. Why should the average Christian reader be interested in a book on the atonement?

Most of us were taught that Jesus needed to die to appease a wrathful God's demand for punishment. This brings up a number of difficult questions: Does that mean Jesus died to save us from God? How could someone ever truly love or entrust themselves to a God like that? How can that ever be called "Good News"? It's questions like these that have made so many people want to have nothing to do with Christianity.


These are deeply relevant questions for us to face that have a profound impact on our relationship with God and others. Countless people filling our pews have adopted a hurtful view of God and themselves which has led them to internalize feelings of shame and self-loathing. Others have lost their faith entirely, unable to worship a God who seems to them to be a moral monster. Faith motivated by fear, threat, and feelings of worthlessness. How could things have gone so wrong? When did the good news become bad news?

Healing the Gospel is about breaking away from that hurtful image of God and instead learning to understand the cross in the context of grace, restoration, and enemy love.

2. Many people would say that the idea that Jesus died to appease God's demand for punishment is simply what the Bible teaches. How would you respond to that?

First, I would want to stress that this has not always been how Christians understood the atonement. For the first thousand years, the work of Christ was understood primarily in terms of God's act of healing people, and liberating them from the bonds of sin and death. This understanding is known as Christ Victor. But gradually there was a shift towards a legal focus, and with it a focus on violent punishment. With this shift the message was flipped on its head: instead of the crucifixion being seen as an act of grave injustice (as it is portrayed in all four Gospels), it was now claimed that God had demanded the death of Jesus to quench his anger. Not coincidentally, this coincided with increased violence perpetrated by the church, and it went downhill from there.

As a society we've increasingly come to recognize the damage punishment can do—not just in the



realm of religious violence like the Crusades, but spanning a wide scope of issues ranging from how we raise our kids to international conflict. Across the board we have come to see that restorative justice works and punitive justice doesn't. It's about making things right, rather than perpetuating hurt.

At the same time, it has been deeply ingrained into our thinking that God demands retributive justice. For many Christians this is inseparable from how they understand salvation. Consequently, in an effort to be true to the teachings of the Bible, many Christians struggle to believe it, even though it seems immoral and hurtful to them. They hate it, but think this is what God wants them to believe.

Healing the Gospel takes a deep look at the Bible and makes the case that this view is neither representative of Jesus and his teachings, nor is it reflective of the New Testament. Rather, it is the result of people projecting their worldly understanding of punitive justice onto the biblical text. Jesus was focused on confronting those cultural and religious assumptions. What we see in the New Testament is the gospel understood as God's act of restorative justice. This is the master narrative of the New Testament, and entails a critique of the way of retribution and violence rather than a validation of it.

3. But doesn't that entail being soft on crime, and not taking sin seriously? How can God be just if there are no consequences?


There most certainly are consequences. The choice is not between action and inaction, it is between allowing hurt to be perpetuated or acting to repair the harm. The Greek word for "saved" used throughout the Gospels is *sozo*, and it means both "saved" and "healed." This is deeply significant because it reflects the fact that salvation is not conceptualized by Jesus in a legal framework, but in terms of healing and restoration. We see in Jesus that God's response to sin is not to punish it, but to heal it. In other words, the guiding metaphor here is not sin as *crime* in need of punishment, but sin as sickness in need of healing. It's a model of restoration not retribution.

This entails a much deeper understanding of sin because it recognizes its deep roots, and offers a real solution that involves changing a person's heart, whereas a legal focus stays on a superficial level of outward behavior, and only perpetuates hurt through punishment.

In short, love heals. The real problem I think is that people don't trust in love and so they revert to punishment and fear. But that is not the gospel. Real justice is not about punishment, it is about making things right. Likewise, biblical mercy is not about looking the other way, it is precisely about seeing. Compassion means that we do see the real problems and hurt around us, and therefore act in compassion to help. Justice is not in conflict with compassion, on the contrary real justice only comes *through* acts of compassion.

4. What about the the many passages that seem to support Christ being punished instead of us? For example Jesus is described as our sacrifice, and the book of Hebrews says that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Heb 9:22)

This is an important question, and *Healing the Gospel* spends a considerable amount of time carefully



looking at key passages like this one in order to articulate an understanding of the cross that is at the same time both life-giving and grace-centered as well as thoroughly biblical.

In this particular example, it's important to note that you have only quoted half of the verse. Context matters. The full verse reads: “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” So the stated purpose of the sacrificial blood is not to appease, but to *cleanse*, to purify, to make holy. We see this theme of sacrifice understood as cleansing repeated throughout Hebrews. It tells us the sacrifices were a symbol of the reality in Christ, and the focus is on how Christ acts to make us pure, cleansed and holy.

We see this in Paul too: A central focus of Paul's throughout his epistles was on how we are to follow in the way of the cross, which is the way of enemy love. If we instead see the cross as focused on appeasing God's anger then it ends up standing for the opposite: As if to say we should not act in retribution, but God apparently does.

Here's a really simple rule of thumb: If our understanding of the cross completely contradicts everything Jesus taught and demonstrated in his own life, then we are probably missing the point. The things we see Jesus doing in the Gospels are there as a context for us to get what his cross was all about. Paul understood this, and said that we need to follow in that same way of the cross. This is the way of enemy love which God demonstrated in Jesus, and which we are to follow.

There is therefore no contradiction between how God treats his enemies, and how we are called by Jesus to treat ours. Show me someone who has forgiven a great wrong done to them—or even more, show me someone who has forgiven a great wrong done to someone they love dearly—and I'll show you someone who understands the cross better than all the theologians in the world. We fail to understand the cross because we have not plumbed the depths of what great love can bear. Really getting the cross doesn't come through study, it comes through discipleship. The more we grow to be like Jesus, to see people through his eyes, to love as he does, the more we understand his cross.