

Atonement Theology: Reasons Why Everyone Should Care

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The Theology of Atonement and Why It Matters

Theological discussion and debate sometimes feels like a lot of hair-splitting. So I'd like to write this paper by addressing the person who is not attracted to theology. I will address five major reasons why the Christian theology of the atonement matters a great deal.

1. Does God love your non-Christian friend?
2. Does God want to undo all human evil? Or does He require human evil to exist?
3. Is God partly evil?
4. Does God value every person? Does He anchor universal human dignity?
5. Is retributive or restorative justice the highest form of God's justice? Does atonement theology impact our framework for social justice?

I will start with a theory called 'penal substitution' commonly held by Calvinists and Arminians alike, though I focus more of my attention on Calvinist theology here. Throughout this essay, I will contrast 'penal substitution' with another atonement theory called by the Eastern Orthodox tradition 'physical redemption.' 'Physical redemption' is the atonement theory held by the earliest Christian theologians, such as Irenaeus and Athanasius, even prior to the great Nicene Council. Hence it has the distinction of being the earliest atonement theory of the church. I will expand on both theories as I write.

Reason #1: Does God Love Your Non-Christian Friend?

The first major reason why Christians should care about atonement theology is because we may or may not be able to say to our non-Christian friends and family, 'God loves you.' When we first glance at Scripture, that question seems easy to answer. The following verses suggest that we can:

'He himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world.' (1 John 2:2).

'False teachers were...denying the Master who bought them.' (2 Peter 2:1).

'The living God... is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.' (1 Timothy 4:10).

'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.' (Titus 2:11)

'God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4)

'The Lord is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.' (2 Peter 3:9)

'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked...rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?...For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Therefore, repent and live.' (Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33)

However, there are some who have decided that those verses cannot mean what they seem to say at face value. For whether or not you can say, 'God loves you' to a non-Christian actually depends on your theology of the atonement.

Theories of the atonement are trying to answer a few main questions: From what did Jesus save us? How? How does Jesus make us right with God? In the penal substitution theory, Jesus saves us from God's wrath. He does this by sacrificing himself on our behalf, taking the punishment for our sin by dying in our place. He is our 'substitute' who takes our 'penalty'; hence the name 'penal substitution.' Reformed Baptist pastor Mark Dever, for example, says that Jesus took

'on himself the *punishment* for the sins of all those who would ever turn from their sin and trust in him... He rose again from the dead, *showing that God accepted Christ's sacrifice* and that God's wrath against us had been *exhausted*.'¹

Presbyterian pastor John MacArthur says,

'Christ died in our place and in our stead – and He received the very same outpouring of divine wrath in all its fury that we deserved for our sin. It was a punishment so severe that a mortal could spend all eternity in the torments of hell, and still he would not have begun to exhaust the divine wrath that was heaped on Christ at the cross. This was the true measure of Christ's sufferings on the cross. The physical pains of crucifixion – dreadful as they were – were nothing compared to the wrath of the Father against Him.'²

In the penal substitution framework, God's wrath has to be understood in a way that targets people for hell on legal grounds, because the wrath of God as the offended lawgiver needs to be satisfied. Hell must therefore be conceived of as a gigantic, eternal prison system: People want to get out, but God keeps them in. An analogy that helps communicate penal substitution is the courtroom analogy. It says, 'God is the judge. We are on trial for sin. God finds us guilty of the death sentence. But Jesus steps in to take the punishment in our place. So God satisfied His own sense of justice by substituting Himself in for us to exhaust His own wrath as judge.' This made some sense to me, but it left me with nagging questions: Does Jesus want me to do evangelism in order to rescue people from hell? And by saying 'from hell,' I really mean, 'from *God*'? Is that the appropriate motivation? Is Christian growth after conversion of secondary importance? If the most important part of Jesus' life was actually not his life, but his death, then why didn't Jesus go to the cross at age five? Why does Jesus seem significant only as a stand-in, a victim? Did the life Jesus lived have only some secondary importance? Does Jesus deal with the *source* of human evil inside my human nature, or only the *consequences* of God's anger at my evil actions – the 'punishment' part? Was Jesus' resurrection merely proof that God accepted his death (since Scripture sees it differently)? And most importantly, did Jesus exhaust God's wrath *for my parents and friends who don't know him*? How much of God's wrath did He *exhaust*?

Penal substitution advocates like to ask the following question: What if Jesus died and *no one* came to faith in him? Is that a logical possibility? Might Jesus have died for *no one in particular*? In order to safeguard the effectiveness of Jesus' death and protect God's ability to save people from His own wrath, penal substitution offers the following idea: Jesus saved a 'definite' amount of people, even if that amount is now understood to be 'limited' to *some*, and not *all*, people. This is the idea of 'definite atonement' or 'limited atonement.' Of course, the idea of 'limited atonement' brings into question verses like those above. But the tight link between penal substitution and limited atonement is to assert that Christ's death was efficacious for procuring the salvation of some, lest Jesus be said to have died for no one in particular and theoretically none. Hence, advocates of limited atonement prefer to call their conviction 'definite atonement.' The atonement must be 'definite' in order for it to be effective, although this assertion rests on certain assumptions about God's wrath, of course. For example, well-respected evangelical scholar J.I. Packer, in his famous introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, argues that penal substitution necessarily means limited atonement:

'[John] Owen shows with great cogency that the three classes of texts alleged to prove that Christ died for persons who will not be saved (those saying that he died for 'the world,' for 'all,' and those thought to envisage the perishing of those for whom he died), cannot on sound principles of exegesis be held to teach any such thing; and, further, that the theological inferences by which universal redemption is supposed to be established are really quite fallacious...So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of 'saving' grace, so-called ('saving' is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain. Lastly, so far from affording faith additional encouragement, it destroys the scriptural ground of assurance altogether, for it denies that the knowledge that Christ died for me (or did or does anything else for me) is a sufficient ground for inferring my eternal salvation; my salvation, on this view, depends not on

¹ Mark Dever, 9Marks, <http://www.9marks.org/what-are-the-9marks/the-gospel>, italics mine.

² John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p.220

what Christ did for me, but on what I subsequently do for myself... You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement.’³

I agree with Packer’s view that limited atonement is the inseparable – and for some, the unwanted – companion to penal substitution.

Another reason for this tight link between penal substitution and limited atonement is to avoid the double accounting problem: If Jesus took God’s wrath against every person at the cross, then how can God pour out more wrath on the unrepentant in hell? In what sense could God pour out His wrath twice? That is the double accounting problem. And we must also avoid the ‘universal salvation’ problem: If Jesus took all God’s wrath at the cross, then there would be no wrath leftover for unbelievers, so there could be no hell. But since Scripture teaches that there is a hell and people in it, then, according to penal substitution, Jesus could not have taken all of God’s wrath. If God’s wrath is directed against people in this way, then we need only use math, accounting, and logic to conclude this: Jesus did not actually die for all people, but only for those God elected or predestined.

Some, trying to better honor the Scriptures on the atonement above, say that ‘Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all but efficient for some.’⁴ If, however, the answer ultimately comes down to the selective activity of *the Holy Spirit* to save some and not others, then we have created a new problem: Why would Jesus die for all, only to have the Holy Spirit apply his work to only some? This divides the members of the Trinity one way or another. Is the Holy Spirit truly joined with Jesus Christ? Is God the Spirit truly joined with God the Son? Which reflects the mind of God the Father? To protect the doctrine of the Trinity – which holds that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not divided in this way – from falling apart like this, many thoughtful Christians come back to limited atonement, along with the Calvinist definition of predestination.

Perhaps Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all but efficient for some because of human free will? Arminian theology also takes penal substitution as true. Both classical (e.g. Baptist) and Wesleyan (e.g. Methodist) Arminians assert that God, in His foreknowledge of the future, perceives a person’s freely willed choice to believe in Christ or not, and then He limits the scope of the atonement to those who He knows will believe.⁵ Arminian theology preserves the logical continuity between the work of the Father in foreknowledge-election and the work of the Son in atonement. I would question, however, whether Arminians also have a problem in their doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, for other reasons.⁶ Nevertheless, even without exploring those problems, the fact remains in the Arminian use of penal substitution that I could not say to a particular non-Christian, ‘I *know* God loves you.’ The Arminian is left in the same place as the Calvinist on this issue.

I find it hard to understand how the verses above, which apparently say or imply that the atonement is ‘unlimited’ in some sense (which I explain below), can be understood to mean that Jesus died to save only those elected, as in pre-selected, by God to receive that salvation. Yet advocates of limited atonement explain these Scriptures precisely in that way. There are other Scriptures that are affected as well. Paul says that the preincarnate Son of God created ‘all things’ to be under human dominion, and therefore became incarnate to redeem and regather ‘all things’ under his own human dominion on humanity’s behalf (Rom.11:32; 1 Cor.15:27 – 28; Eph.1:10; Col.1:15 – 20). Paul also refers to Jesus as a ‘new Adam’ (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 27, 45 – 50) which serves the same purpose as his ‘all things’ statements. John’s well-known statements about God’s love being for ‘the world’ (Jn.3:16) and taking away ‘the sin of the world’ (Jn.1:29) weigh in that direction. Certainly penal substitution advocates will cite Scriptures relating to God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and His hardening of Israel in Romans 9 – 11, and a smattering of other texts on predestination, foreknowledge, God’s choice and initiative in salvation, and so forth, but other interpretations of those texts, going far back to the patristic era, must also be considered and

³ J.I. Packer, ‘An Introduction to John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ’, reprinted in J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.126. See also R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2nd edition, 2000) for another example of a theologian who explains the verses above as referring to ‘limited atonement.’

⁴ E.g. Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence, *It is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), p.75.

⁵ James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, III, 454; cf. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006)

⁶ In the Arminian view, the Spirit can lose people for whom the Son has atoned. The work of the Spirit, therefore, can be disconnected from the work of the Father and the Son because, in Arminian doctrine, the security of the believer is conditional on the believer’s faith, which can be lost. It appears that the Father winds up losing some people before time and history unfold through divine foreknowledge; the Son keeps the people assigned to him through the atonement; and the Spirit loses even more people through their free will, although the Father thought they were saved? The Arminian theological system does not present to me a particularly consistent vision of the Triune God.

weighed carefully.⁷ Theology is a discipline with pieces that connect and fit together, much like a jigsaw puzzle. Any movement in one area usually affects others, and the atonement is central to all theology. It is, perhaps, the most important piece.

For now, I will highlight the practical ministry implications of holding to penal substitution. If penal substitution were my theology of the atonement, how would I do evangelism? I would not be able to say to any particular non-Christian, ‘God loves you.’ Fred Butler, a contributor to the website monergism.com, writes that evangelism is ‘a presentation of the gospel message and facts of redemption. This is when a believer proclaims to the unbeliever what Christ did to make a way for a sinner’s salvation.’⁸ Butler uses language that distances Jesus from the actual listener. He speaks of ‘a sinner,’ generally, but not ‘you’ in particular. To account for the perceived failure in evangelism due to others’ lack of faith, Reformed ministers typically refer to the ‘inward call’ of God or the ‘effectual call’ of God as distinguished from the ‘outward call’ of the Christian presenting the gospel verbally; and since we do not know if God is actually calling the non-Christian to Christ using the words of our verbal invitation, we cannot logically say that God is calling ‘you.’⁹ Taking the next logical step, since I don’t know for certain who is among God’s elect, I would not be able to say that to anyone else, as some Calvinistic Christians recognize. Depending on how I then interpret other passages, I may not be able to say it to myself. For example, the early European American missionary to Native Americans, David Brainerd, was tormented by this question.¹⁰ Penal substitution can legitimately throw open the disposition of God towards people in our particularity. I will elaborate on physical redemption as my comparison to penal substitution below.

To repeat, the penal substitution theory prevents me from saying, ‘God loves you, in particular, *you*, and He will *always* love *you*.’ Instead, I would have to say, ‘God might love you, but I don’t know. Arminians say that it depends on you. Calvinists say that it doesn’t depend on you, but only on God. Whatever the reality is about that, His offer isn’t good after you die.’ If we limit the work of Christ (limited atonement) or the work of the Spirit (limited application) in any way, then we cannot say, ‘God loves every human being.’ For if God so arranged the mechanics of salvation so that He intends to only save some of humanity (the elect), then this makes it hard for us to say to any particular non-Christian, ‘God loves you,’ because of the uncertainty injected into the theology. Regarding any particular person, I might want that person’s salvation more than God does, which is hard to imagine but becomes a logical possibility.

Reason #2: Does God Want to Undo All Human Evil? Or Does He Require Human Evil to Exist?

The second reason why atonement theology should matter to everyone is it shapes how we think about God interacting with human evil. Is God complicit with human evil or not? Let me lay down two foundational points. First, I believe that the uniquely Christian contribution to discussions about ‘evil’ is to maintain that humanity is the source of the evil in the world. It’s not that at every moment, human beings are as bad as we could be. But at every moment, human beings are not as good as we should be. Human beings are not thoroughly evil, since there remains in us something of the image of God, however tarnished. Yet the problem is *ontological*, concerning our very being, our human nature having been corrupted. So the solution is not simply educational, as if we just needed to educate people in the correct way. It’s not simply structural or political, as if we just needed to change structures. Education and redistributing political power might help in many ways, and I am not diminishing work in those fields, as Christians must also work to bring about better education and more just political arrangements, but Jesus said the fundamental problem is *ontological*. It is in our hearts, at the very center of our will. That is a challenging thought to many, because there is no philosophy or viable political theory that even claims to deal with humanity ontologically, in our very being. To my understanding, and on the theoretical level alone, only the Christian story goes this deep and claims to have a God who heals *human nature* itself.

Second, the Old Testament pointed the Jews towards the necessity of an internal transformation. Throughout Israel’s long relationship with God, those with prophetic insight pinpointed the reason for Israel’s

⁷ Interestingly enough, Jewish and later Christian writers of impressive intellectual stature used this metaphor of clay to explain human free will. See p.13, below, when I explain the classical Christian concept of hell. Their explanation of Romans 9 – 11, a very significant passage, can be found here: http://nagasawafamily.org/paul_romans.09-11.predestination&freewill.pdf.

⁸ Fred Butler, *Evangelism and Calvinism*, http://www.monergism.com/directory/link_category/Evangelism/Evangelism--Calvinism/

⁹ Paul Helm, *The Call that Brings a Response*, says, ‘So while the call of the gospel through preaching is *general*, without restriction, in accordance with Christ’s command to His servants to proclaim the good news in all the world, yet the inward, effectual call of God which makes the good news intelligible and acceptable, is *particular*.’ (http://www.the-highway.com/calling1_Helm.html)

¹⁰ A fact covered over by Jonathan Edwards selectively excising those portions from David Brainerd’s journal when he first published it.

repeated failures: the human heart. They could not blame bad circumstances since they were in the Promised Land. They could not blame bad laws since they had the Law of Moses given by God at Sinai. The authors of the Hebrew Scriptures had the unique insight that the problem was internal. Hence, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said: ‘The Lord will circumcise your heart’ (Dt.30:6). ‘Create for me a clean heart’ (Ps.51:10). ‘I,’ God says, ‘will write My law upon their hearts’ (Jer.31:33). ‘I,’ God says again, ‘will give you a new heart’ (Ezk.36:26). In fact, the reason for Israel’s subordination to Gentile powers in the first place was Israel’s corrupted human nature, or, to use the language above, their hearts. Yet if Israel needed the same heart level transformation as the rest of the Gentiles, and if Israel’s prophets had also foreseen the Gentile world benefiting from the transformation of Israel when Israel’s God finally acted in such a way as to bring that heart level transformation about (e.g. Isa.42:1 – 4; Zech.9:6 – 7), then the Jews would have to look hard at their past attitudes towards the Gentiles and completely reevaluate what it meant to be ‘separate’ from them. It’s not that such a distinction would no longer exist, but the way it was defined would be reoriented fundamentally. With Jesus, it would be reoriented around himself and redefined by him.

In the ‘physical redemption’ atonement theory, Jesus brought about the radical transformation of *human nature itself* that the Scriptures longed for. He transformed the flesh (John 1:14) – the fallen and corrupted human nature – that he took to himself in his conception. As he grew up, he beat his way forward in and through his flesh. Luke describes Jesus’ growth with the word ‘proekopten’ (Lk.2:52), which is a word used to describe the beating by which a metal-smith would shape a piece of metal with blows.¹¹ Jesus’ wilderness temptation, where he wrestled with his flesh and the devil for forty days (Mt.4:1 – 12, Lk.4:1 – 13), is an illustration of Jesus redeeming the story of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. His life was struggle and suffering, culminating at Gethsemane, his trial, and crucifixion, where he applied the wrath of God with unyielding precision to this corruption. God ‘condemned sin in the flesh’ of Christ (Rom.8:3) throughout the life of Jesus by Jesus’ personal decision to never sin, and climactically at Jesus’ death as Jesus killed the flesh, ‘our old self...our body of sin’ (Rom.6:6; 7:21 – 8:4). The wrath of God was always directed at ‘the ungodliness and unrighteousness’ of people (Rom.1:18), but not our personhood per se, as penal substitution advocates claim. In the physical redemption atonement theory, the wrath of God and the love of God *do not have the same object*. Jesus, in the loving embrace of humanity through his incarnation, perfected his human nature in the love of God through his life and death. This is simultaneous and identical with his application of the wrath of God onto the corruption in his human nature to overcome it, defeat it, and kill it.

Therefore, in his resurrection, Jesus emerged as a new kind of human being, ‘raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). Note that Paul does not say ‘crucified for our justification’ as penal substitution advocates might prefer he said. For Paul did not think of the resurrection as merely ‘proof’ that God accepted Jesus’ sacrifice as an absorption of a certain amount of punishment otherwise targeted at us. The Hebrew prophets understood that to be resurrected meant being justified, and vice versa (e.g. Ezk.36 – 37; Isa.40 – 55). Jesus therefore undertook the role and vocation of Israel in himself, fulfilling the covenant on Israel’s behalf. In fact, the wording of Romans 4:25 suggests that the ontological change (to be resurrected) serves as the ground or foundation for the forensic shift (to be justified in the case of Jesus, and justified and forgiven in the case of us), not the other way round. Jesus perfected a God-drenched, God-soaked human nature in himself. He fully reconciled his humanity with God in order to share the Spirit of his new humanity by his Spirit to anyone who comes into a living and dynamic relationship with him. This is why Paul, shortly afterward, does not say that we shall be saved by his *death*, but by his *life* (Rom.5:10). In Jesus, and only in him, is a remedy possible for all human evil in human hearts (Rom.2:28 – 29). Jesus offers a new humanity for all humanity.

I boil this down to a comparison: Where is the evil located? How can it be solved?

<i>In humanity</i>	<i>In bad ideas</i>	<i>In bad laws/structures</i>	<i>No solution/no problem</i>
Christianity	e.g. Education	e.g. Islam, Democracy,	e.g. Buddhism

This articulation of the atonement is called ‘physical redemption,’ which is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church and some Catholics and Protestants. Physical redemption holds that Jesus had to physically redeem the humanity of one sin-scarred human being – his own – in order to offer his Spirit of his new humanity to everyone, for the redemption of all sinful humanity. I place it here in contrast to the atonement theory called ‘penal substitution,’ which is held most strongly by those in the Augustinian-Reformed camp. Penal substitution states that Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God’s wrath on the cross in order to forgive sinners. This is important to reconciling God’s justice (demanding that sin be punished) and His mercy (demanding that sinners be forgiven). The difficulties I have with penal substitution are many, but the two most relevant here are as follows. First, in penal substitution, Jesus absorbs the *punishment* for sin, but it is less clear what he is doing about the *source* of sin internal to us.

¹¹ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.64

Usually, the issue of engaging with the source of our sinfulness is relegated to the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification, but there are textual, logical, and pastoral problems associated with dividing up the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit this way.¹²

Second, penal substitution advocates have difficulty explaining what God is actively doing about *all* human evil. The chief problem they encounter is the question of why God apparently grants salvation from sin to some but not all. For in order to explain why everyone does not avail themselves of the forgiveness and healing offered by Jesus, penal substitution advocates have to say either that the scope of the atonement was limited by the Father to begin with, or that Jesus' work on the cross was 'sufficient' for all but 'efficient' only for some, which then sunders the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to sinners, as I said above, since the Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ only, apparently, to the 'elect.' One way or another, this makes it impossible for us to say, 'God wants to undo *all* human evil.' This is simply an extension of the problem of not being able to say, 'God loves *you in particular*.' For penal substitution offers very little explanation for what Jesus is actively doing to address *all* of human evil.

Some argue that one can attribute 'forgiveness' to the atoning work of Jesus, and 'transformation' to the subsequent work of the Spirit in the believer, and therefore they can say that *God* is acting to undo human evil, but only in the 'elect,' presuming a certain definition of the word 'elect.' I believe biblical exegesis proves that dichotomy false,¹³ but regardless, the fundamental problem which I have raised, remains: What about the 'non-

¹² Penal substitution supporters must surely grow tired of answering this question, but I am asking it in a different way. Indeed, Reformed theologian Sinclair Ferguson, for example, says that 'union with Christ' by the Spirit addresses that issue, which surely it does. I heartily affirm with Paul that believers have died and risen with Christ so that God can change our identity and our practical life. The question comes in how one can integrate penal substitution, with all of its attendant implications, and 'union with Christ,' with all of its implications. The question may be stated this way: When a pastor, preacher, or friend speaks to another Christian, and tries to exhort and encourage said Christian to grow in Christ and not sin, what motivational language should they use? Should they say, 'Jesus died instead of you to take the wrath of God, therefore you ought to...' as in penal substitution? Or should they say, 'You have died and risen with Christ, therefore you are now different' as in union with Christ? Who died and when? How important is gratitude as an explicit psychological state? Is it up to the person doing the encouraging and teaching to decide which logic to use? And here is the logical and pastoral problem. Some take penal substitution logic to apply to Christians throughout their whole lives, thinking that only a proper reverence for God's holiness-justice-wrath will produce fruitful obedience. In this view, human motivation must be rooted in a sense of debt-forgiveness and/or legal-penal-forgiveness because apparently Christ died instead of us to satisfy our debt to God and/or criminal sentence levied by God. It is a psychological motivation in response to an event external to the person. Does Jesus want to construct in my heart a motivation for obeying him that sounds like my Asian parents' reasoning: 'Don't you know how much I sacrificed for you?' Was this Paul's motivational language? It would not appear so according to, say, Romans 6 – 8, 2 Corinthians 1 – 5, Galatians 4, Ephesians 1:15 – 6:20, and Colossians 1 – 3, where Paul says we have died and risen with Christ, therefore have a new identity that undergirds Christian worship, morality, ethics, and spiritual warfare. If we follow Paul's pastoral pattern and use 'union with Christ,' then is penal substitution to be used only with non-Christians? Why then did he not use that language in Acts where he places all his weight on Jesus' resurrection (Acts 13:13 – 42; 14:14 – 17; 17:22 – 31; 22:1 – 21; 23:1 – 12; 24:10 – 21; 26:1 – 23)? Paul *never* uses penal substitution with non-Christians. Penal substitution advocates claim that Paul preached 'the cross' alone based on his letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor.1:17 – 25) and Galatians (Gal.3:1) but in those letters, Paul shows that he consistently integrated the significance of Jesus' death in with his resurrection and its meaning of 'new creation/new humanity' (1 Cor.15; Gal.1:1, 16; 2:20; 4:4 – 5, 19; 6:15), which is precisely what penal substitution finds difficult to integrate. Luke, interestingly, has Paul completely stressing the resurrection (Acts 17:18, 31 – 32), and not mentioning the cross at all. Acts 20:28 might be construed to be a penal substitution text, but the phrase 'purchased with his own blood' can be understood in a physical redemption framework, where it would refer to Jesus' shaping of a new humanity through his life, death, and resurrection, and offered to his people through the Spirit, and not a penal substitution framework where his life paid a ransom to God. Scholars might wish to explore whether Luke avoided the language of 'ransom' because he thought his Greco-Roman audience might miss the fundamentally Hebraic roots of Jesus' original ransom language, which arguably does not lead to penal substitution. And in any case, Acts 20:28 occurs in a context with Christian elders, not non-Christians. The evidence that Paul used penal substitution language anywhere tends to be restricted to Romans 3:21 – 26, Galatians 3:13, 1 Corinthians 6:20, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Ephesians 1:6 – 8, and Acts 20:28, but, needless to say, the meaning of those texts is vigorously debated because Paul does not extrapolate from there the conclusions that many penal substitution advocates have made.

¹³ Paul, in key passages like Romans 5:1 – 11 and 8:1 – 17, Ephesians 1:3 – 14 and 2:1 – 10, and Colossians 1:13 – 14, says that the basis of God's forgiveness of us is not because a punitive transaction whereby – as in penal substitution – Jesus absorbs the punishment for our sins due to us under God's wrath. Nor is it because of an economic transaction – also in penal substitution – where Jesus 'paid the debt' that we owed to God in a fiscal-penal sense, for every time Jesus used monetary debt as an analogy for sin, he draws out a basic ridiculousness, not a realistic comparison (e.g.Mt.18:15 – 35; Lk.7:18 – 35), suggesting that he did not actually think of sin as a 'debt to God' in that sense. Rather, God extends forgiveness to us because we have died and risen again in Christ and have a radically new identity 'in Christ' and not 'in sin.' This is more like a witness protection plan wherein the person's identity changes because they have now 'switched sides': Their past debt no longer applies to them because their

elect'? Has God so arranged the mechanics of salvation so that He is only saving *some* of humanity, which means that He only wants to undo *some* human evil? If so, then it becomes disingenuous for a Christian who subscribes to penal substitution to claim that God wants to undo, heal, and transform *all* human evil, injustice, and brokenness at its very source: within each and every person. The theology simply does not support it. My basic contention is that penal substitution actually makes God complicit in human evil. For this theory posits that at the heart of Christian theology – the atonement – God is solving a problem internal to *Himself* in relation to *some* people, rather than a problem internal to *us* in relation to *all* people. When we are approaching a non-Christian social justice activist, then, penal substitution advocates might have to admit that God does not care enough about every injustice and every person. With penal substitution, a passionate non-Christian might care more about social justice and human evil than God does.

Physical redemption does not have this problem, for two main reasons. First, the objective of the atonement itself is to achieve a deep union between God and humanity and a fundamental compatibility between human nature and divine nature within the loving relations of God's relational, tri-personal nature. This was God's purpose from the creation, but after humanity's fall, in order to accomplish this original purpose, God had to also destroy the corruption of sinfulness within each human being so that His love could be received as love and not as torment, since our self-centeredness would resist and resent the call of God to be as other-centered as He is. In the physical redemption theory, the wrath of God against the corruption in the human nature Jesus had taken on was poured out *within* the person of Jesus, since Jesus was both divine and human, not *upon* the person of Jesus by God, as penal substitution advocates hold. The atonement was personal in the sense that Jesus atoned first for his own humanity through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus forced his humanity to adjust to the radical nature of God's other-centered love. Then and only then could he offer the Spirit of his atoned-for-humanity to all, genuinely, without any reservations or limits from God's side. The destruction of the corruption of sinfulness within other human beings therefore begins in us fundamentally with our conversion to Jesus whereby he comes to dwell in us by his Spirit and puts our 'old self' to death as Paul says in Romans 6:6. God's progressive victory against each person's sinfulness is developed subsequently in each person's active relationship with Jesus by his Spirit as we struggle against our own self-centeredness (Rom.6:12 – 23; 7:14 – 8:4; 5 – 17). Then it is consummated at Jesus' return when he will grant us renewed physical bodies akin to his own resurrection body (Rom.8:18 – 25). Jesus deals with a problem internal to us, not internal to God. For God has always been *for humanity*, desiring to draw us up and elevate us into Himself (Rom.8:26 – 39). Because of humanity's fall, He has also been against our sinfulness, evil, injustice, and brokenness because we contradicted our original good nature and, by this internal pollution, set ourselves ontologically against the purpose for which God created us: union with Himself.

Second, physical redemption holds that God by His grace constantly enables human free will rather than negates it, because it is against God's character to strip human beings of their free choice to accept Him in Christ. Those who reject God in Christ do so by their own free will, thus abusing God's grace, and will bring their unhealed, selfish human nature into the presence of the radically other-centered God who calls for all things to become consistent with His character. By seeing matters this way, the physical redemption theory is not 'Augustinian.' The later Augustine, in his debates with the heretic Pelagius, posited *monergism* (literally, 'one-will'), such that God's will alone is the sole, efficient cause of the salvation of people, apart from and without any human free will whatsoever. Augustine in the Latin West redefined words like 'predestined' in a way that no Christian had done before him. Augustine's contemporary John Cassian, held up in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the one who attempted to correct Augustine, held to the *synergism* (literally, 'working with' God's grace, with God's grace being prior) passed onto him by earlier Christian thinkers.¹⁴ This is why Eastern Orthodox theologians are neither Augustinian, nor Pelagian, nor Semi-Pelagian.¹⁵ Within the physical redemption theory, God is understood as not

identity has been changed, not because someone else literally paid off their debt per se. That is, by faith in Christ, we have participated in our own identity transformation whereby the old person we were no longer exists to God. We are 'in Jesus,' who is the justified one because he is the purified and resurrected one (Rom.4:25).

¹⁴ See my compilation of quotes from the early church fathers here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-free-will-in-patristics.pdf>. This includes Clement of Rome, the Epistle to Diognetes, Ignatius of Antioch, the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Tatian, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Melito of Sardis, Hippolytus, Novatian, Cyprian, Archelaus, Methodius of Olympus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Basil of Caesaria. See also Augustine's early work *On the Free Choice of the Will*.

¹⁵ John Cassian's *Conference 13* is his best explanation of how God's grace *enables* human free will and makes it genuinely free. It is worth noting that John Cassian was a venerated theologian in his own day; he was asked to write an official church response to Nestorius during the Nestorian controversy. For helpful discussion about Cassian, see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2008). See also the dialog on Cassian and synergism between John Hendrix, founder of the website www.monergism.com, and Clifton Healy, an Eastern Orthodox lay theologian, at <http://benedictseraphim.wordpress.com/2005/03/31/st-john-cassian-on-grace-and-free-will/>.

limiting the scope of the atoning work of Christ in any way. Each and every human being must respond personally and affirmatively Jesus' work of undoing human evil at its source in every human being is truly available to every human being, with no limitations from God's side.¹⁶ God is understood to be working by His grace within each person, enabling their free will and calling out to them to come to Christ and be transformed; it is their free choice in refusal that explains their ongoing rejection and their embrace of self-centeredness. Much more can and must be said about this comparison, but I offer a preliminary comment here: I believe physical redemption allows us to treat the Old Testament story and prophecies more naturally, and does a better job making sense of the various New Testament idioms surrounding the atonement, so as to firmly undergird the claim that God really and truly wants to bring *all* people to Himself and undo *all* human evil, at its source. This articulation of the atonement clearly gives us the ability to say God is against *all* human evil, and for *all* humanity – each and every person – and all this by His love.

Reason #3: Is God Partly Evil?

The third reason everyone should care about the atonement is because it affects the character of God Himself. Is God wholly good? One hundred percent good? Or is He partly evil? The most natural conclusion a person can make about a generic 'god' and the character of that 'god' is that this 'god' is both good and evil. Just look out at the world. There is good and there is evil, despite all the questions of how one defines good and evil. With the Hindu god, there is no true moral difference between actions or motivations that we call 'good' and other actions or motivations we call 'evil.' This is because in Hinduism, good and evil are held to be constructs of our own limited perspective; they are simply aspects of the same ultimate reality, as Shiva the Destroyer is merely an aspect of the one god. The *Brahma Sutra* 2.1.34 – 36 offers this understanding of reality as the resolution to the apparent problem of injustice, where people do not get what they deserve in this life. Where is justice? The great Hindu commentator Sankara says that the resolution involves saying that people are actually receiving the karmic rewards or consequences from a past life, and that the creation is beginningless, so that there is no true problem of injustice. Many questions can be asked of this, but one suffices: If human dignity is said to be a distinct moral good, then can a deity who makes the duality between good and evil irrelevant serve as its foundation? Such a deity would be just as much at work to neglect it or undermine it. The same is true in relation to other eastern concepts of 'god,' if they exist in those systems. Good and evil are either eternal principles that just fight each other forever (as in Zoroastrianism), or aspects of the same God (as in Hinduism) and therefore just constructs in our own minds (by implication in Buddhism).

The Islamic concept of God leans towards the Hindu concept of a god who is both good and evil. The Qur'an says, 'Verily, God will cause to err whom he pleaseth, and will direct whom he pleaseth.' (Qur'an 6:39; 4:88, 143) Nothing happens without his actively willing it, compelling it to happen. 'Allah is Al-Jabbar,' or 'all compelling.' The saying refers to God's determination of the fate of individuals, and this becomes the Islamic equivalent of double predestination. This is rather strongly reinforced by the idea that the Qur'an was pre-existent. By elevating the authority of the Qur'an so high, the problem of unbelievers is cast into the character of the Islamic God: The deity enacts a predetermined narrative which requires unbelievers; the Islamic God then condemns those unbelievers to hell before they actually existed and before their choice. Additionally, Muslims identify a total of ninety-nine names or attributes of God in the Qur'an. Integrating these ninety-nine names or attributes together, however, into a coherent statement about the character of God is a challenge. For the God of Islam is both the giver of life (Allah Al-Muheed) and the bringer of death (Allah Al-Mumeet), to all. He is the Benefactor, the one who gives benefits to whomever he wills (Allah An-Nafi'), while being the Abaser, the one who lowers and degrades (Allah Al-Khafid and Al-Muzil) and the Distresser, the one who makes harm reach whoever he wills (Allah Ad-Darr). Can these actions describe a character? What is the relationship between all these attributes? Muslims refuse to say anything integrative about the overall character of the Islamic God. They claim instead that the God of Islam is beyond all human language because all words become anthropomorphic and tainted by human experience. They also claim that any personal knowledge of God is impossible because God does not bridge his unified, unitarian transcendence into a localized, humanly knowable immanence. In effect, they resort to mystery and unknowability. Thus, we cannot speak truly about the character of God, nor can we know him, in Islam. Despite these claims, it is

¹⁶ This is a much more natural reading of the following Scriptures I quoted above on page 1 that seem to teach unlimited atonement, although I am careful to quickly add that the conception of the wrath of God influences whether unlimited atonement necessitates universal salvation. If God's wrath is conceived as being directed at our personhood, and is therefore poured out all at once on Jesus as a person, then there is no wrath left over for people in hell, and this logically requires universal salvation. But if God's wrath is conceived as being directed at the corruption in each person's human nature and therefore connected to each person's conversion to Jesus, then the wrath of God unfolds with respect to each person's choice to participate in Jesus' new humanity or not, and thus does not require or imply universal salvation in the slightest.

hard to escape the conclusion that the Islamic God is both good and evil, or, quite simply, evil. In his magisterial study of the historical development of Christian theology, Christian church historian Jaroslav Pelikan finds:

'It was the widespread belief of Christian theologians that Islam represented an out-and-out determinism. They saw in it the teaching that "God does whatever he wishes, and he is the cause of everything, both good and evil." Christians made him the cause only of good, Muslims the cause of evil as well. This meant, of course, that God must also be "the cause of sin" according to the teachings of "the godless Mohammed." From its beginnings, Christian anti-Muslim polemic denounced this as a notion that made God unjust. But God was the just judge of both good and evil, rendering to each its proper due, and could not be either an unjust judge or the author of evil... The implication of the Muslim position was that, since there were some who were not saved, God either did not want to save them or was not able to save them. Both possibilities were blasphemous in Christian eyes. The Christian alternative to such determinism was to assert the universal salvific will of God, but also to assert free will and responsibility in man.'¹⁷

This raises the thorny question for the Augustinian-Reformed tradition. Their theology, rooted in *monergism* (God's will alone is the sole, efficient cause of human activity, including faith in Christ and also persistence in sin) finds a hard time escaping the same predicament. Why is evil in the world not a direct result of some evil in the character of God? For if God's will is irresistible, then logically speaking, the reason for evil, injustice, and human sin is ultimately God's will, and therefore God's very character. It is very significant that this type of theology emerged in the Latin West through the Scholastics via contact with Islam, through the Spanish Banezians (who also believed in double predestination) and into Calvinism.¹⁸ Calvin himself believed that God actively willed the fall:

'Nor ought it to seem absurd when I say, that God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.'¹⁹

'Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God...Every action and motion of every creature is so governed by the hidden counsel of God, that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him...The wills of men are so governed by the will of God, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained.'²⁰

Calvin admits that logic implies God is therefore responsible for human sins, but he dismisses the accusation without a real basis. I quote him at length:

'By the same class of persons, past events are referred improperly and inconsiderately to simple providence. *As all contingencies whatsoever depend on it, therefore, neither thefts nor adulteries, nor murders, are perpetrated without an interposition of the divine will.* Why, then, they ask, should the thief be punished for robbing him whom the Lord chose to chastise with poverty? Why should the murderer be punished for slaying him whose life the Lord had terminated? If all such persons serve the will of God, why should they be punished? *I deny that they serve the will of God.* For we cannot say that he who is carried away by a wicked mind performs service on the order of God, when he is only following his own malignant desires. He obeys God, who, being instructed in his will, hastens in the direction in which God calls him. But how are we so instructed unless by his word? The will declared by his word is, therefore, that which we must keep in view in acting, God requires of us nothing but what he enjoins. If we design anything contrary to his precept, it is not obedience, but contumacy and transgression. *But if he did not will it, we could not do it. I admit this. But do we act wickedly for the purpose of yielding obedience to him? This, assuredly, he does not command.* Nay, rather we rush on, not thinking of what he wishes, but so inflamed by our own passionate lust, that, with destined purpose, we strive against him. And in this way, while acting wickedly, we serve his righteous ordination, since in his boundless wisdom he well knows how to use bad instruments for good purposes. And see how absurd this mode of arguing is. They will have it that crimes ought not to

¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, volume 2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 – 1700)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p.234 – 5

¹⁸ David Bentley Hart, *Nihilism and Freedom*, a lecture given in 2007

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, ch.23, section 7

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, ch.16, section 3

be punished in their authors, because they are not committed without the dispensation of God. *I concede more--that thieves and murderers, and other evil-doers, are instruments of Divine Providence, being employed by the Lord himself to execute the Judgments which he has resolved to inflict. But I deny that this forms any excuse for their misdeeds.* For how? Will they implicate God in the same iniquity with themselves, or will they cloak their depravity by his righteousness? *They cannot exculpate themselves, for their own conscience condemns them: they cannot charge God, since they perceive the whole wickedness in themselves, and nothing in Him save the legitimate use of their wickedness.* But it is said he works by their means. And whence, I pray, the foetid odour of a dead body, which has been unconfined and putrefied by the sun's heat? All see that it is excited by the rays of the sun, but no man therefore says that the fetid odour is in them. In the same way, while the matter and guilt of wickedness belongs to the wicked man, why should it be thought that God contracts any impurity in using it at pleasure as his instrument? Have done, then, with that dog-like petulance which may, indeed, bay from a distance at the justice of God, but cannot reach it!²¹

I have italicized areas where I see Calvin embracing logical inconsistency, and acknowledging it. For example, to say that 'neither thefts nor adulteries nor murders, are perpetrated without an interposition of the *divine will*' and then to simultaneously assert, 'I *deny* that they serve the *will of God*' is rather puzzling. Are there two different wills of God? Then Calvin says, 'But if he did not will it, we could not do it. I admit this.' That is the fatal admission. Some followers of Calvin postulate that God indeed has two wills: a moral will and a sovereign will. God's moral will is ostensibly the source of the morality He gives to us, as well as the call to us to believe in Christ. However, God's sovereign will is the source of people's actual behavior and decisions, which include unbelief, resistance, evil, injustice, destination in hell conceived of as a prison system, and in this framework, desire to escape from this hell but to no avail. This supposed division between the moral will of God and the sovereign will of God, however, raises the haunting question of whether God's morality has an actual foundation in God's being. If I as a parent say to my children, 'Do as I say, not as I do,' my authority is compromised because I would lack the integrity to command a morality in the first place. Likewise, can God serve as the basis for His own morality, if His sovereign will is different from His moral will? I do not think Calvin successfully extricates himself from this conundrum.

Calvin's analogy – that of the sun's rays causing a dead body to decay and stink – can be questioned on the grounds that a dead body has neither will, nor moral agency, to do wickedness by itself. So a dead body cannot acquire guilt; but if another animates that body and causes it to do evil, then the one pulling the strings is, by definition, to blame. Calvin is confusing categories. Therefore, it is insufficient as an analogy to convince me, at least, that God can incite a man to do wickedness, as Calvin claims, and remain blameless. Yet high federal Calvinist theologian Mark R. Talbot maintains:

'God does not merely passively permit such things by standing by and not stopping them. Rather, he actively wills them by ordaining them and then bringing them about, yet without himself thereby becoming the author of sin.'²²

How these statements can be logically held together is beyond my ability to explain, or do. This idea, paired with the conviction that there are unredeemed people in hell by God's own willing, would in effect, make God both good and evil, or once again, quite simply, evil. To make matters fairly puzzling, Calvin claimed that man was still free and accountable, and that God's reason for willing the fall is hidden but could not be unjust.²³ For Calvin to appeal to 'unknowability' or 'mystery' in this way sounds like special pleading, like the Muslim who insists that one cannot say anything negative about Allah's character, despite the logical implications. Furthermore, if Jesus offers salvation to only the elect, and not for all people, and if God has a causal role in humanity's sin and suffering, not to mention some people's damnation in hell, then that would mean that Jesus reveals *only a part of God – the nice part*. There remains a frightening part, what Luther called 'the dark face of God.' In this theological system, God wills people's damnation prior to their choice and prior to history.

Under these remarkable, weighty statements, the impression that God is at least partly evil does tend to be reinforced, rather quite a bit. This conclusion is sometimes denied by Calvinists, who at various points invoke the concept of 'mystery.' Many, including me, find this whole system to be illogical to the degree to which the logical

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 1, ch.17, section 5, italics mine

²² John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL: 2006), p.35, footnote 7

²³ Calvin, *Predestination* 122, OC 8.315

conclusions are avoided, and troubling to the degree in which they are. However, other Calvinists, like Joseph Haroutunian (1904 – 1968), a professor of systematic theology at McCormick Theological Seminary and later the University of Chicago,

‘gloried in Protestantism’s insistence that God’s sovereignty pushed the conclusion that God decrees evil as well as good. Double predestination was, for him, the last assertion of God’s ultimate freedom as He creates the world, a last terrible tribute to the fact of reprobation as known in this world... These doctrines distinguished Calvinism from theological traditions that suffered a failure of nerve and let down a culture that was desperate for a theology with iron in its blood.’²⁴

Along with the earliest Christian theologians (the patristic writers) and the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and increasing numbers of Catholics and Protestants rediscovering the full implications of trinitarian theology, I would not say the above things. I believe that the Triune God *fully reveals Himself* in Jesus (Jn.14:8 – 21; Heb.1:4; Col.2:9; etc.), as opposed to revealing just the ‘nice’ part of Himself while He hides the ‘scary’ remainder in mystery. If this is so, then we have a revolution in how we think about God. If Jesus reveals who the Father is, by the Spirit, then there is no aspect of God that is hidden from us by Jesus. All of God’s love for humanity and consequently, God’s wrath upon the flesh of Christ, birthing the new resurrected humanity of Christ, is on display for us to participate in.

I can therefore say that the Christian Triune God is completely and wholly opposed to human evil, and not complicit in it at all, for God is incapable of turning us into robots precisely because of His love for us, and this explains why God is not a passive partner-in-crime to human evil: it is not a choice that is even available to Him. Jesus said, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you’ (Jn.15:9), which means that just as the Father and Son work in free and loving partnership with one another in the Spirit, without coercion, so God’s character requires, and enables, humanity’s free partnership by His Spirit, even if people abuse their free will to reject God. Thus, we cannot posit a doctrine of omnipotence whereby God could overstep human free choice but simply chooses to not do so. Rather, God’s grace upholds and enables human free choice, even when that choice is abused to reject God Himself.²⁵ Still less can we posit a doctrine of divine omnipotence like the Sunni Muslim doctrine of Allah’s omnipotence, such that our God also causes humans to err, to sin, and do evil. No: Rather, by calling us all to receive the new human nature that He perfected in Jesus, God is a very active opponent of human evil at its very source, who calls all human beings to come to Jesus. This Triune God, revealed *fully* by Jesus as embracing humanity in principle, is wholly good and, while utterly respecting our human free choice, calls us to join Him in healing humanity and the world.

Moreover, Jesus reveals to us what God intended for humanity from the beginning of creation – to be elevated and glorified and brought fully into the life of the Trinity. In other words, God predestined all to share in the physical, glorified humanity that the resurrected Jesus now has, regardless of whether humanity fell into sin or not. For those who receive Jesus, we experience God’s love as love. But for those who reject Jesus, they reject their very own existence and destiny. Through their own choices, they have conditioned their nature and will to curve in upon itself with self-love, having taken even that gift from God and turned it inwards. Yet God does not give up on them in and through Jesus. He keeps calling out to them in love. But because they experience God as a hated and jealous stalker who is constantly calling out to them; they experience God’s love as sheer torment. They can only experience His love with utter loathing and bitterness. In this case, hell is the wrath of God, yes, but on a more profound level, hell is the love of God. This is the most natural logical implication if God has revealed Himself as the one who becomes one with us by the Spirit of the divine-human person of Jesus of Nazareth. Father Michael Himes, a Jesuit theologian at Boston College, writes:

‘Of course, the question of punishment, i.e. of hell and damnation will arise in many people’s minds, and quite rightly. But damnation does not mean that God ceases to love the one damned. If that were true, then the sinner would be more powerful than God, since the sinner would have the power to make God, who is love, agape, something less than God. No, God’s love is constant, unchanging and perfect. Damnation means that the sinner refuses finally and absolutely to accept being loved and to love in response. The damned may not love God, but God continues to love the damned. After all, the love of God is what holds

²⁴ Stephen D. Crocco, ‘Whose Calvin? Which Calvinism? John Calvin and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Theology,’ edited by Thomas J. Davis, *John Calvin’s American Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.177 – 8

²⁵ John Cassian’s *Conference 13*; cf. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2008); see footnote #12, above. See also Jaroslav Pelikan (1974), ch.5, ‘The Vindication of Trinitarian Monotheism’ especially the sections, ‘Evil and the God of Love’ on p.216 – 227 and ‘The One God – And His Prophet’ on p.227 – 242.

us in existence. If God does not love you, you're not damned. You simply aren't. What supports our existence and holds us in being is God's love. We exist by the fact that God gives God's self to us at every moment. Therefore, of course, God loves the damned. God loves everything that exists just because it exists. Indeed, that is what makes it exist: God loves it into being.

'Let me give you an image which comes from Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the fourth century. The difference between heaven and hell is described in this story he tells: Picture yourself walking out on a bright sunny day with healthy eyes. You will experience the sunlight as something wonderful and pleasant and beneficent. Now, picture yourself walking out on exactly the same bright sunny day, but with a diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

'That is the point about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are exactly the same thing: the love of God. If you have always wanted the love of God, congratulations, you got heaven. If you don't want the love of God, too bad, you are stuck for all eternity. God remains God. God makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the rain fall on the good and the wicked. If you don't want rain or sun, too bad, you are still going to get them. The question is not that God changes in response to us. It is that we are judged by our response to the absoluteness of God's self gift.'²⁶

Of course, I am deeply aware that many Catholics and Protestants have not heard of hell articulated this way. Why is there this rather significant difference between the patristic theologians and Eastern Orthodoxy on the one hand, and most Catholics and Protestants on the other? Methodologically, this is because some people start with the question, 'What is hell?' *before* they answer the questions, 'What is sin? And what does it do to us?' For if we start with the question of sin and its effect on us, the matter becomes much clearer. How did Adam and Eve damage their natures? By internalizing into themselves the ability and desire to define good and evil, which should have remained outside of them within God alone; they therefore violated the nature of God's creation order itself. We became dying beings, alienated from God, the life-source, wanting there to be some moral basis for good and evil yet unwilling to relinquish control of defining it to someone outside ourselves. We became a contradiction in terms, which is what the third literary section of Genesis narrates: Each human being is made in the image of God, that is, the *living* God, and yet *dies* in an utter contradiction of who and what God meant us to be and how we are to reflect Him (Gen.5:1 – 6:8). Thus, the salvation wrought by Jesus is a salvation from our false selves, the corruption in our nature, and into the true selves that God always wanted for us. For example, Jesus said, 'For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake *will find it*' (Mt.16:25; Mk.8:35; Lk.9:24). Jesus' story of the prodigal son has the son return to his father when 'he came to his senses,' where the Greek literally says, 'he came to *himself*' (Lk.15:17).

Conversely, John's Gospel portrays rejection of Jesus as involving self-denial. In John 18 – 19, sin is expressed in terms of self-negation. Jesus, when he was arrested, boldly stated his identity and said three times, 'I am' (John 18:5, 6, 8). But in John's tightly woven narrative, Simon Peter, Pilate, and the Jews negate their own identity. Simon Peter, while trying to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the trial, was confronted by people who suspected him of being a follower of Jesus, and he said three times, 'I am not' (John 18:17, 25, and implicitly in v.27). Pilate, when Jesus was standing right in front of him, should have cared about truth in Roman legal proceedings, but said in abdication of his office, 'What is truth?' (John 19:38) The Jews, who cried out at every Passover that they had 'no king but God', said, 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19:16). If, in John's Gospel, the result of negating Jesus is self-negation, then the result of embracing Jesus is discovering one's true self. This, too, is consistently portrayed in the narrative (cf. Jn.4:1 – 29; 8:31 – 34). This is why John's Gospel portrays Jesus as God, bringing about a new creation and new humanity. In an echo of God breathing into Adam (Gen.2:7), Jesus breathes into his followers his Holy Spirit (Jn.20:22), constituting them as God's *truly human beings* once more. Jesus healed the corruption in human nature in himself, and now offers himself to us by his Spirit, at the pleasure of the Father. This is why receiving Jesus is a restoration of true humanity, and rejecting Jesus is the ongoing rejection of one's true self, which deepens at every turn, making Jesus' ongoing invitation and call to receive him a living hell.

Paul in Romans also provides corroboration with this point. Paul's last mention of the wrath of God (as distinct from the wrath of the state) in Romans is this: 'Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be

²⁶ Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about Faith, Love, and Service* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), p.14 – 15.

overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ (Rom.12:19 – 21) This ethic provides another example that God’s love can be experienced as burning wrath by someone who is opposed to Him. But this does not change the fact that from God’s side, it is His love. Once again, the sequence of our questions determines our results. When we ask the questions, ‘What is sin? And what does it do to us?’ *before* we ask the question, ‘What is hell?’ we come up with clearer and more theologically consistent answers for both.

Irenaeus of Lyon, the earliest writing theologian outside of the New Testament, in the second century, said, ‘For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, as Himes notes, repeated this illustration. So did Maximus the Confessor, the great defender of orthodoxy in the monothelite controversy in the sixth century: ‘God is the sun of justice, as it is written, who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love for matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.’²⁸ Isaac the Syrian, in the eighth century, said, ‘The sorrow which takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God...But love acts in two different ways, as suffering in the reprov’d, and as joy in the blessed.’²⁹ The *entire Eastern Orthodox tradition* – fully one third of the church – articulates the doctrine of hell this way. This fact cannot be lightly dismissed, along with their critique that Western theologies of the atonement and of hell have been overly shaped by Latin ideas of merit and penance. Lutheran mystic Jakob Boehme (1575 – 1624) said, ‘Hell is in heaven and heaven is in hell. But the angels see only the light, and devils only the darkness.’³⁰

In the twentieth century, Protestant evangelical theologian Donald Baillie said, ‘God must be inexorable towards our sins...not in spite of his love but because of his love: not because his love is limited but because it is unlimited.’ Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, also in the twentieth century, said: ‘Crucified love is something that sears and consumes, and its two aspects – redemption and judgment – are inseparable and indistinguishable.’ Catholic spiritualist Thomas Merton said, ‘If we refuse his love and remain in the coldness of sin then will his fire (by our own choice rather than his) become our everlasting enemy, and Love, instead of being our joy, will become our torment and our destruction.’ Catholic lay theologian, philologist, and renowned writer J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrates this understanding in his masterful *The Lord of the Rings*. Those characters who are corrupted by evil lose their physical substance and find good things hard to bear: the orcs cannot bear the sun; Gollum cannot bear the light of the sun and moon, the touch of elvish rope, or the taste of elvish lembas bread; the Nazgul have become wraiths and cannot bear running water and Gandalf’s light; etc. Anglican professor of literature, patristics expert, and lay theologian C.S. Lewis says this very strongly in *The Great Divorce*, which federal Calvinists tend to plunder conveniently when their own articulation of hell as God’s prison system fails to explain inconsistencies or persuade others, without appreciating the way in which Lewis arranged all the theological pieces.³¹ In the Reformed tradition, Swiss theologian Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics*) and Scottish Presbyterian T.F. Torrance (*Incarnation, Atonement*) and American Donald Bloesch (*The Last Things*) also describe hell this way.³² Hence, Father Himes is not alone.

It seems to me that the gravitational pull towards Hinduism is quite strong, because if God reveals Himself through all of history, including the fall of humanity and our ongoing sin, then at best, He would be both good and evil, arbitrary, and at worst, simply evil. To the person who ‘wants to experience everything’ and thinks it is ‘close-minded’ to make conclusions about God before experiencing everything in life, I would ask one question: If you

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4

²⁸ Maximus Confessor, *Selected Writings*, Chapters on Knowledge, paragraph 12, Paulist Press, 1985, p.130

²⁹ Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82

³⁰ Jakob Boehme, *Of Heaven and Hell: A Dialogue Between a Scholar and His Master*, although Boehme also saw the fall as necessary

³¹ See my essay *C.S. Lewis’ Theology of the Atonement*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-cslewis-paper-atonement.pdf>, to see how Lewis drew from Irenaeus and Athanasius in particular

³² See also Grace Communion International, <http://www.gci.org/media/youre-included> for a very good repository of Trinitarian theology including T.F. Torrance, J.B. Torrance, Ian Torrance, Trevor Hart, Elmer Colyer, Ray Anderson, Andrew Purves, etc.

take all of history and human experience as valid data about the character of God, then you invariably include human evil and the fallen creation as part of the data, thereby making God both good and evil, or just evil. This is why the gravitational pull towards the god of Hinduism is so strong, and why, logically, the Muslim Allah and the high federal Calvinist rendering of the Christian God get pulled back to it. Only a thoroughly and consistently Trinitarian definition of the Triune God revealed by Jesus alone, through the Spirit, and not by a fallen human history, is a God who is not responsible for any human evil, who is in fact opposed to it, and is thoroughly good.

Reason #4: Does God Value Every Person? Does He Anchor Universal Human Dignity?

The fourth reason why everyone should care about atonement theology is because it affects whether we can think of the Christian God undergirding universal human dignity. Social activists and political philosophers have written a flurry of recent books on whether there is a foundation for universal human dignity, and what that might mean. Human dignity means that there is something that legitimately distinguishes human life from animal and plant life. This is the response to the accusation of ‘species-ism’ by naturalists who carry their naturalistic presuppositions to their logical conclusion: there is no difference between human life and other life. Human dignity also means that the U.N. is not simply being culturally imperialistic when intervening in the affairs of countries where that dignity is being violated. British political philosopher John Gray, American legal scholar Michael Perry, and German philosopher Jurgen Habermas are among those who recognize that universal and equal human dignity comes from a Christian – and only Christian – foundation. Habermas, one of Europe’s most prominent political philosophers, who built his intellectual career on secular and Marxist foundations, surprised many by saying in 2004:

‘Christianity, and nothing else is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of western civilization... To this day, we have no other alternative to it... We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is just idle postmodern chatter.’³³

Nor is this conclusion unique to Western scholars. One of the leading Chinese scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said in a lecture to a group of American tourists:

‘One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don’t have any doubt about this.’³⁴

I would ask one further question. Can any deity serve as an adequate foundation for human dignity and sacredness? I ask this because the deist god believed in by the Enlightenment philosophers and the authors of the American Constitution is understood to be entirely passive in the face of human evil. Yet to be fundamentally passive in the face of human evil is to be evil. It is to be uninvolved in the afflictions of human beings. Since the deist god was not and is not personally involved in supporting human dignity, such a god cannot serve as the foundation for this idea. The deist god was always nothing more than an intellectual place holder for a generic ‘creator’ who endows people with theoretical ‘rights’ but who otherwise does not intervene in human history. The deist god therefore suffers from a consistency and integrity problem.

It seems to me that the Hindu god and the Muslim Allah suffer from similar problems. With the Hindu god, there is no true moral difference between actions or motivations that we call ‘good’ and other actions or motivations we call ‘evil.’ This is because in Hinduism, good and evil are held to be constructs of our own limited perspective; they are simply aspects of the same ultimate reality, as Shiva the Destroyer is merely an aspect of the one god. Similarly, as I wrote above, the Islamic concept of God also leans towards the Hindu concept of a god who is both good and evil because of God’s active causation of all things. Furthermore, serious questions related to human dignity can be raised about how the Qur’an envisions the political and social status of non-Muslims, ex-Muslims, women, and slaves.

The Christian Trinity, by contrast, quadruply affirms human dignity and sacredness in one continuous

³³ Jurgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (English translation Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p.150 – 151

³⁴ Reported by Time essayist David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2003), p.5

movement of love towards humanity. First, he made humanity, male and female, in his own image. He gave equal value to men and women. He also made loving relationships the norm for humanity, starting with marriage (Gen.1:27). The question of what is imaged in humanity leads to a reflection on the source of that image in the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit freely choose to love one another, for that is their divine nature; they cannot choose otherwise. Because God is not coerced from some force outside of him, it follows that people, to be like God or similar to God, must also not be coerced by some outside force; they must be free to reflect their God-given, God-inclined nature. Jesus said, 'Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you' (Jn.15:9), and since the Father did not coerce the Son's response, so the Son did not coerce his followers' response. God created human beings as beings-who-are-becoming, beings designed to grow through love, with a nature inclined towards this God. Our free choices towards God and one another would have helped us know and participate in the Trinity himself, eventually resulting in each person's free choice to allow our human nature to be perfected in union with this God, such that we would freely choose to always choose God eternally. This understanding of humanity and the Trinity means that the Christian God is completely and wholly opposed to human evil, and not complicit in it at all: He is incapable of turning us into robots precisely because of his love for us, and this explains why this God is not a passive partner-in-crime to human evil. It is not a choice that is even available to him. Thus, we cannot posit a definition of omnipotence whereby the Trinity *can* override human free choice but merely chooses to not do so for some unexplained reason. Rather, this God's love upholds and enables human free choice, even when that choice is abused to reject God Himself. I understand that this raises questions for those Christian traditions rooted in Augustinian monergism, but the question must be asked.

Second, this God personally took corrupted human nature – the source of human evil – to himself, in a preliminary way in the community of Israel, and then ultimately and ontologically in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the representative of Israel. In the person of Jesus, he took corrupted human nature to himself, fought its self-centeredness, defeated it in his death, and gave us back a new, God-soaked, God-saturated human nature in the body of the resurrected Jesus.³⁵ Jesus is able to share his new humanity with us by his Spirit, once we receive his Spirit by faith. Jesus, therefore, is both the Christian foundation for human worth and the model and source of Christian human love and responsibility to one another to honor the other's dignity: 'Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (Mt.20:26 – 28) Jesus fully reveals a God who simultaneously loves humanity and opposes the evil corruption of our nature – a God who can be considered to be wholly good. The resurrected Jesus reveals to us what the God intended for humanity from the beginning of creation: to be elevated and glorified and brought fully into the life of the Trinity. In other words, God designed each and every person to share in the physical, glorified, God-soaked humanity that the resurrected Jesus now has, regardless of whether the fall of humanity had happened or not.

Third, in his present, personal work by his Spirit, this God is simultaneously attacking the root source of human evil in each one of us and personally loving us and providing love in which we can participate. This gives rise to a 'new humanity in Jesus' (Eph.2:15) indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus, mobilized in Christian mission, proclamation, and embodied witness through Christian love and social justice. The Spirit of God does not operate mechanically and causally on people as if they were simply robotic. The Spirit works personally; he issues both an external call concretely spoken by another person, but also an ongoing internal call within each person, through our consciences and in our humanity, because our humanity is patterned after Jesus' and because Jesus exerts a claim on it. Each person is called to respond personally to Jesus through the activity of his Spirit. This reality makes the Triune God a very active opponent of human evil at its very source. While enabling and utterly respecting our human free choice, he calls us to freely join him in healing humanity and the world, while we receive his ongoing healing of ourselves. In this understanding, predestination requires human free will. The patristic and Eastern Orthodox definition of predestination involved a human being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom.8:28 – 30; Eph.1:4) which requires human free will, because only by freely choosing to always choose the Father can a human person grow in the image of Christ. Thus, the patristic theologians prior to Augustine universally taught free will.

Fourth, this God promises to resurrect people in the likeness of Jesus' resurrection, in fresh, purified, and incorruptible human bodies. This is why, for example, the apostle John writes, 'We know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is.' (1 Jn.2:2) The Triune God will give to each willing person the resurrected humanity that he physically perfected in Jesus. This is Eastern Orthodox explanation of the sayings

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3; *Odes of Solomon* 11, 15, 17; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch.48, 100; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ch.2 – 3. To see that the patristic theologians taught physical redemption and not penal substitution, and the significance thereof, please see my essay *Penal Substitution vs. Physical Redemption: A Historical Comparison*, found here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-penal-substitution-vs-physical-redemption-historical-comparison.pdf>.

in John 6 which contain the language of the Father giving humanity to the Son to save. Notice the interplay back and forth between the neuter subject and the personal subject. ‘*All that* (neuter) the Father gives me will come to me’ (Jn.6:37) refers to all of human nature being resurrected by Christ. ‘And *whoever* (personal) comes to me I will never drive away’ (Jn.6:37) refers to persons who come to Christ with faith and trust. ‘This is the will of Him who sent Me, that *of all that* (neuter) He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise *it* (neuter) up on the last day’ (Jn.6:39) refers to human nature. ‘For this is the will of My Father, that *everyone* (personal) who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise *him* (personal) up on the last day’ (Jn.6:40) refers to persons. Jesus is the source of life for everyone, even the wicked. If he was not, then they would not be raised up. All come to Christ, but not all come to Christ in the same way. All belong to Christ by nature by virtue of him taking up their nature and so all will come to him in the resurrection. But some will come to him in belief, which is why ‘come to me’ (Jn.6:37) is not synonymous with belief.

We must ask again about the question of human destiny and hell. Those who receive Jesus and the fundamental transformation he both offers and insists upon experience Jesus’ love as love. They receive the final consummation of their personal union with the Triune God for which they had longed; they also receive the new heavens and the new earth as the restored and elevated creation which God had always desired. But those who reject Jesus reject their very own existence and destiny. Through their own choices, they will have conditioned their nature and will to curve in upon themselves with self-love, having taken even that gift from God and turned it inwards. Yet this God does not give up on them. He keeps calling out to them in love. But because they experience God as a hated and jealous competitor who constantly calls out to them to yield up their self-definitions, ambitions, pride, and resistance, they experience God’s love as sheer torment. They can only experience His love with utter loathing and bitterness, and with ever increasing feeling. In this case, hell is the wrath of God against their corrupted human nature, yes, but this does not change the fact that, on a more profound level, hell is the love of God for them as persons. What is important for the purpose of this paper is simply to note that this action does not impugn this God’s ability to serve as the foundation of human dignity, because, articulated this way, he loves *each and every human being for all eternity*.

Teasing out the implications of Christian belief, building from this last point, C.S. Lewis aptly remarked, ‘Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever, and this must be either true or false...And immortality makes this other difference, which, by the by, has a connection with the difference between totalitarianism and democracy. If individuals live only seventy years, then a state, or a nation, or a civilisation, which may last for a thousand years, is more important than an individual. But if Christianity is true, then the individual is not only more important but incomparably more important, for he is everlasting and the life of the state or civilisation, compared with his, is only a moment.’³⁶ To be precise, *every individual* has more dignity than the state.

Can a god who arbitrarily condemns some people to damnation prior to time and prior to their choice serve as the basis of each person’s human dignity? I do not see how he can, for he would only love some people, and not all. Can a god who holds some people in a hellish prison system against their will as they desire reconciliation serve as the basis of each person’s dignity? The same basic problem seems to occur. Those theological schemas call into question how a god understood in these ways can serve as the basis of universal human dignity, for his own actions suggest that he is willing to create ‘throwaway people’ from the start, and/or inflict eternal suffering upon them even when they want to be reconciled to him. If there are Christian theologians who insist on those theological schemas, I will leave it to them to explain how their articulation of the Christian God can serve as the basis for universal human dignity. I am confident, in the meantime, that a systematic Trinitarian theology (which is Patristic, Orthodox, and Reformational) offers a quadruple affirmation of human being, flowing out of the continuous commitment of an active, interventionist, thoroughly good, and loving Creator God who loves every human person, who joins Himself to humanity, first as one of us, then as one with us, thereby overcoming the corruption and alienation within human nature itself.

Reason #5: Is Retributive Justice the Highest Form of Justice? Does Atonement Theology Impact Our Framework for Social Justice?

‘Justice’ or ‘social justice’ is something many people – Christian and non-Christian alike – talk about but seldom think about systematically. I can identify at least four major types of social justice. First is retributive-meritocratic justice, or getting what you deserve – good or bad, reward or punishment – instead of experiencing favoritism or nepotism. Second is distributive justice, ensuring some baseline level of equity for everyone, such as clean air and water, public education, factual information, universal health care, etc. Third is libertarian justice, a European Enlightenment idea where individual liberty is justice. The less the government constrains people the

³⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1943, 1945, 1952), p.73

more just a society is. And fourth is restorative justice, where you start with a vision of what relationships we ought to have, and how to maintain or restore that type of relation, for example, by cultivating personal virtues.

The problem is as follows: There is nothing *in secular thought* that tells us how to order or organize these four types of justice. My understanding, after talking with many people, including people involved with law and policy, law school students and graduates, and reading books like *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* by secular philosopher Michael Sandel and *Which Justice? Whose Rationality?* by Marxist-turned-Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, is that there is no sure intellectual way to organize the four types of justice *from a secular foundation*. In my assessment, this is why Republicans, who stress libertarian justice and meritocratic justice, are unable to talk to Democrats, who tend to stress distributive justice more than Republicans, and vice versa. Public debate is not just failing at civility or character, although many people interpret it that way. It is a fundamental limit of rationality. Within any secular intellectual foundation, any organization of these four types of justice is arbitrary. American politics, therefore, has become (and always has been?) fundamentally irrational and reduced to emotional appeals without substantive debate.

As I discussed above, there is a connection between one's atonement theology and one's ability to *speak* about social justice: Is God trying to undo all human evil; is God morally implicated in human evil; is God the foundation of the human dignity of each person? But I wish to go further. I believe there is a connection between one's atonement theology and one's ability to actually *do* social justice. For if penal substitution is the correct atonement theory, then the highest form of justice within the character of God is *retributive-meritocratic justice*. The reason is that penal substitution offers, as the reason behind Jesus' atonement, the idea that God must deal out retribution to sinners, either upon them in hell directly, or upon Jesus as a substitute for them instead. On the one hand, He carries out some kind of 'infinite justice' in hell against those who reject Jesus in this life, because sinning against an infinite being requires infinite retribution. On the other hand, God gives an infinite blessing to those who believe in Jesus, because Jesus has merited for them a blessing from an infinite being.

If retributive-meritocratic justice is the highest form of justice in God's character, then rewarding good behavior and punishing the bad is the highest form of justice that we can maintain in human relations. I believe this is why there is a conceptual and emotional link between believing in penal substitution and being politically on the right. Appreciating God in a penal substitution framework seems to depend, psychologically and socially, on a human experience of 'tough parenting,' 'getting what you deserve,' 'meritocracy' and 'working hard,' 'getting tough on crime,' and 'law and punishment.' Interestingly enough, those who seem most concerned that people have a *spiritual* experience of God's grace – defined primarily as judicial forgiveness – also seem most concerned that people have a *socio-political* experience of law and merit. In another paper,³⁷ I explore three examples from history: John Calvin's Geneva, British evangelicals during the Victorian Age and the beginning of England's Industrial Revolution, and American conservative evangelicals during the twentieth century. In all three cases, a strong commitment to penal substitution coincided with a strong commitment to capitalism, antagonism towards the welfare state, and so on. Some of this had advantages and positive qualities. Yet there were downsides as well. Theologians and ethicists interested in restorative criminal justice, in contrast to merely retributive sentencing, question penal substitution atonement theory because of its impact on how Christians think of criminal justice: In the realm of criminal justice, theologian Timothy Gorringer finds, 'Wherever Calvinism spread, punitive sentencing follows.'³⁸ The precise relationship between theology and social movements has always been difficult to trace, and while I do not believe that we can always say with surety that the one *caused* the other, the theological elevation of retributive-meritocratic justice to the center of God's character – which lies at the heart of penal substitution atonement theology – certainly has made it difficult for those Christians to consider other principles and forms of justice.

Conversely, I find it notable that Christians who are strong advocates of broader notions of social justice express reservations with penal substitution; witness the increase in interest among scholars and lay people in non-

³⁷ This paper is being written, but some of my sources include John Milbank, 'The New Evangelicals: Are "New Evangelicals" a New Phenomenon or Reversion to Type?', *The Immanent Frame* blog, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/01/18/are-new-evangelicals-a-new-phenomenon-or-a-reversion-to-type/> accessed Feb 13, 2013; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Timothy J. Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Vengeance, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Timothy J. Gorringer, 'Atonement' edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.367 – 369; Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), p.220 – 221 and also Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p.157

³⁸ Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p.60 quoting Timothy J. Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Vengeance, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.140

violent atonement models, christus victor and spiritual warfare motifs, Rene Girard's mimetic scapegoat theory, and feminist and liberation theologians' criticisms of penal substitution. These critics may be more or less successful at protesting penal substitution. But in my opinion, they are, by and large, unsuccessful at asserting something biblically and historically grounded in its place, mostly because they do not come to terms with the wrath of God and key features of how the judgments of God occurred in the Old Testament, nor do they seem to value the historical continuity between the apostles and the earliest theologians.

I will explore the logic of this below by a close examination of Dr. Timothy Keller's book *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*. I appreciate this book deeply and have many positive things to say about it. Although he uses slightly different terms than I do, Keller basically recognizes that there are competing definitions of justice being voiced. What is justice? Is it: getting what you merit (meritocratic justice); getting what you need, and some baseline level of equity (distributive justice); freedom from constraint (libertarian justice); or a certain vision of relationship and personally cultivating virtues towards that vision (restorative justice and virtue ethics)? Keller gives the example of tax policy: 'Underneath all the name calling are sharp differences of opinion about what justice actually is. Democrats think of it more in collective terms. They believe a low tax rate is unfair because it deprives the poor and minorities of the help they need to overcome years of discrimination. Republicans think of justice more individualistically. They believe that a high tax rate is unjust because it robs people of their due who have risked much and worked hard to keep what they earn.'³⁹ Which form of justice should be prioritized and when? Which justice do we mean when we speak of 'social justice'? Keller then answers, 'Each of the theories...makes one of these factors...trump the other[s]. However, the Biblical understanding of justice is not rooted in any one of these, but in *the character and being of God himself*.'⁴⁰

By making this move, Keller goes farther in social justice theory than many American evangelicals. At that moment, I was eagerly expecting Keller to give an exposition of that very topic: the character and being of God, who I understand as loving every single person, who seeks to restore every single person, who is love in his very triune being, who offers the wealth of creation to every human being as a loving gift (a fact that Keller recognizes⁴¹), and then relate all that to social justice. But on that crucial point, Keller hesitates and falls silent. He offers the generic wisdom of involvement without clear critique or direction: 'This means that no current political framework can fully convey the comprehensive Biblical vision of justice, and Christians should never identify too closely with a particular party or philosophy.' Keller then cautions that some churches 'have uncritically adopted a liberal political agenda, one that has a very expansive view of government. Others adopt a politically conservative approach to justice, one that insists that poverty, at least in America, is not the result of unjust laws, social structures, and racism, but only a matter of family breakdown.'⁴² Thus, he leaves his readers to be just as confused as the secular world about how to organize these various claims and forms of justice – *the very heart of the question of justice*. Because he cannot say – or chooses not to say – what justice fundamentally is within the character of God, Keller does not go farther to clarify the confusion about the nature of social justice.

Why does Keller not see in the character of God a particular arrangement of these various types of justice? Perhaps he recognizes, as I suspect he does, that defining the character and being of God according to his commitment to penal substitution leads him into logical problems. I suggest that Keller is prevented by his commitment to penal substitution from subordinating retributive-meritocratic justice concerns to those of restorative justice and economic distributive justice *that he himself brings up in a previous chapter*. Does God in fact love every single human being? If so, then He desires to restore us all, which would imply that the highest form of justice in God is *restorative justice*. And if that is the case, then God must be drawing us all back to His vision from creation that in some sense *limits* people's economic choices. I would be more precise by saying that God calls each person into a relation with Himself where *our freedom is meant to express His love and compassion for others, including but not limited to the economic realm*. But Keller seems strangely reluctant to say this. Why? Does he believe instead that God desires to weigh out retributive-meritocratic justice to all beings – onto Jesus for the elect and on the non-elect directly – implying that the highest form of justice is retributive-meritocratic justice? In other parts of his book, Keller demonstrates that he wants to affirm types of justice other than retributive-meritocratic justice. But he is unable to anchor his own logic back to the very place he claims justice comes from: 'the character and being of God himself.' In the field of theology, Keller can chalk up confusion about how to arrange these various principles in God's character to 'mystery.' But in the field of law and jurisprudence and vision-casting for social justice, the confusion leaves him incoherent.

³⁹ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2010), p.150

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.163, italics mine

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.88 – 92 refers to God's ownership over all creation and His desire to share it with every person as a gift.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.163

By contrast, I believe that the Christian approach to social justice has a coherent way of ordering these four types of justice. The highest and framing type of justice is restorative justice, because God had a vision for human relationships from the creation, and is still working to restore each person to it. That is, an all-loving God gives all of who He is in love to restore human beings, so that we might become all that He intended us to be, individually in relation with Him, and spiritually, socially, emotionally, and economically in relation to each other. I will explain those statements in what follows. This has great significance for any given Christian's ability to engage in social justice. If physical redemption is the correct atonement theory, with its coherent doctrines of the Trinity and human free will, then the highest form of justice within the character of God is *restorative justice*. Distributive justice is the second principle of justice. This priority can be seen especially in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, especially in their calls for the fair distribution of wealth and work. They do not shrink from calling for a redistribution of wealth on behalf of the poor. Meritocratic justice is the third principle of biblical social justice. There are times and places in Scripture where it is important for a person to get what he or she deserves. Anyone who has experienced corruption, favoritism, nepotism, and racism can testify to the injustice of 'not getting what you rightly deserve.' And libertarian justice raises important concerns – such as freedom of religion and the question of undue constraints – but by itself has no firm foundation. Because libertarian justice starts with the individual and makes every relationship a social construct that people can opt into or out of, it starts from a fundamentally incompatible premise than restorative justice does. One cannot start with 'individualism' and also simultaneously start with a communitarian vision for all relationships. Thus, libertarian justice is incompatible with a biblical vision of social justice, which, in my argument, is best described as *biblical restorative justice referring to God's original creation order*.

Significantly, this Christian approach to social justice has epistemic foundations in history that make it intellectually knowable. It is not simply an arbitrary claim. It is rooted in the historical Jesus as God's initiative to restore all people to be the people He has always wanted them to be; the teaching of Jesus which demonstrates that; the historicity of Jesus resurrection as the healing of human nature from sin and the affirmation of the human body and the physical world; the historical witness of Scripture; and to a lesser degree, the church. Jesus and his resurrection mean that God has affirmed His original creation order, by which I mean the relational vision that God intended from the beginning, which, as I will demonstrate, Jesus affirms.

What is that creation order? In answering that question, I wish to explore Timothy Keller's argument, supporting and affirming it in certain places, for he too refers to the creation. Keller says that the first reason for us to do justice is that God made all human beings in His image.⁴³ I heartily concur. From the opening chapter of Genesis we learn that 'God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Gen.1:27). Keller helpfully cites Genesis 9:5 – 6 and James 3:9 as examples of how God condemns murder and cursing, respectively, because those actions violate His image. After considering this, Keller says, 'The image of God carries with it the right to not be mistreated or harmed.'⁴⁴

The second reason Keller offers also relates to the creation order. 'If God is the Creator and author of all things, that means everything we have in life belongs to God.'⁴⁵ Keller agrees that this is a countercultural claim, especially for Americans. Americans, he says, believe that since our success depends on our own hard work, that we have the right to do with our money what we choose. Keller accepts that some Scriptures do speak of industriousness and hard work, citing Proverbs 6:9 – 11 and 10:4. In my language, there is meritocratic justice to be found in Scripture. But, he says, being born in another century or another place, would have typically resulted in one's hard work not amounting to that much. 'In short, all your resources are in the end the gift of God.'⁴⁶ And, 'therefore, just men and women see their money as belonging in some ways to the entire human community around them, while the unjust or unrighteous see their money as strictly theirs and no one else's.'⁴⁷ Keller goes on to quote from Deuteronomy 24:14, 17, and 19 and the Sinaitic Law's command to the Israelites to not double back while harvesting their fields, so the immigrant, orphan, and widow could freely glean through those fields. Failure to do so in Israel was seen as depriving the poor of their God-given rights. In truth, God owns all wealth, and extends His resources to all. To make a contemporary application, Keller then points to children and where they are born and grow up. I appreciate his counsel to see inequality in schooling to be an injustice stemming from stinginess. 'My three sons, just by being born where they were, have a far better chance to have a flourishing, happy life in society.'

⁴³ Ibid., p.82

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.84

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.88

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.89

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.90

There is an inequitable distribution of both goods and opportunities in this world. Therefore, if you have been assigned the goods of this world by God and you don't share them with others, it isn't just stinginess, it is injustice.⁴⁸

This is a strong assertion with which I happily agree. However, Keller's foundation for his assertion shows its weaknesses, and ultimately undermines him two chapters later. Keller does not explore what legal and institutional reasons lay behind this 'inequitable distribution of both goods and opportunities.' What lies behind some people's ability today to amass huge amounts of wealth? Does that very fact betray an important insight? Taking that one step further, Keller does not explore to what degree the capitalist and democratic United States – with its laws, banks, institutions, history, and culture – conforms to a basic biblical sense of justice. Are there meaningful legal and institutional differences between Israelite society and American society? To be sure, and I will explore some of them below.

Also, Keller does not explain why some admonitions from the Hebrew Bible seem to be wise counsel for the present – especially the meritocratic 'work hard' passages in Proverbs – while others seem completely impossible to truly implement – especially the prohibition against interest-rate lending and the equal distribution of land by family in Leviticus 25 and its accompanying 'jubilee year' where shifts in land ownership are undone and the land returns to its original family boundaries. Can we just pick and choose material from the Old Testament? What allows Keller to take some passages from the Hebrew Bible more seriously than others? At times, Keller seems to rely on a naïve biblicism: if it is commanded somewhere in Scripture, it must be always valid.

Let me illustrate two types of relationships from God's original creation order from Genesis: marriage and economic relationships. They follow a similar development across the overall narrative of Scripture, from creation through Israel to the church. In discussions about homosexuality, evangelicals (including me) are quick to go to Matthew 19:3 – 12 for Jesus' teaching on marriage. Why? The passage so clearly links God's original creation to Jesus' new creation, and spells out the implications for marriage and sexual expression. 'He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'' (Mt.19:5 – 6). In one breath, Jesus quotes from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. He cites the action of the creator God in making Adam male and Eve female, and then attributes the poetic statement of Genesis 2:24 not to Moses or to any other human author, but to that very same creator God.

Jesus therefore gives us his own key to understanding God's commands from creation to Israel to church. God had a vision for human relationships from the creation. Regarding marriage, God designed it to be male and female, monogamous, lifelong, and loving, with no pre-marital sex, adultery, desertion, or divorce. But after the fall, 'hardness of heart' (Mt.19:8) set into humanity, Israel included. Jesus claims to be reversing 'hardness of heart.' Thus, Jesus read the divorce clause in the Sinaitic Law (Dt.24:1 – 4) as a concession to Israel's hardness of heart. In effect, he saw marriage from God's original unspoiled creation as only partially preserved by the Sinaitic Law. Hardness of heart and its downstream effects of sin, adultery, and divorce, would not have affected human beings in the original creation, so the Sinaitic Law had to allow for the reality of sin which was now internal to human nature as a disease and hereditary defect. While making room for the single eunuch who does not get married (Mt.19:12), Jesus announces that he is removing 'hardness of heart' from people. He is restoring people to God's *creation order* as far as marriage, divorce, and sexuality are concerned. That is why I think it is fair to call the highest form of justice in God a type of *restorative justice*.

Unfortunately, many evangelicals are exceedingly slow to recognize that the very next section, the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:13 – 30, has profound implications for Christian ethics about money and the economic dimension of human relationships. It also has implications for how we read God's intention from the creation for the economic dimension of human relationships. If Jesus is returning God's people to the original creation order, then that fact has radical implications for wealth, generosity, hospitality, and how we evaluate our own faithfulness to God. Jesus apparently believed that something similar held true about humanity's economic relationships from creation to fall to Israel. The Sinaitic Law preserved in Israel only part of what God intended from the creation order for all human beings. However, hardness of heart and its downstream effects had to be considered by God in the Sinaitic Law. But which parts?

The literary design of Genesis 1 – 11 makes it clear that welcoming a new human life was an economic responsibility of all human beings from the creation. Keller does not explore this. I have slightly modified the structure ascribed to Genesis 1 – 11 by Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn and also Duane Garrett by placing a genealogy at the start of each subsection, drawing together the genealogy of Adam in 5:1 – 6:8 and the genealogy of Noah in 6:9 – 9:29 as one coherent section, which seems to me a more natural way to organize the text.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.84

⁴⁹ Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.36 – 53

Homer's Iliad (European)	Atrahasis (Babylonian/Akkadian)	Zoroastrian Avesta (Old Iranian)	Genesis 1 – 11 (Hebrew)
Problem: Overpopulation, wickedness, earth burdened	Creation (1.1-351): the work of the gods and the creation of humans	Creation: Ahura Mazda tells Yima (human) to be king over creation	Creation (1:1-2:3): God creates the world and humans and blesses them
First Threat: Zeus sends the Theban War; many destroyed	First Threat (1.352-415): Humans numerically increase; plague from the gods to limit overcrowding; Enki's help	First Threat: Overpopulation; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	First Threat (2:4 – 4:26): Genealogy of heavens and earth; the Fall; God promises victory to the seed of the woman; Cain kills Abel and settles in a city; God preserves Seth
Second Threat: Zeus plans to destroy all by thunderbolts; Momos dissuades Zeus	Second Threat (II.i.1- II.v.21) Humanity's numerical increase; drought from the gods; Enki's help	Second Threat: Overpopulation; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	Second Threat (5:1 – 9:29): Genealogy of Adam to Noah; human corruption and bloodshed; God cleanses the land through the flood; God preserves Noah and family
Third Threat: Momos suggests that Thebis marry a mortal to create Achilles and that Zeus father Helen of Troy; war results between the Greeks and the barbarians	Third Threat (II.v.22- III.vi.4): Humanity's numerical increase, Atrahasis Flood, salvation in boat	Third Threat: Overpopulation; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	Third Threat (10:1 – 11:9): Genealogy of Shem, Ham, Japheth; Tower of Babel and dispersion
Resolution: Many destroyed by Trojan War, earth lightened of her burden	Resolution (III.vi.5- viii.18): Numerical increase; compromise between Enlil and Enki; humans cursed with natural barrenness, high infant mortality rate, cult prostitution (to separate sex and procreation)	Resolution: Ahura Mazda sends a deadly winter with heavy snowfall to punish overcrowding; Yima told to build a three storied enclosure to survive; humanity destroyed outside while a boy and girl born in enclosure every 40 years	Resolution (11:10 – 26): Genealogy of Shem; introduction of Abram (In 11:27ff., God calls Abram out of Ur to begin Israel.)

Genesis 1 – 11 seems to be aware of the other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories surrounding it. How can we tell? Because similar elements are there: a fivefold structure, problems caused by humanity, a concern for population, divine judgment. But Genesis 1 – 11 seems to turn the tables on all those other stories because it reverses the meaning of those stories. Notice the differences. What do the first three stories say the big problem is? Overpopulation: It is amazing that about four thousand years ago, people worried about overcrowding. But what does the biblical story identify as the big problem? Human greed and violence – the problem is our character, our inability to make room for another person. We see this in two ways. First, in the Atrahasis Epic, the reason for the flood is overcrowding. Some other flood stories from around the world also say that. In Genesis, however, the reason for the flood is human violence and bloodshed; it's about human character, not human overcrowding.

Second, what do the first three stories defend? Cities, the symbol of power in the ancient world. What does God's story attack? Cities, symbolic of civilization. The first three stories defend civilization at the expense of the individual. God's story starting from Genesis 1 – 11 defends the individual at the expense of civilization. In fact, Kikawada and Quinn argue, 'This command [to be fruitful and multiply], so long familiar to us, is in its cultural context utterly startling, as unexpected as the monotheism.'⁵⁰ They conclude: 'All other traditions view population control as the solution to urban overcrowding. Genesis offers dispersion, the nomadic way of life. Genesis 1 – 11 then constitutes a rejection of...civilization itself, if its continuance requires human existence to be treated as a

⁵⁰ Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.38.

contingent good. For Genesis the existence of a new human was always good.⁵¹ The opening chapters of Scripture, therefore, assert a powerful biblical argument for the intrinsic – not instrumental – dignity of every human being. In this creation order, God loves each person for He is involved in making each according to His image. He calls all other human beings to live out their *imago dei* by recognizing the *imago dei* in every other person through hearty hospitality and generosity.

Keller makes the same basic points about the *imago dei*, but without the strength of the contrast between God's priority on the value of the person even at the expense of the city, the civilization, or the given social order. In my judgment, this means that his willingness to challenge the socio-political order of the United States, in this case, is limited. But this is precisely what Genesis 1 – 11 requires. Genesis 1 – 11 serves as the polemical introduction to the rest of the biblical narrative. It served to explain to Israel why they are different than the Gentile world and the nations around them. This narrative would have shaped Israel's self-understanding as Abraham and Sarah were called out of the Gentile world in order to start the people Israel and be the human beings, in some sense, that God wanted.

Keller's approach to the Genesis narrative and the Sinaitic Law, however, causes him more difficulties. Surely the creation order from Genesis and the Law of Sinai are related in Keller's mind. After all, the vision of Israelite life as articulated in the Law of Sinai was patterned after the original creation order. In a sense, it was *what could have been*. Israel's garden land was a parallel of Adam and Eve's garden land. As they entered the garden land, the Israelites divided up land by tribe and then family in a roughly equal distribution (Lev.25). They were supposed to pass down land as an inheritance to their children, because that is what it meant, in a very real sense that Jesus will later qualify, to bear the image of God: to pass down the garden land as an inheritance to your children, reflecting the character of God in terms of provision, hospitality, and joy. In fact, God legislated to Israel that temporary changes of ownership of family land would be reversed and restored to their original family boundaries through the 'jubilee year' provision when, in effect, God pressed a 'reset button' (Lev.25:10). The Israelites could pass down neither advantage nor disadvantage to their grandchildren. Israel did pass down the land through their generations in a parallel way to how Adam and Eve might have done it, as suggested by the emphasis in Genesis 1 – 11 on each and every human life, called by virtue of being in God's image to bear more human life and bless the subsequent generation with an inheritance.

The relational and economic vision of the Sinaitic Law made that law code unusual and remarkable in its own right.⁵² Moses had already set a fairly high bar for both equity and wealth. The Sinai Law liberated Israelites from debt-indenture after seven years (Ex.21:1 – 8; Dt.15:12 – 15) and every forty-nine years on Israel's fixed calendar (Lev.25:40 – 41). Israelites had kinship requirements to redeem a relative's land for them (Lev.25:24 – 27). But even if the Israelite had sold land and had no relatives to redeem it for him, the purchaser was required to return the land to him in the jubilee year without charge (Lev.25:28). Israelites also had kinship obligations to redeem each other out of indentured servitude (Lev.25:47 – 53). But even if the Israelite had no relative to redeem him, the debt-holder was required to release him in the jubilee free of charge (Lev.25:54 – 55). Moreover, the Law required Israelites to lend generously to fellow Israelites in need (Lev.25:35 – 43; Dt.15:7 – 11; 24:10 – 22) and banned interest rate lending between Israelites by which one could profit from another's misfortune (Ex.22:26 – 27; Lev.25:35 – 38, Dt.23:19; cf. Ps.15:5; Pr.28:8; Ezk.18:10 – 18, 22:12; Neh.5:1 – 13); this legislation made it much less likely that Israelites would fall into debt, the reason why most people in the Ancient Near East became slaves (or indentured servants) in the first place.⁵³ Besides that, the Law required Israel to respect the physical needs and dignity of the poor in a robust number of ways (Dt.24:10 – 22). Thus, how Israel cared for others economically reflects the emphasis in Genesis 1 – 11 on God's value on each and every human person and the relationships He envisioned human beings to have with each other.

Meritocratic justice, while vitally important, must be prioritized *beneath* restorative justice and distributive justice, particularly distributive *economic* justice. Within the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, the claims of meritocratic justice cannot be truly met unless the requirements of distributive economic justice are fulfilled. For instance, the book of Proverbs does contain warnings to not be lazy lest hunger and poverty result (e.g. Pr.6:9 – 11; 10:4; 13:7, 11, 13, 18, 21 – 22; 21:25 – 26). That is a type of meritocratic justice. But Proverbs assumes that the relational vision and the distributive justice reflected in the Law of Sinai was being carried out. In Proverbs, since

⁵¹ *ibid*, p.51

⁵² Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.169 says, 'A sojourner you are not to oppress... This bias toward the underdog is unique not only in ancient law but in the whole history of law. However faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all it is still a Jewish sense of justice.'

⁵³ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors, 'Slavery', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003)

poverty might not be the result of laziness in work, but also physical disability, crop failure, bad weather, or even an enemy attack, generosity is due to the poor out of respect for the many Mosaic commandments to care for the poor in the midst of the land:

Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor. (14:21)
Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him. (14:31)
He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will cry himself and not be answered (21:13)
He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor (22:9)
He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself
Or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty (22:16)
Do not rob the poor because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;
For the LORD will plead their case, and take the life of those who rob them (22:22 – 23)

Lest anyone think that Proverbs was simply commending ‘charity,’ Proverbs 23:10 – 11 recalls the laws of family and land, as well as the law of gleaning:

Do not move the ancient boundary, or go into the fields of the fatherless.
For their Redeemer is strong; He will plead their case against you. (23:10 – 11)

The ‘ancient boundary’ refers to the family-based land boundaries (Lev.25) that started with Israel’s career in the Promised Land under Joshua. The ‘fields of the fatherless’ refers to the orphan’s right to glean *in one’s own field* (Dt.24:19 – 22). But a field harvested once by the apparent ‘owner’ becomes the orphan’s field. This was not ‘charity’ but legality. Indeed, although the tone of Proverbs is that of ‘advice wise and good,’ the subject matter is the very commands of God to Israel in the Sinaitic Law on relational and economic matters (Pr.1:8).

In addition, Proverbs echoes the Law of Sinai in its teachings about usury in Proverbs 28:7 – 9. This small section in particular stands out because it condemns financial practices that lead one away from manual labor on the land:

He who keeps the Law is a discerning son,
But he who is a companion of gluttonous men humiliates his father.
He who increases his wealth by interest and usury
Gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.
He who turns away his ear from listening to the Law,
Even his prayer is an abomination. (28:7 – 9)

As I mentioned above, Moses condemned usury (interest rate lending) as a financial practice among Israelites (Ex.22:26 – 27; Lev.25:35 – 38, Dt.23:19), hence the references in Proverbs to the Law have such passages in mind.⁵⁴ Usury provides a way to tie risk to return, to tie the future to the present through the medium of money, to offer a very easy way for the wealthy to get wealthier, to incentivize dependence upon people rather than reception of God’s good land, to promote profiteering off of another’s manual work rather than doing work yourself, and to otherwise permanently introduce instability and materialism into human life by promoting the growth of material wealth via acquisitiveness and exploitation of the creation. Proverbs, with the Sinaitic Law behind it, sharply curtailed the Israelites’ individual freedom to lend at interest, acquire or hold debt, and indenture someone else, in order to promote relationally restorative justice and distributive economic justice. In other words, God wanted His people to be free to serve Him. That was one reason why they were not to be debt-slaves to other people. God’s vision for His own relationship with people informed His restorative justice. And God wanted people to have a relationship with one another such that (1) lending to the poor would not be a profit-making venture, and (2) people would enjoy His gift of the garden land in a relational family context. Those were the reasons behind distributive economic justice regarding Israel’s land and wealth. Given this strong sentiment, it is problematic that our entire civilization seems to hang on usury to keep it going as an ‘entitlement’ of ‘personal liberty’ and ‘unlimited private property’ from the framework of ‘libertarian justice’ and ‘laissez-faire economics.’

Jesus calls people to sit loose to all forms of wealth, to forgive debts more frequently than every seven years or every fixed jubilee year, to loan freely, to give without expecting a return, and to give generously to the poor and

⁵⁴ In Proverbs, God will take wealth away from a person who dabbles with usury and give it to someone who is gracious to the poor. The money will not even be given to the poor directly, but, ironically, to a faithful Israelite who will bring praise to God’s name by his or her compassion. This thought may have the jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 behind it, perhaps because of the kinship requirement to pay for a relative’s debt (Lev.25:24 – 27).

to Christian missionary endeavors even to the point of deep personal sacrifice (Mt.5:38 – 48; 6:12; 6:19 – 34; 8:18 – 22; 19:13 – 30). By doing this, Jesus supersedes the Sinaitic Law in at least three vital ways.

First, Jesus calls us to orient ourselves towards making disciples of the whole world (Mt.28:18 – 20; Lk.24:44 – 47; Jn.20:21 – 23). Jesus wants to proclaim his reign across the entire Gentile world, to every single person. Consequently, Jesus calls his disciples to completely disinherit themselves from their parents' land and the Mosaic land system. He removes the socio-economic safety net that existed in the Law of Sinai from beneath the Israelite family. Jesus calls his disciples to sell their land inheritance and not look back. Jesus declares the end of that Jewish land system when he said, 'Do not store up treasure on earth' (Mt.6:19). His controversial statements about hating one's parents apply not to emotions but inheritances of wealth (Lk.14:26 – 33), since Jesus uses wealth to welcome outsiders (Lk.14:12 – 24) and to celebrate their conversions (15:6, 9, 22 – 24). In and through the person of Jesus, God is restoring the whole world.

Second, Jesus shifts the norm and standard of conduct from the Law of Sinai to himself. He radically deepens the character of God's people. He calls us to embrace a pilgrim lifestyle on behalf of his mission and economic uncertainty on behalf of the poor because he did so: In the context of a preliminary trip to the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, in which he was training his disciples to see the Gentiles with his own eyes, Jesus said to one would-be Jewish disciple, 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Mt.8:18 – 20; Lk.9:58). Jesus certainly disinherited himself from any claim to Israelite land inheritance. He expects the same from all his disciples. To parallel that shift, Jesus shifts the commandment from Moses about lending with *some* expectation of return (Dt.15:8) to giving without any such expectation (Mt.5:42). He therefore deepens the nature of the financial sacrifice and the risk. For Jesus gave away wealth without expectation of return.

Third, Jesus also broadens the scope of who are the poor. He broadens possible recipients of compassion from fellow Israelites to anyone anywhere, from needy fellow Jews to needy human beings anywhere on the planet. Jesus is not only interested in Israel's poor; he is interested in the world's poor. Hence, I am arguing that Jesus himself believed that the economic care for the poor, generosity, and hospitality commanded by the Sinaitic Law did not happen frequently enough. And the concession to Israel's 'hardness of heart' within the Sinaitic Law that prevented generosity and hospitality was the Law of Sinai's institutionalization of possession and inheritance. Jesus saw Israel's possession of land as a nation as a problem, all the way down to the inheritance of one's portion of wealth as an individual. We cannot fail to notice, especially in Matthew and Luke, that Jesus removes any theological support from the idea of economic possession. *The claim of exclusive possession – both nationally and individually – did not exist in God's original creation order and would not have existed but for the fall.*

Paul demonstrates and confirms Jesus' way of thinking. Paul's collection for the famine victims in Jerusalem is a case study in what some have regarded as simple redistribution of wealth within the church. It is also a good example of what I am calling God's restorative justice. Indeed, Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 speaks of a rough level of 'equality' (2 Cor.8:13) across the church worldwide. The 'equality' Paul has in mind is probably more than the state of everyone merely having basic needs met. While he probably does not have in view a strict condition of equality across all metrics, he does want the church worldwide to have a relative, though not absolute, sense of economic equality *and economic sharing*. This practice of Paul and all its attendant passages have profound implications along the lines that I described above.

First, Paul sees the financial collection as an evangelistic witness. When he speaks to the Roman Christians about this financial collection, he quotes from Isaiah's prophecy about the Gentiles turning to the God of Israel (Rom.15:8 – 12), which, in his mind, should confirm to non-believing Jews that God is fulfilling his covenant promises in and through Messiah Jesus, and make them 'jealous' (Rom.11:11 – 36).

Second, Paul sees that the goal for God's people is Christ-like character. Therefore, when he speaks of the financial collection to the Corinthians, he says to encourage them, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich' (2 Cor.8:9). Indeed, Paul applauded Christians for giving beyond what would have produced equality. We see this through Paul's interaction with the Philippians. Notably, Paul affirmed the Philippian believers, who were impoverished (2 Cor.8:1 – 5), for giving to the Jerusalem collection and to his own ministry (Phil.4:10 – 17). The more we reflect on Paul's encouragement to the low-income Philippian church, like the story of the poor widow in the Gospels, the more surprising it becomes. What kind of person would take money from poor people? Only someone who was convinced that giving was so important it either reflected or ushered in one's possession of the greatest of all riches, the life of Jesus Christ by the Spirit within.

Third, Paul confirms Jesus' sense of who are the poor about whom we must be concerned. Regarding how Christians give financially to the church, Paul does not seem to think in terms of Christians giving only to their own local congregation. Instead, he glances across the wider, worldwide body of Christ and encourages Christians to give money where it is needed most. In this case, need outweighs proximity, affinity, and personal acquaintance,

since Paul is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to give generously to Jewish Christians who live far away, are culturally different, and known only through the reports of Paul and others. In this light, the contemporary practice of tithing ten percent of our income to a local congregation should be re-evaluated. Such local churches might give a token amount to ministries elsewhere, but they surely spend the lion's share of the money on their own operations. This practice reinforces often vast inequalities among churches, as wealthy congregations build sparkling buildings equipped with the latest technology, while others struggle to pay one pastor. Perhaps Christians should be mindful of Paul's example here by giving our money to the global church in a way that contributes to greater partnership within the worldwide body of Christ, instead of exacerbating class differences.

This is why Christian theologians regarded God to be the true owner of land and wealth, especially as God claimed to be the defender of the poor and vulnerable. Ambrose: 'Not from your own do you bestow upon the poor man, but you make return from what is his.' In 379 AD, Gregory of Nyssa, in a sermon during Lent against the forms of slavery of his day, reminded his audience that God has given dominion over the creation to *each person*, so to possess a slave's material possessions is contrary to *creation*. Gregory of Nyssa clearly saw a *creation order*, as I do. Basil of Caesarea: 'That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry...Wherefore as often you are able to help others and refused, so often did you do them wrong.' John Chrysostom: 'This also is theft, not to share one's possessions. Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor.' Centuries later, theologians and preachers were still drawing from this deep well of teaching. Thomas Aquinas argued: 'In cases of need, all things are common property. There is no sin in taking private property for need has made it common.' This teaching is not merely hyperbolic language. Nor was it coming from a context-specific situation where the rich were forcibly robbing the poor. It's not as if wealth acquired by 'hard work' makes it yours. No: In God's eyes, the poor are being robbed by the rich if the rich are resisting their sibling responsibility to the poor.

As an example of where I would extend my critique in a direction that Keller does not, I would commend the work on economic ethics of Paul Mills and Thomas Schluter at the Jubilee Centre, a British Christian think tank.⁵⁵ They examine the legal and institutional framework that allows the rich to exploit the poor and middle class using banks and corporations. As such, Mills and Schluter go much farther than almost all other Protestant ethical analyses I have ever seen. They examine the way we handle debt and limited liability in our banking and legal systems.

For example, Mills and Schluter critique usury. Usury was forbidden by the ancient Jews and the early Christians (the ancient Greeks and Romans also frowned upon it). The consensus of the early church fathers was that the prohibition against Israelites lending to fellow Israelites had been universalized in Jesus' new covenant.⁵⁶ Many people see this biblical law as outdated. However, the basic relational problem caused by usury was why loaning money, especially to the poor as an act of compassion, should yield a profit. It was deemed inappropriate as measured against the type of relationship God envisioned for human beings, which involved compassion, generosity, and hospitality. That is, it violated God's restorative justice. Thus, the Emperor Justinian, the great organizer of Byzantine law, drove down legal interest rates to between 4 – 8% for normal loans 'depending on the status of the creditor' and 12 – 12.5% for maritime loans because of the greater risk.⁵⁷ Charlemagne was the first head of state to make usury illegal for everyone. By the Synod of Pavia in 850 AD, the united Church was decided and influential enough to declare that all lay people practicing usury would be excommunicated. The Catholic teaching on social ethics continues to criticize interest-rate lending, and devout Muslims avoid it because of Quranic prohibitions.

Mills and Schluter also critique the legal and economic principle of limited liability from a theological-ethical-relational standpoint. We allow corporations to be not fully liable for their actions. But why? If I hit

⁵⁵ Paul Mills and Thomas Schluter, *After Capitalism: Rethinking Economic Relationships*; cf. Paul Mills, *Losing Interest: Imagining a World Without Debt*, a lecture for the Veritas Forum at Oxford University (www.veritas.org). See also Scott Schuh, Oz Shy, and Joanna Stavins, 'Who Gains and Who Loses from Credit Card Payments? Theories and Calibrations' (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Public Policy Discussion Papers, August 31, 2010) on how credit cards and ATM fees are a wealth transfer mechanism from the poor to the rich

⁵⁶ The Council of Arles (314 AD, 12th canon), First Council of Nicea (325 AD, 17th canon), Council of Laodicea (372 AD), First Council of Carthage (12th canon), and the Apostolic Canon (44th canon) and many others forbade clergy from trafficking in usury. John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch from 389 AD, thundered against it. The Councils of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries forbade it to both clergy and laity, and laid down the punishments for such behavior. Usurers were not to be given communion or Christian burial, their offerings were not to be accepted, and clergy who fail to punish them were to be suspended until they made satisfaction to their superior (Pope Gregory IX (1227 – 1241), *Corpus Juris Canonici*); cf. Pope Innocent IV (1243 – 1254), *De Usuris, Apparatus v.* For how this ban on usury was respected among Christians until John Calvin, see R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926, 1954), p.44 – 45; Eric Kerridge, *Usury, Interest and the Reformation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), p.79 – 95.

⁵⁷ Homer Sydney and Richard Sylla, *A History of Interest Rates*, 4th edition (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), p.55

someone and damage their teeth, I am liable as a person to pay for his dental bills. If I set up a limited liability corporation and sell people a product that damages their teeth, I can lose my equity, but declare bankruptcy as a protective measure, protect much of my profit, and walk away having made a substantial amount of money. How is that 'just' under basic principles of meritocratic justice? Yet that is what our corporate law structure allows. This principle of limited liability violates the principles of meritocratic justice and restorative justice: Meritocratic because people should actually be liable for their actions; restorative because this is not the type of relationship that God desires. In Jewish law, when a thief stole something, he was liable to repay two to five times as much (Ex.22:1 – 14), which demonstrates that consequences are compatible with restorative justice, and is remarkable and deserves comment for many reasons.⁵⁸ Why then do we have limited liability? And why are American evangelical Christians either blind to it, or adamant in defending it? Why are banks allowed to be in this category? I see no principled justification for it.

This problem came to a head very clearly in the financial crisis of 2008. We treat bonds as money, even though bonds are not money; a bond has risk that the issuer will not repay you. But bonds can circulate in the economy as money. Then corporations can have limited liability, a legal invention of Americans in the 1800's; shareholders are not on the hook to repay the debt. Banks are limited liability corporations, so they can default and not pay their debts unless they are required to by legal constraints. Furthermore, banks can receive bond notes as assets, and then leverage those 'assets' on other risky ventures to make more profits. Then if the bond issuer defaults on paying the debt back, a ripple effect runs through the entire economy as 'assets' completely disappear from the balance sheets. Therefore, in essence, banks are predatory organizations that are always in need of being bailed out by tax payers. The portent came when the Savings and Loan deregulation (libertarian-inspired) in the 1980's under Ronald Reagan resulted in those banks buying up junk bonds, failing, and then getting a government bailout from Reagan himself. The fact that the deregulation advocates in Congress under Bill Clinton dismantled the Glass-Steagall Act, which divided commercial from investment banks, allowed the banks to mingle home mortgage loans with high-risk derivative instruments; that compounded the problem. Notice that since the Great Depression, we have not had a crisis of this magnitude until this deregulation of the financial industry. If we take the relational view of finance that Mills and Schluter do, and ask what type of relationship is being enacted through debt-financing, we would be left with the conclusion that there is a predatory relationship at work, involving a substantial degree of greed and deception. This is not the type of relationship that God wants people to have with one another.

Allowing usury and limited liability are therefore uniquely Protestant heresies. These practices 'stimulate the economy' in some sense, but in a way that favors the wealthy and allows them to escape full responsibility for their actions. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the 'Robber Barons' (Mellon, Morgan, Carnegie, Rockefeller, etc.) and other major corporations changed the face of American capitalism, and unduly influenced American politics with their massive concentrations of wealth. U.S. Senate seats were essentially sold to the highest bidder. Banks went through boom and bust cycles until the Federal Reserve System was created and then refined after the Great Depression. To counterbalance the massive inequalities caused in this period, progressives like William Jennings Bryan campaigned to make U.S. Senators elected by popular vote (through the Seventeenth Amendment) rather than being elected by state legislatures, to reduce corruption in government. Populists pushed to control banks, fight for labor rights, and ensure product safety, especially under President Theodore Roosevelt. The populist trust-busting era began, where monopoly power was broken up, labor rights were legislated, workplace safety was revisited, child labor laws were passed, and product safety and consumer protections were put in place. In other words, much of our regulation and welfare laws had to be passed to protect the individual from the enormous powers that corporations and banks had acquired.

However, the underlying problem of disproportionate corporate power was never addressed. This disproportionate corporate power is a violation of restorative justice, because the types of relationships that are institutionalized are not appropriate as measured against God's creation order. This is also a violation of distributive justice, because ensuring a baseline level of equity is being constantly jeopardized and violated. And finally, this is a violation of meritocratic justice, because people are not being held responsible for what they deserve. They do damage to other people through the legal fiction of the limited liability corporation (LLC). If they are sued for damages, they might lose their equity in the corporation, but they are not fully liable for the damage they cause. Hence, for those on the political right, who insist on retaining their economic and legal advantages over the poor and less educated, and then complain about our current welfare laws that help people keep up with the increased costs of living, I would suggest this: (1) Either just accept the progressive income tax and other welfare entitlements that are trying to keep the heads of the poor and middle class above water, because usury and limited liability protections give you massive advantages over the poor and middle class, economically and legally; or, (2) repent entirely of the institutionalized privileges that usury and limited liability incorporation give you, and change those laws. Play on a

⁵⁸ Kathryn Tanner, 'Justification and Justice in a Theology of Grace', *Theology Today*, January 1999

truly level playing field. Yet no one on the political right perceives these problems or seriously advocates for change regarding them. In my mind, this shows a basic hypocrisy against the very principle of meritocratic justice that people on the right claim to uphold. Why does Timothy Keller not address these very fundamental issues? Perhaps because he does not perceive the significance of Genesis 1 – 11 and instead takes ‘society’ and our current laws as basically acceptable, or because he is unsure what role the church ought to play in the political debate about ‘social justice,’ or because he is unsure of what type of ‘justice’ should be attempted by the church at all.

To draw out further implications of how my understanding of biblical restorative justice would engage the public sphere, I will contrast it to another American evangelical. Wayne Grudem, a five point Calvinist and a best-selling author in the realm of systematic theology, in his recent book, *Politics According to the Bible*, draws ill-formed conclusions about economics from Leviticus 25 and other biblical passages. In his chapter ‘Economics,’ Grudem takes the Bible as affirming private property. He takes this to mean that individual as the right to acquire as much wealth and private property as possible by all lawful and moral means. He begins by quoting the prohibition on coveting (Ex.20:17) as assuming private property. He immediately condemns communism, or public ownership, on the grounds that it seeks to abolish private property. He cites Leviticus 25:10 as an example of how God returns land and property to individuals, not governments. He quotes 1 Samuel 8:10 – 18 (the warning of Samuel to Israel that a king will tax, take, and enslave) as evidence that big government power is an evil. Grudem affirms the Bible’s concern for the poor but critiques government attempts at alleviating poverty. He believes government should encourage businesses. He believes taxes should be as low as possible for all individuals, and lower than 20% for corporations. He comments on capital gains taxes, income tax rates, and eschews a higher tax rate on the rich. Based on his highly selective reading of Scripture, Grudem believes that God gave people the unlimited right to pass on economic inheritance to their children (Pr.19:14; Num.27:8 – 11) and that government should not interfere with that (Ezk.46:18). He says, ‘The Bible clearly takes the side of individual ownership of property. My conclusion is that the estate tax should be permanently repealed.’⁵⁹

Grudem is essentially saying is that libertarian justice and retributive-meritocratic justice are the highest forms of justice found in biblical ethics. He is clearly influenced by European Enlightenment thought and the European-American political tradition stressing individual liberty, which results in a combination of libertarian justice and meritocratic justice. His commitment to penal substitution is rather well known and coincides with his political commitments. My deep disagreement with Grudem should be obvious. For the moment, I’ll set aside the fact that American wealth is, to a very significant degree, built on stolen land (from Native Americans, Chicanos, and Mexican Americans), stolen life and labor (from African Americans), stolen wages (from underpaid immigrant strikebreakers to today’s migrant workers, with underpaid women throughout), and stolen health (from people affected by pollution, toxins, harmful products, workplace injuries, etc. who went without legal defense). I will only address Grudem’s misuse of various Scriptures which undergirds his thinking about economics and private property. I am incredulous that Grudem can read Leviticus 25 and say, ‘My conclusion is that the estate tax should be permanently repealed.’ How can he wrench the idea of ‘private property’ out of its context and foundation in Leviticus 25? For people to have the unlimited ability to accumulate wealth and pass it on to their children is *precisely the opposite* of what Leviticus 25 says. And quoting Proverbs or any other Old Testament passage about ‘inheritance’ or ‘hard work’ is of absolutely no use for his case. That is because every other Old Testament passage about Israel’s wealth takes Leviticus 25 as the starting point and foundation. So ‘inheritance’ in Proverbs includes God’s ‘reset button’ of land redistribution to its original intended ‘ancient boundaries’ and nothing beyond it. It most certainly does not imply that parents should have the ability to pass down unlimited amounts of wealth and property to their children, especially when they gained it at someone else’s expense, but even when they gained it ‘fairly.’

Our definitions of ownership and theft need to conform to biblical categories. God has never withdrawn His ownership over the world and its resources. God owns all things. Theft occurs, by His definition, when the rich do not share with the poor. For ‘individual liberty’ – including one’s personal freedom to accumulate as much wealth as possible – in Scripture is clearly not God’s preeminent value. Certainly, ‘individual liberty to *accumulate unlimited wealth*’ cannot even be said to be a value God recognizes. Even for those people who have ‘worked hard’ to ‘deserve it.’ On principles of ethics and justice, I see many reasons to support a progressive income tax, a high capital gains tax, and so on.

Imagine if the United States followed a policy of land restitution to Native Americans, African Americans, and Chicanos. We would have a very different situation to say the least! Or, imagine if we could design a social system such that the children and grandchildren of parents who fell on hard times would not be punished for what happened in the generations before them. Instead, our social system forces children of lazy and criminal parents to swallow their parents’ choices, as if we could safely assume that children of those people will share their parents’

⁵⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p.309

characteristics. And, we perpetuate myths that many of the poor are poor because they keep having children. Historically, European American people infected by the sin of racism allowed children of black slaves and sharecroppers to inherit all the unmitigated disadvantages they could handle, and more. Even for people who claim to be without racial prejudice, which may be the case on a personal level, they fail to see how the economic and legal system we have perpetuates injustice by forcing children and grandchildren to bear the brunt of all their ancestors' misfortunes and choices. From 1979 – 2007, the income gap in the U.S. tripled.⁶⁰ In roughly the same period, the racial wealth gap between white families and black families increased by fourfold.⁶¹ The Law of Sinai's arrangement of Israel's land and wealth in ancient Israel stands in principle against all that. In Israel, an adult did not have the 'right' to pass down advantage – even if it was land 'earned fair and square' – to his or her children and grandchildren. Meritocratic justice did not extend so far. It was checked by the demands of distributive justice and restorative justice, which were rooted firmly in the relational vision God had for His people. And that relational vision can be understood as being derived from God's Triune nature. God wanted a relationship with each person that mirrored the relationship of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. That is, God wanted to bless each human person with a life-giving context in which to live and thrive. That mirrors the role of the Father wanting to bless the Son in the life-giving context of the Spirit. *The relationship between God and each human being in the material creation is patterned after the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit.* That is how the character of God within theology proper results in a relational Christian vision for human life, which in turn results in a high level blueprint for what social justice means, which then results in ethical and political actions.

Though Timothy Keller is admirably more sensitive than Wayne Grudem to many biblical passages about distributive justice, Keller nevertheless shows a profound weakness in the realm of the public sphere. I agree with Keller when he says that there is no concept of justice that is actually free from religious influence. I also agree with him when he concludes that social justice comes out of the character and being of God Himself. But when I imagine a conversation between them, based on their respective books, I am unsure of how Keller would combat Grudem's libertarian and meritocratic view. Keller would certainly call for non-entanglement with either political party. Perhaps he would also call for 'biblical balance,' which is reflected in Keller's tantalizing statement, 'Each of the theories...makes one of these factors...trump the other[s]. However, the Biblical understanding of justice is not rooted in any one of these, but in *the character and being of God himself.*'⁶²

But I am disappointed that Keller does not answer his own question: How does God Himself organize those various kinds of justice in His relationship to humanity *from within His own character?* I believe that this vagueness stems from Keller sharing the same theological understanding as Grudem about what 'justice' means *within God*, stemming from their shared commitment to the penal substitution atonement theory. This contributes to why Keller, though he certainly cares about America's racial history and current problems of racial injustice, cannot move beyond individual and church-level actions undertaken by Christians. He does not seem able to propose truly public (municipal, state, or national) policy-level actions prioritizing distributive justice and restorative justice over the more individualistic principle of retributive-meritocratic justice. Thus, for Keller, 'justice' cannot fundamentally rise above the level of 'Christian acts of charity.'

Keller's hesitation is especially disappointing because Michael Sandel, from whom Keller quotes, is actually arguing for a return to Aristotelian teleological ethics where virtues and the pursuit of 'the good' are more important than merely individual rights.⁶³ Sandel critiques the theory of the 'individual-as-merely-individual.' He argues that the 'individual right to not be interfered with,' which is the liberal theory of the individual, and the foundation stone of libertarian justice, is simply not intellectually and morally robust. Sandel is working from a theory of the individual as 'individual-in-relation' or 'individual-in-community,' as did Aristotle and later Thomas Aquinas, which makes Sandel's theory fit nicely with my case for Christian restorative justice, and the Trinitarian theology that stands behind it. Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas, for example, were wrestling with what prices and wages were just, how to limit the power of the banking class and interest rates, etc. based on relational concerns; this eventually resulted in the modern Catholic social teaching. In point of fact, Enlightenment political and moral philosophy was mistaken in trying to divorce morality and ethics from a Christian foundation. The Enlightenment gave us only incoherence in the field of moral philosophy, from the very foundations. I expected that a Christian intellectual and pastor like Tim Keller would jump at the opportunity to say that the Triune God is the

⁶⁰ Arloc Sherman and Chad Stone, 'The U.S. Income Gap Triples', Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 25, 2010, <http://www.cbpp.org/files/6-25-10inc.pdf>

⁶¹ Thomas M. Shapiro, Tatjana Meschede, and Laura Sullivan, 'The Racial Wealth Gap Increases Fourfold,' Institute on Assets and Policy at Brandeis University, May 2010, <http://iasp.brandeis.edu/pdfs/Racial-Wealth-Gap-Brief.pdf>

⁶² Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2010), p.163, italics mine

⁶³ Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), see esp. chs.8 – 10

one and only firm intellectual ground for the theory of the 'individual-in-community.' I had hoped Keller would argue that the biblical story is the best source for relational ethics. I had hoped he would have worked out his definition of public 'justice' from there. But unfortunately, Keller actually retreats from Sandel's bold conclusion and the open door this secular political philosopher leaves us to undo the damage the Enlightenment has done.

By contrast, I believe the physical redemption atonement theory establishes that distributive justice comes before meritocratic justice, and restorative justice frames them both. This is because God genuinely seeks to restore every person, without limits on His side, and without relying on the underlying logic of people's merit. Instead, we begin to reason out social justice from the kinds of relationships God calls us to have with one another, which are ultimately grounded in the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. The physical redemption atonement theology makes a broader vision of social justice possible, and yes, even *necessary*.

Conclusion

Those are five practical reasons why theology – and atonement theology in particular – does matter, and should matter to everyone. Does God really love every human being? For that affects how we speak to non-Christians, and possibly to ourselves. Does God want to undo all human evil? For that affects how we speak to social justice advocates and the social issues we all face. Is God Himself partly evil? For that affects how we feel about and talk about our God being complicit or not in human evil. Can our God serve as the foundation point for universal human dignity? For that affects how we can participate in some of the most pressing human rights issues of our world? What is the highest form of justice, and how does that affect how we actually do social justice? For which type of justice is highest in the character of God strongly shapes what ethical and political action we will prioritize the highest. Those are five very important reasons for why I believe everyone needs to care about atonement theology.