

**Let Judgement Begin in the House of the Lord:  
The Role of Theology in Oppression**

Tabitha Sheeder

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Dr. LA Henry and Dr. David Moore

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“There is perhaps no greater tragic irony than the scene that was surely played out at numerous black lynchings when both the lynchers and the lynched ostensibly cried out to the same God, the God of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction**

In her book *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper describes the moment she stood in the Martin Luther King Center, staring at propaganda paintings from the Southern confederacy that featured scenes of happy, well-dressed slaves. She realized that many of the most atrocious acts in the history of the United States happened in the Bible belt, by “people who claimed to believe in Jesus and the power of the Cross for salvation. How could they believe the gospel and do this?”<sup>2</sup> It is naive and far too convenient for Christians to claim that slavery and genocide are things of the past, committed by individuals who were simply “people of their time.” Christianity both enforced and absolved these crimes against humanity. Denial of this has led to a resurgence in white supremacy and Christian nationalism, as was evidenced by the prominence of the confederate flag during the recent attack on the US Capitol building.

The White church has historically been complicit in violence against marginalized communities, either by its silence or its active participation. If the church is to have any role in establishing justice for these communities, we must examine the role doctrine has played in allowing such egregious abuse to flourish. While many doctrines have undoubtedly contributed to ideologies that impose suffering on humanity, this paper will

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2016), 5.

focus on several troubling aspects of the most commonly accepted atonement theory, penal substitutionary atonement.

## II. What We Believe Matters

Systematic theology is the narrative term for the building blocks of doctrine that show us what God is like, and how God intervenes in human history.<sup>3</sup> These beliefs play an enormous part in how we see the world, and by extension, how we treat others. Many theologians, particularly womanists, feminists, and pacifists, have offered alternative theories for the theological implications of the cross.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this paper, however, is not to offer a *solution* to the complex and problematic doctrines that make up our understanding of the gospel. Rather, it is an *examination* of one commonly held theory, penal substitutionary atonement, and how it has contributed to oppression. Medicine should not be prescribed without a diagnosis, and there can be no diagnosis without examination. Jumping straight to treatment would prove harmful.

This essay is not meant to be an indictment against churches that believe in penal substitutionary atonement. There are kind, justice-oriented people who believe this theory is the gospel itself. However, these exceptions do not mitigate the damage caused. Not every child in Flint, Michigan, shows signs of lead exposure. There is still ample evidence that the waters were poisoned. For some, it will be difficult to engage the problematic features of dearly held beliefs, especially those which have long been

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief overview of objections to the three most well known atonement theories, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), chapt. 4-6.

considered the core of the gospel message. Nevertheless, this is a subject that demands attention. Culture will not change unless there is a fundamental transformation of our religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Therapist Dr. Resmaa Menakem distinguishes between what he calls “clean pain” and “dirty pain.” Dirty pain is the harm that comes when we refuse to face the discomfort of our own trauma or bad behaviour. Clean pain is the difficult but necessary examination of our wounds so that we can tend them.<sup>6</sup> The church must willingly walk through the clean pain of examination, otherwise our dirty pain will continue to be passed onto others.

### **III. Penal Substitutionary Atonement**

Before any discussion about atonement, it’s important to distinguish between the act of atonement and the various theories that surround it. Atonement itself is the reconciliation of God and humanity. Atonement theories, however, simply seek to explain exactly how that atonement occurred.<sup>7</sup> Though there are many atonement theories, the most common in Evangelical, Baptist, and Reformed circles is penal substitutionary atonement. In the span of Christian history, it is a relatively recent theological development.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gloria Watkins, *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 19, Kindle.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (Pasadena: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015), 227.

<sup>8</sup> For the first thousand years of church history, most Christians understood the atonement as God’s cosmic victory over Satan, termed “Christus Victor.” For a more thorough examination of Christus Victor, as well as Ableard’s “Moral Influence” theory, see J. Denny Weaver, “Violence in Christian Theology,” *Cross Currents* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 150-76.

In the year 1098, Anselm of Canterbury proposed his “satisfaction” theory in his book *Cur Deus Homo?* Anselm believed that humankind, due to sinfulness, owed God a “debt of honour” they were unable to pay. By dying in their stead, Jesus “satisfied” the debt and restored “justice and harmony in the universe.”<sup>9</sup> Anselm’s understanding of the atonement was heavily influenced by the feudal system of medieval times, in which paternalistic feudal lords “gave protection to his vassals but also exacted penalties for offenses against his honor.”<sup>10</sup> James Cone calls Anselm’s explanation a “neat rational theory but useless as a leverage against political oppression. It dehistoricizes the work of Christ, separating it from God’s liberating act in history.”<sup>11</sup> Sin became something to be punished rather than a wrong to be righted,<sup>12</sup> and God’s “honour” became the victim. It is tragically ironic that the most vulnerable—and indeed the most likely to be sinned against—were relegated to the metaphorical role of thankful penitents, while their rich, powerful masters were cast as God himself.

If Anselm’s ideas were based in feudalism, John Calvin’s “substitutionary” spin off was based on his legal background. Instead of God being a nobleman, God was a righteous judge who had a divine responsibility to enact justice. Put simply, penal substitutionary atonement “means that Jesus died to bear the penalty for my sins, hence “penal,” and that he did this in my place, hence “substitution.” The bearing of penalty

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<sup>9</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, loc. 272.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, loc. 276.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1997), 212.

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 7-8.

implies that God needed to punish sin.”<sup>13</sup> As an innocent victim, Christ’s death satisfied God’s demand for justice, and thereby reconciled mankind to God.<sup>14</sup> For many Evangelicals, this has become the gospel itself.

This theory contains numerous theological difficulties. For instance, it makes a dualistic presupposition that God can’t forgive without some form of cosmic payment, which of course, isn’t forgiveness at all. Secondly, like the satisfaction motif, it doesn’t depend at all on Jesus’ life or the resurrection. “The questions of *why Jesus died and what is the meaning and message of his death* have dominated the recent Christian narrative, often much more than his life and teaching. As some have said, if this theory is true, all we needed was the last three days or even three hours of Jesus’s life.”<sup>15</sup>

Atonement theories that separate the cross from Jesus’ life and resurrection will produce many theological inconsistencies. The following section will examine two areas of penal substitutionary atonement that contribute to oppressive theology: it necessitates violent retribution and it distracts from the historical Jesus’ solidarity with the marginalized.

#### A. Violent Retribution

The first issue with penal substitution is obvious: it requires God to be an active participant *and* instigator of violence. In order for God’s wrath to be appeased, either the sinner or the substitute must pay. Not just the payment of a fine, but a gruesome, public, torturous capital punishment before God’s wrath could be stymied. Many feminists reject

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way Through the Maze* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 140-141.

this view of the atonement, calling it “divine child abuse.”<sup>16</sup> At the very least, it serves as a divine endorsement of capital punishment.

In penal substitutionary atonement, God deposits his wrath on the Son, letting the sinner go free. To some, this ought to mean that Christians are generous to people convicted of crimes, after all, if Jesus lovingly took our punishment on the cross, what right have we to demand the punishment of another? Author and activist Dominique DuBois Guilliard writes, “Christianity revolves around Jesus, a falsely convicted criminal who was falsely charged, punitively convicted, mercilessly tortured, and unjustly sentenced to death. Given this, I would think the church would understand the necessity of thinking more restoratively about criminal justice.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, largely, this is not the case. In fact, “It is this sacrificial center and accompanying mythology that make it most susceptible to becoming a religion that perpetuates brutal human terror.”<sup>18</sup>

The United States, disputably regarded as a Christian nation, incarcerates more of its own citizens than any other “developed” country.<sup>19</sup> The imprisoned are disproportionately BIPOC, who are systematically convicted at higher rates and receive longer sentences than their white counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, though the word atonement is defined as a reconciliation of God and man, penal substitutionary atonement is focused on punitive, retributive justice rather than restorative justice. According to this theory

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<sup>16</sup> Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” 2.

<sup>17</sup> Dominique DuBois Guilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 147-48, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, *What’s Faith Got To Do With It?* 59.

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

God *cannot restore without retribution*. Guilliard concludes, “Penal substitution therefore emphasizes the need for penalties, retribution, and recompense. This is the standard approach within our criminal justice system; justice comes through indictment, sentencing, and punishment.”<sup>21</sup>

Not only does penal substitution set the tone for a punitive criminal justice system, it opens the door to Christian violence as well. In her book *What’s Faith Got to Do With It?* Kelly Brown Douglas writes,

If one follows the theological logic of Christianity’s classical atonement tradition, the Christian God is one who some way accepts human sacrifice. A crowd that lynches, therefore, would not repulse such a God. A God that sanctions human sacrifice as brutal as the crucifixion can serve as a divine ally for those who make such a sacrifice—even a sacrifice as brutal as lynching.<sup>22</sup>

As long as the dominant party can convince themselves that the “other” is deserving, their act of punishment for perceived crimes is an act of divine justice. No matter whether their crime is simply being black, or gay, or female; so long as God requires his pound of flesh, many Christians have shown themselves to be all too willing to hold the knife.

#### B. The Great Distraction

As Cone noted, there is danger in theology that is merely cerebral. The incarnation may be correctly defined as “God becoming human,” however, when it is separated from *what kind of human* it is merely a talking point, useless to the vast majority of the population. It is all too easy to forget that Jesus was a brown-skinned, religious minority

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<sup>21</sup> Guilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It?* 72.

under an oppressive regime. Refugee, homeless, peasant—these identities are easily eclipsed by atonement theories that posit that the sole reason for the incarnation was his eventual death. If the crucifixion of Jesus was simply God’s means-to-an-end in his cosmic plan for human salvation, then Christians need not pay attention to who killed Jesus or why he was a threat. In this view, the Roman Empire and the scheming religious leaders were simply plot advancing background characters. As Weaver observes about this theory, “The strange implication is that both Jesus and those who killed Jesus would be carrying out the will of God.”<sup>23</sup> In penal substitution, Jesus is no longer a radical leader executed by the state; he is simply carrying out a task set before him by God the Father. The cross, therefore, loses its revolutionary message, “This is what happens when you go against the empire. This is what happens when you propose an alternative kingdom.”

If Jesus went to the cross for the sole purpose of appeasing God’s wrath and bearing the punishment humanity deserved, then is it any wonder Evangelicals rarely notice any comparison between his death and the countless victims of lynching in the Jim Crow era? James Cone similarly asks of silent preachers and theologians, “Did it require such a leap of imagination to recognize the visual and symbolic overtones between the cross and the lynching tree, both places of execution in the ancient and modern worlds?”<sup>24</sup> In twenty-eight years of Evangelical church attendance, I have never heard any mention of the crucifixion being a sign of solidarity with innocent victims who suffer

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<sup>23</sup> Weaver, “Violence in Christian Theology,” 154.

<sup>24</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 94.

violence. How could it be? According to penal substitution, God required the suffering of the innocent in order to clear the guilty.

This is perhaps the most tragic element of this theory. It confines the crucifixion to a few hours one Friday long ago, sanitizing the cross enough for it to adorn necks and church altars. Its significance is thereby relegated to an identity marker rather than a provocative symbol that compels us to ask, “Who is being crucified *today*?” Christians consider the words in Isaiah 53 to be a Messianic prophecy, in which the prophet writes, “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.”<sup>25</sup> Reverend Elizabeth Edman calls this “Despised Other” anyone “who has become so alien to you that you stop being able to conceive of that person as human.”<sup>26</sup> Black liberation and womanist theologians have long identified themselves with the crucified Christ. Jacquelyn Grant writes, “The condition of Black people today reflects the cross of Jesus. Yet the resurrection brings the hope that liberation for oppression is immanent. The resurrected Black Christ signifies this hope.”<sup>27</sup> If the White church cannot learn to recognize the face of Jesus on those being crucified today, then it will continue to either ignore or inflict their suffering. What’s more, without this recognition of suffering, it can never hope to witness their resurrection.

It is easy to denounce penal substitution only to ask, “Well, then what is the right theory?” But that is the wrong question. The point of atonement is not to understand

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<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 53:3a (NIV).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 22.

<sup>27</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and a Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 216.

exactly how God reconciled us to himself; it's what is done with that reconciliation. The question that ought to be asked is, "How does someone who is perfectly loved, forgiven, and reconciled to God act in God's world?" If this is answered only with the crucifixion part of the story, we are doomed to create oppressive theologies that glorify violence and sacrifice without even noticing how those theologies inflict suffering. Guillard concludes, "Thus, penal substitution is most problematic because it makes God's response to sin too much like our own. It is a sort of recasting of God in our own image."<sup>28</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion: Rethinking Theology**

Penal Substitutionary atonement is only one of many doctrines that needs to be examined for oppressive theology. Our history of war, colonization, sexism, homophobia, and racism cannot be dismissed because of the witness of a dissenting minority. It is too easy to imagine ourselves as the ones who would have marched with Dr. King, when in reality, the vast majority of Christians disapproved of his methods and mission.<sup>29</sup> The Christian legacy contains both abolitionists and slave owners, and a silent majority hovering somewhere in the middle, uncomfortable with extremism but unwilling to think too deeply lest their lives actually have to change. Disavowing only the most blatant forms of white supremacy, sexism, or other violent ideologies is not enough. This troubling history demands an examination of our core beliefs.

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<sup>28</sup> Guillard, *Rethinking Incarceration*, 159.

<sup>29</sup> Jemar Tisby, "Why So Many White Churches Resisted Martin Luther King Jr.'s Call," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/01/15/why-so-many-white-churches-resisted-martin-luther-king-jr-s-call/>

Perhaps the greatest danger in theology is the propensity to get lost in philosophical arguments about “how it all works” and lose focus on *what it actually means*—especially for the poor and disenfranchised. Past theologians may have planted a seed with good intentions, unaware of the type of fruit it would bear. However, their former ignorance does not negate our current responsibility to discern if the fruits of that tree are poisonous. As Cone observed, though the famous American preacher Jonathan Edwards could effectively elucidate a theological treatise on various doctrines, he did so “without the slightest hint of how these issues related to human bondage.”<sup>30</sup> We must acknowledge the cost our theology demands from people with less power. If it is not good news for the poor, then it’s not good news. If it’s not good news, then it’s not the gospel.

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<sup>30</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 44.

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