

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 12

How Does the Doctrine of Atonement Inform Public Theology?

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In a world grappling with issues of justice, wrongdoing and reconciliation, Christian theology offers a profound lens through which to view and address these challenges. Central to this perspective is the doctrine of atonement, which speaks not only to personal forgiveness but to the heart of public accountability and societal restoration. How can a doctrine that focuses on sin, redemption and forgiveness inform our collective approach to justice and healing in the public square? This essay explores how atonement theology, rooted in both the demands of justice and the promise of restoration, provides a robust framework for confronting sin's horizontal dimension – our wrongs against one another. By engaging with atonement models and biblical perspectives, we will see how this theology upholds the dignity of victims, insists on accountability for perpetrators and ultimately calls us toward a vision of justice tempered with mercy. Through this lens, public theology gains a powerful resource for building a society that values both truth and grace.

Sin and the upholding of victims

Sin has a vertical (human-God) and horizontal (human-human) dimension. The words of the prodigal son are, "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:21).

Human beings sin against one another and God, and so atonement theology speaks not only to the issue of vertical sin but horizontal sin as well, reflecting the worth of the victims of sin. It is the horizontal dimension on which this article focuses.

In his treatise on the incarnation and atonement, Saint Anselm says, "You have not yet considered how heavy the weight of sin is."¹

¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 305.



Recent rejections of atonement theories such as penal substitution have been based upon a rejection of the wrath of God. Yet Miroslav Volf offers an important corrective:

My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? ... Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.²

Few would question Volf's demands for justice or his sense of righteous anger. Wrath, when read from the position of such extreme wrongdoing and oppression, is a preferred outcome.

There is a human need to see wrongdoing held to account and injustice corrected. The cries of the Psalmist echo this need. For example, in Psalm 72, we hear such a call for justice as he implores God to protect the poor: "May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor."³ A similar call to God is echoed in Psalm 94:

O LORD, you God of vengeance,
you God of vengeance, shine forth!
Rise up, O judge of the earth;
give to the proud what they deserve!
O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.
They crush your people, O LORD,
and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the stranger,
they murder the orphan,
and they say, "The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive."

² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 139.

³ Psalm 72:4.

... He who disciplines the nations,
he who teaches knowledge to humankind,
does he not chastise?⁴

Proverbs 17:5 reads similarly: "Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished." The cry for justice continues in the New Testament, as in the Revelation of St John, where the oppressed and persecuted church cries out, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of

the earth?"⁵ These passages speak to a human need for divine justice, a need picked up by Rachael Denhollander while reflecting on her own experience as a victim of abuse. In *What is a Girl Worth*, Denhollander writes, "If God was really perfect – which I believed

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– RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER

Him to be – He'd be wrong to act as if bad things weren't really bad or could be erased by doing nice things. I knew God hates sin."⁶ Later, writing with her husband, Denhollander comments: "In short, the wrath of God vindicates the victim of abuse and stands against the unrighteous, self-centred abuser."⁷

⁴ Psalm 94:1-10.

⁵ Revelation 6:10. See also Psalms, 13:1; 35:1-28; 89:46; 103:6, Proverbs 22:22-23, Isaiah 10:1-3; 30:12-13; 49:26, Jeremiah 50:33-34, Amos 2:6; 5:11.

⁶ Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2019), 99.

⁷ <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse>.



George Wesley Bellows, *The Charge* (detail, 1918)

Similarly, the doctrine of atonement brings to public theology a statement about the worth of victims and the need for justice. Throughout all systems of atonement, the question of human sin is paramount. Regardless of which model of atonement one subscribes to, there is a recognition of the “weight of sin,” to use Anselm’s phrase. This is particularly strong in objective models that require an action to atone for such sins. In Ransom and *Christus Victor* models, sin brings entrapment and slavery to Satan. In Penal Substitution, it brings punishment. In all cases, our failure to treat our fellow human beings according to their value as human beings brings with it divine consequences. These consequences reflect the divinely given value that God places upon the victim, even if justice escapes them in this life.

Such models not only speak to the value and worth of victims, providing them with a hope of justice, but also bring to bear the need for any society created in the image of God to hold wrongdoing and injustice to account. However, even our dispensing of justice must be understood in the light of the cross of Christ and God’s love for the perpetrator.

The Cross and the restoration of the perpetrator

Within the doctrine of atonement, the divine condemnation of injustice is carried out in a restorative manner. Atonement includes condemnation of wrongdoing but also the restoration of the wrongdoer – the *telos* of atonement is the restoration of sinful humanity rather than their destruction. Within historical

models such as *Christus Victor*, atonement liberates wrongdoers from the reign of Satan and restores them to God. In substitutional models, Christ takes the penalty that separates the wrongdoer from God, thereby bringing restoration. These models have in common the restoration between God and sinful humanity as the objective of atonement theology. “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” (1 Peter 3:18).

This brings us back to the question of how our view of atonement impacts our view of society. Wrongdoing must be publicly condemned and held to account – there must be consequences to injustice – but these consequences should be carried out with a view to restoration. Restorative models of justice bring with them both these concerns. For example, restorative practitioner Howard Zehr confesses, “Despite my earlier writing, I no longer see restoration as the polar opposite of retribution, though it should reduce our reliance on punishment for its own sake.”⁸ This insight is significant as he notes the need for redress and offender responsibility. The process includes an act of restitution whereby the act of wrongdoing is condemned, thereby upholding the victim, but with the restoration of the perpetrator in mind. The *telos* of such a system of justice reflects the twofold concepts of wrath and mercy that we find in cruciform atonement theology. Justice is provided to the wronged and restoration to the wrongdoer.

Conclusion

The potential of the doctrine of the atonement for public theology deserves fuller discussion. However, the judicial impact of atonement theology offers the most fertile field of discussion. I have suggested that the doctrine of atonement requires us to take wrongdoing seriously. Wrongdoing and injustice must be held to account and condemned. However, the goal of such actions must be the restoration of the wrongdoer. The doctrine of atonement understands the cross as the place where wrath and mercy meet. Sin is condemned and restoration is offered. The wronged are upheld and the wrongdoer is restored. Public theology can be equipped with these same principles to bring about a flourishing society grounded in a concern for both victim and perpetrator alike.

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Quentin Metsys, *Man of Sorrows*

8 Howard Zehr, Allan MacRae, Kay Pranis, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, *The Big Book of Restorative Justice: Four Classic Justice & Peacebuilding Books in One Volume* (New York: Good Books, 2022), 20.