

The Divine Exposure of Evil: A Defense of the Penal Substitution Model of Atonement

By Kenneth A. Boyce

In their book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, Evangelical scholars Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker provide a thorough going criticism of the penal substitution model of Christ's atonement – the view that on the cross Christ bore the wrath of God or took upon himself the punishment for human sin – as popularly expressed in Western, especially American, Evangelical circles. In this essay I respond to Green's and Baker's critique, arguing that the language of the penal substitution atonement model, properly understood and interpreted, provides a Biblical, theologically cogent, and appropriately contextual (for Western societies) expression of the meaning of Christ's atonement. I do this in three parts. First, I summarize Green's and Baker's major objections to the penal substitution model. Second, I argue that, contra some of Green's and Baker's claims, the penal substitution view finds sufficiently strong support in the Biblical tradition to be regarded as a legitimate expression of Biblical themes. Third, I develop my own exposition of the penal substitution model – one which I think evades most of Green's and Baker's criticisms.

Above I have stated my strategy to defend the penal substitution model as popularly articulated by American Evangelicals. Insofar as I recognize the need to interpret the language of this model in a way that evades Green's and Baker's critiques, however, I implicitly acknowledge the legitimacy of many of those critiques under alternate interpretations of that very same language. In this respect, I join with Green and Baker as much as I argue against them in their critiques of popular accounts of the atonement. My aim is not merely to defend these popular accounts, but to interpret them in ways that allow them to be transcended, in ways that free them from their more limiting features and redeem them from their more oppressive overtones. I see this as a much more effective approach, one more in keeping with the spirit of redemption, than merely calling for the jettison of language which already finds itself deeply entrenched in the hearts and minds of many.

For the sake of concreteness, some particular expression of the popular penal substitution model must be given. I believe Green and Baker do a fair and accurate job in this regard. They give the following synopsis of the penal substitution model of atonement as it is popularly expressed:

One of us was giving a class to a group of indigenous pastors in Panama. In response to the question of why Jesus died on the cross, these pastors responded with the following answer that communicates the heart of the penal substitution model of the atonement. They explained that God would like to be in a relationship with humans and dwell together with us forever in heaven, but human sin does not allow for this since God is holy and cannot associate with anyone corrupted by sin. It is impossible for humans to achieve the sinless perfection necessary, and because God is just, he must punish us for our sin. God, however, provides a solution. God the Father sends his Son to earth to suffer the punishment we deserve by dying on the cross. Since Jesus has paid the penalty for us, God can regard us as not guilty. If we believe that we are sinners deserving of hell, but that Jesus died in our place, then we can be in relationship with God and go to heaven.¹

As Green and Baker rightly point out, and as anyone familiar with popular American Evangelical Christianity or places where such has been influential will testify, the meaning of Jesus' death is often articulated in precisely this manner among American Evangelicals.² And, Green and Baker have no shortage of criticism for this kind of language as a means of describing the atonement. The major objections of Green and Baker to the popular penal substitution model broadly divide into three different categories.

The first category of objections Green and Baker level against the penal substitution model pertain to its portrayal of the nature of God. They note feminist critiques of the atonement to the effect that the penal substitution view portrays God as a "powerful patriarch in the greater household of the human family" who "demands absolute allegiance and punishes any act of disobedience."³ Green and Baker argue that since the penal substitution view construes the death of Jesus as a manifestation of God's anger, it portrays God as "the distant Father who punishes his own son in order to appease his own indignation."⁴ As such, they argue that this view of God has much in common with pagan views of arbitrary gods who constantly needed placating through sacrifice lest they lash out in anger.⁵ This contrasts sharply, they say, with the Biblical portrayal of God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."⁶ They also argue that viewing the atonement as something that served to placate the wrathful disposition of God toward sinful humanity contradicts Biblical assertions that the death of Christ supremely demonstrated God's loving disposition toward humanity (e.g. Romans 5:8).⁷

Green and Baker further argue that the penal substitution view runs afoul of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by setting the Father over against the Son, rather than viewing the atonement, as the Bible does, as a cooperative effort between the Father and the Son who both actively seek to demonstrate God's love in the redemption of humanity.⁸ The penal substitution model, by contrast, they maintain, construes God the Father as the sole active subject in the death of Christ, inflicting pain on Jesus as an object who voluntarily assumes the role of a passive victim.⁹ The atonement becomes an instance of "divine child abuse."¹⁰ "For others," Green and Baker

observe, “atonement theology represents an even more startling drama in which God takes on the role of the sadist inflicting punishment while Jesus, in his role as masochist, readily embraces suffering.”¹¹

This leads to the second category of objections; Green and Baker maintain that the penal substitution model of Christ’s atonement has negative ethical consequences. Their criticism in this regard is twofold. First, they argue that the penal substitution model construes the meaning of Jesus’ death strictly in terms of its “soteriological ‘cash value.’”¹² It becomes simply “a legal (penal) transaction whereby we are declared ‘not guilty,’” and thereby leaves no real basis for moral behavior.¹³ In this way, the cross is stripped of its exemplary character in terms of the cost of personal discipleship.¹⁴ Along similar lines, Green and Baker observe that Western atonement theology has often neglected the New Testament portrayal of Jesus as “the one who joins us in our suffering.”¹⁵ They further complain that the penal substitution model “has had little voice in how we relate to one another in and outside of the church or in larger, social-ethical issues.”¹⁶ “That a central tenet of our faith might have little or nothing to say,” they contend, “about racial reconciliation, for example, or issues of wealth and poverty, or our relationship to the cosmos, is itself a startling reality.”¹⁷

The lack of ethical content associated with the penal substitution view becomes “all the more discomfoting, though,” Green and Baker lament, “when it is remembered that the death of Jesus was a consequence of social and political factors and not just theological ones.”¹⁸ Green and Baker rightly point out that Jesus’ death was intimately bound up with Jesus’ opposition to the unjust hierarchical power structures of his day.¹⁹ Thus, they are also right to say that “a faith grounded in the cross of Christ is a faith that has profound and far-reaching, this-worldly implications.”²⁰ They also rightly ask whether the popular penal substitution model properly addresses such implications. Later I intend to show that the popular model at least has the potential to do so, but that discussion must be delayed for now.

Second, not only do Green and Baker argue that the popular penal substitution view neglects the full range of the cross’ ethical dimensions, but that it actually often promotes ethical consequences which are fundamentally opposed to the genuine ethical implications of the cross. In its popular portrayal of Jesus willingly taking on the role of a passive victim, Green and Baker maintain that that the penal substitution model makes for “only a small step from the crucifixion of Jesus to the legitimization of unjust human suffering or the idealization of the victim.”²¹ They quote the feminist critique of Rita Nakashima Brock to the effect that this version of the atonement leaves room for the grace of God only at the expense of “the abuse of one perfect child.”²² According the Brock’s critique,

“the shadow of the punitive father must always lurk behind the atonement. He haunts images of forgiving grace.”²³

Green and Baker expand on such critiques as follows:

Feminist theologians have been quick to observe that atonement theology construed along these lines legitimates and perpetuates abuse in human relationships, not the least in the home. What is more, locating Jesus, characterized as the willing victim of unjust suffering, at the heart of the Christian faith is for some tantamount to idealizing the values of the victim and advising the abused to participate in their own victimization.²⁴

That the popular Western view of the atonement can and has been used in such ways, Green and Baker contend, “is a scandal that calls for repentance and repudiation.”²⁵

The final category of objections Green and Baker have to the penal substitution model of atonement center around contextual concerns. They note that popular Western accounts of the atonement have gained ascendancy because of and are strongly conditioned upon “our particular view of justice, with its orientation toward guilt and innocence on the one hand, and toward autobiography on the other.”²⁶ They observe that Western notions of autobiographical justice have “tended to work on the basis of the view that individuals perform acts of aggression, so that individuals (or individual entities) ought to be examined and punished for their complicity.” Such a view of justice, as Green and Baker point out, flows out of Western individualism where people are “looked upon primarily in an atomistic way – as individuals, not as persons embedded within social systems.”²⁷ Thus, in cultures where notions of guilt, individualism and autobiographical conceptions of justice are lacking, missionary preaching of the Gospel, based in the Western penal substitution model, often falls flat.²⁸ Green and Baker further question whether such a model will continue to have contextual relevance even in the West given the rise of postmodern culture where individualism and autobiographical theories of justice are giving way to a communal view of human nature, systems theories of justice, and a more holistic view of the human family as related to the cosmos.²⁹ “In these respects,” Green and Baker observe, “postmodernism is arguably more at home in the Biblical tradition than modernism.”³⁰

Such concerns do not necessarily abrogate the value of the penal substitution view itself. They only demonstrate that the penal substitution model has limited contextual value such that it does not translated well into the categories of other cultures. Elsewhere, Green and Baker enthusiastically endorse the use of contextual models of atonement that communicate Biblical themes to other cultures even in cases where such models are extremely limited in their ability to communicate outside the cultures for which they were designed.³¹ Given Green’s and Baker’s argument that the penal substitution model of atonement has gained ascendancy in the West because it

resonates deeply with Western conceptual categories, could not the penal substitution model be viewed as a valuable contextual tool for communicating Biblical themes to at least some Western audiences?

In response to this question, Green and Baker argue that the penal substitution model is *overly* dependent on Western culture. They rightly insist that contextual models of the atonement must not only be able to speak to their surrounding cultures, but that they must be able to transcend their cultures and criticize them.³² Green and Baker believe that the penal substitution model is too dependent on Western culture when it comes to the task of transcending that culture. They claim that rather than communicating Biblical themes in Western categories, the penal substitution model obscures Biblical themes by misreading Western notions of justice and punishment into the Biblical language.³³

Are Green and Baker correct? Does the popular penal substitution model of the atonement rest entirely with modern Western culture without having any real basis in the Biblical tradition? Whether any of the Biblical tradition explicitly teaches or endorses such a view of the atonement is a complex and much debated question which cannot be treated in any great detail in this essay. Thus, my aims in discussing the issue here are modest. I simply intend to demonstrate that the penal substitution model has some legitimate grounding in the Biblical language and Biblical metaphors, whether it is explicitly taught in the Biblical tradition or not.

In their discussion of Pauline passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:14 -6:2, Galatians 3:10-14, Romans 8:3, and the like, Green and Baker acknowledge the Biblical basis for language describing the atonement in terms of sacrifice, substitution and even Christ becoming accursed by God and taking the condemnation of humanity upon himself.³⁴ Thus, Green and Baker themselves acknowledge the Biblical basis of much of the language and metaphors that the penal substitution model draws upon. They deny, however, that these passages imply that Christ's death was in any sense a satisfaction of punitive justice. That Paul conceived of Jesus' death in sacrificial terms, argue Green and Baker, "does not mean that Paul thinks of Christ's having been punished by execution on the cross so as to satisfy the rancor of God." Instead, they maintain, "what is at stake is the mediation of restored relationships, the mediation of God's holy presence among those whose holiness is lacking."³⁵ In other words, they seek to understand the Pauline language here strictly in sacramental and covenantal terms.³⁶

Outside of Green's and Baker's critiques, but related to this issue is the long standing debate among New Testament scholars as to whether the New Testament word group translated as "propitiation" in older translations would be better translated as "expiation" instead, as C.H. Dodd has famously argued. That is, does this word group

describe Christ's atonement merely in terms of having removed the barrier of human sin so that humanity could be related to God ("expiation") or did Christ's atonement in some sense also placate the wrath of God ("propitiation")? Theologian J.I. Packer maintains that Dodd's arguments in this area show only that "this word group *need* not mean more than expiation if the context does not require a wider meaning, but he has not shown that the word group *cannot* mean propitiation in contexts where this meaning is called for."³⁷ Packer then argues that the context surrounding Romans 3:25 does indeed call for such a meaning. Packer, tracing Paul's argument in Romans 1-3, explains:

In the first part of Romans 3, Paul carries on his argument to prove that every person, Jew and Gentile alike, being "under sin" (v. 9) stands exposed to the wrath of God in both its present and future manifestation. Here, then, are all of us in our natural state, without the gospel; the finally controlling reality in our lives, whether we are aware of it or not, is the active anger of God. But now, says Paul, acceptance, pardon and peace are freely given to those who hitherto were "wicked" (4:5) and "God's enemies" (5:10) but who now put faith in Christ Jesus, "whom God set forth to be a propitiation ... by his blood." And believers know that "much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him" (5:9 RV). What has happened? The wrath of God against us, both present and to come, has been quenched. How was this effected? Through the death of Christ.³⁸

Thus, Packer concludes that "propitiation" is indeed the correct word to be used here.³⁹ This, combined with Pauline passages which describe Christ's death in terms of categories such as sacrifice, substitution, Christ becoming accursed by God and taking the condemnation of humanity upon himself, at the very least, point to the inference that Christ in some sense bore the wrath of God upon the cross.

Such is not sufficient support for the penal substitution model, however, unless it can be demonstrated that "the wrath of God," as Paul understands it, has a punitive aspect to it. Green and Baker deny this. In reference to Paul's development of the concept, they state, "The wrath of God is not vindictive judgment or divine retribution, but the divine response to human unfaithfulness."⁴⁰ Green and Baker note that Paul conceives of God's wrath as both present and eschatological, but they do not view it as a manifestation of divine punishment. Rather, the wrath of God in the present is simply that "God is now handing people over to the consequences of the sin they choose."⁴¹ Likewise, the eschatological manifestation of God's wrath "refers to the climactic, end-time scene of judgment when those who prefer to worship idols rather than the living God receive the fruits of their own misplaced hopes and commitments."⁴² In summary, Green and Baker conclude that God's wrath constitutes God "letting us go our own way" as sinful humanity.

Though I largely agree with Green and Baker on many of these points, I deny that such entails that the wrath of God in Romans 1-3 contains no retributive or punitive elements. The Pauline language in these chapters

suggests otherwise (e.g. “[they] received the due *penalty* for their error” (1:27): “for he will *repay* according to each one’s deeds,” (2:6)).⁴³ Thus, while the wrath of God does indeed involve God’s giving people over to the consequences of their own sinful choices, this itself is punitive on God’s part. Furthermore, this giving up of humanity on the part of God does not exhaust the full dimensions of Paul’s description of the wrath of God in Romans 1-3.

A primary aspect of human rebellion, according to Romans 1, is that humans, in their wickedness, “suppress the truth” (1:18). As a result of this, human beings have become “futile in their thinking” (1:21), and God has handed them over to the consequences of their own delusions (1: 28). This state of affairs will not be allowed to continue, however, because there comes a “day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (2:5) and “God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” In other words, though the present manifestation of God’s wrath hands people over to the consequences of their own delusions, its eschatological manifestation will involve God’s disclosure of the truth concerning the horrific nature of human sin. In this way God “will repay according to each one’s deeds” (2:6) and for those “who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (2:8). Thus, God’s punishment (or “repayment”) of human beings for their sinful deeds will involve God’s active and just disclosure of the truth that human beings had previously suppressed. Therefore, God’s eschatological judgment involves more than merely handing humans over to the consequences of their own sinfulness, as Green and Baker contend, but God’s active exposure of the truth.

If we concede, then, that the wrath of God, in Biblical terms, does indeed involve a retributive/punitive element and that, on the cross, Jesus did indeed bear the wrath of God thereby taking upon himself, in some sense, the punishment for human sin, then all of the elements of the penal substitution model are in place. Still, the task remains for us to find a way of understanding this which does not fall prey to the critiques of Green and Baker expounded upon above. Does the fact that Christ’s atonement involved a divine punishment for human sin mean that God engages in vindictive behavior or that God becomes some angry tyrant whose anger must be appeased as opposed to God’s being a God of love and mercy? Answering these questions involves taking deeper look at the nature of retributive justice, which in turn leads me to develop my own distinct interpretation of penal substitution language.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, while dealing with the topic of hell, expounds upon a moral aspect of retributive punishment which is often missed. His insights are profound and important for the argument which follows. Thus, I quote him at length:

First, there is an objection, in many minds, to the idea of retributive punishment as such. This has been partly dealt with in a previous chapter. It was there maintained that all punishment became unjust if the ideas of ill-desert and retribution were removed from it; and a core of righteousness was discovered within the vindictive passion itself, in the demand that the evil man must not be left perfectly satisfied with his own evil, that it must be made to appear to him what it rightly appears to others – evil. I said that Pain plants the flag of truth within a rebel fortress... Let us try to be honest with ourselves. Picture to yourself a man who has risen to wealth and power by a continued course of treachery and cruelty, by exploiting for purely selfish ends the noble motions of his victims, laughing the while at their simplicity; who, having thus attained success, uses it for gratification of lust and hatred and finally parts with the last rag of honor among thieves by betraying his own accomplices and jeering at their last moments of bewildered disillusionment. Suppose further that he does this, not (as we like to imagine) tormented by remorse or even misgiving, but eating like a schoolboy and sleeping like a healthy infant – a jolly, ruddy-cheeked man, without a care in the world, unshakably confident to the very end that he alone has found the answer to the riddle of life, that God and man are fools whom he has gotten the better of, that his way of life is utterly successful, satisfactory, unassailable. We must be careful at this point. The least indulgence of the passion for revenge is very deadly sin. Christian charity counsels us to make every effort for the conversion of such a man... But that is not the question. Supposing he *will* not be converted... Can you really desire that such a man, *remaining as he is* (and he must be able to do that if he has free will) should be confirmed forever in his present happiness... And if you cannot regard this as tolerable, is it only wickedness – only spite – that prevents you from doing so? Or do you find that conflict between Justice and Mercy, which has sometimes seemed to you as an outmoded piece of theology, now actually at work in your own mind, and feeling very much as if it came to you from above, not from below? You are motivated, not by a desire for the wretched creature's pain as such, but by a truly ethical demand that, soon or late, the right should be asserted, the flag planted in this horribly rebellious soul, even if no fuller and better conquest is to follow... Even mercy can hardly wish to such a man his eternal, contented continuance in such a ghastly illusion.⁴⁴

Later, in the closing of this same discussion, Lewis adds the following remarks:

One caution, and I have done. In order to rouse modern minds to an understanding of the issues, I ventured to introduce this chapter with a picture of a sort of bad man whom most would perceive to be truly bad. But when the picture has done that work, the sooner it is forgotten the better. In all discussions of hell we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation, not of our enemies, nor of our friends (since both these disturb reason) but of ourselves. This chapter is not about your wife or son, nor about Nero or Judas Iscariot; it is about you and me.⁴⁵

In summation, Lewis argues here that the moral value of retributive punishment lies in its revelatory function. Punishment reveals to the one punished the existential horror of his or her evil. The moral value of punishment consists of its not allowing its recipient to continue in the illusion that his or her evil finds no opposition in the universe. In this way, punishment functions as a means of *exposure*. It reveals the true ugliness of evil, and as such, *divine* punishment reveals truth about the goodness of God and God's holy opposition to evil. Notable, in Lewis' account, is that retributive punishment does not simply concern itself with exposing the evil of particular acts, but the evil of the personal disposition on the part of the one from whom those acts flowed. In Lewis' example of the "bad man," it was not merely the acts of the man which morally demanded punishment, but the attitude and

character from which those acts flowed and from which they were regarded after having been committed. Thus, retributive punishment, as Lewis describes it, directs itself to the entire disposition of the moral agent, not merely to individual moral acts themselves.

These insights provide a helpful way to interpret the standard Evangelical penal substitutionary model of atonement which evades Green's and Baker's criticisms of it. It also provides a contextual bridge from the popular Evangelical penal substitution view to ways of speaking of Christ's atonement in terms of its fuller ethical, social and discipleship dimensions.

If punishment is understood primarily in terms of the exposure of evil, then to say that, "God is holy and cannot associate with anyone corrupted by sin" is just to say that God's goodness will not allow evil to go unexposed and unopposed in the divine presence. Likewise, to say "because God is just, he must punish us for our sin" is just to say that God, in God's goodness, will and must reveal the truth about human evil by bringing to light its full existential horror and ugliness. This entails that humans will experience eternal condemnation in the presence of God rather than eternal fellowship with God unless some alternate means of exposure are found.

Green and Baker criticize the penal substitution model on the grounds that it makes "God's ability to love and relate to humans circumscribed by something outside of God – that is, an abstract concept of justice instructs God as to how God must behave."⁴⁶ But, if the above explanation holds, then to say that God must punish sin is just to say that God's character is such that God will not allow evil to remain hidden. God must reveal evil for what it is. Not only the goodness of God demands this, but the truthfulness of God demands it as well. For God not to expose evil for the horror that it is would essentially mean that God has allowed a lie to prevail over the truth, and this, the very Origin of truth, cannot and will not do. Thus, God's diligence punishing evil does not flow out of a vindictive heart, but out of a passion that goodness and truth prevail.

Along these same lines, to say that "God the Father sends his Son to earth to suffer the punishment we deserve by dying on the cross," entails that in some sense, God the Father has exposed human evil through the suffering, death, shame and condemnation that Jesus experienced on the cross rather than exposing it by handing us over to the eternal suffering, death, shame and condemnation that our sin would have otherwise justly brought upon us. Likewise, to say, "since Jesus has paid the penalty for us, God can regard us as not guilty" and that "if we believe that we are sinners deserving of hell, but that Jesus died in our place, then we can be in relationship with God and go to heaven" is just to say that God has already exposed the existential horror of human evil through the

condemnation that Christ received on the cross. Thus, those human beings who find themselves appropriately related to what Christ has done through faith will not, because there is no longer any need, have their evil exposed through their own condemnation before God. “If that is so,” one might ask, “how exactly does it work?” How does Christ’s death on the cross expose human evil and how does that exposure become a substitute for our own condemnation? There are a variety of mutually complimentary answers that could be given. I will discuss two of them.

First, we might note, for example, how in passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 2:19-20, Paul speaks of our partaking of the benefits of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection in the context of participation and exchange. By entering the Christian community, we become mystically united with Christ, and thus mystically united with Christ’s death. In this union, our sin becomes identified with Christ on the cross, and there we see that sin justly condemned, exposed in all the horror and ugliness attached to stigma the cross brings. In turn, Christ’s righteousness becomes identified with us and, by virtue of being “in Christ,” we become “the righteousness of God.” Given that our entrance into the Christian *community*, as the body of Christ, provides the ground for this union, we should not view this transaction in purely individualistic terms, as merely an exchange between individual persons and Christ. Rather, it is the union of the Christian community in Christ, where all bear the burdens of one another, that allows the sinful burdens of the whole community to be gathered up together and exposed in a single act of atonement. This stands in sharp contrast to the broken and fragmented community of the world, where refusal to share in the burdens of others ultimately leads to eternal isolation and individual condemnation.

Second, Christ’s atonement also functioned to expose human evil insofar as it publicly exemplified the hidden evils of human society. By vindicating Christ in the resurrection, God exposed the evil of the social/political power structures that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. These evil structures, which had morally legitimized themselves through religious and cultural institutions, inadvertently exposed their true nature, in all of its horrifying evil, by committing the most evil act in human history – by crucifying the Son of God. In this way, these unjust power structures were stripped of their false religious and cultural justifications. In their unjust act of crucifying Jesus, they showed themselves to be opposed to the authentic purposes of God and contrary to the true human community that God, through Jesus, had sought to establish. In this way, by overturning their perceived legitimacy, Jesus disarmed the ability of these structures, empowered by human sinful rationalizations, to bring about the final

destruction of the human community. He did this through taking the full brunt of these destructive powers upon himself, thereby exposing them ahead of time.

Given that the punitive wrath of God partially manifests itself in the handing over of humans to the natural consequences of their own sinful rationalizations, by taking the consequences of human injustice upon himself, thereby exposing the rationalizations which sustain it, Jesus took up the punishment that humans would have otherwise received for their injustice. His death exposed human injustice for what it really was before it was too late, and thus diverted the course of humanity from its inevitable path toward destruction. Likewise, the love that Jesus demonstrated in this act and his refusal to fight the unjust social/political structures of humanity on their own terms – through violence and the posturing of corrupt political power, but through the power of self-giving love instead – revealed God's insurmountable power in what the world considered as weakness and showed forth God's true intentions for authentic human community. Thus, the cross must never be twisted into a sanction for the abusive power relationships that mark the unjust ways of the world.

In these ways also, Jesus' penal substitutionary atonement extends beyond mere human individuals because it exposes not only the evils that adhere in individual hearts but also the evils that adhere in the structures of human social/political relationships. Insofar as Jesus' death exposes the evils of these relational structures, it provides the ground for their redemption as well. Thus, the atoning value of Jesus' death extends to all areas of human relationships, which, though originally created as good by God, have been corrupted by human sin. It promises to redeem humanity from all of its relational isolations, to the isolation from one another caused by selfishness, injustice and oppression, to the isolation humans experience from their environment in the natural created order, and ultimately to the isolation that humans experience from God. Thus, Jesus' penal substitutionary death does indeed have social, political, environmental and even cosmic significance.

Does Jesus' acceptance of human punishment and his bearing the wrath of God then make God out to be a sadist who must inflict pain to receive satisfaction and Jesus out to be the masochist who plays the role of the innocent victim? On the contrary, in the atonement Jesus strives actively with God to expose evil in a way that does not result in the destruction of the human community. In this way both the Father and the Son actively demonstrate the salvific love of God through Jesus' atoning death. The Father does not function as subject, inflicting pain on Jesus as object, but rather, Jesus' atoning sacrifice becomes a cooperative joint venture between Father and Son as they both seek to actively confront, expose and overthrow evil so that humanity might be saved from having its evil

exposed through its own self condemnation. In the process, Jesus takes the condemnation of humanity, the just punishment it would have received from God, upon himself, but this flows out of Jesus' active confrontation of evil in his alignment with the purposes and activities of the Father, not from his being the passive recipient of the infliction divine punishment.

In this way, Jesus also serves, not as one who encourages us to remain passive in the face of evil and oppression, but as one who calls us through example to unmask the forces of evil and oppression and to fight for their destruction even at the expense of great personal cost. Sometimes this struggle may even entail our own suffering and death (though, since we have already been crucified with Christ and raised with him, ultimately such does not matter), but we may rest assured, on the basis of the divine love demonstrated on the cross, that God fights and suffers along with us. Though suffering should never be sought as end to itself, God insures that our suffering in the fight against evil never occurs in vain. God takes our unjust suffering, inflicted by a world which opposes all those who do the will of God, and causes it to serve God's own redemptive purposes by using it to unmask, expose and delegitimize the oppressive forces that led to that suffering. The death and resurrection of Jesus, in turn, remind us both of God's solidarity with us in our struggle and that God's decisive battle against evil has already been won.

47

Thus, we have seen a way to interpret popular penal substitution language in a way that evades the vast majority of Green's and Baker's criticism of it. This interpretation does not portray God as capricious, but as one who lovingly seeks to rescue human beings from the consequences of their own self-destructive behavior in a way that does not compromise the truth. It portrays Jesus' taking upon the punishment that sinful humanity deserved in a way that involves his active confrontation with the forces of evil and not in a way that makes him the passive victim of divine child abuse. Ethically, this interpretation of the penal substitution model avoids legitimizing victimization and encourages the active confrontation and unmasking of oppression. Contextually, this view begins with Western categories of guilt and punishment, but also transcends their individualistic and autobiographical presuppositions. It provides a bridge from a popular way of expressing the meaning of Christ's atonement in the West to ways of expositing the fuller implications of the atonement for discipleship and social justice. Therefore, I have shown that the criticisms which Green and Baker have articulated against the popular penal substitution model of Christ's atonement do not necessarily adhere to that model.

¹ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 140

² Green and Baker, 140

³ Green and Baker, 91

⁴ Green and Baker., 30

⁵ Green and Baker, 50

⁶ Green and Baker, 52 (see also Exodus 34:6-7)

⁷ Green and Baker, 56

⁸ Green and Baker, 57

⁹ Green and Baker, 92

¹⁰ Green and Baker, 31

¹¹ Green and Baker, 30

¹² Green and Baker, 27

¹³ Green and Baker, 31

¹⁴ Green and Baker, 26-27

¹⁵ Green and Baker, 19

¹⁶ Green and Baker, 31

¹⁷ Green and Baker, 31

¹⁸ Green and Baker, 31

¹⁹ Green and Baker, 39-41

²⁰ Green and Baker, 31

²¹ Green and Baker, 30

²² Green and Baker, 91

²³ Green and Baker, 91

²⁴ Green and Baker, 92

²⁵ Green and Baker, 92

²⁶ Green and Baker, 24.

²⁷ Green and Baker, 25

²⁸ Green and Baker, 29-30

²⁹ Green and Baker, 29

³⁰ Green and Baker, 29

³¹ Green and Baker, 184-198

³² Green and Baker, 28-29

³³ Green and Baker, 146-147, 149-150

³⁴ Green and Baker, 58-67

³⁵ Green and Baker, 63

³⁶ Green and Baker, 63

³⁷ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 182-183

³⁸ Packer, 183-184

³⁹ Packer, 183-184

⁴⁰ Green and Baker, 54

⁴¹ Green and Baker, 54

⁴² Green and Baker, 54

⁴³ Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical citations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁴ C.S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Touchstone, 1962) 107-108

⁴⁵ Lewis, 114

⁴⁶ Green and Baker, 140

⁴⁷ Though we would likely radically disagree over the value of the penal substitution model of the atonement, I am much indebted to Walter Wink for the inspiration behind many of these insights. See, Walter Wink, *The powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), especially chapter 3.