The Two Gorillas of Atonement Theory

More than a year after I completed and published a three-part study of the atonement, here is what I think now: Penal Substitution (PS) needs substantial modification, but Christus Victor (CV; a brief explanation of these two will follow) cannot replace it. Instead of false dichotomies (either/or) and competition between explanations, we need an integrated model of models.

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Quite a few concepts and explanations have been put forward to speak about the atonement, but the two I just mentioned, PS and CV, are the two big ones, the two gorillas in the room – and they do not get along with each other (or rather, their respective advocates do not). I will therefore focus on these two.

Gorilla 1: Penal Substitution (PS)

Caricatures of PS are as common as they are unhelpful. Here is a *good* definition. I am not asking you to agree with it. But let's make sure we do not set up a strawman that is easily defeated – but does not truly represent PS.

> Jesus Christ … voluntarily suffered the judgment of God on sin that we deserve and suffered it in our place. He did this in order that he, God, together with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, could forgive us and justify us righteously. Without his suffering he could not forgive righteously; without it forgiveness would be indulgence. The cross event is a work of love that includes a work of justice (and wrath). (Olson 2019)

Notice that the definition avoids the term *punishment*. Was Christ punished in our stead? Supporters of PS differ on this. More importantly: Olson's definition makes the Father an active initiator and participant in the atonement; God the Father is acting, not merely acted upon.

There is no room here for the caricature of an angry God stopped by his Son, who managed to appease his anger – thus introducing a deep split into the Trinity between the Father and the Son. Not so; as John 3:16 has it:

> For *God* so loved the world, that *he* gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV; emphasis added; see also Rom. 5:8f)

Gorilla 2: Christus Victor (CV)

The CV model understands the atonement as a victory over hostile powers that hold humanity in bondage. Christ did not die to pay legal debts and satisfy justice but to defeat and liberate. However, as I pointed out in the original paper, CV is not very clear on how this works. How does Jesus' death on the cross defeat the powers?

In addition, the category of 'the powers' is also problematic. It does not distinguish between the powers of evil (with agency and malice: will, motivation, aims, initiative) and sin, death, the law, and structural or systemic evil. Members of the second group are 'powers' only in a more figurative sense; different from Satan, they have no agency or consciousness. It is to be expected that such a wide array of issues needs a variety of solutions, not just one.

PS, by the way, does not deny Christ's victory but understands it as a consequence of the atonement in a narrower sense. It claims that PS is the mechanism that explains how Christ conquered the powers through his death: by dealing with sin and its legal consequences (cf. Col. 2:13-15; Rev. 12:10f).

Restorative Versus Retributive Justice

Before I move on to discuss how PS needs modification, let me mention something that was not covered in the original paper. It is not necessarily linked with CV, but it does offer a critique of PS.

Is the atonement based on restorative or retributive justice? Another dichotomy! A false one? To some extent, seeing that both are present in Scripture, yes.

Simply put, restorative justice aims for the criminal to undo the harm done and restore relationships, in as far as this is reasonably possible, so that the criminal, too, is restored. Retributive justice includes an element of retaliation, but with limits. It believes a price must be paid in terms of suffering in proportion to the harm done.

So, which one is biblical? God's heart and aim, for creation, for humanity, for individuals, is restoration. A classic statement of this, already in the OT, is in Ezekiel: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23 ESV).

However, the element of retribution is not absent. To engage in a bit of proof-texting, verses like Galatians 6:7f, Hebrews 2:2f and 10:30 (in fact, the entire paragraph, Heb. 10:26-31), Romans 12:19, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 20:12, and Matthew 25 make this clear.

It stands out to me, though, that this list of relevant verses is mostly about final and eschatological judgment. Eventually, ultimately, God will judge as described in these verses – after long and ample room for change and escape and restoration; presumably, as a last resort. So let us tread softly here because, within history, God does.

Still, there is a principle of retribution, of (ultimate) reward – and

punishment. Would we think God fair if he did not uphold it?

This question, could God have chosen to simply forgive sin, was discussed at some length in the original paper (Hornstra 2020: 18f), so I won't rehash the arguments here. The biblical language that speaks of Christ dying *for our sins* suggests to me that God, whether there were alternatives or not, decided to pay the price. The atonement, while restorative, also satisfies the demand of retributive justice (to put it in legal terms), cleanses the sinner from moral and spiritual defilement (to put it in sacrificial terms) and pays a debt owed (to put it in economic terms; Col. 2:13f).

But at heart, God is restorative.

The Gospel in Chairs

When I did an online session on the atonement with staff of Bible courses a few weeks ago, someone pointed me to a YouTube video in which Brian Zahnd offers his version of 'the gospel in chairs'.

Brian Zahnd contrasts two understandings of salvation. The first he calls the legal or modern one; the second is the patristic or "restorative" understanding. There is a bit of caricaturing ("God killed Jesus for the sake of justice" – who says that? obviously, Jesus was *not* killed by God), but not much. In the patristic view, so Zahnd, the problem salvation deals with is "not primarily the problem of legal guilt or personal guilt, although that is included"; it is death. This way, he appears to avoid a false dichotomy.

In the legal understanding, God turned away from humans because of sin. In the alternative understanding, humans turned away from God. As Zahnd puts it, "God is never turning away from humanity".

I think he has a point. PS has overemphasized the retributive side of God's justice, whereas it is the restorative side we should press more, even if not exclusively. What other modifications of PS should we consider?

How to Modify PS

I wish I could modify the label. 'Penal Substitution' sounds too exact (and cold). Besides, too often, both PS and CV have become banners or battle cries to rally the faithful – which tends to bring all thinking to a halt. However, I am not sure we can expect to replace such an ingrained term ('judicial model'?). But I do want to point out a few modifications, based on criticism of PS, that are crucial to consider.

1. PS is based on a **Western notion of justice**, which is individualistic and impersonal. It is about me (and you) in front of an impartial judge, being held accountable for certain transgressions. Ideally, this judge is not emotionally involved. However, biblical justice is **relational and covenantal** – and emotional. We do need a 'judicial' model – but one modified to match that different notion.

2. PS is overly exact. The atonement does not fit in such a straightforward manner, 1:1. There is a strangeness to it. God is not the judge who speaks the verdict, nor does he order the execution. I like the phrase the famous theologian Karl Barth coined for this: **the judge judged in our place**. It still is judicial or forensic, using the language of the courtroom. But it captures something of that baffling nature, the twist in what happens. Roles are reversed. The creator and judge of the universe stands on trial and is condemned. It does not quite mirror normal courtroom procedure and legal process, but it is a legal and judicial

transaction.

However much the atonement is also a victory over powers, it must deal with the question of justice; it has a legal dimension. *Judgment* is a word, an important word, in the Bible, and law court imagery and judicial language (e.g., justification, curse) are part of how the Bible speaks of the cross. As Fleming Rutledge points out, sin has two sides. It is “an alien power which must be overcome” (CV!), but it is also “responsible guilt for which atonement must be made” (PS! Rutledge 2017: 189).

3. I believe writers like N. T. Wright (2017) and Fleming Rutledge (2017) are right to argue that the atonement needs to be **embedded in a narrative frame**. The cross stands at the centre of the great drama of Scripture, which is a story of war (Rutledge 2017: 321f) and of exodus and liberation. The judgment humans need to be saved from is eschatological and final: it stands at the end of this grand narrative. It won’t do to reduce the atonement to PS without this narrative.

To speak within the framework of such a narrative may sound like Christus Victor (a view PS does not deny anyway). But as part of this drama, our guilt still needs to be dealt with – and this is one thing the cross accomplishes.

4. Finally, lest we forget, we must stress the fact that **the atonement is an expression of God’s love**.

Strictly speaking, this is not a modification, since it is not new and has always been part of PS rightly understood. There is no tension or division in the Trinity. God always loved us; HE gave his son and put him forward as *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25).

Toward an Integrated Model of Models

Even PS and CV together do not capture and explain everything that has been accomplished through the cross. Sin is a force, and death is its ultimate and lasting outcome. The death and resurrection of Christ do indeed deal with these ‘powers’, but through a different mechanism: our union with Christ. Through it, we are ‘in him’. It explains how his death can count as ours. The cross takes care of the legal consequences we have brought upon ourselves and explains the broader deliverance, from sin-as-a-force and death, because his resurrection is ours and therefore marks the way out – into a new life of freedom from the old slave masters.

It would be too optimistic to speak of an emerging consensus, but increasingly some voices call for what is essentially an integrative model. Joshua McNall (2019) uses the image of a body. The feet represent union with Christ (and this, rather than CV, is the original view of many of the church fathers). The head is CV: the aim and outcome. But without a ‘middle part’, it would hang in the air. In between is the heart or body of PS which makes CV possible: Jesus conquers the powers by dealing with sin.

Likewise, this middle part of PS would hang in the air, too, if weren’t for the feet that carry it. The incarnation, through which the Son united himself with the human race, explains how he became our legal and legitimate representative and how his death can therefore count as ours.

The hands represent the exemplarist or moral influence model: the atonement as an example. It has implications for how the church lives in the world and fulfils its mission.

It is such a model of models that will keep us from false dichotomies.
The atonement saves us from the manifold ‘powers’ – but also from the wrath to come. We don’t have to choose.

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