Richard Neuhaus’ Death On A Friday Afternoon,
And the Substitutionary Atonement

Why did Christ die? The question has been answered quite differently throughout the history of the Christian church. To some, such as most modern Evangelicals, the answer is a no-brainer: Christ died to save us from our sins. What more does one have to know? What they are referring to is a version of the so-called “substitutionary atonement” theory, which relates how an innocent Jesus died as a sacrifice to God the Father, taking upon himself the punishment and death that God would otherwise have inflicted upon guilty humanity. In this way, the Father’s justice is satisfied, and He can now extend mercy to sinners. We are saved.

Despite the cultural dominance of substitutionary atonement theory among Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Catholics, and other orthodox western churches today, theologian S. Mark Heim nicely sums up the reality of the situation:

If we expect something so basic to Christian life as the crucifixion to have a universal, agreed meaning, we will be disappointed. Early creeds and confessions specified belief in the incarnation and in the Trinity. There was an “official” view on who and what Jesus was, and what kind of God God was. There was no similar formulation of exactly what Christ had done that saved us or specifically why Christ’s death was important. (Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross)

The purpose of this essay is to critique the substitutionary explanation of Jesus’ death, and to lay out an alternative perspective on the meaning of that gruesome death. There are many variations of the substitutionary scheme in atonement theology, but I intend to concentrate here on one in particular, set forth by Richard Neuhaus in his book, Death on a Friday Afternoon; Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross. I have chosen to focus on Neuhaus because he attempts to set forth a substitutionary atonement theory that he hopes will be more palatable to those who are offended by talk of a vengeful, just God who heaps punishment upon his Son. Specifically, he wants to give an alternative to the Calvinist and Lutheran theologies, which view God as a righteous judge who is obligated by His own law to condemn and punish sin, and who punishes Jesus so that He can show mercy to human beings. Neuhaus is aware of the offense in such a view, but feels that the idea of Jesus as a sacrificial substitution for the sins of humanity is theologically nonnegotiable. As he puts it, “Christianity is stuck with the idea of sacrifice.” But if we are stuck with it, he wants to make the idea as palatable as possible, wants to define sacrifice so that it no longer carries connotations of retributive justice (the idea that God is a judge who demands and enforces an “eye for an eye,” requiring equal payback for wrongdoing.) He wants to move away from the idea of sin as an abstract quantity that merits punishment, to the idea of sin as a broken personal relationship in need of mending. Let’s say person “A” wrongs person “B” and there is a rupture in the relationship. Neuhaus calls our attention to the fact that in such a case we all sense that some kind of amends need to be made. And this, he says, is also the case in our relationship with God. Neuhaus wants to understand atonement in terms of personal relationship rather than in the language of justice. Jesus becomes our “representative” who, by sacrificing himself, makes those personal amends and offers
satisfaction to God through his death. Neuhaus is at pains throughout to create the image of a loving God, and to show how the whole atonement scenario can be seen as beginning in the desire to restore a broken love relationship – all the while retaining the idea of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice.

It seems to me, however, that the question still remains: why does God demand satisfaction at all? We can remove the scene from the courthouse and strip off the judge’s robe, but if we must still talk about satisfaction, we are only bringing in some form of “justice” by the back door. Neuhaus himself writes, “Justice had to be done, but ‘justice’ here means not a legal relationship of crime and punishment, but a personal relationship of reciprocal love between God and his creatures.” What is that sentence supposed to mean? It makes no sense to define justice as a “personal relationship of reciprocal love,” because in a love relationship one can choose to forgive and forget; but in Neuhaus’ understanding, God either does not or cannot forget, but requires satisfaction. What kind of love, then, are we talking about? Neuhaus wants to remove the idea of vengeance from our concept of God. He doesn’t want to see God as vindictive, or as a penal judge. Fine. But after all is said and done, we still end up with a God who demands satisfaction. Is it God’s love that demands satisfaction? If so, what kind of love is that? I thought Paul told us that love does not consider wrongs done. But if it isn’t God’s love that demands satisfaction, then what does demand it? The only thing I can think of would be God’s justice, or God’s honor. Neuhaus seems to think he can both have God’s justice and make it go away with the simple wave of a linguistic magic wand as, for example, when he writes the following: “... justice has been done, and justice was done by love, because the justice of God is love, and that is because God is love.” Woah! What an amazing piece of doubletalk! Simply stating that “justice” means “love” only confuses language, it doesn’t remove the difficulty.

The long and short of it is that dressing up the idea of satisfaction in the language of personal relationship and love doesn’t really move us very far beyond the realm of retributive justice and punishment, it just makes us feel better about it. Not only are we still left with the need for satisfaction, but the satisfaction demanded by God still requires a gruesome and violent human sacrifice. I think J. Denny Weaver, Mennonite theologian and author of The Nonviolent Atonement, sums up my criticism of Neuhaus very well:

. . . . every form of the satisfaction motif assumes divinely initiated or divinely sanctioned violence – the Father needing or willing the death of the Son . . . . Since the logic of the satisfaction motif itself assumes such divinely sanctioned violence, a search for a different version of satisfaction does not resolve the problem. (p.19)

Who then actually demanded Christ’s death? The answer is almost ludicrously obvious to anyone not in the habit of reading the story with spiritualizing spectacles: a lynch mob demanded Jesus’ death. Whose wrath did Jesus’ death appease? The lynch mob’s. I didn’t see The Passion of The Christ, but I know from all the buzz that the film's main virtue was also my main reason for not viewing it: the graphic portrayal of violence and suffering sustained by Jesus. (I have too weak a constitution to handle such graphic images.) A film like this raises the question what kind of warped mind Jesus must have had, had he really believed that mob violence was a reflection of his Father’s wrath. Such a God seems far removed from the “Abba ” that Jesus preached. And yet
Neuhaus says: ‘This is what God wanted to do and, in some sense, what it was necessary for God to do.’ God wants the violence, sanctions the violence, and is bound by the necessity for violence.

Human analogies show the difficulties involved in holding such a view. Imagine a father who destroys his own son in order to make amends for the wrongs committed against him by the other neighborhood kids, since those kids could not or would not make the amends themselves. This father demonstrates his incredible love by physically destroying his own son? And this somehow makes things right? God forbid that I should ever have such a father! Maybe it isn’t fair to use human analogies like the above: but Jesus looked to human fathers all the time for analogies concerning the nature of God – his “Abba.” When Jesus portrayed human fathers as bad, it was only to say how much better is the heavenly Father than they.

How can Neuhaus and other Christians who hold this understanding of Jesus’ death reconcile the obvious contradiction between the God of love and the God of violence? Mostly through the magic of the doctrine of the Trinity. The fact that the God who demands such satisfaction is the same as the God who voluntarily suffers it is supposed to cancel out the problem. God does violence to Himself in order to avoid doing it to us. If we are repelled by a God who would sanction such violence, we are also moved and inspired by the thought of a God who would place himself in the path of such violence for our sake. However, assimilating God the wrathful Father into Jesus the merciful Son through the doctrine of the Trinity is a two-edged sword; because it also makes Jesus, the merciful Son, one with the wrathful Father. And when this blend is accomplished, it is ultimately the Father who triumphs. We begin in Genesis with a violent God and end in Revelation with an even more violent God. For a brief three year period in between God graciously set aside His violence and appeared on earth as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who tries lovingly to rescue us from the wrath to come. But, ultimately, it is the wrathful Father who sets the game plan, and who has to be satisfied, and Jesus’ mission is interpreted within that framework. So much so that most Christians who hold a form of satisfaction theory also believe that when Jesus comes back to earth for a second round, it will be with a sword in his hand, no longer meek and mild but full of wrath against those who didn’t accept him the first time. From start to finish, violence trumps forgiveness. And if Jesus ultimately reigns as the King of Peace, it is a peace established only as a result of a violent victory.

There are several questions which are seldom raised, much less answered, in theological literature about this idea of God demanding satisfaction. One might ask, for example, why the ‘remedy for our great wrong’ (Neuhaus’ phrase) should require Jesus’ death? Why can’t the remedy consist in Jesus living a perfect human life? A perfect life, lived in complete submission to the will of God: is that not a “sacrifice” of self-giving, a perfect worship offered to God? Why can the Father only be satisfied by the death of such a life?

We might pose this question within the context of the theory of “retributive justice.” The penal version of substitutionary atonement theory, that God is essentially a judge who is beholden to His own law and must therefore destroy Jesus “according to the law” in order to save us, assumes that the concept of “retributive justice” has its source in God’s own nature. Retributive justice is all about balancing crime with punishment, such as we find in the famous lex talionis – “an eye for an eye.” But even human courts acknowledge another form of justice called restorative justice. Instead of punishing the criminal, we give him a hundred hours of community service. We require
him to contribute an amount of goodness to society equal to the amount of harm he inflicted upon it. Is God not enlightened enough to see the beauty in this form of justice? The scenario for this kind of atonement theory would be: Jesus as our perfect representative does the “community service” we are incapable of doing. Because it is being done by the perfect God-man, this service has infinite value, and thus provides the infinite amends God requires. At the end of the service term, perhaps God takes Jesus in the same way He took Elijah and Enoch – no need for Jesus to die. Restorative justice provides God with a “humane” (!) way making the necessary amends. Neuhaus is critiquing the penal view of substitutionary atonement, but he nevertheless sees death as the essential requirement in the amends making. It is hard to see how this could be the case unless some form of retributive justice were still operating behind the sweet love language. If God was really after some form of “satisfaction,” it seems to me that the “community service” scenario would have accomplished it and balanced the scales, and at the same time demonstrated God as love. In fact, however, I believe that God was never after satisfaction and the “balance” or exchange it implies, in the first place, as will be developed further later.

One might answer my objections by saying that God didn’t do any real harm to Himself because, after all, He knew that death couldn’t hold Jesus, who was resurrected a mere three days later, no permanent damage done. The problem with this response is that it writes off Jesus’ ordeal as no big deal. But, of course, if Jesus’ ordeal was, despite appearances, no big deal, then the love of God supposedly revealed by suffering through that ordeal would also be diminished. But even if we were to say that Jesus’ death was ultimately no big deal – a mere 72 hour roundtrip visit to Hell so that he could preach to the damned, and then come back to life again – what are we to say about Jesus’ suffering? Are we, like the old Gnostic sects, to say that it was a mere illusion? Mainstream Christians find such a view anathema. But if Jesus really did suffer, and suffer badly, how in the world would that “satisfy” his Father? If what God needed to remedy our great wrong was a death, pure and simple, why not just take Jesus’ life in a heartbeat – fast, clean, and painless? Jesus lives a perfect life, then dies in his sleep – payment rendered. Or maybe Jesus falls and bashes his head, is knocked instantly unconscious, and dies – amends made, score settled. But why must Jesus suffer on his way to death? Substitutionary theorists don’t think much about that question, which is why Mel Gibson’s film made such an impact: it put the issue Jesus’ suffering right in our face.

One view of Jesus’ suffering is that it was necessary so that Jesus could identify with human beings. But that would be, at best, only a secondary and incidental reason. It doesn’t answer the real question about atonement: how Jesus’ suffering provides atonement for our sins. Does God demand not only death, but that those who wrong Him should suffer? Is this what Jesus is shouldering in the crucifixion, the suffering that God demanded as our punishment? This certainly doesn’t make God a very sympathetic character. On the contrary, it comes close to demonizing God as a sadist who feels impelled to inflict suffering upon those who reject Him, and requires horrible suffering from those who would make amends in order to restore the relationship.

Another question that holders of satisfaction types of atonement theories need to address is why Jesus’ suffering must happen at the hands of a human lynch mob. If the Father wants and needs Jesus to suffer, why doesn’t He inflict it Himself? Why must He rely upon human henchmen to carry out the torture? Is He a “godfather” who hides his own violence by sending out hit men to do the job?
Yet another question: If Jesus understood the meaning of his suffering and death as a sacrifice to appease the Father’s wrath, why didn't he simply take his own life, literally sacrificing himself to God? Such an act would have been a courageous, noble, and straightforward way of acknowledging his Father’s demand. Furthermore, it would accord with Neuhaus’ attempt to redefine the meaning of the term “sacrifice” as “…an external act that symbolically expresses the interior homage of the creature to God. . . . Sacrifice is an act of homage, of worship.” Jesus gets down on his knees and prays, “And now, Father, I offer you the sacrifice you require. I would rather this cup pass from me, but thy will be done. As an expression of perfect homage, I offer you the sacrifice of my life that you require.” Then Jesus drinks the poison, or falls upon the sword. The book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, but also as the high priest. Why then didn’t Jesus take his own life as the high priest slaughtering the lamb? Why, instead, must the Jews and the whole Roman legal and political machine get involved? Why, instead of a self-sacrifice, do we have the circuitous, prolonged route of suffering and humiliation at the hands of a lynch mob? Unless the lynch mob is the very point.

The whole idea of God requiring satisfaction, and Jesus offering it on our behalf, involves a transaction that takes place between Jesus and his Father, by which God has a change of attitude towards humans. It is something mysterious that takes place within God himself. Isn’t this therefore something that Jesus and God could handle in private? Jesus offers himself to God as a human sacrificial lamb, either by dispatching himself, or by God dispatching him swiftly and painlessly, perhaps descending upon him the way Yahweh consumed Elijah’s altar. Atonement is achieved, and the whole affair is a private matter, transacted somewhere out in the wilderness (maybe right after Jesus’ victory over temptation in the wilderness.)

But, of course, this is not the way things unfold in the New Testament gospels. What we see instead is an elaborate scheme of human violence, an unfolding pattern of blaming, accusation, and scapegoating. We see this violence exposed in the purest possible way, written down in dramatic form, clearly, without mythological cover-ups, for the first time in human history. The idea that Jesus is a sacrificial lamb, while perhaps taken seriously in a few places in the New Testament, is an essentially ironic idea that belongs in the realm of thinking exemplified by Caiaphas when he says, “It is better that one man die than for the whole nation to perish.” It is ironic in that those who believed they were sacrificing a life in order to propitiate a vengeful deity were only really exposing their own violence. If Jesus is a sacrificial lamb, it is in the sense that he puts himself deliberately in the path of our violence, occupying the place of the victim, allowing himself to be “sacrificed” in order to end the whole murderous business of sacrifice by exposing it for what it was: scapegoating. We project our own violence onto God, making God into the one who must be appeased, when all the time we are the ones who demand victims to blame, in order to hide and cover over our own guilt. When the New Testament views Jesus as a “sacrifice,” often the idea is being used ironically, seeing Jesus as a sacrifice that exposes and ends the whole idea of sacrifice.

Neuhaus hopes that by stressing the “amends making” and personal relationship aspects, he can move us away from Calvin and Luther’s penal substitution concept. But he retains the necessity of satisfaction, and actually moves us closer to Anselm, whose atonement theology was less formally legal, and more based in medieval concepts of personal honor. Anselm likened God to a medieval lord, but one of infinite dignity. Our sin against God offended God’s honor. We could not make amends for that because our finite amends could hardly be satisfaction for an infinite offense. Thus
the need for God to become man, which Anselm explains in his famous book *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Man?). Neuhaus wants to lose the legal language and talk in terms of our broken relationship to the deity; but then it begins to seem as if God has taken personal offense and simply refuses to forgive without some form of satisfaction – and not just any form of satisfaction, but the suffering, humiliation, and death of his own Son. In a sense, this makes thing worse: If God requires this *even though He is not bound by legal justice*, then what is the source of the requirement if not God’s own personal offense at our actions?

It is important to mention here that Neuhaus misunderstands the significance of the “amends” that need to be made in order to restore broken relationships. There are two ways to think about the necessity of such amends: ethically, and from the standpoint of healing. If we talk about God needing humanity to make amends from the standpoint of ethics, then whether we use the word or not, we are back in the camp of justice. If we talk about amends from the standpoint of healing a relationship, it is important to realize that the real necessity for the amends falls on the side of the offender, not the offended. It will be important for the person who committed the offense to make amends in order to clear his or her conscience; it may *or may not be important* for the offended party to have amends made to him or her. That person might simply be capable of forgiving. Neuhaus’ view seems to imply a God without that capability.

**My Own Current View**

In his chapter dealing with the atonement, Neuhaus states three different ways in which atonement has been interpreted: what he calls exemplification theory, existentialist theory, and liberation theology. Amazingly enough, however, he leaves out the view that was the most popular approach to atonement theology during the first six hundred years of his own Catholic church history: *Christus Victor*. I simply cannot imagine why Neuhaus did not include this. *Christus Victor* stresses the image of cosmic battle between good and evil, and the victory of the kingdom of God. God was apparently defeated, but Jesus got resurrected, and this triumph over the powers of death freed humans from Satan's clutches.

"Ransom theory” is a variation on the *Christus Victor* theme. Satan “owned” us, having obtained rights over us because of our disobedience to God. In order to set us free, God had to pay Satan a ransom, which was the death of his Son. Another variation on *Christus Victor* is the “hook” theory. This theory also stresses human bondage to Satan, although not because Satan possessed some kind of legal rights over us. To set us free, God didn't have to pay a ransom to the devil. Instead, he *tricked* the devil by becoming incarnate as a perfect human being. Little did Satan know that in killing Jesus he was really “killing” God. He “swallowed the bait,” so to speak. And in doing so, Death swallowed something that death could not stomach, and Christ was resurrected. As a result, we were freed from Satan’s power.

The problem with the ransom approach is that it elevates the devil to the level of a creature that can actually possess “rights” that give him a legal platform against God. The problem with the “hook” variation is that it makes God into a mimetic rival of the devil, using the devil's own weapon – trickery – to win the battle. Common to all *Christus Victor* type themes, however, is that the “enemy” is the devil. That is what Jesus’ death aims to overcome. In the substitutionary and satisfaction approaches, on the other hand, the object and aim of Jesus’ death – the “enemy” to be
overcome – is either the "law," or the offended "honor" of God. (The former developed particularly in the penal substitution theories of Calvin and Luther and their descendants, and the latter developed and made famous by Anselm.)

The other major approach is the "moral influence" theory, which Neuhaus calls "exemplification." This approach stems from Anselm's contemporary, Abelard. God doesn't pay a ransom to the devil, nor does He pay our debt to the law or His offended honor. J. Denny Weaver in *The Nonviolent Atonement* puts it like this:

> For Abelard, the problem of atonement was not how to change an offended God's mind toward the sinner, but how to bring sinful humankind to see that the God they perceived as harsh and judgmental was actually loving. Thus, for Abelard, Jesus died as the demonstration of God's love. And the change that results from that loving death is not in God but in the subjective consciousness of the sinners, who cease their rebellion against God and turn toward God.

In this approach, Jesus' death is aimed towards *us*. Not God or the devil, but *we* are the enemy that needs to be overcome. Neuhaus criticizes this view because he claims it doesn't say much about what the crucifixion actually accomplished, what it really did in terms of reconciling God and humanity. But it seems obvious to me that, on the contrary, it says *loads* about what the crucifixion accomplished: but it accomplished it in *us*, whereas Neuhaus wants it to accomplish something in *God*, that Jesus' death should somehow change the way God regards us as human beings, that it somehow freed God up to extend us forgiveness. Neuhaus also claims that the Abelardian viewpoint leaves us doubting our ability to imitate what Jesus did. It is hard to fathom, however, how any of the other atonement theories make imitation of Jesus any easier. Imitating Jesus would seem to be a daunting prospect for anybody not living a merely superficial Christianity. Finally, Neuhaus claims that the exemplification approach to atonement does not explain exactly how Jesus' death shows unconditional love. I find this objection difficult to understand, especially from a Girardian perspective. A Girardian "moral influence" theory would say that Jesus in unconditional love submitted himself to our violence. He substituted himself in the place of our victims, our scapegoats. He did this in order to reveal the truth humanity had spent millennia covering up – that we are murders and liars, just like our "father" the devil – so that we might know the truth and, knowing it, be set free.

In chapter 20 of Brian McLaren's *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, McLaren describes an atonement theory he calls "foolish wisdom." It's a name McLaren made up, but the content sounds very Girardian. This is how he describes it:

> By becoming vulnerable on the cross, by accepting suffering from everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than visiting suffering on everyone, Jesus is showing God’s loving heart, which wants forgiveness, not revenge, for everyone. Jesus shows us that the wisdom of God’s kingdom is sacrifice, not violence. It’s about accepting suffering and transforming it into reconciliation, not avenging suffering through retaliation. So through this window, the cross shows God’s rejection of the human violence and dominance and oppression that have spun the world in a cycle of crisis from the story of Cain and Abel through the headlines in this morning’s Washington
The only exception I would take to this description is the comment that “the wisdom of God's kingdom is sacrifice, not violence.” I know that by “sacrifice” McLaren means self-giving. But historically sacrifice is violence, and the idea of “self-sacrifice” carries a lot of negative connotations stemming from that history that we would do well to avoid. McLaren calls this rather Girardian atonement theory “foolish wisdom,” which seems to me a rather obscure name for it; but neither do I like the term “moral influence” as a way to describe the Girardian approach to atonement, because the goal of Jesus’ death was not to make us good, moral people, but to transform us inwardly and spiritually, providing us a new model to imitate. “Moral influence” is too reductionistic a label to capture the essence of the thing.

My own understanding of atonement is a combination of this Girardian perspective and the Christus Victor theme. The aim of Jesus’ death was twofold: to effect a subjective change within us, and to truly and objectively defeat the devil (whether one understands the reality behind that term as supernatural or anthropological). Jesus inaugurated the reign of the kingdom of God in this world. He confronted the worldly and heavenly “powers.” He defeated the devil not by paying a ransom, or through some backstage divine mystical principle, but by overcoming death through his resurrection, offering us now the possibility of living “as if death were not” (to use James Alison’s happy phrase) – which is a tremendous freedom.

. . . . he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. Heb. 2.14-15

This view, by the way, makes Jesus’ resurrection a crucial part of the atonement process, as opposed to putting all the emphasis on his death alone. And because it shifts the emphasis to what happens here, on earth and in our hearts, the real meat of the matter becomes the establishment of God’s kingdom here. Denny Weaver documents how substitutionary atonement theology has often become, at best, an excuse for Christian non-involvement in attempts to change and better society, and, at worst, a sanction for all kinds of worldly abuse like racism, war, and so on. This is because that theology reduces Jesus’ life to a set-up for the crucifixion, whereby Jesus saves us for heaven.

Jesus also defeats the devil by exposing him, making a public display of him from the cross, as Paul says: When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through it [i.e., the cross, although the pronoun “it” could also be translated “him,” meaning God]. (Col. 2.15). How could Jesus’ hanging on a cross be equated with a public display of triumph over Satan? By openly and clearly exposing our violence. The exposure works because Jesus did not respond in kind. He was manifestly the non-violent victim, and thus could show up evil for what it is. The utterly innocent Jesus hangs there for all to see – the victim par excellence. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” takes us right back to the Psalms, to invoke the voices of all the Old Testament victims who felt forsaken by God and overwhelmed by their enemies, and cried out, “How long oh Lord!” But this time the victim-voice sounded louder than the abusers' lies. It was impossible for the old mythology machine to continuing working. In Girard’s view, ancient myths represent real incidents of scapegoating murder – but told from the viewpoint of the persecutors, who turned their victims into gods. The gospels, on the
other hand, are quintessentially anti-mythological, allowing victimization to take center stage in human consciousness, truthfully exposing our violence as had never been done before, and thus exposing Satan as the murderer and liar he had always been from the beginning.

This exposure happens in a given place and time, and is thus inserted into the flow of historical events. Although initially unappreciated even by Jesus’ own followers, who failed to understand the significance of what they were witnessing when they gazed upon the cross, it soon begins to make itself known and felt. Eventually the cross, and the exposure of human violence that it images, is proclaimed with joy and a sense of triumph, so much so that the earliest Christians seem to have gone rather overboard in their enthusiasm to become victims themselves! And this triumph – never complete, always in process, and sometimes retarded by Christian unfaithfulness – has continued throughout history to the present day as the voice of the victim has been recovered in culture after culture, everywhere the gospel truth has penetrated. It is just as Jesus said: the kingdom of heaven is like a little leaven that a woman kneaded into her dough, until eventually it leavened the whole loaf. This was the process Jesus died to initiate.

Jesus’ death resulted from his faithfulness to his commission to make the rule of God visible and actual on earth (“on earth as it is in heaven”). This was his mission, and people could choose to join the kingdom or reject it, but it was graciously offered to all. In this context, J. Denny Weaver gives a nice definition of “salvation”:

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\text{Salvation is to begin to be free from those evil forces, and to be transformed by the reign of God and to take on a life shaped – marked – by the story of Jesus, whose mission was to make visible the reign of God in our history. \ldots \text{ Salvation is present when allegiances change and new life is lived \textit{in Christ} under the rule of God.}}
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The resurrection provided the ultimate proof, the “Amen” of God to everything Jesus had done, and it demonstrated the kingdom’s triumph. As Weaver says, “The resurrection reveals the true balance of power in the universe whether sinners perceive it or not.” This is a Christus Victor theme, and what distinguishes it from a purely moral influence approach is that the latter sees no change in the universe unless and until individuals subjectively acknowledge it, whereas Christus Victor posits an objective victory over evil and death whether anyone acknowledges it or not. I hold a combination of both approaches. Perhaps a word that brings them both together would be “reconciliation.” Maybe it should be called the “reconciliation theory.” It's not about us, through Jesus, satisfying some requirement within God, whether of justice or some personal need for amends; it’s about God overcoming two powers: (1) human wrath, and (2) Satan/death. Overcoming our wrath, God is able to create a new heart within us as we perceive His great love for us; and overcoming Satan creates a new, objective possibility for the world, whether we avail ourselves of the opportunity or not. In this way there can be reconciliation with God. What this approach does not entail is the idea that something had to change on God’s side in order for it to become possible for God to show us mercy and love. God (or some Law within God) is not the obstacle to reconciliation. God is in no way implicated in the violence suffered by Jesus: it is a purely human act of violence, unleashed upon Jesus, the scapegoat.

Something that most atonement theories have in common, is that they theologize away human
violence. The violence of the crucifixion becomes a purely secondary, incidental factor. In the
typical substitutionary scenario, God is ultimately responsible for bringing it all about. The
Romans and Jews were mere pawns who played into His plans. God’s plan of salvation includes
our acting out the role of violence so that Jesus could die, fulfill prophecy, and effect our salvation.
Thus the violence is not taken with complete seriousness as violence. For all the various atonement
theories, violence as such is accidental to the meaning of the cross. The violent act of crucifixion is
just the means by which something is effected, so we can move quickly past the violence itself.
And yet violence is where we human beings actually live! What could possibly be more relevant,
particularly in today's world? Here is something everyone can really relate to in a very practical
way.

I find Girard's analysis of the crucifixion event very convincing. It really does look like the
gospels are intent on powerfully presenting a scapegoating event that took place within the chaos
of first century Judaism, and which involved the mimetic bonding of enemies in unanimous
hostility towards Jesus. We are violent creatures who can only live together peacefully for any
length of time at the expense of victims – which is the complete reverse of Christian fellowship.
The Girardian take on the death of Jesus is not an abstract theological proposition that attempts to
solve some mystery within the nature of God; rather, it speaks directly to human society and the
human heart. For we are indeed children of our father the devil – a liar and murder from the
beginning.

Coming at it from this perspective, we can see indeed why Jesus could not take his own life.
We can also see why Jesus had to suffer as well as die. And we can see why the death had to be
public, not a private affair between Jesus and God. Because suffering and death at the hands of a
violent, public mob is part of the essential message. The crucifix is not meant to be turned into an
abstract religious symbol; it is meant to be gazed upon as an act of gruesome violence, and
displayed as a revelation of human wrath and our desire for victims. Protestants especially are
guilty of abstracting the cross, removing the body and polishing the wood; at least Catholics retain
the entire crucifix, often with blood and gore. The crucifixion must be contemplated for what it
reveals about the human condition. By submitting to this horrible ordeal, God in Christ was able to
tell us a story about a love so powerful that it has the potential to break our hearts. And when this
story is combined with another, the story of the resurrection, not only can our hearts be broken, but
there is a real possibility that our very desires can be transformed, and we can a real degree of
freedom from violence. Because at the root of these things was the power of Death, but when we
have been set free from fear in order to live “as if death were not,” real transformation is possible.
Death dominates the world, but the kingdom of God has overcome the world. Christ is risen:
Christus Victor!

Jim Warren

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