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# Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation:

## Essential Elements in Atonement Theology

Don McLellan

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EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY, in the face of many challenges, has until recently generally held to the view that our reconciliation with God has been made possible through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and that there was no other way. But the scandal of the cross of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 remains to this day. To some it is foolishness; to others the idea that Jesus must shed his blood is totally repugnant. There have even been claims in recent times that the idea of atonement through a violent act may lead to the justification, indeed the glorification, of violence,[1] and this has given rise to attempts to develop theologies of atonement that repudiate the theology of justification through the cross.[2]

In the following discussion, I will not attempt any rebuttal of such viewpoints, nor offer a restatement of traditional atonement theology involving satisfaction or penal substitution. Instead I will explore what I regard as three essential elements in atonement theology: justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Without specifically revisiting penal substitution which I firmly believe the New Testament teaches, I intend to demonstrate that if any of these essential elements is misunderstood, misused or overlooked, we are bound to have an incomplete or inadequate theology of atonement. That demonstrated, we will find ourselves coming back to the penal substitution theory, and for all its faults, we will recognize that it cannot be abandoned.

My approach is anthropological: I

**1** J. Denney Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 5.

**2** Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: the Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Weaver, *Nonviolent*.

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will seek to demonstrate that for human reconciliation to be complete and genuine, all three of these elements are essential, and from this I will extrapolate the dependence of atonement theology on the same three. A fourth element, repentance, is also imperative in the process of reconciliation with God. This should be taken as a presupposition to this discussion and is mentioned only occasionally. Repentance is also mostly necessary for reconciliation between people. However, if Joe believes that Fred has sinned against him when Fred has not, repentance on Fred's part would be a sham. In that case the process of reconciliation must take another route, but the essential elements remain.

Justice without forgiveness cannot produce reconciliation. Forgiveness without reconciliation is possible, but by definition it leaves the relationship issues unresolved. And while reconciliation obviously cannot occur without forgiveness, there are important reasons for insisting that when forgiveness is offered, to overlook justice is to endanger the whole concept of forgiveness. My discussion of these will highlight how these elements cannot be overlooked in the question of reconciliation with God.

Reconciliation and atonement are highly congruent, to the point of being synonymous. However, the word 'atonement' is more commonly applied to the process of restoring the relationship between humankind and God, rather than between human beings.[3] 'Atonement' is an old English word, derived simply from its elements, 'at-one-ment'. 'Reconciliation' is mostly used of restoring human to human relationships, although it is also used with reference to God (1 Cor. 5:19). I therefore believe that studying reconciliation may give us important insights into atonement.

## 1. The problem of sin

The most obvious place to start to formulate a theology of forgiveness and reconciliation is with the problem that makes forgiveness and reconciliation necessary. Biblically, sin is the state in which humankind finds itself as a result of the fall (Rom. 5:12). However, in this exercise I will concentrate on the nature of the sinful act, assuming here that we may and should apply such an epithet to reprehensible human behaviour while admitting that the world scarcely thinks this way.[4]

It is not overstating it to assert that the whole theology of atonement pivots on whether sin exists and if so, whether it is serious. If human behaviour that causes pain and suffering for no moral reason is to be explained in some way other than in terms of sin, and if that pain and suffering does not matter to God, then we do not need a theology of atonement. Psychology, anthropology and sociology have yet to come up with convincing explanations of the pleasure human beings appear to get out of doing things that hurt or

**3** Andrew H. Trotter, Jr, 'Atonement', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.) *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 44.

**4** D. A. Carson, 'Where Wrath and Mercy Meet' in Alison Hull (ed.) *Thinking Aloud: Keswick Lectures 1999* (Carlisle, UK: Authentic Lifestyle, 2002), p. 87.

harm others, except to explain them in purely animal terms. Social and behavioural sciences have provided us with many important insights into human behaviour, but I take the view that unless the concept of morality is dropped altogether, the concept of sin still has its place in psychology as well as theology. A number of behavioural scientists, not all Christians, have been embracing this notion recently.[5] As Leon Morris constantly asserts in his publications on atonement, sin is serious, and its seriousness must never be minimised.[6] In a world where all sorts of factors other than sin are proposed to explain negative human behaviour, it is important to assert firmly that sin exists and that it is a serious problem.

Many of the words for sin in OT and NT are words relating to actions: *shagah* and *planomai* denoting error; *chata'* sometimes suggesting failure as a deliberate act and the corresponding *hamartano*; '*abar* used in Dt. 26:13 of transgression of the covenant commandments; *parabasis*, the word Paul chooses to describe a violation of the law in Rom. 4:15.[7] There are many other deeds-related words. We may also define sin in terms of the commandments the synoptic Jesus identifies as 'the great commandment' and 'the second which is like it' (Mt. 22:36-40) and the Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12) and say that sin is any action or inaction that causes pain or harm unjustly. Three concrete NT definitions of sin are also worth considering:

*1 John 3:4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.* RSV has paraphrased here. In the Greek, this verse twice uses *anomia*, 'without law', the antonym of *nomos*, 'law'. This text could be translated (rather crudely), 'all sin-doers also act lawlessly; indeed sin is lawlessness.' In other words, sin is equated with total disregard for the law. As far as the sinner is concerned, the law does not exist; and precisely this defines him or her as a sinner in John's view. To sin is to make a decision that nothing will restrain: not the discomfort of the victim, not the moral values of the law, and not the law itself.

*1 John 5: 17 All wrongdoing is sin…* Here the writer paints with a rather broader brush. 'Wrongdoing' translates *adikia*, the antonym of *dikaios,* usually translated 'righteous'. Older translations usually use 'unrighteousness' to translate *adikia*. Morris has shown the strong forensic element in righteousness,[8] but true righteousness goes much further than the law, as the Sermon on the Mount posits forcefully (Mt. 5:21-48). Even

**5** e.g. M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994); Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997); c.f. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

**6** Leon Morris, 'Atonement, Theories of the', in Elwell, Walter A. (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 100.

**7** Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Second Edition) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 586.

**8** Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Leicester: IVP, 1965), p. 269. 'Righteousness' is the alternative translation to 'justification'.

though we may correctly regard righteousness as primarily a forensic status, there is always a strong behavioural element in what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. 'Wrongdoing' is any behaviour that does not care that it causes avoidable pain or harm to another.

When all this is taken into consideration, it is evident that selfishness is a major factor in the act of sin: I sin when I decide that your interests simply do not matter as I pursue mine. In this act therefore, I am not only devaluing your interests, but in the process devaluing you. Thus I am arrogating to myself a position of superiority over you of such magnitude that I consider it my right to harm you. Later we will explore the teaching of Jesus that in God's eyes precisely the opposite happens: my sin against you diminishes me and places me in your debt.

*Rom 14:23 …everything that does not come from faith is sin.* Paul's thesis in Romans, based on Hab. 2:4, is that righteousness is concomitant with faith: 'The just shall live by faith.' In Rom. 14:23 we have a corollary from Paul which is simply Hab. 2:4 written in negative form: 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.' This emphasizes the relationship aspect of righteousness. To put it another way, the rightness or otherwise of behaviour may always be measured in terms of what it does to the relationships involved, rather than merely in terms of whether or not some law code has been observed. Jesus taught that the law is simply not enough when it comes to righteousness (Mt. 5:17-30).

In life, sin causes a degeneration in human relationships. At the lowest level, sin creates disappointment in the observer or victim, often because trust has been betrayed. As the level of seriousness of the offence rises, so the level of estrangement between offender and victim rises, until the point of complete alienation may be reached. If that alienated relationship was once loving, there can be much grief and anger.

But sin can generate much more than pain in its victims. It is the nature of sin to beget sin. Wrongdoing has a terrible ability to compound itself, sometimes in the guise of seeking justice. A characteristic common to many of the great conflict zones in today's world is that horrible crimes have been committed in the name of justice. The slaughter of Moslems in the Balkans during the recent conflicts is justified in the eyes of many non-Moslems in that zone because of atrocities, sometimes generations ago, allegedly committed in the name of Islam. In Israel and Palestine 'an eye for an eye' appears to have become 'ten eyes for every eye' on both sides—a sure recipe for escalation. In Ireland, a culture of non-forgiveness has fed on past events even after hundreds of years, as history is recalled selectively on both sides.

It is this very propensity for purported acts of justice to violate the principles of justice that makes the whole issue of justice so difficult. The distance between a totally inadequate response to injustice, and a response that becomes a new and possibly worse injustice, is exceedingly short. It is precisely here that the idea of atonement can provide not only a solution, but a vital circuit breaker to the vicious process of revenge and retribution, as I will show later.

## 2. The consequences of sin

The Decalogue is seen in Judaism and Christianity as containing the conditions of a covenant that, *inter alia*, sets forth both the righteousness of God and God's divine values. Sin breaks covenant with God, and breaks relationships between people. The relationship is broken because the offender has unjustly and either wilfully or thoughtlessly caused some kind of harm to the victim. The result of this breach is separation and, since in Hebrew thought death was seen as separation, death is terminology that may be applied metaphorically to describe the result of sin. But it is more than a metaphor. The association of sin with death is an integral part of Judeo-Christian thought (Gen. 2:16-17; Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:56).

The Bible speaks most profoundly of consequences in terms of what sin does to the relationship with God, but the human dimension also features. First, on the human plain, sin causes injury or harm to its victim. Sin is that which causes harm or injury unlawfully. Obvious though this is, it needs to be stated. The secondary result of sin is that it effects the relationship between the offender and the victim. The relationship is no longer trusting, comfortable, or normal. Jesus sometimes likens sin to debt. He equates sin with debt in the Lord's prayer, where instead of *hamartia*, he uses *opheilema*, which is usually translated 'debt'. He teaches us to pray, asking the Father to forgive our debts, as we forgive the debts of others (Matt 6:12), then goes on with an explanation in which he uses *paraptomata*, another synonym for sin.

> For if you forgive others their trespasses (*paraptomata*), your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:14-15).

In Matthew 18, when Peter asks how many times a person may sin (*hamartano*) before he ceases to forgive (18:21-22), Jesus launches into a parable that is about debtors (*opheletes*, 18:23-35) and ends with the solemn warning,

> This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive (*aphiemi* = forgive, release from debt) your brother from your heart (Mt. 18:35).

The relationship between offender and victim, then, is likened to that of debtor to lender. Some kind of transaction has taken place that demands an equal and opposite transaction. However, instead of insisting that the demanded transaction be carried out, Jesus instead demands that the offended person carry out a different transaction, that of releasing the debtor from the debt. This is to be done on the basis that God releases us from our debts, an important principle of atonement which we will revisit later.

But sin also injures the offender. Externally and objectively, it is seen as placing the offender in the 'debt' of God and of the victim, harming the relationship with both. Internally, the offender is diminished as a person both by the fact of the transgression and by the relationship breakdown. In biblical theologies, one may generalise that sin is never against only one other person. It is also sin against the perpetrator himself or herself, and sin against God.

My relationship with myself as well as my victim is damaged and my relationship with God is broken. I therefore can be described as a victim of my own sin.

## 3. The imperative of justice

It scarcely needs to be established that justice is a major theme of the Scriptures. Curiously, evangelicals committed to the authority of the Bible have sometimes overlooked this emphasis, failing to appreciate that in the NT generally speaking, *dikaiosune*, which we usually translate 'righteousness', also means 'justice' in a moral as well as a forensic sense.[9] A righteous person is *inter alia* someone committed to justice and fairness.

Sociologically, the notion of justice requires that the ambient society disapprove of the offence, either through the development of norms and mores or through the more formal process of legislation. Punishment may be justified as an attempt to reform a wrongdoer, and the threat of punishment may be justified as providing deterrence to would-be offenders. But, as Morris has argued, if that is all there is to it, then punishment ought to be abandoned, since it succeeds all too rarely on both counts.[10] A frown, a word of disapproval is scarcely enough. Unless the ambient community does something to the perpetrator that reflects its disapproval *and inflicts pain*, mere disapproval does nothing to reinforce the importance of the law.

Weaver attempts to make a case against this[11] but while he may have convinced himself, he would have a hard time convincing most people in most societies, since punishment remains a fundamental element in the dispensing of justice. Evidence that our courts hold this view was provided forcefully to me recently when a friend whose life had changed completely since his conversion felt it his duty as a Christian to go to the police and confess to a crime committed ten years earlier. The best efforts of his lawyer to keep this now upright citizen out of jail failed. My friend's present good citizenship was taken into account in the sentencing, but it was not enough. The judge's view was that society's disapproval had to be reinforced by inflicting punishment, but in terms of rehabilitation or deterrence the sentence was meaningless. A theology that wants to leave the concept of punishment out of atonement will scarcely be convincing, even though it may be attractive. Which leads to the next observation:

Justice also requires that penalties against the offender be adequate. That is why there is a natural inclination to regard *lex talionis* as the epitome of justice, of which I will say more in a moment. One of the great difficulties facing justice systems today arises from the question of exactly what is an adequate penalty.

This is a vast topic, but there are a couple of things worth saying here. First, adequate penalties would appear to require that some effort be made by the perpetrator of the offence to compensate the injured party. In societies

**9** Gottlob Schrenk, *TDNT* II, p. 198.

**10** Leon Morris, *Glory in the Cross: A Study in Atonement*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 39-44.

**11** Weaver, *Nonviolent*, chapter 7.

with a Judeo-Christian heritage, compensation of some sort is regarded as an important part of penalties because it emphasizes the 'debt' aspect of offences. However, the demand for adequate penalties would appear to require also that in some way the offender experience what the victim experienced. The Levitical law used *lex talionis* to ensure that justice was seen to be done. *Lex talionis* literally means 'the law of the tooth', the Latin phrase encapsulating the OT notion of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' (Ex. 21:24). The logic appeared to be that the offender should experience the same suffering that his victim had experienced. Importantly, however, the offender was not to experience more suffering than the victim, except insofar as restitution would entail hardship.

The problem is that, as society has become more complicated, *lex talionis* has become more inept and inadequate. For example, a clever lad in the Philippines created the 'I love you' virus and damaged thousands of computers world wide. Can he be dealt with under *lex talionis*? How do the purveyors of justice do the same to him? What compensation does he pay? The nature of adequate penalties therefore remains an unresolved issue in today's world, and will continue to be so. But whatever the penalties, justice requires that they be carried out. Where there are no penalties or the sanctions are inadequate, there is no sense of justice. The natural logic is that having afflicted others, offenders must somehow feel the pain of their crimes and misdemeanours in their own persons. Yet this immediately brings us to the problem of what justice cannot do.

## 4. What justice cannot do

It is in human nature to desire justice, and every society develops its system. Nevertheless, justice alone is a very inadequate entity. Justice may go some way, though it can never go all the way, to satisfying the victim's need for retribution, or the group or society's need to indicate its displeasure, or to providing some form of deterrence. However, justice is completely powerless in two important ways:

First, justice cannot undo the offence. One of the difficulties people have with *lex talionis* is that it appears to require society to commit the same crime. This is one of the great counter-arguments against capital punishment: its opponents argue that it makes the whole society guilty of the crime it condemns.

Second, justice very often takes no thought of its ramifications on innocent people connected to those it punishes. It is very difficult to deny that justice may well compound the problems that it sets out to solve. An incarcerated breadwinner may leave a family in poverty and worse. Nor can justice reconcile the victim and the offender. While the exercise of justice may provide some level of satisfaction to a victim, reconciliation is rarely the result. Indeed, it may only engender more bitterness.

Justice therefore is always necessary and always inadequate. It is like a mechanic whose only tools to fix a car are a hammer and a cold chisel. Not only can it not undo the offence, but it can aggravate the very situation it tries to address. It is for this reason that forgiveness is so important because justice alone solves very little, and may

even exacerbate the alienation caused by sins and offences.

This inadequacy of human justice, however, finds something of an answer in atonement. Paul's theology of atonement in particular provides some important answers to the impossibility of human justice systems to both provide justice and result in reconciliation, whether those systems exist on the group or the state level. I will argue below that the notion of God both demanding justice and carrying it out *in himself* provides an indispensable circuit-breaker for the just process of retribution following wrongdoing. However, before I do that, we must look closely at the concept of forgiveness.

## 5. Ethical issues concerning forgiveness

Surprisingly, forgiveness contains a number of quite serious ethical problems. While these ethical problems are rarely expressed, anyone who ever desires to forgive knows instinctively that they exist and that they often make forgiveness difficult. It will be useful to spell some of them out.

The first and gravest danger that arises from the act of forgiving is that forgiveness may tend to make laws and mores ineffective. Among other things, to forgive is to waive the right to see the offender punished. Now plainly, if forgiveness is offered too freely or too often, an offender may never receive the penalties that justice so clearly demands, in which case the law or the mores may as well not exist. This is what makes the demand of Matthew's Jesus that we forgive seventy times seven (Mt. 18:22) seem emotionally impossible if not morally bizarre.[12] The effect of forgiveness is to waive the penalties, whether legal or personal, that may be expected to be the response to wrongdoing. And if there are no possible penalties, the gravity of the offence must surely be abrogated.

The strength and significance of a law is measured by the penalties that accompany it. The same can be said of mores, and social groups demonstrate an almost instinctive ability to develop penalties that impact upon people who do not observe group mores. When it comes to crime, the more serious the crime, the more serious the penalties need to be. If a law defining a crime or misdemeanour has no penalties, it exists in name only and will be ignored.

This was demonstrated very clearly in the early 1990s when one state government in Australia legislated for the compulsory wearing of bicycle helmets but, because children would be the ones effected most, chose to provide no penalties. The law was almost universally ignored by cyclists until penalties were introduced much later, whereupon helmet wearing instantly became fashionable. Similarly, if breaches of mores are always forgiven or overlooked, in effect there are no penalties, and the mores lose effectiveness and eventually disappear. This has clearly been the case with the wholesale abandonment of sanctions against breaches of Judeo-Christian mores in our society. Things are condoned today that

**12** In the quasi-parallel of Luke 17:4 this complaint is ameliorated somewhat, because repentance is the prerequisite for the forgiveness.

would not even have been spoken of a generation ago. Similarly to forgive offenders for breaking laws may tend towards the destruction of the credibility of those laws.

Another danger is that forgiveness may trivialise the offence. If forgiveness is offered or granted too willingly, the effect can be that the offender may overlook or not understand the seriousness of the offence. Forgiveness, therefore, must be a very careful process. Notwithstanding the words of Jesus in Mt. 18:21-22, which we need to deal with more fully later, forgiveness is not to be dispensed mindlessly, lest the offence actually become trivialised. God's own forgiveness must operate against a similar background. Sin becomes trivialised if forgiveness overrules justice. This is also a vital point in the development of atonement theology.

Another ethical problem arises when forgiveness is laid upon Christians as a moral necessity. The result of the demand to forgive may bring condemnation to the victim. By this I mean that because Jesus commands us to forgive, pressure can sometimes be put on the victim to forgive the offender, even where the offender has not faced justice and has not shown any kind of contrition.

This is an issue that needs to be carefully thought through by clergy, especially conservative evangelical clergy who may tend to apply the Scriptures indiscriminately. It is very unseemly in the church to see victims being condemned, sometimes by the very same people who have sinned against them, because they appear unwilling to forgive. The greater likelihood is that the offence has been repeated often and the victim has lost all trust. I am sure I am not the only pastor to have seen wicked people laying guilt on their victims by quoting the demand of Jesus to forgive when all that the victim is doing is refraining, legitimately, from trusting the offender too soon. Forgiveness cannot be earned. Trust can be earned, but where it has been breached, that may take time. The imperative of forgiveness based on Mt. 6:14, 18:15-35, Col. 3:13 and other NT references must never be presented as if the ethical problems outlined above do not exist.

## 6. The imperative of forgiveness

Nevertheless, forgiveness is clearly a Christian imperative. It is the demand of God and Jesus. What we have observed so far about justice and the morality of forgiveness must not be used to cloud the fact that the biblical writers demand that we forgive, as Col. 3:13 says, 'just as the Lord has forgiven you'. The Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13) is packed with ideas regarding the relationship of God with his people, the kingdom of God, faith, forgiveness, and much more. But Jesus does not expand on any of these except forgiveness, when he says:

> For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Mt. 6:14-15).

This is expanded further in the parable that follows Peter's query concerning how often he should forgive a 'brother' (Mt. 18:21f.).

> 'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart (Mt. 18:33-35).

These words must not be minimised. I propose that they should be understood thus, in the light of the parable: The person who has experienced forgiveness will appreciate the enormity of this gift, and will in gratitude offer forgiveness to all who may offend him or her. Failure to offer forgiveness indicates a devaluation of God's forgiveness, and to devaluate it, according to Jesus, is to despise it.

It is perhaps too obvious, but nevertheless necessary, to note that without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation. On the other hand, but apparently not so obvious, is the fact that reconciliation is notionally not possible where the offender has shown no remorse or repentance, and has not sought forgiveness. Sometimes Christians express surprise at this statement, but it is clear that this is what the biblical writers say about God.

In a major article, Leon Morris points to the consistent teaching of the OT, carried forward into the NT, that the best word to describe the attitude of God towards sin is 'wrath'.[13] Salvation history suggests that God has done everything possible to reconcile people to himself. He was 'reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them' (2 Cor. 5:19). But if people will not be reconciled, they are under the wrath of God (Mt. 18:35 etc.). Morris's studies have shown, at least to my satisfaction, that the biblical literature speaks of a God who has provided and has offered forgiveness to all people for all time, but that same literature affirms that there is still no reconciliation until the offender has repented and accepted the offer.

The biblical demand that we forgive is therefore tempered with this fact: while it is imperative that forgiveness be our attitude, no matter how serious the offence, the victim has no obligation apart from that. If forgiveness is offered but not received for whatever reason, reconciliation has not occurred, a situation for which the victim is not responsible. Victims who truly want to forgive sometimes find this lack of reconciliation difficult. The victim may find anger welling up periodically, and bitterness can be an unwelcome companion in life. But the old adage, 'To err is human, to forgive, divine', while trite, contains an important theological idea: the victim becomes the outlet of God's forgiveness to the offender. Provided that outlet is there, the victim may be at peace, no matter what emotions may well up from time to time.

Lack of reconciliation with the offender may also cause a problem of the victim's reconciliation with himself or herself. It is common for rape and child abuse victims to suffer severe guilt. This was the great struggle for Debbie Morris, the victim in the famous 'Dead Man Walking' case in the USA.[14]

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**13** Morris, *Apostolic,* pp. 144-213

**14** Debbie Morris (with Gregg Lewis), *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

She found full release from the trauma only when she learnt to forgive herself, even though there was nothing to forgive. Self-forgiveness led to self-reconciliation, and ultimately to the ability to forgive the offender. He never sought forgiveness, and had made no attempt to be reconciled to his victim at the time of his execution.

## 7. Atonement and forgiveness

What happens when I forgive? At the point of forgiveness, I am in effect relinquishing all personal claims to seeing the process of justice carried out on the offender. I make a decision that only one person will bear the pain of the offence, and that will be myself, the victim. I absolve the offender of his or her debt. This is one of the not-so-obvious implications of the forgiving king in Matthew 18:25-35. The cause of the debt is not explained, but in terms of the economics of the day, a debt of 10,000 talents is unbelievable. It is Jesus' way of saying that it is beyond repayment. Surely Jesus' words must therefore have been greeted with astonishment:

> Out of pity for him, the Lord of that slave released him (*apoluo*) and forgave him (*aphiemi*) the debt (Mt. 18:27).

What is not so obvious, but an important adjunct here, is that it is not the servant who has suffered the unrepayable loss, but the king. Forgiveness is at a price, and the price is born by the victim. In a profound sense, what traditional atonement theology is saying is precisely that. Whatever problems there may be in the concept of substitutionary atonement, in the long run it is emphasizing this point: that in the death of the Son of God the loss and pain suffered in the act of forgiveness is suffered by God himself.

Forgiveness therefore is arguably one of the most profound expressions of love, and the cornerstone of atonement. The atonement, the work of God in which he makes his own reconciliation with humankind possible, requires that God absorb in himself the guilt of the offence against him. And the atonement actually becomes both the means and the motivation by which we human beings may forgive and be reconciled to each other.

Psychologically, we may regard the sacrifice of Jesus 'once for all' as being the one and only, and final, point at which the need for an injured party to exact retribution, the need for God's laws to find fulfilment, and the need for the wrath of God against sin to be expressed, find their meeting point. Viewed in this way, on the one hand substitutionary atonement through the death of Christ is not abandoned, and on the other hand the trenchant criticisms that accuse it of justifying violence[15] are ameliorated. There was violence towards the Son of God from humankind's side to which God did not respond. He did not and does not respond because in the cross, and in the God-man Jesus, the wrath of God is met. There is no place for further violence.

Luke's Gospel has a textually disputed word from the cross (Luke 23:34): 'Father, forgive them, for they

**15** Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*; Weaver, *Nonviolent*.

do not know what they are doing.' As Morris points out, the reason for the omission of this text in some otherwise reliable manuscripts may simply be the antagonism of an early copyist towards both the Romans who crucified Jesus and the Jews who allegedly were behind that event.[16] This is just as plausible as the contrary position based on the principle of *lectio brevior*.[17]

Whether original or not, these words encapsulate my understanding of atonement: Jesus absorbs the wickedness of his tormentors without any demand for retribution. From the overall picture the evangelists paint of a Jesus Christ who preaches forgiveness, the words of Luke 23:34 are completely consistent with the words from the Sermon on the Mount which provide a response to *lex talionis*, as Jesus urges his followers to turn the other cheek and to go the second mile (Mt. 5:38-42). It is not a long journey from here to a view of atonement which sees the Son of God as God absorbing in himself the wickedness of humanity directed towards him, and the Son of God as man absorbing the wrath of God which would have been expected in retribution. (Naturally, this does not work for non-Trinitarian theologies!)

Thus we can affirm with Paul, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them…' (2 Cor. 5:19). The cross was much more than symbolic, but nevertheless it is symbolic too: it symbolizes starkly how God himself absorbs the offence of the sinner and suffers the pain of the offence, yet offers forgiveness. Forgiveness is indeed difficult. That is why Peter spoke of the suffering of the Christian in 1 Peter 3:13-4:2. But we have an example to follow; and the example is Jesus, by whose death we ourselves are reconciled to God. So we forgive rather than demand justice, while never diminishing the importance of justice, and the result is social and interpersonal harmony which justice by itself can never achieve.

## Conclusion

Plainly what I have done here covers very little of the theology of atonement. I have merely sought to highlight the fact that justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation are three indispensable elements in good human relationships and in the production of a peaceful society, and to suggest from this that they are essential elements in atonement theology. The aim of forgiveness is reconciliation, but reconciliation without justice is an oxymoron, and justice without penalty is meaningless.

For all of its difficulties, only the biblical theology of substitutionary atonement covers all the bases. Evangelical Christians have always found it difficult to defend, but defend it they must. The alternatives are wishy-washy forgiveness that produces no true reconciliation, ineffectual justice that trivialises sin, or blunt-instrument justice that perpetuates conflict. Society, and Christianity, can afford none of these.

**16** Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 356.

**17** *Lectio brevior* is the name given to the textual criticism principle that the shorter readings found in some early manuscripts are more likely to be original than the longer readings found in others.