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Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: The Reconciliatory Cross as Forgiving Justice

A Response to Don McLellan

James R. A. Merrick

KEYWORDS: *Forgiveness, grace, atonement, reconciliation, substitution, justice, retribution, punishment, suffering, and mercy.*

I am grateful[1] for the opportunity to respond to the fine essay by Don McLellan, 'Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Essential Elements in Atonement Theology'.[2] I share his concern for integrating these three elements in atonement theology and agree that if one is undermined and/or misunderstood, our grasp of Jesus' death is confounded. At certain points, however, I believe that greater clarity is needed. The aim of this response is not to proffer an analysis of McLellan's essay, but rather to move toward more robust conceptions of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation by using his paper as a starting point.

1. Summary of McLellan's Article

At the heart of McLellan's proposal is the conviction that 'justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation are three indispensable elements in good human relationships and in the production of a peaceful society' and therefore are 'essential elements in atonement theology' (p. 15; cf. p. 5). He suggests that 'justice without forgiveness cannot produce reconciliation' while forgiveness without justice compromises 'the

1 I am also indebted to Bob Fischer for numerous suggestions and to Don McLellan for his original article, continued charitable discussion, and friendship.

2 *ERT* 29 (2005): pp. 4-15.

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whole concept of forgiveness' (p. 5). For justice to be effected, sin must be punished: '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' (p. 9, italics original). Justice, on this view, is essentially retributive punishment; it is repaying the wrongdoer in proportion to his/her crime. As McLellan observes, 'there is a natural inclination to regard *lex talionis* as the epitome of justice' (p. 9).

Yet McLellan's notion of justice appears to be in tension with his definition of forgiveness: 'To forgive is to waive the right to see the offender punished' and its effect 'is to waive the penalties' (p. 11). Forgiveness, as a removal of penalties, and justice, as an enforcing of said penalties, conflict. Seemingly aware of this tension, he states that there are 'a number of quite serious ethical problems' with forgiveness (p. 11), arguing that forgiveness 'must be a very careful process' and is 'not to be dispensed mindlessly, lest the offence actually become trivialised' (p. 12). While he does not concentrate on how both can operate in the cross, he is at pains to preserve his sense of justice, safeguarding forgiveness from becoming a process that dismisses the necessity of retribution.

Like many,[3] McLellan concludes that in the atonement Jesus 'absorbs the wickedness of his tormentors without any demand for retribution' and suffers 'the wrath of God which would have been expected in retribution' (p. 15). Jesus suffers the punishment due as a result of sin and therefore justice is upheld. This enables God to remove the penalties (forgive) from those who accept this offer and are thereby reconciled to God through Christ. If God simply forgave sin without requiring retribution, his law would be trivialized and justice would remain unsatisfied. Since we can assume that this would be unacceptable in any society, there is good reason to believe that it is unacceptable for God as well. Therefore the cross is a demonstration not only of God's forgiveness, but also of how serious God takes the law and justice. For atonement to be real it must include both justice and forgiveness, both punishment and pardon, without which reconciliation cannot be accomplished.

Justice on the above view is basically *lex talionis*. As McLellan notes, just penalties 'would appear to require that some effort be made by the perpetrator of the offence to compensate the injured party' (p. 9) and 'appear to require… that in some way the

3 Notably, J. I. Packer, 'What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution', *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): pp. 3-45; John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986); David Peterson ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); Simon Gathercole, 'The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement', *SBET* 21 (2003): pp. 152-165; and Hans Boersma in both his 'Eschatological Justice and the Cross: Violence and Penal Substitution', *Theology Today* 60 (2003): pp. 186-99; and his recent book, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

offender experience what the victim experienced' (p. 10). Indeed, 'whatever the penalties, justice *requires* that they be carried out' (p. 10, italics added). Thus, in the cross, Christ must suffer the divine retribution so that forgiveness can be offered. Without this, the atonement is unjust.

2. Areas of Concern

While, as will be apparent below, I am in full agreement with McLellan that Jesus bears sin in his person without demanding retribution and thus offers forgiveness, I am hesitant to accept his account. There are three concerns I have with his essay. First, by trading heavily on the idea of retributive punishment, McLellan skews divine justice into merely a principle of punishment. This reduction forces forgiveness outside the scope of God's justice.

Understanding forgiveness as separated from and subsequent to justice causes the second complaint: by construing justice as simply a matter of retribution, McLellan makes God's mercy hostage to his justice.[4] In other words, there is an assumption that God's justice must be satisfied *prior* to God's bestowal of forgiveness. As Kevin Vanhoozer admits, 'the penal substitutionary model of atonement presupposes a divine "economy" in which God distributes a particular resource (forgiveness) only after the appropriate payment (Jesus' death).'[5] This makes God's justice primary and something to which his love/mercy is subordinate.

Finally, the logic of retribution is incompatible with the logic of substitution. Retributive punishment holds that the *offender* must suffer the same amount of pain/burden s/he inflicted upon the victim. As Mark Tebbit explains, 'the core concept of… retribution is that of desert, indicating the principle that punishment should be given to people according to what they justly deserve, rather than to what we may feel is necessary for purposes of deterrence or rehabilitation.'[6] Robert Nozick makes clear the utilitarian nature of this view: 'According to the retributive theory, the punishment deserved is $r\ X\ H$, where H is the amount of harm (done or intended) and r is the person's degree of responsibility for bringing about H.'[7] And as McLellan himself says, 'offenders must somehow feel the pain of their crimes and misdemeanors in their own persons' (p. 10).

4 Note Boersma, 'Eschatological Justice', p. 189: 'If justice always means strict retribution…then little room is left for mercy and forgiveness.'

5 'The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats, and Gifts', pp. 367-404 in Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III eds., *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 372.

6 *Philosophy of Law: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 166.

7 *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 62. Retributive punishment is not simply 'withdrawal of certain rights and/or privileges from a wrongdoer' as Steven L. Porter, 'Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution', *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004): pp. 228-241, p. 234 suggests.

Indeed, the purpose of punishment is to force the offender to suffer for his/her wrongdoing.[8] Yet, even if Jesus suffers the proper punishment on behalf of sinners, justice still goes on unsatisfied since the *offenders* have not experienced the pain of their offence (cf. p. 10). In fact, substitution only seems to *exacerbate* justice in the retributive sense since the victim is bearing the offence twice while the offender is absolved from suffering his/her due punishment. Thus, justice, in the retributive sense, appears to be absent when an innocent substitute suffers on behalf of the guilty.

In light of these difficulties, I want to step back and reconsider whether or not justice might be broad enough to include the act of forgiveness. Following McLellan's methodology, I will examine the function of justice in society by highlighting contemporary legal and political philosophy. I will then suggest that forgiveness can legitimately be understood as an act of justice. As a just act, forgiveness is adequate for appropriately dealing with both sin and sinners, yet it does so redemptively, not retributively. Ultimately, sinners are dealt with within the context of reconciliation in which forgiveness is appropriated and sinners are transformed into saints.

3. Justice: Right Relationships

Obviously this is not the place to conduct a full-orbed analysis of justice as a concept. Instead, I will call attention to a few major theorists, suggesting that their common intuition is that justice is a principle for maintaining right relationships between persons. Having suggested that 'right relationships' is the common characteristic, it becomes plausible to view forgiveness, as an act that restores right relationships, as an act of justice.

Justice is at the core of any properly functioning society, being fundamental to its health and governance. No society can exist without some concept of what are ethically acceptable interactions between its members. Being integral to the peace and well-being of society, when justice is breached the community is disrupted and becomes anxious for restoration. Frequently thought of as a basic principle that determines ethics and right relationships between members of society, simply put, justice could be defined as 'each getting what he or she is due'.[9]

8 Paul Jensen, 'Forgiveness and Atonement', *SJT* 46 (1993): pp. 141-59 suggests, poorly in my view, that punishment does not necessarily entail that the offender suffer the punishment. Leaving aside the question about whether this is the case, I ask *what does punishment accomplish if it is not leveled against the offender?* It would seem to make satisfaction arbitrary since it does not matter that the actual offender suffers punishment. On the other hand, Jerome Hall, 'Biblical Atonement and Modern Criminal Law,' *Journal of Law and Religion* 1 (1983): pp. 279-295 points out that there are notions of 'collective responsibility' in both ancient and modern law. Yet, all the cited examples are ones in which the person sentenced is actually connected to and/or responsible for the wrongdoing.

9 Brad W. Hooker, 'Justice', pp. 456-57 in Robert Audi ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 456.

However, justice is much more than this. Plato, for example, who understands justice to be the core virtue, contends that when each member of society performs that for which they are properly suited (i.e. what they have the skill to do), society will function in harmony and the values of communal life will be actualized. This harmony amidst virtuous societal relationships is for Plato, justice. Aristotle, in similar vein, sees this harmony expressed in law and civic duty. '"The just"… means that which is lawful and which is equal or fair, and "the unjust" means that which is illegal and that which is unequal or unfair.'[10] Justice is the pinnacle virtue in that it is exhibited *in relation to others and for their well-being*.

Following Aristotle somewhat, Paul Ricoeur posits that justice 'is based on a relation of distance from the other, just as originary as the relation of proximity to the other person offered through his face and voice'.[11] Defining ethics as 'the wish for a good life', he explains that justice 'is an integral part of the wish to live well… in just institutions [which] arises from the same level of morality as do the desire for personal fulfillment and the reciprocity of friendship'.[12] In other words, justice presupposes a relationship of distance between persons. This distance is mediated by the institutions which ensure justice. Justice for Ricoeur is the existence of right relationships through societal institutions.

For the above philosophers, justice is connected to ethics and the search for societal harmony. Others, however, emphasize that justice is something that society *agrees* upon which establishes laws and mores (e.g. a constitution). For example, John Rawls argues that his famous dictum, 'justice as fairness' expresses 'the idea that the principles of justice are *agreed* to in an initial situation that is fair'.[13] Rawls argues that in the 'original position', members behind the 'veil of ignorance' would unanimously choose 'justice as fairness', i.e. Rawls' theory, meaning that everyone would be situated as equals, receiving an equal distribution of rights, resources, status, etc. As 'the first virtue of social institutions', justice is 'a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and… [defining] the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation'.[14]

To breach justice is to enter into a wrongful relationship with both victim and society. When injustice occurs, theories of corrective and punitive justice become relevant. In order to handle an infraction justly, society must determine how to uphold justice in a manner that is itself in accordance with its principle of justice. Both theories seek to regain a right relationship among victim, victimizer, and society at large.

10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham in Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 257.

11 *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), p. xiii.

12 *The Just*, p. xv.

13 *A Theory of Justice* rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), p. 11, italics added.

14 *Theory of Justice*, pp. 3-4.

In terms of punitive justice, three theories are proffered. *Retributive* justice, the theory McLellan espouses, revolves around the notion of 'desert' which holds that offenders must suffer in proportion to their crime. Next is the *deterrence* theory which maintains that punishments should be calculated so as to discourage the maximum amount of crime. The last theory has a more positive role—for *rehabilitation* theorists punishment exists to reform the guilty individual so that s/he can be restored to society. This theory shifts from the quantitative to the qualitative. At issue is not only how much punishment, but what *type* of punishment is the best for rehabilitation. Offenders need to be reformed rather than repaid.[15]

Corrective justice, on the other hand, focuses on the process of restoring the community. It holds that whatever act would restore society to the state of affairs it experienced prior to the infraction should be performed by the criminal. Connected to the act of restitution, it carries with it the idea of 'repaying one's debt to society'. An appropriate act of corrective justice would be an act that either undoes the crime or adds a certain quality to society that would have the same effect. Obviously no sentence is able to restore perfectly, yet the aim is to compensate society with enough 'good' so that the crime loses its negative impact.

Each of these notions of justice revolves around the maintenance of right relationships between persons. For Plato and Aristotle justice is concerned with ensuring optimal social harmony through individuals doing what they ought. Ricoeur locates justice at the heart of ethics, arguing that it is bound up with the desire to live rightly with others through just institutions. Rawls with his emphasis on equity sees justice as an agreed upon principle where fair relationships are determined, achieved, and maintained. With both corrective and punitive justice, the focus remains upon right relationships.[16] With punitive justice, society seeks to mete out punishment aimed at re-establishing proper relationships amongst society, victim, and offender. Punishment gives the offender what s/he deserves and places him/her in a penal position with respect to victim and society.

In regards to corrective justice, the role of the state is to restore equilibrium, peace, and optimal relations to society. Injustice not only causes harm to individuals, but also disrupts and fragments society. Thus the role of corrective justice is to heal that division and return society to harmony. Justice, therefore, is centred on safeguarding societal interactions from becoming violent, destructive, slavish, manipulative, and unfair. Thus, as a principle that determines fair and proper conduct and how such is maintained, *jus-*

15 For a recent attempt in this vein which is now in its trial run at Red Hook, NY, see David R. Karp, *Community Justice: An Emerging Field* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); and Todd R. Clear and Eric Cadora, *Community Justice* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003).

16 Cf. Clear and Cadora, *Community Justice*, p. 3.

tice is a matter of sustaining right relationships.[17]

4. Forgiveness: Restoring Right Relationships

Before I argue that forgiveness stands within the realm of justice, I want to first address three common misconceptions about forgiveness. First, it must be said that forgiveness is anything but indifference towards injustice. Unfortunately there seems to be widespread suspicion that mere forgiveness trivializes wrongdoing. McLellan notes that 'forgiveness may trivialise the offence' (p. 12). However, properly conceived, it is nothing like simply 'forgetting' about or ignoring evil. One cannot forgive somebody without identifying *who* the wrongdoer is and *what* s/he has done wrong. There is always an assigning of guilt and concession that certain actions are wrong.[18] Furthermore, wrongs are not condoned when forgiven. To condone a wrong action is 'to deny that it is an action that caused… injury, and thus also to deny that there is anything to forgive' whereas to forgive claims that the action did cause harm, yet the victim 'would rather bear the injury than abandon the fellowship that [has been] damaged by [the offender's] action'.[19]

Secondly, forgiveness cannot be reduced to 'pardon'. At the very least, 'divine forgiveness means more than pardon' for forgiveness cleanses the sinner as well as removing punishment.[20] Biblical forgiveness purifies, and as Paul Fiddes notes, 'unlike a mere pardon, seeks to win the offender back into relationship'.[21] It 'is not simply a word of acquittal; nor is it something that merely refers backwards' because forgiveness is a continual and eschatological process.[22] Whereas pardon is an act of legal mercy which has

17 I would argue that this notion is biblical. Indeed, what is at stake between God and man is a *righteous* relationship. See N. T. Wright, 'righteousness', pp. 590-92 in Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer eds., *New Dictionary of Theology: A Concise & Authoritative Resource* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988); Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids/Auckland: Eerdmans/Lime Grove, 2001); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Contours of Justice: An Ancient Call for *Shalom*', pp.107-130 in Lisa Barnes Lampman with Michelle D. Shattuck eds. *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids/Washington: Eerdmans/Neighbors Who Care, 1999).

18 Cf. Miroslave Volf, 'Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment', pp. 27-49 in Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (Radnor: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002).

19 Vincent Brümmer, *Atonement, Christology, and the Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p. 41.

20 Leon L. Morris, 'Guilt and Forgiveness', p. 285 in Ferguson, Wright, and Packer eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*.

21 *Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), p. 16.

22 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 66.

little focus on the relationship between the reprobate and the injured party, forgiveness is a decision made by the latter which *refuses to let an offence prevent fellowship* with the former.

The final concern over forgiveness is whether or not punishment must be meted out before it can be offered. Is it 'unjust' to forgive without first demanding that the 'price be paid'? *Prima facie*, many might be tempted to answer 'no', since punishment is absent from the common experience of forgiveness. Yet many, particularly in terms of God's relationship to humanity, believe that justice must be served first. Conversely, Volf contests the claim that forgiveness is subsequent to justice. It is best to quote him at length:

> Forgiveness outside justice means treating the offender as if he had not committed the offense. Forgiveness after justice means the same—only the demand that justice be satisfied before forgiveness can be given is meant to redress the situation so that one can rightly treat the wrongdoer as if he had not committed the deed. Whereas in the first case forgiveness is the stance of a heroic individual who is 'strong' and 'noble' enough to be unconcerned with the offense, in the second case forgiveness is the stance of a strictly moral individual who shows enough integrity so that after the injustice has been redressed he or she refuses to feel and act vindictively. To forgive outside justice is to make no moral demands; to forgive after justice is not to be vindictive. In both cases it is to treat the offender as if he had not committed the offense or as if it were not his.[23]

He goes on to argue that 'if forgiveness were properly given only after strict justice had been established, then one would *not* be going beyond one's duty in offering forgiveness; one would indeed *wrong* the original wrongdoer if he/she did not offer forgiveness'.[24] In other words, to execute 'justice' before offering forgiveness is nonsensical. The logic of forgiveness implies, as McLellan notes, a refusal to require that wrongs be righted through punishment. What is more, if justice is prior to forgiveness then Paul's statement in Romans 5:8 ('while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'), loses its force. It would appear that the biblical concepts of grace and mercy would be robbed of their profundity.

To think that punishment/justice must be exacted prior to forgiveness is to assert that there is something of which forgiveness is incapable. John Piper represents this well, asserting that 'forgiveness is not enough'.[25] Forgiveness, it is said, does not give the victimizer what s/he deserves and therefore 'justice' remains unfulfilled. But notice, forgiveness is exactly this; it absolves the offender from what s/he deserves. That is why it grips us as it does; its supererogatory character is

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23 'Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice', pp. 40-41, italics original.

24 Ibid., p. 41, italics original. Similarly, Brümmer, *Atonement*, p. 42: 'If full satisfaction has been made or appropriate punishment has been borne, there is nothing left to forgive.'

25 *The Passion of Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), p. 37.

such that it gives where it should take away. It is thus grace.

Take for instance the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) or the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18:23-35). In both cases, forgiveness is offered in the face of a serious infraction without prior dispensing of punishment or requiring payment. According to McLellan, the New Testament pattern of forgiveness, as well as the moral charge it lays, is one where forgiveness is offered without demanding retribution (p. 15). There is no sense that the forgiver must first be 'just'; rather, forgiveness is granted freely (Cf. Mt. 18:22).

Of course, one might reply that there is a disjunct between human forgiveness and divine. For instance, Stott: 'The analogy between our forgiveness and God's is far from being exact' because God is the creator and we are mere humans.[26] Or Michael Horton: 'God cannot simply forgive the way we are enjoined, because unlike us, he is not simply violated personally… , but God's moral character that establishes and upholds the moral order of the cosmos must be sustained.'[27] Yet both Horton and Stott affirm that God commands humans to be and do only that which is true of himself. By arguing that human forgiveness is not analogous to divine, they undercut this position. Instead of special pleading, I believe it is best to see the aforementioned parables as true indicators of the nature of forgiveness, both human and divine.

Above I called attention to the fact that forgiveness can transpire only with an affirmation of justice. As such it is simply not the case that forgiveness undermines justice. Recall the sense of justice sketched above. Justice, I suggested, is a matter of determining and maintaining right relationships between persons. If this proposal is anything near the mark, then it now becomes plausible to view forgiveness as an act of justice. Forgiveness, of course, restores right relationships and thus is within the scope of justice.[28] Therefore, it is inaccurate to contend that God's justice is simply a matter of punishment while his forgiveness is an event outside, something like icing on the cake. There is nothing which must be added to or accomplished prior before forgiveness can be 'just'. God's moral character and cosmic purpose are not undermined by forgiveness.

At this point those who favour the retribution theory might object, arguing that there can be no right relationship in the face of evil without penalty. 'Where there are no penalties… there is no sense of justice', McLellan states (p. 10). But I must ask what it is about retributive punishment that deals with

26 *Cross of Christ*, p. 88.

27 *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), p. 190. Similarly, see Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp. 288-89; and Robert Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 190.

28 Cf. J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 51-52 where he writes that God's justice, righteousness, and holiness crave not for punishment but for the salvation and transformation of the unrighteous sinner, clearly locating forgiveness within the realm of justice.

wrongdoers in a manner that is superior to forgiveness? Why is retribution more just than rehabilitation? Why is making a person suffer for their misdeed more appropriate than offering that person a chance to take responsibility for their evil and reconcile with their victim? In what follows, I will argue that forgiveness, as an act of justice which takes seriously, but redemptively, the reality of evil and human sin, is aimed at transformation; this aim deals adequately and justly with criminals. But first I want to offer one more reason why forgiveness must be seen as an act of justice.

At the beginning of this paper, I pointed out that understanding forgiveness as beyond the scope of justice and arguing that justice must be satisfied prior to forgiveness makes God's justice primary and his mercy subordinate. Theologically this is unacceptable for it would undermine divine simplicity. Inasmuch as forgiveness is an act of God, it is reflective of his person and therefore is 'good' and 'just' in the same way as his 'wrath' toward sin is. It is errant to hold that God's justice flows out of his holiness whereas his mercy flows out of his love.[29] '[T]here is nothing in the Bible about strife of attributes.'[30] God's justice does not demand what forgiveness seeks to release for each attribute is united. Karl Barth puts it well:

> Grace is the very essence of the being of God… This is… the secret of the forgiveness of sins. For this reason the latter does not imply merely a noteworthy episode the scope of which is open to doubt… It meets us, not in spite of, but in and with all the holiness, righteousness and wisdom of God… There is no higher divine being than that of the gracious God, there is no higher divine holiness than that which He shows in being merciful and forgiving sins.[31]

Forgiveness is thus fundamentally 'good' and cannot be construed as in tension with or as an act that could potentially undermine God's justice. This in mind, it would be wrong to think of forgiveness as something completely 'free' and without cost, for God's forgiveness is most potently revealed in the cross. At the cross God in Christ bears the sins against him in his own being. As McLellan points out, 'forgiveness is at a price, and the price is born by the victim'; in the atonement 'God absorb[s] in himself the guilt of the offence against him' (p. 14). I agree entirely; he swallows both sin and, by not directing his wrath outward onto sinners, his wrath against it. Yet on the cross 'the love of God breaks through the wrath of God'[32] for he chooses not to be wrathful towards sinners. In this way, his wrath is not enmity poured out, but rather the internal suffering of anguish from the redemptive decision to love his people in the face of their

29 Cf. Tony Lane, 'The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God', pp. 138-167 in Kevin Vanhoozer ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 63.

30 P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), p. 118.

31 *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 356.

32 Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), p. 520.

evil, rebellion, unfaithfulness, and utter contempt for his will and to bear and bury in Christ their sin. Christ's last breath of air was sin's death gasp; in him sin is finally defeated (Rom. 6; 8:3; Heb. 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:55-57; 2 Tim. 1:10).

When forgiveness is offered the forgiver simultaneously bears in his/her person the offence(s) committed and offers the sinner a chance not to bear their sin. It is thus an act of grace in that it does not redirect the sin back onto the sinner through retributive punishment but rather *takes the sin upon oneself* and bears its burden. As such, forgiveness, unlike punishment, is compatible with the logic of substitution.

Sin aims at destruction and the deprivation of good. The forgiver suffers this violence in his/her person and exhausts its effects.[33] Choosing to forgive is thus the choice to suffer, the choice to bear the evil of sin and thereby to *stop* its parasitic spreading by exhausting its violence in oneself. In enduring sin and exhausting its destructive effects, Christ in the cross submitted himself to evil's ultimate consequence, death. Yet by bearing sin in himself, the death of Christ at the hands of evil is paradoxically the death of evil itself (Col. 2:15). Through love, sin is conquered and condemned (Rom. 8:3). Forgiveness is thus 'an alternative form of power… [which] is found in Christ's cross and resurrection… it is this power that breaks apart the cycles of violence and offers a re-turning of the announcement of God's peace'.[34] There is a metaphysical and expiatory power that love possesses through Christ (1 Cor. 13; Philp. 2:1-11); it is the power to purify sinners and 'overcome evil with good' (Rom. 12:21).

As an act of justice, forgiveness deals adequately with both wrongdoing and the wrongdoer; yet it does so redemptively rather than retributively. In the first place, when forgiveness is offered it stings the offender and pronounces a 'judgment of grace'. Jones argues that this 'judgment of grace' in forgiveness has a clear redemptive bite:

> Christ's forgiveness must be received by us… as a judgment on the destructiveness of our lives… God's forgiveness does not come apart from an acknowledgment of, and confrontation with, human sin and evil. God does not 'overlook' or 'ignore' our destructiveness… Rather, God confronts sin and evil in all of its awfulness… *not* for the purpose of condemning us… [rather] it is for the explicit purpose of healing our—and the world's—wounds (see John 3:16-21). It is a judgment of grace… [which] involves moving initially from a third person stance of *holding* people (or oneself) responsible to a first person stance of *accepting* responsibility… [drawing] us into relationship, enabling and inviting us to remember and claim the past as our own.[35]

33 Cf. Jensen, 'Forgiveness and Atonement', p. 154.

34 Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 97.

35 *Embodying Forgiveness*, pp. 146-47, italics original.

In other words, forgiveness itself has the power to judge, not through punishment, but through a love which awakens one to the evil that one has committed and the love for which one is called. 'Innocence' is the cry from the jailhouse, but in order for forgiveness to be received, the wrongdoer must plead 'guilty' and repent. 'This judgment of grace… aims at transformation—a transformation that the recipients of forgiveness consent to and that therefore calls for repentance.'[36] Forgiveness not only casts light on the darkness of the offence committed, but also calls the evildoer into that light, to participate in the love and grace offered and thereby to renounce evil, hatred, and violence. Forgiveness is the goodness of God which leads to repentance (Rom. 2:44).

5. Reconciliation: A Context of Transformation

'The purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness.'[37] This restoration takes place within the context of reconciliation.[38] Divine forgiveness is transformative, rehabilitative, and redemptive. It not only expiates sin but also restores justice, creating a context in which right relationships can resume and grow. This context enables further sanctification in which ongoing confession and repentance are necessary as God remains faithful to his covenant of forgiveness through Christ. The *forgiveness of Christ* thus creates the context of reconciliation in which sinners are transformed into saints. As sinners are faced with the goodness of God and implanted with his Holy Spirit, they become sanctified and conformed to the image of the divine forgiver, Jesus Christ.

Jones argues that the process of reconciliation is best carried out in the context of the church where its practices and the sacraments transform humans into Christ as they unlearn habits of sin and learn habits of grace. By mending the broken lines of communion, God's forgiveness enables sinners to grow under the light of his Son into holy people who reflect his glory and image throughout his creation.

God's forgiveness not only invites sinners into church and provides them with responsibility in the Kingdom of God, but it also places them within the family of God. The Holy Spirit of adoption transforms cosmic criminals into *filii in filio*. As children of God, sinners receive both God's grace and his discipline which, through the work of the Spirit, transforms them into saints. This transformation enables the restoration of brokenness and the redemption of that which was lost. As reconciled people, sinners are compelled by God's grace to share his forgiveness with others through the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

Just as the cross has both a vertical and horizontal bar, forgiveness is not simply vertical, i.e. relations with God, but horizontal/social as well. This is most apparent in the celebration of the

36 Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 136.

37 Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 5.

38 For a different, but compatible account of what follows, see Colin Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp.173-203. Cf. Stott, *Cross of Christ*, Part IV.

Eucharist whereby God through Christ extends transformative communion in the power of the Spirit to his church. Furthermore, 'Christian forgiveness involves the task of responding to God's forgiving love by crafting communities of forgiven and forgiving people.'[39] Volf puts it well: 'Enmity toward God [is] enmity toward human beings, and enmity toward human beings [is] enmity toward God… Reconciliation involves a turning away from enmity toward people, not just from enmity toward God, and it entails a movement toward a human community, precisely that which was the object of enmity.'[40]

Marilyn McCord Adams suggests that as humans remove this enmity through forgiveness there will be a need for prayer. She writes, 'Christian forgiveness will be imbedded in prayer, because it involves a process of letting go of one's own point of view (regarding the situation, one's self and/or the victim, and the offender) and entering into God's point of view.'[41] Discipline and prayer empower the children of God through the Spirit to be ambassadors of Christ's forgiveness. Forgiveness enables reconciliation and reconciliation transforms sinners into saints, establishing a renewal of divine-human justice, peace, and dignity.

Ultimately, however, reconciliation is a two-way street. It can occur only if the offender receives forgiveness and repents. Those who scorn and reject forgiveness reject not only the restoration of the relationship and their responsibility in evildoing, but also the opportunity to be transformed and reconciled. As the Christian doctrines of final judgment and hell maintain, those who so choose place themselves eternally at odds with God's grace and justice and therefore are given over to destruction.

6. Conclusion

As an action that is intimately bound up with his love as well as his justice, forgiveness is an outworking of God's character. Justice, which includes much more than retributive punishment, is concerned with maintaining right(eous) relationships. As such, justice can be appropriately recognized as not merely a matter of giving someone what they deserve, but giving someone what they *do not deserve* (forgiveness). By reducing justice to a principle of punishment and forgiveness to legal pardon, the atonement becomes a balancing act between these two elements. Yet when justice and forgiveness are understood in the way which I have outlined here, the atonement can be understood as God's forgiving justice and righteous reconciliation.

The aim of forgiveness is not to redirect sin back onto the sinner, but to bear it in oneself and exhaust its power. It is the victim's radical choice not to let an offence prevent fellowship. This creates a context in which transformation and further purification can transpire. By exhausting the effects of sin in his person, Christ suffers and dies. This act ushers in the

39 L. Gregory Jones, 'Crafting Communities of Forgiveness', *Interpretation* 54 (2000): pp. 121-134.

40 'The Social Meaning of Reconciliation', *Interpretation* 54 (2000): pp. 158-172, p. 166.

41 'Forgiveness: A Christian Model', *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): pp. 277-304, p. 294.

Kingdom of God and creates Christ's church, providing the context in which the cross can be appropriated, sinners can be transformed, and justice becomes an already/not-yet reality. Reconciliation then is an eschatological reality that is established in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Indeed, 'instead of pursuing rightful claims of justice against the enemy, God—through Christ's death—sought to justify the unjust and overcome the opponents' enmity—not to condone their injustice and affirm their enmity, but to open up the possibility of doing justice and living in peace, whose ultimate shape is a community of love'.[42]

While it may be 'natural' to respond retributively toward sinners, *it is supernatural to respond with forgiveness*: 'To err is human; to forgive is divine.' Perhaps the reason why forgiveness without retribution is so hard to comprehend and embody is because it operates on the same logic as the call to love enemies, to do good to those who do evil, to be last in order to be first. Perhaps we love justice only when it is for us, for our cause, and not for sinners. As H. R. Mackintosh majestically and profoundly challenges:

> [The reason we cannot understand the atonement] *is that we are not good enough*; we have never forgiven a deadly injury at a price like this, *at such a cost to ourselves as came upon God in Jesus' death. We fail to comprehend such sacrificial love because it far outstrips our shrunken conceptions of what love is and can endure.* Let the man be found who has undergone the shattering experience of pardoning, nobly and tenderly, some awful wrong to himself, still more to one beloved by him, and he will understand the meaning of Calvary better than all the theologians in the world.[43]

42 Volf, 'Social Meaning', p. 167.

43 H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), p. 193, italics added. Cf. Philp. 2:1-11.

Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

A Brief Rejoinder by Don McLellan

Throughout the history of Christian doctrine, the theology of atonement has been difficult. Paul wrote that the message of the cross is 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1:23), and it does not get any easier as the years roll on. The advent of liberalism in the 19th century saw a wholesale rejection of the centrality of the cross in human salvation. The idea that the Son of God must bleed and die on a cross to demonstrate the love of God was repugnant to them, and even more repugnant was the idea that Jesus must suffer vicariously for our sins.

The advent of the third millennium has seen renewed interest in atonement theology. Some evangelicals are expressing dissatisfaction with the con-

cept of penal substitution as articulated by the likes of John Stott and Leon Morris. Some are openly repudiating penal substitution. The present article by James Merrick is an example of an evangelical thinker who is uncomfortable with the idea of punishment/penalty, and of course this has implications for his reading of the cross.

It would be easy to locate Merrick's thesis among the moral influence theories, but I think it represents a new departure, a new way of looking at the death of Christ that hopefully he will develop into a full scale book. The essence of what he is proposing has been touched on in some of the less technical literature on forgiveness, especially works that have arisen from the personal struggles of Christians to forgive after horrendous mistreatment. Debbie Morris[1] and Corrie ten Boom[2] are two who come to mind. This way sees forgiveness not as an act of weakness but of power, which of itself has reconciling force. Rather than calling this a version of Moral Influence, perhaps we could coin the term 'Moral Authority'.

In 'Moral Influence', the loving act of Jesus in giving his life causes the sinner to respond in sorrow and repentance. Its limitation as a theory has always been that giving one's life makes sense only where another life is in mortal peril, and if it is not, the sacrifice is senseless. Moral Influence survives only in the presence of an implied penal substitution.

In 'Moral Authority', the loving act of Jesus in forgiving those who crucified him is an act of power. Those who mocked him demanded that he show his power by coming down from the cross, but the words 'Father, forgive them…' demonstrated an infinitely greater power of a different order. His love for his tormentors and his plea for forgiveness overwhelms them, so that the centurion cries out, 'Surely this man is the Son of God!' This is moral authority, and when allowed to take its course it may lead to reconciliation.

If we approach the question anthropologically, we can find plenty of examples of how a determination to forgive has ultimately broken through aggression and enmity, has humbled the oppressor, and has led to reconciliation. When we extrapolate this theologically, we have a reconciling cross that functions on the determination of Jesus to forgive his oppressors. This is a beautiful picture, and one which I hope evangelists will take up in their preaching. Merrick makes a great contribution here.

A major part of Merrick's article focuses on what he sees as a failure of logic in the idea of penal substitution. Specifically, Merrick challenges whether forgiveness is subsequent to justice (i.e. dependant upon punishment) rather than integral to justice. That forgiveness is integral to justice is one of his important points and, I think, a sound one. I appreciate that he corrects the impression my paper may have left, that justice is only about punishment, and that he demonstrates the correspondence of *dikaiosune* with *shalom*. But it is difficult to reconcile the NT focus on the death of Christ as being 'for our sins' with Merrick's dis-

1 Debbie Morris (with Gregg Lewis), *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* (Zondervan, 1998).

2 Corrie ten Boom (with John and Elizabeth Sherrill), *The Hiding Place* (Chosen Books, 1983).

cussion here.

Some of the important biblical metaphors, such as ransom, redemption, purchase, sacrifice, and purification, belong to a different conceptual subset from reconciliation; and while the theologians he quotes make impressive arguments, if penal substitution fails the test of logic, it could only be said that the Bible fails it, so clear in my view is its declaration. We were ransomed, redeemed, purchased and purified by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and the possibility of reconciliation is thus effected. Merrick's thesis, I suggest, would require that we dispense with all these metaphors. The significance of the cross does not depend on its location on a time line. It does not happen 'prior' to God's forgiveness, as Merrick suggests our view proposes, but is absolutely integral to it. It is the grounds and basis of it; it is simultaneous with it.

Theology using anthropological methodology is risky, even though it is a useful and legitimate approach. The risk is that, starting from the human experience and culture angle, we find the Scriptures saying things our culture disapproves of, and so want to steer around them. Some of the evangelicals who are repudiating penal substitution find extremely creative ways of reinterpreting the New Testament. Hermeneutics is an inexact science of course, and we are duty bound to respect genuine new insights into NT interpretation. But when the motivation for a new interpretation appears to be a more convenient theology, we should exercise great caution. Evangelical theology must arise from the divine revelation of the Scriptures, and as fallen humankind we should expect sometimes not to like what we find there. But we must adjust to the Bible, not adjust the Bible to us.

Nevertheless, to maintain the anthropological approach for a moment, the question Merrick's article raises is, Can there be justice in a fallen world without punishment? There is a natural aversion to punishment, and this is sometimes reflected in our culture even to the extent of regarding it as barbaric. Here in Queensland Australia, we have no 'jails'. A decade or two ago some criminologists managed to persuade our state government to give our jails the rather Orwellian title 'correctional centres'. Convicted felons no longer were to do 'hard time', but were to undergo 'rehabilitation' in relatively nice surroundings, the razor wire on the perimeters being practically the only indication that they were in custody. So a rapist may be sentenced to ten years 'correction', and good behaviour see him released in three. A murderer may be sentenced to life—there is no death penalty in Australia—and 'life' becomes as little as ten years if the parole board thinks he is rehabilitated. But the result is a growing disquiet in the general population. The time the judge stipulates in sentencing is a farce, for few ever serve it fully, and victims constantly ask, 'Where is justice?'

Punishment, the payment of penalties, is an idea that springs naturally to the human psyche, and the Bible nowhere repudiates it. Indeed, while the word 'punish' is not used often in the Scriptures, the concept is clearly there. It begins with *lex talionis* in Exodus 21:24, where the offender must suffer in exact proportion to the suffering caused. In the temple cultus, it is

implied in the substitution of the animal, which suffers so that the sinner may go free. Furthermore, though there have been recent attempts to reinterpret Isaiah chapter 53, the passage clearly presents foundation concepts for the NT doctrine of atonement; the word is plain: 'Upon him was the punishment that made us whole…' (Isaiah 53:5 NRSV).

Fifty or so passages in the NT express the idea that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor. 15:3). He 'gave his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28); he is the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29); God 'purchased the church of God with the blood of his own son' (Acts 20:28); 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8); 'In him we have redemption through his blood' (Eph. 1:7); 'Christ… offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins' (Heb. 10:12); 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24). These are not mere proof texts. They are expressions of the central theme of biblical theology. There is no salvation apart from the act of God in sending Jesus to die on our behalf. Sin is that serious.

Atonement theology, like all theologies, must be revisited and restated in every generation. But if we are to continue with our evangelical insistence on the ultimate authority of the Bible, we must not abandon the centrality of the cross. And the most straightforward way of reading the cross is that there Jesus died on our behalf. There are many other ways to see its significance, as John Stott's seminal work *The Cross of Christ* shows so eloquently, but the central one remains: 'Christ died for our sins'. To do away with penal substitution is to mess with the heart of soteriology.

So thank you, James Merrick, for great new insights into the cross, but penal substitution, for all its unresolved and frustrating issues, remains in my view the *sine qua non* of biblical soteriology.