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Recovering the Scandal of the  
Cross: Atonement in New  
Testament and Contemporary  
Contexts

Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker

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Joel Green, Dean at Asbury Theological Seminary, and Mark Baker, Assistant Professor Theology and Mission at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, call for a fresh interpretation of the atonement. The book has a two part goal: to show the inadequacies of the penal substitutionary theory and to urge contextualization of the message of the cross in culturally relevant ways.

In chapter 1, the authors suggest that penal substitution does not find adequate support in scripture and limits the wealth of imagery about the death of Jesus in the New Testament. Scripture does not show an angry God who needs to be appeased by an atoning sacrifice but a gracious God who initiates relationship in love demonstrated on the cross. The authors spend several chapters (2-4) surveying how the New Testament writers creatively applied and reinterpreted the significance of Jesus' suffering and resurrection for the various situations faced by the early church. Particularly insightful in this section is how the writers of the New Testament were not bound by one particular interpretation but were free to apply a variety of metaphors or terms that spoke to the needs of their audience. 'The impression with which we are left is that

the death of Jesus is an historical event of such profundity that we can only do it violence by narrowing its meaning to one interpretation or by privileging one interpretation over all the others' (p. 86).

How one views the nature of the atoning God can be incarnated in human relationships. Some feminist theologians contend that penal substitution leads to the view that 'God is the patriarch who punishes his son in order to satisfy God's own parental honor and sense of justice' (p. 91). At issue is the use of metaphor. No atonement metaphor used in the New Testament can stand alone or be taken to logical extremes. The authors suggest a two-fold task: to 'grapple with appropriating language suitable to communicating the profundity of Jesus' salvific work to people outside the Christian faith as well as those inside the church', and to do this 'in ways that do justice to the biblical representation of the work of Jesus' (p. 109). Theologians must realize that the metaphors of the New Testament may not be relevant for today and perceive *how* these writers adopted and adapted these metaphors for their own contexts. This challenges us to be creative in proclaiming the cross and not be satisfied with parochial and narrow views of the atonement.

Chapter 5 provides historical examples of how culture influences one's theory of atonement. The first is the *Christus Victor* model, advocated especially during the post-apostolic period by Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa, that posits the cross as a victory over the powers of evil. This model was effective because it addressed the cosmology and needs of the people of that period. The second is the satisfaction model of Anselm, where Christ's sacrificial death satisfies the human debt of sin owed to God. The strength of Anselm's approach was that it addressed the feudal

system of his day but in this lay the weakness, for it 'too easily associated God's character with practice with those of feudal lords' (p. 134). A third is Abelard's moral influence theory which sees 'Jesus' life and death as a demonstration of God's love that moves sinners to repent and love God' (p. 137). The problem with Abelard's approach is that it is too abstract, individualistic and exclusive of other approaches. The need for the cross is lost in overconfidence in the human ability to find salvation. The last is the penal substitutionary theory, the dominate model in the West. The authors look at this theory through the theology of Charles Hodge who argued that God's justice demands the punishment of sins which was placed upon Jesus who took our place upon the cross. Among the many problems with this approach include its use of terms foreign to the Bible, diminishing the significance of Jesus' resurrection, the limited concept of sin as transgression of law; it also leads to glorifying suffering and tolerance of abuse. It is too easy to conclude that 'Jesus came to save us from God' (p. 150).

In addition, the penal substitutionary theory does not adequately speak to contemporary needs, in particular non-western cultures. Using the shame-based interpretation from Japan of C. Norman Kraus, the authors show how on the cross, Jesus took upon himself the alienating shame of sin and revealed God's authentic image for humanity (ch. 6). Next, the authors dialogue with feminist theologian Darby Kathleen Ray who reinterprets the *Christus Victor* motif in an effort to correct the possible abuses from the penal substitution approach (ch. 7). The authors then survey several models that effectively communicate the power of the cross to contemporary audiences from various

parts of the world (ch. 8).

In their final chapter (9), the authors give a theological agenda for renewed appropriation of the cross for contemporary contexts. They suggest redefining sin to take seriously the complex issue of the human condition in all its facets, engaging culture with the message of the cross while remaining faithful to scripture, and realizing the limitations of any theory of the atonement.

The book is relatively easy to read with a limited use of technical terms, and carefully documented with scripture citations and occasional footnotes in conversation with the latest research. The book returns at various points to the basic theses which at times becomes repetitive but also aids the non-specialist reader. This book will especially be useful for those who minister in multi-cultural congregations or in missions settings where the gospel message needs contextualized. The authors could have expanded their thoughts at many points but provide a good introduction and catalyst for further dialogue.

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### Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style

Roger Standing

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*Reviewed by John Sweetman, Malyon College, Brisbane, Australia*

*Finding the Plot* introduces one of the major recent developments in preaching, the use of narrative style in the presentation of sermons. Standing argues that 'using a narrative style is not only an appropriate way to open the Scriptures

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