

What Story do We Tell?: Two Foundational Stories of the Cross and How They Affect Evangelism¹

By Mark D. Baker

A Japanese pastor asked Norman Kraus, a Mennonite missionary, “Why did Jesus have to die?” The pastor immediately clarified that he knew the answer – that Jesus had to die to pay the penalty for sins that God required – but that he did not find that explanation satisfying. Kraus pondered the question over the course of several months. He concluded that the traditional penal substitution explanation of the atonement was intelligible in a guilt-based society such as ours, which understood wrongs as an infraction against a legal or moral code. This guilt could be remedied through punishment. However, that same explanation would feel foreign and unintelligible in a shame-based society like Japan where both the wrong committed and the remedy are understood and felt in more relational ways. The wrongdoer is ridiculed or removed and hence feels alienation and shame more than guilt.²

Recently a Japanese friend recounted to me how he became a Christian. He was a university student following the path he desired and the one expected of him. Yet his life lacked meaning and purpose. He had never gone to a church, but visited one hoping to find more meaning for his life. The warmth and acceptance he felt there drew him back. He continued to attend. Although the pastor explained to him the plan of salvation, how to become a Christian, it was hard to comprehend. The concepts of guilt and sin were foreign to him. The pastor, however, kept explaining it to him. Finally after a few months he did come to understand that he was a sinner, that Jesus died for his sins and that he could receive forgiveness. After listening to his story I asked my friend, “Wouldn’t it have been wonderful if the pastor would have described salvation to you in a way that connected with concepts and experiences you would have readily understood—like shame and honor? How might things change if rather than trying to teach Japanese how to understand the cross and salvation using concepts and terminology of guilt and justice that are foreign to them we instead talked about the cross in terms of shame?”

I tell these two stories not to say that talking about the cross in terms of freedom from guilt is wrong, but to communicate that it is more intelligible in some contexts than in others. To understand the concepts, however, is not the only issue. What if a person is not suffering a burden of guilt? I recently watched a number of video clips of people using a particular method of evangelism.³ In contrast to the above stories the North American and European people in these videos readily understood the courtroom imagery the evangelists used and the talk of falling short of moral perfection, of guilt, and of punishment. They understood the concepts, but they were not feeling guilty. They were not looking for a solution to a problem they did not have. It impressed me that rather than sharing the gospel in a way that connected with people’s felt needs

¹ This is a revised version of an article originally published as “Two Foundational Stories of the Cross: How They Affect Evangelism,” *Mission Focus Annual Review* 15 (2007): 26-38.

² Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2011), 192–209. See also: C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciples’ Perspective* (Scottsdale, Penn: Herald, 1990).

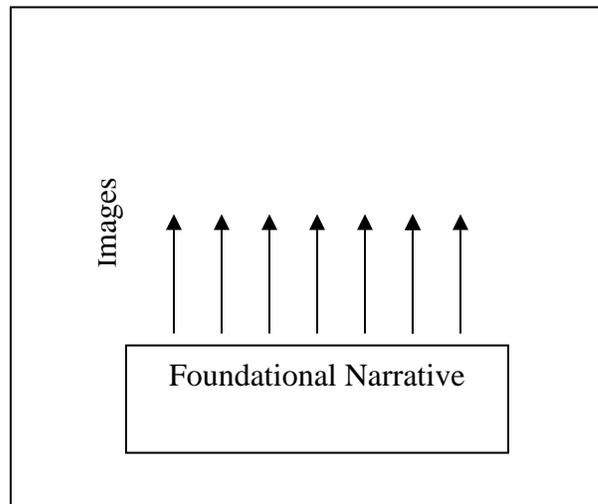
³ <http://www.wayofthemaster.com/watchwitnessing.shtml#> accessed 10/5/07

or pressing questions the evangelists used a strategy to create a sense of need. They worked at making the person feel guilty so that the evangelist could then present the person with the solution to that problem of feeling guilty.

All humans are alienated from God. Living in that state of sin produces symptoms in their lives. What happens, however, when our evangelism addresses a symptom they are not experiencing? Watching the videos left me with questions similar to the ones I asked my Japanese friend. Imagine how different it might be if rather than working to try to move people to a point where they feel guilty the evangelists instead asked questions that would help them present the gospel in a way that connected with needs and longings the people already have?

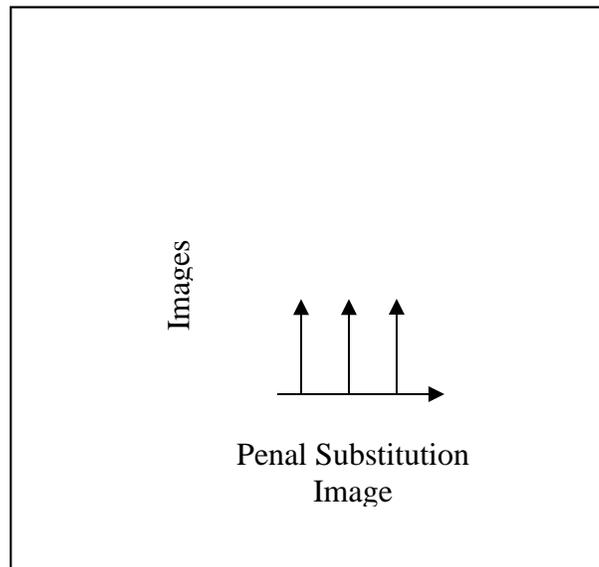
A number of factors may contribute to an articulation of the gospel that hinders understanding or connection. One contributing factor is viewing the penal substitution model of atonement as being the one and only explanation of how the cross provides salvation. In the New Testament, legal language of justification is one of a number of images used to proclaim the saving significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Yet this one image has, in the form of penal substitution theory, become for many the foundational narrative of how the cross saves. When someone only has this one tool in their gospel toolbox it leads to situations like those we have just observed.

New Testament writers use a variety of images and motifs to proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection, including: redemption, reconciliation, victory/triumph, justification, sacrifice, and ransom.⁴ They use different images for differing pastoral situations and for different audiences or contexts. Also, however, they use a diversity of images because no one image can capture the full meaning of the cross.



⁴ For a more complete list and description see: John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986). I thank Steve Bomar and Rafael Zaracho for help with the diagrams.

A foundational story is broader and deeper than an image. The various images, represented by arrows in the diagram, build off of, or find a place within the foundational story of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation. In essence, however, the penal substitution theory has taken one image and sought to make it the foundational story. It is like taking one of the arrows from the diagram above and turning it sideways as if it was foundational as in the diagram below.



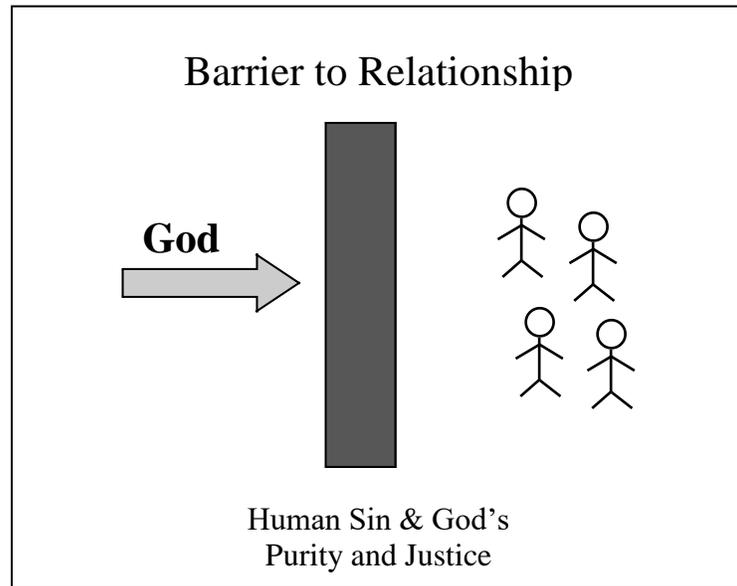
It will not have the breadth to provide space for all the images. Although there will be room for the sideways arrow to support a few other images, they will end up communicating something very similar to the image used as foundation. One image does not have the depth of a true foundational narrative to support diverse imagery. No foundational narrative of atonement can fully capture the depth of the cross, but, in terms of the toolbox metaphor, we should work to have a foundation, or toolbox, that will provide us with a rich variety of images, or tools, we can use in evangelism.

It is a mistake to present the penal substitution model as the only explanation of the atonement in a way that pushes aside or distorts other images and models of the atonement. Some forms of the penal substitution model, especially as expressed at the popular level, contain a number of other problems that lead many to question whether penal substitution should be included in the toolbox at all. I will not argue that point in this article, but rather focus on proposing an alternative foundational narrative to the one supplied by penal substitution theory.⁵

⁵ For a description and assessment of the penal substitution theory see: Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, especially chapter 5. An important point to clarify is that substitutionary atonement is a broader category than penal substitution. The critique in the early part of this paper focuses not on substitutionary atonement, but the specific type of substitutionary atonement called penal substitution.

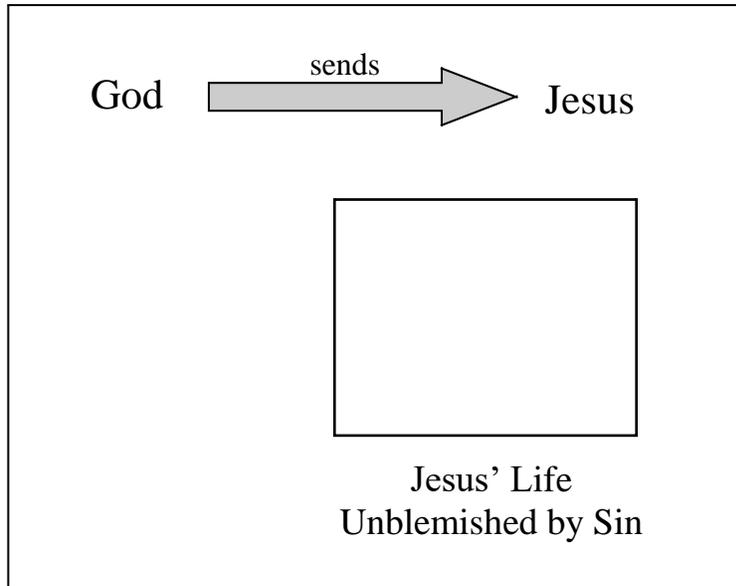
First, however, I want to present the foundational narrative produced by the penal substitution theory as it is commonly articulated at the popular level, and reflect on its fruits.

Penal Substitution as the Foundational Story of the Atonement⁶

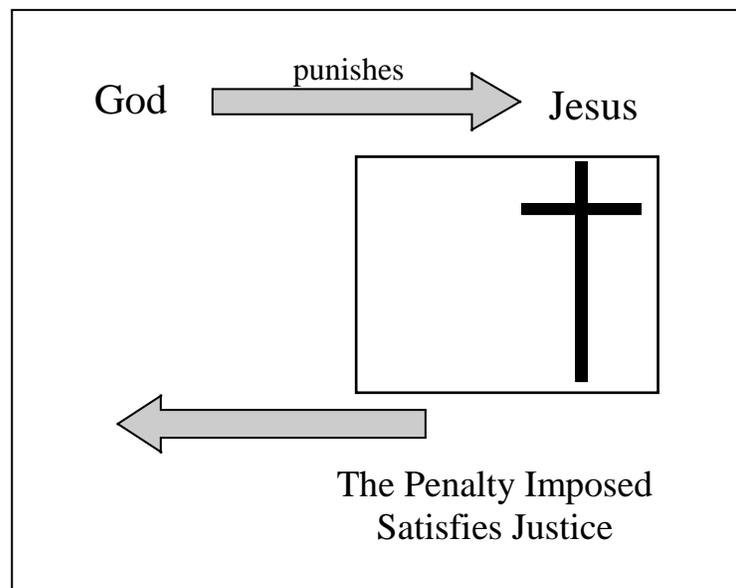


Humans are sinful and our sin is a barrier to a relationship with God because that would compromise God's purity and holiness. Because God is a just God and justice demands appropriate punishment for misdeeds God cannot simply pardon or forgive our sins.

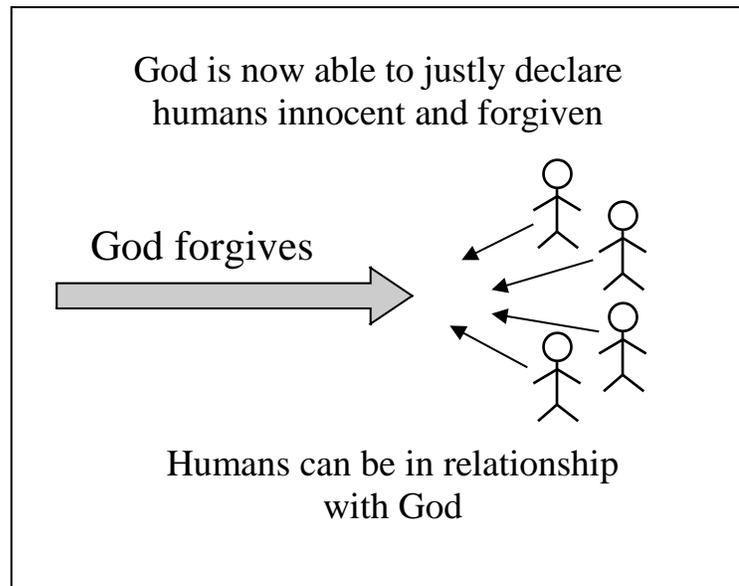
⁶ I want to underline what I stated in the previous sentence. This section is meant to communicate the narrative of penal substitution as it is commonly articulated at the popular level. It also corresponds with many scholarly articulations of penal substitution theory. There are, however, articulations of penal substitution theory that are much more nuanced and differ in ways from this summary.



God sends Jesus to earth to remedy this situation by living a sinless life and.....



dying in our place. Because Jesus lived without sin he is able to offer to stand in our place and take the punishment we deserve—death. Through punishing Jesus on the cross God has imposed the penalty justice demands.



Justice has been satisfied, and God is now able to justly declare us innocent and forgive humans. The barrier has been removed; humans now have the possibility of entering into relationship with God if they acknowledge their sin and ask for forgiveness recognizing this possibility has been graciously provided through Jesus' dying in their place.

Assessment

Using simple diagrams like the ones in this article I have told this story to a number of groups, and asked them: What are positives and negatives of using this as the foundational story of how God provides salvation through Jesus' life, death and resurrection? What follows is a list of some of the responses I commonly receive.

Positives

- It takes sin seriously.
- It is clear and logical.
- It is short and easy to understand.
- It is effective in relieving feelings of guilt.

Negatives

- It does not include the resurrection.
- Jesus' life, how he lived, what he did and said, is not part of the story. All the story requires is that he did not sin.
- Salvation is not connected to life and ethics (just freedom from guilt and clean slate).
- It is very individualistic.
- It conflicts with some biblical images of God (for example: Luke 15; II Cor. 5:18).

- It is hard to fit in some biblical atonement imagery, such as victory over powers of death and evil; and with this as the foundational story all images end up being about guilt and individual legal standing (so for instance sacrifice understood through the lens of this story becomes about payment and appeasement).
- It has a limited view of sin (individual moral transgression). Although the problem is severe and significant it is narrow, thus the solution is narrow. In reality the human sin problem is broader and deeper and the solution, the cross, is also broader and deeper.
- It can lead people to separate members of the Trinity (and degenerate to the point of some people thinking that Jesus came to save us from God).
- It can lead to people viewing God as an angry figure who must be appeased.
- It emphasizes retributive punishment over restorative justice and can support the myth of redemptive violence.⁷
- It is difficult to understand in some cultural contexts.
- Its logic is not always intelligible or credible even in N. American or European contexts

This is a significant list of negatives that play out in ways that limit and hinder evangelism. We must stop using this image as a foundational story and instead use a broader foundational story. We need to return New Testament legal language to its rightful place as one image among a constellation of images to proclaim the gospel. In that process we also would do well to take the New Testament legal metaphor out of the familiar setting of our judicial system and attempt to understand it through the lens of a Hebraic understanding of justice.⁸

The Life of Jesus as the Foundational Story of the Atonement⁹

The New Testament proclaims the saving significance of the cross and resurrection through various images and metaphors. It does not provide a unified theory of atonement. Through the ages, however, theologians have offered various theories or models that explain how the cross and resurrection provided salvation. My co-author Joel Green argues convincingly that to settle on one theory is always to lose something.¹⁰ The meaning and the significance of the cross

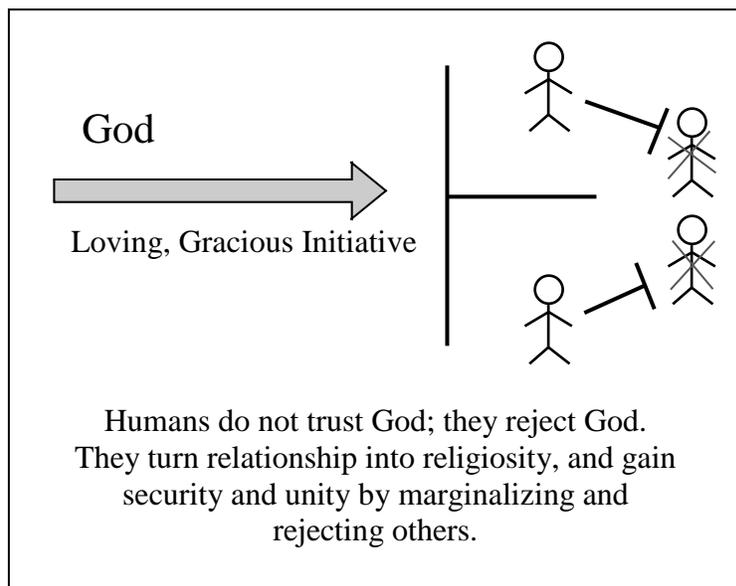
⁷ For an in-depth investigation and discussion of how changing legal and penal practices influenced understandings of the atonement and how articulations of the atonement influence perspectives on and practices of punishment see: Timothy Gorrige, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

⁸ For an explanation of the Hebraic understanding of justice and discussion of implications for interpreting Pauline language of justification see: Mark D. Baker & J. Ross Wagner "Reading Romans in Hurricane-Ravaged Honduras: A Model of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Conversation," *Missiology* 32 (July 2004) 367-383; James D. G. Dunn and Alan Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:1129-33; N. T. Wright, *Justification* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity, 2009).

⁹ This is a revision of a shorter version of this narrative that was published in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 (2007): 26-38.

¹⁰ Green, Joel B., "Kaleidoscopic View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James

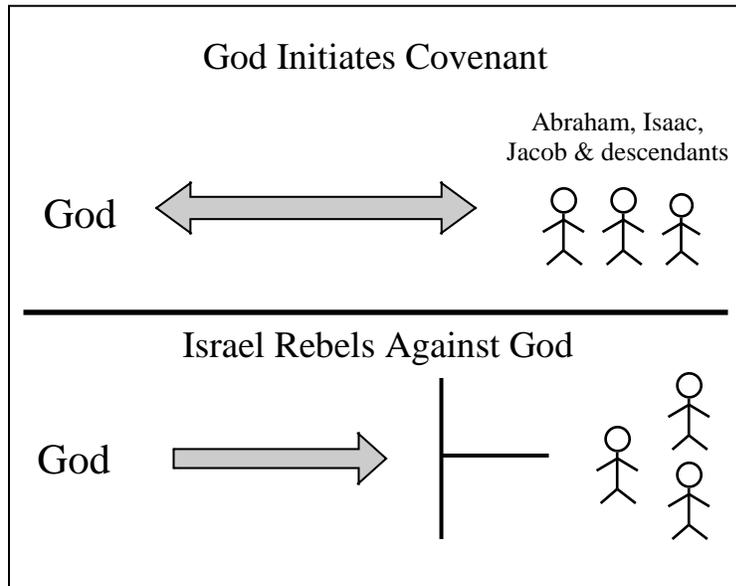
cannot be captured in one theory. I agree, yet I am sympathetic to those who want more than a collection of images and desire a unified explanation of the atonement—a foundation. Seeking that unity through a foundational narrative, I believe, avoids the drawbacks of a theory. For some, this method is a limitation. A narrative does not pull all the strands together in a neat logical way, but it does not leave them hanging either. It weaves the strands together into a tapestry. Of course, other tapestries could be woven. This is *a* foundational narrative, not *the* foundational narrative. Others could weave the threads into a different tapestry. I have chosen to highlight theme of covenant and put Jesus’ life at the center. Rather than developing a theory about the mechanics of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation and building a story to support that theory, I have sought to have Jesus’ life inform the way we understand the cross and resurrection. I have intentionally used the term “foundational story” or “foundational narrative” to emphasize that this is not an image of salvation. I am not seeking to privilege one image over others. This story will support a wide variety of images that highlight and proclaim aspects of the narrative.



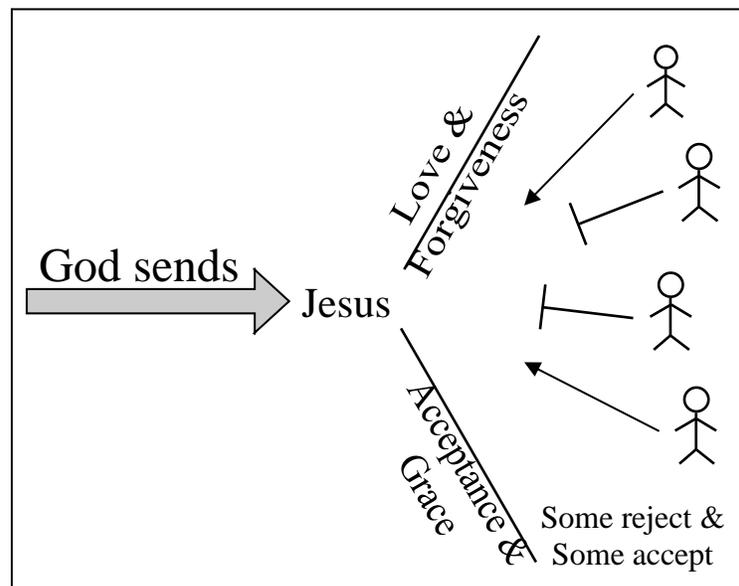
God created the earth and cosmos and pronounced it good. Humans, lovingly created in the image of God, had a special place in creation and a special relationship with God. Humans, however, did not trust God and disobeyed God. God has lovingly taken the initiative toward humans; yet since Eden humans have sought security through a religiosity of human efforts

K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 165–71. See also: Mark D. Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. Michael Gorman lists four problems with traditional atonement theories. 1. They are constructed to stand alone and thus exclude others. 2. They tend to not pull other aspects of theology into their account, making little connection between atonement and ethics, spirituality, ecclesiology, pneumatology and missiology. 3. They are highly individualistic. 4. In focusing on one aspect they end up with a cross that does not do enough (“Effecting the New Covenant,” 31-32).

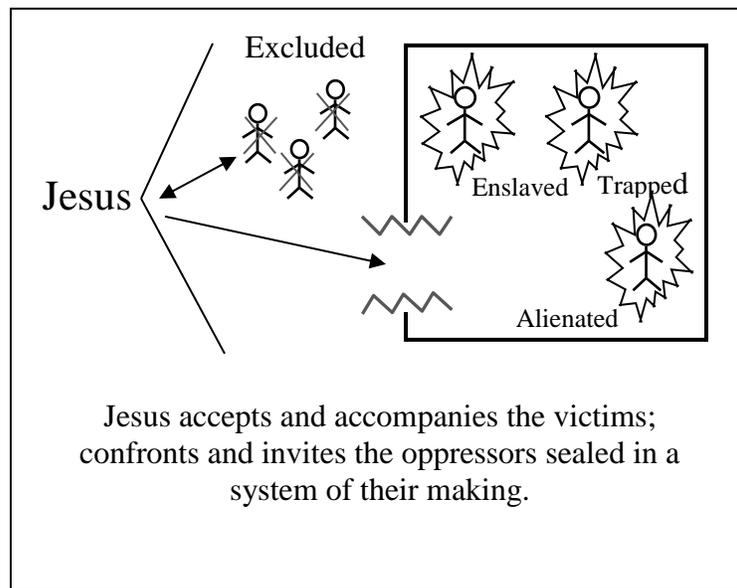
rather than through a relationship with God. They grasped for status and security through putting others down—often violently.



God initiated a special covenantal relationship with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. God promised to bless them and through them bless others. God provided the people of Israel guidance in the forms of laws and prophets as well as priests and a variety of sacrifices. These served as the means of restoring the relationship when they sinned and broke the covenant. Israel, however, repeatedly rebelled against God and their covenant commitments and suffered the consequences of failing to trust and obey God. God, however, remained faithful to them, seeking to heal and restore the broken relationship. At times God punished them with restorative intent and repeatedly bore the pain of their rejection and forgave them.



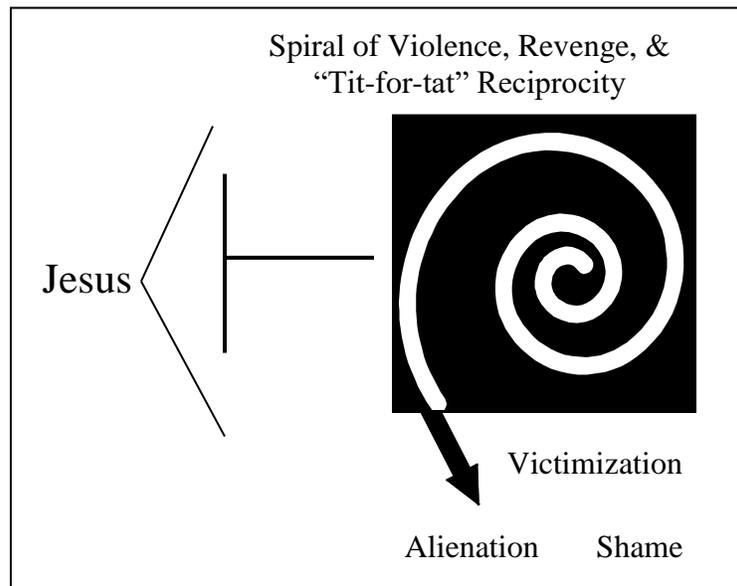
God sent his son Jesus to live out the covenant commitment that Israel had failed to fulfill and to create a new covenant community (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:17-20; 36:23-28). In contrast to other humans, Jesus maintained a relationship of trust and obedience with God the Father, whom he called Abba. Through Jesus God incarnationally continued communicating, through word and deed, love, forgiveness, acceptance, and grace. (In the diagrams the lines extending from the word “Jesus” represent his open arms of loving embrace.) Jesus invited conversion. He invited others to trust and believe that God is a loving God who is for them, to repent and turn from their stance of rejection of God. Jesus challenged them to then follow him in loving God and loving others. Some accepted and some rejected Jesus and his loving invitation.



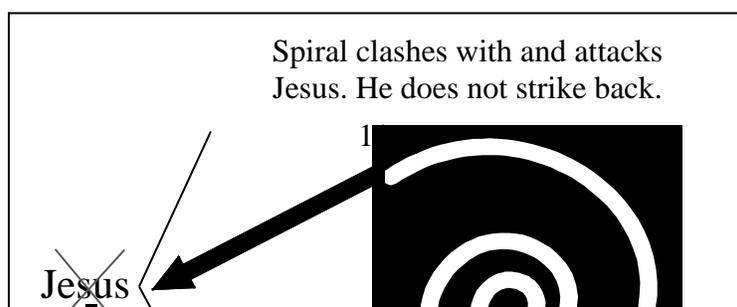
Although the acceptance and mercy offered are unconditional, there are consequences for rejecting the invitation. Those who rejected Jesus’ invitation built their security walls of exclusion even higher. An elementary school playground analogy might help us here. Being part

of the “in” group—those with the most status and privileges—requires dressing in certain ways, acting in certain ways, having a certain level of ability, and being friends with the right people. Imagine, however, if the most popular child comes out one day and says, “things are going to be different on the playground now. We are going to let everyone play—no worries, even the nerds can join us.” What would happen if some said, “No, we don’t want to let others join in”? These excluders would have to work even harder to exclude and maintain their status. In the process they would become even more closed in. So it was with those who rejected Jesus. They closed themselves into a system of their creation. As they excluded others they lived under the pressure of, and became enslaved to, their rules and traditions. They lived with the God of accusation that they created. The walls that excluded outsiders and brought status to the insiders also created an environment of alienation lacking in freedom and authenticity.

Jesus confronted these systems and structures of exclusion through his actions and through his parables of judgment. He graciously continued, however, a stance of open invitation to a different reality even to the oppressors. Jesus reached out to and embraced the victims—those who had been excluded and rejected.



Jesus continued reaching out in loving acceptance. People, however, continued to reject Jesus’ call to include all at the table. Instead they operated within a “tit-for-tat” system—always looking for the advantage and seeking payback and revenge. This spiral of violence and one-up-manship produces alienation, shame and victimization.



Factions of society, usually in tension with each other, unified and attacked Jesus. He did not, however, back off from stances that had incited the wrath of the people and powers that threatened him. He did not rescind his loving acceptance nor turn against the marginalized and excluded, but he stood in solidarity with the victimized to the point of death. I want to pause here for a moment. The gospel stories are so familiar to us we do not often stop to think it could have been much different. For instance, at the beginning of Luke 15 Jesus heard the Pharisees and scribes, with an air of superiority, critiquing him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. To save face at that moment Jesus could have vowed to change his ways, or offer some kind of excuse about why he had eaten with these people. Instead he invited the Pharisees and scribes to join him in tearing down barriers of exclusion and come to the table as well. When things got really tense and he was heading toward death, he could have abandoned his commitments and practices to try to save his life. He did not. He was so uncompromisingly for the marginalized and identified so closely with the victimized that he suffered the ultimate act of exclusion and victimization—a shameful death on the cross. Jesus also did not adjust the way he acted, nor the way he talked about God and God’s Kingdom to fit more comfortably within the status quo of the day. He was faithfully obedient to God to the point of death. He never broke covenant—faithfully keeping the human side of the God-human covenant. In both his life and death Jesus willingly suffered shame and exclusion so that others would not have to. He also, however, suffered the judgment the excluders deserved to suffer. He bore the consequences of their actions—consequences he had warned them of.¹¹ At this moment of being thrashed by the violence at the vortex of this spiral of revenge, rejection and victimization Jesus did not reciprocate with violence.

At this point in the story, looking at Jesus on the cross, a number of things become clearer to us. The cross is an act of revelation that has saving effect. It reveals a God who loves us, who is committed to us and our salvation—even to the point of death. In contrast, although

¹¹ I have found Raymund Schwagger’s work especially helpful on this point: *Jesus and the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999).

the principalities and powers may masquerade as pro-human forces necessary for the smooth functioning of society, the cross exposes them for what they are.

The cross also reveals the depth of human sin and alienation. The cross displays graphically the end result of our “tit-for-tat” approach to life, our religiosity of exclusion, and our seeking unity through victimizing others and finding a common enemy. Humans reject and kill God incarnate. Humans reject and kill a man who lived authentically as God created humans to live. How does God respond to this ultimate sin? Both Father and Son must have experienced great sadness, but also anger at this injustice, this murderous act against one who had consistently loved and offered inclusion to all. What would have happened if God had responded according the law of retribution and revenge, according to the same logic of the “tit-for-tat” system that had lashed out and killed Jesus? What retribution would have balanced out this immense crime against God? Simply wiping out those who had actually killed Jesus would not be sufficient recompense. In fact, destroying all of humanity and the principalities and powers with them might be the only action, from an “eye-for-an-eye” perspective, that might balance this act of killing God incarnate through such a shameful means.

Throughout the Bible, however, we see God seeking to rein in the human propensity for revenge and retaliation.¹² God’s own actions go beyond simply moderating the retaliatory urge. God rejects the logic of retaliation and practices a radically different justice—a restorative justice. Therefore it should not surprise us that at the cross, God does not follow the human way of “making things right” by responding with equal or greater violence and punishment against those who killed Jesus. Rather God responded in a non-retributive manner consistent with Jesus’ life and words. On the cross Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34, TNIV). Forgiveness, however, is not free. When a wrong is done someone pays the price. On the cross Jesus paid the price absorbing the pain, violence and shame into himself. It was a costly forgiveness.¹³

As we observed, in life Jesus stood in solidarity with the victimized and excluded and remained committed to them to the point of death. We also observed that in life, even as Jesus confronted the oppressors and excluders he did not rescind his invitation of loving acceptance. We see that initiative again in his words of forgiveness on the cross. It should not surprise us to see it in the resurrection as well. God responded to the offense of the cross not by lashing out

¹² Excessive retaliation and retribution is the way of sinful humanity (Gen. 4:23-24). God introduces the law of an “eye for an eye” as a limit, a way of reigning in retaliatory retribution. The “eye for an eye” law had significant qualifications and safeguards (Ex. 21:12-14, 23-24; Num. 35:9-15, 30; Deut. 19:1-7, 15; 17:6; 24:26) and Ezekiel qualifies it even further stating that if the criminal repents of his crimes and amends his ways, then his life should be spared (Ezek. 18:21-24; cf. 33:10-11). Jesus completes this trajectory fulfilling the intent of the “law and the prophets” in the Sermon on the Mount saying, —“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you...” and calling his followers to renounce retaliation and to love friend and enemy (Mt. 5:17, 38-48; Rom. 10:4).

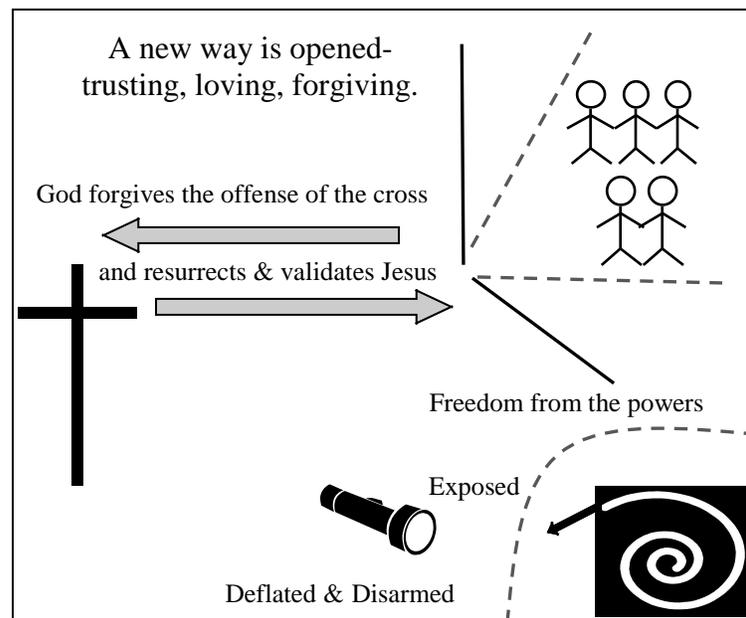
¹³ Tim Keller, writing apologetically at the popular level, responds to the question: why did Jesus have to die? In doing so he provides a clear example of portraying the cross as costly forgiveness, but also making clear that it is not God demanding appeasement or payment, acting according to laws of retribution and retaliation, but absorbing the cost as a one who forgives does. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 186-200.

with retaliatory punishment against humanity, but by resurrecting Jesus as a living forgiving presence. The resurrected Jesus did not go on a rampage seeking revenge, but followed through on the words of forgiveness he pronounced on the cross. Rather than shaming, scolding or disowning his disciples, the risen Jesus embraced them and worked to restore relationships. They in turn carried this message of forgiveness to others in Jerusalem. They stated clearly, “you crucified Jesus,” but the disciples followed that statement not with threats but with an invitation to repent and be forgiven.¹⁴

In Jesus God absorbed the worst of human sin-rooted violence and responded with forgiveness. God’s action stopped the spiral of violence and “tit-for-tat” reciprocity. We are saved from that cycle and through forgiveness saved from our burden of guilt for having participated in it. The cross and resurrection reveal the character of God and thus also save us from living with the concept of God that many imagine—an accusing and vengeful God. This saving revelation has its roots in the Incarnation. As Debbie Blue writes:

The Incarnation is a story about a God who comes into the world as a naked, weak, little baby. It’s a story that punctures narratives of a violent, all-powerful deity. It is about a God coming to disarm us by being utterly weaponless, absurdly vulnerable. God doesn’t come in power to save us, according to the Christian narratives, but in weakness.¹⁵

We are invited to trust in the loving God revealed through Jesus’ birth, life, death on the cross and resurrection (John 3:16-17).



¹⁴ Acts 2:23, 36-37; 3:15.19; 4:10; 5:30-31. It is noteworthy that as Stephen was being executed he follows Jesus’ example and stated: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Clearly the disciples experienced the transformative effect of the cross and resurrection in a way that led them to reject the calculus of retaliation just as Jesus had.

¹⁵ Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, 2013, 100.

To look at the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection through the interpretive lens of Covenant even more meaning comes to light. First of all, God is revealed as just, as keeper of Covenant. God goes to amazing lengths to be faithful to covenantal relationship. Humans break it in an ultimate way, but God responds with forgiveness and actions to restore covenant. In Jesus God steps in for humans on the human side of the covenant. In Romans Paul makes clear that Israel has not been faithful to their covenant commitments. They have not been just in a covenantal sense.¹⁶ God, however, is just, is faithful to his covenantal commitments to Israel and commitment to bring salvation to the nations through Israel. How does God provide this salvation? Through the faithfulness of Jesus (Rom. 3:22, see also Gal. 2:16). This reality of one person's living justly providing salvation for many is pointed to in the Old Testament.

In Isaiah 58 we read that the one who lives justly, as described in that chapter, "shall be called the repairer of the breach" (Is. 58:12, NRSV). God speaks through Jeremiah saying, "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth—so that I may pardon Jerusalem" (Jer. 5:1, NRSV, cf. Ezek. 22:30-31). Note that God is not looking for one to punish in the place of others, but with a calculus radically different than the law of an eye for an eye God will pardon guilt and restore the whole because of the righteousness of one who is willing to act on behalf of others. When that one is not found, God sacrificially enters into the human situation, incarnate in Jesus, to be that righteous one.

Let us now read texts in Romans 5 and 6 through the lens of covenant and these Old Testament texts of the righteousness of one person. As Paul describes, through Jesus' faithful obedience we have been justified. We have been united him and brought into new life and right relationship with God.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! . . . Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:9-10, 18-19, TNIV).

Retaliatory punishment claims to "make things right," but it does not heal or truly rectify. In fact, it plants the seeds of further violence. In Jesus, however, God acts to truly change and

¹⁶ For description of justice from Hebraic covenantal perspective see: Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More*, chapter 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); Mark D. Baker, "Which Courtroom and What Narrative Shapes Your Atonement Theology?" *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 41 (1, 2012) 97–110; available at: <http://www.directionjournal.org/41/1/which-courtroom-and-what-narrative.html>; James D. G. Dunn and Alan Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3:1129–33.

rectify.¹⁷ These texts point to so much more than just a legal declaration. “Reconciliation occurs . . . because of a correction of humanity’s covenant relationship to God through faith-obedience which thus removes the barrier to reconciliation and provides a foundation for the reality of sanctification (Romans 6:5-14).”¹⁸ This is also evident when we look at Jesus’ own words about The Covenant and his death—“my blood of the covenant poured out for many” (Mark 14:24).

At the cross the powers of sin and death were exposed, but through the resurrection they are triumphed over. Death does not have the last word (II Tim. 1:10). In the words of Jonathan Wilson, “In Christ as victor, we see God as . . . our liberator, who reveals our victimization and captivity, defeats our enemy, destroys our prison, shatters our chains to free us and bring us home to live for eternity.”¹⁹ The resurrection is a victory, yet a victory in line with how Jesus lived and died.

Many explanations of the work of the cross would end here. An atonement narrative rooted in Covenant, however, naturally continues. Those who trust in Jesus are not only freed from guilt and shame and saved from hell, they are also brought into a new covenant community and a new way of life. Just as a spiral of violence, tit-for-tat vengeance, shame and alienation led to the crucifixion of God incarnate, a positive spiral of forgiveness and shalom spins out from the cross through this new covenant community.

The resurrection validates. It is God’s seal of approval on the way Jesus lived and thus a call to us to live the same way. It is a call to conversion to trust the radically different God revealed on the cross and a call, in the security of that relationship with God, to follow Jesus’ example and live as authentic humans. The resurrection not only calls, but also enables. The victory, forgiveness and validation of the resurrection form a new covenant community without walls of exclusion where all are invited to the table. Through being united with Jesus, not only in his death, but in his resurrection we have the possibility through the living Spirit of Jesus of joining with others in this new way of life. As Michael Gorman states,

Christ’s death effected the new covenant, meaning specifically the creation of a covenant community of forgiven and reconciled disciples, inhabited and empowered by the Spirit to embody a new-covenant spirituality of cruciform loyalty to God and love for others, thereby peaceably participating in the life of God and in God’s forgiveness, reconciling, and covenanting mission to the world.²⁰

Assessment

¹⁷ We have looked at just one Old Testament image, standing in the breach, to underscore that the narrative of the cross is rooted in the narrative of Israel and to help illuminate our understanding of the cross. If space allowed, we could weave many other Old Testament images and teachings into this foundational narrative.

¹⁸ Shelton, R. Larry, “Relational Atonement: Covenant Renewal as a Wesleyan Integrating Motif,” in *AAR--Wesleyan Studies Group/Open and Relational Theologies Consultation Session*, 2008, 12.

¹⁹ Jonathan Wilson, *God So Loved the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 97.

²⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not so) New Model of the Atonement* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 75.

When I have asked groups for their assessment of this foundational story in comparison to the previous story they generally agree that using Jesus' life as the foundational narrative avoids the negatives of the penal substitution foundational narrative without sacrificing the positives of that story. The exception often mentioned is that the second story is not as short or as easily packaged as the first. This observation is true, but that is because penal substitution is in essence an image turned into a foundational narrative. We would expect a true foundational narrative to have more depth and breadth and thus be longer. One would not generally tell the whole foundational narrative in an evangelistic conversation or presentation.²¹ Rather parts of the narrative would be used depending on the situation. As a foundational narrative it supports a wide variety of images, and the evangelist can select what is the most appropriate image for a particular group or person. For instance, biblical imagery such as legal/justification, redemption, ransom, sacrifice, adoption, and triumph over death/sin/evil can be used to highlight and proclaim parts of the narrative.²² Since the narrative has layers of meaning it also can inspire and serve as the basis for a wide variety of contemporary metaphors. For instance a book I recently edited contains eighteen contextualized presentations of the atonement.²³ The breadth and diversity of metaphors in the book would not be possible if we had used the penal substitution model as our foundational narrative. The presentations build on aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection found in this alternative narrative, but not found in the penal substitution story. Would using Jesus' life as the foundational story lead to different results than using the penal substitution model as the foundational story? To begin to answer that question we will turn again to concrete examples.

We began this article by observing how the penal substitution model is difficult to understand in some cultural settings, and how it can fail to connect with people who are not feeling a burden of guilt. The contrast between the two narratives, however, is not that one addresses guilt and the other does not. The alternative story based on Jesus' life also provides resources for bringing freedom from guilt. For example, recently I stood in the county jail waiting for inmates to come to the weekly Bible study I lead. A man in a holding cell called to me and asked me to pray with him. He explained that he had only seven days left in jail, but had just gotten in a fight with another inmate. I prayed for him, and continued talking with him through the crack in the door. Knowing a guard might come any minute to move him I asked directly, "Do you feel guilty?" He said, "yes." I asked if he thought God would forgive him. He responded, "I don't know." I began talking to him about the cross, about how it was the worst thing humans could do to God—actually kill God incarnate, kill the Son of God. Had he done anything that bad? How had God responded at the cross? I told him words that he did not know,

²¹ One can, however, use the whole story itself as the basis for a presentation. See for instance my "Atonement: A Beach Parable for Youth" in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement*, Mark D. Baker, ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 84-95.

²² To observe how many of these biblical images are explained in ways that build off this foundational narrative see Mark D. Baker, "Ten Ways the Cross Saves: Brief explanations" available at: <https://profmarkbaker.com/atonement-resources/>

²³ Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*.

that on the cross Jesus had said, “Father forgive them.” God would forgive him too. I told the inmate this was a prayer I could not pray for him. He needed to confess and ask God for forgiveness. Just as I asked, “would you like to pray now?” a guard came and took him away.

A colleague of mine, Jon Isaak, recently returned to Congo to teach a theology course. He observed that his students responsibly took notes and did their assignments, but often appeared unengaged. He perceived that they experienced a disconnect between the theology they received from the West and their daily life, including their experiences of the role of evil as an active power. When it came time in the course to talk about the cross and salvation Jon used Colossians 2:15 for his central text—a statement of Jesus triumphing over the principalities and powers at the cross. The students came to life as they connected atonement theology to their confrontation with evil spirits. From that moment the atmosphere in the classroom changed. Since the cross is central in Christianity it should not surprise us that once these students saw the connection between the cross and their daily lives they also began to see greater connections between other theological themes and their lived reality. It would have been very difficult for Jon to have done this if he operated with penal substitution as his foundational story. Because he used Jesus’ life as his foundational story Jon was still able to explore traditional topics like forgiveness of sins, but also to highlight the cross and resurrection as victory over the powers, and connect with the Congolese.

Finally, how might using this alternative narrative help in a shame oriented culture? Rather than having to first teach the person to think like a Westerner, this narrative would allow the evangelist to present the gospel through relating it to shame. If you have thought of the cross primarily in terms of guilt it may be hard to conceptualize how it relates to shame, how one might evangelize talking about shame rather than guilt. In order to help you imagine how to do that I invite you to read, in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, four examples of presentations of the gospel that proclaim freedom from shame through the cross and resurrection.²⁴ I will, however, share one example. Mariela, a Peruvian, carried a heavy burden of shame as she suffered rejection by the people in her community. She did not feel guilty; she was being shamed not for something she had done, but because of the actions of someone close to her. Earlier this year she read a story I wrote about how the reality of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection had transformed Alba, a Honduran woman,—freeing her from enslaving shame.²⁵ Through reading that story Mariela met Jesus in a way that freed her from her burden of shame and transformed her view of God. She now passionately shares with others the good news of God’s love. If I still used the penal substitution model as my foundational story I would likely not have thought about the relationship between the cross and freedom from shame—let alone have been able to write an evangelistic booklet about it.

These few examples do not exhaust the variety of images and metaphors that are

²⁴ Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement*, see especially chapters 12-15.

²⁵ Marcos Baker, “Salvación por la cruz: imágenes para hoy” available at: <https://profmarkbaker.com/espanol/libros-y-articulos/> ; in English: Mark D. Baker, “Saving Significance of the Cross in a Honduran Barrio,” *Mission Focus Annual Review* 14 (2006) 59-81 available at: <https://profmarkbaker.com/publications/articles-essays/>

supported by and flow from this alternative narrative. I hope, however, they do help readers imagine the rich benefits of replacing the narrow and limited foundational narrative provided by penal substitution with a broader and deeper narrative rooted in Jesus' life that includes not just the cross, but the resurrection as well.