

Talking to Victims of Trauma  
Through the Lens of Atonement Theology  
at Wildewood Christian Church

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To God

To my ever faithful and prayerful wife, Becky,  
without your strength I would be so much less.

To my supportive children, Nate, Hannah, Ian and Taylor,  
you all are my source of joy.

To the members of Wildewood Christian Church,  
who gave me constant encouragement

To the faculty and staff of Emmanuel Christian Seminary,  
for your guidance and instruction.

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## Introduction

In August of 2016, Olympic gymnast Rachael Denhollander stepped into the public spotlight for reasons other than her powerful athleticism and graceful routines. She was the first woman publicly to accuse Larry Nasser, the doctor of Team USA Gymnastics, of sexual assault. Suffering silently, she waited fifteen years to reveal the horrific abusive incidents to her family, the police, and the wider public. This brave act opened the door for hundreds of other women who also were assaulted by Nasser to tell their traumatic stories; confront their perpetrator; be heard, believed, supported, and begin healing. Denhollander was the first to courageously break the silence that had kept these atrocities hidden while confronting her own pain, doubt and fear.<sup>1</sup>

It is naïve to hope that the abuse by Larry Nasser, a once-trusted physician, was an isolated incident. Empowered by the volume of the voices of other victims beyond those abused by Nasser, these brave individuals continue to alert the world to the overwhelming scope and number of the affected and afflicted. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men are victims of physical violence, including but not limited to sexual assault stemming from both professional and personal relationships.<sup>2</sup>

School administrators, politicians and the wider public have been growing in awareness of the broad scope of the abuse epidemic. Church leaders and pastors are also waking to the number of church members who identify as abuse victims. Lifeway Research published a study in 2019 stating that as many as 10 percent of Protestant church attenders under the age of 35

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2016/09/12/former-usa-gymnastics-doctor-accused-abuse/89995734/>, accessed February 7, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Huecker, Martin R., Kevin C. King, Gary A. Jordan, and William Smock. 2021. "Domestic Violence." CDC. April 19, 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK499891/>, accessed February 21, 2022.

have left a church where they felt that victims of sexual abuse or the potential for sexual misconduct were not taken seriously. On any given Sunday, as many as 1 in 4 (25%) of pew occupants can identify as victims of physical, verbal, emotional and/or sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most painful stories are revealed when allegations of physical and sexual abuse have landed upon the church. Cries for help come in the form of revelations of thousands of victims of abuse from within the church and among the clergy. News stories are seemingly unending and the accusations unyielding as the reports tell that the church has failed in both preventing and dealing with the abuse occurring in the parishes. For example, as recently as March 2020, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that more than fifty priests who were under credible investigation were transferred to other parishes, many outside the United States, after allegations against them were filed with the diocese rather than prosecuted in a public court.<sup>4</sup> Also, consider an extensive 2500 page report commissioned by the Catholic church in France where it is estimated that 330,000 children have been abused in the church since 1950. Of that number, 220,000 were abused by priests and the remaining 110,000 by lay leaders within the church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Earls, Aaron. 2019. "Churchgoers Split on Existence of More Sexual Abuse by Pastors." Lifewayresearch.Com. March 21, 2019. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/05/21/churchgoers-split-on-existence-of-more-sexual-abuse-by-pastors/>, accessed February 2, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Texas-Catholic-priests-accused-of-abuse-mexico-15107745.php>, accessed February 21, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Siladitya Ray, "At Least 330,000 Minors Were Victims of Sex Abuse in the French Catholic Church since 1950, Report Finds," *Forbes* (*Forbes Magazine*, October 5, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/10/05/at-least-330000-minors-were-victims-of-sex-abuse-in-the-french-catholic-church-since-1950-report-finds/?sh=3846794d5566>, accessed February 21, 2022.

The tide of abuse is not limited to the church. In a shocking study conducted by the United States Education Department it was reported that incidents of sexual violence at schools rose from about 9,600 in the 2015-2016 school year to nearly 15,000 in the 2017-2018 school year. That's an increase of more than 50 percent.<sup>6</sup> The rise in cases may be due to increased reporting, poor screening of applicants or other contributing factors. Either way, the increased numbers represent actual victims who deserve care and counsel.

My personal experience of providing pastoral care for those who have experienced abuse began when I was both young and new to located ministry. One sunny afternoon, a high school girl, (whom I will call Casey)<sup>7</sup> stopped by the church office and asked to talk. Opening the conversation abruptly, she revealed that she was currently being sexually abused by her neighbor who was a church member. She wanted it to stop but “didn’t want him to get in trouble,” she said. Immediately, I accompanied her to talk to her parents and listened as she informed them of the details of her assault. The police were summoned and the man arrested. I made a call to the Senior Minister.

In small-town middle America, it didn’t take long for the news to spread. The man was well known to church members after years of active participation and many spoke their opinion of what or who was the catalyst of this scandal. Some conjectured, “He was lonely after his wife died.” Others blamed Casey, the high school girl by asking, “Well, why did she go into his house anyway?”

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<sup>6</sup> Moriah Balingit, “Sexual Assault Reports Sharply Increased at K-12 Schools, Numbering Nearly 15,000, Education Department Data Shows,” The Washington Post (WP Company, May 28, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/10/15/sexual-assault-k-12-schools/>.

<sup>7</sup> Asterisk denotes that names contained in unpublished stories have been changed to protect the identity of the actual person.

Following a brief trial, he was placed on probation but due to advanced age and particularly declining health and advanced age, he died a short time later. His sizable financial estate and productive farm land were given to the church and placed in a trust fund bearing his name. The proceeds from crop farming the land would benefit the church for decades, even to this day. The high school girl and her family left the church shortly after the trial. I don't recall anyone asking why.

I remember feeling inadequate and unprepared for the task of helping Casey deal with the impacts of the abuse. I remember feeling grateful that I was well trained to act on behalf of the victim as a mandatory reporter. The Senior Minister praised me for doing the 'right thing' by informing her parents and convincing them to call the police. Legally, we checked all the boxes and shielded all our liabilities. Yet, I didn't yet grasp the extent of the damage done to this girl, her family, the abuser, or his family. I failed to understand that along with Casey, the entire church was now wounded and in need of healing. As a church, we missed not only the opportunity but also the significance of shepherding both the victim and the abuser along with their families. The situation was never publicly discussed. Conversations during leadership meetings dealt with the memorial trust created by the donation made by the abuser but I don't remember the emotional or spiritual implications ever considered. I remember thinking at the time that we were too embarrassed to be proactive. Looking back, I realize that ignorance and timidity more than fear was the emotion that prevented clear doctrinal teaching and compassionate pastoral care from occurring. I spoke recently with a leader in that church and asked about the family. He thought they had "moved to the south," he said. The land trust is still named for the donor and remains active and is still funding the church.



Occasions of significant trauma and especially long-term or early life abuse both physical and sexual can provide opportunities for guidance in spiritual formation. Spiritual assistance and counseling is not only effective immediately after discovery but also years and even decades later. Victor Vieth, director of Education and Research at the Zero Abuse Project notes that “although the spiritual impact of abuse can be devastating, research also documents that spiritual guidance and theological teaching can be a source of resiliency for many victims of abuse and trauma and that those who are able to cope spiritually also do a better job of coping emotionally.”<sup>8</sup>

It has been my experience that abuse survivors often ask theological questions during and following the trauma. Questions often echo the inquiry, “Why did God allow this thing to happen to me?” On his website, Victor Vieth shared a story of a girl who was inconsolable as she informed a police officer of the long history of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. She recounted the abuse, the police officer asked her if she had any questions. After a long tearful pause, she asked quietly, “Am I still a virgin in the eyes of God?”<sup>9</sup> These are tough questions.

Understanding the need to have Biblically accurate and cathartic answers for spiritual questions in the aftermath of trauma and abuse, the gymnast, abuse survivor, Christian and now lawyer, Rachael Denhollander (mentioned above) penned an article titled “Justice, The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse” that piqued my interest and launched this research project. Denhollander reinforces the perception that in many cases, survivors of abuse are

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.zeroabuseproject.org/when-faith-hurts-the-spiritual-impact-of-child-abuse/> accessed January 7, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

“mishandled as a result of poor theology and misinformation about the dynamics of abuse.”<sup>10</sup>

Denhollander asserts, “A poorly developed understanding of forgiveness can lead to victims being shamed for being ‘bitter’ or ‘vindictive’ or pressured into premature forgiveness as a key to their healing.”<sup>11</sup> She expands her thoughts in an interview about her book, *“What Is a Girl Worth”* saying, “ideas have consequences . . . and bad ideas have victims. There needs to be a good theology . . . there needs to be right and true ideas underpinning what we are doing here.”<sup>12</sup>

Denhollander’s perspective applies to more people than just those traumatized by sexual abuse. Abuse is only one form of trauma. As a pastor, I stand on the platform each Sunday and look in the eyes of hundreds of people. I know many of their current struggles and stories of their past traumas. On any given Sunday I may see an older couple whose intoxicated adult son murdered his ex-girlfriend and her partner before burning down their house in an effort to make it look like an accident. Weekly they visit him in prison as he serves a life sentence plus 50 years. I see another woman in her seventies and remember when she told me in vivid detail about the day she turned ten years old and on that same day a severe thunderstorm caused their town to be flooded. Now decades later, she cried as she recounted how she tried and failed to rescue her mother who was trapped and died from rising floodwaters. She still weeps for her ten-year-old self. I refocus and see that on the front row, a woman who survived a beating with a hammer by

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<sup>10</sup> “Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse.” 2018. Fathommag.Com. November 19, 2018. <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse>, accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, Warren Cole. 2019. “Rachael Denhollander Speaks with Ministry Watch on Sexual Abuse in the Church.” Ministrywatch.Com. October 16, 2019. <https://ministrywatch.com/rachael-denhollander-speaks-with-ministrywatch-on-sexual-abuse-in-the-church/>. accessed January 21, 2022.

her husband and presently receives threatening emails from him. I scan the worship center and see individuals who are facing serious medical diagnoses including cancer, ALS, and Parkinson's Disease. Others are facing divorces, bankruptcy, unresolved grief. We must be careful to look beyond our own definitions of trauma and recognize that for some it is the loss of a pet, the destruction of a family home, or parental divorce that can swell into trauma-induced depression or situational anxiety.

The church has routinely been and should continue to be a place for people turn to in search of faith in God, as well as, a source of community and hope. As a pastor, I try to teach people how to make sense of a good God and an evil world. But the questions that I have been hearing have increased the need to reconsider how best to communicate the foundations of faith in God and His interactions with people who face trauma and abuse. I fear, however, that many in the church are well-meaning but move too slowly. Barbara Zust published the results of a ten-year study concerning church support for victims of domestic violence and she concluded,

Churches have the capacity to reach large numbers of people representing a wide age span and socio-economic range. With 80% of the US population having a religious affiliation, clergy have a unique opportunity to create awareness and open conversations. As a trusted and social community, congregations have the opportunity to provide an environment of support for victims of domestic violence . . . both congregation members and clergy want to create an environment of support and help for victims of domestic violence. However, their wish to do so may not match their actual efforts.<sup>13</sup>

As a preaching minister for more than three decades and a licensed therapist in private practice, I feel like I should be qualified to provide perspectives from both theological and psychological viewpoints when questions arise following a disaster. But, in my mind's eye, I see

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Zust et al., "10-Year Study of Christian Church Support for Domestic Violence Victims: 2005-2015," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 3-4 (March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518754473>, 2980-2981. accessed November 11, 2021.

Casey from long ago and I ask questions such as, “Why do I still struggle to minister to those who are hurting?” “Is it possible that I am unintentionally causing pain for victims through my ignorance of what they are thinking, feeling or needing?”

Seeking the answers to these and other questions became the impetus for this project. After reading her article, I believe Denhollander is correct in her assessment that a poorly developed theology of atonement or the inability to communicate the truth clearly contributes to a mishandling of abuse victims by the church thus increasing the potential to create shame, bitterness, or a vindictive attitude on the part of the traumatized.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse.” 2018. Fathommag.Com. November 19, 2018. <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse>. accessed March 17, 2021.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this project is to determine if a deficient understanding or poorly communicated doctrine of atonement contributes to a mischaracterization of God's loving intent and creates a barrier to a healthy relationship with God and others for those at Wildewood Christian Church who have suffered trauma and abuse.

### **Setting of the Study**

Participants for this study will consist of adults currently attending Wildewood Christian Church. The church is located in Papillion, Nebraska, a southern suburb of Omaha. The church was initially formed by members of other Restoration Movement churches who began meeting in a home-based small group in a newly built housing development called Wildewood, which was built during the 1950s outside the southwest boundary of Omaha, NE. As part of the growth of the suburbs following World War II, these homes were purchased by the new 'middle class' who were eager to enjoy their increased financial freedom. As the gathering grew in number, the now larger group built and occupied its first building and was recognized by the State of Nebraska as a church in 1961.

By the 1980s, the first building was insufficient for the size of the congregation, and there was inadequate land to expand the structure. A new building was constructed less than one mile south of the original location. However, the church was never given a Certificate of Occupancy by the city zoning board due to the local controversy over the shape and size of the structure. With the original building already sold, the Wildewood congregation met in various rented spaces until another building was constructed on a piece of land further south outside the city of Papillion, NE. The building was completed in 1991, and the church currently meets in this

location. During the intervening years, the city of La Vista, NE was formed and built up around the original suburban area, and Papillion, NE has grown in all directions. The church stands on the street that is the boundary between La Vista and Papillion. These cities are now considered part of the Omaha metroplex with a population of just under one million.

Wildewood's polity and theology adheres closely to the independent, autonomous, evangelical mold. The church remains connected to the Stone-Campbell Movement and is governed by the Elder/Deacon Board model. The current staff consists of three full-time ministers (Senior, Spiritual Formation, and Youth) and three part-time staff members who oversee the ministry to women and children. All full-time staff are graduates of Christian Church/Churches of Christ Bible colleges. Additionally, eight part-time staff have various duties and responsibilities.

Unique ministries include hosting a South Sudanese congregation and a Classical Conversations Homeschooling group weekly. In 2020, the church founded the Wildewood Academy. The purpose of the Academy is to provide a two-year classroom curriculum and practical ministry experience for those who wish to continue in ministry education or eventually move into located ministry. This program is overseen by the Senior Minister (me) as well as one part-time staff member to oversee recruitment and operations.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, the church marked 380 in average worship attendance. Post COVID, the church hosts 250 worshippers weekly and streams two of the three-morning worship services on YouTube and Facebook.

During my seventeen-year tenure, I have experienced Wildewood as a faithful, loving, and active congregation that seeks to create an environment that is open to all people. One of my first acts of ministry was to help create a Celebrate Recovery ministry which has met since its

inception in 2005. The church as a whole has embraced the ministry to guide people through their ‘hurts, habits and hang-ups’ and to find freedom and healing through the Holy Spirit. So I wasn’t surprised to hear encouragement from the congregation when I asked them to reevaluate their knowledge and view of atonement and consider how best to communicate God’s love to the traumatized and hurting.

Currently, the church building stands next to the road that divides the city of Papillion from the city of La Vista. La Vista is the new name for the ever-expanding Wildewood housing development. The two cities combined have a population of over 70,000 residents. The residents are aware of the fiscal disparities between the two locales. La Vista is now populated by families who fall into the lower economic range and traditional families are quickly being replaced by descendants of immigrants. Papillion, on the south side of the road where the church building stands, is home for upper-income earners and wealthier retirees of the military. Offutt Air Force Base is located twenty minutes east of the church. The economic and racial diversity is evident in the shared school districts as well as in the church.

The mission of the military base is goes beyond a simple airfield. Formerly known as STRATCOM, those who operate this base are senior leaders, intelligence officers, battlefield analysis experts and communication interceptors. Those who hold these jobs are likely to finish their careers at this base and retire into the local communities. The joke that is often spoken is that “once you get Offutt, you never get off it.” Subsequently, these are also the warriors who have experienced the most deployments. Mental disorders including PTSD, anxiety and depression are common among airmen from this base are both common and severe.

## **Chapter One: Biblical and Historical Foundations of Atonement Theology**

*“The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”*

*1 Corinthians 15:3*

The church where I am privileged to be the pastor is blessed with many traditions including in our corporate worship on Sunday mornings. Two Sunday morning rituals that I dearly love are the weekly celebration of communion (Lord’s Supper) and participation by the Elders who give communion meditations prior to serving the elements to the congregation. These lay leaders are not professional orators yet I find their folksy but Biblical wisdom and often off-topic stories make our celebrations approachable and spiritually whimsical. I always listen closely to their comments but recently I found myself focusing even more attentively since I began researching the theology of atonement. Not long ago, one of the Elders said, “Jesus died to rescue you from death when he went to the cross to pay your penalty for sin and now He stands in Heaven victorious over Satan.” Inwardly, I smiled with amusement, “He nailed three metaphors of atonement all in one sentence,” I thought. Impressive but I wonder what it says about the elders’ understanding as well as their ability to clearly communicate to the congregation the impact and import of atonement theology during the celebration of Communion. I fear that the topic of atonement has been reduced to short phrases and pithy sentences that are far more dangerous than suspected.

Serene Jones, in her book *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* describes a woman in her church who became overwhelmed with emotion and ran from the worship center during communion. Chasing after her out of concern, Jones discovered her in the bathroom experiencing a panic attack. The woman later explained that she experiences symptoms of PTSD following significant abuse by her father and others during her teen years. She said, “It happens to me, sometimes. I’m listening to the pastor, thinking about God and love when



suddenly I hear or see something and it's as if a button gets pushed inside of me. In an instant, I'm terrified: I feel like I'm going to die or get hurt very badly." She continued, "Last week it was the part about Jesus' blood and I couldn't tell the difference between Jesus and me. I saw blood everywhere and broken body parts and I got so afraid I just disappeared."<sup>15</sup>

Jones reflected on the event and their later conversation as she wrote, "I found myself looking at people differently . . . I wondered how many students had felt the traumatic reactions (she) described and how I might use the words of my teaching in a way that could better reach them."<sup>16</sup> She goes on to ponder how best to help this woman. She considered how she would keep her promise to allow, even lead the community of the church in a graceful way to offer help but became somewhat discouraged in thinking that some would want to form a social action committee. She doubted that would affect this woman effectively. Instead, she tried to see how the elements of worship and the teaching from the pulpit would sound differently to those who had faced trauma. She asked, "How does the Lord's Prayer sound to each of them? or Did our collective words of thanksgiving to God make sense in the face of so much pain and loss?"<sup>17</sup>

Experiences like these, lead me to suspect that the theology of atonement is both poorly understood by many of the leaders and therefore poorly communicated to the *whole* congregation. I also wonder if modern praxis in the seeker-sensitive American evangelical church has reduced both the study of and emphasis on Biblical theology and doctrine. It appears to me that doctrine study and teaching have been replaced with curt sound-bite statements of self-centered and self-serving sayings that fit neatly on banners and Easter invite postcards.

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<sup>15</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

“Jesus is the reason for the season.” “Let go and let God.” Even the ubiquitous, “Jesus saves” has become insider jargon. While generally accurate, these statements fail to answer pertinent questions and fall short of providing information that is enticing to neither believer nor seeker.

If we are to study the impact that teaching from the pulpit and classroom podium has on members of the church who have been affected by violence, it is imperative that we have a clear foundation of the scriptural basis of the concept of atonement. Only then can it be clearly communicated to the whole church.

In the New Testament, we find that the cross itself is the culmination of all redemptive history and the crossroads of all critical doctrines. Discussing Christ’s work upon the cross was important to the Apostle Peter, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.” (1 Pt 1:10-11) Peter highlights their intentional and passionate search for both the predicted suffering and the following glories. As back then, today we continue to intently question the how, the when, and the why of the crucifixion.

The post-resurrection Jesus gave voice to the central question while walking on the road to Emmaus with travelers who had just witnessed the crucifixion but departed the city before learning of the resurrection. Jesus asked, “Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:26). The question of the necessity of the crucifixion has created much discussion and little clarity through the centuries among Christians. Many answers have been proposed but little unanimity has been achieved. Perhaps it is due to the shared belief that salvation has indeed been offered, but we have yet to understand how salvation was secured. For

many in the church, reconciliation with God has been accepted but the process of atonement still escapes comprehension. The process of salvation is especially pertinent to those who have face trauma and abuse because too many times those who they have trusted have abused their innocence. Additionally, the word reconciliation frightens the abused who are terrified to reenter unsafe relationships. Subsequently, the term atonement is fraught with emotional landmines. We must learn the meaning so we can deal with the implications.

The word ‘atonement’ hails from the Middle Ages, an English word without root in either ancient Hebrew or Greek, literally translated ‘at-one-ment’ and often defined as the act of reconciliation. This definition can be understood more clearly if we agree that the definition of the term reconciliation describes the *outcome* of the process of reuniting two or more combatants, while atonement describes the *process* of reconciliation that produces an outcome in which two or more separated entities are united into a complementary whole.

In the Christian tradition, the *outcome of reconciliation* describes forgiveness or salvation as a renewed relationship between God and humanity following the fall of humanity due to disobedience in the Garden of Eden as well as all the disobedience since. While *atonement*, on the other hand, is the *process* by which the renewed relationship between humanity and God is accomplished. An important key to understanding the accomplishment of atonement is the realization that biblical atonement inherently contains the confrontation of literal evil. The confrontation of unrighteousness by righteousness is the foundational view to a clear view of atonement’s purpose and reconciliation’s process. We observe this mentality throughout the life and work of Jesus within the process of reconciliation. Casting out demons was never to invite them to be reconciled.

John Sanders, in the introduction to his book *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, recounts the opening lecture during his theology class for undergraduates. He asks them to define the concept of the Gospel. The students offer up the typical answer involving sinners who are guilty before God. Thus God sends his Son to die for us that that we may be forgiven. Then he asks, “What you are saying is that if I place my trust in Jesus then I am completely forgiven and I do not have to follow Jesus after that?” The students normally respond that atonement is more than just mere forgiveness but the entire class fails to explain what more is necessary nor provided. Sanders goes on to explain that, “Christians have always agreed that Jesus is the savior. They have not agreed on the way in which to understand just how Jesus saves.”<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to describe atonement, the writers of the New Testament used various images and metaphors to attempt to illustrate the message of the gospel. In subsequent centuries, others developed major models in order to elucidate the meaning of atonement. As time marched on, these theories of atonement were repeated, rewritten, compounded and criticized. The mountain of theories and literature concerning the atonement that has been produced over the course of two millennia may be one of the key reasons for a lack of clear understanding of atonement theology itself.

I suspect that many interested Christian adherents have opted to trust the trite sayings (i.e. Let go and let God.) have simply fatigued and settled on calling atonement a mystery. One woman who often attends Bible studies that I teach is fond of saying, “If God had wanted us to know . . . He would have made it clear to us.” I grit my teeth and try to smile in appreciation of

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<sup>18</sup> John Sanders, *Atonement and Violence: a Theological Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), ix.

her childlike faith but I truly believe that the answers are available for the diligent student and vitally necessary for the wounded among us.

For the purpose of this project, I cannot hope to explore all the theories of atonement that have been proposed. Additionally, I will not commend or condemn one specific metaphor of atonement over another. There are too many questions to consider and scores of conflicting opinions. However, I will attempt to give a summary of the key theories which I think relate to the topic of educating the local church on how to understand and use atonement theology for the benefit of both themselves and trauma/abuse victims. As a reader, I appreciate your patience and trust in my choice of the theories considered. I believe these specific metaphors of atonement are the most widely highlighted theologies by contemporary scholars and most popular among church leaders and congregants.

It must be noted that the favored view in Western Christianity, which has gained and retained popularity beginning five hundred years following the Reformation, is the penal substitutionary atonement view that attests that Jesus died for humanity by taking the punishment that we deserved. Likely controversial since its inception, this view espouses that God is a jealously violent character. As such, the penal view entertains a host of questions which beg for answers. For instance, is God to be feared due to his violent nature? Did God choose or even relish the role of the violent parent? Is it doing God's will to sufferer the violence of others a commendable trait of the righteous? These and other questions plague the abused and leaves them wondering if their particular brand of suffering was foisted on them as a test of obedience to God. Is it possible that God wanted them to experience pain in order to walk in His will for their lives?

These questions have coalesced into one particular criticism of PSA by pointing out that this metaphor seems to depict the crucifixion as divine child abuse. God acts violently toward the Son in order to satisfy his need for respect and restored honor. The focus of the theory highlights the violent and jealous nature of the Father.

Sanders notes, “Our worship and the very way we explain the gospel are often couched in terms involving violence. Moreover, atonement theology has played an important role in shaping our societal structures and personal relationships.”<sup>19</sup> An example of this that found in the comment made to me when a woman shared with me that she expects painful things to happen to her because “God is keeping me humble.” She characterizes God as a punishing father who routinely uses pain in order to control creation.

If violence is the correct way to interpret the atonement activities, it is no wonder that victims of violence and trauma reject the institution who tells them it is their duty to bear their cross daily. Jesus only endured the pain of crucifixion but the church expects believers to suffer daily. Additionally, when they are the offended, church leaders have counseled them to develop a spiritual maturity and practice the spiritual discipline of forgiveness. Ironic they may feel, that God insists on enacting violence upon the innocent yet demands forgiveness be offered the guilty perpetrators of violence. This is the confusion that is common among many.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

## **Biblical Background**

Scripture emphasizes the value and importance of atonement. David Allen notes that twenty-five to forty-two percent of the Gospels are devoted to describing Jesus' final week and death. He counts 175 direct references in the New Testament concerning the death of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> This topic was obviously important to the authors of the New Testament (NT).

Throughout the NT, God's love for humanity has been connected with the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This is clearly stated in 1 John 4:9-10, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." The phrase 'atoning sacrifice' stands out as a phrase of the process of salvation.

Sacrifice as part of atonement has been significant since the beginning. Following the first sin, we discover that something innocent had to be sacrificed as a result of sin. God provided a covering of animal skins for Adam and Eve when they discovered both nakedness and shame (Genesis 3:21). Likewise, offering a sacrifice is key to understanding the story of Cain and Abel. Assuming they learned this practice from their parents, they each brought a sacrifice to God; one a sacrifice of grain the other of flesh. Either must be offered with a righteous attitude or it will be rejected by God. (Genesis 4:2-5). Other OT characters are seen offering sacrifices such as Noah (Gen. 8:20), Abraham (Gen 12:7-8), Jacob, (Gen 31:54), and Job is offering daily sacrifices by proxy for his children. (Job 1:5).

The purpose of Cain and Abel's offerings are never delineated. Nor are we ever clued in on why after being rejected was Cain moved to violence. In the same way, the purpose of

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<sup>20</sup> David L. Allen, *The Atonement: A Biblical, Theological and Historical Study of the Cross of Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 5.

Noah's sacrifice is left unknown however the practice of it prompted God to promise continued blessing. (Gen. 8:21)

God's command to Abraham to take the elements for sacrifice up to a mountain and there kill his son as recorded in Genesis 22 gives the reader immediate pause. God's command for human sacrifice causes most to recoil in repulsion. Explained literally, this child sacrifice event darkens the character of God. While God stops the killing seemingly only moments prior to the fatal knife wound, this command seems to be a random act of hubris or a horrifying test of Abraham's obedience. It also is contradictory to the command of God recorded in Deut 18:10 in which Israel is explicitly commanded to avoid any such practice. For today's reader, it is a cause for question. Perhaps the answer lies not in the sacrificial act but rather the design of sacrifice itself.

It is generally understood that sacrifice is a response to sin and within the process toward full personal and corporate salvation and reconciliation. Consider the command to sacrifice a lamb for the Passover (Exod. 12), here are found the themes of substitution, rescue from divine judgment, and the use of blood as the Israelites painted their doorframes as a sign and protection from the angel of death.

This theme of sacrifice in relation to God is expanded and codified in Exodus and Leviticus. In Exodus 20, God teaches Moses specific methods for both purpose and pace of carrying out the sacrifices under the covenant. Sacrifices referred to as offerings begin to adopt names as to their purpose: (burnt offering (Lev 1:1-17), grain offering (Lev. 2 ), fellowship offering (Lev 3:1-17)

This motif of sacrifice is evident in many NT passages as well (e.g. Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8). Jesus understood and often taught that his physical death would be a sacrificial offering. Jesus



openly taught that he was aware of his impending death (Mk 10:33-34). He was not only aware of this but by his own actions provoked the religious leaders of his day by flagrantly fulfilling Messianic prophecies. (Mk 11:1-10; 15-18). He was cognizant that the religious leaders would interpret his actions as a challenge to their authority seemingly goading them into a confrontation.

Jesus intentionally and publically celebrated the Passover meal with the disciples and overtly guided the interpretation of his actions. “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” (Mark 14:22-24). Clearly, he saw the foreshadowing of his death in the elements of the Passover meal. The Passover for generations in Jewish homes provided the venue for teaching about the blood of the sacrificial Passover lamb. Blood was used to mark the doorposts and save the Jewish people from death when they were enslaved in Egypt. William Craig Lane notes Jesus’ use of the phrase, “this is the blood of my covenant’ recalls Moses’ word at the inauguration of the old covenant.<sup>21</sup> Jesus is announcing the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33-34). Also, the phrase “poured out for many” not only orients us toward a sacrificial act but echo from the prophecy of Isaiah, “because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors”<sup>22</sup> (Is 53:12).

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<sup>21</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Atonement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

It seems apparent that Jesus wanted to be identified as the Suffering Servant described Isaiah 53. This servant is one who “makes himself an offering for sin” (Is 53:10). This is attested to in Mark 10:45 where Jesus says of himself, “the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.” From these passages and others, it seems evident that Jesus saw his life and death as a redemptive sacrifice.

The sacrificial nature of the atonement process is brought into focus through an understanding of the OT sacrifices. There is a sense of mystery in thinking about sacrifices of the OT. As Martin Luther points out, “One has sinned. Another has made satisfaction. The sinner does not make satisfaction; the satisfier does not sin. This is an astonishing doctrine.”<sup>23</sup> Craig points out that most sacrifices fulfill two fundamental purposes: expiation and propitiation. Expiation is to remove or cancel the effects of sin. Propitiation means to appease or to satisfy; in this case God’s honor.<sup>24</sup> Stated simply, the sacrifice of the life of the Messiah either removed or canceled the consequences of sin while the same sacrifice paid the ransom or debt that was due. I find it unconscionable that the church is willing to accept the gifts of salvation purchased by the death of Jesus with so little reflection or meditation.

It must be stated that the purpose and process discussed here results in salvation and salvation is connected to the shedding of blood. While this offends our modern sensibilities, Ephesians 1:7 brazenly states, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...”

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<sup>23</sup> David L. Allen, *The Atonement: A Biblical, Theological and Historical Study of the Cross of Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 9.

<sup>24</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Atonement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.

The blood is significant to the concept of atonement. Leviticus 17:11 points out, “For the life of creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves ... it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” Additionally, Hebrews 9:22 reinforces by stating, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

While Christians agree that there is no forgiveness without blood, perhaps the purpose of the blood is something different than previously imagined. Many, if not most Christians view the sacrifice of blood through the moral lens of the “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” mentality believing that shame must be responded to by shame. Death brought about by sin, can only be atoned through the death (shedding of blood) of a perfect sacrifice. However, note what is stated in Leviticus 17:11, “The *life* of the creature is in the blood and I have given it to you to you to make atonement for yourselves.” Thinking changes when we realize that the *life* of the sacrificial offering is offered in trade for death. Further, note that the Hebrew writer informs the reader that “the law requires the nearly everything be cleansed with blood.” Blood not only counters the impact of sin (death) but also cleanses from the effect of sin upon the conscience. The concept of a cleansed and restored conscience will be key in our discussion of atonement theology among those affected by trauma and abuse.

As we study atonement, despite all the published writings and classroom discussions, the New Testament word *hilasterion*, translated “atoning sacrifice” or “the sacrifice of atonement” only appears in the NT in a couple of places. In the writings of Paul we find it used only once. Subsequent usage is found in Hebrews and 1 John.

“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood...”  
(Romans 3:25)

“Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover.”  
(Hebrews 9:5)

“... in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”  
(Hebrews 2:17)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.:  
(1 John 2:2)

“This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”  
(1 John 4:10)

It must be considered that this sparsely used word denies clear definition through the use of contextual reference alone. However, Scot McKnight notes that modern translations stopped using the word propitiation as a definition and instead use the more generic term “sacrifice of atonement” seemingly to broaden the definition. In doing so, he suggests three options for consideration.<sup>25</sup>

The first option is to emphasize the concept of propitiation and focus our efforts on appeasing the wrath of God. The context of Romans 1-3 is definitely concerning topic of God’s displeasure against unrighteousness. “The wrath of God is being revealed against all unrighteousness ...” (Romans 1:18). So that the righteousness of God is offended by human sin that may only be appeased through sacrifice and the sacrifice required is the death of Jesus.

The second option for the definition of the word *hilasterion* is to reference the concept of expiation or the cleansing of sin from humanity. This is referred to above that the blood of the sacrifice has a cleansing and protecting effect upon the object of salvation. This fits the usage of *hilasterion* as used in 1 John 1:7-9 where we read that “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin

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<sup>25</sup> Scot McKnight, “What Is a ‘Sacrifice of Atonement’?,” April 14, 2019), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2019/04/15/what-is-a-sacrifice-of-atonement/>.

... if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness ... He is the atoning sacrifice [hilasmos] for our sins...”

The third option is a combination of both propitiation (appeasement of the wrath of God) and expiation (cleansing of sin by the blood) through the reminder of the purpose of the Day of Atonement. Hebrews 9:5 uses the same word (*hilasterion*) by referring to a physical place, the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. In doing so, the Hebrew writer leads us to consider that that Jesus is the central meeting place between God and humanity. This is the place where the body and blood are combined into a union of God and saved humanity. This option is particularly useful as we discuss how justice and forgiveness can co-exist particularly for those who have been abused and offended.

## History of Atonement Theology

At the beginning of this project, I walked the halls of the church building where I serve and asked people, “Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?” A wry smile or blank expression was typically the first response. Most suggested, “To save me from sin.” However, their intonation and body language suggested they were uneasy with that simple answer but knew no other. I believe I had once again discovered a lack of understanding concerning the process and outcome of the central doctrine of atonement.

An important insight that I gained in attempting to educate the congregation about atonement theology is that the meaning of the term atonement is not widely agreed upon either by scholars or laity. They had heard the shorthanded titles of various theories and tended to attach themselves to particular theory or another. For example, in my casual conversations but not a formal survey, I discovered those whose life had been impacted by military service often have a particular affinity to the interpretation of atonement reflected the ideology of battles fought and the sin war won through Christ. Others, who are more connected with rules and consequences were far more likely to lean toward a moral stance. It is possible to find common ground and to gain a measure of consensus by recognizing that atonement theology is one doctrine that can be viewed from various perspectives and thus seen as a many-faceted jewel.

In his book, *Problems in Theology – The Atonement*, Michael Winter notes that the beginning of the atonement riddle can be found in the discussions of the distant past, among the Church Fathers. During the first few centuries of the church, the Fathers commented and elaborated on many of the doctrines of the church as they are reflected in the New Testament. Winter asserts that the reason for this theological undertaking was not idle debate. Instead, questions were raised in response to the heresies, false teachings, and wandering theology of the

church and the culture in which they lived. Winter writes, “The orthodox writers were trying to clarify and safeguard the Church’s teaching against those who had left the community because they could not accept conflicting doctrines.”<sup>26</sup>

Over time, the valuable discussions of the Church Fathers concerning the *person* of Christ gave way to the *work* of Christ, and the foundations of the theory of atonement. It is important to note that they came to no dogmatic teaching or single orthodoxy that defines atonement. No ecumenical council ever pronounced a definite orthodoxy on the description or determination of the atonement. Their remarks reflect the ideas highlighted by the NT authors but stop short of a full and definite explanation. As we see from Eusebius:

The Lamb of God . . . was chastised on our behalf and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonor, which was due to us and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls? And so the oracle says in our person: “By his stripes, we were healed and the Lord delivered him for our sins.”  
(*Demonstration of the Gospel* 10.1)<sup>27</sup>

The foundation of the theology of atonement is based on the fact that God loves humanity and a restored relationship is made possible through the crucifixion of Jesus. This theological understanding is unquestioned, however, God’s rationale has been controversial for centuries. Many have attempted to create a systematic theory of atonement in order to attempt to explain all the implications of the crucifixion and the result for humanity (outcome). In their attempt to understand and communicate their ideas, scholars have relied on single metaphors characterizing the entire concept of atonement found in the New Testament. This has proven confusing to laity

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Winter, *Problems in Theology: The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey, 1995), pp. 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

in general. As I began my study, it was overwhelming to consider the sheer number and variety of metaphors that have been posited. Each one defines one important part of the whole. I found it difficult to hold all the pieces in my consciousness simultaneously.

As atonement theories have evolved over the last two millennia, these ideas have coalesced into ideologies and metaphors that depict the work of Christ on the cross. The ideas and beliefs of these theories have served to create the language of sermons, hymns, liturgies, prayers, and lessons throughout Christianity. In my church just this last weekend, following the immersion/baptism of his daughter, a father stood smiling next to her on the stage and sang the hymn “Victory in Jesus by Eugene Monroe Bartlett.

Oh, victory in Jesus, my Savior forever  
He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood  
He loved me 'ere I knew Him and all my love is due Him  
He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood

The last line in the second verse of this hymn reads,

And then I cried, "Dear Jesus, come and heal my broken spirit;  
and somehow Jesus came and brought to me the victory."<sup>28</sup>

Those lyrics describe what many believe about the atoning work of Jesus. They know enough to cry out to Jesus but find that what actually happened to be a mystery, so they settle for singing, “*somehow* Jesus came and brought to me the victory.”

N.T. Wright understood how confounding the study of atonement can be when he wrote, “The term ‘atonement’ is not well served by being seen as the name for a ‘thing’ or one specific truth . . . we use the word atonement in Western theological discussions as though there is one

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<sup>28</sup> Post author By Jenny M., “Victory in Jesus: Hymn Lyrics and Piano Music,” Hymns, April 9, 2021, <https://gccsatx.com/hymns/victory-in-jesus/> accessed Feb 22, 2022.



thing that we all know we're talking about, even though it is hard to say what exactly it is."<sup>29</sup>

Wright compares the concept of atonement to a suitcase which carries all our important items.

The suitcase is built from the base material found in 1 Corinthians 15:3 "the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." In these eleven words, the Apostle Paul is able to sum up the entire essence of atonement. Wright describes this as the suitcase. In his metaphor, believers then fill the suitcase with doctrines, theologies, and characterizations of God that help define who we are in relation to the Creator. Each suitcase is identical in function and each suitcase is packed with similar but different items that each person finds important. Wright continues by referring to the suitcase, "So we pack it away, zip it up, call it 'atonement' – then we go off into a hundred different discussions that are often more about the color and shape of the suitcase than about what is inside."<sup>30</sup> Wright illustrates well the struggle to both understand and describe the concepts of atonement.

Toward this point, Craig discussed that at times we struggle in our conversations about atonement because we fail to distinguish between the *doctrine* of atonement and *theories* of atonement.<sup>31</sup> The New Testament is clear in its teaching that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected on account of our sins and that these actions achieved our reconciliation with God. Jesus did for us what was not possible for us to do on our own. However, since that time, there have been many of theories attempting to explain how Jesus' death allowed us to be reconciled. In this paper, I will simply endeavor to provide the reader with enough background of the

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<sup>29</sup> N. T. Wright, Simon J. Gathercole, and Robert B. Stewart, *What Did the Cross Accomplish?: A Conversation about the Atonement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> William Lane Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ an Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 21.

theories of atonement so that we may discuss the modern-day implications, particularly with the theory of penal substitutionary atonement.

As we focus our attention on the most prominent atonement theories, it is important to note that each theory depicts violence as a necessary element. While it is not a question of whether Jesus encountered and was a victim of violence, we will be considering if the violence is necessary in gaining reconciliation and if violence is a representation of the character of God.

Additionally, Denny Weaver stresses the importance of evaluating each theory based on the participation of the three principal players in the atonement story. We must track the participation of God, Satan, and Humanity itself.<sup>32</sup> It is by our evaluation of the actions or inactions of these three that will help us to determine the villain, if you will, of each theory. By determining this focus, we will better understand how each theory is interpreted by the laity.

### *Christus Victor*

Two concepts important to the Christus Victor metaphor that are often mentioned in hymns and sermons are the ideas of “ransom” and the “deception of the devil.” The ancient Church Fathers were convinced that human beings are held captive by sin and evil, therefore they reasoned humans must be bought back from the devil by paying a fee or a ransom. The Bible supports this notion that a payment was needed to release the captive sinners. Matthew 20:28 notes, “The Son of Man came . . . to give his life a ransom for many.” Or refer to Hebrews 2:14-15, “he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him

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<sup>32</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 14.

who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

According to this view, the devil is attributed rights and powers over human beings. These rights were significant in that the justice of God was rejected by humanity and their allegiance given to the devil. The choice of humanity to move from the kingdom of God to the realm of the devil is what gave Satan the legitimacy to have possessive ownership over humans. In contrast, in the image of the cosmic battle, the devil is the cause of the crucifixion but he is deceived into believing that victory is won when Jesus breathes his last mortal breath. The resurrection is a counter-attack and humanity is rescued from the clutches of the devil. Therefore, the incarnation was necessary for the deal to be feasible. Jesus, unlike all other humans, was completely sinless. He never left the kingdom of God behind therefore he never became the property of the devil. This understanding, promoted by Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa, reasoned that the killing of the sinless Son of God was the devil’s greatest blunder. Through this one act, Satan was now guilty of the murderous possession of a man who was not his to collect. Because of this error, the devil was forced to renounce his rights to all of humanity and relinquish his claim over them.

Darby Kathleen Ray notes that “the ideas of ransom and overreaching of authority helped the early Christians understand the nature and consequences of evil, personified by the devil.”<sup>33</sup> I think that the idea of ransom also assisted them in comprehending the role of God in the redemptive plan. According to this model, the incarnation was a ruse designed by the Father and shared by the Son in order to deceive the devil. For the purpose of our study, please note that

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<sup>33</sup> Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 122.

the ransom model makes the devil the instigator of the cross and the crucifier of Jesus. Jesus suffered in accomplishing his successful mission to “seek and save that which was lost.”

### **Satisfaction Atonement**

Satisfaction atonement as credited to Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) begins by asking the question “Why did God become human?” Anselm’s answer is that God became human in order to restore God’s honor because the sin of humanity had dishonored Him. In turn, justice demands satisfaction to satisfy God's honor and the upset in the divine order of the universe. Anselm’s model contends that God’s is engaged in a struggle due to the fact that he has a need for justice but a desire for mercy. God’s need and desire stand at odds with one another and cannot be easily resolved. God desires to forgive by offering unlimited mercy to his creation but justice requires that the serious nature of sin demeans the moral code and diminishes both God’s honor and integrity. Therefore, God’s honor is the target of the effect of Jesus’ death.

Anselm reasoned that God’s requirement for justice included punishment for sin as compensation for the debt of sin. However, humanity is unable to pay the debt to a good and righteous as well as infinite God. Humankind has nothing of sufficient value to give to God in lieu of sin. Only God could pay such an infinite debt but only humanity should pay the debt.<sup>34</sup> Anselm reasoned that the only solution is that the God-man would need to become a sacrifice due to his innocent nature being of infinite value. With this sacrifice of Jesus, God’s justice is satisfied and He is free to forgive and love humanity. Jesus’ death is the payment that reconciles all people to God.

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<sup>34</sup> Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 8.

The key to Anselm's theory is understanding that it is humanity's obligation to honor God through obedience. Disobedience then is offensive to God's honor. This offensive behavior stems from humanity's desire to choose themselves as the one to be honored and worshipped above the Creator. This sin of dishonor as demonstrated through disobedience creates the barrier between God and humanity and thus necessitates the incarnation of Jesus.

Stephen Finlin suggests that Anselm constructed his theory of atonement based on the feudal social structure of his time. Mark Baker echoes this idea that Anselm builds his theory on a feudal allegory with God as a feudal lord and humanity as serfs. The lord of the kingdom is responsible for oversight and protection of all things. The serfs are rewarded as they farm the land and give honor to the lord.<sup>35</sup> This structure has God as feudal lord and humanity as the serfs. However, if the serfs refuse to honor the master or share the harvest, then this is sin when they begin to play the role of both the owner and manager of the farm. The lord then demands satisfaction which could be compared to civil damages that require some form of compensation.<sup>36</sup>

This theory is illustrated by the parable of the tenants from the Gospels. (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). The owner planted a vineyard, built all the infrastructure and protective watchtower. He rented the farm to tenants and required only respect for his ownership made manifest by the relinquishment of a portion of the harvest. The owner sent servants but the squatters were increasingly violent in their expression of resistance. Finally, the owner sends his son and expects them to 'respect the son'. However, instead of showing honor through

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<sup>35</sup> Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 93.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville (Minn.): Liturgical Press, 2005), 72-72.

obedience, they murdered the son. The owner then is given justification by the narrator to kill the tenants in seeking satisfaction and repayment of damages suffered.

An important shift in this theory occurred during the time of the Protestant Reformers, there was a shift from Anselm's original purpose of the crucifixion and the death of Jesus. In Anselm's view, Jesus' crucifixion was a necessity to restore God's honor. For the reformers, formed by a focus on justice and penalty, Jesus' death was necessary to satisfy the divine law requirement that sin must be punished. The consequence of sin (death) must be paid. Jesus no longer honored God through sacrifice, instead he accepted the punishment that is owed by humanity. In offering his life, he is the substitute that satisfies the penalty for sin. This shift in focus creates what is known today as Penal Substitutionary Atonement. (PSA) has become the most recognized and accepted atonement metaphor by evangelical Christians.<sup>37</sup>

### **Moral Influence**

Following Anselm by a generation, Peter Abelard, a professor at the University of Paris, rejected both ransom and satisfaction atonement theories and instead described the theory of moral influence. Abelard stated, "the purpose and cause of the incarnation was that He might illuminate the world by His wisdom and excite it to the love of Himself."<sup>38</sup> Abelard thought it "cruel and wicked" that the blood of an innocent would be the requirement of any debt. Abelard could not imagine that the repayment of an obligation or satisfaction be discovered by the death

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<sup>37</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 73

of an innocent person and “still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world.”<sup>39</sup>

Instead, Abelard taught that Christ’s death on the cross and the cruelty itself should stimulate repentance in humankind and create an overwhelming desire to live in obedience to God. Identified as the “moral influence” theory, the focus is directed on the character of Christ’s life and teachings. Abelard believed that humanity would naturally gravitate toward identification with a suffering servant rather than of an afflicted sacrifice.

This was perhaps the hope of Mel Gibson when he produced the movie “The Passion of the Christ.” Too difficult for many to watch, including me, it attempted to create an accurate depiction of the events leading up to and including the crucifixion. While I waited for years after its theatrical release to screen it, I still recoiled at the images of Jesus beaten, shamed, abused and murdered. I expressed to friends that seeing the violent death of a person I love is not honoring rather saw it as horror voyeurism. Surprisingly, after viewing the movie, through interlaced fingers for much of it, I will admit that I felt a sense of shame and a nagging desire to live up to spiritual expectations.

Finlin and others give credit to Abelard for bringing attention to some aspects of atonement that had been previously ignored. He expressed that one result of forgiveness is an inward spiritual and external behavior alteration. Finlin notes that this change was the effect of a sinner experiencing the consequence of shame and thus would seek to live up to a better standard. So atonement, according to Abelard, put the emphasis on the entirety of Jesus’ life and ministry. He proposes that Jesus came to teach and model a righteous life. Finlin quoted

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

Abelard, “seeing the noble death of a truly innocent man who bore no ill will touch the conscience and regenerated the life of believers.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Comparison of these theories of Atonement**

Distinguishing the unique metaphors of atonement does more than just provide a theological history lesson. Rather, it allows us to visualize the movement of how one metaphor informed and transformed the earlier theories.

Weaver points out that in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm strongly rejects the idea that Jesus’ death was a ransom paid to the devil as was noted by the previous *Christus Victor* model. He argued that Satan had no contractual right to demand payment from God and in turn, God has no responsibility to be obligated to the devil. Even though humankind has violated God’s law and is deserving of punishment, Satan has no expectation of being the beneficiary of that debt payment. The topic of paying Satan creates an untenable position for God. Therefore, Anselm removes the devil from the atonement equation.<sup>41</sup> Rather than making humanity a captive of the devil, Anselm makes humanity directly responsible to God. Humans sinned against God and the punishment is payable by those who offended God’s honor. Ultimately the ransom was paid to God.

Abelard followed Anselm’s lead of rejecting the idea that a ransom was due to the devil. But Abelard also rejected the doctrine that Jesus’ death was restitution payable to God. Instead, the death of Jesus was a direct result of evil humanity attacking God’s righteous and loving son.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).



Note Acts 2:23, “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” The incarnation was God’s gift of his most precious possession in order to garner their attention and affections. God’s affections were rejected and Jesus was crucified through the evil intentions and actions of humanity.

Dennis Weaver considers these three atonement metaphors and asks the question, “Who or what needs the death of Jesus?”<sup>42</sup> For the ransom theory, it is the devil who requires Jesus’ death as a payment to release the souls of humanity. For the satisfaction theory, God requires a sacrificial death to restore His honor or it is the law that requires the crucifixion to satisfy the letter of the penal system. In the moral influence theory, it is humanity that needs death in order to perceive how much the Father loves us and to demonstrate the extent of that love as Jesus willingly dies to prove his devotion to the Father and humanity.

Building on the last question, Weaver asks, “Who is responsible for the death of Jesus? or directly asked, who ultimately killed Jesus?”<sup>43</sup> In the *Christus Victor* (ransom model) it is apparent that the responsible party is the devil demanding a ransom payment of gruesome proportions. Weaver suggests that this makes God look “particularly bad” in the fact that God appears weak to the devil’s strength.<sup>44</sup>

As attention is turned toward the satisfaction model and the question is also asked, “Who is responsible for the death of Jesus?” the answer can be uncomfortable. As it is God’s honor that has been disrespected, it is also God who arranges for Jesus to be crucified as both

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 34.

propitiation and expiation for the dishonoring sin of humanity, so it appears that God has Jesus killed to pay the debt owed to self. Weaver points out that Anselm has removed the devil as the orchestrator of the crucifixion. This creates misunderstandings for Anselm's substitutionary theory. As Weaver noted, there are only three actors in this drama: God, Humanity and Satan. By removing the devil, it leaves only God and humanity. It has already been established that it is impossible for humanity to pay the debt owed to retrieve God's honor. As such, the Father is the only alternative left to be the one to orchestrate the crucifixion.

Some have tried to put the blame on the devil or the mob or even the influence of the Roman Empire who sought to restore peace through making Jesus serve as an example of punishment. But to choose any of these is to put the two parties at odds while at the same time they are in league with each other for the benefit of humanity. In other words, Jesus, who is innocent of any wrongdoing is doing the will of God by becoming subject to punishment for sin he didn't commit. Conjointly, the violence of those who are acting in an evil conspiratorial drama to oppose the sovereignty of God through killing Jesus are also actually doing the will of God through the crucifixion of the Son. The implication of this is that both entities are obedient to God and act in ways that honor Him. Weaver notes that some wave the card of "mystery" and claim that God's acts are simply "too big for our theories to contain" thus rendering any attempt to understand meaningless to us. So we are back to singing, "and *somehow* Jesus came and brought to me the victory."

### **Critique of Penal Substitutionary Atonement**

The implied role of God the Father as the instigator and enforcer is why a number of feminists, womanist theologians, and essayists have claimed that the penal substitutionary

atonement theory presents a case of coercive abuse. While many Christians find this description of God radical, distasteful, or completely offensive, others wonder how to describe a God who “sent His one and only Son.” One woman in my church referred to God as ‘a frightening divine thug.’”

In the 1970’s, Joanne Carlson and Rebecca Parker wrote:

The atonement is the central reason for the oppressiveness of Christianity . . . Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering . . . We must do away with the atonement idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race . . . this blood-thirsty God.<sup>45</sup>

As early as the 1980’s, Rita Nakashima Brock wrote that any theory of atonement that subjected Jesus to punishment to satisfy God’s need for honor or vengeance as “cosmic child abuse.”<sup>46</sup> This graphic negative depiction has served to alarm many and has become a touchstone phrase for those who resist the theory of penal substitutionary atonement. Brock has not been the only voice. Elizabeth Johnson points out that the concept of Jesus, the innocent, being punished on account of sinful humanity is, “virtually inseparable from the underlying image of God as an angry bloodthirsty, sadistic father, reflecting the very worst kind of male behavior.”<sup>47</sup> Deloris Williams writes that seeing Jesus as a helpless surrogate is to “glorify suffering.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville (Minn.): Liturgical Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>46</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 56.

<sup>47</sup> Rachael Denhollander and Jacob Denhollander, “Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse,” *Fathom Mag*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse>, accessed 2/22/22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Denhollander addresses these concerns by asking, “What separates an abusive view of substitutionary atonement from a biblical view of substitutionary atonement? Her answer: “the status of the Son.”<sup>49</sup> She notes that PSA becomes an abusive paradigm when the Father acts against the Son to bring about a result that benefits the Father primarily and for his own distinct purpose. Many interpret PSA as a theory that inserts the innocent Son between the wrathful Father and sinful humanity so that the Father can pour out his anger on someone.

The problem with this depiction, Denhollander writes, “(this interpretation) considers PSA in isolation from orthodox Trinitarian theology that stresses the complete equality and unity of the Godhead in which no one member dominates or controls the others and in which the actions of each member is inseparably connected to the others.”<sup>50</sup> She rejects a subordinationist view of the Trinity.

It is not surprising that people have misunderstood. Often the incarnation has been described from a subordinationist viewpoint. I have often heard sermons that have stated that God the Father *placed* the Son into a human body for the express purpose of killing him. This promotes the idea that the Son is a passive entity born only to be executed, likened to livestock.

The subordinationist fails to consider that the triune nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a single will that is borne out of their combined divine nature. The Son of God suffers and dies on the cross because that was the way the triune Godhead in complete agreement chose to both rescue sinners and bring about justice, as well as defeat the devil.

Denhollander concludes that the crucifixion cannot resemble child abuse, “for this requires the Father and the Son acting separately, one against the other – an impossibility

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

according to this doctrine. Rather, at the cross, the Father, Son and Spirit work to do the same work.”<sup>51</sup> Without this understanding being reflected from the pulpit and lecturn, many who are sensitive to violence brought about by power inequities through trauma and abuse, find it exceedingly difficult to draw close to a seemingly abusive deity.

Many believers, whether ivory tower educated or pew-sitting philosophers may have a difficult time grasping the emotional concerns of the trauma-affected resisters to PSA. An excerpt from Roberta Bondi’s book, “Memories of God” gives us a glimpse into her psyche. In this story, she is a young girl visiting her ‘country cousins’ and attending a revival meeting.

Brother Smith’s message was always the same, and it was not designed for the easy listening of children. “Sinners!” he would shout. “You are all sinners! Are you ready for hell? Do you think you can keep your sins hidden from your heavenly Father? Don’t you think your own Father knows what you do in secret? Do you think he can’t see into your hearts? That there will be a day of reckoning? Well, I’m here to tell you judgment is coming and coming soon! Aren’t you afraid?”

Soon, I would be huddled down and shivering, not just afraid but terrorized in my starched sundress . . . I would try to believe that my heavenly Father loved me, sins and all – only I could not believe it. How could a God love me in spite of my sins if they were bad enough to make God’s own Son die?

Rita Nakashima Brock notes that the problem may begin with the use of father as an image of God. Although this is inherent in all the theories, she points out that in the aftermath of abusive situations, there is a longing on the part of the child/adult for an intimate and loving relationship with the father figure. She asserts that based on our patriarchal society, there is a belief that the mother-figure alone cannot provide for the child. So, the child’s needs are left unmet. She also states that in a patriarchal religion, the child’s theology is consumed with

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 25.

avoiding guilt or placing blame in order to discover protection from punishment as they seek approval from the powerful but threateningly absent parent.<sup>52</sup>

Brock sees all atonement theories falling into four categories: 1) through Jesus death the enemies of God are reconciled; 2) Jesus life is demanded as ransom for sinful humanity; 3) sin is costly and the debt is paid by Jesus life; 4) Jesus is a perfect sacrifice who cleanses humanity. In all of these theories, Brock's understanding is based on the theology of original sin. In her view, every child is taught from birth that she is inadequate and lacking. So sinful, as a matter of fact, that the heavenly father is unable to be in their presence. They are rejected as detestable and disgusting. So, the only answer is to degrade the perfect child, Jesus, and punish him for being so. Brock considers religious teaching trauma-inducing in itself.<sup>53</sup> The child seeks to project an idyllic image herself but is still left lacking, sinful. This ongoing religious trauma exacerbates the tendency of the child to accept the blame for being wrong and causing and subsequent violence. This tendency is often identified in abused children. The acceptance of blame and subsequent shame helps the child manage a sense of rage about being denied love, being hurt and proven to be wrong. According to Brock, the child's anger is turned to fear rather than looking for reciprocal love.<sup>54</sup> Fear of being discovered as less-than is a formidable obstacle that appears insurmountable. However, those who build the barriers for those who are recovering from trauma and abuse is unintentional.

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<sup>52</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 55.

<sup>53</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 55.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Mark Baker remembers sitting in a church class listening to a preacher asking, “See this glass?” as he holds a filthy glass in one hand and continues, “Because of sin, you are this filthy glass.” Next, the preacher reveals a hammer in the other hand. “This hammer is the righteousness of God,” he announces, holding it high above his head. “God’s justice can only be satisfied by punishing people whose lives are filled with corruption.” The preacher lays the glass on the pulpit and begins to quickly lower the hammer. As the hammer blow falls, a crash of metal on metal is heard rather than shattering glass. At the last moment, he covered the glass with a large metal pan. The hammer has struck but no damage was created. The pastor finishes his lesson, “Jesus Christ died for your sins. He took the punishment that ought to have fallen on you. He satisfied the righteousness of God so that you can go free if you believe in him.”<sup>55</sup>

Baker notes that Anselm, in his opinion, would not have approved of this illustration. The character of God must be presented as God requiring satisfaction of Christ outside of a wrathful God who punishes the innocent. Rather he feels we fall short of the mark when we forget the principle that, a debt must be paid and that God is willing to pay the penalty by accepting the pain unto himself.<sup>56</sup>

Denhollander and others find that the concept of the Trinity answers the problem of an abusive deity carrying out unfair punishment on the innocent son. Alternatively, Brock finds a system that can potentially create a system of survivor guilt and bondage. She writes, “Trinitarian formulations of atonement absolve god the father of his punitive aspect by asserting that the consequences for sin are actually taken into divine existence . . . by doing so he

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<sup>55</sup> Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 168.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

demonstrates his love for all others.” Her complaint is this can sound like the father saying, “This is going to hurt me more than it does you.”<sup>57</sup>

Alternatively, Brock finds PSA to be a system of thought that can potentially create a sense of survivor guilt and bondage. She writes, “Trinitarian formulations of atonement absolve God, the Father of his punitive aspect by asserting that the consequences for sin are actually taken into divine existence . . . by doing so, he demonstrates his love for all others.” Her complaint is that to a victim of trauma or abuse this can sound like the father saying, “This is going to hurt me more than it does you.”<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Darby Kathleen Ray not only writes critically about this doctrine of atonement, but also offers a proposal for a better way to communicate the importance of the cross. She evaluates all the explanations of the theories of atonement “not solely on the basis of their noble intentions or conformity to standards of orthodoxy, but also in light of their experienced effects.”<sup>59</sup> Similar to the concerns of others, she concludes that the effects of traditional atonement teaching include divine assent of domestic abuse and a level of passivity toward prosecution and justice. She notes “the very doctrine whose job it is to attempt to understand and articulate God’s response to evil perpetuates evil in the lives of many women, men and children.”<sup>60</sup> If I understand what she is saying, and put more colloquially, it is both frightening and confusing to a child to be threatened with violence as an expression of love.

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<sup>57</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>59</sup> Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



In response to Ray, I feel we must consider how to respond to the criticism leveled at violent atonement theories and begin by acknowledging that there are legitimate concerns that lie behind these objections. It remains my hypothesis that typical Bible studies, small groups, sermons and many worship songs in the American church often present violence-oriented and problematic interpretations of atonement theology. So, it must be concluded that atonement theology has been used to mask the mentality of embracing abusive behavior within the church. But I also agree that PSA may not be the culprit as much as the way PSA has been portrayed by leaders in the church and understood by those who have experienced trauma and abuse. As much as the church needs to know theology, Christians need to be aware of the unique proclivities of those with whom we worship.

## Trauma and Abuse

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

“I don’t like dogs,” Amanda\* said as she walked toward me, referencing a story I told while teaching the Sunday school lesson. The young woman approached me timidly, her demeanor reminding me of a five-year-old child but she was obviously a high schooler. As she spoke her hand caught my attention as she absent-mindedly brushed her hair away from her face revealing a two-inch scar on her cheek that started at the corner of her mouth and stretched toward her left ear. She told me that she had been bitten by a dog at age three. “I understand why you don’t like dogs,” I thought but didn’t say. Later a church staff member informed that it was Amanda’s angry neighbor who had given a command to the dog to attack her because she had wandered into his yard. Now I also understood her timid demeanor around dogs and men. Years had passed since that incident yet the trauma of that day had altered both Amanda’s perception of people and her behavior towards others.

Shelly Rambo states, “Trauma is the suffering that does not go away. The study of trauma is the study of what remains.”<sup>61</sup> The ancient Greek word for trauma, τραύμα, means a “wound” or “an injury inflicted upon the body by an act of violence.”<sup>62</sup> When this definition is used, it is correct in the broadest sense. When visiting a hospital, there is no confusion about what is occurring in the ‘Trauma Unit’. Medical professionals are dealing with immediate and dangerous physical injuries. We assume that these wounds were caused by an entity harming the

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<sup>61</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). 15.

<sup>62</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 23.

physical body. However, contemporary uses of the word trauma have extended this definition to involve the mind and emotions and include the effects of violence on our inner worlds of emotion, perception, imagination, and spirituality. Similarly, Sigmund Freud's work with Josef Bauer was one of the earliest examples of someone making the connection between the experience of incest and subsequent psychological difficulties. Later it was correlated to battle fatigue when attention was given to returning veterans of war."<sup>63</sup> Trauma can be easily overlooked. Generally speaking, physical trauma is obvious, evident, and immediate. Examining external wounds allows for medical trauma teams to quickly diagnose the issue and begin the process of treatment. Physicians understand the importance of keeping the delay between event and treatment intentionally small. Psychological trauma remains hidden in plain sight and manifests itself with a thousand symptoms or no visible symptoms at all. Due to lack of obvious signs and many other reasons, rapid response is not always feasible in cases of psychological trauma. The phenomenon of the lingering effects of trauma and abuse presents challenges to comprehension and therefore treatment.

Human nature also hinders the initial response. The innate human reflex is to turn away when witnessing an unpleasant event; even more so when we see or hear of a traumatic violation of defenseless populations. Jennifer Baldwin notes "Dealing with the phenomenon of lingering pain after a traumatic event is deceptively challenging."<sup>64</sup> This is an especially difficult task for religious communities who are conditioned to think about "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable."

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<sup>63</sup> Jennifer Baldwin, in *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 21.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

(Phil. 4:8). The leaders of the church often struggle to comprehend the effects of suffering connected to trauma that occurred earlier in time and such trauma often leaves victims struggling to verbally describe their painful symptomology. Well-intentioned people mistakenly imagine that the impact of the trauma ends when the violence ceases or the offender is stopped. This is not the experience of most trauma victims. It is in the aftermath of violence they must begin to reassemble their lives in a world that has shattered the basic mental and spiritual frameworks of trust in relationships and personal security.

Mental health practitioners have been keen to describe and label the work they do with hurting people. This work has focused on the psychological effect of fighting terrorists and urban battlefields most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. Often equated with members of the military, the concept of moral injury has gotten considerable focus from scholars and practitioners over the last twenty years. Moral injury is the damage done to a person's moral compass when what they believed to be true about themselves and their moral compass becomes violated. The clinical definition of moral injury refers to "the lasting emotional, psychological, social, behavioral and spiritual impacts of actions that violate a person's core moral values and behavioral expectations of self or others."<sup>65</sup> Moral injury can lead to serious depression, anxiety and suicidality when the level of cognitive dissonance is raised high enough. Often church members will recount that their abuse was perpetrated by a person known to them from within the faith community. The lingering effect is a lack of trust in all church affiliated persons when they experience similar relationships to the abuser.

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<sup>65</sup> "Welcome," The Moral Injury Project Welcome Comments, <https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/>, accessed March 14, 2022,

Diane Langberg writes that “trauma means living with the recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed.”<sup>66</sup> Effective trauma response sees the connection between the experience of an event and the aftermath that often becomes increasingly evident. However, the challenge of identifying this type of harm is that often a wounded soul doesn’t manifest the signs of harm that would typically be associated with victims of violence. As these invisible wounds often are marked by acute anxiety, obsessive thoughts, recurrent dreams depression, hypersexuality, isolation, or disassociative states. Church leaders are unsurprisingly timid to engage with victims, often fearing that delving into these trauma responses will push victims to ask questions beyond the comfortable theological paradigms of simple forgiveness and restoration.<sup>67</sup>

One woman expressed to me her continued anger toward her last church pastor and church members who asked her to leave the fellowship after she admitted ongoing rage and a sense of unforgiveness toward her physical and sexually abusive father. The church had counseled her that her lack of ability to forgive was a signifier that she was not properly delivered (saved). They instructed her that complete forgiveness was her pathway to walk out of the depression and anxiety that marked the ongoing effects of her trauma.

Today, the word trauma is finding a wider usage in philosophical, sociological, theological, and pastoral texts. Narrative theology is expanding our understanding by defining the word and the concept of trauma as having deeper meaning and more importantly, a faith-based significance. Theologically, recognized events termed as abusive and/or traumatic have been equated with the word ‘evil’. As this is technically accurate, there are connotations for

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<sup>66</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro,, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

those intentionally involved and even more so for those who were forcibly included to feel guilt by association with something that is unholy. Trying to avoid this feeling of guilt by association, pastoral responses are often unwittingly muted and delayed in hopes of spontaneous resolution. Church leaders succumb to the ideology that time alone will heal all wounds. Churches need to reconsider the warning in the book of James. Although he is addressing those with physical needs, the same principle applies to those among us who are hurting. “If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed but does nothing about their physical needs’, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead’ (James 2:16-17).

The task of recognizing and listening to those who have faced traumatic experiences and formulating post-traumatic response as deceptively challenging as it is our common predisposition is to turn away in disbelief from information or experiences that are difficult to process within the social framework of our beliefs. Baldwin stresses that we often will ignore the experiences and associated trauma that reinforce the concept that human beings are capable of violating deeply held societal norms and pushing past cultural taboos.<sup>68</sup> We are reticent to see or hear of the abuses and subsequent after-effects because we don’t want to believe them. As a society, we have the innate tendency to seek to see the best scenarios and ignore the evidence to the contrary.

Some years ago, author Robert Fulghum wrote a book titled *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*. The title of the book is a quote of a response to a firefighter who rescued a man from a smoldering bed from within a house fire. The firefighter asked, “How did this happen?”

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<sup>68</sup> Jennifer Baldwin, in *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), p. 21.

The man's response was, "I don't know, it was on fire when I lay down on it."<sup>69</sup> I find this mentality often true in the church community in relation to pastoral ministry. The dilemma is that we see what other people do, but we are left wondering why they do it. Why did he lie down on the burning bed? Was he drunk? Blind? Confused? We can't know. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul is as confused by his own behavior when he stated, "I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate." We become so focused on dealing with the present that we ignore the past experiences and the ways they have or have not dealt with the aftermath of the past. Fulghum has explains this concept well when he wrote,

To get through this life and see it realistically poses a problem. There is a dark, evil, hopeless side to life that includes suffering, and death . . . on the other hand, the best side of our humanity finds us determined to make life as meaningful as possible."<sup>70</sup>

So we choose to ignore the fires smoldering and burning in the lives of those around us and comfort ourselves instead by following our typical routines and practices. And we protect ourselves, our closest relationships, our institutions, and livelihoods by minimizing the effect of our practices and theologies. Perhaps this is why many victims are fearful to come forward and share their stories. Perhaps they fear the repercussions of being the outlier in the system that preaches the ideology summed in the trite statement, "Let Go and let God" as a maxim of spiritual success. The church needs to understand the concept of trauma and how it alters the theological perception of the victims.

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay down on It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The church would do well to focus attention and learn to see the signs of trauma. Serene Jones defines a traumatic event as an event “in which a person or persons perceives themselves or others as threatened by an external force that seeks to annihilate them and against which they are unable to resist and which overwhelms their capacity to cope.”<sup>71</sup> Jones notes several features that distinguish trauma from other stressful or disturbing life occurrences.

First, traumatic events are not simply incidents that create unhappiness, discomfort, or even creating deep sadness. Trauma producing events include a credible threat of physical annihilation. The abuse or trauma must be literal circumstances in which a person’s life is actually threatened with the actual potential of death to themselves or others. For instance, an abuser who swears a child to secrecy by threatening to kill her parents does not put the child in immediate danger but creates the belief within the child that they have the power to cause or protect their parents from harm.<sup>72</sup>

Second, an event rises to the level of trauma when the threat is internalized and subjectively experienced to be life-threatening. Events of life are actually life-threatening but not recognized as such will not create the same kind of psychological distress. Comprehension of the threat is the initiation of the trauma response. Being unaware of the potential danger does not constitute trauma.<sup>73</sup>

Third, trauma must be rooted in an actual event even though the memory of the event may be shadowy. Dreams, visions, impressions, or intuition do not meet these criteria. Real-life

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<sup>71</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009). 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



events that are lived experiences in which life is threatened or taken often involved the malevolent actions of others. The death of close friend is tragic but is raised to traumatic when the death is the result of homicide.<sup>74</sup>

Fourth, witnessing a life-threatening event that is vicariously experienced and seen as meant for the individual can create a trauma response. Witnessing an attack can be emotionally devastating even though the physical assault was not personally experienced. Jones points out that the sheer force of violence can collapse the commonly held barrier between individuals and cause involuntary participation.<sup>75</sup> An example would be witnessing a collapse of a building that killed dozens of neighbors as was the case in Miami, Florida of the Surfside Condominium in July of 2021.

Fifth, building on the last criteria, violent events can impact both individuals as well as whole communities and nations. This requires a shift of focus to understand the relation of trauma to the response. The closing of borders, masking mandates, and other responses by the governments of the world will most likely be seen as reactive trauma responses to the threat of physical death predicted by the COVID virus. Society's response was one of fear of another or continuing assault from an uncontrollable malevolent force this led to further protests, abusive rhetoric, and violent responses.<sup>76</sup>

Sixth, traumatic events are not limited to one-time events of life-threatening cataclysms. Trauma can be in repeated events of low-intensity domestic or workplace abuse. These ongoing

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

harmful and threatening relationships constantly wear away at the security of the individual over the course of years or decades.<sup>77</sup>

Seventh, events are raised to the level of traumatic when they are perceived as inescapable and unmanageable. When the situation exceeds the ability of the individual to respond or cope with the events or effects of the situation, the fight or flight mechanism is disabled. At times, abusers will depend on the weak responses of the abused to protect them from detection or consequences. The abused will sometimes be faulted for staying in the situation rather than complying with the “just get out” advice offered. However, they are unable to leave or resist due to the overriding power of the abuser on their ability to take action or even imagine a positive outcome.<sup>78</sup>

In her book, *Trauma Sensitive Theology*, Jennifer Baldwin includes a list of categories of types of trauma.<sup>79</sup> They are included here for the purpose of assisting the reader in fully grasping the scope of traumatic experiences. Those who remain uninitiated to the trauma by way of a blessed life or inexperienced in ministry may find it difficult to empathize with the stories, emotions, and responses of those who seek comfort and counsel from the church. It is valuable to be aware of your own experiences. It is also important for us to program liturgies and write sermons that at least minimize continued harm and are biblically supportive. Baldwin notes, “Until we can attend to the multivariate dimensions of the impact of trauma in our individual and

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Jennifer Baldwin, in *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), p. 32.

collective lives, we are more prone to perpetuate behaviors, systems, and laws that continue to inflict primary traumatization.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Primary Trauma**

When we initially describe someone suffering with the effects related to trauma, it might be a veteran returning from war diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who overreacts to loud noise is our first thought. Alternatively, it may be the survivor of a sexual assault who struggles with maintaining ongoing healthy relationships or manifests symptoms of depression or anxiety. Most generally, these sufferers follow a linear response from abuse to symptoms due to directly and personally experiencing a substantial trauma. These symptoms are most likely to be listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5)*. Primary traumatization is normally thought to occur with any direct violence, violation of personal rights and sexual boundaries, natural disasters, auto accidents. Following the race riots in Omaha in 2019, I saw client who struggled to leave their downtown apartment building for fear of being confronted or harmed for offending a person of color.

### **Secondary Trauma**

Secondary trauma has been previously referred to as vicarious trauma. This category includes both individuals and communities whose loved one is primarily traumatized. Secondary trauma can occur when a loved one’s life is threatened or ended. A colloquial title for secondary trauma is compassion fatigue. This is a primary cause for personal and professional burnout. Diane Langberg defines secondary traumatization as “the transformation of a person’s inner

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Following points refer to *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*.

experience resulting from empathic engagement with another's trauma."<sup>81</sup> She identifies a trackable progression that begins with stress caused by the trauma of a loved one that leads to compassion fatigue (burn out) and often leads to post-traumatic stress disorder. She notes that burnout builds slowly over a long period of time as opposed to the expected sudden onset due to a traumatic event. Ultimately the combination of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in caregiving can present in clinical symptoms.

Sufferers of secondary trauma include a family in my church. Lizzie\* was diagnosed with cancer at age seventeen. She lives with her mom at her grandparents' home near the church. Lizzie has endured medical tests, surgeries, chemotherapy, loss of hope, false hope, devastating diagnoses, and much more on her cancer journey. While none of these things are literally happening to her mom or grandparents, their trauma is palpable. I have seen them exhibit the symptomatic behaviors of overwhelming sadness, emotional shutdown, and a sense of helplessness and rage. Additionally, in the beginning of Lizzie's cancer journey, the church held fundraiser dinners, home visits with meals were scheduled, prayers and Facebook posts were plenty. As the weeks and months turned into years, she was mentioned less and the gifts of support dwindled. Lizzie is still with us and the church does have compassion but the focus of the church has moved elsewhere.

### **Intergenerational Trauma**

Trauma and abuse is the lingering effect following exposure to events, threats, or circumstances that are fearful and affecting. Fear responses both during and immediately following an event are coping responses that are expected. These coping mechanisms are crucial

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<sup>81</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 240.

to protect and survive in the moment and immediately following. Many can react to the moment and when it passes so does the fear. However, some have lingering symptoms that develop into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Referred to as shell shock or combat fatigue a century ago, the symptoms include a lack of ability to recall the traumatic event without re-experiencing the event along with the physical autonomic, and emotional responses. Due to the apparent inability to control the flashbacks, PTSD sufferers will often avoid people and social situations. As they self-isolate, negative beliefs will manifest in feelings of depression, anxiety, regret, recrimination, irritability and hypervigilance. This is full-blown primary trauma.

When PTSD or the effects of trauma begin to manifest and the survivors of primary trauma are unwilling or unable to access competent treatment, it is common for negative responses and behaviors to become patterns of behavior that are standard daily fare. Often these behaviors and reactions dealt with through normalizing the behavior. Children begin to pattern their life after their parents, as is developmentally typical, so the negative behaviors are also imitated. Often these patterns of behavior manifest as adopting rigid rules and boundaries that restrict the expression of authentic emotion or overly emotional outbursts. In simple terms, the children are trained to act like the ailing parent in order to validate the negative behaviors. This becomes intergenerational trauma.

These maladaptive behaviors are difficult to distinguish as trauma because they are often passed off as family traits or traditions. Examples could include daughters who dress provocatively without parental intervention or perhaps at the request of a parent. Incidents of road rage that encourage emotional and physical violence often reveal that an intergenerational trauma that has never been resolved. But the tapestry of development is far greater than simple mimic-behavior of parents.

Mental health disorders such as PTSD, anxiety and depression can be projected into the lives of children who imitate parental behavior. But also, according to Inger Burnett-Zeigler, “These same disorders can be passed on through one’s genes – they can be inherited.”<sup>82</sup> She asserts that a child who has a mother with PTSD has a 30 percent increased risk of having symptoms of traumatic stress. And that the heritability of depression is estimated at 50 percent as well as 30-67 percent for anxiety.

Zeigler notes that traumatic experiences among Black women manifest intergenerationally and can date as far back as slavery. She notes that while enslaved Black women were not only exploited for their physical labor in the agricultural fields and household work, they were also subjected to sexual assault in order to produce more “property”. In the modern-day, the legacy of slavery and the collective trauma that was produced has resulted in the experience of mass suffering among Black women.

Joy DeGruy, in her book, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, claims that patterns of behavior including poor self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, depression, suspiciousness of negative motivation of others, a propensity for anger and violence, and internalized racism are results of intergenerational trauma passed from parents to children through DNA alteration.<sup>83</sup>

The study of changes in genes that are not caused by literal alteration of the DNA has been called epigenetics. Studies in this field were the first to suggest that trauma leaves a mark that is passed to future generations even if they didn’t experience the trauma first hand.

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<sup>82</sup> Inger Burnett-Zeigler, *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women* (S.l.: AMISTAD, 2022), 57.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

It is a given that multiple factors that are both witnessed and encountered continuously impact the outcome of children. The biopsychosocial model of health has determined that biological, familial, environmental, and social influences manifest in the outcome of subsequent generations. Burnett-Ziegler asserts that “acting from a space of trauma leads to – avoidance, denying or numbing pain . . . or unknowingly repeating harmful behaviors.”<sup>84</sup>

She suggests that in order to learn and grow, the church leaders need to engage the abused with open conversations and their experiences and resist maintaining the tradition of silence. Liberation, she asserts, is in recognizing the negative behaviors and routines so that changes can be chosen. Sharing the stories is bearing the load together rather than perpetuating the harmful patterns from the past.

### **Societal Trauma**

“Societal trauma is prompted by a crisis event that is either experienced in person or via media on a mass scale.”<sup>85</sup> The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 spring to mind as well as other tragedies such as the Challenger explosion, deaths or assassinations of notable celebrities or focus on individual personal tragedies. Even as I write this a five-year-old Moroccan boy is trapped in a well and the media is updating the public continuously.

Increased visibility of traumatic events became ubiquitous through the twenty-four-hour news cycle. For example, police body camera footage is demanded through public outrage and posted online mere hours after the event. Societal trauma manifests as an increased emotional

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<sup>84</sup> Inger Burnett-Zeigler, *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women* (S.l.: AMISTAD, 2022), 53.

<sup>85</sup> Jennifer Baldwin, in *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), p. 120.

response beyond what would be expected and deepens a sense of tribalism by drawing thick lines between “us” and “them” who threaten us. In this state of trauma, it is unclear who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. Often the response is emotional decision-making, violent rhetoric, or physical altercation.

### **Cultural Trauma**

Baldwin notes that cultural trauma is an outgrowth of unprocessed societal trauma. When trauma is left unprocessed in the body and soul, eventually it will find expression in other ways. Examples are a trauma survivor who gets a tattoo as a commemoration of surviving the trauma or a family putting a sticker on the back window of a car with the name and dates of a deceased loved one. Culturally, the unprocessed trauma will find a way to be expressed. Baldwin noticed that often a film or musical is created after the national trauma.

As a therapist and pastor, I wonder what impact the international trauma called COVID will have and how it will be culturally expressed in the years ahead. One of the comments emailed to me last week following the sermon on Sunday read, “Thank you for NOT mentioning COVID. Please don’t refer to it again.” This commenter doesn’t understand that the first step in healing from trauma is to identify and name the trauma as trauma. Much harm has been done in the world due to denying the existence of trauma and refusing to recognize the pain that it created. While it requires tremendous courage to admit it, the church as a sub-culture in this society can only be a benefit to this generation if we identify the perpetrators and the victims and acknowledge our mistakes and failures. In the New Testament, we are counseled to confess sins to God and each other so that we may be healed. (1 John 1:9; James 5:16). However, when we encourage parish members to confess, we need to be ready to listen to their stories from a place



of compassion and helpfulness that is victim-needs focused. In the past, we have not always done so well.

Let's consider the biblical story of Tamar. 1 Samuel 13 misleads the reader in the beginning by sounding poetic. "Amnon, son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom, son of David." (vs 1) Then the author quickly narrates the reveal, "Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill." (vs 2) As the story unfolds, Amnon's incestuous desire is encouraged by his servant Jonadab who becomes co-conspirator as he suggests a ruse and sets a trap for the attack. Pretending to be ill, and Amnon flatters Tamar by asking her to prepare a 'medicinal' loaf of bread. She arrives to care for her sick brother. Luring her closer, he physically restrains her and states his intentions. Tamar responds by bargaining. At first, she tries to reason with him appealing to his sense of patriotism in Israel, then she attempts to remind him that he is risking his own reputation. Finally, she offers to appeal to the king to allow him to marry her. Refusing all attempts to dissuade him, Amnon rapes her. After the assault, Amnon, feeling his guilt and shame, rejects Tamar and has her tossed outside into the cold. Abused and refused, she leaves wearing the clothes that belie the state in which she now finds herself. No longer a virgin, she tears dress from her body and wanders into the street covering herself in ashes, tearing the hair from her head.

Anger against Amnon and compassion for Tamar are the feelings I feel when reading this story. However, the reaction of Absalom and King David leaves me tremendously frustrated even as I read that Absalom sees her state and correctly guesses what has happened. His counsel to Tamar is not only unhealthy but harmful. "Don't tell anyone on account of the fact that he is your brother" and "don't take it to heart." (vs 20). I am aware and amazed by the similarities to

the response of the church today to those who have experienced trauma and abuse. Be quiet, protect the guilty and just forget about it.

### **Trauma-Sensitive Theology**

As both a practitioner of traumatology and an active member of the clergy, Jennifer Baldwin promotes trauma-sensitive theology as a way to help ministry professionals, spiritual directors, and therapists create a vernacular that is able to speak well of God and faith without further wounding those already deeply traumatized by life events and the abuse at the hands of others. Baldwin believes her work to be important because, as she notes, the church has traditionally been the place trauma victims turn with questions like, “How and why did this happen to me?”, “Now what is my place in the world?”, and (importantly) “How do I make enough sense of suffering to be able to continue?”<sup>86</sup> In turn, Baldwin confronts the long-held practice of remaining silent about traumatic experiences and consequences of abuse as a tactic of healing. Instead, she promotes that church leadership can acknowledge the presence of trauma in the stories of the Bible and use these as texts that interpret the difficult choices we face daily. For the survivor, this begins the reconnection process between the victim and community, the victim and the various parts of themselves, and between the victim and God. It occurs to me that these are the same wounds inflicted in the Garden of Eden. Following the trauma of the initial sin, Adam and Eve grieved the loss of perfect connection to creation, each other and God. Their response was to hide their embarrassment with leaves and their shame with lies.

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<sup>86</sup> Jennifer Baldwin, in *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), p. 1.

Who among us hasn't experienced the similar shame of sinning and breaking relationship with others? Trauma-Sensitive Theology seeks to call out to those in need of the supportive community who can offer grace and healing. Baldwin highlights four commitments of Trauma-Sensitive Theology that promote helpful pastoral care and congregational presence as the whole counsel of the church is able to share perspective that is similar.<sup>87</sup>

The first commitment is asking the church to commit to awareness of the bodily experience of trauma. When we consider trauma and abuse, we easily imagine the physicality of an attack. The physical experiences of trauma are direct and apparent violations of the human body. (car accident, physical and weapon assault, etc). Bessel van der Kolk asserts that our bodies keep a record of the trauma we have endured and that we carry these records of abuse with us.<sup>88</sup> These physical records are sometimes visible but often or hidden and hormonal or chemical. The result of the chemical records results in hyper- or hypo-arousal states that produce an ongoing flight-fight-freeze response. This is why knowledge of post-traumatic stress has become invaluable. Through our acceptance that PTSD is a valid response to stress, we begin to open the door for acceptance of the individual and their need for healing. Subsequently, all strategies employed by the church must begin and include an awareness of the bodily manifestations and need of physical support.

Providing bodily understanding and support may create a challenge for church leaders in primarily rational-oriented religious movements. To be specific, the church often responds to issues with didactic teaching like a father who bypasses the moment to hold his child with a scraped knee and instead lectures about the dangers of running on the gravel path. It seems that

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-10.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

the answer to difficulty often is to rationalize and intellectualize both the cause and response. I often tell clients and parishioners alike that intellect and emotion do not communicate well. The illustration I often use is a child who lies afraid and crying in bed during a nighttime thunderstorm. The lightning flashes and the thunder rumbles as the child experiences fear. The arrival of the parent with a meteorological lesson on the cause and effect of storms does little to assuage the child's fears. When I ask the client to tell me what the child needs, most will say a physical presence and a hug of reassurance. Instinctively, the client can intuit the need for a bodily response to the trauma of storm fear.

In contrast, when the church promotes the idea that the effect of the mind or spirit is more valuable than the body, the sufferers are left wanting. I have experienced church leaders who will offer a class on spiritual discipline instead of dealing with the felt needs of the physical body. I have talked to many people who have received the message that faith is preferable to medication or that spiritual disciplines are more effective than physical touch. Not everyone is a hugger, but worship can include physical movement, ritual action or messages of a physical nature. The Apostle Paul used physical metaphors to describe his faith journey. He is running a race, he is fighting like a boxer, he is weak. (1 Corinthians 9)

The second commitment the church can make to trauma-sensitive theology is acceptance of the narrative of trauma. It is not hard to find someone who is timid to tell their story assuming that they will be dismissed at best and refuted at worst. By the very definition of trauma, their experiences are overwhelming. To share the story is not to simply retell the incident but it is to re-experience the event. When retelling the story, the emotions are reanimated and the coping mechanisms are stressed. Many fear they will be rebuffed and disbelieved. Often referred to as

“survivor shaming”, many will fear being questioned. Their stories may be overanalyzed, discounted or exaggerated. Some will find themselves becoming too vulnerable and exposed.

The mistake made by church leaders and others is adopting a law enforcement mentality believing it is their responsibility to discover the facts of the story. Looking for proof, the questions of timelines, details, other witnesses and even evaluating other potential outcomes “What else could you have done to protect yourself?”, serves to push the blame back onto the victim. If we want to draw out the pain of trauma, we must relinquish the expectation of discovering the facts and instead advocate for safety and understand that retelling the story builds resiliency and strength. Progress is made when a trauma survivor can recount the event without reliving the event with strong emotions.

Baldwin’s third primary commitment of trauma-sensitive theology is the idea of human multiplicity. When individuals are approached in the assumption that “what you see is what you get,” we limit our ability to experience the entire person. By limiting or labeling the individual by a title like “abuse” we limit their ability to respond to life with their fully authentic self. I often discuss the needs of the “inner child” as opposed to the “adulting” that is currently manifest. The church limits the trauma survivor when the assumption is that the only acceptable response to trauma is sadness, anger, regret, or shame. The truth is much more complex than we can understand. The survivor needs the opportunity to give a “tour” of their intellect by sharing the narrative but it is just as important to allow them to give the emotional tour without the constraints of logic or being asked to be consistent. It is the opportunity to present the complexity of the multiplicity that allows for self-discovery and courageous response.

The fourth foundational commitment for the church to construct a trauma-sensitive theology is to understand and promote the practice of resiliency. One of the most devastating

mistakes made by the church is making assumptions that those who have endured trauma and abuse are somehow permanently broken, weak, damaged, or shattered. While on the path to process the burden of enduring pain, the journey may leave the sufferer in a stronger state than in previous times.

While the path towards recovery and ultimately resiliency is both long and difficult, many move far beyond an adequate survival and being to thrive. The aftermath of the struggle adds to the strength and confidence that is subsequently available. The trite phrase which says, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” is as accurate as it is blunt. Humans have the ability to tap into resources for processing trauma that become valuable sources of power and understanding. The trauma may foster a greater ability to exhibit compassion, courage, curiosity and grace. Resiliency is the capacity to bounce back however the return is both stronger and grants the ability to adapt to new situations. The church needs to be ready to learn from the survivors and tap into the lessons taught by resiliency.

In light of these four commitments, Baldwin points out that for the abuse survivor, typical atonement theology metaphors (and particularly penal substitutionary atonement) present challenges. One of the common problems for the survivor is the characterization of God. As is often verbalized, God the Father sends Jesus into human existence with the primary purpose of suffering on behalf of the guilty. Baldwin notes, “Theologies that valorize the traumatization and execution of Jesus as the essential feature of salvation and divine revelation, either intentionally or unintentionally, promote the enduring of abusive suffering as the mark of a pious Christian life and are dangerous. They are dangerous in that they function to sacrilize [sic] enduring sinful abuses of power and reinforce social and interpersonal relationships that value

harmful relational connections over healthy relational connections.”<sup>89</sup> Any explanation of atonement that is centered around God’s anger or promotes the reception of abuse as proof of love is harmful and mistaken in its application.”<sup>90</sup>

Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her article, “Redeeming the Name of Christ” wrote, “Along with other forms of political and liberation theology, feminist theology repudiates an interpretation of the death of Jesus as required by God in repayment for sin. Today, such a view is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent and sadistic father, reflecting the worst kind of male behavior.”<sup>91</sup>

To balance this perspective, she notes that instead it is possible to interpret Jesus’ death, not as an act of violence from the Father, but abuse brought about from a threatened humanity and an act of willful disobedience to a gracious God. Instead, Jesus’ fidelity to the Father was to present himself to the world not in dominance but in submission. The resulting victimization does not promote submission to the abusers but instead allows all who are abused to enter into solidarity with the suffering Savior. Johnson sees this as a demonstration of Sophia-God’s appearance in the passion narrative.<sup>92</sup>

Darby Kathleen Ray, adds to the discussion in *Deceiving the Devil: atonement, abuse and ransom* by pointing out that in ancient Israel rituals of sacrifice provided for the efficacy of atonement. However, there is are two natures of sacrifice. In the case of a sin offering, the

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

<sup>91</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth A Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” in *Freeing Theology: the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 124.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

submission and subsequent sacrifice was presented from humanity to God. In the case of the memorial sacrifice, the focus is directed toward celebrating the divine nature. Either way, it was a significant time of communion and covenant which brought God and humanity into a reconstructed relationship.<sup>93</sup>

This concept of right relationship with the divine is key to Ray's understanding of atonement. Ray defines atonement as God acting, "to conform and confound the powers of sin and evil that enslave human beings, and in doing so, God has opened up for humanity the possibility of right relationship with the Divine and other creatures."<sup>94</sup>

Having stated this definition, she importantly broadens the field of thought by noting the apparent contradiction between Anselmian and Abelardian views of atonement. If we view Anselmian as the 'Jesus saves' metaphor that concerns itself with only human sin and the salvation ransomed through the death of Jesus, then we see it as individualistic and lacking the capacity of reuniting human to human.

On the other hand, Abelard broadens the atonement from this perspective and informs the adherent to appreciate Jesus' virtues of humility, obedience and self-sacrifice as embodied in his hardship of life and suffering rejection by his community. Ray points out that both feminist and liberation theologies agree that these approaches are equally narrow focused in their conclusions.<sup>95</sup>

### **Preaching and Trauma**

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<sup>93</sup> Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998). p. 53

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.



Serene Jones asks in her book, *Trauma and Grace*, “How can ministers craft sermons that speak to the plight of trauma survivors without retraumatizing them? How do we make theological sense of what happened on the cross in a way that speaks to the experience of traumatized victims without glorifying violence?”<sup>96</sup> She writes:

If the church’s message about God’s love for the world is to be offered to those who suffer these wounds, then we must think anew about how we use language and how we put bodies into motion and employ imagery and sound. With fresh openness we must grapple with the meaning of beliefs not only about grace, but also about such matters as sin, redemption, hope, community, communion, violence, death, crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>97</sup>

As a preacher, I want always to understand how to facilitate religious education as well as motivate toward spiritual practice. It is also valuable to understand that sermons are a way to voice what people are already feeling and thinking. As we move through this world, sermons create a space to voice truth in a world of lies. Shelly Rambo refers to the tension of preaching as the “as is” and the “otherwise”.<sup>98</sup> Pointing out that preaching works on the intimate and intellectual levels of both imagination and language. Preaching is the public face and voice of the church and her theology.

Preaching can harm victims of abuse as quickly and deeply. Preaching can also salve damages souls and offer tremendous hope. Baldwin warns of two common mistakes that occur during the sermon time. The first error is to “mistake the signs and symptoms of traumatic wounding as indicative of a lack of faith or moral fortitude.”<sup>99</sup> This is an easy mistake to make

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<sup>96</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 85.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable; Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 5.

<sup>99</sup> Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 161.

especially when discussing the healing miracles of Jesus. When dealing with these texts, it is possible to imply that either the presence of faith or the lack of faith by the person being healed is the deciding factor of the outcome. Preaching needs to be careful not to unintentionally imply that those who fail to receive the expected healing outcome are deficient or lacking in faith. Preaching needs to grapple with the reality that people get sick, stay sick and eventually die regardless of their faith. The object of faith and healing is God. Damage can occur if preaching blames the victim.

Baldwin points out a second way that preaching can cause harm is when “our homiletics, teaching and liturgy unreflectively promotes uses of power and social practices that contribute sin and abuses of relational power.”<sup>100</sup> Sermons that ignore the social systems that underly certain kinds of power inequalities run the risk of unintentionally elevating the abuser above the victim in a way that validates abuse. Trauma sensitive preaching avoids this by calling out the obvious abuses and their offenders as well as refusing to make light of the power abuses.

For instance, nowhere is the inequity of power more evident than in those instances of children who have experienced sexual and physical violence. Children are abused by adults who leverage their inherent power over children and because children are naïve, trusting and lack the resources or experience to protect themselves. While some children are literally physically overpowered by adults who have no regard for their physical or emotional health, others find they are exploited through trinkets, false acts of kindness, or fake empathy. These children, who believed they were acting in good faith are subsequently intimidated into silence and shame through fear of their own safety or their family. This is a cycle of reward followed by threat as

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<sup>100</sup> Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 162.

they are controlled through manipulation. This abuse can last over a long period of time and often is an important element of the offender's gratification cycle.

Rita Brock points out that power in relationships is not inherently bad. The power of an individual is enhanced and magnified through the web of personal relationships when these bonds are benevolent. Personal creativity and participation can become greatly strengthened when healthy mutual and transforming. She notes that is a primary need of our society to be interrelated. The sense of security in the power of leadership is valuable to promote self-awareness, openness, vulnerability, caring.<sup>101</sup>

The church would do well to grasp the importance of these power relationships in a healthy context. Jesus addressed issues relating to interpersonal violence by discussing abuse of power in order to contrast the world from the Kingdom of God. Jesus called out the disciples who were trying to build their political power over the other disciples in Matthew 20. He showed mercy to the woman caught in adultery in John 8 and was obviously inclusive of women as members of his inner circle of leaders. Jesus gave his followers a vision of an inclusive community that prized justice and promoted using power to benefit everyone.

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<sup>101</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 26, 37.

## Overview of the Study

### Methodology

Step one for this project was informing the congregation during the Sunday morning worship services that I have been working toward a Doctor of Divinity degree at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University. The congregation was also told that as part of the requirements for the degree that I was conducting a project that was seeking to answer two questions: “Does a lack of clear biblical teaching on the doctrine of atonement prevent believers from forming an accurate image of the character of God?” and the second question, “Does the language used in church worship and teaching to discuss the doctrine of atonement negatively impact survivors of trauma and abuse who attend Wildewood Christian Church.” It was then explained that I was requesting them to participate by taking two surveys, attending four sermons and if applicable, a 1:1 interview with those who identify as victims of trauma or abuse.

The next step was to administer the initial survey. It was conducted on a Sunday morning and the survey contained questions that were adapted from a questionnaire used in a previous study titled “Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor’s Relationship with God and the Church” by Barbara R. McLaughlin<sup>102</sup> Her study sought to determine if childhood sexual abuse manifests in lifelong negative effects for victims’ connection to the church and their personal spiritual practices.

Similarly, I hoped to discover those from among the attenders of Wildewood who have identified as victims in order to assess how their church experience before and after their

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<sup>102</sup> McLaughlin, Barbara R. “Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor’s Relationship with God and the Church.” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 1, no. 2 (1994): 145–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720169408400039>.

traumatic event has impacted their theology and characterization of God. In order to achieve my purposes, the wording of four questions was changed from the original assessment used by McLaughlin to reflect the makeup of one evangelical church instead of a more diverse group of respondents as in her study. Additionally, four questions were added to study the congregations' familiarity with the atonement metaphors *Christus Victor*, satisfaction atonement (including penal substitutionary atonement), and moral influence. The questionnaire was composed of 18 statements. The respondents were asked to respond to the statements on a five-point Likert Scale. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.)

During the administration of the initial survey, a total of 186 respondents completed the survey, and returned following the end of each of three worship services. Two responses were submitted in person the next day. All data was categorized by which worship service was attended<sup>103</sup> and the raw score for each statement was recorded. The scores were averaged to get a mean score. These numbers are recorded below.

The survey also inquired if the respondent was a victim of trauma or abuse and if so, would they "be willing to participate in a short in-person interview regarding (their) understanding of atonement in light of your life experience." They were instructed to answer affirmatively by text and schedule an appointment. Further contact was initiated through either text or phone calls. A confidentiality statement was included in the assessment. The statement assured all participants that, "All contact and content of the discussion will be kept confidential and anonymous."

Of the 186 surveys, a total of 32 or 17% of the participants affirmed that they had experienced trauma or abuse. Of that number, eighteen asked to be contacted for an in-person

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<sup>103</sup> Wildewood has Sunday worship services at 8:00, 9:30 and 11:00 am.

interview. All were contacted and ten individuals scheduled and attended an interview.

Conclusions and selected comments from the interviews are recorded later in this chapter.

### **Summary of the Pre-Study Survey**

During the initial step of this study, a survey of eighteen questions was used to measure three areas. A subsequent purpose of the study was to assess if the congregation has an under-developed understanding of atonement theology and if so, is it effectively communicated through the teaching and preaching. Additionally, this survey seeks to measure a felt sense of connectedness between the respondent and God and others in the church.

### **Connectedness to God**

The following questions sought to determine a level of connectedness to God. The question is followed by an average of all the church responses.

Question 3 - "I sometimes feel fearful when thinking about God."	2.6 (52% agree)
Question 4 - "I regularly experience God as a loving parent."	4.1 (82% agree)
Question 5 - "I would describe God as a patient teacher in my life."	4.5 (90% agree)
Question 6 – "There are times when I feel God's displeasure with me and my actions."	3.7 (74% agree)
Question 9 - "I believe that I am a child of God, loved and accepted by Him."	4.9. (98% agree)

Three scores indicate that the overall congregation has a strong sense of connectedness to God. (90% feel connected to God). However, the response to question six alerts us to a distinct disconnect in relationship to God in the case of feeling God's displeasure with the person and their actions. (26% regularly feel God's displeasure). Additionally, when we look at question

three indicates that just over half of the church (52%) at times feel fearful in their relationship to God. These attitudes appear to contraindicate the sense of seeing God as a loving parent, patient teacher and the feeling of being accepted as a child of God.

### **Connectedness to the Church**

These questions and scores relate to the felt sense of connectedness to others at Wildewood Christian Church and the congregation as a community.

Question 1 - “Active participation in the life of my church is very important to me.”	4.5 (90% agree)
Question 2 - “Knowledge of the beliefs and traditions of the church is important to me.”	4.6 (92% agree)
Question 10 – “I feel closer to God in my personal meditation time than in the midst of the church community.”	4.1 (82% agree)
Question 11 – “It is easy for me to trust people in positions of leadership in the church.”	3.7 (74% agree)
Question 12 – “Even though I am involved in my church, sometimes I don’t feel all that connected.”	3.2 (64% agree)

The first three scores in this section indicate a strong alliance among the attenders/members of the church. However, questions 11 and 12 communicate a disconnect in the areas of trusting leadership (over 25% struggle to trust leadership) and sense of connectedness in spite of being involved. (64% don’t feel all that connected).

### **Familiarity with Atonement Theology**

Finally, these questions were designed to ascertain the congregation's familiarity and knowledge of classical atonement theology metaphors.

Question 7 – “I occasionally read articles about theology.”	2.7 (54% agree)
Question 13 – “I am familiar with the phrase substitutionary atonement.	2.7 (54% agree)
Question 14 – “I have heard of the theological term atonement and I am confident that I know what it means.”	3.4 (68% agree)
Question 15 – “I believe that Jesus was crucified to atone for the sins of the world.”	4.9 (98% agree)
Question 16 – I believe that Jesus' death on the cross was a ransom paid for the sins of the world.”	4.7 (94% agree)
Question 17 – “I believe that on the cross Jesus won the victory in a war between God and Satan.”	4.5 (90% agree)
Question 18 – “I believe God was angry with sin and took out his wrath on Jesus.”	1.9 (38% agree)

If we wonder why the congregation struggles to comprehend theological doctrines such as atonement, it may be revealing to realize that 54 percent of the congregation does not read about theology. Additionally, at the beginning of the project 54% of the congregation was unfamiliar with the phrase atonement theology and 32% have either not heard the terminology or are not confident in their knowledge of the meaning of the term substitutionary atonement. However, a high percentage identify with the concepts of atonement metaphors as briefly described in questions fifteen through seventeen. Lastly, in response to question eighteen, 62% responded negatively to the characterization of God wrathfully punishing Jesus on the cross.

Copied here is the entire survey and results.



1. Active participation in the life of my church is very important to me. 4.5
2. Knowledge of the beliefs and traditions of my church is important to me. 4.6
3. I sometimes feel fearful when thinking about God. 2.6
4. I regularly experience God as a loving parent. 4.1
5. I would describe God as a patient teacher in my life. 4.5
6. There are times when I feel God's displeasure with me and my actions. 3.7
7. I occasionally read articles about theology. 2.7
8. I seek time to be alone in God's presence. 3.7
9. I believe that I am a child of God, loved and accepted by Him. 4.9
10. I feel closer to God in my personal meditation time than in the midst of the church community. 3.4
11. It is easy for me to trust people in positions of leadership in the church. 3.7
12. Even though I am involved in my church, sometimes I don't feel all that connected. 3.2
13. I am familiar with the phrase 'substitutionary atonement. 2.7
14. I have heard of the doctrine of atonement and I am confident that I know what it means. 3.4
15. I believe that Jesus was crucified to atone for the sins of the world. 4.9
16. I believe that Jesus' death on the cross was a ransom paid to purchase freedom for sinners. 4.7
17. I believe that on the cross Jesus won the victory in a war between God and Satan. 4.5
18. I believe that God was angry with sin and took out his wrath on Jesus. 1.9

### **Post Study Survey**

Following the fourth sermon, a second similar survey was given to the congregation. This survey was amended for brevity and one question was added to measure the participants' perceived growth of understanding about the doctrine of atonement. Below each question is the original survey score followed by the post sermon series score and the percentage of differential.

1. I sometimes feel fearful when thinking about God.

Before = 2.6

After = 2.2

8% decrease in feelings of fearfulness about God.

2. I regularly experience God as a loving parent.

Before = 4.1

After = 4.3

4% increase in experiencing God as loving parent.

3. I seek time to be alone in God's presence.

Before = 3.7

After = 4.0

6% increase in those seeking to be alone in God's presence.

4. I believe that Jesus was crucified to atone for the sins of the world.

Before = 4.8

After = 4.9

2% increase in belief of Jesus atoning for the sins of the world.

5. I am familiar with the phrase 'substitutionary atonement.'

Before = 2.7

After = 3.3

12% increase in familiarity with the phrase substitutionary atonement.

6. Do you feel that you have increased your understanding of the doctrine of atonement?

91% = Yes;  
9% = No

While little movement of knowledge and attitudes would be expected over the short time span of this project, nonetheless movement is clearly observable. In terms of fearing God, 8% of the congregation indicated they were less fearful. Additionally, 4% more people experience God as a loving parent and 4% began seeking time to be alone in God's presence. Among those in the congregation who were unfamiliar with the term substitutionary atonement, 12% gained familiarity with the term and 91% reported an increase in understanding of the doctrine.

### **Individual Interviews:**

The focus of this project was specifically to understand if the knowledge of atonement or the lack thereof within Wildewood would affect survivors of trauma or abuse. Ten people self-identified as victims of trauma and participated in 1:1 interviews. The interviews were conducted in the church office at an appointed time. Each participant was asked to read/sign a consent form and asked if they had any questions about the purpose of the project or the process of the interview. Each interview was conducted over a span of time lasting 25-30 minutes. The conversations were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of highlighting phrases sentences that relate to the goals of the project. The following are quotes will be attributed to a number given by this researcher in order to maintain confidentiality.

At the beginning of the interview I informed asked each person to verify that they were self-identifying as a person who had suffered significant trauma and/or experienced abuse. I also reassured them that we would not be discussing their personal traumatic incident unless they desired to share details. Somewhat surprisingly, every participant asked permission to describe

their traumatic/abuse story, and most suggested that they had wanted to share their story for a long time but lacked the confidence that anyone would believe them or care to hear their story. It was important for each person to explain what happened and often why they decided to attend the interview. One woman said, “I wanted someone in the church to know why some days are just hard to be around people.” Another man said that he just wanted to “be honest.” After telling me his story, he timidly asked if he could still attend church at Wildewood. Questions for the interview were pre-written to create a semi-structured interview that allowed each person the opportunity to conversationally share their insights.

The interviews were my favorite part of the project process. Perhaps this is due to my desire to listen to the faith journey of the people that I pastor. Each person was very willing to answer the questions with thoughtful comments. Every person was willing to open themselves in order to tell the hardest stories of their lives. The narratives were bitter sweet as we laughed together about the crazy ways we deal with the ups and downs of life. Each interview also created tears of compassion as I heard stories of childhood trauma and unimaginable abuse. I marveled at the sheer resilience and strength of faith in God as each one highlighted that their strength came from God. Below, I will try to respectfully tell their stories as they relate to the spirit of the project. Names have all been altered in order to maintain confidentiality.

### **Selected Interviews:**

#### **Sue\***

Sue is a 50-year-old married Caucasian woman who has been an active member of Wildewood for more than 25 years. She has two adult children and three grandchildren.

Recently, Sue lost her step-father to cancer and her mother died ten years ago from natural causes. These losses have created a time of grieving but the reason she decided to participate in the interview was based on abuse suffered during her childhood.

Due to COVID restrictions, Sue and her husband have been watching the Wildewood worship services from home via YouTube. Following the initial sermon of the atonement series, her husband asked her if she was going to be interviewed for this project. He encouraged her to share her perspective in order to help others who have faced trauma. During the interview, she explained that as young children, Sue and her siblings experienced physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, mental abuse at the hands of her father. She refers to her upbringing as “a soap opera life” and revealed that the Lifetime TV network asked to make a movie about her life.

Sue’s biological father and mother were divorced. Her mother remarried. Sue’s father returned to murder her step-dad by shooting him as he lay in a hospital bed. Sue’s mom was witness to the murder. A number of years later, Sue’s biological father was released from prison and two months later he was killed in a car accident. She interpreted the accident and her father’s death as an act of protection instigated by God. “Despite all the abuse, God was always my protector. I believe that God was protecting me from what was going to happen in the future if he lived.” she said. “I have never been mad at God for the hard events of my life.” Sue shows signs of connectedness to God, the church and is solid in her understanding of atonement. She is comfortable with the Christus Victor metaphor as she sees Jesus as her victorious warrior.

### **Roger\***

Roger is a 45-year-old single man who recently left his job due to physical disability and the result of multiple addictions. He is currently struggling with lifestyle changes due to

inactivity. He began his story by revealing that when he was six years-old his mother, a devout Christian, died at age twenty-eight from Leukemia. Roger noted that when his mother died, he was told that God needed her in heaven. He notes that he was simultaneously angry and afraid of God; fearful that God could “kill people” and angry because God ‘took’ his mom.

In addition to the loss of his mother, Roger was eight or nine when he became aware that his dad was a homosexual. In order to shelter Roger and his brother, his dad would cycle their living arrangements between various relatives and home. Roger said, “It was the 1980s and my dad would coach me, “Don’t tell anyone.” and “If they ask, the man living with us is just a roommate who shares expenses.” During this time he was often physically abused in the homes he was sent to live. He remembers being angry, alone and desperate for conversation.

Roger recalls going to many different churches as he was shuffled about. He felt it was a conspiracy of silence about the events of his life. They didn’t ask and he kept the family secret. This led to decades of apathy toward the church and continued anger toward a God who killed his mom and neglected his need for security and safety.

Roger was able to reconcile with his father later in life. He was able to offer and seek forgiveness. However, soon after their reconciliation, his father died from cancer. This sent Roger spiraling back into drugs, alcohol and gambling addiction. He felt abandoned again and rejected God as he developed a strong resentment toward Him. At times he has felt suicidal particularly when he found himself alone and lonely.

### **Barb\***

Barb did not grow up in the church nor does she remember having any particular need to have a spiritual connection with God until later in life. She was introduced to Christianity by her third husband who was active in his church until he inexplicably lost faith and soon after died

from cancer. Now in her late sixties, she is seeking to be part of a community of faith and desires a vibrant relationship with God.

Her story of abuse begins and ends with her three abusive marriages. She laughed as she recalled that she married a musician, an athlete and finally a bar owner. When she first encountered the Gospel story and learned about the crucifixion, she was attending a church that she describes as “fundamentally mean believers.” She said, “They worked in fear” and taught her that God would punish you for doing the wrong thing and for not doing the right thing. These lessons led her to believe that all the abuse she had experienced from her husbands, including the third husband who was spiritual, was her fault. She believed that she deserved it.

When asked if that church was helpful for her recovery following the abusive relationships she laughed. The church wanted her to stay in the third marriage despite the abuse. They told her she was to forgive him each time he hurt her. She felt blamed, shamed and depressed all of the time.

A change occurred when she was with her father when he passed away. He was a Christian and she noticed that he was facing death and meeting God with no fear. She saw that he was smiling until his final breath. This is when she began looking for a community that taught that God loved her enough to help her care for herself. She is hoping to share her faith with her two adult sons.

She concluded the interview by saying, “I am glad I found Jesus.”

### **Chloe\***

Chloe began the conversation by explaining that she lost her faith when she became an adult and then returned to it following the divorce of her abusive husband. However, she admits

having a difficult time with the word and concept of submission. “Spending an eternity on our knees worshipping God sounds awful.” she said. Because of the abuse she suffered first in her family home and then later from her husband, submission is a touchy subject. So, when the church teaches that we should submit our will to God, she bristles at the memories of her abusers.

Chloe returned to her faith after leaving the small church where she was coerced into many volunteer hours and where she felt that she was blamed for many things. After she began attending Wildewood, she began to reconsider the cross and changed her mind about the atonement. She explained, “I realized that when we sin, there is an effect. Jesus can fix the effect.” She worries less about how the reconciliation occurs and more about the focus being put on the Jesus as the object of our faith.

She admitted to a continued struggle to comprehend the wrath of God. She is confused by stories of God’s wrath; mentioning the death of King David’s baby as an example of jealous anger. She still finds God to be dangerous. She is also confused about forgiveness. She asked, “How do I forgive (those who abused me) but not get myself back into the situation?”

When asked about the role of the church in her life, she said, “The church was hiding (from me and my situation). The pastor knew what was happening and the people knew what was going on but nobody ever offered to help.” After the divorce, she explained, that many of her Christian friends told her to just move on, what had happened was in the past.

### **Carrie\***

Carrie was only six years-old when she and her twin sister and parents were in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. All the family was hospitalized and eventually recovered



except her mother. She died a couple of days after the accident. Despite her young age, she asked their pastor if her mother had died. He lied and said he didn't know. The truth was she did die and the pastor knew. She felt angry with him and had a difficult time trusting church leaders for years afterward. Her father consoled her and her sister following the funeral and promised them that he would not remarry. Six months later, he introduced them to his new wife. Carrie's step-mother was abusive physically, verbally, and emotionally for years. She refused to allow the extended family to visit and destroyed gifts or cards that were sent to the house. Carrie noted during the interview that she lost her mother to death and lost her father and family to her step-mother.

Carrie also discussed that the drunk driver who caused the accident was uninjured and walked away from the accident. He was never prosecuted. When asked, "Why?" Carrie replied, "Well, my daddy was a good Christian and he was counseled that it wouldn't be right to prosecute instead of forgiving the man. So, he let it drop."

These events guided Carrie in her faith journey. She admits a deep respect and fear for God who loves us, she said, but we go too far. This is why God needed to wrathfully "let loose on his Son. God had to feel terrible to have to do it, but the Father had a good reason." she said.

Despite the abuse and overbearing personality, Carrie sees God's hand in her journey with her step-mother. Later in life, the step-mother suffered health issues and Carrie was able to help her father care for her. It was during this time that she became a believer in Jesus. Carrie believes that her mother's death was an atoning sacrifice that allowed step-mom to be saved.

**Rich\***

Rich revealed that he was sexually abused as a child but didn't continue that conversation. Instead, he discussed that his father was physically abusive to him but in a socially acceptable way. Rich learned to use his physicality to enforce his will on his own children. He is sad about it today and wishes he had learned better when he was younger. He also has suffered significant grief following the death of his twenty-four-year-old step son. These events in his life have been culminating to his recent decision to become a believer.

He credits his grandmother for leading him to faith by her lifestyle, teaching and ultimately her death. The church was very involved in caring for her and often coordinated with Rich on her needs and care. Because of this, Rich became friends with one particular man. They began studying and praying together. It was through these meetings that Rich learned that God loved him in spite of his previous behaviors. As he accepted the knowledge of a loving God instead of an angry God, Rich was more and more interested. Rich has been able to forgive his father for his abusive actions and forgive himself for his mistakes because of the grace given him by God.

### **Phyllis\***

Phyllis grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. She explained that she lived in two worlds: home and church. At home there was abuse and neglect. At church she learned that no one wanted to listen to her fears and needs, so she stopped talking. It was easy to equate God with the church so her prayer life failed as well. Phyllis noted that, "I knew this was my life and I learned what I needed to survive. Part of that plan was to trust nobody." She also decided that if God didn't care about her enough to rescue her from the abuse, then she wasn't good enough. So she gave up trying to meet God's expectations.

As an adult, she got married and her husband became abusive. She was driven farther into isolation. She said, "I blamed myself for being there when the abuse happened. I should have been able to make it stop but I couldn't." Since joining Wildewood, she has been attending Celebrate Recovery and has been growing in her faith. But she still fears God daily. She said, "God's love is unconditional but I don't trust it. Sometimes he just has to take care of business."

### **Cassie\***

Cassie spent much of her childhood sleeping on the floor of her bedroom closet. She tried to hide from her older brother who would molest her during the night. She tried to fight him but usually it was to no avail. Her parents became aware of the nocturnal visits but her mom explained that if she let him do what he wanted, then he would go away. Plus, her mom explained that the brother would leave the younger sister alone, so Cassie was the sacrifice.

She remembers being a Christian her entire life. She never questioned God's love for her and felt that if Jesus could go the cross as a sacrifice for her sin, then making the sacrifice for her sister was something she was willing to do. She felt it was her ministry. Cassie doesn't remember being taught this at home or church but she deduced it from all the teaching at the church.

Cassie left home and married a Godly and safe man. She is aware of how the abuse has affected not only her but also her daughters. She has felt at times that she has been overly protective. She told her daughter to be very careful when attending High School functions saying, "I know it's not your fault that you are 'chesty' but boys will want to touch you. That's the way God made you, so be on your guard."

Cassie has a growing faith and is allowing God to develop in her a growing peace with her past. She denied being angry with parents or brother, instead she remains rooted in her faith believing that God is working His will for her life.

## Conclusions

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel they belong more to the dead than the living.<sup>104</sup>

“How do I move forward?” she asked seated across from me in my office. I paused a moment too long without responding so she continued, “How do I forgive him but not get myself back into the same situation?” This time I intentionally wait and remember her telling me that her husband had sexually and verbally abused her and their daughter for over ten years. She sought help from any number of Christian friends and church leaders, but their promises to pray rang hollow. “I have anger toward those who could have helped, but didn’t. I have some very unchristian thoughts about them.” She is talking to herself now. Unashamedly, she sheds a couple of tears and eventually looks up with a wry smile, “I am grateful for the pain. God used something horrible to make something good.” She understands atonement.

Abuse stands at the very center of our Christian faith story but so does hope and healing. The trauma experienced by the followers and family of Jesus as delicately chronicled in the Gospels allows us, the readers to feel the palpable pain. The cross marks the time and place that

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<sup>104</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 50.

we find our inspiration in a humiliated, bloody, beaten, and broken Savior. The physical torture Jesus received prior to the cross and during the crucifixion is among the most barbaric punishments devised by humanity. It is this traumatic event that causes some unbelievers to turn away from Christianity altogether. For many believers, it is not the manner of Jesus' death that is disturbing but rather the reason for Jesus' sacrifice that is confounding. Like the New Testament writers, some whom witnessed the event, we try to describe what we cannot comprehend.

I entered into this study after reading Rachael Denhollander's article which concerned itself in asking whether victims of abuse were being shamed for being bitter toward the perpetrators or judged as vindictive when they sought justice of their abusers. I began this study from a position of concern for those who have endured abuse and trauma both in the church as a whole as well as all who have literally walked through the valley of the shadow of death. I want to help them feel no evil. These are the ones to whom I wanted to offer both help and hope. I was moved to make right what I perceived had been neglected. The church, I feared, had forgotten to learn from the experience of all its members. The purpose of this study is based on the hypothesis that the church where I serve does not know nor does it communicate the concept of the atonement well. I also concerned myself with understanding how trauma and abuse has affected by siblings in Christ. Lastly, I want to comprehend my role in their recovery and subsequent faith journey.

Considering the conclusions garnered from the large group survey, I discovered that the concept of atonement is not foreign to the church leaders but they hold only cursory awareness of the most popular metaphors offered by theologians ancient and modern. What they taught me was that holding one theory above others produces more heat than light. Holding multiple views

is beneficial to understanding, as best humans can comprehend the mind of God, what both the process and outcome of the atonement.

During this study, I specifically considered if penal substitutionary atonement creates tension for victims of abuse or trauma. I discovered that PSA is connected to the fact that God is simultaneously loving and comprehensively holy. It is his holiness that hates sin and seeks to justly punish sin. However, because He is also loving toward both creation and humanity, the incarnate Jesus lives among us sinlessly. One understanding of PSA teaches that Jesus dies by receiving the total and terrible wrath of God that was due to humanity. As Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the rub for many, as they perceive that the Father has acted from rash emotion or premeditated vengeance.

Baldwin noted that harm that can occur in churches among the abused and traumatized in She first mentions that “we mistake the signs and symptoms of traumatic wounding as indicative of lack of faith or moral fortitude.”<sup>105</sup> This perceived lack of faith is wounding when the blame for spiritual immaturity is placed on either the discipline or willingness of the person. The result is often a sense of shame toward self and/or either a resentment toward or fear of God. A poorly communicated theology of atonement can create a misunderstanding of the nature of God. I believe that the survey and interviews discovered both within Wildewood.

### **Theme One: Characterization of God**

During the interviews, I expected to hear a variety of answers concerning the characterization of God. I anticipated that I would hear everything from denials of God, during

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<sup>105</sup> Baldwin, Trauma-Sensitive Theology, 161

periods of atheism to apathy toward the existence of God as they questioned the motives of God. However, what I heard was instead a dichotomy of answers that were separated by the time immediately following the trauma contrasted with present day beliefs. For instance, when asked if she thinks that her abusive experiences have affected her view of God, Barb stated that before she feared “being punished for not doing something (to stop the abuse).” But today, she feels “cared for by God.” Chloe echoed this sentiment while referring to her view of God in the past, before she had experienced therapy and healing. She said, “I felt God as playing game with us. It was like being on a playground but not knowing all the rules, you know, the ins and outs.” Others saw God as justified in his anger and punishment toward evil. Lorna doesn’t understand God’s character to be either forgiving or vengeful. She notes that God simply “took care of business.”

The most common sentiment promoted by every person I interviewed agreed that God was present and powerful in their lives both during and following the abuse. They all admitted that they were unable to always comprehend his purpose in allowing the trauma, however they agreed that it occurred in order to help them and others; never to harm them. Phyllis stated, “Everything happens for a reason.” Greg noted that “God challenges us” but God used it “to bring me to my faith.” Sue responded, “God is my protector, He wanted to prove to me that I am strong enough to get through anything.”

I found it surprising that a number of people had read and referred to a book by Sheldon Van Auken titled *A Severe Mercy*. This autobiographical work detailed the author’s journey to faith in Christ through and following the death of his wife. Each person who mentioned it recounted how that book validated their feelings and experience of God leading them through the trauma to a relationship with God and the church.

## **Theme Two: Role of the Church**

One of the questions asked during the interview asked them if the church they attended during their time of trauma was helpful. Out of the ten participants, only one stated that the church was “significantly involved and helpful” during the troubling time. She felt that the church leadership was both aware of what was happening in the family and helpful in ways that were meaningful, inclusive and created a “sense of God’s presence” for her and her mother and sister. She remembered that the pastor and a woman would often stop by and pray with them and bring necessities. She also recalled feeling safe when they would attend the church on Sundays.

Responses about the involvement of the church from the other respondents fell into two categories: some were not connected to a church and others were connected to a church that was not helpful or supportive. Two were not connected to a church during their traumatic times. Five of the ten who remember being members of a church answered that the church either didn’t know what was going on or they didn’t react or respond to the needs of the individual.

These negative experiences concerning the lack of church support and involvement and how that affected their perception of God. One woman reported that she “left the church and her faith” as an older teen because of the lack of support for her when she shared that her father was abusive. She remembers the church leader’s response was to question her ability to submit to the authority of her Christian father. Later in life, she returned to both her faith and the church after she married. Unfortunately, this same woman approached a different pastor at the new church to discuss leaving her physically abusive husband. The pastor said she would follow up but never did. The woman assumed it was because she had decided to divorce her husband and the pastor



believed that she should “submit to her husband”. In the interview, she stated that she has a hard time with her relationship with God, “spending eternity submitting to God on our knees sounds awful.”

The other negative response was from a man whose mother died when he was six years old and he was often placed in the homes of relatives or foster care. His father was gay and often had a partner living in the home. When they went to church but it was stressed that “no one can know” and the story was that his dad’s friend was “a roommate and they share expenses.” A couple of times, as a teenager, he recalls being asked by a leader if he had ever been touched or had he seen things that were inappropriate. For this man, the church and subsequently God was someone to be feared or deceived to protect the family secrets.

Generally, the interviews convinced me that the church has neglected victims of abuse and trauma. This neglect however has not come as a result of poor theology per se but rather neglect stemming from apathy. Unwaveringly, every interview I conducted the participant wanted, at times demanded to tell their story. Victims not only want their stories to be spoken but also to be seen as valuable to the entire church. I have begun to see victims less as damaged goods, people who are weak due to suffering. I want to recognize them as warriors returning from lands of abuse thankfully foreign to me. I want to use their insights to strengthen the doctrine of the church as they can describe the works of God in contexts that are battle borne.

### **Theme Three: Teaching / Understanding of Atonement**

During the interviews, I found a universal lack of concern for the topic of named theories or metaphors about atonement theology. This served as a reminder that there is a difference between doctrine and metaphor. All the pages written in defense or criticism of one metaphor

over another, serves only to wall paper the outhouse. The business of reconciliation is communicated to and through us is a work of God. The result of atonement is reconciliation of God/humanity, person/person and person/self. The details of how we describe it is useful only in regard to sharing the Gospel.

This study also highlighted one of my own mistakes. Previously, I have been uncomfortable in my own emotion regarding their experience of pain. As a result, I have rushed from the event to the recovery while ignoring the time in between. It is common that church leaders rush past the intervening time of healing or grieving after the trauma. Years ago, Tony Campolo made famous the sermonic sound bite, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” His point was dramatically proclaimed that the hardship of the crucifixion was replaced by the joy of resurrection. But during the course of this project, I have been privileged to walk among those who are brave enough to spend time exploring Saturday. Often in my preaching, I have implied that the distance between experiencing damage from others to healing is a brief process that related in its depth and length to a measure of faith. Too often have I transitioned in both counseling and preaching from harm to humor with only a sentence. For example, in my preaching, I fear that Joseph, with his coat of many colors, traverses from beaten and betrayed by his brothers to stating “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” (Genesis 50:20) too quickly. The journey is long and laborious and the church should celebrate those who make the journey. Our doctrines need to reflect this reality.

#### **Theme Four: Forgiveness**

One earned criticism leveled at PSA concerns the points of forgiveness and justice. In our rush from ‘Friday to Sunday’, the church has implied and outright taught that true forgiveness

requires reconciliation. It is important to note that no victim should ever be pushed into being reunited with their abuser. As one person asked me during the interview, “How do I forgive but not get myself back into the situation?” PSA seems to promote the neglect of justice in pursuit of forgiveness. Victims are concerned that they are being asked to brush crimes under the carpet and that the lying, manipulations, deception and violence of their abusers and tormentors will go unpunished.

Victims often fear the process of seeking justice worrying that they will not be found credible. One does not need to listen long to those who are commenting on a public accusation of abuse as reported in the media before someone questions the motives or veracity of the victim reporter. PSA seems to echo this sentiment when it teaches that all sin was atoned in the past and that the past doesn't matter. Even animation promoted this ideology in the Disney movie, *The Lion King*. The eccentric shaman character of Rafiki hits the young lion on the head with his walking stick. The young lion protests and asks, “Hey, why did you do that?” Rafiki responds, “It doesn't matter, it's in the past.” The church can teach that things in the past are best forgotten. But we forget that often age, wisdom and spiritual maturity will allow us to better comprehend what happened to us thus providing ongoing insight and wisdom.

### **Summary**

While conducting this study, I became aware that each victim is unique and I was blessed by being entrusted with their stories. I was also blessed with a church and leadership who are open to learning both of their faults and willing to consider solutions. Over the period of months, the conversations fostered by this topic have been amazing.

However, one of the limitations of this study is that all the interviews were conducted with people who have achieved a high level of resiliency that allowed them to self-identify as victims within the context of Wildewood Christian Church. Subsequent study will benefit from broadening the interview base to those who have had less time to heal as well as those who have left the church. It is my observation that the participant's level of spiritual development and sense of strength in discussing these matters influenced the interviews.

Similarly, the sample of adults who participated in the surveys was limited by those who attend church, most of whom have a relationship with this researcher in a personal way. I recognize the potential for personal bias factored into the survey results.

Taking into account the study limitations, the hypotheses on which this study was based were all supported by the data presented. Wildewood Christian Church membership and leadership has an underdeveloped understanding of atonement theology and subsequently communicates it poorly. While they recognized atonement terminology, a majority of respondents remain fearful of God and fail to see Him as either a loving parent or compassionate teacher. This lack of understanding is mirrored in the responses of the self-identified victims reporting little to no support from the church in terms of their recovery from trauma. While they remain positive about the community of the church, they remain unaided in telling their stories.

To foster healing, church leaders will benefit themselves as well as the whole congregation through study and teaching discussions about Biblical atonement and reconciliation in totum. Additionally, focus can be made in efforts to embrace those who have faced trauma and promote discussions of healing and justice-seeking in a church context.

Finally, the discussion in the previous pages is not simply a scholarly exercise or playful debate of ideologies. The church and her leaders have the mandate to illustrate the character of

God and exhibit his justice as well as his grace. The theories of atonement are merely ways to describe how the Messiah was able to save us from ourselves. To debate the efficacy of our explanations at the expense of our listeners is to harm the child while the parents are fighting.

As Rachael Denhollander wrote, “I had to remind myself of the truth of who I was and the reality that success wasn’t defined by a result of my faithfulness. I had to remember that my identity and healing weren’t dependent on the voices that surrounded me and that the truth wasn’t dependent on popular opinion or cultural responses. I had to focus on what was real and true.”<sup>106</sup> While some find entertainment in debate and discord, we must hear the pain of those in our midst to are looking for acceptance more than answers. They need hope beyond platitudes and help in the form of grace. They seek power from the most High God but too often receive power struggles from church leaders.

It is the hope of this author that this project will inspire the reader to distinguish the need to be right and the path of doing righteous acts for, to and with the most fragile among us. Let the truth of the character of God be our guide and the lessons of Christ and Him crucified be our conquering call.

*Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;  
save me and I will be saved,  
for you are the one I praise.*

*Jeremiah 17:14*

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<sup>106</sup> Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2019).

## Appendix 1: Sermon 1

### What does atonement mean to me?

SLIDE 1 – Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan University

For the past few years, I have been a student at Emmanuel Christian Seminary. I was a student there before, after I got my Bachelor's degree in Pastoral Ministry from Nebraska Christian College, Becky and I moved to Upper East Tennessee for the three and half years I worked on my Master of Divinity Degree. I graduated with a Master of Arts in Counseling from Grace University and then in 2017, I began working on my Doctor of Ministry degree.

I am almost done, but this is where I need your help. As a final project, I am conducting a project based on this question:

SLIDE 2

Question: Does a lack of clear biblical teaching on atonement prevent believers from forming an accurate image of God?

What do I mean by atonement?

While Christians have always agreed that Jesus is the Savior, believers have not always agreed on the way in which to understand just how Jesus saves.

The New Testament writers used images and metaphors to explain their view of salvation, and later theologians developed major theories of the concept of atonement.

In short, what I am researching is to understand how atonement theology plays an important role in shaping our individual faith in God, our church relationships and church community.

Metaphors of Atonement:

#### 1. Moral Atonement

- a. Peter Abelard
- b. God loves us dearly and wants us back in relationship with him. So God wants us to choose the Moral or Right choice and he wants to convince us of this through love. So he comes to earth as a human, lives his life and dies on the cross to prove to what extent he will go to in order to be 'at-one-ment' with us.
- c. The cross is not about victory over the devil or repayment for our sins or punishment for our wrong doing.
- d. If we love enough, people will see the error of their ways.
- e. John 3:16

#### 2. Christus Victor Atonement

- a. The work of Jesus was to overcome the forces of evil that hold humans in bondage. The powers of evil work through individual humans as

well as political and economic structures to get people to do the opposite of what God would want done. (enslaved)

- b. But Jesus is born and lives his life contrary to these forces and proves that it can be done, however he is killed and it seems that the forces of evil have won. Through his resurrection, Jesus triumphs over the evil forces and wins the day!
- c. There is Victory in Jesus – Hymn
- d. Death has been swallowed up in victory “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

### 3. Ransom Atonement

- a. All humanity have sold their soul to the devil by the evil passions and desires they live by. So we must be bought back or ransomed. The only thing precious enough for God to give up is the life of his son, Jesus so he is killed and given over to death and thereby allowing all of us to return to God. However Jesus returns to life and is able to also return to the Father.
- b. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

### 4. Penal Substitutionary Atonement

- a. While the idea of Jesus’ substitution for sacrifice was around in early Christianity, the metaphor was developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Basing his ideas on the need for the Norman king’s honour to be satisfied if it had been disrespected,
- b. Anselm believed that human sin had disrespected God’s honour and needed to be satisfied. Since no human being could do so, God—in Jesus—took the place of humanity and satisfied the debt.
- c. This idea was further developed by Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Calvin, in particular, developed the idea that it was God’s law which needed satisfying, leading to Penal Satisfaction.
- d. This has been the basis of much of western lawmaking ever since.
- e. The Passion, A movie by Mel Gibson

It is the violent nature of the cross that creates conflict for both the learned scholar and passionate believer. We see that the ever-increasing response to disagreement is violence, payback, or vengeance. Especially among those claiming to be Bible Believing Christians.

-I thought that radical groups were few and far between, like the Westboro Baptist followers who picketed funerals of servicemen and women but now it is our friends and family who are using their faith as a shield to mask their verbal violence.

The attack on the Capitol just one year ago demonstrates my point.

Doctrines such as penal substitutionary atonement have been misrepresented as condoning divine child abuse as the Father is portrayed as abusing Jesus so that others may go free. Phrases like, Jesus came to die, seem to imply that suffering at the hand of a violent attacker is acceptable.

Question: “Does the language used to discuss atonement negatively impact trauma and abuse survivors who attend Wildewood?”

I became interested in this topic after reading an article from a woman named Rachael Denhollander.

Rachael was an Olympic gymnast but . . .

In August of 2016, gymnast Rachael Denhollander stepped into the spotlight for reasons other than her powerful athleticism and graceful routines. She was the first woman to publicly accuse Larry Nasser, the doctor of Team USA Gymnastics of sexual assault. As a victim of abuse, she had waited fifteen years to report the horrific abusive incidents to the police. This brave act opened the door for hundreds of other women who also were assaulted by Nasser to reveal their traumatic painful stories. Denhollander courageously broke the silence that had kept these atrocities hidden while confronting her own pain, doubt and fear.

As both a Christian and an abuse survivor, Denhollander, who is now a lawyer, noted in an article titled, “*Justice, The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse*” that in many cases, survivors of abuse are “mishandled as a result of poor theology and misinformation about the dynamics of abuse.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview about her book, “*What Is a Girl Worth*”, Denhollander says, “ideas have consequences . . . and bad ideas have victims. There needs to be a good theology . . . there needs to be right and true ideas underpinning what we are doing here.”<sup>2</sup>

“A poorly developed understanding of forgiveness can lead to victims being shamed for being ‘bitter’ or ‘vindictive’ or pressured into premature forgiveness as a key to their healing.” -Rachael Denhollander

Who am I writing this for?

I am research and conducting this project for us.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men are victims of physical violence as a result of an intimate relationship.<sup>3</sup>



Church leaders are growing in awareness that the number of church members who identify as abuse victims is growing exponentially. Lifeway Research published a study in 2019 stating that 10 percent of Protestant church attenders under the age of 35 have left the church where they felt that victims of sexual abuse or the potential for sexual misconduct were not taken seriously.<sup>4</sup> On any given Sunday, as many as 1 in 4 (25%) of church attenders can identify as abuse victims. So here is where I need your help.

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Then, I am asking some of you to text my phone and I would like to interview you about your view of God in light of your trauma or abuse. During this 20-30 discussion, I don't want to hear the story of your past, rather, I want to know how it has affected your understanding and relationship with God.

Then, over the next couple of weeks, I will be teaching through sermons about the atonement so that we may have a place to discuss what is accurate and truthful about our shared salvation through Christ.

<sup>1</sup>"Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse." 2018. Fathommag.com. November 19, 2018. <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse>.

<sup>2</sup>Smith, Warren Cole. 2019. "Rachael Denhollander Speaks with Ministry Watch on Sexual Abuse in the Church." Ministrywatch.com. October 16, 2019. <https://ministrywatch.com/rachael-denhollander-speaks-with-ministrywatch-on-sexual-abuse-in-the-church/>.

<sup>3</sup>Huecker, Martin R., Kevin C. King, Gary A. Jordan, and William Smock. 2021. "Domestic Violence." CDC. April 19, 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK499891/>.

<sup>4</sup>Earls, Aaron. 2019. "Churchgoers Split on Existence of More Sexual Abuse by Pastors." Lifewayresearch.com. March 21, 2019. <https://lifewaysresearch.com/2019/05/21/churchgoers-split-on-existence-of-more-sexual-abuse-by-pastors/>.

## Appendix 2:

### Is God Violent or Loving

Thank you for filling out the survey last week and thank you to those who are willing to sit down with me for a conversation.

The first thing I want to talk about is dealing with the question as to whether God is unjustifiably violent.

-Imagine with me, you come home from the store to discover that someone has broken into your house and is now living there. Is violence justified? I am assuming that most of you are agreeing, Yes.

God was giving the Promised Land to the Israelites, it is His possession and His decision. There people living there, (squatting) and they were opposed to even acknowledging God or recognizing his sovereignty.

Let's look at a passage of Old Testament scripture: Deut 20

<sup>1</sup>When you go out to war against your enemies and see horses, chariots, and an army larger than yours, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, is with you. (Here we see God as a Political Leader)

<sup>2</sup>When you are about to go into battle, the priest is to come forward and address the army, <sup>3</sup>saying to them, "Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle with your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be alarmed or terrified because of them. <sup>4</sup>For the LORD your God goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory."  
(Here He is a Religious Leader)

(A Military Leader)

<sup>5</sup>The officers shall say to the army; "Has anyone built a new house and not yet begun to live in it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may begin to live in it. <sup>6</sup>Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. <sup>7</sup>Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her." <sup>8</sup>Then the officers shall add, "Is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too." <sup>9</sup>When the officers have finished speaking to the army, they shall appoint commanders over it.

(Offer of Grace)

<sup>10</sup>When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. <sup>11</sup>If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you.

<sup>12</sup>If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city.

After God's offer of peace, who is left? The most defiant bad characters.

<sup>16</sup>However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. <sup>17</sup>Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.

(We may ask the question, “Why must they go?”)

See Vs 18

<sup>18</sup>Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.

So, as a matter of protection for the people, God orders that the most defiant must be dealt with. We will often use our Hollywood imaginations and create in our minds a huge battle of thousands. The truth is, it was probably few. When choosing between conformity and death, most will choose conformity.

Now, when it comes to reading, especially the OT, there are some things to consider. While considering God's violence, here are some points to ponder.<sup>107</sup>

### 1. Understanding Hyperbole and Imprecatory Language

We need to first understand the term Genre.

The Bible is full of different types of genres of material: laws, stories, poetry, prophecy and so on. To understand a passage properly, we need to know how to read and understand its genre. The conquest (talked about above) commands the Israelites to do whatever is necessary to carry out the first commandment – to show total loyalty to God in the land that he is giving to them.

The Canaanites who dwell in the land are portrayed as a great danger to Israel's relationship with God due to their idolatrous worship practices in the land. Therefore, Israel must remove that danger by destroying the Canaanites (and particularly their worship) from the land.

In Deuteronomy this kind of ‘destruction’ refers to being removed or dismissed from the land as a people group of influence.

Today we talk about societal influencers. I am referring here to Tik Tok, Facebook, YouTube and the like. Often, I desire their voices to be muted in the landscape of our society.

The same was true for those who were living in the land promised to the Israelites. Dismissal from a position of power is different from destruction.

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<sup>107</sup> Outline is adapted from an uncredited article published at <https://www.belfastbiblecollege.com/commanding>, accessed December 21, 2021.

As an example, Deuteronomy 7:1-2 seems to suggest that the Canaanites should all be wiped out, but verse 3 commands the Israelites not to marry Canaanites. If verses 1-2 are understood literally, there is no need for verse 3. (There is no danger of marrying those who have been killed!)

Another way to look at this is when we read the stories of the conquest primarily in Joshua chapters 1-12.

One characteristic of this material is that it uses hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point).

As an example, passages like Joshua 10:40.

“So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded.

However, In Joshua 13:1 God tells Joshua that much of the land remains to be taken. (This implies that there are still a lot of Canaanites left.)

This exaggeration is not deceitful, because the initial readers would have known what it meant.

We use hyperbole all the time: (For example, I want the Kansas City Chiefs to slaughter their opponent later today). In other words, I want them to win rather than the killing of the members of the team.)

Or you might say, “I have a million things to do today.” Or “I will never drive on I-80 again.” It is an overemphasis for a point.

While we are talking about understanding genre, Psalm 127:9 used to really bother me”

“Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”

This is what is called an imprecatory psalm. The violence of the imprecatory psalms will use powerful emotional language to convey pleas for God bring justice. Imprecatory psalms invoke prayers of judgement, often in the midst of white-hot anger in the face of shame and oppression.

This verse does not give us a description of God’s character nor of commands given in the past that serve as a guide for us today. Rather it is heated language that conveys strong emotion.

## 2. God’s Character is a Mystery

(I just don’t understand God. Much like a toddler who thinks that a parent is ‘mean.’)

The ark was being moved and it was sliding out of the wagon. A man named Uzzah tried to stop the ark from falling but he made the mistake of touching it.

“Then David was angry because the Lord’s wrath had broken out against Uzzah.

Do what God says . . .

David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, “How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?” -2 Samuel 6:8-9

-“Who can understand the greatness of God?” Ps 145:3

Something of God’s presence in the Ark of the Covenant seems to be lost in the church today. In the time of Moses, the people knew the awesomeness of God’s absolute holiness.

### 3. God’s Character is being Progressively Revealed

A common perception is that the “Old Testament God” is cruel and severe, but the “New Testament God” is kind and commands us to love our enemies.

However, Jesus acknowledged judgement and consequences for our sin. Jesus spoke of both rewards and punishments.

“Consider the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.” - Romans 11:22

### 4. God’s is acting with Justice

God’s anger is just rather than arbitrary, and he punishes the reluctantly and is willing to relent.

-A central Old Testament text affirms that God is “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6).

-For over four hundred years, God patiently waits till the sin of the Canaanites fully ripens (Gen 15:16)

-And judgement is not God’s preferred way of dealing with sinners; he prefers their repentance and relenting from punishment.

-When God punishes, it is with a grieved heart (Gen 6:6; Ezek 6:9).

But right is right and God will protect and defend those who try to damage the righteous.

“I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run.” -Exodus 23:27

### 5. God’s Sovereignty

Instead of questioning or really judging God, we need to allow Him to reveal His character to us. Too many use the name of God to do their deeds, enact punishment or harm others ‘in the name of God.’

“They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. <sup>3</sup>They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.” -John 16:2-3

Conclusion:

I know that hell fire sermons are currently out of vogue, but we must not buy into the misunderstanding that God the Father is somehow unjustified in protecting his children and that Jesus is only about turning the other cheek.

Note this passage:

“Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgement than for you.” -Matthew 11:20,25

Teach us Lord, to know You, not who we want you to be.

## Appendix 3:

### Defining the Terms

In his writings, John uses the parallels including truth and lies, light and darkness; righteousness and sin, love for the Father and love for the world and lastly the Christ vs Antichrist to describe a similar culture to our own. He uses simple words and simple style of writing, he reduces the world into right vs wrong.

As a result of this sermon and the ones to follow, we will

- experience authentic fellowship with God and fellow believers.
- be bold as we stand against false teaching and teachers and
- find trust in the assurance of eternal life with God which begins today.

#### SLIDE 2

Have you ever gone into a store and seen a sign that says, “You break it, you buy it!”

So imagine that you are in that store, the one with that sign, and you see a parent and young child. The child walks the aisle of this antique store and seeing a pair of colorful vases, he grabs one and holds it up to his parent, “I want this!” he says excitedly. In the next moment, the vase slips from his hands and crashes to the hard wood floor breaking into a hundred pieces.

Let me ask you this question: What should happen now?

Remember the sign? It says, “You break it, you buy it.” The Owner is owed the price of the vase. For the sake of this story, let’s assume the price is \$100. The child is four years old and has only \$1.59 in change in pocket.

Let me ask again, “What should happen now?”

Mercy: I won’t charge you, you are free to go.

Grace: I won’t charge you, you can have the other vase for free.

Punishment: Anything from physical violence to verbal shaming.

Atonement: The parent pays the man, cleans up the mess.

Atonement can be divided into two parts:

1. Reconciliation: pays the debt

- process of two people in conflict agreeing to make amends

-Romans 5:10

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!

2. Restoration: The action of returning something to a former condition.

- Fixes the vase

-AND Fixes the relationship

-1 Peter 5:10. “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you.”

It’s a cute story that illustrates a good point, but what happens if we change the scenario?

SLIDE 5

But what if the child is intentionally stealing?

How does that change the situation?

SLIDE 6

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23

SLIDE 7

Romans 6:23. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Let’s talk about this death for a moment:

Death is separation.

The Bible speaks of the 2<sup>nd</sup> death.

The second death is mentioned on multiple occasions in the book of Revelation and is synonymous separation from God, the Giver of life. It is called the “second” one because it follows physical death.

Revelation 21:8 explains the second death in the most detail:

“The cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all the liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

It is not a judgement that one is sent to, but rather a destination that one chooses, usually out of ignorance and apathy.

SLIDE 8

For if, while we were God’s enemies, we reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life.”

Remember that reconciling is the process of two people in conflict agreeing to make amends. (seeking and giving forgiveness)

SLIDE 9 – VIOLENCE

William Romanowski points out that Hollywood has demonstrated that Americans believe that violence is the way to solve problems..



He makes his point by reminding us of the movie, *The Matrix*. You may have seen, in the movie, the hero named Neo is proclaimed as the Christ-like savior and he is determined to liberate humanity from a computer-generated virtual reality. In order to set mankind free, Neo teams up with a woman named Trinity. Together they entertain only one idea, 'might makes right. and they must destroy the evil empire. It is an enjoyable action movie, but it reinforces the myth that violence sets us free from evil.

And some justify it by pointing to God and Jesus on the cross.

I have often preached things like: 'My sins were wiped away when God poured the agonies of my punishment onto Jesus.' This means that God himself was punishing Jesus with one of the cruelest forms of torture ever invented. But when I think about it, I realize that I am in danger of portraying God as though he was dangerous and frightening.

Perhaps unwittingly, I'm presenting the holy God as a perpetrator of parental cruelty, which is regarded as revolting and illegal in every civilized society. I've been surprised to find that the Bible itself avoids this problem.

We have to be very careful how we present penal substitution (the idea that Jesus carried the penalty for our sins).<sup>108</sup>

John Stott warned in *The Cross of Christ* again saying that our salvation was based on 'A sacrifice to appease an angry God, or... a legal transaction in which an innocent victim was made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others.' This view of the cross does help to explain why Jesus had to suffer so terribly, and it helps us understand how a just God deals with sin but, like all images or metaphors, not every detail fits the full meaning of the crucifixion perfectly. As soon as we explore the idea that God himself carried out the punishment of Jesus, we fall into problems.

The main Bible passage concerning penal substitution is Isaiah 53, where a servant of God is portrayed as suffering on behalf of sinners. This is applied to Jesus in various places (especially John 12:38; Acts 8:32-33; Romans 4:25; 1 Peter 2:21-25). These passages emphasize the rejection and suffering of Jesus, *but none of them say that God himself was the source of his suffering.*

But the only actual source of this punishment that the Gospels tells us about was sinful humans.

#### SLIDE 9

This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. -John 2:23-24

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<sup>108</sup> Outline is adapted from a sermon published by John Piper.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/breaking-the-power-of-shame>, accessed January 7, 2022.

Yet it is for the fear of punishment that many have been separated from God and God's people. This is called shame. When we try to hide because we are afraid of being rejected because of things that have happened to us.

Her life is a wreck. After five failed marriages she stopped with the formalities. She came to the well when the sun blazed so she could draw water alone and hide from the comments, the whispers, and the condemning looks (John 4).

He was a powerful man who abused his power to sleep with another man's wife. But he got her pregnant. And out of fear of exposing his wickedness he tried to hide behind a cover-up that turned murderous (2 Samuel 11).

She had suffered from a bleeding disorder for twelve years. All that time: unclean, uncomfortable, and uncomforted. She saw Jesus heal others and longed to receive his touch. But how could she ask him in front of the whole crowd? So she sought to hide in anonymity by just touching the fringe of his robe (Luke 8:43-48).

These are three biblical portraits of people who tried to hide their shame in the wrong places. But the wonderful thing is that all three experienced God's power to break shame's hold over them and set them free. And this wonderful experience can also be ours.

Thanks to the work of Brene' Brown, the world now better understand that shame is "the intensely painful feeling or experience that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance, connection or belonging."

Kate – Honor your father and mother

-Dad was abusive, Mother was complicit and the church was ignorant

-but you don't go against God, especially when her father repeatedly told her, "I am your father, by God and you will obey me."

Like the woman at the well, King David, and the hemorrhaging woman, our shame frequently encourages us to hide in the wrong places.

We hide in our homes or away from our homes. We hide in our rooms and in our offices. We hide in housework, yard work, and garage puttering. We hide behind computers and phones and newspapers and magazines. We hide behind earphones and Netflix and ESPN. We hide behind fashion facades, education facades, career facades, Facebook facades, and pulpit facades. We hide in busyness and procrastination. We hide in outright lies or diversionary conversation. We hid behind sullenness and humor. We hid behind bravado and timidity. We hid in extroversion and introversion.

You see, we have our own noontime well visits, our sin cover-ups, and our anonymous touches. Pride moves us to use whatever we can to hide our shame.

Restoration and Reconciliation

SLIDE 10

Colossians 3:15

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”

## Appendix 4:

### Hearsay and Heresy

#### 1 John 1:1-10

##### SLIDE 1

##### Authorship of 1 John

-Although the author is never named, since the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the consensus is that John the Evangelist, the Apostle is the author. He was writing late in his life from Ephesus, probably 85-95 CE.

-This letter was not written to one church group but was intended to be circulated from church to church.

-The purpose was to stem the tide of defections to a belief system that attempted to blend Christianity with Gnosticism. There were elements which taught that Jesus was born in a normal fashion and the Spirit of God indwelt him at his baptism and left him again at the crucifixion. This view was held in conjunction with the belief that matter or flesh was inconsequential and therefore one could not sin 'in the flesh.'

Purpose:

1. Encourage believers to stay in fellowship
2. Expose the dangers of false teachers (Gnosticism)
3. Empower Christians to live with confidence

##### SLIDE 2

-Similar phrasings, topics and word choice between the Johanine letters and the Gospel of John helps the scholar to conclude a John authorship.

-Compare John 1:1-2 with 1 John 1:1

##### SLIDE 3

LIFE VERSE: Favorite verse:

##### 1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

##### 1 John 3:1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

##### 1 John 3:16

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

### 1 John 5:13

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

I could pick from nearly any of the other verses in this book, but for the purposes of our study, I have chosen

### 1 John 2:18

“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard the antichrist is coming.”

The second chapter continues:

“This is how we know it is the last hour.....They left us.”

Many will try to convince you that the presence of evil is a sign of the anti-christ. I cannot disagree. There is much going on in the world today . . .

### SLIDE 4

Persecution in the world:

- China
- Finland

-1 John 3:13.

“Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, when you discover that the world hates you.”

But what John is talking about is Fellowship or the Greek word: Koinonia

### SLIDE 5

-In Romania, after communism collapsed, the world became aware that many children in that country were warehoused in huge orphanages.

-While babies had most of their physical needs met (food, shelter ... etc.) they were very seldom picked up, hugged or played with.

-Many of them had what doctors called “failure to thrive syndrome.” This meant that even though they might have been many months or even years old, they still looked and acted like newborns. What they did not have is family that would encourage growth.

-Many Christians seem to have this same ‘failure to thrive syndrome.’

-If you want to destroy a church, limiting or deleting koinonia among the believers.

-In the Pauline letters the term koinonia is one of a cluster of technical terms connected with the Roman society, a legally binding association of equal partners based on their mutual assent to a common purpose.<sup>1</sup>

-Koinonia is often defined as devotion and participation with others.

-Have you ever talked positive about a sports team just because you didn't want to be left out of the conversation?

-KC Chiefs (13 Seconds)

-Fellowship (koinonia) means that if you are in relationship with God, then you automatically must be in relationship with God's people.

So let's see how John makes his case:

#### SLIDE 6

“<sup>2</sup> The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.”

Commentary: He establishes his credentials.

1 John 1:2

The author was an eye witness to Jesus ministry.

He verifies, testifies and proclaims what he has seen.

-Why does he proclaim what he has seen?

#### SLIDE 7

<sup>3</sup> We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> We write this to make our joy complete.

1 John 1:3-4

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<sup>1</sup>Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 60). W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

The author claims to be in fellowship with God and other believers. ‘Complete’ means ‘totally devoted to each other and to God.’

-MAKE MY JOY COMPLETE

-Sad when someone is missing

#### SLIDE 8

<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.”

1 John 1:5-6

The author draws a parallel between light and darkness.

Light is truth, darkness is damaging lies.

REMEMBER John was verifying, testifying and proclaiming?

THOSE who were leaving were making some claims of their own.

Those who are leaving are making 3 inaccurate claims:

-Claim to be in fellowship with God and walk in darkness (vs 6-7)

-Talking about SANCTIFICATION not JUSTIFICATION (not new believers)

-This may be wrong, but...Known sin (lying on our taxes)

-God will just have to forgive me for this.

SLIDE 9

<sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

1 John 1:7

- Walking in the light shows all the defects and blemishes
- But Jesus purifies us, CLEANSSES us. (SHOUT)

SLIDE 10

<sup>9</sup> If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

(vs 8)

- Claim that what we are doing is not sin
- Confess: agree with God, acknowledge our mistakes
  - our part: confess
  - His part: forgive and purify
    - clean and sanitize
    - forgive sin and take away the desire to continual sin

SLIDE 11

<sup>10</sup> “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.”

- Claim to have not sinned (10)
    - I have never sinned
- Making God into a Liar – are YOU bold enough?

The devil knows that the way to destroy the church is to prevent the church from having fellowship together.

What is the opposite of fellowship/unity/koinonia . . . . separation and loneliness.

Practical steps to building fellowship:

1. Stand in church (while doing something)
  - Too often when in worship or a bible study you are sitting
  - Standing is what you do when you are serving with others
2. Talk in church (while you are doing something)
  - Too often when in worship or bible study you are listening
  - Talking is what you do when you are creating new ideas and accomplishing tasks
3. Raise your hands in church (while you are doing something)
  - Too often in worship or bible study, you have your hands in your pockets
  - Hands that are up are ready to high five, pat on the back or hug
4. Walk in church (while you are doing something)

- Too often in worship or bible study you are stuck in one place
- Walking allows you to take initiative to talk, encourage, share your stories

There are lonely people within 20 feet of you right now.



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