One Event, Multiple Meanings:

Rediscovering Life, Hope and Love in Theologies of the Cross

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Introduction

I am four years old. I am seven years old. I am nine years old. It makes no difference; it is always the same story. I lie awake in bed. I hear the quiet murmur of my parents talking and the background noise of the television. I find this somewhat comforting, but still, I am terrified. I think about God and "lukewarm" people, about burning pits and leering, twisted faces. The preacher tells us that it is not enough to go through the motions, you must truly believe, in your heart. "I do believe, I do believe, I do believe," I whisper to myself, but it doesn't feel right. I think I am probably one of the lukewarm people; I don't believe, not really, not in my heart. God will see this right away, and I will go to the burning pit. I only want to stay with people who are good and kind and warm. I want to be good myself. I want to be safe and loved. But my feelings are all wrong, my thoughts are all wrong. Finally, I call out to my brother. "I'm afraid." I dare not say what I am thinking deep down: I am afraid of God. I think he is mean and scary. "Of eternity," I say instead. "I know. Me too," my brother answers.

Twenty years later I am again sitting in the pews of my childhood church. It is Christmas Eve, and my husband and I are spending the holiday with my parents. The children of the church are called to the altar, where they open a gift; inside is a tiny, ceramic baby Jesus, "the first Christmas present." "Look kids, IT'S JESUS!" Although this is somewhat amusing, I feel ill at ease. I become more disturbed as the pastor pulls out a gift card he received from the congregation. He proceeds to explain that Jesus is just like that gift card; our job is simply to cash him in. "If you don't use it, who's the loser- YOU'RE THE LOSER!" I have not felt this angry in a long time. There is an

irrational, wild part of me that wants to make a scene. I want to grab the brass candleholder from the altar and smash in the headlights of every luxury car parked outside, dismantle the coat closet, ruin the evening for everyone. I hold back tears, because I feel that something true and beautiful is being degraded. My husband squeezes my hand, and I realize he knows exactly what I am thinking. I sit quietly and hold my inarticulate rage. I will say later that this scenario encapsulates everything that is wrong with Protestant spirituality in America, but my family rolls their eyes, laughs at me, and wonders aloud who I am getting all these crazy ideas from, why I must always be so difficult. I feel angry with them, and I hate that. Because they are good people, they love me, and it is a holiday.

I chose to begin my project by sharing these personal stories so the reader may better understand where I am speaking from. I grew up in a church that has become completely dominated by a hybrid of the penal substitution and satisfaction theories of atonement. I refer to the belief that Jesus died to pay the price for our sin, making us acceptable to God and bridging the gap between God and humanity; when we profess faith in Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven and we are saved. This particular way of conceptualizing and explaining the saving work of Jesus has become absolutized to the point of defining, for many believers, what it means to be Christian. I struggled with this for most of my life. When understood as the single, definitive truth, I found that I simply could not accept this dominant soteriological model. I felt myself pushed into a corner, where my only option was to reject the tradition and faith I was raised in. Rather than bringing the good news of life, freedom, and healing, I found the teaching of salvation, understood as forgiveness of sins through belief in Jesus Christ, to be restrictive and

oppressing. Yet there was some power in the images, the stories, and the person of Jesus, which never allowed me to completely turn my back on them.

When I later was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study religion, I discovered that the penal substitution/satisfaction theory of atonement is simply one, among many, ways of speaking about the Jesus event. This experience liberated me. I was no longer forced to see the world as a saved/damned binary, a model that crumbled into confusion when faced with the reality and ambiguity of life. For the first time, I felt myself free to engage the tradition, open myself to all the ways God works in the world, and approach scripture with an eager heart.

In this project, I hope to broaden our understanding of how God works on behalf of humanity--more particularly, how God saves us through Jesus. Christian theology affirms that a man named Jesus actually lived in history, and was a vessel of God in a unique and complete way; he lived and died in an exceptional manner, as testified to in the Scripture. However, all the meanings and models we assign to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are relative. We all share, however distantly, in the experience of an event, yet we interpret that event in different ways. Historically there have been many ways of talking about the Jesus event including Christ the Sacrifice, Christus Victor, satisfaction, penal substitution, the moral influence model, the mysticism of suffering and the Crucified God. Today theologians from many different contexts continue to explore the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

By broadening the language, models, and theories used to articulate the truth of salvation found in Jesus, we are freed to truly approach God, in Christ. We will recognize that certain models may conflict with one another, offending logic and reason.

Yet we will hold and value these incongruencies when we remind ourselves that we are dealing with a mystery. In the journey of faith, we will continue to judge, critique, and transform the tradition that has been passed down to us, while still remaining deeply rooted in that tradition. We will find some ideas relevant and helpful, and we may judge others to be irrelevant, or even harmful. Yet we will keep the ideas that do not immediately speak to us on our horizon, recognizing that they have spoken to others and may one day speak to us as well. We will not be threatened by those who understand things differently, but will instead wonder what we can learn from them.

In accepting that there are many different ways to talk about the saving work of God in Christ, one naturally assumes a position of humility. We passionately embrace the truth that has been given to us, while remaining ever cognizant of the fact that we can never claim to have everything all figured out. The possibility of humility becomes accessible when one accepts the relativity of one's own life, thought, experience, and even faith. Understanding the breadth and variety of the Christian tradition relativizes one's own experience of that tradition. We then live our faith from a position of humility. Theology becomes the process by which we grow in our faith, rather than the answer that explains it.

In Part I, I briefly introduce the reader to the traditional soteriological models, including the satisfaction/penal substitution model. I situate the models in their historic context and attempt to highlight what is life-giving in each model. This survey provides the reader with the necessary background information, and broadens our understanding of how Jesus saves us, while remaining faithful to the Christian tradition.

I then explore critiques of the satisfaction/penal substitution model, and alternatives offered, by both feminist and Latin American liberation theologies. I have chosen to focus on the feminist and liberation perspectives because these voices offer the necessary corrective and prophetic call to conversion desperately needed in my own context, which has been shaped by consumerism, individualism, and privilege. In Part II, I look at the theologies of Rita Nakashima Brock and Wendy Farley. Brock is a leading scholar in the fields of religion and women's studies and has written and lectured extensively on soteriology and understandings of salvation. Her 1988 book, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, is widely celebrated as a landmark work in feminist theology. Farley is a Professor of Religion and Ethics at Emory University and author of several books including *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, a reflection on suffering and transformation. I chose to focus on these two theologians because they both offer important insights. Brock articulates the feminist critique of the dominant soteriological model clearly and forcefully, and emphasizes the importance of working for our own salvation through relationships of love, respect, and mutuality. Farley offers a convincing and detailed analysis of the human psyche, brokenness, and healing.

In Part III, I focus on Latin American liberation theology through the work of Jon Sobrino. Sobrino is a Jesuit priest and a highly-respected theologian. He spent most of his adult life in El Salvador and served as theological advisor to the late Archbishop Oscar Romero. I chose to focus on his work not only because he is one of the leading Latin American liberation theologians, but also because he boldly and explicitly addresses issues of poverty, injustice, and oppression in his soteriology.

Finally, drawing upon the insights and strengths found in these theologies, I propose my own soteriological model in Part IV, which I believe can speak to the ambiguity, pain, and sin of Christians in the privileged First World. I'm not suggesting that this soteriological model is superior to others or that it is all-encompassing, but rather that it offers a needed perspective. In constructing my own model, I sought to articulate a soteriology that is life-giving and remains deeply rooted in Christian tradition.

Part I: Jesus Saves

Traditional Models and Historical Background

In this section I provide an overview of some of the major soteriological models in the Christian tradition. As previously stated, my concern here is simply to introduce the reader to the variety of ways Christians historically understood the saving work of Christ; my discussion of each model is not comprehensive. After introducing each model, I point out some problems/critiques with the model. I then highlight what is life-giving within each model. No one model can perfectly explain the saving work of Christ, yet each has something to offer. Throughout this brief survey, I attempt to discover how, in different ways, all of the traditional models communicate the good news brought by Jesus.

Christ the Sacrifice

Christianity is rooted in the Judaic tradition. Jewish ideas such as sacrifice, covenant, and God's active participation in the world, undoubtedly influenced the early followers of Jesus, as they struggled to find life and meaning in his violent murder and the disappointment of their deepest hopes. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the understanding of sacrifice in Judaism, as it is presented in the Old Testament texts. In the discussion that follows, I rely heavily on the work of Timothy Gorringe in *God's Just Vengeance.*

The earliest understanding of sacrifice is connected to the breaking of a taboo and the resultant pollution of the community. For example:

> You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. -Numbers 35:33

> Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him, all you gods! For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people. - Deuteronomy 32:43

Although these passages contain themes of guilt and God's justice, the central problem can be viewed in terms of pollution, and the central need as expiation, or cleansing of the people. This understanding is based upon the idea, common in ancient times, that an active and effective power resides in blood.

Closely related, but still differentiated from this understanding, is the idea of propitiation. Propitiation assumes that the central problem is God's wrath, and the central need is to appease God. Appeasement occurs through payment of blood, or sacrifice. This theme arose in the post-exilic period, as believers attempted to reconcile political and military defeat with an understanding of God's power and activity in the

world, interpreting their suffering as God's punishment of the sins of the people.[1] Clear examples of this understanding of sacrifice can be found in Joshua 7, 2 Samuel 21, and 2 Samuel 24.[2]

However, sacrifice in the Old Testament is not always related to guilt, sin and suffering. Offerings of thanksgiving and communion also constitute a tradition of sacrifice. In this context, sacrifice is more clearly related to covenant and relationship between God and God's people, and often has nothing to do with dead animals.

An understanding of sacrifice as obedience and ethical living is formulated within the paradigm of covenant. This alternative tradition, running throughout the Old Testament, insists that what God truly desires is obedience to the law, sorrow over evil, and commitment to living more fully as children of God. For example:

Sacrifice and offering, you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart. – Psalm 40:6-8

I will not accept a bull from you house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall glorify me. - Psalm 50:9-15

[1] Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance,* Cambridge University Press, 1996, 37. This is, of course, not the only response to suffering in the post-exilic period. Other important responses viewed suffering as pedagogy or focused on God's continued fidelity and care for God's people, even in the midst of current suffering.

[2] Ibid, 33-37. In addition to the classification of sacrifice found in the OT, specific scriptural examples are drawn from Gorringe's text. Joshua 7 relays the story Achan. The Israelites were entering the land of Canaan when Achan stole from the treasure dedicated to God, resulting in God's anger and Israel's defeat by the men of Ai. Achan and his entire family were stoned, satisfying God's wrath and bringing renewed success and prosperity to Israel. In 2 Samuel 21, there was a famine in Israel because God was angry that Saul massacred the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites demand the death of seven from Saul's family and David complies, again satisfying God. 2 Samuel 24 discusses a situation in which God kills 70,000 people of Israel and is finally appeased when David erects an altar and sacrifices oxen to God.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. – Psalm 51:16-17.

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? – Micah 6:7-8.

And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."- 1 Samuel 15:22.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.- Hosea 6:6

These verses interpret sacrifice as obedience to God's will, lived out in daily life. The deep meaning of sacrifice lies not in the appeasement of God and the *formation* of relationship with God, but rather in the affirmation that life, suffering and sacrifice are already *embedded in* relationship between God and God's people. In other words, it is not that we need sacrifice in order to live in relationship to God; living in relationship to God is, in itself, the only sacrifice God desires. It is possible to understand the tradition of animal sacrifice within the paradigm of covenant. Gorringe writes "this line of Old Testament thinking insisted on pointing beyond the signifier to the signified, beyond the sacrament to the life of obedience and thanksgiving which was in fact demanded. From the very earliest period animal sacrifice was above all a metaphor for total commitment to God."[3] Sacrifice should not be understood merely as a means of satisfying God's wrath, but rather should be understood holistically, as part of life lived in love, truth, justice and obedience to the will of God.

[3] Ibid, 53-54.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the early followers of Jesus, rooted in the Jewish tradition, were influenced by the nuanced and varied understandings of sacrifice presented in the Old Testament. Therefore, the interpretation of Jesus' death as sacrificial, presented in some New Testament texts, must be understood within the paradigm of covenant and the broader understanding of sacrifice that runs throughout the Old Testament. The New Testament interpretation of Jesus as sacrifice is much deeper than the facile model of propitiation alone. It is not merely that the spilled blood of Jesus satisfied God's wrath, leading God to forgive human sin and relent from punishment. The entire of life of Jesus can be understood as sacrifice.

In the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, there is no *conclusive* evidence that Jesus himself viewed his death in terms of an atonement offering for the sin of humanity. To the contrary, Jesus is seen offering forgiveness of sins prior to his death. In addition, the Synoptics do not speak about the Fall or the need for a once-for-all sacrifice. Instead, they depict Jesus preaching a new kingdom, liberating the people from illness, death, and oppression, and challenging his disciples to follow him. The sacrifice Jesus asks of his disciples is not religious or symbolic; it is not a matter of belief but of action.

In the letters of Paul there are numerous references to Jesus as a sacrifice for humanity. However, these references should be viewed in the wider context of Paul's work to establish community and overcome long-standing hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Salvation was not a matter of being forgiven of sin, but of becoming incorporated into the community. Furthermore, it is through participation in Christ's death that we are incorporated into the community. For example, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised," 2 Corinthians 5:14. We are not considered merely *passive* benefactors of Christ's saving work, but are called to be *active* benefactors. This action takes place in the concrete situation and praxis of the new community: the strong help the weak (Romans 14), the wealthy give to the poor (2 Corinthians), and masters and slaves accept one another as brothers (Philemon).[4] Christ died a sacrificial death, but the sacrifice was effective not because it appeased God's wrath (propitiation) but because it led to the creation of the new community. In giving himself up to death, Christ encouraged his followers to likewise give themselves over to one another, in a community based more upon love than mutual self-interest.

It is certainly true that Biblical texts present Jesus' death as a sacrifice "for us". However, it does not necessarily follow that this is *always* intended to indicate that the death of Christ occurred as payment or atonement for our sin (propitiation) or as effecting a cosmic transaction that effectively cleansed humanity and healed relationship with God (expiation). Although a comprehensive and thorough exegesis of biblical texts lies well beyond the scope of this paper, even a rudimentary understanding of the idea of sacrifice in scripture broadens the horizon and challenges the believer to imagine other ways Christ's death, and even more his life, might be called a sacrifice, and we might indeed affirm that it was "for us."

[4] Ibid, 76.

Christus Victor: Patristics and Eastern Orthodox

The central insight of the Christus Victor model is that in Jesus, the power of life triumphs over the power of death. In presenting this model, I begin with the writings of the church fathers and early Christianity. I then briefly explore the model from a more contemporary perspective.

In the worldview of early Christianity, there was widespread belief in the existence of demons and hostile powers. These powers were both mythological and empirical; they were real to the people. All sorts of illness, oppression, and misfortune were understood as the work of hostile powers.[5] It naturally follows that release from demons and hostile powers would be both appealing and deeply meaningful to the people.

Within this context, the patristic model emerged in the second to fourth centuries C.E. The patristic model is based on the presupposition that the devil has rights over humanity. God, however, wishes to save humanity from the devil's grasp. God therefore enters into a struggle with the devil, from which God emerges triumphant. God's victory occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, interpreted both as deception of the devil and ransom, or blood price, paid to the devil.

For example, Gregory of Nyssa writes in the fourth century C.E.:

> He then, who…shut his eyes to the good in his envy of man in his happy condition, he who generated in himself the murky cloud of wickedness, he who suffered from the disease of the love of rule, that primary and fundamental cause of propension to the bad and the mother, so to speak, of all wickedness that follows,-what would he accept in exchange for the thing which he held, but something, to be sure, higher and better, in the way of ransom, that thus, by receiving a gain in the exchange, he might foster the more his own special passion of pride?

[5] Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998, 121.

In this interpretation, the devil is taken down both by his own lust for power and the inventiveness and trickery of God.[6] God does not use concrete power but relies instead upon "weakness" to overcome dominance. The devil is undone by overstepping his bounds and by his endless entitlement, which is also at the root of contemporary evils such as spousal abuse, poverty, and ecological destruction.[7]

This model has some definite weaknesses, primarily in its depiction of redemption as a purely cosmic affair. Salvation is a done-deal and God is the cosmic super-hero. It is not a far cry from the "gift-card Jesus" that so antagonized me on Christmas Eve. Although Jesus is not being punished by God for our sins, we are saved as passive bystanders**.** If believers are not challenged and called to participate in their own salvation, it can easily degenerate into a cheap and meaningless consolation. We are saved, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything when it comes to the way we live our lives. In addition, the model relies on a dualistic framework of good and evil, which can not adequately address the ambiguity of real life.

However, the model also has strengths that the Church today can benefit from. Its metaphorical and narrative character makes it conducive to multiple readings and opens room for the imagination. In addition, it takes evil seriously and offers a more comprehensive interpretation of evil than the notion of personal sin. Evil is understood as the sum total of all that holds the world in bondage, and salvation is understood as

[6] Ibid, 124. The quote from Gregory of Nyssa comes from Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, eds *The Great Catechism of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* New York: Christian Literature Co, 1893. I am drawing the quote from Darby's book. Although this imagery sounds primitive to contemporary ears, particularly in the university and academy, it can still be found in today's society. For example, C.S. Lewis's beloved children's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* employs the patristic model.
[7] Ibid, 140.

liberation from bondage. The struggle against evil is real and the powers of evil do real damage, even to God's Self. Kathleen Darby writes:

> Taking evil seriously, as the patristic model of atonement does, means that we recognize its reality and power, admitting that within this finite, fragile world, good and evil are locked in battle, that mortal existence has the character of struggle, and that it is up to us to keep hope alive by loving and living the good and resisting evil in concrete acts of compassion and celebration.[8]

Understood in this light, the patristic model challenges believers to struggle against evil, while simultaneously recognizing that human activity alone is not enough.

The motifs of the Christus Victor model continue to appeal to many contemporary theologies. Its influence can be clearly seen, for example, in liberation theologies, as we shall later see in the context of Latin American liberation theologies. Contemporary theologies tend to stress the non-violent nature of God's victory and our role in participating in that victory. In this way, they overcome what I see as the primary weakness of this model: that God saves us without our participation.

For example, Colin Gunton reinterprets the demonic powers as all social, psychological, and cosmic forces that keep people in bondage to what is not God.[9] The victory is not placed solely in the cross and resurrection, but rather is the outcome of the entire Jesus event, including the incarnation and life. The cross is seen as the completion of a pattern of non-violence, love, and resistance to evil that already manifests in Jesus' life; the submission of Jesus on the cross is actually refusal to submit to the use of violent forces, and therefore victory.[10]

Gunton describes the victory primarily in terms of revelation and unveiling. The cross is victory because it reveals the fact that the real enemy of humanity is not opposing

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[8] Ibid, 133.
[9] Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, Eidinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989, 70.
[10] Ibid, 77.

human forces, but the structures of evil themselves. The cross is victory because it creates a new vision of the world as both fundamentally good and tragically fallen, subject to bondage, but awaiting the final revelation. The cross is victory because it allows us to speak of God, with real but limited knowledge, obtained through Jesus. In claiming the cross as victory, it is always understood as the completion and perfection of the entire life of Jesus. Furthermore, the victory of the cross is considered the guarantee of the future and ultimate victory, yet is also understood as the source of strength for continued struggle against evil.[11]

Similarly, Denny Weaver also emphasizes the non-violent nature of Jesus' victory. In addition, he provides more thorough analysis of what this victory means, in real terms, for the lives of Christians today. Following Jesus is a necessary component of our true participation in his victory and salvation. Furthermore, before we are able to follow him, we need to acknowledge our participation in the powers of sin and evil that killed Jesus. We need to repent from our participation in these powers and engage in active struggle against them. This practice assumes a confrontational stance against the social order. Nonetheless, justice and mercy exist in unity; what we experience as judgment when we are in bondage to the powers of evil is experienced as love and mercy when it frees us from those same powers. Released from bondage to the powers of evil, we are freed to engage in prophetic testimony and practice of justice and mercy, creating visible signs of God's victory in the world. The New Jerusalem, Gunton argues, already exists in the testimony and practice of those who are loyal to Jesus.[12]

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[11] Ibid, 77-80.
[12] Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement.* Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001, 31.

In its demand for a confrontational stance against the powers of evil and the world, the Christus Victor model is an important corrective for a Church that is often all too willing to accommodate worldly powers, placing salvation and redemption in a spiritual realm, removed from the messiness of real life. The model takes evil seriously, yet does not allow for despair. Its central insight is a bold testament: in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, there exists something stronger than the powers of evil and death. This is both a statement of thanksgiving, grace, and joy, and a challenge and call for believers to abandon themselves, ever more fully, to God.

Anselm, the Satisfaction of Justice and Penal Substitution

North American, Protestant spirituality has been heavily influenced by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) and his satisfaction model of atonement. In fact, a hybridization of his model and the penal substitution model has come to dominate Protestant churches in the United States. Most Christians are familiar with this theology, although they may not be aware of its historical context and lineage. Even a brief exploration of Anselm's context and the historical trajectory of his thought may assist the believer in better evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of this theory. The fact that it has come to so thoroughly dominate popular theology today speaks to the power of its insight, yet the church and society are not served in its absolutization.

Anselm formulated his theory in the eleventh century, in response to critics who felt that the crucifixion dishonored God. Anselm objected to the Christus Victor model, which dominated from the fourth century to his own time, due to the assertion that the devil had some sort of right over humanity. He insisted that both the devil and humankind

belonged to God. In formulating an alternative, he drew upon his own context of feudalism in medieval Europe. He imagined God operating analogously to a feudal ruler, albeit a benevolent one**.** In the hierarchical power structure of feudalism, the lord, ideally, has the obligation to protect, govern and rule his people. In return, the people must serve, obey and honor the lord. This is the necessary order that prevents society from degenerating into anarchy. As ruler of the universe, God must maintain the ultimate order of things. This is God's covenantal obligation. If God failed in this task, the universe and human life would descend into meaninglessness and chaos.

Anselm maintains that the ultimate order and beauty of the created universe were disrupted due to human sin and evil. In order to maintain order, God must put things right, so to speak. So in God's great love for the created world, God lifted up his Son as the one offering worthy enough to set things right again. Jesus, the God/man, alone is capable of paying the debt owed on behalf of humanity. It is not that God demands payment because God is personally affronted, but rather that the order of the universe itself, and the resultant well-being of God's creatures, demands some form of payment.

In Anselm's theory, God's real concern is right relationship in the universe and right relationship between God and creation, as opposed to abstract justice. Prior to the death of Jesus, this relationship was not possible, due to the severe disruption caused by sin and evil. This differentiates Anselm's satisfaction theory from the later development of the penal substitution theory.

The penal substitution theory is an offshoot of Anselm's satisfaction theory and was first developed by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The theory continued to develop throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, seen in the work of Reformation theologians

Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564), and has maintained influence up to the present time.[13] In the penal substitution theory, the central problem is human sin and guilt, which alienate us from God. The absolute seriousness of sin and evil demands some form of payment; God's justice can not abide with it. The debt is tremendous; we humans can never pay it, and are condemned to separation from God and to damnation. Yet even in the midst of our guilt and sin, God's love and mercy is greater. God continues to work on our behalf. God offers Jesus as the only possible satisfaction for human sin. Being God, the offering is worthy, and being man, the offering can be accepted on behalf of humanity. Jesus bears the punishment that all humanity deserves.

Liberation and feminist theologians have done a great deal to uncover the harmful effects the penal substitution theory of atonement has had on men and women throughout the world. They have shown how an understanding of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice to take away the sin of the world has allowed Jesus to become merely an abstraction, fitting into a neat and tidy cosmic understanding. The desperate need for Christians to follow the life and practice of Jesus is ignored; the powerful are not able to hear Jesus' prophetic cry for justice, and the hungry, sick, and oppressed are encouraged to passively wait for their reward in a higher spiritual plane. The incarnation and the life of Jesus have no role in this theology as the entire meaning of his existence is wrapped up in the cosmic event of his death.

Furthermore, women in particular are often encouraged to passively accept abuse just as Jesus did, rather than feel empowered to actualize their true selves before God. They are taught that suffering is a virtue, and their great inner rage is pacified. God

[13] Gregory Love, 1. Although John Calvin is best known for his ideas about the vengeance and judgment of the Lord, he combines these ideas with the tradition of God as the defender and liberator of the poor and oppressed. Behind his motif of judgment is concern for justice for the victims of the world.

becomes the distant, angry, punishing male figure that many women are all too familiar with, and dysfunctional family dynamics are replicated, and thereby absolutized, on the divine plane.

Despite the weaknesses of the penal substitution theory, it is also appropriate to recognize and appreciate its strengths. It is powerful because it addresses the human experience of guilt, violence, and sin. It takes evil seriously and reveals the sinfulness of humanity. In the penal substitution theory, salvation is bound up with judgment. If we allow this judgment to speak its word and do not move too hastily to the word of mercy, salvation can not be a matter of mere sentimentality.[14] Yet the theory also illustrates the mercy and love of God. It speaks of a God who loves creation so deeply that even the Son is not held back. Any parent will understand that this is a greater giving by far than even one's own self. If we allow this theory to speak to us, without feeling the need to accept it as the ultimate and only meaning of the life of Jesus**,** it can help us to hold judgment and mercy, challenge and consolation, sorrow and hope in tension.

Abelard and the Moral Influence Theory

Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a contemporary of Anselm, objected to what he viewed as the judgmental and blood-thirsty aspect of God in Anselm's theory, writing "How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain- still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable

[14] Gunton, 108.

that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world."[15] Abelard believed that the goodness and mercy of God is obstructed in Anselm's understanding of atonement; the good and loving God could not possibly demand the death of an innocent man. Seeking to maintain God's goodness, Abelard posited that the cross is salvation because it is effective in changing people's hearts. People are blind, unaware of their own sin or the depth of God's love and mercy. On the cross, people come face to face with both the intensity of human cruelty and the even greater mercy of God. They are then able to feel remorse, repent, and turn towards God. The turn towards God is not merely an emotional response to the suffering of Christ. Abelard maintained that there is also a more objective power active in the divine love revealed on the cross. This power, although difficult to define, is effective, and creates love in humans.[16]

The moral influence theory was further developed in the 19th century by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who described atonement as an ongoing process. When human beings face the cross, they reach a crisis point; they must choose to respond and turn towards God's love, or shut themselves off. In responding to God, they begin the process, animated and encouraged by Christ, of striving towards fulfillment of the divine will, which is perfection. This line of thinking was carried on in the social gospel of the twentieth century, which encouraged believers to follow Christ in perfect obedience to God, humility, and self-sacrifice on behalf of others.[17] Finally, strands of this thought can be found in liberation theology (although it makes use of other traditional models as well), as we shall see in a later chapter.

[15] Ray, 13. Abelard, quoted in Ray's book.
[16] Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Ideal of Atonement,* 141
[17] Ray, 17.

Contemporary theologians have described the persuasive power of God on the cross in several ways. Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of it as the breaking of self-will, the evasion of the truth, and the invasion of wisdom and power, which together create the opportunity for change.[18] Similarly, Mary Solberg identifies the power of the cross as the process by which we come to see the truth of suffering, acknowledge our own implication in that suffering, and feel ourselves compelled to act.[19] Alicia Vargas says that we must first grasp Christ as gift and then as an example to follow.[20] Helmut Gollwitzer describes the gift of grace that creates interpersonal relationship, not allowing one to remain passive. He uses the metaphor of breath to illustrate his point. We cannot help but breathe, and are therefore passive, yet at the same time, we breathe in and out, and are active. Similarly, in response to the gift of grace in Jesus, gratitude and change of heart flow naturally.[21] Paul Fiddes identifies the power of the cross as love that does not ultimately resort to "survival strategies" and the self-centered promotion of one's own self-interest.[22]

Feminist theologians in particular have been critical of Abelard's moral influence theory and its contemporary articulations. This theology, they argue, places the responsibility for change on the shoulders of the victims; they must bear their suffering patiently in order to affect repentance in the perpetrators. It assumes that perpetrators have the empathy and moral conscience to be affected by the suffering of others, and views their salvation (through repentance) as more important than the suffering of the

[18] Fiddes, 147
[19] Mary Solberg, "All That Matters" in Trelstad, Marit, ed. Cross Examinations. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 150.
[20] Alicia Vargas, "Reading Ourselves into the Cross Story" in Ibid, 157.
[21] Helmut Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982, 171.
[22] Fiddes, 150.

victims. In addition, it fosters unhealthy relationships and use of power. Rebecca Parker writes, "This is sick. This is manipulative and evasive. This strategy assumes there is no power available to me other than the power to elicit guilt from another and put him in my debt. This binds the other person through pain. This is not a strategy of freedom, but a rearrangement of bondage. It won't do."[23] Parker, along with others, insists that theology must encourage people to care for themselves as well as others. The model of self-sacrifice is not necessarily helpful, because it can foster an unhealthy valorization of suffering and victimization.

Although we must always bear the feminist critique in mind, the moral influence theory also has something positive to offer. In placing the salvation of the cross in the change it effects in human beings, the theory challenges believers to respond to suffering. To have faith in Jesus Christ does not mean simply to profess the correct formulation of belief, but rather to be called, make concrete changes, and become animated with love and power to follow him. In the privileged First World, suffering, death, and injustice are often covered up and pushed aside. We prefer to remain oblivious, to suppress the thoughts and questions that disturb us, and occupy our minds with trivialities and banal entertainment. In contemplating the cross, we are forced to open ourselves to the truth of an injured world and respond to the call of a loving God.

Suffering and Mysticism

Mysticism in general refers to the intuition of spiritual truths inaccessible to the intellect, or to the direct experience of, and union with, God. The mystical tradition in

[23] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Boston: Beacon Press, 41.

Christianity can be traced back to its roots. The apostle Paul spoke about participating in the reality of Christ, through dying and rising with him. For example:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. - Gal. 2:19-20

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. – Romans 6:3-4.

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through the power of God, who raised him from the dead. – Colossians 2:11-12

The Egyptian hermits sought the isolation of the desert to pursue personal encounter with Christ through ascetical purification. Throughout the Middle Ages, mystics and religious continued to pursue union with God and relay experiences of ecstatic encounter. Traditionally, mystics have sought union with the divine through the three-fold path of prayer, self-denial and service to others.

The lives and words of the mystics teach that in following the path of Christ's journey through spiritual death, one can attain union with God and true life. The journey through spiritual death is a struggle, often described as the dark night of the soul. In the pain and struggle of life, whether it is sought intentionally or thrust upon one, the soul participates in the crucifixion of Jesus. And this brings the promise of the resurrection. The journey through death ends in new life.

In her book, *The Silent Cry*, Dorothee Soelle articulates the mystical experience for the present day. The mysticism she describes is another way of talking about salvation, because it leads the soul through a radical journey to new life. In this journey,

the Christian identifies with Christ, both through the pain of crucifixion and the hope of resurrection. Although Soelle attempts to avoid a glorification of suffering, she also maintains that we can not truly "be like God" without, in some way, undergoing the same journey as Christ. "A Christianity that is free of suffering leaves suffering to others," she explains.[24]

Soelle describes the path in three stages: to be amazed, let go, and resist. Amazement is a positive experience, whereby one experiences the beauty and wonder in the world, but it is also the negative experience of terror and hopelessness. When we are amazed, we are freed from preconceived notions of the world and lose the illusion that we are in control of the universe. We are able to experience and see reality without feeling the need to manipulate or manage it. Amazement and ownership are incompatible, Soelle contends. When we are amazed, the self is de-centered, and we are able to begin the second stage of the journey: letting go. In the process of letting go, the self is purged of false needs and desires. We let go of possessions, the need for power *over* others through violence, and ultimately, the ego. Finally we arrive at the stage of resistance. Soelle's unique insight here is that healing and resistance belong together:

> The third stage leads into a healing that is at the same time resistance. The two belong together in our situation. Salvation means that humans live in compassion and justice co-creatively; in being healed (saved) they experience also that they can heal (save)…Being-at-one is not individualistic self-realization but moves beyond that to change death-oriented reality. Being-at-one shares itself and realizes itself in the ways of resistance.[25]

She maintains the insistence upon concrete change and work on the behalf of life, while at the same time avoiding the cultivation of a mystique of martyrdom and suffering.

[24] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 87.
[25] Ibid, 93.

Resistance, for Soelle, is a long term practice that involves taking responsibility for reality. We do not look to God as the miracle-worker or omnipotent savior, but we do allow God to be an ally of the exploited. Our hope is not that God will magically change the course of history, but that we will be able to change the course of our own lives and participate in the redemption of the world. We seek this change in liberation from our own fear and sin, and resistance to the forces that oppose life. In remembering God, we affirm life and oppose death, even when such practices do not appear successful by the world's standards. The ultimate reason for resistance can not be success, Soelle claims, "because that would mean to go on dancing to the tunes of the bosses of this world."[26] Rather, we resist because of our participation in "the nothing that wants to become everything."

The mysticism of suffering has been criticized by some theologians as leading to a justification of violence. In speaking of dying and rising with Christ, they argue, we are taking the historical act of Jesus' murder and manipulating it into a spiritual truth.[27] We cover over the horror of violence, committed against ourselves and others, by saying that it will discipline our spirit, or help us to be more like Christ. The seriousness of evil and violence demands that we face it in silence, without attempting to offer any consolation.

Nonetheless, the theology of mysticism and suffering, and particularly Soelle's articulation of it, has much to offer today. In a world where human suffering, destruction of the earth and trivialization of the spirit continues to grow, it often seems that the only option is to become anesthetized to reality or suffocate in the darkness of despair. The existence of a tradition of hope and the legacy of others who have journeyed through the

[26] Ibid, 230.
[27] Brock and Parker, 44.

night of despair to the morning of new life, offers strength, peace, commitment, healing, and power.

The Crucified God

The theology of the crucified God affirms that on the cross, God suffers with the victims of the world. In the incarnation, God became fully united with humanity. Because being human also includes the experience of pain, betrayal, humiliation, loss of hope, and victimization, God also underwent these torments. The scripture tells us that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). In this way, God's love becomes credible to human beings. God is not above and outside of pain, but in the midst of it. God does not sanction or legitimize human suffering, but is silently present as witness and companion.

This theology does not affirm the impassibility of God, but rather speaks of a vulnerable God who is ever-changing, affected by others. If God were not this way, we would be unable to speak of a God who loves. God suffers over the fate of God's children, and we are called to participate in that suffering.

The theology of the Crucified God is most closely associated with German theologian Jurgen Motlmann. Moltmann developed his thought in the context of his own painful experience as a German soldier in WWII. As a soldier, he experienced all the horrors of war. After the war, when he was confronted with the atrocities of the Nazi death camps, he was overcome with a suffocating sense of shame and despair. It was out of this experience that Moltmann came to the belief that God must be present with us in our suffering, if God is truly one who can save. He writes:

In July 1943 at the age of seventeen, I lay watching bombs rain down all around me in my hometown of Hamburg. Forty thousand people, including women and children, were killed as a result of the bombing or burned in the firestorm that followed. Miraculously, I survived. To this day I do not know why I am not dead like my comrades. My question in that inferno was not, "Why is God letting this happen?" but rather, "Where is God?" Is God far away from us, absent, in his heaven? Or is God among us, suffering with us? Does God share in our suffering?[28]

In the story of the passion of Jesus, Moltmann found the God who suffers with humanity, and experienced this as salvation and redemption.

Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer also wrote eloquently about the Crucified God. Bonhoeffer played a key leadership role in the Confessing Church, which stood in opposition to Hitler. He was eventually arrested, charged with conspiracy and imprisoned for a year and a half in Berlin, after money used to help Jews escape to Switzerland was traced back to him. After the failed July 20 Plot[29], Bonhoeffer's connections with the conspirators who planned to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the government were discovered. He was moved through a series of prisons and concentration camps, and was executed on April 9, 1945. Bonhoeffer writes from prison:

The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.[30]

Bonhoeffer clearly does not express a naïve faith, but one that was formed in the midst of intense suffering, trial, and struggle. Yet even in the midst of failure, when faced with his own death, he continues to speak of the saving activity of a God who is present.

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[28] Jurgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God", in Trelstad, Marit, ed. Cross Examinations. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 127.

[29] The July 20 Plot was a failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler, in which German officer Claus von Stauffenberg, who had personal access to Hitler for reports, played a key role. The failed attempt led to the arrest of more than 5,000 people, the execution of 200 and the destruction of the German Resistance.

[30] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953, 188.

Finally, James Noel writes about the spirituality of African-American slaves, who were drawn to the Crucified God, finding strength, sustenance, and dignity. Although the presence of God, who shares in the suffering of the people, does not answer the theodicy question, Noel writes "it was a balm and consolation at the ontological level."[31] In addition, the suffering of Christ justified and affirmed the people's own sense of outrage. The murder of Jesus was a scandal, as was the scandal of slavery. The suffering of Jesus exposed the nature of the crimes against the people and against God, and confirmed the ultimacy of their quest for liberation.[32]

The theology of the Crucified God has also received criticism from feminist theologians**.** Rebecca Parker argues that the theology models an abusive relationship and "describes a merging of selves in pain and annihilation."[33] While the Son actually suffers abuse and torture, the Father/God inflicts the pain and then feels sorry for him. The Son's will becomes fused to that of the Father/God as he submits in total self-surrender. This suggests that love is destruction of boundaries between selves, even to the point of self-annihilation, a dynamic that functions in unhealthy relationships and the abuse of women and children. Suffering together does not necessarily bring salvation for anyone. In addition, she argues, the death of Jesus is not necessary for us to realize that God is with us in the world, because God is always and everywhere present. For Parker, who speaks out of her experience as a victim of childhood sexual abuse, the theology is not life-giving but destructive.

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[31] James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson, *The Passion of the Lord: African-American Reflections*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 45.
[32] JoAnne Terrel, "Our Mother's Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice" in Trelstad, Marit, ed, *Cross Examinations.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 42.
[33] Brock and Parker, 47.

We must always keep Parker's critique in mind. Nonetheless, we can also recognize what is life-giving in this theology. In a world where all too often God is hidden and where we continue to see death and destruction daily, it brings hope and strength to know that God is there. We can imagine God as the Mother, who stays by her child's side throughout the night, rocking and soothing him. We can make the pain of God our own, and feel ourselves compelled to act. And we can find the hint of peace in the presence of God, which may be "nothing" but at the same time is everything. Furthermore, we can affirm that not only is God present, but God's very Self is changed through deep participation in the pain of creation. We are given a profound affirmation and are able to assert that we have been heard, a process that in and of itself is dignifying and life-giving.

Conclusion

As we can see, Christians have interpreted the saving work of Jesus in various ways throughout the history of Christianity and the church. This brief survey of the traditional soteriological models is in no way a comprehensive examination of all the different understandings of how Jesus saves. It is simply an introduction to some of the major streams of thought. We have seen how each model has its strength, but also certain weaknesses. In deabsolutizing any single model, we are able to open ourselves to the richness and depth of the Christian tradition. Instead of fencing the story of Jesus into our own preconceived notions, we open room to allow the story to speak to us. We hear that God takes sin seriously and stands against all that destroys and degrades life. Yet there is nothing we can do that makes us repulsive to God. God suffers and dies, yet is

also victorious over death and suffering. God forgives us our faults, yet also demands that we repent, and participate in life and goodness. Above all else, we hear in these theologies that God loves us and is working on our behalf.

Part II: The Work of Healing

Truth and Salvation in Feminist Theology

I begin this section by exploring the primary feminist critiques of the satisfaction/penal substitution model of atonement that has become dominant today. To be as clear as possible, these critiques are referring to the common Christian understanding that Jesus died for our sins, reconciling us to God/Father and winning eternal life for all who believe in him. Although the intent of this project is not to tear down the penal substitution/satisfaction theories of atonement, it is necessary to look briefly at some criticisms of the model in order to decenter it. Due to the fact that the model is so well-known and widely accepted, it is important to highlight some of the less audible voices, voices which make it clear that the model can never serve as the final and consummate explanation of the meaning of Jesus' life and death for all Christians.[34] I then outline the alternative models offered by Rita Nakashima Brock and Wendy Farley, and comment briefly upon my own reaction to their work.

Feminist criticisms of the satisfaction/penal substitution model of atonement fall into four main categories. First, the model does not adequately address the entire human

[34] I do not examine the faults of the other models as extensively because there is no need to do so. They are not currently as dominant as the satisfaction/penal substitution model.

situation. Second, the model preaches obedience and self-sacrifice as the primary virtues, encouraging all oppressed people, in particular abused women and children, to passively accept their fate. Third, in locating salvation in the passion of Christ the model glorifies death, denying the memory of a historic act of violence. Finally, the model portrays God as distant and angry.

The satisfaction/penal substitution model of atonement assumes that the primary human problem is sin/guilt. Salvation, therefore, takes the form of forgiveness from sin and individual salvation in the after-life. However, in focusing exclusively on sin, the model ignores the fact of unjust suffering. The primary concern is the guilt of the oppressor, rather than the pain of the oppressed. Rebecca Parker writes:

> We don't need to be saved from the wrath of God or the sin of selfishness. We need to be saved from the gender socialization that teaches women to abnegate selfhood and teaches men to depend on the service of subordinates. The dynamic of dominance and submission in human relations is the heart of sin. What will save us from this? Does Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross end dominance and submission? No. Jesus' crucifixion was a consequence of domination, not its cure.[35]

Parker opposes identifying the problem purely in terms of sin and God's wrath. In locating the problem in the inter-relational dynamic of dominance/submission, she attempts to incorporate the reality of both sin and suffering.

In addition, feminists argue that salvation must be understood as more than just personal. Humans are, by nature, relational beings. We are inextricably tied both to one another and the world around us, including the natural environment and social structures and systems. Salvation must incorporate this wider reality, if it is truly to have meaning for human existence. Kwok Pui-lan describes salvation as "liberation from bondage, the opportunity to develop one's potential, the well-being of one's family and community,

[35] Brock and Parker, 37.

the freedom from warfare and other forms of violence, the availability of a life-sustaining eco-system and a sense of hope and security for the future."[36] She describes salvation holistically, touching upon all aspects of human existence, rather than *only* being a matter of individual remission of guilt and hope for immortality.

Furthermore, understanding salvation as merely personal produces isolation and lack of connection. This is problematic, both because it fosters the self-centeredness that cares only for self-gratification even at the expense of others, and because it cannot satisfy the deeper longings of the human soul. We cannot live alone. We should not expect that we can be saved alone.

The second major critique of the satisfaction/penal substitution theory of atonement is that it valorizes obedience and self-sacrifice. This encourages women and children to passively accept abuse and endure suffering for the sake of the abuser. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker state that Christianity has been a primary force in women's acceptance of abuse, writing "the central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive."[37]

In addition, it creates an unhealthy dynamic whereby women count their worth and goodness in the measure of their suffering. Roberta Bondi writes:

> Obedient to the Father even unto death, Jesus had chosen his death in exactly the same ways and for the same three reasons women sacrificed themselves for their husbands and children. First, he had to prove to us that he loved us by pouring over us fountains of his blood. Second, he had to show us he was so good that he had wanted nothing for himself, not even his own life. Third, he accepted it as his role in life to bear the brunt of what we had done wrong. And there was a fourth reason as well. Jesus wanted us to know without a shadow of doubt that all Christians, but especially Christian women, were to sacrifice themselves exactly like him.[38]

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[36] Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000, 81.
[37] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1989, 2.
[38] Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 127.

Because we want to be good like Jesus, we also want to suffer like him. This opposes a healthy self-understanding that seeks to balance love of others and love of self.

The valorization of obedience and self-sacrifice suppresses the virtues of resistance and revolt. Women and other oppressed groups are placed in a dilemma in which their credibility depends upon their status as innocent victims. If there is any degree of moral ambiguity, or if they begin to seek and use power, their claims are no longer viewed as legitimate. This places people in a bind, by which their only access to agency and voice is in their victimization.

Finally, the dynamic of self-sacrifice, and the guilt it creates, does not foster healthy relationships. Roberta Bondi writes about the guilt she felt when faced with the sacrifice of others, "My mother was sacrificing for me every day. She hadn't literally died, and I couldn't stand it. Now I was being told that because of my sin, Jesus had actually gone through with it and died. How on earth could this be good news? I could never survive the cosmic burden of guilt and gratitude and obligation."[39]

Guilt and obligation is not the same thing as gift and acceptance, and does not foster love. Violence and abuse dehumanizes both the one who is asked to bear it, and the one who is supposed to be the benefactor.

The critique that the satisfaction/penal substitution theory of atonement valorizes obedience and self-sacrifice, and creates more suffering, is especially compelling because it is based not upon abstract theological reflection, but is the result of concrete experience. For example, Brock's conviction that mainstream, American Protestant doctrines of atonement perpetuate trauma is the result of her own experience working

[39] Bondi, 132,

with abused children. These children often interpreted their abuse as divinely ordained and intended for their own good. Passive acceptance of abuse was reinforced by the ideal of Jesus as the perfect son, willingly undergoing torture and murder out of obedience to the parent.[40] Similarly, Sarah Bentley noted in her work with battered women that many used the ideal of turning the other cheek and decided to remain with their abusers.[41] Delores Williams argues that in accepting the role of Jesus as surrogate, bearing the punishment for sin in our stead, African-American women are also encouraged to passively accept the experience of surrogacy, and all the exploitation that entails.[42] Finally, Virginia Fabella writes that in the Philippines, women are often inculcated with a "dead end theology of the cross" and are encouraged to see suffering and death as an end in themselves. This fosters a culture of victimization and acceptance of the multiple oppressions Asian women must negotiate.[43]

The third major feminist critique of the satisfaction/penal substitution theory of atonement is that it glorifies death, denying the memory of a historic act of violence. In arguing that the death of Jesus brings salvation, death is upheld as the source of new life. Brown and Parker comment that the metaphor of Jesus as the new mother, bringing life

[40] Brock and Parker, 148.
[41] Darby, 58.
[42] Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption", in Trelstad, Marit, ed., *Cross Examinations*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 28. Williams describes the experience of surrogacy, in which African-American women were forced to fill roles that would ordinarily be done by others, as unique to black women's oppression. She identifies the three main areas in which black women have been coerced into surrogate roles as mammy (childcare), manual labor (slave labor) and sexuality (used as concubines by white slave owners), and discusses the ways all three roles have been perpetuated in society even after the abolition of slavery.
[43] Virginia Fabella, "Christology from an Asian Woman's Perspective", in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women, Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds,* Hong Kong : Asian women's resource centre for culture and theology and the Asian office of the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 1989, 27.

from death, devalues real mothers, who give life through life.[44] Rather than truly honoring all that is life-giving, this theology glories in death, and calls it life.

Brock explains that in mystifying and glorifying the death of Jesus, the historical act of murder is obscured and forgotten. Brock writes, "Violence succeeds by mystifying accurate perception and historical memory and isolating human beings from community bonds and moral responsibility…The execution of Jesus as an enemy of the state was gradually transmogrified into an intimate interaction between Father and Son, opaque and mysterious, behind which the agents of Jesus' death disappear."[45] Although it may be necessary for a time, denying the memory of trauma is ultimately not life-giving. Perpetrators are not held accountable and victims are not able to begin the process of recovery.

Finally, in glorifying the death of Jesus as the act of God that brings salvation, God is portrayed in a negative light. God is seen willing the death of an innocent victim, in an arbitrary decision of divine (in)justice. Some feminists have described this picture of God as "the divine child abuser."[46] God demands the death of the Son, and Jesus, like many abused children, obeys in order to maintain the love of the Father.

Furthermore, the theology assumes an ontological separation between God and humanity. God is distant, requiring the death of Jesus in order to establish communion with God's children. At worst, God is a child abuser, at best a remote, yet kindly father-figure. Power, Brock maintains, is structured as "benevolent paternalism" in which the parent (God) is good while the child (humanity) is bad, helpless and dependent. One is

[44] Brown and Parker, 11.
[45] Rita Nakashima Brock, "The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption" in Trelstad, Marit, ed., *Cross Examinations,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 249.
[46] Darby, 62.

forced into a relationship with God that is not based on mutuality, love and shared power and cannot, therefore, realize healing and transformation. Many feminists deny this ontological separation between God and humanity, claiming instead that God is always present and accessible to human beings.

Having clearly articulated the problems with the dominant model of atonement, feminist theologians have also sought to offer alternatives that are life-giving. Feminist theologies often tend to view the human problem more in terms of suffering than guilt, although they are not naive about the reality of sin. In addition, they are highly cognizant of the reality of patriarchy and the extent to which theological models can reinforce patriarchal standards. The two models I will explore, Rita Brock's and Wendy Farley's, both offer understandings of salvation that are responsive to suffering and avoid the problems discussed above in the feminist critique.

Rita Nakashima Brock's Alternative

In her books *Proverbs of Ashes* and *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, Rita Nakashima Brock constructs a theology of atonement--an understanding of how human beings are reconciled to themselves, others, and God--that is deeply embedded in her own experience. She does not seem to be constrained by any doctrine or dogma, but rather relies upon her own life story, and the stories she has been witness to, as ultimate sources of truth. In her search she squarely faces her pain and that of others, yet continues to remain receptive to moments of grace and transformation. Although I object to the extent to which she decenters Jesus and find her theology lacking in eschatological hope, she presents an understanding of salvation that is neither naive

nor despairing--a theology that is able to hold ambiguity and remains, above all else, deeply committed and faithful to the actual lives of real men and women.

In sharing pieces of her own life, Brock uncovers an understanding of sin as primarily a denial of relationship and connection. In her abrupt departure from the family she knew and loved in Japan, she first felt the sorrow of isolation and separation. In both the acute pain of racist attacks and the veiled yet pointed reminders that, as an Asian child and woman in the United States, she somehow did not belong, she was further isolated. As an adult, she clearly understands the ambivalence and estrangement she experienced, even within close relationships, particularly with her two fathers and boyfriend T.C., as the result of both personal sin and larger structures of social sin that deeply wounded both parties.[47]

Although Brock is aware that humans make mistakes and have the capacity for evil, she maintains that the underlying problem is one of brokenness. Humans are wounded and therefore wound each other, becoming isolated from one another and from God (although God is never isolated from us, it is only a matter of our inability to see/feel God's closeness). She writes, "I am suggesting that sinfulness is…a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others."[48] This understanding of isolation and brokenness as the ultimate human problem is crucial to Brock's theology.

Salvation can be understood as that which saves or releases humanity from whatever would persecute, destroy, or degrade. If isolation is understood as the ultimate

[47] In the book *Proverbs of Ashes*, Brock reveals part of her own life story, including her relationship with her biological father, a man from Puerto Rico who was absent for most of her childhood, and her adoptive father, a Caucasian American.
[48] Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, New York: Crossroad, 1988, 7.

human problem, salvation is understood as home, a place to belong. Brock writes: "We are like the ancient Israelites trying to find a home in the wilderness, unable to go back, uncertain of where we wander. We seem, in our diversities and hyphenated identity groups, restless in our longing to belong."[49] Salvation is found in breaking through our protective shells and relating to others in profound and loving ways; it is found in the creation of a common home for everyone. It is through this connection to others that we find healing for our own wounds. It occurs in bits and pieces, in connection found in the midst of pain, misunderstanding, suffering, and despair. It is an ever-going process, not an ultimate destination.

Humanity is not saved by an isolated God, demanding death and sacrifice, no matter how good one claims that God to be. People are saved by the love they extend and receive; they are saved in relationships of mutuality that provide strength to honestly face the past, and courage to work for the future. It is only by facing the pain of the past that we are empowered to overcome it. In being honest with reality, perpetrators are exposed, not so that they may be punished, but so that restitution can be demanded and the process of healing for all parties involved can begin. Furthermore, in sharing their stories and allowing themselves to become involved in communities of support, victims may find the love, strength and hope they need to come to terms with their own wounds. Brock suggests that our relational nature leaves us vulnerable, allowing us to be hurt and hurt others. Yet it is also the source of healing power. She calls this relational power erotic power, and describes it as "the power of our primal interrelatedness,"

[49] Brock and Parker, 63.

distinguishing it from power as commodity, possessed by the singular self.[50] The concept of erotic power is central to Brock's understanding of what saves us.

In Brock's own life, she experienced salvation through loving relationships with individuals and participation in communities committed to truth and healing. In occupied Japan, she was saved from the poverty and death that befell many young women and fatherless children by the love, strength, and commitment of her mother, grandparents, and step-father. In the care of her family in Japan, she felt a sense of belonging, comfort, and home that helped sustain her throughout her life. In the United States, she was rescued from her isolation and despair in the quiet support of her childhood bus driver, Melvin, the unconditional friendship of Denver and his family, and the simple acceptance of Virginia Ann and other family members.

In her adult years, she also experienced salvation through her activism and participation in groups such as the student movement against racism and the Brotherhood/Sisterhood program. It is particularly in community struggles for truth and justice that Brock finds salvation. Writing about an experience she had in the Brotherhood/Sisterhood program, she asserts, "I knew something greater than all of us had entered that moment, something that was made possible by a community commitment to truth in its ambiguity and rawness. Love transformed the future that flowed from that moment."[51] In her social activism and participation in communities working for truth and justice, Brock felt herself pulled beyond her personal limitations. She became a part of something larger than herself, finding rescue from isolation and

[50] Brock, 23.
[51] Brock and Parker, 144.

despair. She found that when she was able to connect with others, the power of God was present, bringing healing and new life.

In addressing the role that God, or the Spirit, plays in salvation, Brock presents three related, yet distinct, ideas of God. God is the spirit that moves among people, inspires transformation, fires the soul, and reconciles human beings. The Spirit arises within relationships of mutuality and is intimately linked to the thoughts, words, and actions of people, yet is somehow more than the sum of the parts. This is an important point. Although Brock claims that salvation comes through relational power within communities, she does not maintain that salvation is an entirely human affair, carried out apart from and indifferent to God. Rather she understands God as an integral part of the process, intimately related to human persons, working within human structures and relationships, as opposed to above or beyond them. God is present as the Erotic Power in the midst of human relationships that makes connection between human beings possible, brings healing from past wounds, and provides the power to work towards restitution and new life.

Brock's second understanding of God is as Presence, often just outside conscious awareness, offering steady love and protection. Although this Presence is different than the power that moves within relationships, it is closely linked to the love humans express for one another. Brock equates this Presence with the unwavering devotion her Puerto Rican grandparents showed to her, long before she knew of their existence, preserving her childhood pictures on the dresser mirror and wishing her well. Speaking of her homecoming, Brock writes "Looking at those photographs on the dresser mirror, I had a glimpse of life so much larger than my own, I could not comprehend it. I sensed that no

matter what happened, a discernable, enlivening, creative presence underlying all things embraced me and wished me well."[52] She saw God's presence in the face of the grandmother she had never known. She also felt the Presence as a small child, when her grandfather would lovingly hold her and walk around the garden. She found it in the constant love and support of her mother and the empowering presence of others in communities of support, such as the Brotherhood/Sisterhood program. Salvation does not come through some sort of divine reward or eschatological utopia, but is found quietly, in the very existence of a loving God. The steady love and protection of God is always available, offering consolation, strength, and companionship, even in the deepest darkness of sin and brokenness that cuts us off from one another and our awareness of the Divine. Even when we are not aware of it, God's Presence is there, offering relief from isolation and estrangement.

Finally, Brock presents God as the transcending power of the universe. The idea of transcendent power expresses the ineffable mystery of God, the sense that despite the Spirit's deep embeddedness in human life, God is ultimately more than any human understanding, belonging to all of life, the entire universe. Brock found this view of God in the book of Job. She writes: "The answer to Job was a vision of nature. Perhaps it was enough. I knew I thought of my life as enlarged by love for a numinous universe--awesome, beautiful, and powerful. My personal existence was transcended by a power I did not fully understand. This power was not there for me alone, but belonged to the universe itself, and I belonged to that universe."[53] Salvation comes through belonging to, and participating in, the universe, in the mighty power of Spirit. In recognizing that God

[52] Ibid, 233.
[53] Ibid, 123.

is always beyond our understanding, we are filled with an awe that draws us outside of ourselves. We are pulled beyond our own shell of pain, into the universe and the Spirit. Sometimes, Brock maintains, this in and of itself constitutes salvation.

Erotic power and the power of the Spirit work across time and space, creating a legacy of hope and love. The struggle for truth and justice and the creation of community is not constrained to any particular circumstance, but stretches forward and backward, connecting human beings throughout history. It is here that Brock locates the figure of Jesus and the specifically Christian nature of her theology. Jesus, in his love for others, his resistance to oppression, and his full participation in the community, is part of a legacy of truth, justice, and hope. He is not a lone savior, but is one among many.

The saving work of Jesus, Brock argues, must be found in a larger reality than simply his person and relationship with the God/Father.[54] She locates this reality in the community that gathered around Jesus, highlighting the importance of others in his life and work, and the community's perseverance after his death. She mentions, for example, the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:33) who initiated and actively participated in her own healing and the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) who is bold enough to teach Jesus a lesson on the inclusive and all-embracing nature of the Spirit. In the resurrection of Jesus, meaning is found in the community's maintenance of connection, even in the radical disconnection of the cross and their healing acts of memory that allow Jesus to continue to live with them.[55] The true legacy of Jesus is found in the relational power of the bonds sustaining the community that gathered around him, a power that persisted through his suffering and death and emerged triumphant in the resurrection. Brock

[54] Brock, 68.
[55] Ibid, 100.

writes, "Jesus is like the whitecap on a wave. The whitecap is momentarily set off from the swell that is pushing it up, making us notice it. But the visibility of the whitecap, which draws our attention, rests on the enormous pushing power of the sea-of its power to push with life-giving labor, to buoy up all lives and to unite diverse shores with its restless energy…To understand the fullness of erotic power we must look to the ocean which is the whole and compassionate being, including ourselves."[56] Power did not rest in Jesus alone, or in his individual connection to the God/Father, but rather belongs to the entire community that gathered around him, and to those who continue to participate in the quest for truth, justice and love, irrespective of explicitly religious context. Through her participation in this legacy of hope and connection, manifest in concrete experiences of community in her own life, Brock found release from her isolation. She found salvation.

Brock presents a theology of atonement that has much to recommend it. First and foremost, she is committed to the actual lives of real men and women. She rejects traditional penal and substitution models of atonement not only because of a theoretical or logical flaw, but because she has not found the theology to be liberating for herself or others. In fact, she has seen that it has deeply harmed some of the most vulnerable, the abused children with whom she has worked. In constructing her own theology, she begins with what she has found to be liberating, healing, and life-giving, both for herself and others: the transformative power of mutual relationships. She accepts this truth as her starting point. She is more profoundly committed to people than to ideas, and her theology is deeply practical. Whatever brings life is good and should be pursued. I appreciate the simplicity and honesty of this approach.

[56] Ibid, 105.

In addition, the fact that her theology is based on real life allows her to accept the ambiguity of human experience. She does not need to force people, events, or relationships into tidy boxes, because her idea of salvation is not a saved/damned binary, but rather a messy, complicated continuum. Salvation is not a one time event that could occur in a particular moment, as when one has an emotional break-through and dedicates one's life to God. It is a process, whereby one continually opens oneself to God and others. This is not to deny the possibility of radical moments of insight or major decisions that change one's basic orientation to life. Yet it does insist that salvation is not something that ever occurs in complete and final form, as in "being saved". Salvation is a way of living life. This understanding allows Brock the freedom to squarely face pain while maintaining a posture that is open to seeds of healing.

Another strength of Brock's theology is the extent to which it encourages men and women to actively struggle against forces that destroy, degrade, and deny Spirit and life. In connecting God and salvation so closely with human experience, she places responsibility for working towards salvation squarely in our own hands. One is not allowed to accept the status quo fatalistically, wait for a later reward, or expect God to one day fix all our problems. At the same time, she preserves room for the Spirit that multiplies our efforts and bestows grace.

Finally, Brock's theology avoids common problems of Christian exclusivism and exceptionalism. In other words, she does not maintain that Christianity is the only path to salvation, or that it is in someway the best or most complete. Although she claims to have found her own salvation in connecting to the legacy of truth and justice in Christian tradition, she never claims that this legacy is perfectly embodied in, or limited to,

Christianity. Furthermore, she does not claim that salvation comes specifically through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation does not require belief in, or even knowledge of, Jesus or Christianity. Brock presents salvation as a universal phenomenon that occurs as people of all religions, races, and cultures connect in love. In today's world, this ability and willingness to remain open to plurality and inter-religious dialogue is increasingly important for theologians who are committed to the pursuit of peace, justice, and love.

Brock's theology challenges us to open ourselves to the healing that comes through connection with Divine Presence and relationships of love and mutuality, yet its pluralistic stance opens the tradition so wide it requires the relinquishment of basic tenets of the faith, such as the incarnation, divinity of Christ and resurrection. Brock presents a theology in which many Christians could no longer recognize their faith. While this allows her to avoid problems such as the glorification of suffering and Christian exclusivism, it also requires the relinquishment of much that is valuable within the tradition.

For example, I object to the extent to which she decenters Jesus. Jesus is simply part of the community of struggle. He is one among many. There is no incarnation.[57] God is among us as the power and spirit that moves through relationship, the Presence that loves and protects us and the force that creates, fills and sustains the universe. Yet God has never walked in our shoes, does not know what it is to have a body, and does not understand what it means to have imperfect knowledge, insight, and ability. Most importantly, God does not know what it means to love the way humans love; to love as

[57] Although Brock does maintain that the world is imbued (incarnate) with the Divine Presence, she rejects the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

finite, limited beings in a world full of death, pain, and degradation. To say that God does feel with and through creation is not the same as to say that God has actually been human. Creation is not God; although creation is intimately linked to God, there remains a separation. This separation was overcome in the incarnation. In Jesus, God's love was made real, comprehensible, and credible to human beings. Furthermore, without the incarnation it cannot be claimed with any authority that Jesus revealed something of God. To claim that God came down to our level and communicated something of the Godhead in the incarnation is not to say that God can be possessed, completely understood, and grasped in Jesus. God is always beyond all human understanding, all religion. Yet Jesus allows us to truly know something of God, even if we can never claim to know all of God.

In addition, Brock's theology is lacking in its absence of eschatological hope. I am appreciative of the need to discourage fatalism and passivity and encourage human beings to actively engage in struggle towards utopia today. However, without hope, without the belief that one day God will redeem the world, I may not have the strength to open my eyes and see the truth of pain, injustice, and death. My life, thus far, has not been free of heartache, untouched by death or oppression, but it has been a good and privileged one. If my reality were the only truth, I may be willing to imagine that salvation occurs now, in the midst of pain, and that suffering can not be redeemed. I cannot, however, tell that to the millions who have lost children to starvation and preventable disease, husbands, brothers, and sisters to war and violence, mothers and fathers to the slow death of poverty and malnutrition. The world needs to believe that God will redeem life, if we wish to speak of hope. This does not mean that humans do

not have responsibility for our own salvation or that God will ultimately fix things without our participation. It does mean that God will increase and multiply our efforts and will continually challenge and compel creation to turn towards life; that God will faithfully and lovingly draw us towards God Self until, with our participation, there is some final consummation. Brock's theology speaks of the partial healings and the small resurrections that allow us to continue living in the world. However, that ultimate hope for the world is lacking. She does not speak of the time when God will be all-in-all; she does not claim that the ultimate reality for all creation is existence in the heart of God, whatever that may mean. This hope of finality in God is absolutely essential to the Christian understanding of salvation.

Wendy Farley's Alternative

Like Rita Nakashima-Brock, Wendy Farley presents a soteriology that is deeply rooted in human experience. As she gazes at the life around her, she attempts to identify both the sources of pain, suffering, and brokenness, and the spaces where God moves. In her understanding of the human situation, Farley relies heavily upon depth psychology. In addition, she examines human desire and motivation, as expressed in everyday life and folk music. In her search for what ultimately saves, she looks to the Christian tradition in which she is rooted, finding important resources in both mysticism and the Christian stories of creation, incarnation and the life and death of Jesus. However, it is important to note that her understanding of salvation is not limited to the Christian tradition, but rather attempts to describe all of reality as she sees it. Christianity is not the locus of salvation, but one model with which to *describe* universal truths. Farley indicates that

these truths are equally accessible from other traditions, and makes free use of Buddhist terminology and understanding when it is more suitable and better expresses her intentions.

In describing the human situation, Farley argues that beneath our conscious thoughts, actions, and decisions lay buried memories and hidden traumas. These traumas are both highly personal and universal; there is no one on earth who has always been completely happy and at peace. [58] These hidden desires and terrors deeply shape our motivations, becoming habitual ways of perceiving and reacting to the world. Farley terms these habits *passions*. However, following the 16th century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila, she also indicates that beneath these protective shields, the human soul is grander and more beautiful than we dare to imagine. It is inhabited both by the divine spark and God's Self, termed the Great Emptiness, The Good Beyond Being, and the Divine Eros.

It is the divine spark in the human soul that births desire, compelling one toward the good and leading one to cry out against injustice and suffering. This spark lives in even the most hard-hearted and cynical of persons, in the voice that protests against one's own suffering and pain. Farley insists that desire is not only good, it is holy; it is the means by which we are connected to God and God to us. However, the first tragedy of human existence is that desire has become disordered. Although we ultimately desire God's Self, we do not truly believe in our own union with God and settle instead for the goods of the world: love, community, home, food, drink, and laughter. The problem is not that it is wrong to desire these things, but that they leave one unsatisfied. In our

[58] Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 36. Farley refers to these traumas as "oppression, poverty, grief, illness, work, lack of work, the untold millions of disasters that befall us"

desperation and neediness we begin to grasp these goods ever more tightly; we try to possess them, rather than enjoying them in loving relationship.

Unsatisfied in our desires and trembling in our pain, we become ever more isolated. It is here that Farley identifies the second tragedy of human existence. Humans exist as "egological" beings. We experience the world as distinct, feeling, thinking selves. This in itself is normal and healthy. However, it is part of human nature to slip from "egological" existence into egocentrism, the belief that one is the center of the world. Although one may intellectually understand that billions of other beings exist, each with equally compelling claims to justice, comfort and love, it is nearly impossible to truly believe it. The intensity of our personal experience leads us to accept the suffering of others as infinitely more tolerable than our own. We inflate our own injuries and viciously protect ourselves against pain.

In the attempt to protect ourselves, we become entrapped by the passions, unconscious patterns of relating to reality that prevent fullness of life. In contrast to traditional doctrines of sin, the passions are not associated with guilt, but arise from human wounds. In identifying our wounds, instead of sin, as the ultimate human problem, Farley's theology is very similar to Brock's. Farley identifies the three primary passions as terror, rage, and addiction. Terror manifests in passivity and "shuts down the adventure of life…in part by deflating a healthy sense of self-worth and agency."[59] Rage responds to pain by attempting to shut oneself off from others, becoming invulnerable. Distinguishing it from anger, which is a healthy human emotion, rage cares only for its own pain and relates to others as "obstacles rather than persons".[60] Addiction is the

[59] Ibid, 60.
[60] Ibid, 63.

tendency to relate to any particular worldly good in a desperate, possessive and grasping manner, as if it will satisfy desire and ease our pain. Humans become further entrapped in the passions by the demons--the inner workings of the mind that convince one that the evil they are enacting and the pain they are bringing upon themselves is actually goodness and light.

In identifying inner structures of the human mind, egocentrism, and disordered desire as the primary problems of human existence, Farley departs from the penal substitution model which views the main problem as separation from God based upon human sin/guilt. In relating the human problem to guilt, one is unable to attack the structures that bind the human soul. This is her primary critique of the penal substitution model. Farley does not believe that there is a gulf separating humankind from God that must be overcome. The problem rather is that in our pain and egocentrism we are unable to live in the fullness of connection to God that already exists. In her model, guilt is simply not a concern.

Having identified what Farley views as the human problem, I turn my attention to her understanding of salvation. Salvation, for Farley, is intimacy with God, or the Divine Eros. As I pointed out above, she believes that this intimacy with God is always present, despite the fact that humans believe themselves to be separated from God. Salvation, therefore, is not coming closer to God in order to achieve intimacy, but rather learning to rest in the power of the Divine Eros that already exists. It is relationship with God and is therefore not a fixed location but rather journey and path.

Farley makes use of the Buddhist term, *vajra pride*, to describe more clearly the nature of intimacy with God. It is displacement of the ego but not in a way that leaves

one powerless, without agency or sense of self. The ego is displaced so that the self can more fully live in the reality of oneness with God. Vajra pride is the belief that one is truly capable of making manifest a unique power of God in the world.

God, for Farley, is not a substance or thing, but is rather desire, movement, and union; desire for creation, movement towards greater intimacy with humanity, and union with all that exists in an outpouring of love. Farley writes, "The Good Beyond Being can be perfectly intimate with creation because it is desire, lover, breath. The cosmos is held together and each soul is held together by these ecstasies of desire, ever self-emptying, ever uniting."[61] It is the being of God, in love and desire, which creates, structures and sustains all of reality.

The nature of the Divine Eros is unveiled in the Christian stories of creation, incarnation, temptation, and ransom, in revealing both the "oneing" of humanity with God and the nature of God's power. God's power is not the power of might or control. It is not a power that can intercede and suddenly erase suffering and pain, yet it is at the same time the deepest power of life. Farley describes God's power as "not the efficient or formal causality of an artisan but the contagion of power that sets nothingness ablaze with being."[62] The great mystery is God's incredible presence, which is powerful and powerless at the same time.

The nature of God, or Divine Eros, is further revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, God again displays the "oneing" with the human person that was accomplished at creation. The incarnation, for Farley, reveals to human beings the deep desire the Divine Eros has for her creation in its entirety. She writes "It is not

[61] Ibid, 102.
[62] Ibid, 103.

the way of the Divine Eros to despise what She has made. Becoming enfleshed, Christ reveals the sanctity of our own flesh. This sanctity is not something that is accomplished by way of perfection but is present precisely in the form of our existence: luminous, wounded, and infinitely diverse."[63] In the existence of Jesus Christ, the human person is assured of God's love of the entire person, in all one's bodily, emotional, and spiritual weakness, pain, and beauty.

In the life and work of Jesus, God further reveals the nature of divine power. In the temptation stories Jesus rejects the power of the world that is displayed in might, authority, and glory. The power he embodies is displayed in his life's work, particularly in the healing and exorcism stories. The power of Jesus is the power of Divine Eros. It is the power of life yet also is no power at all, as seen in his death on the cross.

Unlike other feminist theologians, Farley does not reject the importance of the cross in salvation. Rather she sees the presence of God in the midst of the deepest human suffering as crucial, if God is to remain relevant to human beings that continue to suffer and die. She writes "it is in the depth of disfiguring agony that our intimacy with the Beauty Beyond Being must be found, if it is to be significant to a humanity that remains on a cross throughout its history."[64] It is not that salvation occurs on the cross, but that the presence of Jesus on the cross reveals the fact that God will never leave us; God remains united with humanity through the most gruesome display of inhumanity, and even through death.

This is not to say that one must seek pain, suffering, and death in order to find unity with God. God is united with humanity always and everywhere. Suffering remains

[63] Ibid, 104
[64] Ibid, 112

suffering, and the infliction of pain and injustice is wrong. Farley writes "Affliction is the place farthest removed from the Divine Eros. It is destructive and ugly; in it we are not in misery; we are in hell. We are at the farthest reach from heaven. But the passion and death of Christ enacts for us the entrance of Christ into hell. Christ brings all the power of the Divine Eros to us in hell."[65] It is in the realization that the power of God is available to one, even in the midst of suffering, that opens up space for the possibility of healing.

It is important to note that Farley's description of salvation does not follow a linear view of time and history. There was never a point that the power of Divine Eros was not present in suffering. The life and death of Jesus Christ did not change the structure of reality once and for all, but rather are indicative, or revelatory, of the truth that has always existed. Farley writes "Everything is always happening at the same time: creation and death, affliction and conversion, imprisonment and the release from prison…Christ shows us Erotic power as the power that keeps the story moving toward freedom at every point."[66] God, in Jesus, does not save in any sort of cosmic transaction or historical triumph over death and evil. Jesus saves in revealing the truth of God's love and desire for humanity, in showing deluded human beings, still trapped by the passions, that intimacy with God truly is possible. It remains up to human beings to comprehend the truth and learn to rest in the power of Divine Eros.

Human beings, therefore, are not passive recipients of salvation. One has a role to play in making salvation, freely and perpetually offered by God, real for oneself. Farley indicates that contemplation is one way to touch the reality of God's love. Through

[65] Ibid, 144.
[66] Ibid, 145.

contemplation, one is able to displace the ego and attain a clearer view of the passions that have entrapped one in harmful and unsatisfying ways of living. As the hold of the passions and egocentrism are gradually displaced, one becomes ever more capable of living into the truth of one's unity with God. Farley indicates that the path is difficult, but not solitary; the communion of saints, all those across time and space who travel the path, are important sources of sustenance, wisdom, and guidance. Human beings are not saved alone.

I find Farley's atonement theory to be insightful and convincing. Like Brock, she offers a theory that promotes transformation, change, and agency, is faithful to real life and avoids claims of Christian exceptionalism. Human beings are not passive recipients of salvation, but must struggle, learning to live fully into the truth of salvation. Salvation is not negation of self, but rather the fullness of self. In describing unity with God as vajra pride, Farley avoids the common bifurcation of personal and social liberation, or salvation. Salvation is about wholeness for oneself and others; it seeks to love and protect the self and other beings equally. It does not demand self-sacrifice, yet it also views the suffering of others as intolerable and recognizes the need to fight injustice.

In addition, the description of the power of Divine Eros offered by Farley is, in my opinion, faithful to what is actually observable in the world today. In looking at the world with clear eyes, one sees that God is not, in fact, acting definitively to reverse suffering and make everything okay. Yet God is acting.

Finally, her understanding of Christian doctrine as revelatory of the truth of God's love, as opposed to the locus of that love, allows her theology to remain open to the truth found in other religious symbols and traditions. We are not saved simply by being

Christian. We are saved by internalizing the deep truths Christianity points towards, freeing ourselves from all that entraps, and seeking union with God. Christianity is the signifier that points toward God, and, as is the case with all signs, can not be absolutized.

I think these strengths are also present in the theology of other feminist theologians. However, unlike other feminist theologians, Farley does not completely reject the cross as an important component of salvation. In my view, this is a major strength of her theory. It is important for us to know that God is with us in the depth of our struggles and suffering, that no matter what the world may do, God's love will never betray. This belief does not lead one to desire or seek suffering, but sustains one through the suffering that is an inevitable component of life. Furthermore, God on the cross does not necessarily engender passive resignation to unjust suffering. To the contrary, it can provide the strength and sustenance that is necessary to continue the struggle towards greater peace, love, and wholeness. Farley's understanding of the cross, as revelatory of God's unity with humanity in the midst of inhumanity, respects the human need for God's solidarity in suffering, while at the same time avoiding glorification of that suffering.

Although I find Farley's theology to be insightful, I do disagree with her on two points. First, her description of the human problem as essentially one of woundedness does not encompass all of human reality. We must preserve a place for guilt and sin in theology. I agree that many of our mistakes and failings are a result of misguided attempts to ease our pain. However, it also seems that the human heart has an ability for evil and darkness that can not be explained simply as the result of past wounds. We cannot forget that we live in a world that has seen the Holocaust, the killing fields of

Cambodia, and the atomic bomb. Even in our own callous lack of concern for the farmer in Guatemala, who supplies us with fresh produce for sixty-nine cents a pound (behavior that can reasonably be understood in terms of Farley's passions), there is space for guilt. Guilt need not condemn one to self-hatred and immobility, but rather can be an important avenue for recognizing one's own faults, and a stimulus to change.

In addition, Farley's theology is missing the resurrection. I agree with her that the power of God is forever moving quietly, in ways that can be difficult to discern and conflict with worldly understandings of power. I even mentioned her understanding of God's power as a strength, because it is consistent with what can actually be observed in life. Yet we must retain hope in God as the final word for all of life. I attach this hope to the resurrection because the resurrection is the symbolic and actual locale of God's victory, and the salvation of a human. The final word in Jesus' life was resurrection to eternal life in God, and we are therefore able to hope that is the final word for all of life. I do not know exactly what that will mean, but we must continue to hope, work for, and have faith in the day when God will become all-in-all. I agree that God is working quietly today, yet I interpret this as a sign of hope for tomorrow.

Furthermore, it is important to affirm the resurrection of Jesus as a historic reality. The power of God, even in its powerlessness, is able to overcome suffering and death in ways that matter for human beings. Clearly, the resurrection of Jesus did not change the structure of reality in a quantifiable and objective way. Suffering continues to exist and our murdered brothers and sisters do not stand up and walk. Yet in the resurrection, we find the truth that God will not let suffering have the last word. God will one day redeem us and be all-in-all, and this will matter for us as historic beings.

Conclusion

Feminist theologians have offered important critiques of the dominant penal substitution/satisfaction model of atonement. The model ignores the reality of unjust suffering, placing guilt at the center of the human condition; preaches obedience and self-sacrifice as the primary virtues to the detriment of women and children; glorifies death and suffering; and portrays God as distant and angry. These are all valid criticisms and clearly show that the model does not adequately address the entire human situation. However, I suggest that radically de-centering the penal substitution/satisfaction model of atonement, as opposed to demolishing it, deals with many of these problems. When the model is viewed as one among many ways of understanding the Jesus event, it suggests that guilt is part of the human experience, but not the entirety. God at times seems distant and angry, and humans need assurance that they have been forgiven, but there is no absolute statement that God is indeed harsh and punitive. Obedience and self-sacrifice can actually be virtues, but they also must be balanced with virtues such as courage and self-respect. Meaning can come out of death and suffering, but it need not be glorified.

In addition to pointing out flaws in the penal substitution/satisfaction models of atonement, Brock and Farley add important elements to the discussion. Brock reminds us that salvation is something that must occur in time and space, between human beings as we learn to relate to one another in more loving ways. Yet she also maintains space for the working of the Spirit, which is the power of God and grace, enlivening, enriching and enlarging human efforts. Farley delves more deeply into the human psyche, pointing out the extent to which human experiences of pain and egocentrism prevent us from living

the reality God desires for us. In addition, she argues that our blindness to the reality of God's love is at the root of the human problem. Both theologians remind us that God is always and ever present, but Farley expresses clearly the way in which the life and death of Jesus specifically reveal this truth. Finally, both women assert that we are able to begin to live the process of salvation as we become aware of the truth of God's love and connect more deeply and self-consciously with the Spirit that moves within the world and between human beings.

Part III: Following Jesus

Sin and Redemption in Latin American Liberation Christology

Latin American Christology has consistently advocated a turn to the historic Jesus, as not only the Redeemer of the world, but also the Liberator of the oppressed. The focus on the liberation of the poor, and the insistence that the poor must be the center of both church and theology, distinguishes Latin American liberation theology from other schools of thought. It arises from the context of the oppressive poverty and violent repression endured by great masses of people on the American continent, and has striven to be a "bottom-up" theology, always looking to the experience of the poor as affirmation and corrective of its theological claims.

The context in which Latin American theology is rooted is very different from my own context as a middle class, Caucasian citizen of the United States, and it is for precisely this reason that it is a necessary and prophetic voice. If Christian salvation is to

be understood as "universal" in any sense of the word, it is important to listen to the voices of those who are most vulnerable amongst us, including the oppressed and marginalized people of Latin America.[67] In this section, I explore Latin American Liberation theology's critique of the satisfaction/penal substitution theories of atonement, highlighting points of contact and conflict with feminist theology. I then explore one understanding of salvation and redemption arising from L.A. liberation theology, through the work of Jon Sobrino.

L.A. liberation theology has found the penal substitution/satisfaction models of atonement, as it is articulated in mainstream, North American, Protestant spirituality, to be inadequate for several reasons. First, it turns Jesus of Nazareth into an abstract principle. This is problematic because it effectively silences his critical and questioning voice.[68] Belief in Jesus becomes a matter of individual salvation in the afterlife, not liberation from the social history of oppression today. Jesus is placed above and beyond history, in the realm of the spiritual, where he can have little effect on social reality, except in the form of belief and hope. He no longer calls into question all social and institutional powers, but actually supports them by encouraging believers to wait for liberation in the after-life.

Furthermore, in viewing salvation as a cosmic transaction occurring within the Godhead, human beings are given a completely passive role in their own salvation. This easily results in what Sobrino terms "infantilization", the naïve belief that God will take

[67] Although I am aware that great diversity exists amongst people who are labeled "the poor", and that various and complex oppressions occur on the American continent, including the struggles of women, indigenous peoples and people of African descent, this more in-depth sociological analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. I am simply attempting to describe, albeit in very general terms, the reality of poverty and injustice that many struggle against.

[68] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*. Trans. John Drury, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978, 283.

care of all our problems without us.[69] Instead of facing reality and becoming partners with God in the transformation of the world, we simply wait for the solution to fall from above. The problem is that while we wait, people continue to suffer and die unjustly. This clearly cannot be the will of a good God.

This criticism is very similar to the feminist critique that glorifying the cross as means of salvation encourages those who suffer to resign themselves to it. However, it can be distinguished from the feminist critique in that it views the abstract understanding of Jesus/salvation as that which encourages resignation, rather than the glorification of suffering that makes people believe their suffering is good. In addition, the explicit concern is the poor, whereas in the feminist critique the explicit concern is abused women and children.

Another criticism of the penal substitution/satisfaction theory of atonement is that the theory arrives at an understanding of the cross based upon pre-conceived ideas of God, rather than vice versa.[70] Inherent in the penal substitution theory is the idea that justice, particularly distributive justice, is an integral part of God's being. In other words, justice, for God, is a matter of giving to each what he/she deserves. However, it is not clear how or why one can assume to know this. Furthermore, there seems to be no reason to assume that God's justice necessarily takes the form of our own. Perhaps God is less concerned with giving to everyone their due and more concerned with transformation. L.A. liberation theology, by contrast, urges us to return to the cross and allow our understanding of God to be turned upside down. The cross reveals something about God, and also how we should approach God. Knowing God does not explain the cross.

[69] Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008,188.
[70] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 193.

This critique is also resonant, in many ways, with the feminist critique. The feminist theologians we have examined also argued that the picture of God under-girding the satisfaction/penal substitution model of atonement is flawed. They understand God as always accessible and infinitely close to humanity, whereas the satisfaction/penal substitution model assumes an ontological distance between God and humanity that must be overcome. However, where the L.A. liberation theologians urge us to turn to the cross to discover something about God, many feminist theologians maintain that there is nothing of God in the cross.

This brings us to the main point of contrast between the feminist and L.A. liberation approaches. Feminist theologians tend to reject any notion of Jesus' suffering/death as salvific, while liberation theologians almost never do.[71] Feminist theologians have argued that viewing the cross as the locus of salvation glorifies death and encourages victims to remain victims. In contrast, L.A. liberation theologians have argued that the suffering Christ offers the people hope, strength, and dignity. For example, Jon Sobrino writes, "In Latin America it is a tangible fact that God's suffering has also been an idea that has encouraged liberation rather than resignation. And it is true that love, when it is credible, has its own efficacy."[72] Furthermore, they have argued that in explicitly identifying the suffering of oppressed people with that of Christ, the people's suffering is named and therefore dignified.[73]

[71] Darby, 81.
[72] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 246.
[73] Latin American feminist theologians, such as Ivone Gebara, have also recognized the problem of the glorification of suffering.

Jon Sobrino's Alternative

Jon Sobrino is a Spaniard, born in 1938 in Spain's Basque region. Although Spanish by birth, he has spent the majority of his adult life in El Salvador, after first moving there at eighteen, as a novice in the Society of Jesus. He became increasingly drawn into the wider community, and is heavily involved in issues of social justice. Until recently, he taught at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador, a Jesuit-run school which he helped found.

He was particularly active, along with others, in speaking out against human rights abuses and struggling for justice for the poor during El Salvador's civil war.[74] On November 16, 1989 he narrowly escaped assassination by the Salvadoran government, when members of the military broke into the rectory at the UCA and murdered six of his fellow Jesuits: Ignacio Martin Baro, Ignacio Ellacuria, Amando López, Joaquín López y López, Segundo Montes, and Juan Ramón Moreno. Their housekeeper, Elba Ramos, and her 15-year old daughter, Celina Ramos, were also murdered. The body of one of Sobrino's brothers was dragged into his room where, by coincidence, his blood soaked a copy of Moltmann's *Crucified God*. Although Sobrino was not present when these events occurred, the experience undoubtedly influenced him deeply. Sobrino writes self-consciously from his context in El Salvador, and states explicitly that the poor people of El Salvador are the starting point, and the privileged locale, from which he practices theology.

[74] The Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992) was fought between the government and a coalition of four leftist groups and one communist group. The United States supported the government troops, which were notorious for atrocities such as massacres of civilians (typically peasants) and the killings of nuns, priests and educators (for example, the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero). The civil war resulted in the deaths of at least 75,000 people and the displacement of another 2 million.

Sobrino's work received a theological critique statement and an admonishment from the Vatican in March, 2007. The main criticism was that he places too great of an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus at the expense of his divinity. He was banned from lecturing or teaching by the decision of his own bishop, the Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle. However, numerous Catholic theologians and professional organizations have defended Sobrino, and his work remains widely influential.

In writing with the reality of the poor as his starting point, Sobrino defines the central human problem as "that which puts persons to death."[75] His concern is the death and suffering of God's children, both through oppressive poverty and violent, military repression. His analysis of the forces that bring about death is complex, taking into account both social structures and individual guilt. In general terms, he identifies both blindness and sin as being of central importance.

Blindness and sin are intimately related. We are blind to the truth of reality, and remain unaffected by the suffering of others. Yet this blindness can be described as "culpable blindness". We do not see the truth because we do not want to see it. He writes, "If we now ask why we humans are so given to the lie (blindness, hypocrisy) and to the manipulation of God, the answer is not so much our desire to distort reality or to distort God, but to conceal what we are doing to reality (in violation of the eighth commandment) and sometimes to give ultimate justification to the unjustifiable things we are doing to reality."[76] Sobrino does not offer an in-depth analysis of why he believes people want to cover up the wrong they are doing to reality, but he does suggest that we

[75] Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 86.
[76] Sobrino, *Where is God?*, 40.

do not want to accept responsibility for it, particularly if that entails changing the standard of living we have become accustomed to.[77]

Sin certainly entails culpable blindness, but is not limited to it. Sobrino states that fundamentally, sin means killing.[78] Sin is not the brokenness of our relationship with God, but the brokenness of our relationship with our brothers and sisters, God's children. Sobrino claims that sin is not saying no to God, but to the kingdom of God.[79] This "no" to the kingdom of God has both structural and individual components.

On the structural level, Sobrino identifies the empire (the United States) and the civilization of wealth as the basic problem. The empire deals death through the violent imposition of its will onto others by the use of military might, and the maintenance of an unjust economic system through which the poor are further impoverished. In addition, the empire dominates the cultural and social sphere, imposing individual success as the way to be human, and defending the "enjoyment of life" as an unquestioned value. Related to this is the "civilization of wealth", which understands the continued growth of capital as the engine driving history, and defines humanization as the possession of ever greater levels of material goods. This is a death-dealing reality because the wealth of the few depends on the impoverishment of the multitude. In addition, the wealthy are dehumanized by their selfishness and insensitivity to the suffering of others.[80]

Sobrino believes that the possession and selfish enjoyment of wealth is what makes it most difficult, if not impossible, to open oneself to God. He describes riches as

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[77] Ibid, xiii.
[78] Ibid, 49.
[79] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 51.
[80] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 37 Sobrino quotes Bishop Pedro Casaldaligo, stating that 2.5 billion people survive on less than 2 Euros/day, 25,000 people die daily because of hunger and desertification threatens the lives of 1.2 billion people.

a radical evil and an idol because "they act against God, dehumanize those who render them homage and need victims in order to survive."[81] The ultimate evil of riches lies in the relational problem they create. There is poverty in the world because there is wealth. The possession of wealth causes suffering and death, and separates us from our brothers and sisters. Anything that kills and divides the children of God can not be considered a blessing. Instead, it is an abomination.

Governmental, military, and economic structures actualize the power of sin and create an environment that makes it difficult for people to lead lives as children of God. Nonetheless, Sobrino maintains that people remain responsible for their decisions. It is not enough to identify the problem as larger social structures, because ultimately, it is people who are responsible for those structures. We must hold ourselves accountable, and preserve room for individual guilt.

If the central human problem is understood as the death of God's children, salvation is understood as "those without life attaining life."[82] This does not mean triumph over human mortality; it means justice for the victims. Justice is not a matter of distributive justice, but redemptive justice, and ultimately results in fellowship and solidarity. Sobrino often describes the triumph of justice, fellowship, and solidarity as the kingdom of God. The kingdom is both the gift of God and something that we must build. Salvation is, therefore, both an ultimate hope for the future and something that we live today.

In speaking of the kingdom as the ultimate gift of God, Sobrino retains room for mystery. He does not claim to know precisely what it means. He leaves it open as the

[81] Sobrino, *Where is God?*, 174.
[82] Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008, 82.

reality of God, which is never completely known. However, he does insist that we can know something of the kingdom through the work of God, as manifested in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the revelation of Jesus. We can know that the kingdom is, first and foremost, for the poor, and that it entails justice for the victims. We can imagine it as a shared table, set for all God's children. Sobrino writes of the ideal of a "civilization of poverty", as opposed to the civilization of wealth. In the civilization of poverty, God's children share austerely in the earth's resources, so that there is enough for all. The civilization of poverty "makes universal satisfaction of basic needs the principal of development, and the growth of shared solidarity the basis of humanization."[83] Although the kingdom of God, and the civilization of poverty, can not be achieved through the efforts of humanity alone, it can serve as an ideal and yardstick by which to measure those efforts.[84]

Although the kingdom is the ultimate gift of God, we are not called to idly wait for God to intervene, as if by magic. We are called to work towards the kingdom today, and in this, we experience something of salvation. In small victories of justice for the poor, something of ultimate importance takes place. Sobrino describes this as an experience of finality, or an eschatological experience, in history.[85] In participating in the history of God through work on behalf of the poor, we are able to live now as risen beings. This is a life of freedom and joy. Freedom consists of triumph over selfishness. It is "the greatest freedom of love to serve, without putting limits or standing in the way

[83] Ibid, 14.
[84] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 115.
[85] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 71.

of this love."[86] Joy is triumph over sadness. It is the ability to recognize and love all that is good and positive in the world, even in the midst of all that is not.

Finally, the kingdom of God is understood as coming about despite the opposition of the anti-kingdom. Justice for the poor occurs over and against the oppression of the poor. Because this is true, we can refer to salvation as liberation. Yet the process of liberation is not only a matter of defeating evil, but also of redeeming it. This implies change and transformation. It means "getting to evil at the roots."[87]

In understanding salvation and liberation, Sobrino advocates a turn to the historic Jesus. In turning to the historic Jesus, we learn how humans should approach God. We learn what the kingdom of God means and how to bring it about in history. We learn that it is possible, because Jesus did it. And we learn something of God.

In the life of Jesus, proclamation of the kingdom, and opposition to the anti-kingdom, were absolutely central. Jesus did not preach himself, but the kingdom. He did not ask for belief in his person, but for commitment to the God of life and to God's work in the world. Furthermore, in his commitment to life, Jesus was partial towards the poor and the oppressed, not because of their individual moral status, but simply because they were poor. He worked on behalf of life in a context of oppression, so his work can not be understood as simply beneficence, but rather liberation.[88]

In working for the kingdom, understood as the liberation of the poor, the fundamental basis of Jesus' practice was mercy. He was deeply moved by the suffering of others, and this was the foundation of his praxis. He taught that it was good to tell the truth, to do justice for the victim, and to condemn oppression. He was honest with

[86] Ibid, 81.
[87] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 58.
[88] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 18.

reality, and unmasked the lies that covered the truth of oppression and injustice. He spoke out against all forms of oppression, not because he hated the oppressors, but because he loved the victims, and he loved life. He worked miracles as a way of generating hope, showing that oppressive forces can be beaten. He proved that living a good life is truly possible.[89]

Jesus persisted in announcing hope, denouncing oppression and working on the behalf of justice, even when it led to the cross. Sobrino maintains that the cross was a historic necessity, the natural result of Jesus' life, rather than a divine necessity, willed by God. God did not want Jesus to die on the cross, but God did want him to remain faithful to his message, even to death. Jesus was not pleasing to God because he suffered, but because he lived a life of love to the end. Sobrino explains that in relation to God, Jesus remains the person who is faithful, and while in relation to humans, He was the person who serves.[90] Serving others and faithfulness to God are essentially the same thing, and they are both perfectly embodied in the historic life of Jesus of Nazareth.

In his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus experienced a radical discontinuity with his life. The God whom he experienced as infinite closeness, who he called Abba/Father, now seemed absent. Yet Jesus continued to open himself in complete surrender to his God, even when he could not understand. Sobrino describes Jesus' reaction to the silence of God on the cross as "trust in a God who is Father, and as self-surrender to a Father who is still God, mystery."[91]

Although Sobrino identifies Jesus' fidelity to both God and humans as the ultimate meaning of the cross, he also seems to suggest that suffering has some sort of

[89] Ibid, 89-90.
[90] Ibid, 204.
[91] Ibid, 141.

power to overcome evil. He writes that suffering disarms evil. On the cross, sin was allowed to discharge all its force against Jesus, leaving it without force. On the cross, Jesus could not confirm God's will, but in giving himself up to God, he revealed that faith is total self-surrender to God, and that liberating love is also love with suffering.[92] It was through the power of self-surrender and love for others that Jesus mediated the power of God.

In addition to revealing to humanity how to approach God, Jesus, in his divinity, reveals something about God. Sobrino writes, "On two points, however, Jesus has clarified the mystery of God. First, the greater God appears to him as the lesser God, present in what is poor and little- the silent God on the cross comes later. Second, the mystery of God has ceased to be an enigmatic mystery and has become a luminous mystery in one respect: love. Where human beings exercise true love, there is God."[93] God comes down to humanity, and even more to what is vulnerable and weak in humanity, and is present in love. Jesus witnessed to the truth of God through acts of love, not only in his death on the cross, but throughout his life.

Jesus revealed the truth of how to be human, and allowed us to speak a true word of God. Yet in revealing what it is God requires of us, Jesus also issued a challenge and command. The salvation Jesus brings is not a done-deal, simply requiring our affirmation, but a call to action. Sobrino places great emphasis upon our role in salvation, arguing that the power of God can not be paternalism, acting upon us rather than within us, if it is to be truly transformative. Instead, we must join with God in the

[92] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 99-100.
[93] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 158.

work of our salvation. In our lives, we are called to carry on the hope of the resurrection, giving signs of the kingdom through concrete moments of truth and justice.

This means that we must turn towards the poor and oppressed as the locus of salvation. Sobrino refers to the poor and oppressed as the "crucified people", a term developed by his colleague Ignacio Ellacuria. In using this term, he is attempting to identify the suffering people with the suffering Christ. In addition, he is highlighting the fact that Christ continues to suffer with the people. The intent is not to justify the suffering of innocent people, but to uncover the truth of their suffering, and offer them dignity and respect.

The crucified people bring salvation, Sobrino argues, because, like Christ, they bear the sin of the oppressors on their shoulders, they have the capacity to unmask the lies of the world, they shed light on what utopia should look like, and they offer hope. Sobrino follows Ellacuria in claiming that, simply by existing, the poor have the power to reveal the truth of reality. The wealthy can see their own truth by looking at the pain and suffering they produce. If this does not move the heart and inspire change, then nothing can. Yet the poor do not only manifest the negative reality of oppression, but also the positive reality of humanizing values, such as community over individualism, service over selfishness, and simplicity over opulence. Furthermore, in their refusal to die, their tenacious hope, and their countless martyrs, they prove that hope and love are real and possible.[94]

For the non-poor, salvation comes through participation in the life of the poor. Sobrino insists that the "option for the poor" must be considered the first step in

[94] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 261-263.

becoming human and Christian, not the final goal.[95] In participating in the life of the poor, the wealthy are called to radical honesty with reality. We must acknowledge the enormous amount of suffering and pain in the world, and we must accept responsibility for it. Telling the truth about reality is an important step towards humanization, because it returns dignity to the victims and begins the process of transformation and change. However, telling the truth is not enough; we must also make concrete changes and work to develop social structures and systems that are life-giving. We must become the voice of the voiceless in prophetic condemnation of oppression. We must make the impossible become possible, fighting against the idols of wealth and success, overcoming resignation and despair, and forgetting ourselves as we turn towards others. And we must make the hope of the poor, as the guarantee of life for all, our own hope.

In this way we "bear the burden" of reality, yet we also discover that reality is replete with grace that carries us. The poor and the wealthy begin to work together in solidarity, which Sobrino defines as "unequals bearing one another mutually", and we discover that we are made truly human by each other.[96] Although we sacrifice for one another, we are compelled by love, and it does not seem to be a sacrifice. We give ourselves to the other, not in an annihilation of self but in the ultimate self-fulfillment. I think this is a reality that most of us have experienced in some way. I am reminded of the love I feel for my son, which is beyond anything I have known. I would not hesitate to give my entire self for him, and although my husband and I have had to make certain changes since he came into our lives, we could not call it sacrifice, because loving him

[95] Sobrino, *Where is God?*, 61.
[96] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 62-67.

has expanded our world exponentially. Yet we still retain our own unique identities, which are not merged, but rather articulated and fulfilled in love.

Participating in the life of the poor and working for the kingdom is always a confrontational reality, because it also entails working against the anti-kingdom. Sobrino writes, "Whoever assumes responsibility for the kingdom must be ready to bear the weight of the anti-kingdom. Refusing to see it this way is ingenuous and self-deceiving, and is a great danger for Christians and for the Churches."[97] Working against the anti-kingdom invariably produces persecution. Bearing the burden of sin and persecution, therefore, is a necessary component of salvation. Suffering and pain is a necessary component of salvation.

Yet we can trust in the God of love, revealed to us in Jesus, and believe that ultimately, reality is not meaningless. Sobrino writes beautifully:

> If we walk in history intending to bring the crucified down from the cross, showing kindness to the despised and silenced victims, if we walk humbly and in the silence demanded by the memory of Ivan Karamazov, we can perhaps, inwardly, allow the ultimate mystery, God, to mould our life: And perhaps we can have the hope that at the end of our journey we may meet with this God in the community of the risen. There can be no mere 'doctrine' to cover this. But we can make the experiment of hope being wiser than absurdity.[98]

We can not pretend that the problems of suffering, pain, and injustice have already been answered, or console ourselves by saying it will one day be reconciled. We must learn to live with questions and mystery, and allow ourselves to hear the word of suffering. But we can also walk in history with God, and maybe that will be enough.

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[97] Ibid, 93-94.

[98] Ibid, 108. Ivan Karamoazov is a character in the Dostoevsky's acclaimed work *The Brothers Karamazov*. He maintains that if salvation means the innocent and the guilty enter into the same heaven, without justice, he prefers not to go.

Although Sobrino places great emphasis on the role of human beings in our own salvation, and urges us to turn towards the historic Jesus as a model to follow, he also maintains that the work of salvation is ultimately made possible by God's love. It is the acceptance, love, and forgiveness of God that makes possible our own response. It is not that God's acceptance requires our conversion from death to life; rather God's acceptance compels our conversion, and makes salvation possible.[99]

God is present in the world, Sobrino explains, not in power as it is typically understood, but in hope, love, and solidarity. God is present as the greater God, who triumphs in the resurrection. But God is also present as the lesser God, who is weak and helpless in the face of suffering. Another way of stating this is that God manifests active love, in liberation, and also passive love, in solidarity and suffering.[100]

God suffers on the cross as silent witness. In this presence on the cross, God shows that God is irrevocably near to humanity, and particularly to all that is weak and hurting. In suffering on the cross, God's love becomes credible to human beings. This is particularly important for the oppressed, who may not trust a power that comes only from above, without having first moved among them. God not only understands the suffering of innocent victims, God also has to fight suffering in the human way, by bearing it in solidarity with the children of God. Not only God's love, but also the demand that we follow the path of Jesus, becomes credible. God has been there too.[101]

Yet, mysteriously, God's love is also present as the triumph of the resurrection. God ultimately does justice and vindicates Jesus. The triumph of God in the resurrection is not, for Sobrino, triumph over mortality, but over injustice and suffering. Sobrino

[99] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 90.
[100] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 227.
[101] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 88.

claims that "resurrection of the dead" is a biblical term, differentiated from the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. The resurrection of the dead refers to the total transformation of the person and history; it is hope against, rather than beyond, death and injustice.[102] God brings hope in the resurrection, but it is hope first for the victims. It is only by sharing in that same hope, and in following the path of Jesus, that we also share in the power of the resurrection.[103]

Finally, Sobrino talks about the Spirit as an instigating and enabling power. The power of the Spirit takes us out of ourselves, frees us for others and enables us to call on God. It seems that the Spirit is analogous to the power of the risen Christ. It is the power that brings hope, freedom and joy in following the crucified Jesus.[104]

In my opinion, Sobrino offers a strong theory of how Jesus saves. First and foremost, his theology attempts to place itself in the service of the poor and oppressed. He condemns stubborn refusal to see the truth and/or passive resignation, insisting instead that we take responsibility for reality. This is of urgent importance in today's world, where problems seem so insurmountable it is tempting to retreat from reality and naively claim that it is all in God's plan, or that it is of little consequence because God will one day redeem everything and we will go to heaven. As we pacify ourselves with these cheap consolations, we continue down the path of meaninglessness, and our brothers and sisters continue to suffer and die. In Sobrino's theology, orthopraxis takes precedence over orthodoxy, and there is no cheap grace. In focusing on the following of Jesus and the turn towards the poor, he offers a prophetic call to conversion. Jesus is not,

[102] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 379.
[103] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 44.
[104] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 13.

ultimately, a gift card to be used. He is a leader to follow, a brother to love, and an unexpected power to bear witness to.

In addition, Sobrino strikes a fine balance between retaining the unique beauty and truth of Christianity, and opening the faith up to a religiously plural world. He does not abandon the traditional images, metaphors, and doctrines of the faith, and draws upon many of the primary soteriological models in his work, including Christ the sacrifice, Christus Victor, Abelard/moral influence, and the Crucified God. Christians need not abandon the faith that sustains them, yet he also reminds us that justice for the poor is not a uniquely Christian value. He writes, "Jesus needs be seen not as the monopoly of Christians but as belonging to the current of hope-expressed in religious or secular ways-of humanity, as belonging to the current of solidarity with the suffering of history."[105] In placing orthopraxis at the center of the faith, rather than orthodoxy, Sobrino creates the foundation for an effective ecumenism, in which all God's children may work together for life and justice, regardless of religious belief or background.

Sobrino's is a voice that we who are privileged and wealthy absolutely must listen closely to. Nonetheless, his approach is often too dogmatic. In insisting that humanity is ultimately divided between the oppressor and the oppressed, he ignores the fact that people suffer under multiple oppressions, and may be, to varying degrees, both victimizer and victimized. In addition, his insistence that persecution is the mark of a life lived as a follower of Jesus seems misguided. I hesitate to make this criticism, because his own experience allows him to speak with authority. However, it seems that this approach predicts failure, ruling out the possibility that change and transformation can take place without bloodshed. Furthermore, it encourages martyrdom, suggesting that suffering is

[105] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 75.

the equivalent of God's stamp of approval. Similarly, I object to his claim that suffering has a mysterious power to overcome evil. This is a glorification of suffering and encourages people to embrace their suffering as the only mode of power available to them.

Conclusion

The theology of Jon Sobrino and other Latin American liberation theologians may make us uncomfortable. We are asked to see things that we would rather not see. Our faith, our lives, and our own self-image are called into question, and this is a painful process. Defensiveness and denial come easily. Yet we should interpret his words not as an attack, but as an invitation and opportunity. We are called to participate in reality and are invited to the shared table. We hear a word of judgment, yet we recall that God has also issued a word of love and acceptance. We must listen to these two words simultaneously, and grow into our stature as men and women, God's beloved children.

There are several important points that I adopt from Sobrino's theology in the construction of my own model. First, I agree with his insistence on radical honesty with reality and a subsequent turn towards justice. Second, I make use of his idea of the fidelity of Jesus and God on the cross as central to an understanding of the meaning of the cross. In addition, I echo the idea that, on the cross, God shows God's nearness to humanity. Finally, I accept his idea of God's love as that which compels our conversion and makes it possible.

Part IV: Healing the Wounded Oppressor

Salvation in my own context

In explaining the saving work of Jesus, it is important to treat the entire Christian narrative as a coherent whole. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection can not be viewed as isolated events but rather must be understood as integral parts of the larger narrative structure in which the saving work of God takes place. In the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God enters intimately into human life, uniting God's Self with humanity even in the depths of inhumanity seen on the cross. In this unity God, in Jesus, both transforms the structures of evil in the world and reveals to humanity their true power as beloved children of God, even in their guilt, brokenness and suffering. There are two aspects to the salvation that come through the life of Jesus: the revelatory and the transformative. God, in Jesus, both reveals the truth to humanity and actually transforms God's Self and creation. Human beings are now free to live fully in God's love, participating in the transformation of the world that God has promised in Christ.

It is my view that the primary problem theology must address today is the continued existence of historic suffering. By historic suffering, I am referring not simply to suffering that is concretely and physically located in the world but more specifically to suffering that occurs as the result of decisions and actions made by human beings in time and space. Although I recognize the problems of natural evil, human finitude, and death, it seems that the sheer magnitude and weight of suffering inflicted upon the majority of God's children by structures and acts of oppression cries out for attention. My

theological norm is straightforward; I hope that my theology addresses, in useful and realistic ways, the continued existence of historic suffering. In this respect, I am adopting Sobrino's norm. However, I am writing from my own context which is defined more by guilt, sin, and wealth than by suffering. For this reason, I do not adopt the same oppressor/oppressed binary as Sobrino.[106] In constructing my theology I believe that all four of the traditional sources are important: tradition, scripture, reason, and experience. I will attempt to outline an atonement theology that addresses the contemporary experience of oppression and suffering while remaining faithful to biblical witness and church tradition.

Ongoing historic suffering is the result of individual acts of sin yet also contains a power beyond the individual and one's ability to make conscious choices towards good or evil. The powers of evil that hold humanity in bondage can also be described as systemic evils or corporate sins. This refers to sin and evil that is embedded into the structure of society and includes systems of racism, sexism and class oppression. My use of the word sin refers to humanity's tendency to live as if we are not in communion with God, each other, and creation. Sin is essentially living in a state of willful alienation and all that entails, including culpable ignorance, self-deception, and the use of violence.

Following both Wendy Farley and Dorothee Soelle, I identify blindness, better described as ignorance, as the essential aspect both to sin and bondage to powers of evil.[107] I agree with Sobrino that the injustice perpetrated against the poor and marginalized is the central problem of our time. However, I believe that it is ignorance

[106] This binary is one of the challenges leveled against the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians. Many contemporary L.A. liberation theologians reject this binary as well.
[107] Although both Farley and Soelle make use of the metaphor of blindness, people with disabilities have challenged the use of such language to describe human sinfulness. For that reason, I will use the word ignorance.

that is at the root of this problem. Soelle writes: "The greatest sin of humans is to forget that we are royal children."[108] We forget that God is always and everywhere present with us, despite the forces that would separate us, and we do not know that God loves us. Furthermore, we do not recognize God as ultimate reality. It is because we are ignorant of these truths that we are unable to face our own sin and remain trapped by the powers of evil. The root cause of the human problem is ignorance of God's nearness, love, and the truth of God as ultimate reality.

In our ignorance, we live as if we are alone, alienated from God. Yet human beings, by our very nature, are not meant to exist alone. Just as an infant depends upon the care and love of others for its very survival, we all depend upon the care and love of God. In believing we are separated from God, that the only reality is the harsh truth of history and the only possible redemption a cold calculus of justice, we are thrown into a state of deep existential terror and pain. We no longer seek God, or we attempt to construct our own gods in an effort to reassure ourselves, quiet the terror. We then become addicted to harmful patterns of life in an attempt to ease our pain.

In addition, our ignorance to the reality of God engenders feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. We accept injustice as our natural lot and, overwhelmed by guilt, are unable to address the ways in which we cause it. The structures of evil in which many of us ambiguously participate seem so powerful, large, and difficult to locate that we give up all hope of change.[109] Seeing no way to move forward, guilt becomes unbearable and

[108] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 42.
[109] I am referring to the extent to which we, as citizens of the USA, perpetuate and benefit from systems of racism, sexism and class oppression both through our consumer choices and our willingness to passively maintain the status quo. I use the word ambiguous because most of us have no desire to harm anyone. To the contrary, we often want to help, yet we find that a great number of people are harmed through the life-style we maintain. We all find ourselves entwined in these structures of evil as a simple fact of our social existence.

we shut down, refusing to feel the reality of unjust suffering and death in our world. We refuse to acknowledge, for example, that our standard of living and rate of consumption is leaving our brothers and sisters throughout the world with inadequate food and shelter and quickly depleting the world's resources. Alternatively, we rely upon our own rage and attempt to create the changes we deem necessary in the world through the demonic use of power as violence, seen, for example, in some revolutionary movements.

Although humanity is trapped by the passions and powers of evil, there is also a willful refusal to acknowledge the truth, which Sobrino identifies as a central component of sin and the civilization of wealth. I agree with Sobrino that willful ignorance (as one manifestation of willful alienation) is a central aspect of sin. However, unlike Sobrino, I do not believe that we refuse to acknowledge the truth because we are selfish and unwilling to change our standard of living. Rather it is because recognizing it requires one to undergo the painful process of reevaluating one's own self-image, life decisions, and worldview. It requires honest self-assessment and the willingness to accept less than flattering truths about oneself. In addition, it requires one to face old wounds and deal with the painful aspects of the past. We are only able to undergo this process if we have a strong and stable sense of self-worth. This is not the same as self-esteem, in the common sense of the word. It is not important that we think we are smart or good-looking or athletic. It is important that we know we are incredibly valuable because we are children of God. It is the knowledge of God's love that gives us the strength to recognize the truth, even if it is ugly.

In addition to being ignorant of God's love, we are also ignorant of the fact of God as ultimate reality. I define salvation as the ability to live and struggle as free

people, at peace in relationship with God and creation. This freedom necessarily includes concrete actions aimed at mitigating historic suffering, actions taken in the confidence that even the smallest contribution towards life is of ultimate value. Yet this confidence comes from security in a loving God as the final word for all of history and reality, security that arises out of the resurrection. Colin Gunton writes "The past victory is guarantee of a future consummation and the locus of a present struggle."[110] It is the knowledge of God's ultimate victory that gives us the strength to shun demonic uses of power, recognize our own sin, and take action towards salvation in this world, even when our actions seem insignificant and inconsequential.

Despite the fact that my view of salvation involves a concrete change in worldview and way of life for human beings, God is the one who both initiates and completes our salvation. Like Marit Trelstad, I affirm God's absolute decision to be with and for all of creation. I appreciate her concept of God's absolute decision to be with human beings as the locus of our salvation. We are saved, in a sense, because nothing can separate us from the love of God**.** God has made an eternal decision to be with and for the world, both in creation and still more in the incarnation. God comes closer to us not just on the cross, but in the entire experience of the incarnation. By drawing near, God completes our salvation regardless of human decision. God is near whether we want God or not.

God, in God's ultimate love, strives to draw ever nearer, overcoming our misperceptions and sense of alienation. In the incarnation, God's love becomes comprehensible and credible to human beings in God's assumption of vulnerability. In God's everlasting decision to be with creation, God chooses to love in the way that is

[110] Coin Gunton, *The Acutality of Atonement* (Eidinburgh: T & T *Clark*, 1989), 81.

comprehensible to human beings, the only way we know how to love, as vulnerable, finite creatures and thus open to the possibility of suffering as a result of our love. It is Jurgen Moltmann's insight that if God could not suffer, could not be affected by others, God could not love.[111] Sobrino also speaks of the cross as the event in which God's love becomes credible to human beings, in the sense that God shows God's Self as a God who moves within and amongst the people, rather than a power that imposes itself from above. Furthermore, Sobrino asserts that on the cross God fights evil in the human way, by bearing it, thereby legitimizing the demand that we do the same.

My understanding of the meaning of the cross is very similar to that of Sobrino. However, there are important differences. For me, the point is not that God has shown that God must fight suffering in the human way, but that God has made an absolute decision to be with and for humanity, whatever the cost. It is only after we have come to truly and deeply understand this that we can begin to recognize the truths of reality, repent, and move towards new life. In addition, I disagree with Sobrino that because God, in Jesus, endured the cross, it is now reasonable to demand that we also endure our own crosses. God does not desire a cross for anyone. Furthermore, God does not reveal on the cross that the way to fight evil is by bearing it, as Sobrino maintains. God fights evil not on the cross, but through the entire life of Jesus; God endures the cross because it is part of the incarnation.[112] From my perspective, it is not the cross that makes God's

[111] Jurgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God" in *Cross Examinations*, Marit Trelstad, ed, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2006), 131.

[112] The saving work of Jesus' life can be described in multiple ways, which is well beyond the scope of this paper. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel describes it as the disruption of the patriarchal order through the creation of a community of equals (Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jurgen Moltmann, *Passion for God: Theology in Two Voices*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, 33). Delores Williams writes of Jesus' conquering of evil forces in the temptation narratives (Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption" in *Cross Examinations*, Marit Trelstad, ed.)

love credible, but rather the incarnation. If Jesus did not die on the cross, God's love would still have become credible and comprehensible in God's assumption, through the incarnation, of vulnerability and the human experience.[113]

God did not intend or desire the cross, yet God, in all three persons of the Trinity, made the decision to open God's Self to the possibility of the cross in the incarnation. The fact of the cross is both a tragic murder and the ultimate indictment of human evil and sin. Yet it is also on the cross that the ultimacy of God's desire for humankind is revealed. Even when confronted with the depths of human evil and suffering, God does not back down or rescind from the decision to be with and for us. God does not back out of the incarnation because it entails the cross. Suffering and oppressed humanity is assured that God is there in the midst of trial, suffering alongside God's beloved children. God stands alongside the victims of history in concrete, physical solidarity. God knows the truth of suffering and cannot, therefore, ignore their pain.

God also stands by the oppressors and perpetrators of evil by refusing to abandon relationship with them, while at the same time bearing witness to the reality of evil and oppression. God intimately knows the depth of the pain they inflict and will not whitewash the truth of evil. In bearing witness to evil on the cross and proclaiming the reign of justice in the incarnation, God stands against perpetrators. Yet in standing against them, God is also for them. God does not give up on anyone; there is nothing one

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while Colin Gunton focuses on Jesus' refusal to use power demonically (Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*, Eidinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989, 58)

[113] Although other faith traditions certainly affirm the love of God without the incarnation, I maintain the importance of the incarnation for the Christian tradition. God loves in ways that are comprehensible to human beings. Yet God is still God, and incomprehensible to humans. The incarnation helps us bridge that gap. Affirming this as an important Christian insight does not deny the fact that others also recognize, and speak of, God's love in different ways.

can do to separate oneself from God's love. God knows our evil and still chooses to engage us. This is a source of hope and the locus of new life.

Similarly, we can also speak about the cross from the perspective of Jesus' action. Just as God must remain faithful even to the cross, Jesus also must remain faithful to both God and humanity. If either side failed or backed down, deeper union and the transformative power of the resurrection would not be possible. In addressing Jesus' death on the cross, I follow Sobrino in identifying his continued fidelity to God and his commitment to participation in the Trinity as the locus of his saving work. Jesus did not desire the cross or see it as in any way necessary. He was committed to living life in the reality of God, a reality that is based on love, justice and non-violence. When this path led to the cross, to destruction at the hands of the powers of sin and evil, Jesus remained faithful to his commitment. In this sense, the cross is both necessary and dispensable. It was not necessary that the cross occur for Jesus to live a life fully committed to God. Yet when the world thrust the cross upon him, it was necessary that Jesus undergo it rather than revoking his commitment to love and non-violent resistance, for to revoke that commitment would be to revoke his participation in the reality of God as Trinity. In refusing to back down on this commitment, Jesus allowed the human experience to enter fully into the transformative power of God, winning a decisive victory over the powers of sin and evil. Jesus won this victory in time and history, yet the transformative experience entered into God as an eternal reality.

In the incarnation of Jesus, God's Self takes on an experience that allows for deeper identification with creation. In moving into the vulnerability of the incarnation and the subsequent experience of life and the cross, God did experience an objective

change in God's Self, in addition to bringing about an objective change in creation. This is the transformative aspect of the salvation brought by Jesus. However, I also affirm that this is a revelation of the way God always is. Alan Lewis writes, "God's way of being eternal involves that forward movement characteristic of temporal existence, though in God's time the past is not lost nor the future unreachable."[114] God chooses to make way for time and history and allows for the possibility of change; this is consistent both with who God is and God's eternal decision to be with creation. However, God remains, at the same time, beyond history. In the incarnation and cross, suffering and finitude enter into God in a new, more complete way, yet that experience is eternally a part of God. It does not seem to me to be of great importance to identify, as Moltmann does, the particular way in which God the Mother/Father experiences the suffering of the cross. It is enough simply to know that God, in the Trinity, assumes the experience of suffering. I believe that it is important to note, however, that it is not only on the cross that God takes on experiences allowing deeper identification with humanity. All experiences of life are important.

In identifying more closely with humanity in the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus, God refuses to allow us to believe we are alone. God is absolutely with humanity, not in a purely abstract or metaphysical sense, but in real, concrete ways that we can easily apprehend. This addresses one of the root causes of our pain and sin: ignorance of God's nearness and love. In God's ultimate identification with humanity, we are offered access to the truth of God's presence and love. We are offered the possibility of healing.

[114] Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 189.

God does not, however, enter intimately into creation only in order to assume the experience of suffering and exist more deeply with humanity in their pain. God is capable of transforming the forces of sin and the powers of evil. This is revealed in the resurrection. The resurrection is the flagship event whereby God reveals that the ultimate end of creation is existence in God. In the resurrection God raised Jesus to new and eternal life. Knowing that we also are children of God, we are given the same hope. We will be raised to life in union with God, but in a way that completes, rather than annihilates, our identities. This addresses the second root cause of our pain and sin: blindness to the truth of God as ultimate reality. In the knowledge that life in God is the ultimate reality, humanity is freed from powerlessness and fear. The oppressed are validated in the rightness of their claims for truth, justice and life. Oppressors are offered the possibility of moving forward, of moving beyond guilt, in realizing that God's power is capable of transforming even the grossest injustice. Furthermore, God is the God of the living and the dead, and there remains the possibility of healing even for what has passed; it is not pointless to repent past injustice. In this way, all of humanity is empowered to address the continuing crimes of historic suffering.

Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that the power of God over evil revealed in the cross and resurrection is not the triumphant and victorious kind of which we dream. God did not miraculously intervene to prevent the events of Good Friday just as God did not miraculously intervene at Auschwitz and does not seem to be doing so in Darfur or Iraq. In refusing to use coercive and violent power over and against humanity, God is subjected to suffering at the hands of sin and evil and we are promised no easy escape route. God and humanity suffer, yet the love of God proves greater and ultimately

prevails. Human responsibility is real and the journey our world takes is, largely, in our own hands. Yet we know that God will take that journey with us, lovingly working on the side of life and justice. God will see the long story of history through to the end. God will faithfully challenge, call, compel, and empower us until we repent and turn towards life. God will not rest until creation rests in God; this is the ultimate truth and reality of our world.

This is a statement of faith. However, it is not merely wishful thinking. What I know of God from ordinary experiences and small resurrections leads me to believe the ultimacy of God's love is true. I believe this because angry and terror stricken cancer patients somehow learn to face death with courage and love. I believe it because arrogant and materialistic middle-aged men give up their belongings and dedicate themselves to social justice work. I believe it because borderline and suicidal psychiatric patients become loving and reliable mental health counselors. I view these small victories as signs of God's ultimate victory, because I believe in the hope of the resurrection.

Although God has definitively accomplished our salvation through Jesus, we also have an important role to play. God has made an eternal decision to be with and for humanity, a decision that has been fulfilled and accomplished in the life of Jesus. This is the ultimate reality. Yet we do not exist only within ultimate reality but also within specific, limited, and historic reality, and it is here that we must live out the truth of God's salvation. If we do not acknowledge our salvation and turn toward God, it is not real for us in our historic being.

Helmut Gollwitzer writes "The unilateral *chesed*[115]-- whether it is that of the Creator, of the covenant God, or of the forgiving Redeemer-- always seeks reciprocity. Indeed its whole purpose is to seek the reciprocity, the chesed answer of the human partner; this is the 'true object of the covenant,' for it is identical with the good and true life of man."[116] God has saved us, yet we may choose to ignore this salvation, to live as if we are in isolation, enslaved by the forces of sin, guilt, and powerlessness. Alternatively, we may choose to live in the confidence of God with us. In this choice we allow ourselves to live the truth of God's salvation, to live the "good and true life".

Living this truth does not imply that we live in paradise and it most certainly does not mean that we accept the free ticket into heaven. Yet it does mean that we live in peace, as free people in relationship to God. It means that we begin a path of union with God, that we begin to see the world as God sees it and desire the wholeness that God desires. It involves repentance for the evil we have committed and continue to commit, repentance that goes beyond apology and seeks change and reconciliation. It also involves healing the wounds that have been inflicted upon us.

In God's salvation, we are free to claim our true selves as children of God, a theme Cynthia Crysdale elaborates upon in her book *Embracing Travail*. In claiming our true selves, we must embrace both the ways we are crucified and crucifiers. Crysdale writes, "To embrace the travail of discovering oneself as victim as well as perpetrator is perhaps humanly impossible but can occur within the embrace of a loving God."[117] In embracing these truths about our own identity, we are empowered to move beyond guilt,

[115] The Hebrew word for God's steadfast love.
[116] Helmut Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, translated by David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 166.
[117] Cynthia Crysdale, *Embracing Travail,* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 89.

hopelessness and powerlessness. We allow ourselves to participate in God's grief over suffering, pain and sin, grief that does not lead to hopelessness but inspires new life.[118] We mourn both the ways we have been hurt and the ways we have hurt others. We are empowered by the reality of God's presence with us to see what needs changing within ourselves and to struggle for life, even when it seems impossible.

As we struggle to live the truth of God's salvation, we are aided by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can be understood as the inexpressible and undefined power that animates human life: the insight that whispers in quiet reflection, the Presence which envelopes and supports in times of pain and confusion, or the holy fire that fills those struggling for justice and truth. The Spirit is also a way to name that which creates connections across time and space, holding each one of us in the web of life. This function of the Spirit is clearly visible in the effects that words written five thousand years ago have on life today, yet goes far beyond the simple passing on of knowledge. It is the real but mystical connection with the dead that aids us on our path to live life fully in God. It is the reality that just as the past influences the present, the present changes the meaning of the past. For Christians, it is the power that allows us to claim Jesus as important for our lives. These are simply a few of my own words, and do not begin to exhaust the meaning, power, or role of the Spirit. The Spirit is the power of God in the world and expresses the myriad ways God continues to work on our behalf.

In looking honestly at ourselves and our world, we know that there is much to mourn. We see dead children and wailing mothers. We see people living in the midst of crushing poverty or violence. We see thousands of young people sent off to war. We see them returning in body bags. We see them returning to ghostly lives in nursing wards,

[118] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 204.

where they are fed through tubes and turned every two hours to prevent bed sores, cared for by nurses who know that, in truth, they are attending the dead. Or we realize the still more dreadful fact that we do not seem to see these realities. Yet we know that despite all this, God has eternally chosen to be with and for humanity, a choice made concrete and complete in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God has affirmed to the utmost God's desire for covenantal relationship with humanity. The resurrection has revealed that God is ultimate reality and all things finally exist within God. God is always with us and it is only in this knowledge that we can, however tentatively, begin to speak of hope.

Conclusion

In examining a number of soteriological models, both traditional and contemporary, we have seen how the dominant penal substitution/satisfaction model alone cannot possibly encompass the richness and depth of the Christian tradition. Furthermore, we have seen that when it becomes the one and final "answer" to the meaning of Jesus' life and death, it ceases to be life-giving and instead stifles and oppresses the believer. Both feminist and liberation theologians have offered convincing critiques of this model. However, in de-centering, rather than demolishing, the model we are able to retain what is valuable within it, while no longer allowing it to dictate the meaning and worth of both the Christian tradition and our own lives.

In exposing ourselves to a variety of models, we open room for new insight. Each model has articulated, in different ways, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Christus Victor demonstrates that God is on the side of life, fighting evil through the incarnation of Jesus. It takes evil seriously, urging and demanding a confrontational

stand against the powers of evil. The penal substitution/satisfaction model recognizes the human reality of guilt and the need for forgiveness. Furthermore, it assures us that God will stop at nothing in God's work on our behalf. The moral influence model urges us to respond to the suffering of Jesus on the cross and the continued suffering of all God's children. The mystical tradition connects us to a current of hope and life, running through a history of darkness, while the model of the Crucified God emphasizes God's nearness and solidarity with humanity.

The feminist models remind us that the reality of God's love and nearness is the locus of healing and salvation. Rita Brock emphasizes the extent to which God's love and power are manifested through relationships of love and mutuality. Wendy Farley helps us recognize the roots of our destructive behavior and understand how we are trapped by our ignorance of God's love and presence. These women take sin seriously, yet also understand the pain and hurt that often lies at the bottom of sin. They urge us to open our hearts to God and begin the work of salvation.

Jon Sobrino issues a prophetic word of condemnation, but also a word of hope. He reminds us that God is a God of justice, and insists that we pay attention, in our theology and our lives, to the suffering and death of God's children. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, which is both promise and demand. It is demand in that God asks we give our lives to work on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized. It is promise in that through giving ourselves over to this work, we are given true life. Salvation is understood as justice for the poor and life for the crucified. God calls all of us to participate in this justice and life; we are all offered a seat at God's table.

By broadening the language used to talk about salvation in Jesus, we are freed to more fully approach God through Christ. We recognize that we will never be able to fully comprehend or articulate the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, much less the truth of God. God, even in nearness, remains mystery. Yet we also know that God seeks to be known, and we affirm that, through Jesus, we have been given a true word of love. As we continue to live our faith, rooted in the Christian tradition, we must struggle to live up to that word. Our theology will continue to change and grow, yet it must remain rooted in the word of love, and lead to life.

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