

THE CROSS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:
TWO THESES IN CONVERSATION WITH RECENT LITERATURE
(2000–2007)

JASON B. HOOD

The significance of the cross in the NT and in Christian theology makes the cross a perennial target of scholarly and popular texts, particularly among evangelicals. An exploration of books on the cross published from 2000 to 2007 uncovers two aspects of the cross in the NT which are neglected in a number of works. This article does not constitute a full and adequate review of the texts in question. Rather, it is intended to function as an exploration of two significant gaps in response to recent study of the biblical message of the cross. In particular these theses are presented with the intent of highlighting intriguing angles for scholars as well as pastors concerned with “the state of the question,” particularly that which is often missing in evangelical and Reformed literature. Books published since the turn of the millennium will function as the primary conversation partners for the present article.

While the two proposals presented below fall under the umbrella of the cross in the NT, for the benefit of Linnaean readers, I will associate each proposal with one primary field of study: systematic theology or practical theology. Both of these fields function as a seed-bed for one particular aspect of the cross that is often neglected or misinterpreted in recent literature. In this respect, the present article transgresses the tidy boundaries of the collective theological establishment. At the outset I wish to acknowledge fully the significant limitations and increased possibility of errors in such a broad investigation.

I. *Systematic Theology: Penal Substitutionary Atonement*

Surely it is no surprise that systematic theology is the dominant category of discourse for books published on the cross, nor is it a surprise that penal substitution is the most discussed and debated aspect of the cross. The first of the two theses is as follows: *The biblical doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement is the most assailed, most controversial, and most assured result of recent work on the cross.*

The earliest book in the time frame in which we are interested, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* by Joel Green and Mark Baker, began the third millennium with an assault on penal substitution in 2000, followed by books by Denny Weaver and Anthony Bartlett in 2001. The assault is still going strong, with

Jason B. Hood is scholar-in-residence at Christ UMC, Memphis, Tenn., and teaches at the Memphis Center for Urban Theological Studies.

2006 alone witnessing offerings from David Brondos, Mark Heim, Larry Shelton, Marit Trelstad, and Vitor Westhelle—all of which challenge penal substitutionary atonement.¹

In the assault on the doctrine, challenges are raised from a number of areas of theological inquiry. From an exegetical perspective, Shelton incorporates some of the insights of the Ph.D. dissertation on *hilasterion* by Daniel Bailey,² which presents arguments for the “mercy seat” interpretation in distinction from either the classic interpretations of Dodd (expiation) or Morris (propitiation).³ Another possible tact, illustrated by Shelton and dissected by Steve Holmes, is reliance upon philosophical objections, particularly the allegedly skewed view of God’s love in the association of divine love with divine violence.⁴ A similar, third challenge comes under the rubric of ethics, where it is claimed that the alleged mimetic impact produced by the violent nature of the atonement renders penal substitution morally dubious. A fourth category of objection simply states that penal substitution is a relatively late historical innovation beginning with

¹ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000); Anthony Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001); J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle’s Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006); Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). See also Stephen Finlan, *Problems with the Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2005); and Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2007), both of which build on the author’s dissertation, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Academia Biblica 19; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). For comparison of positions on atonement, see James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006). Some challengers draw on René Girard; for an introduction to Girard’s theories and their correlation to atonement theory, see Brian McDonald, “Violence and the Lamb Slain: An Interview with René Girard,” *Touchstone* 16 (December 2003): n.p., Online: <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-10-040-i> (accessed 26 November 2008); and S. Mark Heim, “Visible Victim: Christ’s Death to End Sacrifice,” *The Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, 19-23.

² Daniel P. Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25” (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1999).

³ Simon Gathercole cautiously analyzes the current debate (“The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21 [2003]: 161-62; the article is reprinted in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11 [2007]: 64-73).

⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, “Can Punishment Bring Peace? Penal Substitution Revisited,” *SJT* 58 (2005): 104-23. Hans Boersma, under the influence of Miroslav Volf, holds that violence is in some sense necessary (*Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004]). Taking a very different track, Paul Wells argues that penal substitution in “the atonement, despite appearances, shows that victory occurs by means of *non-violence*” (*Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement* [Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2006], 22; emphasis added). Ironically, Boersma moderates the doctrine of penal substitution while Wells defends and centralizes it.

Anselm.⁵ Fifth, missional relevance is cited by Green and Baker and Shelton as one important reason to reject penal substitution, which they regard as an inappropriate “Western” model. Finally, a sixth objection suggests that penal substitution has no role in the redemptive narrative(s) or story on which the NT relies.⁶

With one exception, these points and others have been adequately addressed elsewhere.⁷ The final challenge requires brief comment. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach as well as Bolt⁸ rightly show that an appreciation for the redemptive historical underpinnings of the cross in the NT increases (rather than decreases) penal substitutionary aspects of the NT message of the cross. The background of covenant disobedience and curses within the narrative of covenant, exile and judgment, and redemption suggests that an emphasis on covenant and Israel’s story buttresses rather than repudiates penal substitution.⁹ As Vanhoozer notes, narrative themes of covenant (including covenant disobedience and its consequences) and exile are “both penal and interpersonal” matters. The implications of this fact are clear: a redemptive historical or “narrative” approach to the cross’s significance in the biblical story may rely less on nineteenth-century legal processes than that purportedly found in Hodge’s articulation, but in the end description of such atonement should be no less “penal.”¹⁰ The same could be said when addressing shame (a prominent theme in Green and Baker) and the absence of God’s presence (prominent in Shelton). One suspects that presuppositions and exegesis proper frequently drive scholarly conclusions *regardless of methodology*, with the latter merely a vehicle for one’s theological preferences. The heaping up of shame on God’s people and the

⁵ Brondos appears to hold this position. Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach do not place Anselm in the penal substitutionary camp while noting that the roots of this doctrine run very deep into the early Greek and Latin church fathers (*Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2007]); their perspective on Anselm is shared by Holmes, “Can Punishment Bring Peace?”; and Boersma, *Violence and Hospitality*, 158. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, agree with Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach in seeing the roots of penal substitution existing long before Anselm.

⁶ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, uses “covenant” to explain reconciliation in redemptive historical categories, contra penal substitutionary atonement. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross*, denies that the cross actually “accomplishes” anything. He derives an “early Jewish story” in the NT from the work of N. T. Wright and others, then critiques alternative “stories” of the cross—including those held by Wright, although Brondos does not note this fact, “The Cross and the Caricatures: A Response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John, and a new volume entitled *Pierced for Our Transgressions*,” Online: <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070423wright.cfm?doc=205> (accessed 10 July 2008).

⁷ See esp. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*; Wells, *Cross Words*; Holmes, “Can Punishment Bring Peace?”; Gathercole, “The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement.”

⁸ Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel* (NSBT 20; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004).

⁹ Contra Shelton, though he at least notes we are saved from “wrath” (*Cross and Covenant*, 108-12). On exile and the cross, see Boersma, *Violence and Hospitality*, 174-77.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives; Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (ed. C. E. Hill and F. R. James III; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 397, 399.

removal of God's presence are in fact aspects of the wrath of divine justice, and cannot be placed opposite the "penal" aspects of the cross; they are part and parcel of the punishment borne by Jesus on the cross.

In brief the critics have failed to sustain the case against penal substitution. As cited above, the return volley has been voluminous, with many a scholar turning out a book or essay defending the message of the cross as traditionally understood by many evangelicals. The defense of penal substitution has been effectively accomplished by the flood of recent texts pitched at a variety of levels: for Reformed and Arminian and those in between, for scholarly and popular audiences, for exegetes, pastors, and philosophers. The failure to mount a successful attack on penal substitution stems perhaps in part from the fact that no comprehensive attack on the doctrine has been presented, notwithstanding battles pitched over a number of points.¹¹

Yet other points remain open for debate. In the first instance, the tendency to focus upon this one area of controversy has masked or mitigated important aspects of the cross, particularly in popular literature where the books in question often fail to integrate fully the sweep of the biblical perspective on the cross. The gratitude we owe scholars and popular authors engaged in the necessary works of systematic explorations and polemical responses to challenges must be tempered by knowledge that other aspects of the cross and the atonement are far too often missing in evangelical treatments. This is not to say that an essay or book dealing with only one aspect of the cross is an illegitimate or problematic exercise; scholarship demands such focused investigation, particularly when challenges to key doctrines arise. But Marshall's book title has it exactly right: what is particularly needed at the present time are scholarly studies and Christian appropriation of aspects, plural, of the atonement and the cross.¹² Similarly Derek Tidball and John Stott both strike a helpful balance by presenting various aspects of the cross in the NT.¹³ These authors defend penal substitution while also approaching a full-orbed examination of the NT's presentation of the cross.

¹¹ This lack of deep interaction is also suggested by Holmes, "Can Punishment Bring Peace?" 104-5. For instance, to my knowledge no opponent of penal substitution approaches the depth of I. Howard Marshall's paper presented at the Evangelical Alliance U.K. symposium on the atonement, "The Theology of the Atonement," available at <http://evangelicalarminians.org/node/222> and elsewhere on the web (accessed 28 July 2008).

¹² I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2008). Scot McKnight colorfully suggests that as one pulls different clubs from a golf bag depending on the location of one's ball on the golf course, so different aspects of atonement may be employed at different times as needed (*A Community Called Atonement* [Living Theology; Nashville: Abingdon, 2007]).

¹³ Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001); and the 20th-anniversary edition of John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006). In a 2001 interview with Art Lindsley of the C. S. Lewis Institute, Stott noted that *The Cross of Christ* was in his view the most important of his many books, not least because it addressed not just the atonement, but also the implications of the cross for the Christian way of life (Online: http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/sites/www.cslewisinstitute.org/files/webfm/knowning_doing/StottInterview.pdf [accessed 15 December 2008]).

It is of course possible to turn the need to account for depth and diversity into an inappropriate objection, utilizing it as a reason to overlook or marginalize penal substitution.¹⁴ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach counter the objection that penal substitution is “not the only model,” and that therefore it can essentially be bypassed or downplayed. They opine that they themselves “have never read a proponent of penal substitution who claims that penal substitution is the *only* motif connected with atonement in the Scriptures.”¹⁵ Certainly this is a successful parry of uninformed and hostile objections to penal substitution, and Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach are right to warn of the dangers of mitigating or abandoning penal substitution.

But on closer inspection, one notes that various aspects of the cross are in fact being neglected on a wide scale in popular and scholarly Reformed and evangelical literature in favor of an emphasis on penal substitution. R. C. Sproul, for instance, helpfully addresses reconciliation and *Christus Victor*, but these aspects are limited to but one chapter, and others are ignored completely. One can safely say that Sproul’s audience is almost certainly ignorant of non-penal aspects of the cross; one might wish to see these grouped together and covered in more than approximately 9 percent of the book’s content.¹⁶ And others, particularly popular writers, are far less comprehensive even than Sproul. At the risk of generalizing, American writers appear to be slightly less interested in speaking widely on the cross (unless one includes those interested in rejecting penal substitution wholesale); this theme will be addressed in the following section of this article. However, the Steve Chalke-induced debate in the United Kingdom now appears to be steering dialogue in a more polemical direction, which invariably limits the focus of study to the points of contention.¹⁷

Secondly, the biblical basis for penal substitution is solid, yet there remains some lack of clarity on what does and does not constitute penal substitution. Critics tend to focus on antiquated or caricatured models.¹⁸ Marshall proposes that one can find it in short shrift in Gal 3:13: “Jesus bears the curse of God on our behalf. If that is not penal substitution I do not know what it is.”¹⁹ Gathercole gives an abbreviated argument solely on the basis of Rom 8:3.²⁰ McKnight takes a similar, short view of penal substitution on the basis of Rom 5:17.²¹

¹⁴ This is one possible effect of McKnight’s “bag of clubs.” The metaphor relies on one’s ability to read the “course” rightly. But who is to say whether we need greater awareness of God’s wrath against sin (more “woods”) or more consciousness of the reconciling power of the cross in our relationship with others (“irons”)?

¹⁵ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 208-10; quote appears on 210.

¹⁶ Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2007).

¹⁷ As suggested by the content of recent volumes by Wells; Jeffery, Ovey and Sach; and David Peterson, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2001).

¹⁸ See particularly Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 142-52, who focus on Hodge while neglecting to engage sophisticated recent treatments (e.g., Stott, *The Cross of Christ*).

¹⁹ Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, note spanning pp. 53-54.

²⁰ Gathercole, “The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement,” 161.

²¹ McKnight, *Community*, 113.

Moreover, the freight carried by the word atonement itself is unclear.²² Green and Baker define atonement as “the saving significance of Jesus’ death.”²³ McKnight’s text, *A Community Called Atonement*, opens the door to a wider use of “atonement” inclusive of Christian action, arguably running the risk of bleeding theological content from the term. There is also disagreement over the extent to which one should emphasize the active or passive, personal or impersonal, emotional or (more strictly) judicial nature of God’s wrath and punishment. This state of affairs leaves the impression that a definition of atonement longer than one-half sentence could be rejected by many.

Finally, there is lack of clarity or agreement regarding the question of the centrality of one aspect or theory of the divine work of the cross. For Marshall it is reconciliation.²⁴ Boersma offers recapitulation.²⁵ McKnight proposes “*identification for incorporation*.”²⁶ For others it can only be penal substitution.²⁷ Peter Bolt makes a credible case for seeing penal substitutionary atonement in Mark’s narrative.²⁸ On the other hand, Joel Green advocates avoiding such claims to locate one particular “center.”²⁹

In summary, challenges to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement on a variety of grounds fail to persuade. Some writers neglect the potency and the exegetical and historical depth of penal substitution. Others err in an opposite direction, failing to observe the breadth of the cross’s significance in categories other than penal substitution. The next section investigates one such category.

II. *Practical Theology: The Cross and Self-Sacrificial Suffering*

Moving beyond the category of systematic theology, the cross is also relevant in practical theology, particularly as a model for self-sacrificial suffering. This aspect of the NT’s message of the cross may be variously identified as *imitatio Christi*, the way of the cross, cross-bearing, suffering for the sake of Christ and his kingdom, or following in the sacrificial footsteps of Christ. The second thesis of this article is as follows: *The biblical teaching on the imitation of the crucified Christ is the most neglected aspect of recent work on the NT message of the cross.* This neglect is particularly acute among works produced in Reformed and evangelical circles.

²² Contemporary controversy highlights the lack of clarity: in the recent fallout in the British evangelical world, Wright has insisted Steve Chalke does in fact believe in penal substitution; see Wright, “Cross and Caricatures.”

²³ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 36.

²⁴ Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 132.

²⁵ Boersma, *Violence and Hospitality*, 113.

²⁶ McKnight, *Community*, 107-8; emphasis original.

²⁷ See Tidball, *Message of the Cross*, 29, for examples; cf. M. Meynell, *Cross Examined: The Life-Changing Power of the Death of Jesus* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001), 108; Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 210-11, citing Ovey, “The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament,” in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 100-135.

²⁸ Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance*.

²⁹ Joel B. Green, “Death of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 146-63.

For the sake of clarity, correlation of the cross with suffering requires the forging of a distinction between “common suffering” and “missional suffering.” By the former, I mean the sort of suffering usually addressed by scholars under the rubric of the problem of suffering, or in simple terms, the bad things that naturally occur in our bodies, our relationships, and the natural world around us. Particularly in the domain of Reformed theology and pastoral application, one often finds suffering correlated with the biblical teaching on the cross, via such passages as Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28, which offer evidence of God’s sovereignty over all suffering. The biblical presentation of the cross is certainly ripe for rich, multifaceted, pastoral application, as various authors have shown.³⁰

In any event, a focus merely on common suffering is not a major point of interest in the NT’s teaching on the cross and its significance for Christian suffering. Such common suffering must be distinguished from *missional suffering*, the latter term being reserved for suffering that incarnates and actualizes the self-sacrifice Jesus requires of any who would follow him, the suffering that endures discomfort or duress for his sake and the sake of his kingdom.³¹ Jesus and his cross are presented as a model for imitation, and many NT passages model or command the engagement of believers in mimetic, self-sacrificial suffering for the kingdom and for others after his pattern, particularly in his crucifixion. These passages include the following: Mark 8:31-38; 9:30-35; 10:32-45 (and parallels); John 13:12-17, 34-35; 15:12-13; Acts 20:33-35; Rom 8:17; 15:1-7; 1 Cor 4:8-17; 8:13-9:27; 10:31-11:1; 15:30-32; 2 Cor 1:3-10; 4:7-18; 5:14-15; 6:3-12; 8:9; 11:23-12:18; 13:3-4; Gal 5:24; 6:14, 17; Eph 5:1-2, 25-28; the whole of Philippians, especially 2:1-11; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:5-6; 2 Thess 3:7-10; 2 Timothy as a whole; Heb 12:1-4; 1 Pet 2:21-23; 1 John 3:16-18. The imitation of Jesus, above all in the cross, consistently arises as one of the NT’s primary applications of the meaning of the cross. Such cross-shaped missional suffering in the pattern of Jesus must be regarded as a crucial component for teaching the NT’s message of the cross.³²

The importance of living and obeying the message of the cross is underscored in numerous places, particularly in Paul’s summary of his ministry for the Ephesian elders (Acts 20); in his instruction to Timothy; and in his example for the Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians. While Paul surely taught many things “everywhere in every church,” only once does he explicitly use those words to

³⁰ See Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Justin Taylor and John Piper, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006); and various articles in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Summer 2000).

³¹ Of course, one’s response to “common suffering” could also function missionally.

³² It seems best to avoid labeling cruciform imitation “atonement” (as is done with Abelard’s moral influence theory, neither unrelated nor identical to cruciformity; see Boersma, *Violence and Hospitality*, chs. 5, 9). Cruciformity is properly practical theology, and the resulting separation from systematic theology helps fence the unique work of Jesus from the work of his followers. Cf. McKnight (*Community*, 30): “Thus, atonement is not just something done to and for us, *it is something we participate in—in this world, in the here and now.*” There are important parallels between Christ’s atonement and our mimetic suffering (Col 1:24; 2 Cor 8:9; 12:14), but blending the nomenclature of “atonement” in this way is potentially confusing and thus unhelpful. However, McKnight is to be commended for addressing the ethical and behavioral consequences of Jesus’ death for the church.

spell out for his readers such a *sine qua non* (1 Cor 4:17). For teachers and ministers in circles dominated by systematic theological concerns, it is instructive that this teaching is not a doctrine, but Paul's cruciform way of life, the résumé of death he never seems to tire of repeating (1 Cor 4:8-16).³³ Because they have forgotten this teaching, which is to say they are not living according to the pattern Paul himself laid down, Timothy is being sent back to "remind" them of Paul's "ways in Christ," which they are to imitate (1 Cor 4:17; 11:1): the key to success is not video-conferencing, nor literature, nor a conference, but face-to-face, life-on-cruciform-life. Of course, Timothy can only do this because he, too, has learned the cruciform life.³⁴ Paul seems to believe that the doctrinal teaching of the cross may be transmitted well enough by mail; cruciform praxis, however, requires a flesh-and-blood-and-Spirit example.

Moreover, Paul apparently expects cross-shaped suffering to have a profound effect. In Col 1:24 he writes from prison that in his sufferings he is "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (ESV). Although debates swirl around the interpretation of this verse, Reumann closes his analysis of it with the following apt observation: "An apostolic *agon* (struggle) which does not involve vicariously atoning efforts but which helps fill up the eschatological quota of tribulations to be 'suffered by the faithful between the resurrection and the return of Christ,' fits well with the context. Paul's involvement in this struggle—as well as yours, and mine, and all who minister—is not to be lacking."³⁵

Nor is Paul unique. All four Gospels share the command of Jesus to imitate the cross, taking particular care to correlate cross-imitating service and humility with Jesus' self-sacrifice.³⁶ Tidball claims that "no account of the death of Jesus in the gospel of Mark is complete without a consideration of it as a model for believers," and one could persuasively make the same case for Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John.³⁷ Dan McCartney observes, "There are few books in the New Testament more intensely concerned with the atonement than 1 Peter. Yet the

³³ Jerry L. Sumney, "Paul's 'Weakness': An Integral Part of His Conception of Ministry," *JST* 52 (1993): 71-91; Scott Hafemann, "'Because of Weakness' (Galatians 4:13): The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul," in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission; Festschrift for P. T. O'Brien* (ed. P. Bolt and M. Thompson; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 131-46; Hafemann, "A Call to Pastoral Suffering: The Need for Recovering Paul's Model of Ministry in 2 Corinthians," in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (2000): 22-36.

³⁴ 2 Timothy makes this clear. Compare Titus's "same steps" (2 Cor 12:15-18 ESV).

³⁵ J. Reumann, "Colossians 1:24 ('What is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ'): History of Exegesis and Ecumenical Advance," *CurTM* 17 (1990): 454-61.

³⁶ To cite but one essay on each of the Gospels: D. C. Allison Jr., "Matthew: Structure, Biographical Impulse and the *Imitatio Christi*," in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift for Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. Van Segbroeck et al.; 3 vols.; BETL; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:1203-21; Jason Hood, "Cross Imitation in Mark's Gospel, Redemptive History, and Contemporary Evangelicalism," *EvQ* 81 (2009): 116-25; B. E. Beck, "'Imitatio Christi' and the Lucan Passion Narrative," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar* (ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28-47; Edward Donnelly, "Glory and Suffering in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradox of Discipleship," *Reformed Theological Journal* 18 (2002): 1-15.

³⁷ Tidball, *Message of the Cross*, 148-49.

comments in this letter on the redemptive work of Christ in his suffering and death all take place in the context of ethical discussions about the behavior of servants, or the Christian response to undeserved suffering, or general exhortations regarding the Christian life.” The imitation of the cruciform Lord becomes a crucial practical implication of the atonement in systematic theology.³⁸ Hebrews 12 and 1 John 3 present the crucified Jesus as a model for imitation. Acts 9:4-5 and Rev 2:8-11 (and probably Matt 25:31-46) presuppose the correlation of the missional suffering of believers with the suffering and persecution of Jesus himself.

Given the difficulties inherent in interpreting and applying the biblical message of cross-bearing, it is useful to consider the role played by imitation of Christ and the cross in church history.³⁹ Yet lack of attention to the theme of the way of the cross is apparent, particularly against the backdrop of the intense attention paid the cross by historians interested in systematic theological categories. Luther’s theology of the cross is justly famous; yet, according to J. C. Clark, “there remains a correlative aspect of the ‘theology of the Cross’ that attracts somewhat less attention in the secondary literature of Luther scholarship, namely, the Reformer’s understanding of cross-bearing.” For Luther, “just as Christians cannot bear Christ’s cross, so He will not bear theirs. In other words Luther thought that to view Jesus Christ correctly is to view him as both bearer *and* bestower of the Cross.”⁴⁰ Luther is not alone of course; one thinks of Thomas à Kempis and the famous *Imitation of Christ* in the Catholic tradition. It appears that Calvin’s autobiographical self-understanding was influenced by the catalogue of hardships such as those found in 1 Cor 4:9-13 and 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-10.⁴¹ John Owen famously emphasized the crucifixion of one’s sin and the flesh.⁴²

However, a number of factors contributed to the eclipse of imitation as a Christian practice. The controversial nature of the imitation of Christ and others in Socinianism, by Abelard and his followers, as well as the Roman Catholic emphasis on merit in the sufferings of believers (sometimes taken to torturous

³⁸ Dan G. McCartney, “Atonement in James, Peter and Jude: ‘Because Christ Suffered for You,’” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 180. Note the subtitle of Edmund P. Clowney’s exposition of 1 Peter: *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989). Nor will it do to tear imitation from its inspiration: “The actuality of the cross as a pattern to follow depends on the actuality of the atonement” (Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 85).

³⁹ The study of *Wirkungsgeschichte* assists in this task. On the history of the interpretation of Col 1:24, a particularly contested “cruciformity” passage, see Reumann, “Colossians 1:24.” For an historical overview of suffering in Philippians and in Paul generally, see L. G. Bloomquist, *The Function of Suffering in Philippians* (JSNTS 78; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); see also Allison, “Matthew.”

⁴⁰ John C. Clark, “Martin Luther’s View of Cross-Bearing,” *BSac* 163 (2006): 336.

⁴¹ Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 195-96; see, e.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.11.

⁴² See J. I. Packer, introduction to *The Mortification of Sin*, by John Owen (Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2002). Recent work on Owen suggests a possible renaissance of this aspect of the cross; see Kelly Kopic and Justin Taylor, eds., *Overcoming Sin and Temptation: Three Classic Works by John Owen* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

lengths) all played a role, as did the eucharistic wars over the finality and significance of Jesus' death. In his commentary on Phil 2:5-11, Frank Thielman notes the role of imitation among nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal theologians and the subsequent backlash among evangelical and neo-orthodox interpreters. The latter scholars were disturbed by the displacement of theological and supernatural matters with ethical concerns.⁴³ Similarly, for contemporary pastoral theologians, articulation of the pastoral significance of the NT's presentation of the cross is not without its challenges. Stott feels constrained to balance his discussion on cross-shaped suffering with extensive comments on self-affirmation. Feminist interpreters and in particular scholars influenced by René Girard critique the notion of imitation because of the results of self-sacrifice in women's lives.⁴⁴ But above all, growth in levels of comfort and wealth and the value placed on such things among believers has done little to reinforce the "theology of the cross" throughout church history, not least in the contemporary period.

Michael Gorman's recent text is an important attempt aimed at reversing this neglect. The title, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, even provides basic taxonomic help. He offers the term cruciformity as helpful shorthand for "conformity to the cross" in one's life; cruciformity is "a term more appropriate for what has often been referred to as the 'imitation' of Christ."⁴⁵ According to Gorman, Paul uses cross language (*staur-root*) of himself and other Christians almost as much as he uses it for Jesus.⁴⁶ Gorman distinguishes four distinct ways in which conformity to the cross occurs in Paul's letters. (1) Cruciformity is "faithful obedience, or cruciform *faith*." (2) Cruciformity is also "voluntary self-emptying and self-giving regard for others, or cruciform *love*," as found in 2 Cor 8:8-9. (3) Cruciformity illustrates the paradox of "life-giving suffering and transformative potency in weakness, or cruciform *power*." Weakness and power were inseparable in Paul's ministry, and may even be said to exist in symbiosis. (4) Finally, Paul's "pattern of reversal" in values and expectations and destinies points us to cruciformity as the "requisite prelude to resurrection and exaltation, or cruciform *hope*."⁴⁷ None of these four traits is unique to Paul in the NT.

⁴³ Thielman, *Philippians* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 123-25. Thielman cites Käsemann, "who argues against the ethical interpretation" (see Ernst Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," in *God and Christ: Existence and Province* [JTC 5; ed. R. W. Funk; New York: Harper, 1968], 45-88 [esp. 50-51]).

⁴⁴ Barbara E. Reid, *Taking up the Cross: New Testament Interpretations through Latina and Feminist Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 34-35, citing Joanna Dewey, "Sacrifice No More," in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire* (ed. Holly E. Hearon; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2004), 159-70. This trend is sympathetically critiqued by Boersma, *Violence and Hospitality*, 116-20.

⁴⁵ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 35 and 48, respectively; these themes are also brought out well in Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁴⁶ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

In his concluding chapter Gorman notes the “integrative” power of this facet of Paul’s thought, but insists that “cruciformity is fundamentally about living rather than conceptualizing.” It is an “integrative narrative experience” or a function of spirituality, rather than a doctrine *per se*. I am in tacit agreement with Gorman, then, when I place this teaching in the realm of practical theology. Indeed, as Gorman remarks, cruciformity has the added disadvantage of being unlegislated and unlegislatable, fundamental though it is to our ethics.⁴⁸ Such existential and praxis-laden facets render it difficult for scholars to summarize and systematize as we are wont to do with penal substitution and other doctrines. “Cruciformity cannot be inscribed or legislated; it cannot be codified or routinized. It can only be remembered and recited, hymned and prayed, and then lived by the power of the Spirit and the work of the inspired individual and corporate imagination.”⁴⁹ Every aspect of this quote is crucial, but it is especially important to note that human imitation is not bare human effort, but the Spirit’s work in believers that is the force behind the cruciform life.⁵⁰

One would hope that a good deal of literature on the cross would attend to the call to pick up one’s cross, fleshing out the meaning of such “missional suffering” in the contemporary world. Steve Holmes laments the frequent treatment of the cross in systematic theological terms “in splendid isolation” from practical and ethical considerations.⁵¹ A wide-ranging survey of recent evangelical literature on the cross proves this is certainly true in the case of cruciformity. The following survey of recent evangelical and Reformed literature on the cross illustrates the remarkable absence of this theme.

Bruce Demarest makes overtures to the importance of Christ’s sacrifice as example. It appears seventh in a list of seven “ethical benefits” of the NT’s message of the cross, and lacks the fuller treatment Demarest gives other aspects of the cross.⁵² He claims imitation is less important in First Peter than the atonement—a claim which (while theologically true) could have the rhetorical function of leading readers to *downplay* something Peter himself *featured*; the claim is thus difficult to square with the rhetoric of the letter itself, as noted by McCartney (cited above). Less than 1 percent of Demarest’s five hundred pages addresses cruciform themes.

Paul Wells turns Matt 16:21-28 and the exchange between Peter and Jesus into a discussion of the atonement and the cross alone, with cruciform discipleship narrowed thusly:

⁴⁸ Richard B. Hays rightly identifies the cross (particularly cross imitation) as one of the main *foci* for NT ethics (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [San Francisco: Harper, 1999]).

⁴⁹ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 383.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁵¹ S. R. Holmes, “Of Babies and Bathwater? Recent Evangelical Critiques of Penal Substitution in the Light of Early Modern Debates Concerning Justification,” *EvoJTh* 16 (2007): 93-105, esp. 101; Holmes notes this isolated treatment happens among both proponents and critics of penal substitutionary atonement.

⁵² Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology; Wheaton: Crossway, 1999; repr., 2006), 182.

It is difficult not to conclude that the “cross-bearing” and the self-denial required of Jesus’ followers include the confession of Christ’s atoning death, which is contrary to the wisdom of the princes of the world who crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). Taking up one’s cross is not suffering in the sense of the expression “everyone has a cross to bear.” It is confessing Christ . . . [and] following him out of recognition of what his death involves. “Dying to self” involves dying to the worldly wisdom that scoffs at the dying Lord or makes light of his sacrificial death. “Taking up the cross and following Christ” means perishing the idea that a truly benevolent God would have found an easier, softer way than the cross to solve man’s sin problem. “Losing one’s life” for the sake of Christ is accepting that this scandal, the shameful and painful death of the cross, was necessary and that this is the wisdom of God for our salvation.⁵³

This statement is by no means untrue, but it is not all that can and must be said about cruciformity. Suffice it to say that Peter himself seems to have taken the call to suffer in imitation of Jesus in a broader sense which includes but cannot be limited to the sense taken by Wells.⁵⁴

Similar problems abound in more popular treatments—even those written by professional theologians. Sproul’s *The Truth of the Cross*, as mentioned above, is excellent in its explication of God’s wrath and holiness and contains aspects of the cross apart from penal substitution, but is void of the way of the cross. Mahaney’s *Cross-Centered Life* breathes nary a word of cross-bearing, despite the inviting title.⁵⁵ Cross-centered living for Mahaney chiefly consists of meditation on the work of the cross; application is confined to one’s assurance of the end of God’s condemnation of believers because of the cross of Christ. Christian assurance is of course invaluable, and Mahaney’s experience and skill are on display as he puts such material in terms appropriate for laity. But it is impossible to say that the creation of assurance of forgiveness alone wholly constitutes the cross-centered or cross-formed life. Moreover, in Mahaney, the use of “cross-centered” passages frequently bypasses their context. First Corinthians 2:2 stands out as a consistently under-appreciated text. When Paul speaks these words, he is not simply talking about the content of his speech. Rather, as the context makes clear, he is also speaking, per his habit, about his worldview, including his example and his way of life (cf. Acts 20:33-35; Rom 8:17; 1 Cor 4:8-17; 11:1; Phil as a whole; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:5-6; and 2 Tim as a whole).⁵⁶

Mark Dever, felicitously preaching/writing on 1 Cor 4, includes brief words on the pastor’s willingness to inconvenience himself and put others first, humility and the death of self-devotion, and the dangers of prosperity.⁵⁷ He states in his

⁵³ Wells, *Cross Words*, 250-51.

⁵⁴ Similarly Sinclair Ferguson only cites briefly the need for sacrifice in a minister’s life with regard to ambition and willingness to suffer (“The Atonement in the Life of the Christian,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 424).

⁵⁵ C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross-Centered Life* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2006).

⁵⁶ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 1; and Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 245.

⁵⁷ Mark Dever, “A Real Minister: 1 Corinthians 4,” in *Preaching the Cross* (ed. Mark Dever et al.; Together for the Gospel; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 24-30; of the book’s 159 pp., only these discuss the cruciform life.

chapter that the issue of the cruciform life would be taken up by C. J. Mahaney later in the volume, but this never materializes, at least not along cruciform lines.

Yet even when the theme does arise, error often follows. Boice and Ryken claim that “Jesus is our only possible model for self-denial”—a patent denial of several NT passages teaching otherwise.⁵⁸ Even worse is Goldsworthy’s claim that “very early in Christian history there occurred a concentration on the exemplary and ethical Christ, rather than on the substitutionary and redemptive Christ.”⁵⁹ He proceeds to blame Clement of Rome for emphasizing and instigating the imitation of Christ, failing to see that Clement learned cross-shaped praxis from Hebrews and the rest of the NT. In point of fact, the “exemplary and ethical” cannot be torn from the “substitutionary and redemptive”; both are part of the presentation of the cross in the NT. The loss of either aspect constitutes a tragedy.

Tidball’s and Stott’s books, however, give substantial attention to the imitation of the cross as a crucial part of the NT’s message of the cross.⁶⁰ Tidball’s passage-by-passage approach restricts the depth of his interaction, as cruciformity themes are literally strewn across the breadth of the NT. His overview of the “outworking of a crucicentric evangelical spirituality” rightly calls readers to mimetic discipleship in mindset, mission, and mortification.⁶¹ Stott’s thematic approach allows for the investment of more space to cruciformity.⁶² His book in this regard stands above the rest. Stott writes of the implications for cross-imitation and cross-bearing in church growth and ministerial service; in cross-cultural mission; in evangelism; in social action; in community building, drawing on Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf for inspiration; in enemy love; in the creation of personal holiness and in the exercise of hope and patience.

Can one object to an insistence on stressing the practical, cruciform side of the cross by claiming that pastoral necessity dictates focusing on the NT presentation of the cross as data for systematic theology? Certainly no one scholar or pastor can be faulted for picking and choosing what to emphasize. In this light, the critiques above are perhaps more relevant for their cumulative effect than as individual admonitions. But the seriousness of the biblical call to cross-shaped living, and the depth to which the NT models the living out of this command in the life of Paul and in the teachings of the apostles, bears witness to the need to

⁵⁸ James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Heart of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999; repr., 2005), 154; ironically, they follow this statement with a paragraph holding out *Zinzendorf as an example!*

⁵⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007), 92-93.

⁶⁰ As noted above, McKnight and Boersma address various aspects of the mimetic response to the atonement in Christian discipleship and community.

⁶¹ Tidball, *Message of the Cross*, 24-26; the alliteration is my own attempt at a summary; one might add money as well.

⁶² See Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 249-342 *passim*.

make the practical implications of the cross a permanent and prominent part of Christian life and Christian discourse (preaching, teaching, and writing) on the cross. The potent pastoral dimensions of the cross on offer in the NT require that significant attention be paid to aspects of the cross apart from its role in systematic theology.

There are also scholarly implications for cruciformity. Cruciform praxis may well be relevant for the question of the congruence of a full Pauline corpus, and could be brought to bear on the relationship between the Paul of the letters and the Paul of Acts.⁶³ Perriman's analysis of suffering in Paul deserves attention in this respect.⁶⁴ He focuses on the whole of Pauline data, tracing his cross-shaped suffering and teaching as witness to the "complet[ion of] the pattern of Christ's suffering."⁶⁵ The thorny question of the relationship between Jesus and Paul could also benefit from explorations of cruciformity.⁶⁶ One suspects that Paul would be pleased if his own sufferings in Christ's pattern forged a greater link between himself and Jesus via Jewish restoration theology and kingdom-birthing woes.⁶⁷ But these suggestions cannot be explored here.

III. Conclusion

The NT strongly affirms penal substitution and calls readers to imitate Jesus who bore God's punishment against sin in accord with God's will for the sake of others. Recent books on the cross routinely fail to articulate these two aspects of the NT message. But penal substitution is firmly attested in the biblical data. It is crucial that we account for such data adequately: "Penal metaphors matter . . . because they teach us just how serious our plight [as condemned sinners] was, and so just how much God has graciously done in Jesus."⁶⁸ Similarly, cruciformity is a crucial aspect of the NT's message of the cross and must be recovered. As Richard Pratt is fond of saying, a Messiah one cannot imitate is not worth having as one's Messiah. The NT certainly presents its Messiah and his cross as appropriate objects of imitation. The depth of biblical teaching on the

⁶³ Gorman anchors *Cruciformity* in accepted Paulines; a text as crucial as Col 1:24 is absent from its Scripture index, and there is but one reference to 2 Tim despite its function as a virtual treatise on cruciform suffering. It is mystifying to see disputed Paulines debated on the basis of cruciformity, as Jerry L. Sumney does ("I Fill Up What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ: Paul's Vicarious Suffering in Colossians," *CBO* 68 [2006]: 664 n. 1).

⁶⁴ Andrew Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006), ch. 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁶ Hays (*Moral Vision*) and Richard A. Burrige (*Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007]) integrate NT ethics along the lines of Jesus-imitation, but more is surely possible.

⁶⁷ Scholarly literature related to cruciformity themes generally shows more interest in Paul's Hellenistic influences, although Martin Braendl suggests the legitimacy of integrating various facets of Paul's background (*Der Agon bei Paulus* [WUNT 2.222; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006]).

⁶⁸ Holmes, "Can Punishment Bring Peace?," 123.

imitation of Christ throws into bold relief the relative absence of this theme in evangelical and Reformed literature on the cross from 2000 to 2007. These two aspects of the message of the cross, which are in their respective ways central to the NT's message, should not be absent from Christian literature on the cross and its systematic and practical theological implications.

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