

# The Cross in Colossians: Cosmic Reconciliation through Penal Substitution and *Christus Victor*

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Since Gustaf Aulén published his work *Christus Victor*, the view that Christ died to defeat the powers and principalities has enjoyed a rise in theology and popular thought.<sup>1</sup> Among evangelicals (broadly defined), advocates of the view known as *Christus Victor* (henceforth CV) might be classified in three ways: (1) those who reject penal substitutionary atonement (henceforth PSA) outright, and argue instead for CV (e.g., Steve Chalke, Joel Green,

to explain all the ways that PSA and CV intersect, but neither is it necessary since there are several fine works written on the subject.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will consider the cross of Christ in the letter to the Colossians. I will argue that in this epistle Paul describes the cosmic reach of the cross with its twin designs of saving God’s people and defeating the enemies of God. More precisely, I will argue that in agreement with PSA, Christ died to atone for the sins of his “chosen ones” (3:9), that is, his people, and in keeping with CV, his death defeated his enemies and put them to open shame. In other words, through a theological reading of Colossians 1:15-2:15, I will argue that together PSA and CV are the twin means by which Christ’s death brings peace to the cosmos (Col 1:20). To put this graphically, see Fig. 1.

Darrin W. Snyder Belousek), (2) those who advocate CV but retain a secondary place for PSA (e.g., Gregory Boyd, Hans Boersma, Ron Sider),<sup>2</sup> (3) and those who stress the centrality of PSA while recognizing CV as a complementary feature of the atonement (e.g., Sinclair Ferguson, Henri Blocher, Thomas Schreiner, Graham Cole).<sup>3</sup> Together, a large corpus of work on the atonement has been published in recent decades.

In this article, it is not possible

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<b>Cosmic Reconciliation</b>	=	<b>Penal Substitution</b>	+	<b>Christus Victor</b>
<b>Col. 1:20</b>	=	<b>Col. 1:21-23 2:11-14</b>	+	<b>Col. 2:15</b>

My argument will move in three steps: First, to understand how Christ's death reconciles all things in 1:20, it is vital to consider the flow of Paul's argument—how 1:15-20 relates to 1:21-2:23. Only as we relate the first use of *apokatallaxai* to the explanation that follows can we understand how Christ's death reconciles the Colossians to God (Col 1:22) and defeats those rulers and authorities who seek to deceive them (2:15). Second, I will show from a close reading of 1:21-23, 2:11-14, and 2:15 how Paul understands the outworking of Christ's cosmic reconciliation (1:20). I will argue that Paul's explication of Christ's death in Colossians makes PSA the decisive factor in the church's purification *and* his enemies' pacification. Third, I will close with a brief theological explanation of how PSA and CV relate.

## THE ARGUMENT IN COLOSSIANS

### 1:15-2:23

Four key texts outline the theology of the cross in Colossians. First, in 1:20, Paul concludes his Christological hymn (1:15-20) stating that Christ has "reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross." Second, in 1:21-23, Paul addresses the previous condition of the Colossians "who once were alienated and hostile in mind," but who Christ "has now reconciled by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." Third, in 2:11-15, Paul presents a view of the cross that describes how Christ effects salvation for the recipients of his letter and triumphs over "the rulers and authorities" who stand in opposition to Christ. Finally, in 2:20, Paul reminds the Colossians that when they died with Christ, they died to the "elemental spirits," spirits who they were tempted to serve again by means of stringent asceticism (2:21-23).<sup>5</sup>

Typically, these passages are read independently. For instance, theologians point to 1:20 to explain the cosmic scope of the cross and 2:15 to support CV. Similarly, 1:21-23, along with other passages on reconciliation (Rom 5:9-10; 2 Cor

5:14-21; Eph 2:16), is cited in support of God's personal reconciliation. These proof-texts (and the doctrines that they support) are not wrong *per se*, but they simply do not allow Paul's holistic view of the cross to surface. By turning our attention to the cross in Colossians, we will better understand how Christ's death brings peace (*shalom*) to the cosmos. In what follows I will argue that a unified reading of 1:15-2:23 makes best sense of Paul's argument and is necessary for understanding Paul's theology of the cross. There are at least four points of continuity.

First, the local problem of false teaching in Colossae is especially prevalent in the first two chapters. As Moo observes, Paul presents the glories of Christ in order to guard the Colossians against false teaching that was causing them to his sufficiency in all things.<sup>6</sup> In 1:15-20 Paul extols Christ as creator, sustainer, and reconciler of the cosmos, so that the Colossians would not be deceived and follow false philosophies (2:8) or submit themselves to the ascetic practices promoted in their region (2:20-23). While the specifics of the false teaching are difficult to define,<sup>7</sup> most agree that the "principle themes of Colossians are announced in this hymn" (1:15-20) and applied to situation in Colossae (1:21-2:23).<sup>8</sup> As the one in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily (1:19; 2:9), Christ is the source of all that the Colossians will need for wisdom and growth (2:3, 6-7).

Second, the centrality of Christ is not only evident in a mirrored reading of Colossians; it is also plain from the repetition of the phrase "in him" that pervades the first two chapters. Twelve times in these two chapters (1:14, 16, 19, 22; 2:3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15; cf. 3:20; 4:7; 4:17), Paul explains what it means to be in Christ. The focus on Christ makes it clear that Paul wants his readers to see this section as one unified whole. What he introduces in the hymn becomes the focus of the rest of Colossians.<sup>9</sup>

Third, there are numerous verbal connections between Paul's hymn (1:15-20) and the ensuing verses. (1) In 1:20, Paul uses *apokatallaxai* to

describe how the cross brings peace to all creation. Two verses later, he uses the same word to describe how the same event (his death on the cross) effected reconciliation for the Colossians. While the meaning of reconciliation is debated, the best contextual evidence suggests that Paul has in mind a “cosmic renewal” in 1:20.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Paul’s deliberate repetition of this word with divergent objects of reconciliation marks a clear linguistic connection between these verses (1:20, 22), but also a theological distinction that careful readers must reckon. (2) The fullness language of 1:19 (“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”) is repeated in 2:9 (“For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”). Affirming Christ’s superiority to the elemental spirits (2:8, 20) and the angels (2:18), Paul reiterates the deity of Christ to esteem his all-sufficiency. (3) On the other side of this coin, Paul twice speaks of “rulers and authorities.” In 1:16, he uses three pairs of terms to describe the invisible spirits whom he created and rules over. The last of these pairs is mentioned again in 2:15, when Paul says that Christ put these fallen angels to open shame on the cross. (4) Paul twice uses the word *stauros* (1:20; 2:14) to underline the “cosmic significance of the cross.”<sup>11</sup> This reference to the cross is echoed by multiple references to the death of Christ (1:21-23; 2:11-14, 20), not to mention the cruciform ministry of Paul (“I fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” 1:24).

Fourth, Paul’s emphasis on the cross in 1:21-2:23 suggests a theological unity in these verses. As many have observed, Colossians “advances a case for the superiority of Christ over the universe, particularly over its inimical powers.”<sup>12</sup> In 1:15-20 this is clear from the high Christology, and in 1:21-2:23 the emphasis on Christ and his cross continue to be the main focus. However, in addition to the theological unity, there may also be a literary structure uniting Colossians 1:15-2:15—one that intends to highlight the gospel ministry of Paul (over against that of the false teachers) and the death of Christ. In a *First Things* blog post, Peter Leithart has offered a reading of Colossians 1-2

that organizes Paul’s argument around two overlapping chiasmuses.<sup>13</sup>

The first chiasmus extends from Colossians 1:16 to 2:15 and centers on Paul’s ministry to the Colossians.<sup>14</sup> The second envelops 2:9-15 and focuses on the death of Christ.<sup>15</sup> In the first chiasmus, some of the strongest connections include the mention of Christ’s deity in 1:19 and 2:9, the repetition of “rejoice” and “flesh” in 1:24 and 2:5, and the mystery theme in 1:26-27 and 2:2-3. At the same time, there are weaknesses: The outside bracket (1:15-20 and 2:10-15) is too vague. With Paul’s elevated language in 1:15-20 and the multiple metaphors overlapping in 2:10-15, it is insufficient to say that these verses broadly mirror one another. Likewise, Christ’s hypostatic union is immediately followed by a description of his death—first in Colossians 1:19-20 and again in 2:10-15. Leithart’s chiasmus does not account for these. Exegetically, his observations call for further inquiry, but theologically his observations add plausibility to the way 1:21-2:23 explicates the themes of 1:15-20.

To summarize, we can have great confidence that what Paul writes in 1:15-20, 1:21-2:23 expounds. The former section introduces Paul’s cosmic Christology; the latter articulates how Christ’s death purifies the Colossians’ sins, raises them to new life, and liberates them from bondage to the elemental spirits. Therefore, on the basis of the historical setting, Christological focus, linguistic connections, and thematic unity, there is good reason for reading 1:21-2:23 as the theological outworking of 1:15-20, with special attention to the cross of Christ.

Still, before considering 1:21-2:23, one more point must be made. In *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*, Gregory Boyd argues that the cross *first* accomplishes a cosmic defeat of the powers and principalities and *then* elicits a personal application for believers.<sup>16</sup> He states, “While Christ’s death for sinful humans is central for understanding what Christ did for us, therefore, this dimension of Christ’s work is possible only

because of the broader cosmic victory Christ won on the cross.”<sup>17</sup> Exegetically, Boyd supports his claim by appealing to a number of texts, including Colossians 1:15-22. Of these verses, he writes, “Only after this cosmic dimension of the cross is stressed does Paul then turn to talk about what this means for believers ... The cosmic conquest, one might say, logically precedes the anthropological application.”<sup>18</sup> One might say that the cosmic conquest is logically prior, but is that what Paul intends to say? I think not.

Because of his penchant to support his victory-centered understanding of the cross, Boyd fails to recognize the literary and thematic structures of Paul’s letter. He connects Colossians 1:15-20 to the subsequent text which serves as an explanation for 1:15-20. He does not appreciate that a new section begins at Colossians 1:21. In fact, a rhetorical analysis of Colossians provided by Michael Bird suggests that “the whole section of 1:21-2:7 constitutes a rhetorical *probatio* or logical argument that enumerates the main proposition.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the Christological hymn is the main point, or *propositio*, in Paul’s letter, and that 1:21-2:7 is written to support this main point.<sup>20</sup> Boyd fails to consider the literary arrangement of Colossians and assumes without warrant that the first mention of reconciliation is the most important one.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, the relationship between 1:15-20 and 1:21-2:23 should be seen as exegetical, not sequential.<sup>22</sup> Paul uses *apokatallassai* in the broadest sense possible in 1:20 as a precursor to his detailed explanation that immediately follows.<sup>23</sup> Colossians 1:22 shows that the personal focus of Christ’s cosmic reconciliation are the believing elect. Yet, this is not because personal reconciliation is logically subsequent to cosmic reconciliation, but because personal reconciliation is the first way in which God reconciles the cosmos.<sup>24</sup>

### **CHRIST’S DEATH EFFECTS PERSONAL RECONCILIATION**

As we return to the theological question concerning the relationship between PSA and CV,

let me reassert my main argument: The cross in Colossians accomplishes PSA for the believing elect as exhibited in 1:21-23 and 2:11-14. By the same event, Christ subdues all created things (angelic and human) who stand against the Lord as Paul explains in 2:15, 20. The result of this two-fold intention is cosmic *shalom* between God, man, and the rest of creation. We will first look at Christ’s work of personal reconciliation (Col 1:21-23; 2:11-14) and then personal subjugation (2:15).

### **COLOSSIANS 1:21-23: PERSONAL RECONCILIATION (PART 1)**

Colossians 1:21-23 provides the first explication of Christ’s reconciling death. Shifting from the glories of Christ in verses 15-20 to work of Christ on the behalf of the Colossians, Paul addresses the Colossians personally (“and you”) to “indicate that reconciliation is personal as well as cosmic in its effects.”<sup>25</sup> In verse 21, he reminds them of their previous condition (“alienated,” “hostile in mind,” “doing evil deeds”) and says, “[God]<sup>26</sup> has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death.”

Paul uses the same word in verse 22 that he does in verse 20. This has led some scholars to argue that the word means the same thing. For instance, I. Howard Marshall says of the angelic powers threatening the church that “Paul’s stress is not so much on the fact of their reconciliation as on their own need for reconciliation which renders them unfit to mediate between man and God; only Christ can act as reconciler.”<sup>27</sup> Marshall concludes that this reading saves us from any “desperate attempts to give ‘reconcile’ [in v. 20] a sense other than it usually bears.”<sup>28</sup> We can agree with Marshall that Christ is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5), but what stands out as odd is the way Marshall ascribes a salvific “need” to angels—a problem that Scripture never offers to solve. Fallen angels are beyond salvation, and thus the language of 1:20 presses the reader to think more deeply about how Christ reconciles all things.

It is more likely that these twin uses of *apokatallassai* have different objects in mind. In 1:20, “all

things” is explicitly defined by the clause, “whether on earth or in heaven.” Functioning as a *merism*,<sup>29</sup> earth and heaven includes all sentient beings (human and angelic) as well as every inanimate object created by God.<sup>30</sup> This reading is supported by the earlier use of “heaven” and “earth” in 1:16, where the appositive description is even broader: things “visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.” Add to this the fact that Paul’s hymn moves from creation (vv. 15-17) to new creation (vv. 18-20), and it becomes clear that Paul understands Christ’s death to reconcile every created thing.

Therefore, it can be said with confidence that the first use of “reconciliation” in Paul’s letter to the Colossians entails the whole cosmos. As Peterson states: “All things” in Colossians 1:20 “refers to saved human beings, subjugated demons, and the renewed heavens and earth.”<sup>31</sup> The second use is clearly restricted to the saints at Colossae, who experience the saving benefits of Christ’s death by means of persevering faith. For them, the death of Christ is not simply a cosmic reality, but a personal one: “The purpose of [God’s] reconciling action wrought in the body of Christ’s flesh through death is stated to be the presentation of the beneficiaries as holy and without blemish and [beyond reproach].”<sup>32</sup>

In sum, Jesus died first and foremost for his own, for those who were in solidarity with him.<sup>33</sup> In Colossians, this personal aspect of the cross with its unifying effects is repeated often. In the broader context of the New Testament, a variety of personal metaphors stand out to describe Christ’s death: Christ died for his body, bride, church, sheep, etc. In 1:21-23, God’s personal reconciliation is at the forefront, but it is not alone. Colossians 2:11-14 is even more detailed in the way that Christ’s death effects personal reconciliation.

#### **COLOSSIANS 2:11-14: PERSONAL RECONCILIATION (PART 2)**

After describing his ministry and exhorting the believers to grow in Christ (1:24-2:7), Paul starts to oppose the false teachings present in Colossae

(2:8-23). In this section, Paul bolsters the Colossians trust in Jesus by presenting a picture of the exalted Christ, one that highlights the deficiencies of mystical Judaism. Mirroring the conclusion of his hymn (1:19-20), Paul mentions “the fullness of deity dwell[ing] bodily” in Christ (2:9) and then describes the death of Christ in terms of circumcision and baptism, death and resurrection (2:11-14). The Colossians (v. 10) stand between Christ’s hypostatic union (v. 9) and his atoning sacrifice (v. 11-15). United to the head, this body of believers has been “filled in him,” the one “who is the head of all rule and authority.” Polemically, Paul speaks of this unbreakable union to show that the Colossians need not adopt the ascetic practices promoted by the false teachers. Theologically, these verses provide a rich tapestry of all that Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection accomplish for his body. Going farther than 1:21-23, these verses show how God’s work of reconciliation in Christ brings about regeneration, union in Christ, a new covenant relationship, and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>34</sup>

While Paul begins with a focus on union in Christ before addressing the penal nature of the cross, I will approach Colossians 2:11-14 in reverse order. Since Paul grounds the benefits of Christ’s death (vv. 11-14a) in the cross itself (v. 14b), I will show how the punitive nature of his substitutionary death procured forgiveness, a new covenant relationship, union with Christ, and regeneration for the believing elect. In other words, by means of Christ’s PSA, God effectively reconciled the body of Christ to himself.<sup>35</sup> There are four things to observe in these dense verses.

First, *penal substitution is the heart of the cross*. According to the logic of Colossians 2:14, PSA triggers forgiveness as the first domino in a string of (new covenant) benefits. As opposed to other passages where forgiveness is the immediate effect of Christ’s blood (see Matt 26:28; Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:14; Heb 9:22; 10:18), Colossians 2:14 makes forgiveness dependent on an antecedent legal transaction.<sup>36</sup> Paul relates how Jesus’ death terminated

the requirements of the law, which in turn brought forgiveness. While it is biblical and true to say that Jesus died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3) or to reconcile us to God (Eph 2:16), what makes forgiveness of sins and reconciliation possible is the termination of the old covenant law and the beginning of the new covenant sealed in Jesus' blood. Regardless of how one interprets *cheirographon*,<sup>37</sup> a penal substitution is necessary for reconciliation.<sup>38</sup> What George Smeaton observed of Colossians 2 still stands:

Forgiveness presupposes the objective fact of blotting out the handwriting of ordinances and nailing it to the cross ... Christ's body was no bond; but as he was made sin, or bore our sins on His own body to the tree, all was embodied in Him. The handwriting, the curse, the sin of His people are identified with Him; and the language of exchange can be competently applied to Him in the performance of that great work of procuring our discharge.<sup>39</sup>

Though, Smeaton does not use the phrase "penal substitution," he gets at the heart of what Christ's death accomplished—a vicarious punishment that satisfied the law of God. Though such justice might seem foreign today, under the biblical system of covenantal representation, such a substitution was perfectly acceptable. The whole sacrificial system was intended to teach this point: "Sin could be forgiven only on the one condition that its guilt was expiated, and that not by the sinner, but by a surety in his stead."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in one climactic moment, Christ's death satisfied God's legal requirements, so that something new might be put created—namely, the forgiveness of sins stipulated by the new covenant, "signed into law" by Christ's death (cf. Matt 26:28).

In its brief description Colossians 2:14 makes a strong case for penal substitution. The collocation of Christ and the law argues for PSA, because it does not say that "Christ was nailed to the tree" or that "by Christ's crucifixion the law was satisfied." Rather, in the very same act, the Christ who

perfectly embodied the law was executed as a law-breaker. When this seemingly unjust execution is coupled with the fact the believing elect are in solidarity with Christ, it becomes apparent that Christ is not a third party representing someone else.<sup>41</sup> By its covenantal nature, Christ's death is for those *in him*. This covenantal understanding of penal substitution stands against the idea that Christ's death is a legal fiction or a grotesque execution of an innocent man. In context, Jesus' (il)legal execution serves as the basis for all the covenantal blessings—blessings which are delineated in 2:11-14.

Second, *penal substitutionary atonement establishes a new covenant*. Verse 13 ends saying that the trespasses were forgiven by canceling the records of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. In other words, the instrumental cause of forgiveness comes from the penal nature of the cross. While Paul is restrained in speaking about the new covenant, as compared to Hebrews, his understanding of forgiveness cannot be separated off from the terminating and most basic promise of the new covenant—namely, the forgiveness of sins and God's promise to no longer hold sins against his covenant people.<sup>42</sup> If a covenantal reading of Colossians 2:13-14 may be entertained, then there are at least two things to posit.<sup>43</sup>

First, PSA stands as the legal basis for the forgiveness of sins. Clearly, the legal execution of Jesus (2:14) procures the forgiveness of sins (2:13), which stands as the ground clause for Jeremiah's new covenant.<sup>44</sup> Speaking generally of the new covenant, Peterson notes that "various ... New Testament writers point to the fulfillment of such expectations in the death of Jesus and link this to the promise of Jeremiah 31:34."<sup>45</sup> In 2:13-14, we see how Christ's cross bears new covenant fruit—first the forgiveness of sins, then union with Christ, and the gift of spiritual circumcision.<sup>46</sup>

The connection between PSA and the new covenant conjoins the legal requirements of the law with the Trinitarian love of God.<sup>47</sup> It was the love of the Father that moved him to save sinners

through the sacrifice of his son (John 3:16), and it was the voluntary love of the Son that moved him to lay down his life for his own (10:17-18). Therefore, the relationship between covenant-law and Trinitarian love—both of which indivisibly exist in the new covenant—defends PSA from the frequent caricature of divine child abuse or pagan notion of blood lust. On the cross the mercy and justice of God meet.<sup>48</sup>

Second, Christ's penal substitution is set in the context of personal relations.<sup>49</sup> PSA is not superimposed on the Bible from some foreign system of justice; rather it arises from the covenantal (and hence personal) accountability sinful men have before a holy God. Often PSA is charged with assigning to God a kind of distasteful legality (e.g., retributive justice) devoid of personal love.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps some presentations of PSA have made this error, but the Bible does not. Aside from the fact that Scripture demands a covenantal version of retributive justice (see Lev 26-27; Deut 27-28) and that most complaints against retributive justice come from scholars who want to conform the Bible to contemporary culture,<sup>51</sup> Paul's articulation of PSA and the forgiveness of sins clarifies that there is no divide between legal justice and personal love.<sup>52</sup> Just the reverse: PSA arises from and culminates in the Father's love for his children. As Paul develops his theology of the cross, he asserts that Christ died for those people whom the Father gave him before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-6), so that at God's appointed time (2 Tim 1:9-10), the enthroned Son could baptize them by means of the Spirit and bring them into covenantal union with the Father and the Son. This is not a mechanical transaction offered to appease a vengeful deity; it is God's triune love at work to save sinners without impugning his holy character.

Third, *baptism symbolizes the believers' identification with Christ*. Admittedly, this assertion is debated. Paedobaptists argue from 2:12 that baptism functions in the new covenant in the same way that circumcision functioned in the old.<sup>53</sup> This

point has been well-refuted by a number of Baptists. For instance, Fred Malone says, "Paul defined the circumcision of Christians ... as primarily heart union with Christ by faith ... symbolized in their water baptism as a confession of faith which they received in regeneration (as in Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 12:13; and Gal 3:29)."<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Stephen Wellum shows that the typology of circumcision is not carried over into baptism but into spiritual circumcision.<sup>55</sup> Water baptism stands as the new covenant symbol of the believer's new birth.

Taking this new covenant fulfillment as my starting place, I am arguing that Paul asserted that believers who abide in faith (see Col 1:23) are the ones who have died and risen with Christ (cf. Rom 6:4-6). In other words, baptism, which portrays burial (descent) and resurrection (ascension), provides a bridge between regeneration (circumcision without hands) and faith (the necessary response of the believer). In 2:12-13, those who are circumcised without hands (i.e., by the Spirit) are made alive by God. This new life is evidenced by their faith in Christ, making them fit recipients for baptism. Still, Colossians 2 is only secondarily about the ordinance of baptism. Its primary significance concerns the theological reality of the believers' union in Christ.

In context, Paul reminds the Colossians that because of Christ's death and resurrection, they have an unbreakable bond with the creator of the universe, the one who is also the reconciler of all things. Since Paul is writing to overthrow a false cosmology threatening the church, he does not start with a legal argument as he does in Galatians. Rather, Paul aims to unseat the veneration of angels and the appeal of self-flagellation to overcome the flesh. Therefore, he argues that those who are in Christ have put off "the body of flesh" in Christ's death and been made new by a "circumcision without hands." This brings us to the last aspect of personal reconciliation.

Fourth, *the cross effects regeneration*. As an outworking of their union with Christ (2:10), Paul says that the Colossians "were circumcised with

a circumcision made without hands.” Though Paul speaks of circumcision often, this is the only place where he speaks of a circumcision “without hands.” The point he seems to be making is that true circumcision does not come from the impure hands of men but from God himself.<sup>56</sup> The Old Testament speaks of circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6) and later of the removal of the whole, impure heart (Ezek 36:26-27). Both of these texts are regarded as anticipations of the new covenant when God will give the circumcision he demands. Indeed, the hope of the new covenant is not only “forgiveness of sins” but genuine purity (the thing that circumcision was meant to symbolize) and the newfound desire to do the will of God (the law of God written on the heart).

In Colossians, Paul uses circumcision language to explicate this new covenant reality.<sup>57</sup> Speaking of the complexity of Paul’s use of the law, Schreiner writes of 2:11-12, “Circumcision [in the flesh] points to the circumcision of the heart accomplished by the cross of Christ.”<sup>58</sup> The complexity is most obvious in the way that Paul speaks of the circumcision objectively and subjectively in the same verse. He describes Christ’s objective death in terms of “a circumcision made without hands.”<sup>59</sup> Yet, at the same time, he applies Christ’s circumcision subjectively to the Colossian believers, “in him you also were circumcised.”<sup>60</sup> Exegetically, opinions vary and there is no settled consensus. The point I want to introduce concerns the covenantal nature of circumcision, and how a covenantal reading of this passage may help bridge the objective-subjective impasse.

In his objective death, Christ gives his church—and only his church—the thing that he accomplishes on the cross—namely the removal of dead flesh. “At his death, ... God cut off Christ’s bodily life, just as the foreskin is removed in circumcision,” but now in the new covenant, “the only circumcision believers need ... is the circumcision they receive by virtue of their incorporation into Christ’s death on the cross.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, by means of (a covenantal) union in Christ—a

predominate theme in Colossians, especially in 2:9-12—the objective work of the cross becomes the subjective experience of the believer when that individual puts their faith in Christ, which in turn happens because Christ baptizes that individual with the Spirit.<sup>62</sup>

Admittedly, the complex of metaphors and historical events combined with the personal impact that the gospel has had on the Colossians is difficult to decipher. However, from what has been observed in these verses, the following synthesis may be provided: When Christ died on Calvary, he solved the legal problem by dying in the place of guilty sinners. With this legal problem solved, the rest of the blessings follow: The relational problem is solved by the gift of forgiveness and inauguration of a new covenant; the alienation problem is overcome by Christ uniting himself to his body by means of spirit baptism; and the twin problems of purity and death—which were not unrelated in the law (see Lev 21:1-3, 11)—are resolved by Christ circumcising the hearts of the Colossians. In one decisive act, Christ accomplished everything necessary for the new creation, with especial attention to the church he would create by means of PSA. Subsequently in redemptive history, new covenant circumcision and baptism by Christ have been carried out as the Spirit of Christ comes to apply all that Christ accomplished for his elect on the cross. In this way, we get a glimpse of how Christ’s death was “finished” (John 19:30) and yet is still being finished.

This “already-but-not-yet” approach to personal reconciliation is confirmed by the nature and scope of the gospel. The gospel message proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is essential for applying the benefits of the cross to the elect. Significantly, it is Christ who died on the cross and it is Christ still—through his mediation from the throne—who is raising sinners to life by means of his Spirit and his gospel. In other words, Jesus, in his humility, died on the cross personally to reconcile his church to his Father, and now in his glory, he builds his church, by means



of Spirit-filled ministers of reconciliation (cf. Col 1:24-2:7). The scope of Christ's cross is universal, but its accomplishments are gradual as the gospel goes into all the earth (1:23).

Still, cosmic reconciliation is not completed by Christ's work of personal reconciliation. With all that the cross accomplished for the believing elect, it will not restore *shalom* between heaven and earth until Christ's enemies are subdued. To say it differently, PSA is only one part of the equation. Aware of this, Paul goes on in 2:15 to explain how Christ's death also effects CV. In conjunction with PSA and even because of PSA, CV puts to shame all those enemies of God who will not be reconciled to God by faith in the Son. To this central but ancillary effect of the cross, we now turn.

### **CHRIST'S DEATH EFFECTS PERSONAL SUBJUGATION**

I have argued that Christ's personal reconciliation is accomplished on the basis of his personal (and covenantal) relationship with his church. On the basis of this genuinely personal relationship, the nature of Christ's atonement is truly substitutionary—person for persons, not person for predicament (sin, justice, evil). This is the primary aspect of Christ's cosmic reconciliation, but it is not the only effect of the cross. Christ's death also reconciled the remainder of creation by subjugating all rebel angels and humans. In theology, this aspect of the atonement has been labeled *Christus Victor*, and Colossians 2:15 has been one of its chief proof-texts. In what follows, I will argue that a central but ancillary work of the cross was Christ's cosmic but personal subjugation of rebel angels and humans.

#### **COLOSSIANS 2:15: PERSONAL SUBJUGATION**

Colossians 2:15 comes after Paul has explained how Christ's death personally reconciles the church (2:11-14) and in the middle of a section contesting the philosophies threatening the Colossians' faith (2:8-23). Therefore, when Paul declares that Christ has "disarmed the rulers and

authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them," he is (1) making a polemical statement against other competing deities and (2) stating that this victory is accomplished by Christ's penal substitution on the cross. To understand how Paul develops CV, we need to develop these twin ideas.

First, Christ's death on the cross is the fulfillment of God's promise to destroy the devil. In Genesis 3:15, the *protoeuangelion* consisted of a declaration to crush the head of the serpent's seed through the bruising of the woman's seed. God imbedded in this gospel promise a plan to restore the world through the means of destroying the evil one.<sup>63</sup> Henceforth, the story of the Bible is one of cosmic warfare.<sup>64</sup> Advocates of CV have done a good job recovering this important biblical theme.

Throughout the Old Testament, salvation for God's people is accompanied by the defeat of and deliverance from God's enemies. For instance, God's covenant with Abraham included the promise of land to the patriarch's offspring *and* the destruction of its inhabitants (Gen 15:13-20). In the Passover, God saved Israel *and* judged Egypt. God manifested his covenantal love for Israel by destroying their enemies (Ps 136). The Davidic covenant promised an eternal throne to the king's offspring *and* the subjugation of the nations. This means that some of those nations will come to find salvation through David's offspring, but others will not. The Psalmist regularly cries out for God's righteous intervention and salvation against over the enemies. In Esther, the people of God are delivered at the moment that God turns the sword on Haman, the descendent of Agag. Across the canon and ultimately in the new creation, God manifests his glory by means of saving his people and judging his enemies.<sup>65</sup>

Colossians 2:15, along with Hebrews 2:14-15 and 1 John 3:8, is the capstone of this biblical theological truth: God's salvation defeats all other oppressive competitors. On the cross, Jesus won the victory for his people. He defeated Satan and every other false god. In the context of Colossians,

the other philosophies lacked true wisdom and cosmic power. Consequently, they were inferior to Jesus. Paul writes in 2:8-23 that the spirits behind these philosophies—the invisible spirits Paul calls “rulers and authorities”—were defeated foes.

Paul’s point is this: Do not let any false spirit, philosophy, or religious persuasion lead you astray. Christ has triumphed over them all. More broadly, since the Father delivered the members of his covenant from the dominion of darkness (Col 1:13-14), there is no need to return to the “elemental spirits of this world,” for they have died to them and are alive in Christ. Thus, the truth that Christ’s death defeated all other “rulers and authorities” is a strong pastoral argument for abiding in Christ. Yet, we still need to understand how Christ’s victory relates to his legal sacrifice. This is the second point to be made from Colossians 2:15.

To understand Colossians 2:15, we must see how it depends on 2:14. In Paul’s letter, it is necessary to understand what “armed” the rulers and authorities and how Christ’s death rendered these rulers and authorities useless against the saints of God. In order, we need to clarify who these rulers and authorities were, what armed them, and how Christ’s death caused their defeat.

First, “rulers and authorities” refer to the inimical spirits who opposed Christ and his church.<sup>66</sup> As Colossians 1:16 states, God in Christ created these invisible spirits and endowed them with authority on earth (cf. Deut 32:8-9; Dan 7:2-8). However, through rebellion against their maker, these demonic spirits have joined with Satan to deceive humanity and Christ’s church.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, Paul informs the Colossians that Christ’s death has brought cosmic *shalom* by pacifying these spiritual agents of wickedness.

Second, “the devil,” Jesus said, “is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Jesus’ testimony affirms the historicity of Genesis 3. In the beginning, the serpent took the word of God and twisted it to sow doubt in the mind of Adam and Eve. Satan tried to do the same thing with Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4). Following Satan’s

lead, the demonic spirits that Paul describes in Colossians 2:15 take God’s word and use it to deceive and kill. This is part of the cosmic warfare threatening the Colossian church.

In Colossians, the elemental spirits are misusing God’s word, especially its teaching on circumcision, to tempt the Colossians to believe false philosophies (2:8) and seemingly wise but worthless acts of religion (2:20-23).<sup>68</sup> Therefore, it is apparent from a careful reading of Colossians that the weapon of choice is the law.<sup>69</sup> The false teachers were “inspired” by these spirits and tempted the Colossian believers to turn away from Christ with the very laws that God meant to draw people to Christ (see 1 Tim 1:8-11). In response, Paul tells how the crucifixion canceled God’s legal demands (v. 14) resulting in the defeat of the powers (v. 15). More specifically, by showing that these Colossians believers are dead to sin and alive in Christ, Paul shows that the rulers and authorities have no means of controlling them any longer. The fear of death is dead, and the Colossians now are seated with Christ in heavenly places (Col 3:1-4).

In short, Jesus’ death rendered the law inoperable and no longer able to condemn those who died with him. While it would take us too long to consider all the ways that Christ fulfilled, terminated, and reapplied the law, we can see from 2:11-14 that what Paul has in mind is the annulment of the old covenant with its legal demands. On the cross, Jesus received the curses of the law earned by the members of his body—the church that was at one time hostile towards the law and alienated from God (1:21). At the same time, by means of his death and resurrection Jesus established a new covenant by his blood. This covenant was not made with the world (i.e., rebellious spirits and unbelieving humans), but with those who would believe on Christ by means of the new birth. This leads to the third point.

The overarching point to be made from 2:15 is that Christ’s death disarms and defeats the rulers and authorities. Especially in the early church some thought that the “disarming” was actually

Christ “stripping away” his flesh because the same word is used in 3:9.<sup>70</sup> However, it seems better to follow Moo who argues that God stripped the rulers and authorities of any power.<sup>71</sup> Through Christ’s death, God publicly exposed the weakness of these “usurpers of authority.”<sup>72</sup> As Bird and Wright acknowledge, this public defeat stands at the heart of CV and the cross itself. However, as I argue above, “victory [must come] through vicarious punishment.”<sup>73</sup> As Henri Blocher comments, “Efforts to elude the thought that justice was satisfied, and thus the bond that was against us removed, look strangely artificial”—artificial, and in the case of Colossians, incomplete.<sup>74</sup>

In the second half of 2:15, Paul uses a Roman military custom to depict Christ parading his captured enemies as a victorious general.<sup>75</sup> While some commentators take the final “in him” to refer exclusively to the cross, it fits better with 2:11-14 to see Christ and his death and resurrection as the antecedent.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, verse 15 espouses a “temporal progression” which parallels a previous point that the effect of Christ’s death has a ripple effect on the universe.<sup>77</sup> In this case, Christ’s death first disarms the powers, then in his enthronement (i.e., his resurrection and ascension) he parades them as a defeated foe and now, after Pentecost, the strongholds of Satan are being overrun by the power of the gospel. Satan’s captives are being set free because Christ “removed any power that these evil spirits might have over us,” by once and for all nailing the law and its legal demands to the cross.<sup>78</sup>

Through PSA Christ effects CV. By means of personal reconciliation and personal subjugation, Christ brings about cosmic *shalom*. In relation to 1:20, Christ personally reconciles the church to God by means of his atoning sacrifice. Then, with the same event (the cross), Christ brings about the other half of cosmic *shalom* by means of personally subduing all creatures—angelic and human—who refuse to submit to God in Christ. In 2:15, Paul has angelic beings in view. However, when the whole canon of Scripture is reviewed, it

is clear that Christ’s death and resurrection gave him authority over all flesh, such that he has the authority to grant eternal life to the ones given him by the Father (John 17:2), and at the end of the age, Christ by means of his death has authority to open the seals of judgment and personally subdue all men and women who refused to call him Lord (see Rev 5-6, 19-20).

In the realized eschatology of 2:15 this victorious disarmament is presented in clear and certain terms. Yet, this existential reality is still forthcoming. Even as Satan is a defeated foe and the inimical spirits have been stripped of all authority, many in the world—including Christians—still do not know that. This is why Paul writes his letter and labors with unceasing anguish to proclaim the gospel to the world (1:23-29). The rulers and authorities continue to deceive and misrepresent the truth, but the gospel announces liberty to captives and sheds light on the defeat of the powers and principalities. Because of his death, Christ has been given authority over all creation (Matt 28:18), and through him God is reconciling the world to himself—by means of peace-making and pacification.

At present, creation continues to groan (cf. Rom 8:18-22), but as the Gospel gathers more of the elect, the number of days between today and the last day shrink. Christ who reigns on high will return and complete what he has started. In short, since Pentecost, the world has witnessed the effects of the cross—PSA personally reconciling the church unto God and CV liberating Christians from the deceptive bondage of the elemental spirits. This is the point of 2:20 with its reminder that the Colossians have died to the power of the elemental spirits. All that remains is the number of the elect coming to completion, and the wickedness of the world reaching a boiling point where Christ will return to save his own and remove once and for all his enemies—angelic and human. Colossians anticipates this final victory, but it does not discuss the matter as Revelation does.

## A FINAL WORD: COSMIC RECONCILIATION REQUIRES PENAL SUBSTITUTION AND *CHRISTUS VICTOR*

When we consider all the biblical data about the cross in Colossians 1-2, the culminating point is that cosmic reconciliation consists of both personal reconciliation of Christ's church and personal subjugation of his enemies. Both of these works come from the singular event of the cross, and both are being worked out in history. In this regard, advocates of CV are right to see 2:15 as defending the view that Christ died to defeat evil and bring justice to the world. Truly, CV is a *central* aspect of the cross, but it is not *the center* of the cross. Many conceptions of CV go too far. Instead of complementing PSA, they replace it with CV, or reduce PSA so much that the justice of God is impugned. These views are typically right in what they affirm but err in what they deny—namely PSA.

By contrast, advocates of PSA need to give attention to PSA *and* CV. They need to come to passages like Colossians 1-2 and wrestle with all the data. Instead of quickly fitting certain verses into preexisting systematic categories, they need to wrestle with the variegated metaphors that Scripture uses to speak of Christ and the cross. Defenders of orthodoxy and preachers of PSA need not fear a more nuanced view of the cross, so long as it attends to all the biblical data in all of its proper proportions. In truth, Christ's cross is the one thing that reconciles all things. It is by his death that the cosmos is and is being reconciled—first the church, then his enemies. Finally when the sons of God are revealed, Christ will make all things new—in heaven and on earth.

In conclusion, when 1:15-2:23 is read as one literary unit, the latter section (1:21-2:23) provides a binary explanation of 1:20. Exegetically, Paul's presentation of the cross in Colossians unifies PSA and CV as the two central aspects of his cross. At the same time, Paul distinguishes personal reconciliation for the church from personal subjugation of the inimical powers opposing the church. While Colossians does not answer all the questions

concerning PSA and CV, it clearly establishes the priority of PSA to CV and shows how cosmic reconciliation is the net result of personal reconciliation (PSA) and personal subjugation (CV).

On a practical level, preachers should feel no hesitation to preach CV, so long as they remember that Satan's deathblow comes from the penal substitution of Christ on the cross. Only when God's legal demands are satisfied by God's legal substitute can the defeat of sin, death, and the devil be truly good news. This is how Paul presents the gospel in Colossians, and it is a stellar model for explaining how the various intentions of the cross work together.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (1931; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1951). Hans Boersma suggests that before the evangelical reemergence of CV, Aulén's book was an "isolated occurrence" in post-Enlightenment theology (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 193-99). Conversely, Phillip Bethancourt shows that variations of *Christus Victor* appear in Karl Barth, post-Vatican II Latin America, and feminist theology, before numerous evangelicals expounded this view ("Christ the Warrior King: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Analysis of the Divine Warrior Theme in Christology" [Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010], 47-52).

<sup>2</sup> Often, when CV is fore-fronted, the penal nature of the cross changes. For instance, Boersma replaces a person-to-person exchange with a corporate version of substitution he calls "penal representation" (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 177-79).

<sup>3</sup> I am intentionally leaving out a fourth group identified by Steve Chalke. See his article, "The Redemption of the Cross," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of the Atonement* (eds., Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 34-45. According to Chalke, the "penal substitution

of the pulpit” and “the seminar room” is a “monochrome” doctrine that fails to perceive Christ’s “multicoloured” atonement (ibid., 35, 37). For Chalke, PSA presents God as a wrathful deity who demands blood sacrifice in order to be appeased (ibid., 38). The trouble with his view is its reductionism. As Thomas R. Schreiner observed, “No credible or scholarly defender of penal substitution ... teaches such a theology” (“The SBJT Forum: The Atonement under Fire,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11:2 [2007]: 108). The operative word is “credible.” Errant versions of PSA exist, but these caricatures are not the same as scholarly treatments that incorporate all the biblical data and yet retain PSA as the heart of the atonement.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best treatment is Graham A. Cole, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 124-30, 236-38. See also, Henri Blocher, “Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment,” in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation* (ed., John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 67-91; Sinclair Ferguson, “Christus Victor et Propitiator: The Death of Christ, Substitute and Conqueror,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (eds., Sam Storms and Justin Taylor; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 171-89.

<sup>5</sup> The death of Christ may also be evidenced in two other places in Colossians. First, in 1:24-2:5, Paul describes his gospel ministry as that of a suffering servant—not the suffering servant—“filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (1:24). As Christ suffered on the cross, so Paul carries the cross of an apostle (cf. 1 Cor 4:1, 9-13) and portrays in his visible sufferings a testimony to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Second, in 3:5, Paul commands those who have been raised with Christ to put to death sin (“what is earthly in you”). For those who have died and risen with Christ (3:1-4), they are to ‘re-enact’ the cross daily by putting off the old man and putting on the new.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 46-60. Others like

Dunn, Wright, and Bird insist on using Colossians’ own terms to identify the problem—they call it the Colossian “philosophy” (N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* [Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 1986], 25-26; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, [New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 23-35; Michael F. Bird, *Colossians, Philemon*, [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009], 15-26). Either way, the solution is the same: Christ the Lord supplies all that the Colossians need, and thus the positive presentation of Christ in 1:15-20 serves as the wellspring for all that follows.

<sup>7</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Colossians*, in vol. 3 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* (ed., Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 371-76. For a more in-depth look at the religious syncretism present in Colossae, see Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (WUNT 77; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> See Bird (*Colossians, Philemon*, 50) who relies on the work of Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians, Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), 67.

<sup>9</sup> Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 178; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 194.

<sup>10</sup> Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 133-37; Robert A. Peterson, “‘To Reconcile to Himself All Things’: Colossians 1:20,” *Presbyterion* 36 (2010): 37-46.

<sup>11</sup> E. Brandenburger, “Cross,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed., Colin Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:401-02.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 377.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Leithart, “Structure in Colossians 1-2” [cited 30 July 2013]. Online: <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2010/11/04/structure-in-colossians-1-2/>. Thanks to Sam Emadi for pointing out this article.

<sup>14</sup> While the center of this chiasmus may seem surpris-

ing—something Leithart acknowledges—it does cohere Paul’s clear intention to elevate his gospel above the false philosophies in Colossae.

<sup>15</sup>The second chiasmus centers on Christ’s “circumcision,” which is a metaphorical description of his death. The death of Christ stands prominently in 1:21-2:23 lies at the center of this chiasmus, giving explanation to the whole pericope. Through Christ’s cross the Colossians have been reconciled to God (1:22), made alive in Christ (2:11-14), and liberated from the elemental spirits (2:20). It is this death that reconciles all things (Col 1:20).

<sup>16</sup>Gregory Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 240.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>19</sup>Bird, *Colossians, Philemon*, 60.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>21</sup>Boyd makes the same error when he fails to observe the change in subject between Eph 1:20-22 and 2:1-8. In the same section of *God at War*, he argues that cosmic reconciliation is God’s primary intention because Paul speaks of it first in Ephesians (Boyd, *God at War*, 251-52).

<sup>22</sup>I am using expegetical in a slightly broader sense than it is typically applied. In the flow of thought, Colossians 1:21-2:23 expands on the theological truths asserted in Paul’s hymn (1:15-20).

<sup>23</sup>Moo says of Col 1:21-23 that “the high theology of vv. 15-20 is being applied” (*Colossians and Philemon*, 138). This is right. Paul is applying his theology in Col 1:21-2:23, but he is doing more. Paul’s puzzling statement in 1:20 is best understood as an invitation to see how the following verses explicate the details of Christ’s cross.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 133-37; Shawn Bawulski, “Reconciliationism, a Better View of Hell: Reconciliationism and Eternal Punishment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (2013):129-31.

<sup>25</sup>Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 57.

<sup>26</sup>On reading “he” (*autos*) as God the Father, against the textual commentary of Bruce Metzger, see P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 64; Har-

ris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 57-58; Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 140-41.

<sup>27</sup>I. Howard Marshall, “The Meaning of ‘Reconciliation,’” in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology* (ed., Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 126-27.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>29</sup>A *merism* is a figure of speech which includes everything between two extreme elements.

<sup>30</sup>For a thorough defense of this position, one that considers all the theological positions, see Peterson, “To Reconcile to Himself All Things,” 37-46.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>32</sup>John Murray, “The Reconciliation,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (4 Vols.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 4:105.

<sup>33</sup>On the subject of substitution and solidarity, see J. I. Packer, “What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” in *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 84-88.

<sup>34</sup>Murray, “The Reconciliation,” 102.

<sup>35</sup>Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 244-49.

<sup>36</sup>In truth, “forgiveness” is attributed to a number of causes: baptism (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38); knowledge of salvation (Luke 1:77); receiving or believing the gospel (Luke 24:27; Acts 10:43; cf. Acts 13:48), and turning from sin (Acts 26:18). It is also a gift of God (Acts 5:31), which can be missed by blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). The point to be made is that the forgiveness of sins is the most basic gift of the new covenant, which the blood of Christ ratifies.

<sup>37</sup>Because of the accursed nature of the cross, stipulated by Deut 21:22-23, I am inclined to see the Mosaic law standing behind these verses (so Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115-19). For the Jews, it was the legal demand of the law that stood to condemn them. Perhaps, because the Colossians church was mostly Gentile, Paul uses a non-Jewish term—hence, O’Brien’s insistence that Col 2:14 speaks of a universal IOU (*Colossians, Philemon*, 124-26). Nevertheless, since the law of God in creation and the laws of the old covenant do not stand at odds with one another, and since both are covenantal in nature, it is permissi-

ble—even optimal—to read Col 2:14 as God’s legal case against sinners—Jew or Gentile.

- <sup>38</sup>Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 249-50.
- <sup>39</sup>George Smeaton, *The Apostle’s Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 305-06.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 306.
- <sup>41</sup>John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 158.
- <sup>42</sup>David G. Peterson, *Transformed by God: New Covenant Life and Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2012), 17-43.
- <sup>43</sup>I am aware that the presence of (new) covenant theology in Paul is scant and debated. I am simply suggesting that Col 2, with its use of circumcision, baptism, and forgiveness of sins may be best understood by comparison to the covenantal structures of the Bible. This is especially true when in Col 2:16 Paul says that Christ is the “substance” which the food laws, festivals, and special days foreshadowed.
- <sup>44</sup>Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 503.
- <sup>45</sup>Peterson, *Transformed by God*, 35.
- <sup>46</sup>Could it be that when Paul speaks of the cancellation of the handwritten “record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands,” he is intending to hint at another handwritten law (cf. Exod 31:18)—namely the new covenant’s law written on the hearts of his people (Jer 31:33)? The imagery is suggestive.
- <sup>47</sup>For such a theological proposal, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 380-94.
- <sup>48</sup>David Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath & Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001).
- <sup>49</sup>Writing on the priestly nature of the cross, Hugh Martin avers, “If the atonement of Christ falls under the category of his priesthood,” which it certainly does, “it is impossible it can be impersonal, indefinite, unlimited; for the priesthood [as typified in the Old Testament] is not” (*The Atonement: In Its Relation to the Covenant, the Priesthood, the Intercession of Our Lord*

[London: Ames Nisbet & Company, 1870], 55-56).

- <sup>50</sup>Darrin W. Snyder Belousek makes the broad assertion against PSA that “Scripture does not reveal either a divine character of a covenant relationship that is essentially or necessarily retributive” (*Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross the Mission of the Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 48). Defenders of PSA would not describe God as *essentially* wrathful but would argue that economically and covenantally, God’s retributive justice is a necessary aspect of his covenantal love (see Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 70-73).
- <sup>51</sup>Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 30, is a notable example. Arguing for a kaleidoscopic approach to the cross, Green and Baker deny any abiding fixity to the inspired metaphors for the atonement. Instead, they suggest that contemporary models and metaphors should be employed in order to convey the message of the cross. However, such willingness to discard (or demote) inspired metaphors in exchange for new models reveals their willingness to elevate the changing currents of culture over the Bible and their inability to see that Christ’s atoning work is *sui generis* and incapable of adequate description apart from biblical revelation. Cf. Stephen Holmes *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (ed., Richard Bauckham, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 248.
- <sup>52</sup>Cf. Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 41-43; cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 98-108.
- <sup>53</sup>See John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970); Greg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003).
- <sup>54</sup>Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument of Credobaptism versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2002), 116-17.
- <sup>55</sup>Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign*

of the New Covenant in Christ (eds., Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright; Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006), esp. 75-79.

<sup>56</sup>On the notion that “handmade” is synonymous with idolatry, see G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2008), 188-96.

<sup>57</sup>Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” 75-79.

<sup>58</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 653.

<sup>59</sup>The strongest support for this objective sense is to understand the subsequent phrase, “by putting off the body of flesh,” as referring to the death of Christ, as it does in Col 1:22. Cf. O’ Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 116-17; Dunn, *Colossians*, 157-58.

<sup>60</sup>Moo spends little time considering the way “the body of flesh” qualifies Christ’s circumcision. Instead, he notes the strong emphasis on identification with Christ in v. 11 (*Colossians and Philemon*, 200-01). Both he and Constantine Campbell (*Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 196-97) stress the “realm transfer” that takes place when a believer dies with Christ and is freed from their “body of flesh.” Of course, removal of the dead flesh does not happen existentially until a believer dies physically. Hence, it seems better to read Col 2:11 as referring to Christ’s real displacement of the flesh (i.e., physical death) on behalf of those who will later (in redemptive history) enjoy spiritual circumcision.

<sup>61</sup>Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” 76.

<sup>62</sup>Under the terms of the old covenant, the outpouring of the Spirit followed repentance (cf. Prov 1:23); under the stipulations of the new covenant, the Spirit regenerates a believer when the covenant mediator—enthroned at God’s right hand—grants the power to repent and believe (Joel 2:32; cf. Acts 5:31; 13:48; 2 Tim 2:25).

<sup>63</sup>For a biblical-theological treatment of this skull-crushing salvation, see James M. Hamilton, “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *Southern Baptist Jour-*

*nal of Theology* 10:2 (2006): 30-55.

<sup>64</sup>Bethancourt, “Christ the Warrior-King,” 167-68.

<sup>65</sup>James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>66</sup>Daniel G. Reid, “Principalities and Powers,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (eds., Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 747-52.

<sup>67</sup>P. T. O’Brien, “Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (ed., D. A. Carson; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 128-41. In Colossians another term is used, “the elemental spirits of the world” (2:8, 20). O’Brien describes them as “spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements” (*Colossians, Philemon*, 132).

<sup>68</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 156-58.

<sup>69</sup>Dunn suggests that error is not heresy and that false teaching is too strong a word. Dunn has a point; Colossians is not Galatians (ibid., 155-56). However, Paul writes Colossians to teach the church how the Lord, not the law, is their life (Col 3:1-4), and that growth and godliness comes by faith in him (2:6-7) as they walk in the power of Christ, not the flesh.

<sup>70</sup>See the discussion in O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 127.

<sup>71</sup>Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 213-14. He appeals to the use of *ekdyō*, a related verb, and the “personal object that follows the verb.” He comments notes that in biblical Greek, the idea is always that “someone stripped the clothes off someone else” (ibid.).

<sup>72</sup>Wright, *Colossians*, 121.

<sup>73</sup>Blocher, “Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment,” 87.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Arnold, *Colossians*, 387-88.

<sup>76</sup>Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 111-12; Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 215-16. For an alternative reading, see Bird reads *autō* as “by the cross,” because of the dative pronoun “relates back to the dative ‘by the cross’ in v. 14” (*Colossians, Philemon*, 82).

<sup>77</sup>Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 216.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.