

God in the Hands of an Angry Zahnd? (Review of *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* by Brian Zahnd)

By Derek Rishmawy

Introduction

“God is wrath? Or God is love?” This dichotomy printed in bold on the back drives the argument of Brian Zahnd’s new book, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. Zahnd is the pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. He’s made a name for himself among the progressive Evangelical set for his powerful preaching and his no-holds-barred rhetoric against his opponents on issues like Calvinism, just war, and so forth.

This book continues the trajectory. As the title signals, Zahnd’s driving interest is to proclaim the good news that God is not fundamentally a God of wrath such as the one Jonathan Edwards preached in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” There’s nothing petty, vindictive, vengeful, punitive, or violent about him—instead he is a truly loving God. He doesn’t sit there disgusted with sinners. He’s not one of the angry, dark gods of the pagan myths.

God is the one we see in Jesus Christ—the true Word the Father has spoken—crucified by the world’s sin, all the while holding out the forgiveness of the Father. God’s singular disposition towards the world and towards his creatures is a pure, benevolent, non-violent love. There’s nothing to be afraid of anymore—Jesus is what God has to say and Jesus is forgiving love.

Along with this positive message, of course, there is a heavy critique of a variety of teachings Zahnd believes incompatible with this news of God’s singularly loving nature: Old Testament violence such as that of the Canaanite conquest, the notion of God’s personal wrath, any sort of atonement connected to penalty or satisfaction, any sort of reading of Scripture (or view of Scripture) that supports them, as well as some doctrines of hell, and the end-times.

Reactive Theology

Now, normally when I review books, I try to find some positives before moving to critique. So, here’s one: Zahnd is an effective writer and you can tell he’s probably one hell of a preacher. Also, you can tell his main heart is for people to know and trust God. I don’t doubt that for a minute.

Beyond that, the negatives of the book heavily outweigh the positives. On the whole, it is a rhetorically-explosive collection of false dichotomies and theological half-truths aggressively pressed against misrepresentations, gross caricatures, or extreme examples. He seems to relish aggressive, unfair rhetorical flourishes. I will be blunt and say Zahnd seems incapable of representing any of his opponents fairly.

I’m not trying to be harsh or a jerk, but in this case, Zahnd shot first. He pulls no punches talking about the sadistic, cruel, bloodthirsty, “monster God” he opposes—and presumably those teaching penal substitution, etc. believe in. Nor does he mind delving into some unfair, armchair psychologizing about people who need to believe in such things, explaining their views in a light they’d be reticent to own.

Perhaps it's a function of the fact that he is very explicitly writing against his old self. By his own confession he was a fire-and-brimstone, turn-or-burn evangelist, who prayed to have visions of hell so he could preach it more earnestly. It sounds unhealthy and I'm honestly happy he's moved past some of that. But it's also a very unrecognizable portrait of the theological psychology or logic of millions of those believers who hold versions of positions he is criticizing by way of reaction. In which case, the choice presented to the readers is a false one. In that sense, I suppose it's a different sort of "turn or burn" message.

It's an example of something I've talked about before. Often when someone changes views, it looks like "I used to believe position X for stupid, hateful reason Y. Reason Y must be the only reason to believe position X," only here it's "I used to believe position X in this stupid, hateful way, ergo, this is the only way to believe X." It's a [failure of the intellectual imagination](#) that comes when you absolutize and project your theological experience onto others.

Look, I'm not saying Zahnd is imagining problems with the doctrines he's writing about. Nor am I denying they've been poorly handled in the past (and present). I've wrestled a long time with many of them and tried to [critique](#) and correct these walking caricatures myself. My point is that Zahnd's cure for this diseased theology is the sort that ends up killing the patient.

Though the review that follows is long—stupidly long, really—I can't engage all the points or serious errors he makes. Instead, I'll simply note that if you're interested in the difficult subjects of wrath, judgment, Old Testament violence, the cross and so forth, even the end times, and the fate of people in other religions, Joshua Ryan Butler has written two very fine, sensitive (and readable!) works on the subject [The Skeletons in God's Closet](#), and [The Pursuing God](#), which do all that Zahnd is rightly attempting to, without making the serious mistakes Zahnd does in the process.

Well, with that all said, let's proceed to the review.

Scripture and Jesus

Instead of Edwards' portrait of a God holding people over the fires, disgusted, ready to respond to sin in retributive wrath, Zahnd wants us to see God as Jeremiah portrays him:

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
declares the Lord. (Jer. 31:20)

A beautiful passage to cling to, to be sure. The problem, though, is that Zahnd admits there are plenty of texts in Scripture that go on at length about God's retributive wrath and anger towards sin, so, "if you *want* to find passages like that in the Bible, you can" (9). "If we want a vengeful God of retributive wrath meting out violent justice upon his enemies...we can find that depiction of God in the Old Testament" (35). How does he deal with them?

Well, there are at least two strategies. Zahnd's account of Scripture is actually very important to the revisionary work he's trying to do, so I'll camp out here for a bit first.

Zahnd: Jesus, not Joshua

The first is to make a wedge between the Bible and the Bible. So, we have all these texts about God's love, the portrait and reality of it in Christ and so forth, but then these texts about wrath, violence, and even the "genocide" of the conquest of Canaan. Here he poses a trilemma: (1) we accept the genocide of the conquest as commanded by God and worry that God is a "monstrous" God who could ask it of me, which is abhorrent; (2) we admit that God can change and develop and deny God's immutability, which is heresy; or (3) we admit we need to start reading our Bibles differently (26).

Zahnd suggests we should opt for door three. But what he means by "read the Bible in a different way", means less a rereading of those verses, and rather a rethinking of the nature of Scripture. Instead of reading it flat with the OT as authoritative as the NT, or as a unified, seamless book, we need to resist making "the Old Testament univocal." We need to see that it gives us many portraits of God, not just one (14), and "they're not all in perfect harmony" (15). Does God require animal sacrifice or not? Leviticus seems to think so, but David seems to suggest otherwise (Ps. 40:6). We can't make all the texts sing together.

That's because for Zahnd the Old Testament is "a journey of discovery", of "progressive revelation" (15), where Israel slowly came to learn to know her God until the point where Jesus arrives (31). God didn't change, but Israel's understanding did. For a time, God allowed Israel's "Bronze Age" assumptions about the violent gods who fought and punished to get baked into their conception of God as they told the story, but slowly they came to know better. And finally, Jesus shows up and "closes the book on vengeance."

God says, "Listen to my Son" on Mt. Tabor and sometimes the Son who teaches us to love our enemies, forgive them, and turn from violence overrules and contradicts Moses and Elijah, whom he supersedes (57). We need to recognize parts of the Bible may be wrong, sinful even, and obsolete, but "nothing about the risen Christ is obsolete" (61). When Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4, he proclaims the year of the Lord's favor but leaves out "the day of vengeance of our God", improving Isaiah's message by purging it from a nationalist lust for retaliation (41). Jesus' Sermon the Mount, not Joshua's conquest, is authoritative for Zahnd, since he is a "Christian, not a Biblicist" (60). And Jesus, the true and final Word of God, comes telling us about a God who is like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who forgives without anger or atonement, and whose judgment is never retributive.

Reading the Bible this way, then, saves our view of God and saves us from ever being tempted to use texts of judgment or war to justify our own wars against our enemies. And so on.

Revisiting the Wedge

Obviously, I can't do the whole argument justice, but you get the drift. So, is there really a problem here? Call them Legion, for they are many.

First, when it comes to Zahnd's Canaanite wedge, I'll just note that people use just about any sort of text to justify going to war and violence against their enemies. People often forget some of the most cited texts justifying the Crusades were not the Conquest narratives (not really cited at all), but [Jesus' own words](#) about abandoning all, suffering loss of riches, health, and life for the sake of following Christ and loving their brethren—which in this case meant going to liberate Eastern Christians and the Holy Land who had been overrun, slaughtered, and oppressed by Muslims. I'm not defending or critiquing the Crusades here. My point is that if "these texts have been (mis)used to justify violence and war" is a valid criterion for grabbing the scissors, Zahnd might lose more verses than he wants.

That said, I do think we need to re-read the Scriptures. Justifying genocide isn't a great option, nor is a mutable God. But Zahnd's simple trilemma gives the reader no sense that there are other ways to re-read the Bible. And that's exactly what scholars have done, helping us to see that the conquest narratives are *not* describing divinely-sanctioned genocide (a freighted word which appears nowhere in the Bible).

But Zahnd never utters a word about developments in understanding the way hyperbolic, Ancient Near Eastern war rhetoric shapes the narratives, or about the Biblical emphasis on driving out the Canaanites from the land instead of killing them, or the emphasis on the forewarning given them, or of God's patience, or any of a half-dozen other important exegetical, historical, and theological considerations OT scholars and theologians have raised to help us better understand these texts. Instead, your option is to read them the way Richard Dawkins imagines Christians ought to, preparing yourself for God to show up commanding genocide at any time, or avail yourself of Zahnd's scissors.

(Incidentally, Paul Copan & Matthew Flanagan's book "[Did God Really Command Genocide?](#)" deals extensively with all the issues Zahnd raises, including more. In the meantime, here's a [good article by Copan](#), and another by [Alastair Roberts](#). Oh, and again, Butler's book.)

Jeremiah the Split-minded Idolater?

Beyond the wedge, though, there are other problems to Zahnd's approach towards accommodation and progressive revelation in the Old Testament. I believe in both doctrines, but Zahnd's specific versions yield severe problems.

First, recognizing multiple voices in the OT need not yield contradictory cacophony. It's possible to discern a complex polyphony among the choir of the apostles and prophets, which is indeed harmonious when seen in light of the Old Testament's fulfillment in Christ. More on that later. Still, Zahnd's portrayal leaves us not only with Old Testament authors in dialogue with each other, but even divided contradicting themselves. Because there isn't a major prophet that doesn't have glorious prophecies of redemption and love right alongside devastating texts of retribution and judicial wrath.

Take Jeremiah. Yes, we've got the agonized cry of love in Jeremiah 31. But also, chapters upon chapters of threatened judgment at the hands of enemies God will call from the North as judgment on their idolatry:

*Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place,
upon man and beast,
upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground;
it will burn and not be quenched. (7:20)*

Such judgment is what Jeremiah depicts him as enacting in the Exile and judgement of Judah:

Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, saying, ‘Oh, do not do this abomination that I hate!’ But they did not listen or incline their ear, to turn from their evil and make no offerings to other gods. Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, and they became a waste and a desolation, as at this day. (44:4-6)

Or again, even in his prophecy of salvation and hope in chapter 31 we find those terrible, retributive texts:

*All your lovers have forgotten you;
they care nothing for you;
for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
the punishment of a merciless foe,
because your guilt is great,
because your sins are flagrant.*

¹⁵ *Why do you cry out over your hurt?
Your pain is incurable.*

*Because your guilt is great,
because your sins are flagrant,
I have done these things to you.*

¹⁶ *Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity;
those who plunder you shall be plundered,
and all who prey on you I will make a prey.*

¹⁷ *For I will restore health to you,
and your wounds I will heal,
declares the Lord,*

because they have called you an outcast:

‘It is Zion, for whom no one cares!’ (Jeremiah 31:14-17)

Here the Lord promises to heal and save and bring them back from exile, yet he nonetheless claims credit for bringing the nations in to judge them “because your sins are flagrant.” What’s more, his merciful salvation will consist in punishing the nations whom he used to judge them since they did so sinfully.

Which Jeremiah ought we believe? The one in this verse in chapter 31, or the other verses in chapter 31? The one that sounds most like Jesus, says Zahnd. We’ll get to Jesus, but stop and think for a moment about what this means about God’s revelation in the Old Testament. He gives his people prophets—and makes a really big deal about not prophesying falsely in his name and

misrepresenting him (Deut. 13, 18; Jer. 18). But then apparently allows all of them to grossly misrepresent him to Israel for hundreds and thousands of years, giving them true testimony about him right next to false testimony in the space of a few breaths?

Really think about this. Does that make sense in light of the huge premium God places on not making up false idols and representations of him (Exod. 20:4)? And yet Zahnd's theology of progressive revelation and accommodation would have us believe that right at the center of Israel's Scriptures God tolerated an idolatrous depiction of him as a "monster" of the worst sort—a far greater issue than imagining his strength to be symbolically represented by a calf.

Accommodations: Augustinian or Socinian

This is where we come to the difference between the sort of accommodation taught by the [Augustinian tradition, and the later Socinian revision](#). In a nutshell, it's the difference between telling your kid babies come from the love of a mother and a father while skipping some of the details, or telling your kid babies come from the stork. One is accommodation as adapted but true communication, while the other is a (white?) lie.

Now, God *has* accommodated himself to us in Scripture, both in general because of our cognitive differences, but also even allowing for some cultural and historical accommodation. That means all language about God in Scripture is anthropomorphic and analogical. What's more, it also means that God may patiently work in different times and places in less than ideal ways. Jesus says Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of human heart (Matt 19:8), and even Calvin followed this insight teaching that the OT slavery laws were moral accommodations and limits for a harsh time, which God purposely intended to pass away with the old dispensation.

Or when it comes to things like the sacrificial system—the heart of Old Testament religion—Augustine says that, yes, it is a form of religion adapted to the time and place, but it is an *appropriate* adaptation. It's the same religion before Christ, whose signs and figures point ahead to Christ, but a God-ordained similarity so that there is basic unity of God's ways and works across dispensations, or stages in covenant history. On this view of accommodation, God does not lie, nor does he abandon his people to lies about his character. And this progress of revelation is that of a continuing, unfolding storyline told by a self-consistent, self-revealing Author.

Zahnd's approach is still more radical. Instead, he takes what amounts to an old-school, German critical evolutionary view of the Old Testament as developing primitive religion—scrubs some of the worst anti-Semitism originally associated with it—and repackages it as the complex option which honors the Bible's mystery, Jesus, and so forth. What's really going on is that instead of seeing the tensions, wrestling with them in order to be blessed with a fuller portrait of God, you get the easy resolution of finding out the early Biblical authors (with their primitive, "Bronze Age" ideas) were just grossly and radically confused about God the whole time, inadvertently lying about him. And God was letting them.

Zahnd would rather admit contradiction for the sake of simple consistency (or, simplistic) and shave off any hard edge that doesn't fit instead of doing the hard work of thinking through a

complex consistency which incorporates all the evidence. It is the classic example of a canon within a canon, of chopping verses to make it fit your system—of implicitly telling God to shut up because you don't like what he's saying.

I know Zahnd is not trying to rehash “liberal, sloppy, pick and choose theology” but push deeper into the revelation of Christ (97). The thing is, that's not really fair to classic liberal theology. The old-school liberals were careful and [always claimed a deeper fidelity to the person and spirit of Christ](#) and the Father he came to reveal, over and against the mere letter of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Despite his best intentions, Zahnd's project ends up treading some old, liberal ground in a way that would make Albrecht Ritschl and Adolph Harnack proud.

The Spirit of Marcion

Here I sense, as the great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel said of the German historical critics in his own day, “the Spirit of Marcion, hovering invisibly over many waters, has been brought to clear expression” ([The Prophets](#), 390). Zahnd explicitly repudiates Marcion (60). And it's true, he doesn't have a total rejection of the Old Testament, he believes in a unity between the God of Israel and the God of Jesus, the Creator and the Redeemer, etc. But let's be honest, chalking up Old Testament portraits of God, the sacrificial system, etc. to leftover “Bronze Age” religious impulses isn't a good non-Marcionite move.

Marcionism isn't just a matter of a strict dichotomy between OT and NT, but also certain judgments about what is fitting for God to do. Go read the church Father Tertullian's *The Five Books Against Marcion* or Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*. It's not simply a matter of a Creator God versus a Redeemer God, but rather whether a good God could also be a God who has wrath and executes judgment against sin.

For that reason, it's appropriate to see Zahnd's hermeneutic as a sort of cross-Testamental, Neo-Marcionism. Both Marcion and Zahnd tell us that looking at Jesus means massive, sweeping portions of what the prophets and apostles testify about God (in both Testaments) is categorically false.

And to be honest, I am not so sure he can keep the two Gods together cleanly. I've argued this before, but in the Old Testament, YHWH just *is* the God of the Exodus and is known by what he did there, not just the salvation, but the plagues and forceful judgments (including the death of the firstborn). That's at least as “violent”, if not more so than any Conquest text. And yet, if Zahnd is right, God couldn't have performed any of those acts of judgment.

In which case, confessing the God of Israel as the God of Jesus Christ becomes a much dicier proposition.

Jesus v. Jesus?

Which brings us to Jesus. Zahnd's big trump card is Jesus, or rather, a particular reading of Jesus and a hyper-Christocentrism that even Barth would shake his head at. It is a version of what Andrew Wilson has called the [“Jesus-Tea-Strainer” v. the “Jesus-Lens.”](#) Let's leave aside whether the Sermon on the Mount amounts to a call for pacifism. I'll concede it for now. There

are plenty of Pacifists who don't project that pacifism up into the heavens. The question before us is whether that non-violent, non-retributive Jesus Zahnd holds up, doesn't just strain out Old Testament texts, but also New Testament texts including some of the witness of Christ?

For instance, Zahnd holds up Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Father as the ultimate portrait of God's loving, non-retributive nature (Luke 15). And I love that parable. I love grace. I love forgiveness. Forgiveness *is* God's heart. I've preached that to my students week in and week out.

But what of [Jesus' other parables](#)? In the very same Gospel of Luke, Jesus also tells the parable of the Vineyard Owner and the Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9-18). At the end of it, after the tenants kill his son, Jesus asks, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyards to others." Lest we miss the point, the Vineyard Owner is God in this story, the Father who avenges himself on the foes of his Son.

Or again, at the end of the parable of the Wedding Feast, Jesus says those who come unprepared will be thrown out of the party into the darkness (Matt 22:1-14). Or again, in the parable of the faithless servant who abuses the other servants in his master's absence. This one is actually pretty grizzly, with Jesus declaring that upon his return, "The master will cut him in pieces and make him share the fate of the disobedient" (Luke 12:46).

Even more shocking, think of the parable where the King ends up throwing the unmerciful servant in jail to be tormented for his lack of mercy; Jesus ends that one saying, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35). This is the punchline to his parable on why we ought to forgive our brothers just as God does. Jesus apparently saw no contradiction between threatening retribution against a lack of mercy.

Of course, you may argue that single-parables aren't the way to do theology, in which case, I'd agree (hint, hint). But surveying a *variety* of the parables, you've got a pretty good blend of Old Testament-sounding retribution in Jesus' portrait of his Father.

Jesus also speaks directly of Old Testament accounts of retributive justice and affirms them. In Luke 10, his woes against Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum presumes that the judgment against them was from God and that they stand under similar threat. Similarly, in Luke 17, Jesus talks about the judgment coming at the end and compares it to the judgment of God which came against the world "in the days of Noah" as well as "in the days of Lot", which Genesis clearly attributes to God. And yet Jesus doesn't repudiate it or explain it away but says such a judgment will befall when the Son of Man returns again.

I could go on with text after text where Jesus pronounces or threatens judgment, or assumes that a principle of reciprocity and retribution (more on which later) is at work in God's dealings including his own future works as the Judge (John 5), who will send his angels to "gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace" (Matt 12:41-42) at his Second Coming. Incidentally, this is probably where people got the idea that the Second coming of Jesus might involve a bit more judgment than his first coming. Not their need for vengeance or simply a bad reading of Revelation (172); Jesus seemed to say so himself.

This also seems connected the answer to Jesus leaving off the day of vengeance line from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4. The problem with Jesus' contemporaries was not that they were confused in thinking God would judge their enemies, or that Roman oppression was damnable and needed punishment. Their mistake was excluding themselves from the category of sinner who stands under judgment alongside of them. They didn't realize that if the Day of the Lord's judgment came at that time, they would stand condemned alongside them. They were wrong, because they were unwilling to see themselves as recipients of undeserved mercy, being offered the same chance to repent, as well.

Jesus v. His Personally-Anointed Apostles?

Of course, it doesn't stop there. Jesus disciples seem to have no problem speaking of God's retribution and judgment.

Luke thinks God directly struck down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) as well as Herod (Acts 12:20-23).

Or think of the apostle Peter, whom Zahnd highlights as holding up a high view of Christ (58), since he was "an eyewitness of his majesty" who walked, talked, was commissioned, and inspired by Jesus to bear testimony that we "Listen to the Son" (2 Pet. 1:16-19). In the same letter Zahnd cites, Peter dedicates the next chapter to warning against false teachers and heretics who have condemnation waiting for them and "their destruction has not been sleeping" (2:3). Indeed, God will judge them as he condemned the wicked angels casting them into hell (2:4), flooded the world in Noah's day (2:5), and turned Sodom and Gomorrah into ash as an example of what happens to the ungodly (2:6). The hits just keep coming when you press on into chapter three where Peter assures his readers God's present lack of judgment is just God being patient (3:9), but don't worry, his fire is ready for "the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (3:7). Essentially, the whole book is, *Be righteous, don't worry, God is going to punish your persecutors.*

Paul similarly encourages persecuted believers that God is going to punish their persecutors, "since God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day" (2 Thess. 1:6-9).

Paul speaks plainly of God's future judgment whereby God "will render to each according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness there will be wrath and fury" (Rom. 2:6-7).

What's more, in 1 Corinthians 10 Paul references OT acts of divine judgment against sin—23,000 being struck down, God sending serpents, the Destroyer, etc.—and says, "these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction" (v. 11), as a warning for us not to similarly test Christ. Indeed, if you read him closely, he is arguing that

Christ himself is the agent of judgment in these OT texts. So, yes, Paul agrees with Zahnd that Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, but contrary to Zahnd, he makes a connection between Christ and the OT narratives which puts Christ in the middle of them, instead of using Christ to gut them. Paul says, don't test Christ the way Israel tested God in the Wilderness, otherwise you will provoke him to jealousy (10:22), and presumably judgment. The example works because presumably the same God is at work.

Maybe He Meant All of It

Look, believe me when I say I am not obsessed with judgment, wrath, and so forth. It shows up in my preaching only as often as it does in the text. And to be honest, I worry about playing it up, so I'll often tip-toe. Still, when I survey a lot of these texts—and there are many more—I have to ask: is Jesus, the perfect image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15-20), teaching a Monster-God? Is Paul? Is Peter? I mean, those guys knew him. They had special revelations from him. They encountered him from heaven and performed miracles in his Spirit. Did they miss something? Did they just not read enough Rene Girard, or what?

What's more, am I ready to clip these texts too? Are they all part of the dialogue that we can't harmonize so we have to choose?

Or maybe texts about retribution and wrath in both Old and New Testament are more than just petty vindictiveness or simple bloodlust? Zahnd touches on some of these texts later with his other defusing tactic—and we'll get to that in a moment—but we need to reckon with the fact that all of these texts are there *in the New Testament* from the mouth of Christ himself and his apostles from whom we're allegedly getting our "Jesus is What God Has to Say" theology.

Perhaps Jesus' fulfillment, completion, and, yes, abrogation of some of the Old Testament (as a covenant) is not one of contradiction and supersession, but is a lot more continuous than we might initially be comfortable with. Maybe when Jesus said that the Scriptures "bear witness about me" (John 5:39), and that "Scripture cannot be broken" because it was "the word of God" (John 10:35), he actually meant *all of Scripture*? And when "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27), he didn't use a red pen to cross half of it out?

Upon reviewing the material, then, it seems ultimately quixotic to try and [pit Jesus against his Bible](#) on the subject of wrath, retribution, or judgment.

Well, these points made, that leaves us to actually wrestle with the issues surrounding the meaning of these terms.

Wrath, Retribution, and a Forgiving God

As I mentioned earlier, Zahnd has a couple of moves regarding wrath, retribution, and so forth. One had to do with rethinking how much of Scripture reveals God and suggesting it's less than we think. The other is to rework our notions of things like wrath and judgment to suggest they're not what we think they are.

Metaphorical Wrath

Take his treatment of wrath. He rightly notes that much of the challenge of God-talk is the issue of speaking of the infinite God with finite language, concepts, images, and so forth. Older theologians spoke of depictions of God's emotions, body parts, and so forth, as anthropomorphisms, or anthropopathisms. Or again, God takes up many names and images for himself in Scripture (farmer, hen, husband, tower, etc.) to talk about God's activities, stances, and relations towards his creation. Zahnd notes this—though he lumps it all under the concept of metaphor—and he says this is the reality we're dealing with when it comes to God's wrath.

“The wrath of God is a biblical metaphor we use to describe the very real consequences we suffer from trying to go through life against the grain of God's love” (16). Or, quoting Brad Jersak, it is “the divine consent to our own self-destructive defiance.” In other words, it's the pattern of cause and effect at work in the world which brings bad consequences down upon bad choices—the stomach-ache after the food-binge, the counter-punch to the punch thrown, etc. Psalm 7 offers the clue:

God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day.

¹² If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword;
he has bent and readied his bow;

¹³ he has prepared for him his deadly weapons,
making his arrows fiery shafts.

¹⁴ Behold, the wicked man conceives evil
and is pregnant with mischief
and gives birth to lies.

¹⁵ He makes a pit, digging it out,
and falls into the hole that he has made.

¹⁶ His mischief returns upon his own head,
and on his own skull his violence descends.

Here Zahnd sees the Bible tipping its hand that we should understand language of active, personal judgment and indignation on God's part as a way of speaking of human duplicity caving in on itself (18). And that *just is* what is the wrath of God. But, really, “God's spirit toward you is one of unwavering fatherly-mother love” that is never actually mad at anyone (19), even if his withdrawal lets them suffer consequences from time to time. Don't literalize the anger metaphors.

Passive Wrath Is Not the Whole Story

Now, as far as it goes, this isn't that bad. It's clear in Scripture that much of God's judgment has the shape of God “handing us over” to the consequences of our sin (Romans 1:24-25). Scripture also talks about God handing people over to their stubborn hearts (Ps. 81:12), or hardening their hearts in response to their own self-hardening (Deut. 29:4) and so forth. One sees it also in the narratives in Genesis or the latter prophets, especially with the way sinful power politics goes bad for wicked Israelite kings. Older theologians used to call this the “passive wrath” or passive judgment of God to distinguish it from varieties of active judgment, whether direct or indirect.

In any case, the strain is strong enough that in the middle of the 20th Century some Old Testament scholars like Gerhard Von Rad and Klaus Koch questioned whether the Old Testament or books like Proverbs even had a retributive doctrine, suggesting we should talk about “Act-Consequence” schemas, or a “destiny-producing sphere of action.” On the New Testament side, scholars like A.T. Hanson and C.H. Dodd argued similarly that in Paul, the wrath of God had become a mere metaphor for the impersonal process of cause and effect much as Zahnd suggests.

As initially tempting as it is, the model was heavily critiqued, though, by scholars such as [Leon Morris](#), [R.V.G. Tasker](#), and [Old Testament scholars](#) on a number of levels. For one thing, the model is flawed as a total explanation of the Biblical material. Many of the same biblical authors who portrayed sin as bearing evil fruit in this fashion, such as Genesis, the rest of the Torah, and the Latter Prophets also contain numerous examples of direct acts of divine judgment (the Flood, the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, consuming Korah, plagues, etc.). The same is the case throughout both the Old and the New Testament. While the Biblical authors saw cause and effect at work, they also testified to clear instances of the active intervention of God.

Second, theologically, this paradigm doesn’t adequately reckon with the fact that God is the Creator and sustainer of the world order. Yes, Zahnd talks about it as God’s permission, but overall this is a distancing and depersonalizing God’s relation to negative consequences. But Aquinas reminds us that “the order of the universe, which is seen both in effects of nature and in effects of will, shows forth the justice of God” (ST, 1.q.21, a.1). God created the universe in such a way that it works according to his own moral righteousness and he freely sustains it as such. God’s permission is not mere permission, but always in accordance with his good works and ways. Even if “God does not *actively* inflict punishment...the punishment is retributive because the punishment consists in a harm that the sinner incurs due to the harm that the sinner has inflicted” (Matthew Levering, “Creation and Atonement”, *Locating Atonement*, 62). God sustains the world in such a way that negative consequences to sin reflect God’s judgments about good and evil.

Put it another way, even the consequences of sin are upheld by God in God’s world precisely *as* just punishment for sin.

Indeed, look at Psalm 9:15-16:

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;
in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught.
The Lord has made himself known; he has executed judgment;
the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

The Psalmist, goes out of his way to do the opposite of what Zahnd is suggesting. He wants us to know that when the nations get caught in their own trap, it’s not just circumstances working out—“The Lord has made himself known; he has executed judgment.” God claims personal credit for consequences too.

Active Wrath, Passive Wrath, and Just Retribution

And here's where I think we need to see that passive wrath and active wrath shed light on one another. Zahnd looks to reduce wrath to a mere metaphor for God's consent to our suffering the consequences of sin. Why? Because it seems a little more hands off, and I think we can all agree to the fairness of sort of receiving back upon yourself the consequences of your actions. What injustice is there about giving you what you've chosen? You choose idols, then receive the terrible dehumanizing degradation that idolatry leads to. Choose violence? Get war. Choose self-centeredness? Get the terrible loneliness, anger, and despair that narcissism leads to. Choose adultery? Get divorce.

I want to suggest we see this principle at work even in his active judgments. I believe Ray Ortlund Jr. has called this a "fearful symmetry" of judgment. So, for instance, when Israel decides to cheat on God with the idols, his active judgment through the nations is the historical manifestation of the spiritual reality they've chosen. All of the blessings of protection, life, beauty, and goodness are connected with relational wholeness with Yahweh. Reject Yahweh's covenant and you've essentially rejected these things. When you reject God, he gives you not-God, and that is a terrifying, but just judgment. Roll that principle out into the rest of the Bible and you begin to see the way this helps us understand even those more active, seemingly-extrinsic moments of direct, eschatological judgment by God upon sinners. Indeed, we see this in Romans 1, where Paul's talk of God's "handing over" of sinners to passive judgment and ends with a litany of sins. Paul says not only that these sins lead to bad consequences, but that it is "God's righteous decree that those who practice such things *deserve* to die" (Rom. 1:32).

Instead of reducing all talk of active wrath to passive wrath and a mere metaphor for consequences, we can begin to appreciate the fairness, the non-arbitrariness, the non-petty, the non-vindictiveness, the justice of all of God's judgments in Scripture.

Analogy and Anger

Let's turn again, though, to the issue of wrath or anger in God. It's admittedly a very complicated subject that has been treated a few different ways in church history, even in the Reformed tradition I typically appeal to.

It's important to note that generally, the theological tradition spanning from Fathers like Irenaeus, to Augustine, to Aquinas, to Reformed types including Calvin and Turretin (who are credited with coming up with penal substitution), all affirmed [God's impassibility](#): God is not subject to overwhelming passions which cause his nostrils to flare, or his testosterone to pump. God is perfect, immutable, spiritual, and independent of all things. Whatever God's wrath is—if it is an affection somehow "in God"—it can't be just like ours.

As [Tertullian noted](#), no human affection or emotion—even the positive ones like mercy, compassion, etc.—ascribed to God can simply be read back up into God since "in the human being are rendered just as corrupt by the corruptibility of man's substance" but we should know that "in God they are rendered incorruptible by the incorruption of the divine essence." This is why we ascribe these things to God anthropomorphically and know that our language about him is analogical, so we must purge it of anything unworthy of God—including pettiness, vindictiveness, and so forth.

I would tentatively suggest we think of the anger or wrath of God as something akin to a mode of the eternal God's encounter with the fallen world—specifically the reality of sin. It is his negative evaluation of it and will to make an end of it.

Love and Wrath Are Not Opposed

Here we're getting closer to an answer to the questions on the back of the book, "Is God wrath? Or is God love?" The Bible (and the tradition) seems to say that God is love, *therefore* God has wrath.

Let me put it this way: Is God love? Yes. Is true love *righteous*? Well, yes. Is it not righteousness to promote good and oppose evil? To stand against evil? To even hate evil? Yes. I mean, that's what Paul tells us to do (Rom. 12:9). So if God is the sort of love that is righteous love, will his love not include a white-hot opposition to evil? Yes. Well, there you go. The love that God is involves God's inherent, innate opposition to, hatred of, and will to oppose sin because the love that is the life of the Triune God is a love which is righteous.

Let me put it this way: Jesus is God in human flesh, come in the power of the Spirit. If you want to know what God's love is like when translated into a human key, you look at him. Well, Jesus had wrath. When the Pharisees opposed his healing of a man in bondage because it was the Sabbath, "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" and healed him anyways (Mark 3:5). That same blindness and self-righteous wickedness provoked him to angrily pronounce woes against them before the people (Matt 23). And that same zealous anger, jealous for God's name, leads him to pronounce and enact God's judgment on the Temple (John 2). God's love in the flesh flips tables.

If you want to know that the perfect love of God isn't opposed to the righteous anger or wrath of God, just do what Zahnd keeps telling us: look at Jesus.

The Wrath of God as the Care of God

Of course, Zahnd's worry is a punitive, petty God ready to let loose a lightning bolt, of whom we always have to be fearful because we never know what he's going to think. He worries anxious vengeful hearts have projected a monster God up into the heavens (91). And that is a real worry. I'm sure people have taught God that way. But it's not the only worry.

In a world wracked with sin, with oppression, with outrages like slavery, ISIS slaughtering innocents, oppression of the poor by the rich, crass militarism, corruption and greed which grinds the weak into the dust, Fleming Rutledge asks, "Where's the outrage?" ([The Crucifixion](#), 129). For the weak, for the underprivileged, for the outcast, the problem is not that of a punitive God, but of a distant God who seems to let things go with *impunity*. Or worse—who's too weak to do anything about it. In other words, the corresponding danger is projecting a 21st century Western, Rogerian, therapeutic, purely affirming God out of our fear of shame and guilt, who lightly puts our hearts at ease, but can't rightly deal with the sin of a broken world.

Here is where Abraham Heschel's insight is crucial: "The secret of anger is God's care" (*The Prophets*, 374). Divine anger in Scripture refers to "righteous indignation, aroused by that which

is considered mean, shameful, or sinful” (363). Or again, “Anger is an emotion attendant upon God's judgment, but not identical with it. It is the personal dimension of God's justice” (376). And so Heschel argues we must recognize, “Divine anger is not the antithesis of love, but its counterpart, a help to justice as demanded by true love” (381).

Language of wrath and anger in God in Scripture speaks to the fact that God takes humanity's works seriously—for good or ill. There is always in him the profound, unshakeable, unalterable goodness and love which is utterly opposed to sin, corruption, idolatry, murder, rape, lynching, pride, and all manner of ungodliness as well as *a willingness to do something about it*. If God does not look at the shooting of an unarmed black man, or the kidnapping of a child, or the systematic subjugation of nations and people groups with something analogous to anger—what is wrong with him?

Miroslav Volf still has one of the best comments on the issue worth quoting at length:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.

-Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* pp. 138-139

This is not a mere lust for blood. It's not petty. It's not vindictive. In the heart of every Image-bearer is a knowledge that injustice deserves and cries out for an answer. And the God who is truly love is disposed to give it. Indeed, this is something he has promised us—He is a God who “who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Exod. 34:7). He has covenanted with the world (Gen. 9) and with Israel that he will answer sin with judgment.

(For a more careful examination of wrath and love, see the linked article by Tony Lane “[The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God.](#)”)

Retribution and Truth

This promise brings us to the issue of retribution and punishment. Zahnd thinks God's judgment is only restorative, never retributive (44). I think based on the texts I reviewed above, that the Bible (both Old and New Testaments, including Jesus) teach that retribution has a place in our theology of judgment. Indeed, I think there is a false dichotomy there.

Retribution, as I've been saying, is not about vindictiveness, or pettiness, but rather is about notions of desert and truth. Purged of sin, it is a matter of reckoning—of naming sin as what it is and treating it as it deserves. When Peter says we call "Father" the One "who judges impartially according to each one's deeds" (1 Pet. 1:17), retribution is that impartial judgment applied to wicked deeds. As an aspect of distributive justice, it is God paying out what is due.

Looked at from another angle, Oliver O'Donovan has suggested we think of retributive punishment as an aspect of "attributive" justice—as a matter of truth-telling about persons, about acts, about offenses. When society punishes murder with prison time (or even the death penalty) it is saying something about the act of murder, about the value of the victim, and about the status of the victimizer. To leave sin unpunished is to lie about—to say that the victimizer was right to do what they did, that their victim didn't deserve better, and that the act of taking their life was a lite thing.

Whichever way you take it, it names a reality which, in light of the atrocities of the 20th Century—the Holocaust, the Killing fields of Cambodia, the Klan lynching black men in the Jim Crow South, child sex scandals in the Church—cannot be waved off. Indeed, it seems callous to write off people clinging to the promise that the blood of their loved ones will receive an answer as merely people trying to cling to "their religion of revenge" (43). The comfort of God's judgment and retribution is that I don't have to cling to revenge—I know that God will have an answer to every crime, so I can let it go (Rom. 12:14-21). God takes personal vengeance out of our hands, not because he eschews retribution altogether, but because he is the only one who can ultimately be trusted with it. I can rest knowing that because God is not a liar, he will tell the truth about sin and *do the truth* just as he said he would.

Disarming Sin by Taking "sins" Seriously

At this point we come up against the problem with Zahnd's attempt to swap in Rene Girard's -end-the-scapegoating atonement theory. Zahnd thinks seeing the cross as a penal substitution "fails to take sin seriously" (106), because it makes everything a matter of alleviating our personal sin debt, but leaves "the principalities and powers to run the world." In other words, the deep problem with our world is the massive powers of systemic injustice and violence which penal substitution leaves untouched. Instead, we should see the cross as the exposure of all our violent systems of power which led to the scapegoating of the Son of God. It's the end of sacrifice because it reveals the violent, sacrificial logic of the systems we're caught in, so "once we see it, we can repent of it, be forgiven of it, and be freed from it" (114). Sort of a neo-Abelardian, Moral Exemplar deal (and yes, I know even Abelard wasn't an Abelardian). There is no real atonement, only enlightenment.

The problem here is that Zahnd's solution doesn't really reckon with the fact that our problem is both Sin (as power) and the guilt of sins that need an answer, a reckoning (Fleming Rutledge is

right to emphasize both). Having our violent systems of power exposed is a *good* thing, and something the cross does do. But having systems exposed does not give an answer for *specific* crimes by *specific* sinners against specific *victims* committed within them. The cross as God's condemnation of sin in Christ says that every name is known and the cry of every victim will get a reckoning.

Second, it's not just about dealing with the guilt of victimizers *out there* but with my own guilt, my own shame, my own crime that needs an answer. I know it's cliché to refer to Anselm's line to Boso "You have not yet considered the weight of sin", but it's a cliché for a reason. Zahnd goes on a tear of rhetorical questions about whether people really deserve the tortured judgment of the cross (108). And when you think about your grandma (if she's like mine), or a five-year old kid, sure, I balk. But this is also right before Zahnd tells us that it was human society, violence, selfishness, greed, and lust for power (in which we are all complicit) that managed to take the Son of God—pure love incarnate—lacerate, beat, and torture him, and then drive nine-inch nails into his hands. That's some pretty dark sin.

And what's crazy is that it actually does dwell in some very average people. We always think Auschwitz was a matter of Nazi soldiers and Hitler. If you study the history, it was also a matter of bakers and butchers and school teachers and professors and good, simple church folk handing over their neighbors to the charnel house.

Concern with personal guilt and complicity is not petty, which is precisely why we have Psalms of personal as well as corporate confession, provisions in the sacrificial law for the same, and texts in the New Testament as well. 1 John tells his flock to confess their sins that they might be cleansed and forgiven (1:9), and the assurance of that is we have an advocate in Christ (2:1), who has made atonement (expiation or propitiation) for "our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2). This is Christ the righteous, not only exposing systems of Sin, but dealing with *sins*. This is precisely why I have assurance in those moments of guilt and doubt—I know that my "sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more." For that reason, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Dealing with sins is also at the heart of the exposure of the powers going on in Colossians 2:15, which Zahnd appeals to. He ignores the fact that it follows right after verse 14 which states that we have been forgiven because he has "canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." Christ disarms the principalities and powers through exposure, yes, but *also* by robbing them of the power of accusation. This is how "the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down" and why the saints "have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:10-11). They no longer fear death—the ultimate threat of the powers—because they no longer fear God, for their sins no longer stand between them. (On all this, see Jeremy Treat, *The Crucified King*, chapter 4).

Once again, Zahnd gives us an false binary that is unhelpful and should set aside.

Retribution and Restoration

Speaking of false binaries, also note that affirming God deals in retributive justice does not rule out God's restorative justice. Even in punishment intended to reform a prisoner (or even a child), there is an element of retribution—it's only right to do so if the person actually *deserves* it. There's no call to subject them to any treatment against their will if it were not in some way merited.

When it comes to the atonement, satisfaction theories or penal substitution are making precisely the claim that God miraculously accomplishes his restorative justice precisely by way of his retributive justice enacted in the cross. God doesn't have to put aside his law to save law-breakers. He can be just and the justifier of the ungodly (Rom. 3:26) who punishes sin while reconciling sinners to himself.

And let's just add that admitting a retributive moment in the cross does not for a minute mean you must ignore the restorative value of his saving life, his resurrection, or ascension into the heavenlies. This is why Zahnd railing against purely retributive justice of petty appeasement is a red herring (84). He's arguing against a position no classic penal substitution advocate holds. So Herman Bavinck: "we must reject the notion that Christ was solely a revelation of God's punitive justice" (*Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3.*, 369). Indeed, restoration to right relationship with God through forgiveness and the renewal of our nature was always the aim. So even if they didn't use the language, penal substitution advocates have always taught God's restorative ends in atonement.

God's Own Justice

With all these points in view we can also see why Zahnd's combative jabs about the demand of God's justice in the cross are misplaced (102). For one thing, it's not about God [being bound by the chains of some standard of justice](#) outside of himself ("goddess Justice"). No, the demands are God's own just as the Law is God's own. It is about God not denying himself (2 Tim. 3:13), to keep his word in both salvation and judgment.

As the Church Father Athanasius (not Augustine or Anselm or Calvin) notes in [On the Incarnation](#) (4), it is God who promulgated the law connecting sin and death in the Garden and it would be "monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation" (7.1). Alvin Rapien [notes](#), "There is a logic at work here within Athanasius' proposal: the law of death cannot be undone because God must remain consistent with the very law put in place by the Divine." Athanasius believes that the God who casts his word and his law aside is the true monster.

A Forgiving God?

But we still might have trouble holding together the truth that God's fidelity to himself and his word requires the punishment of sin as well as the fact that he's a forgiving God. Doesn't the one nullify the other? Is payment the opposite of forgiveness? And didn't Jesus show us what God is like? In which case, didn't he walk around simply forgiving sins without requiring atonement all the time (103)?

I've tried to deal with these [objections elsewhere](#), but briefly, a few points since it's so important.

First, I would argue that Jesus is able to walk around forgiving sins precisely on the basis of his own future sacrifice, just as God's forgiveness of Israel's sins through the Temple system was all pointing to and dependent on Christ's once and for all sacrifice on the cross. In that sense, as the Mediator, the efficacy of Christ's work is trans-temporal.

Second, Jesus walking around forgiving sins demonstrates God's forgiving heart, yes. Hear me—God is a forgiving God. God is inclined towards mercy. His heart delights in reconciliation. God doesn't have to be convinced to love us. In fact, contrary to Zahnd's cheap-shots, John Calvin never taught that God had to “expend his anger upon an innocent victim before he could find it within himself to forgive sin” (101). Instead, [he taught that](#), “by his love God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ...” since God loved us first.

“...because the Lord wills not to lose what is his in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love. However much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures. However much we have brought death upon ourselves, yet he has created us unto life. Thus he is moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace.” (Institutes, 2.16.3)

All the same, we need to understand two things. First, it's possible to distinguish God's disposition to forgive from the actual *accomplishment* and *enactment* of forgiveness. Second, the accomplishment of God's forgiveness [will, of necessity, look different from ours](#). How could it not? He's God.

God is uniquely related to all of humanity as “also Creator, Maintainer, Ruler, Sovereign, Lawgiver, Judge, and so on, and it is one-sided and conducive to error if one takes one of these names—disregarding all the others—to be the full revelation of God” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, 372). And so, yes, our forgiveness is the mere cancellation of a debt—the assumption of the burden ourselves and not making the other pay. But the debt of sin to God is not a simple financial matter. Nor is it a mere relational fault one can set aside. It is against God as he is the guarantor of justice for the entire world.

Instead, the marvel of God's forgiveness at the cross is that it's both like and unlike our forgiveness. As the Messiah, representing Israel and thereby the world, God himself assumes responsibility for our sin by becoming one of us, taking on its burden, suffering the curse of death on our behalf. And in this way, he actually wipes out sin's guilt and debt himself on the cross. Only God's forgiveness, then, is the sort that erases guilt and debt in an absolute sense. The cross shows us who God is, yes, but it also shows us what God does—he *accomplishes* forgiveness in his own body and blood.

We may wonder at the mechanics of representation, or how things are accounted—and I think there are decent answers connected to union with Christ, etc. that start to get at it—but at this point we do come to the summit of a holy mystery; the glory of the Incarnation itself.

Truly Confessing the Scandal of God Crucified

Which brings me to Zahnd's critiques of atonement theories as "attempts to reduce the scandal and mystery of the cross to rational and utilitarian formulas" (82), which nullify the shock, the horror and sublime glory of the Christian confession that on the cross we see God crucified.

The irony here is that's essentially what Zahnd's been doing throughout the whole book. The Old Testament chop-job, revising wrath down to mere metaphor, shrinking judgment, and so forth. Then—and this is the kicker to end all kickers—doing this as part of a program to swap in Rene Girard's 20th Century, Western European scapegoat theory of atonement to explain the cross. Girard's mimetic theory of sacrifice, violence, and culture is insightful as far as it goes. But as we've seen, it simply can't go far enough to do justice to the message of the New Testament. Even in Girard's own discipline of comparative literature, it's been derided as a reductionistic "[theory of everything on the cheap](#)." Which is part of why it's so tempting to non-specialists, but typically ignored by actual anthropologists or specialists in the literature of sacrifice. Heck, even other hardcore, pacifist, anti-penal substitution advocates like [Darrin Snyder Belousek](#), and Gregory Boyd don't touch it. Because it's *the dictionary definition* of attempting to give an *a priori* "nice, tidy" explanation of culture, sacrifice, and the cross. (For a theological critique, see Hans Boersma, [Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross](#), 133-151.)

No, Christian faith is scandalous precisely because it looks at the human travesty of justice, the godlessness of the cross, and calls it the justification of the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Paradoxically it sees an innocent man crucified by lawless men and confesses nonetheless that this man was "delivered up according to the definite *plan* and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23); it confesses that "God has human executors of his justice who are nonetheless not exonerated from the blame of their actions" (H.U.V. Balthasar, [Mysterium Paschale](#), 110). It recognizes the great revelation of God's Fatherly love (Rom. 5:8) when God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). That somehow God is most pleased with the Son's obedience at that moment when he willingly gives his life to suffer the penalty for disobedience, only to take it up again (John 10:17). That the cross isn't just God choosing to forgive in the face of the violence of his enemies, but God accepting upon himself the judgment for the violence of his enemies *in their place* and *as their forgiveness*.

That is scandal. *That* is mystery. *That* is the account of the cross which honors the glory of the Son revealed in being lifted up before men to bear their sin and shame, and in so doing drawing all men to himself (John 12:32).

Claims to the contrary, affirming a doctrine such as penal substitution is not a matter of painting ourselves into a theological corner to maintain the logic of the system (108). It is a matter of taking God at his word, who reveals himself on every page of the Scriptures to be, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod. 34:6-7). This is the God whom Jesus claimed to be, when he confessed that "before Abraham was, 'I AM'" (John 8:58), because he is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). This is precisely who he reveals himself to be in the unity of judgment and forgiveness, and ultimately, love, on the cross.

It is him we aim to confess, not simply our systems, but Christ crucified and risen. I will preach, sing, and even boast that this Christ is “the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth” (Jer. 9:24). I will trust his hands to love, to forgive, to hold, and to heal.

Conclusion

As I said, I still haven’t dealt with all of the various criticisms and problems in Zahnd’s work. (I do think I’ve covered a number of them here in my [mega-post on penal substitution](#).) All the same, it felt necessary to engage at this length and depth, not out of spite or animosity, but really, because the subject matter is so important and the stakes are so high. This gets said about far too many issues, but in this case, the gospel—and God himself—really is at stake.