

Synopsis of

# DID GOD KILL JESUS?

Searching for Love in History's Most Famous Execution

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## Part 1: The Problem with the Cross

### Chapter 1: 'As He Died, He Saw Your Face'

Some gospel presentations say that God hates you because of your sin, but that his wrath fell instead on Jesus, who stepped in between God and you—appeasing God's wrath—and whose blood is now on your hands. This is only one of many versions of the gospel, and is only 1000 years old.

It is hard to reconcile with 'God is love' and with John 3:16. And Paul says God loved (not hated) us 'while we were still sinners' (Rom 5:8). Also, Jesus and his Father were intimate, so it's hard to reconcile an angry, vengeful Father with a loving, intervening Jesus.

Some believe that the frequent emphasis on a bloodthirsty God, marked by punishment and sending folk to hell, is one reason for the decline of Christianity in some of its historic bastions.

There are other ways of looking at what happened on the cross, ones that (1) resonate better with God as the epitome of love, (2) do not pit God against Jesus, and (3) truly are good news.

### Chapter 2: Why God Matters

Our concept of what God is like colours our view of everything else. Is he seething mad at us? Or just disappointed that we don't measure up? Or something else?

My deepest *experience* of God, through prayer and experiential interaction, convince me he is a loving Father who is totally for me, in spite of my flaws. Someone said, 'I think God has to be at least as nice as Jesus.'

And is God violent? The crucifixion was a violent act. Many have attributed that violence to God, and have used it to justify their own violence. But if God is love, violence must be surmountable, and the crucifixion, while violent, must be the key to ending violence. We will examine the half-dozen different ways of looking at the crucifixion (the nature of the atonement), and what kind of God they point to.

There is not just one 'right answer'. The answer might in fact be, as in multiple-choice questions, 'all of the above'.

### Chapter 3: The Bible and the Smell Test

Beliefs have consequences. Our theological conclusions determine the kind of person we are and the attitudes we adopt (e.g. suicide bombers). We use the 'smell test' on milk that has reached its 'use by' date; we can use it to test atonement theories, too. A belief system may be logically OK (i.e. inside its 'use by' date) but still smell 'off'.

That 'off' smell will be something we sense deep down, but it will also show in the *behaviour* it produces in the beliefs' adherents. Appeasement-based views of the atonement are increasingly being perceived as smelling bad.

We will test each of the models of the atonement against six questions:

1. What does it say about God?
2. What does it say about Jesus?
3. What does it say about the relationship between them?
4. How does it make sense of violence?
5. What does it mean for us spiritually?
6. Where's the love?

We will lean heavily on the Bible, but need to acknowledge that it speaks with many voices on the subject, and can be confusing.

## Part 2: Sacrifice as Prelude

### Chapter 4: The Mystery of Sacrifice

Jesus' death came as the climax of Israel's history, and *sacrifice* was central to Israel's religious system. We need to ask why humans came up with the idea of blood and sacrifice as necessary to appease the gods.

Human sacrifice was common in ancient societies. Often, it was carried out to get the gods' attention. Sometimes there were more subtle mechanisms at work. René Girard has shed much light on this. As societies developed, he says, rivalries developed, leading to violence. Sacrifice developed as a safety-valve: violence was perpetrated on an innocent victim, making everyone feel better, at least for a while. Meanwhile, the person sacrificed was perceived as almost divine, because their death had had such a powerful violence-quenching effect on the society.

The Jews were no exception. The sacrifice of Jesus came out of the Jewish story and its long history of sacrifices to God recorded in the OT.

### Chapter 5: An Acceptable Sacrifice

The first murder was over blood sacrifice. God had not yet formalised a sacrificial system, but humans seemed to feel the need to offer sacrifices to God. Abel brought bloody meat; Cain brought veg. And God, for some reason, favoured the former.

Genesis 22 records Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. God is said to request him to do it. Everyone finds that difficult.

Then comes the bloody Passover incident, which marks the start of regular, systematic sacrificial practice in Israel's annual commemoration of it, as instructed by Moses. It is an act of *thanksgiving* and *remembrance*, and is tied up with the hope of *future deliverance*.

### Chapter 6: Sacred Blood

Nowhere does the OT law explicitly condemn child sacrifice (the closest it comes is Lev 18:21), though the practice was common among Israel's neighbours. But Israel did not practise it (Jephthah's killing of his daughter is a rare exception).

Animal sacrifice, by contrast, soon became an integral part of Israel's worship, and it was the blood that made it valid (Lev 17:10-16). Two kinds of blood sacrifices were seen as appeasing God: the guilt offering and the sin offering (the kind offered at Yom Kippur). These continued through the desert years, and continued when the Israelites were settled in the land, becoming more elaborate, in spite of the prophets' condemnation (e.g. Hos 6:6). Their practice continued into the time of Jesus.

The NT writers clearly saw Jesus' death as fitting the framework of Israel's sacrifices. Since then, Christians have taken one of three positions on the Hebrew sacrificial system:

1. They write off Israel's obsession with sacrifice and blood as remnants of primitive, tribal religion with its unacceptable view of God as someone frightening who needed to be appeased. But this ignores the fact that sacrifice was woven into the very fabric of Israel's worship. Either the Israelites got it wrong, or it was what God wanted.
2. They believe that God really wants blood, and requires it in order for God and humans to be at peace with one another. Israel's system appeased God, and it also set the stall out for Jesus' death.
3. They emphasise that violence between humans preceded religion, and thus violence—like food, sex, offspring, land—eventually took on the tinge of sacredness. So God took something that humans were already doing—being violent and shedding blood—and made it sacred. He went along with them where they were at, but did not see it as the ideal, and he took *human* sacrifice out of the picture. The sacrificial system controls violence, giving it boundaries.

## Part 3: The Violence On The Cross

### Chapter 7: History's Most Famous Execution

We should be clear on the basics about Jesus. Born in 6 or 4BCE, he was reared in Nazareth, in the fairly prosperous region of Galilee. He was, like Joseph, a *tekton*, 'craftsman'—not necessarily a carpenter. At the age of 30 he emerged from obscurity into his public ministry. The core of his message was:

'A new age is dawning—the rules by which followers of Yahweh lived their lives, while not irrelevant, are in need of a serious overhaul; the spirit of those rules has been forgotten amid the attempts to keep those rules; I've come to redefine the relationship between God and humanity.' (p70)

The ultimate rule, he taught, is love—which should extend even to one's enemies. The apocalyptic aspects of his teaching (a common and popular genre at the time) were directed chiefly at the political situations of his day. His miracles were not primarily to show his deity but to demonstrate God's rule and show how it reaches out to the marginalised in society.

Jerusalem, where Jesus headed at the end of his ministry, was the centre of Jewish religious life. The Gospel writers focus on his last week there. Each of the four has its own angle on it. They focus on his trial, sufferings and death. The Gospels show little interest in who actually killed Jesus (or, indeed, in what his death accomplished), but together they portray him as crucified by the Romans at the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

His resurrection led his followers to see his death cosmically and theologically, as an act of God. At a human level, the early church put the blame chiefly on the Jews, while later centuries blamed the Jews entirely, on the basis of Matt 27:25—a verse which has had a terrible anti-Semitic legacy.

The Gospels do tie Jesus' death to the Passover. His passion takes place during the build-up to Passover. His last act is to eat the Passover meal with his followers. Like the original Passover lamb, the blood of Jesus liberates the people. Paul, however, takes this much further...

### Chapter 8: Paul's Cross-Centred Life

Paul got to know the Jesus story backwards: starting with the resurrected Lord. He never heard Jesus teach, nor witnessed his miracles, and never mentions his life—the focus is on his death and resurrection. He sets these in the context of Israel's story, a key feature of which was the *law*. Paul concludes that *the law killed Jesus* (Gal 3:13).

'The cross', for Paul, means 'the gospel', and it is the lens through which he interprets everything else. He opens up his thinking on it chiefly in Romans 3, and Romans 7-8. In Rom 3 God is faithful, and it is through Jesus, the faithful Israelite, that he fulfils his covenant promises. Jesus is the 'sacrifice of atonement'—literally the *place* of atonement, or Mercy Seat. In other words, he sums up everything that has gone before in Israel's history. In Rom 7-8, all of human sin is concentrated in Jesus, and in him on the cross all sin is condemned.

If the Gospels show Jesus as the *Passover* sacrifice, Paul presents him as the *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) sacrifice. Both are valid emphases, but different. According to Paul, in the cross God showed himself to be on the side of *all* human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, and through the cross he shows us how to live right, recognising that we have been crucified with Jesus. We are called to live out the example that God set on the cross: self-limitation, humility and submission.

## Chapter 9: Reunited with God

The other parts to the NT also shed light on the cross.

- *Hebrews*. The writer has much to say about the Israelite priesthood and sacrificial system. On that analogy, Jesus is the ultimate High Priest, and the sacrifice that he offers is himself. Also, his is the shed blood that ratifies the covenant. God, in this book, demands a sacrifice on account of human sin. It is a Yom Kippur sacrifice (to pay God for sins), not a Passover one (to pave a way for deliverance). As for the relationship between Jesus and his Father, he cried out to him for deliverance ‘with loud cries and tears’.
- *Peter*. 1 Pet 2:23-24 says Jesus ‘bore our sins in his body on the cross’, so that we might live the way he did, suffering quietly and without complaint (the opposite of what Hebrews says).
- *John*. 1 Jn 2:2 and 4:10 are key verses. Jesus is ‘the atoning sacrifice for our sins’, and for those of the entire world. These are the only two occasions where the Greek *hilasmos* (‘atoning sacrifice’) appear in the NT. It is disputed in meaning, some favouring ‘propitiation’, others ‘expiation’. The two are very different. The first means that God requires appeasing and only Jesus achieves it. The second presents a more gracious God, seeing sin as separate from humanity and choosing to sweep it away in one loving, self-sacrificial act. The emphasis of 1 & 2 John overall is on love, which chimes better with the second option. Also, Jesus’ entire life is the atoning sacrifice, not just his death, which is not highlighted. God acted out of love; Jesus *was* that act of love.
- *Revelation*. This book is apocalyptic and awash with blood. It starts by saying, ‘To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood...’ (which some scholars think was added later, because the rest of the book does not talk about Jesus’ blood this way, and this is the only mention of our sins). Overall, Jesus’ death does two things: it defeats the powers of death and evil, and it signals that those who follow him may well have to die for it, like him. In 5:9-10 the choir sings, ‘By your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe...’ That blood is not said to pay God for sins committed, but rescues people from the power of evil and makes them a kingdom of priests.

So none of these books present an angry, vengeful God awaiting a sacrifice equal to the weight of all human sin. The common element is how Jesus’ death succeeds in *reuniting God and humanity*.

So far we have seen how Scripture offers a wide variety of ways of looking at sacrifice generally, and Jesus’ death in particular. This should warn us against concluding there is just a single ‘theory of the atonement’.

## Part 4: THE MAJORITY OPINION

### The Payment Model

## Chapter 10: God Is Very Angry With You

Through church history, Jesus’ death has been the answer in search of a question. The question has varied from one period to another, leading to different ways of looking at the atonement. ‘What did Jesus’ death accomplish?’ was answered in different ways at different times. We will examine the main answers, and measure each one against the 6 questions listed earlier.

We begin with *the payment model* because it is the most common today. It is often called the *substitution or satisfaction* theory. It wasn't developed until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, by Anselm of Canterbury. His book *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become man?) argued that Jesus died as a substitute for human beings and as a satisfaction for the sin-debt that humans owe God. Being just, he cannot just let us off the hook. He requires payment, and because the debt was incurred by humans, it has to be paid off by a human. Jesus is sent to become a man and do just that. Some of Anselm's followers went further, insisting that God requires not just payment but also *punishment*, and Jesus took that, too.

The framework of this model is *legal*. It developed when the Western legal mind was being developed, and Anselm was at the forefront of this move. Centuries later, both Luther and Calvin supported this model, leading to its wide influence today. Calvin, in particular, made much of appeasement of God's wrath, penalty, divine justice and vengeance. From him came the developed notion of *penal substitution*.

The problem that the payment model solves is that of *original sin*.

## Chapter 11: The Invention of Original Sin

Whole branches of the Christian church (e.g. the Orthodox Church) have never embraced the doctrine of original sin, which holds that humans are inherently bad, from birth. We inherit the condition and, with it, God's condemnation.

Adam and Eve's sin in Eden was *the* original sin, but there's nothing in Genesis to say they passed down their sinful condition to subsequent generations. The rest of the OT is ambivalent. Exodus 34 says God punishes the children for their parents' sins, while Ezekiel insists he does nothing of the kind. Jesus said nothing about original sin; in fact, he seems to cast doubt on it in John 9:1-12.

It is from Romans 5 (12-14, 17-19) that Augustine gets the idea of inherited guilt, and Calvin gets the total depravity of humanity. Paul seems to have believed that the spiritual nature is passed from parent to child by a biological process. If we believe the same, we will take the chapter one way; if we believe Adam's sin is an archetypal account of the human condition, we will take it another way.

Augustine, a Neoplatonist and thus a dualist, took the idea of inherited sin much further than Paul does. Augustine saw original sin as transmitted via semen. Christians disagree on what exactly we inherit from Adam:

- Eastern Christians say we inherited *death*.
- Western Christians say we inherited death *and guilt*.
- Reformed Christians say we inherited death, guilt and *total depravity*.

Would God punish you for the sin of another person (Adam)? Augustine and Calvin say yes.

But we can account for human sinfulness without accepting either Augustine or Calvin's views. It could be a result of simple fallibility: we make mistakes, and we die. This is the Orthodox position.

## Chapter 12: Does God Demand a Payment We Can't Afford?

The penal substitution model makes God subservient to justice, which it presents as a higher power than God himself. This is built on a human view of justice. The Bible view of God's justice is less clear. Sometimes he demands an eye for an eye; at other times he acts in *hesed* or grace.

Let's apply the six questions to the payment model:

1. [God]. He knows the future completely (predestination) but is disappointed/angry that humans sin—an unappealing God, and an unreasonable situation. He can hardly be loving if he predestined us to sin, resulting in our eternal damnation and requires his Son to die on the cross.
2. [Jesus]. He is a helpless victim, dragged to the cross to fulfil this scheme. His life is secondary, and his resurrection not essential: only the cross matters, which is out of kilter with the rest of the NT.

3. [God-Jesus r'ship]. Jesus really had no choice but to die; he was subservient to the Father, as Isaac was to Abraham. Jesus is love; God is justice and wrath—little commonality.
4. [Violence]. Violence is the means of achieving God's holy demands. Advocates of this model tend to support war, the death penalty and torture.
5. [Spiritual significance]. God's anger burns against you because of your sin—sin he made you susceptible to.
6. [Love]. Does love demand a payment? On this view God, even in love, demands remuneration for the honour our sin has stolen from him.

Divine wrath is central to this model, more central than love. God appears dysfunctional: he tries everything, without success; only when he kills his Son does his anger abate. And if all he required was a sinless victim, why didn't he arrange for Herod's soldiers to kill Jesus as a baby? Jesus' life is not really essential. If God determined from the start who would and would not be saved, what's the point of all of spiritual history? Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the hands of an angry God* doesn't cut much ice today.

Isn't it odd that, on this model, God has to save us from God? Such a God is to be feared, not loved.

## Part 5: MINORITY OPTIONS

### Chapter 13: The Victory Model—God is your spiritual warrior

If the payment model has dominated for the last 1000 years, the first 1000 years of the church was dominated by a different model: the *victory model*. This holds that the death of Jesus either defeated, or severely weakened, Satan's rule over the earth. It has two broad forms.

The *Ransom Captive* form was Anselm's target in *Cur Deus Homo?* Adam and Eve bargained away to Satan the freedom of the human race, who thus became his captives. But God offered his Son as a *ransom* (Mark 10:45). Satan accepted the offer, but was duped, in that Jesus rose from the dead! In this model, the resurrection is central, which fits with the NT emphasis. And God is not wrathful; he is a warrior, fighting evil on behalf of humanity.

The second form is a minor variation on this, also popular in the first 1000 years. In 1930 Gustaf Aulén popularised it again with his book *Christus Victor*. God's victory over the devil in Christ is a voluntary act of love; it is not required by some larger scheme of justice. And no penalty was required, or paid. God conquered sin and death by entering into them, and thus freed creation from Satan's grip. It maintains an egalitarian view of the Trinity, unlike the payment model. The six-question test:

1. [God]. God is a warrior. He has won a war that is still going on. He negotiates with Satan.
2. [Jesus]. He is God's soldier, sent by the Father to overcome the devil, just as he did by casting out demons during his ministry. His resurrection stands supreme.
3. [God-Jesus r'ship]. Jesus and his Father are partners in mission, united in their determination to free us from the devil's influence.
4. [Violence]. Human violence reflects the background conflict going on between God and Satan. But Jesus is the ultimate pacifist, a nonviolent warrior suffering a violent death to show the bankruptcy of violence as a solution to our problems.
5. [Spiritual significance]. We are in conflict with evil spiritual forces, and our prayers can really count.
6. [Love]. Jesus combats Satan's efforts with love, not violence, and we are called to do the same.

The main problem of the victory model is that it has God locked in a struggle with a fallen angel of his own making. And how do we square that with the non-violence that Jesus clearly taught? Also, if God's victory through the cross was so decisive, why is there still so much horror in the world after all this time?

## Chapter 14: The Magnet Model—God draws you in

Peter Abelard (d.1142) was a philosopher and dialectical theologian. In his commentary on Romans he sees God's love as the primary factor—love powerful enough to overcome even sin, as with the woman who anointed Jesus: her sins were forgiven because she 'loved much'. He dismisses both the victory model and the payment model as unhelpful.

His own solution—sometimes called the *moral exemplar* model—is that God took on human nature and even bore death to more fully bind himself to us. Grasping that, we will be impassioned with love for him and for each other. Jesus is God's magnet, and the magnetic force is love. Under the influence of that love, our sins fall away.

Abelard rejected original sin. We are *inclined* towards sin because of Adam, but we are not *guilty* of his sin. He held that one human can't be held liable for another's sin; that's not justice. And neither can one person achieve absolution on another's behalf. Abelard did not invent this position; it was held by some in the first few centuries of the church, like Clement of Alexandria.

Free will is a key component of this model. We choose to let God's love in Christ move us away from sin to a life of love. It is not Christ's crucifixion that removes our sin, but our repentance and embracing of that life of love. Christ's death is simply an example of what God calls us to. Sin, on this model, has us neither in debt to God nor in the clutches of Satan.

Abelard's model never caught on like Anselm's. But it was revived during the Reformation period by Socinus, who was a Unitarian and was ultimately declared a heretic. The magnet model does not require Jesus to be divine. Now the six questions:

1. [God]. God is beautiful, loving and not coercive—he invites and beckons, especially in the cross.
2. [Jesus]. This model embraces all of Jesus' life as an example of love and service. But his divinity is not essential. The magnet model doesn't really confront the need most of us feel for the forgiveness of our sins.
3. [God-Jesus r'ship]. Jesus comes from God to show love, but he is not necessarily divine. In the Trinitarian variety (Abelard) Father and Son are utterly at one in reaching out to fallen humanity, switching on love in a whole new way.
4. [Violence]. Jesus isn't a helpless victim: he throws himself gladly into the mechanism of death.
5. [Spiritual significance]. For many, this model offers a personal, relational connection with God that is very appealing. But it doesn't really confront the sin issue (Abelard believed original sin was washed away in baptism). We want the cross to be more than an example; we want it to *do* something. The magnet model downplays the forgiveness of sin that Paul finds in the cross.
6. [Love]. It's *all* about love!

If catalysing love were the only reason for Jesus' life, surely he didn't have to die? On this model, nothing truly redemptive happened at the cross. And the Unitarian variety of this model has weaknesses for Trinitarian Christians.

## Chapter 15: The Divinity Model—God wants you to be a god

The Great Schism of 1054 saw the church divide East/West. There had been growing differences between the two arms of the church for a long time. And in the West, the further division at the Reformation brought more differences. Catholics highlight crucifixion; Protestants, resurrection; and Orthodoxy, incarnation.

Eastern theologians read Genesis as showing how humans lost their *divinity*—their sharing in the immortal, divine life. A small spark of divinity remains, but we are broken and distorted. Death is the ultimate chasm between us and the immortal God. And since we can no longer reach God, God came to us, in Christ, in order that *theosis* (becoming divine) might be possible for us.

For Orthodoxy, the problem solved by the cross is that we have lost our access to the divine nature; we have lost our immortality. By sharing in mortal, human life, Christ, who was God, makes it possible for us to share in the divine life. His birth was the beginning of the rebuilding of the broken bridge. Then, death swallowed Jesus (the bait), but

hidden under Jesus' human flesh was a hook: his divinity, and 'life was introduced to the house of death' (Gregory of Nyssa, 4<sup>th</sup> c.).

Our problem is not guilt; it is death. By entering into death, Jesus continued to build the bridge, and his resurrection completed the job, defeating death and enabling us once again to claim our divinity. The six questions:

1. [God]. Eastern Christianity is focused on 'God is love'. Love is not one of his attributes; it is his very nature. It is not an aspect of his being; it *is* his being.
2. [Jesus]. The incarnation is an invitation into God's love, and the crucifixion is an extension of that invitation. Jesus is fully God, and his death succeeds in beating death for the very reason.
3. [God-Jesus r'ship]. The *perichoresis* of the Trinity is central, and we are invited into that loving circle of relationship. Of all the models, this one most emphasises the oneness and harmony of the Trinity.
4. [Violence]. Because Christ entered fully into humanity, including a cruel and violent death, the terror of violence is defeated along with death.
5. [Spiritual significance]. The concept of *theosis* is unique to this model. It is a powerful incentive to prayer and discipleship.
6. [Love]. God's love, expressed in Christ, is everything. And it invites us into his very being, that we might be love, just as he is.

The divinity model emphasises that Jesus' death saves us from death, but plays down its saving us from sinfulness. Some Western theologies may overstate the sin aspect, but it surely has a place. [The Orthodox Church holds that only through its sacraments can we enter fully into the divine blessings, but one can hold the doctrines, and experience their blessings, without that!]

## Chapter 16: The Mirror Model—God is showing us what we've done

This is the most recent model, formulated by René Girard.

Humanity developed a pattern of violent sacrifice to 'appease the gods'. It worked only temporarily. What Jesus did on the cross deals with the issue once and for all. Girard holds that when we look at Jesus on the cross, we are looking in a mirror. God is showing us the outcome of our systems of rivalry, sacrifice and violence, and exposing them as bankrupt. Jesus is the final sacrifice because he reveals the fiction behind the entire enterprise of sacrifice.

Girard's version of original sin is called *contagion*—the spread of rivalry and violence in human societies. A *scapegoating* mechanism is introduced to deal with it: a victim is chosen and sacrificed, dissipating the mob's desire for violence and convincing them that the victim must really have done something deserving of his death. The scapegoat then comes to be viewed as a saint, or even as a god. This mechanism is the foundation of all religion. It has certainly worked in societies worldwide, but it only works temporarily (violence builds up again), so the sacrifices become regularised in holy days etc.

The Hebrew Bible, Girard concluded, is an exception to the scheme. Joseph, for example, was a truly innocent victim. And later, after his promotion, he forgave his brothers rather than killing them. The Jesus story exposes the system completely: sacrificial violence is built on a lie. Jesus is truly innocent; he suffered undeserved and unnecessary violence. His death shows that sacrificial victims have been innocent all along, and that the guilt lies with the sacrificing communities.

In Christ, God himself enters human society, becomes the scapegoat, and thereby eliminates the need for any future scapegoats or sacrifices. As Jesus dies of the contagion of violence on the cross he is saying, 'This is what your rivalry and violence have done. Now you know, so you don't have to do it again.' The six questions:

1. [God]. Girard is chiefly an anthropologist, so plays down God's role in the scheme of things. But he infers that, while God never wanted blood sacrifice, he accepted it because it lessened violence. But he weaned Israel off human sacrifice onto animal sacrifice, until we learnt, through Christ, that the whole system needs ending.
2. [Jesus]. Jesus' life is necessary, on this model, only to establish his innocence. His death is a game-changer because it breaks the pattern.



3. [God-Jesus r'ship]. God didn't kill Jesus, but he let the mob violence happen. Girard does not examine whether or not Jesus gladly embraced his fate.
4. [Violence]. This model is the best response of all to the violence issue. The cross exposes it for what it is once for all. If we had been paying attention, this would also have ended violence.
5. [Spiritual significance]. The scapegoating of innocent victims permeates human relations. Christians, understanding its basics, will condemn it whenever they come across it, advocating for victims, and promoting peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.
6. [Love]. By revealing the bankruptcy of violence, Jesus opened the way for us to truly love others. When we choose love over violence we step out of the loop and are cured of contagion.

God assumes a quite passive stance in the Mirror Model, accepting the Hebrew sacrificial system, and allowing the mob to kill Jesus. As an anthropologist, Girard is weak on God. As for Jesus, his divinity isn't a vital necessity in this scheme.

But if it is *God* up there on the cross, it is he who offers himself as the final victim. It is the death of God, the ultimate innocent victim. There was no other way: God needed to experience violence in order to defeat violence.

The mirror model, however, does not face up squarely to the sin aspect of human need. It offers no redemptive element. And the results of the cross seem sparse, in that violence is as rampant as ever.

### Chapter 17: Other Models of What God Did on the Cross

There are more recent models, offered mostly by members of marginalised minorities.

- The *trillion-dollar coin* idea (so called from a suggestion made in 2011 in the US debt crisis) harks back to the mediaeval idea that Jesus, by his death, deposited 'an infinite treasury of merit' in God's bank. Each of our sins adds to the debt we owe God, but it can be paid off from that infinite account as we put our trust in Jesus and what he has done.
- *The lynching tree*. African-American theologian James Cone wrote *The Cross And The Lynching Tree*. White Americans and the Romans used the lynching tree and the cross to rule marginalised minorities through fear. Jesus was crucified by the same principalities and power that lynched black people in America. Seeing that has the potential to bring white and black Americans together.
- *Overcoming disgust*. Richard Beck's approach centres on the Hebrew obsession with purity and what he calls 'sociomoral disgust'. Emotion overwhelms reason, he says (like spitting into a cup and then being asked to drink from it). Disgust marks objects as exterior and alien. This was built into OT law: e.g. the deformed banned from the Temple. In the incarnation a 'clean' God entered the 'unclean' body of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, by touching lepers etc., became 'infected' himself, sharing the disgust they generated among Jews. Finally, in his death, he became the object of disgust, breaking all the purity laws: public nakedness, shedding of blood, broken bones, hanging on a tree. In so doing he breached the wall between 'clean' and 'unclean'; the walls that separate people fell: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek...etc.'
- *Violence against women*. Some feminist theologians, like Brock and Parker, have argued that if God required the death of his Son to save the world, he is thereby sanctioning violence. Christ's death was a morally repugnant act that does not itself save people by its violence, but saves them *from* violence. We should focus, not on the suffering of Jesus, but on the violence done to him, which should put us off violence for ever.
- *A new reality for the Trinity*. Another view comes from Andrew Sung Park, a Korean Methodist. He holds that Jesus' life and teachings, not just his death, are redemptive. But central to his theory of 'triune atonement' is *han*, a Korean concept of collective oppression that leads to feelings of hopelessness. In Jesus' resurrection, the Paraclete pours herself into the world to confront *han* and guide repentant Christians from hopelessness to

hope.

- *Jesus killed God.* Slavoj Zizek, a Slovenian, says ‘the Big Other’ (God, or fate etc.) doesn’t in fact exist. Jesus is not God’s emissary; he *is* God. When he cries, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ he is experiencing atheism. The unreality of God died on the cross, and born in its place was the spirit of Christ, a collective belief of his followers. Peter Rollins has developed Zizek’s ideas. There is nothing ‘beyond’, no God to solve our problems. The cross liberates us from our need for God.

## Part 6: WHAT GOD EXPERIENCED ON THE CROSS

### Chapter 18: What Jesus Tells Us About God

We are going to apply the ‘smell test’ to aspects of what we know about God, Jesus and their relationship.

We begin with *God is love* (1 John 4). The context of 1 John 4 shows that the love of God, Jesus’ death on the cross, and love for our fellow-humans cannot be separated. So the crucifixion must show us the love of God and spur us on to greater love for one another. We will look for that sweet smell of love.

Metaphors of God show him as a parent, a nursing mother, a hen gathering chicks, a bridegroom, a lover and a spouse. In such relationships, love flourishes only if we give room for people to grow and develop. We thus practise *self-limitation* for the other party’s benefit. God does the same.

At creation, God had to ‘withdraw’ to make room for something ‘other than God’, and that set a pattern for his operations thereafter. It was an act of *self-limiting love*, in that love makes space for ‘the other’ to thrive. This does not compromise God’s freedom; he is non-contingent: for him ‘all things are possible’ (Matt 19:26). He is not governed by ‘justice’ or any other factor. But in creation he voluntarily, in love, gave up an aspect of his non-contingency, to be in constant *relationship* with his people. He loves us by giving us freedom, including the ability to influence him and ‘change his mind’.

Did God *have* to kill his Son in order to save us? This touches on his freedom. Part of freedom is the freedom to give up that freedom. He certainly did not control Jesus, during his earthly ministry, like a puppet. But where was he when Jesus died? If he didn’t kill Jesus, he seems to have stood by and let it happen, which can appear nearly as bad. It seems that God the Father withdrew enough to let Jesus follow his own fate. He showed enough love to let Jesus be fully immersed in the human experience, and he must have grieved at the suffering he endured.

And if God was *in* Jesus, as we believe, God experienced all those things, too!

### Chapter 19: The Cry That Changed Everything

Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human, in spite of it being an unfathomable mystery. But believing this means that, at the cross, *God died*. Docetists and Gnostics found ways of avoiding that conclusion, but were branded heretics.

Paul considered the cross the ultimate saving act. But Jesus didn’t need the cross to save: he healed a paralytic because he saw his faith; he healed and forgave another because he saw his friends’ faith; he welcomed the thief on the cross into paradise even though he himself had not yet died. He thus did things only God can do.

In Jesus, we could say God was *learning*. He was experiencing things that God had not experienced before. In Jesus he crossed the line from sympathy to empathy.

From the cross Jesus cried, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’—quoting Psalm 22. Whether or not he *was* forsaken, Jesus certainly *felt* forsaken. God, we might say, was forsaken by God. As his divinity took backseat to his humanity, he felt real alienation—yet another instance of God’s self-limitation. This is a common human experience: occasionally we sense God’s presence, but most of the time he feels frustratingly absent. Jesus endured that at the

cross. In him, God was learning what it is like to be human, and God changed as a result. No longer just *understanding* the human condition, he now *experienced* it. And at the cross he experienced the absence of God.

## Chapter 20: How the Crucifixion Changed God's Relationship with Us

God did not kill Jesus. His death on the cross was not filicide. It was more a case of deicide: the killing of God.

Because God's deportment is one of self-limitation and humility, he does not normally intervene to stop bad things happening. He did not stop the crucifixion. Jesus grappled with this issue in Holy Week. He wondered whether God would rescue him and, then, why God had abandoned him.

In the Holocaust film *God On Trial*, the door is opened to question God. The story-writer, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, watched an angel-faced child being hanged, and in answer to the question, 'Where is God?', replied, 'He is here, hanging from this gallows.' To the cry 'Where is God?' the answer is his *quiet presence*. We tend to lose sight of that during moments of anguish and terror, and Jesus was no different.

For Bonhoeffer, truly following Christ meant living as if God did not exist. He wrote, 'The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.' But we tend to want *power* from God. He is not, however, primarily a distant power-dispenser, intervening to zap the forces that oppress us. Instead, he is now one of us, among us, suffering alongside us, experiencing our feelings of powerlessness. We can speculate about his omnipotence, but what we know for sure, through Christ's revelation of him, is that he is one with the powerless, hopeless and broken.

At the cross, both the oppressed and the oppressor are liberated. God plays both roles. In Jesus he is the victim; in the Father he at least allows the oppression. He is experiencing everything about being human. Jesus' death was *on behalf of others*, and thus a beautiful act of solidarity with us. 'The way of Jesus is one of self-limitation and self-sacrifice—always freely and voluntarily entered into, never coerced or forced.' As at the foot-washing, the Master has joined the servants.

How did Jesus' death deal with sin? To answer that we have to decide what sin is. It is probably unhelpful to categorise lists of do's and don'ts, because sin is primarily an *ailment*, a chronic disease we all live with. It's a *condition* rather than an activity, and its symptoms are many and varied, including physical infirmities and disease.

At the cross Jesus embraced our ailments, both physical and spiritual. He doesn't just wipe our sins away, he *carries* (bears) them, and on the cross they crush him, as they so often crush us. But in his resurrection he overcame the very ailment that crushed him. And as we embrace him we, too, can live in the midst of sin's ailment with the hope that we can overcome it.

## Part 7: THE WAY OF THE CROSS

### Chapter 21: The Way of Peace

The crucifixion must change how we live; it is the solution to our violent tendencies. God's primary posture in the world is that of weakness, not strength. His power lies in his willingness to abdicate power. We don't need to practise violence, and as Christians we should do all we can to reduce it. In this we follow the example set by Jesus himself. We must stand with victims of violence, just as God did in Jesus.

As for our own violent tendencies, courses in anger management, or yoga, may help.

### Chapter 22: The way of Solidarity

The church belongs on the margins of society, where Jesus himself was most comfortable. We should be sceptical of Christian leaders who are keen for the church to acquire political power. Our place is with those looked down upon by the power-systems of society.

Christian humility requires us to practise self-limitation, as God himself did in Jesus. This means making room for others at the table and letting other voices be heard, as Paul urges in Phil 2:3.

God stands in solidarity with us all, no matter how terrible our circumstances or condition. His connection with us is complete. And even when we find ourselves acting as oppressors, God is with us, to redeem us from it. We are never alone, however things may seem. Maybe we are the ones who will need to be available as God's instruments to bring this truth home to those who are hurting and lonely. We are to stand in solidarity with them.

### *Chapter 23: The Way of Love and the Power of Presence*

The way ancient Bible translations, like Jerome's Vulgate, rendered the names of God has left us, unhelpfully, with a preponderance of 'power' descriptions. Examples are Jerome's translation of the Hebrew YHWH as *Dominus*—'Lord', and his rendering of *El Shaddai* as *Deus Omnipotens*. Both are doubtful: the former is more like 'I am that which I am yet to become', and the latter 'God of the abundant breast'.

Certainly the God of Greek philosophical categories—omnipotent, immutable, impassible (unfeeling)—is not the God of the Hebrew Bible. God appeared to his people as *shekinah*, a feminine noun. *Ruach*, the word for God's Spirit is also feminine in etymology, though used in both masculine and feminine ways. This is the Spirit that, following the cross, God has poured out into the world, and we are privileged to enjoy the Spirit's presence.

Brother Lawrence (17<sup>th</sup> c.) is known for *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Its message is that we are constantly in God's presence, and just need to remember that. Meditation on the cross was central to his practice: the place where God's presence with us was made complete. Others, like St Ignatius and Julian of Norwich, have found meditation on the cross to be equally helpful.

God's commitment to our humanity didn't end at the tomb of Jesus; it continued in the resurrection. It is the promise of our own ultimate resurrection. In the meantime, it has brought us into the age of the Spirit, with its promise of victory over death and everlasting life with God.

Christians, thanks to the cross and resurrection, are a people characterised by *hope*. God's commitment to us is everlasting!