

The Driving Force behind Divine Justice

*Dominique Gilliard, director of racial righteousness and reconciliation,
Evangelical Covenant Church, Chicago, Illinois*

The gospel is not a “get out of hell free” card. It is an invitation to participation.¹

We are invited by a gracious and loving God to participate in the reconciling work that God is already up to in the world, as the hands and feet of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, atonement is not about appeasing God’s wrath. It is about realigning humanity to live into its created purpose—to live on mission and to live in right relationship with our Creator and creation. In the words of Cecilia Williams, “We are reconciled so that we can make God’s name known, and love shown, throughout the world.” This is the mission of the church. This is what our witness should prioritize according to the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment. We are ambassadors of reconciliation. We are called to be repairers of the breach, rooted in Jesus’s mission statement founded in Luke 4:18–19 and in Isaiah 58, which is where God tells us about the nature of the fasting we are called to do.

One of the core issues that undergirds Waldenström’s convictions is the belief that the kingdom consists of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. At a time when Christian nationalism is re-emerging, we should

¹ Editor’s note: The following is a transcription of Dominique Gilliard’s talk at the April 8, 2022, conference, “Reconciled and Reconciling: Waldenström’s Atonement Sermon 150 Years Later,” sponsored by the Commission on Covenant History and North Park Theological Seminary. Since this is a transcription of Gilliard’s informal oral presentation, we have not included the few sources mentioned in the piece.

heed the wisdom of Waldenström and learn from his clarity regarding the distinction between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.

Waldenström wrote, “The kingdoms of this world are by their nature characterized by law and order, while the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” For those who belong to it, the law and order of worldly kingdoms is not usually an accurate reflection of God’s will. The laws and the enforcement of earthly laws are ordered by human interests and logic that are commonly in direct opposition to the will of God and the principles and priorities of the kingdom of God. While too many churches conflate being a good citizen with being a faithful follower of Christ, Waldenström is explicit about the ways worldly kingdoms and the kingdom of God are not synonymous.

Worldly kingdoms—which I prefer to describe as empires—do not reflect the love, mercy, and justice of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Worldly empires place profit over people, and in doing so, refuse to equitably affirm the *imago Dei* in all of God’s children—a biblical truth that we find in the beginning pages of scripture. Therefore, they often create a sliding scale of humanity in which it is believed that some people reflect the divine image more than others. This anti-gospel worldview creates categories of “us and them,” and dehumanizing practices, policies, laws, systems, and structures that infringe upon shalom. They engender flourishing for some at the expense of others. These worldly ideologies and practices are incapable of yielding good news, much less the righteousness, justice, and reconciliation the gospel calls us to pursue. Waldenström explains, “For if the kingdoms of the earth were to combine all of their strength, they could not erase a single sin or give a trembling, conscious peace. They can only, with all of their glory, lull centers to sleep in their carnal security and maintain them in such a slumber.”

Worldly empires make false promises. They proclaim that they can bring peace, prosperity, and abundant life, but they pursue these things through warfare, oppression, and rugged individualism. God’s word tells us that these things come through Jesus Christ alone—through sacrificial love first modeled for us and extended to us by Jesus, through a mutuality that declares that we belong to Christ, and through an interdependence that causes us to function as an interconnected body.

Waldenström demonstrates an unrelenting commitment to the word of God and a willingness to suffer for proclaiming an unpopular truth, speaking a prophetic word amid a culture that desired a different accounting or articulation of what is understood as good news. But what the culture and much of the church desired to be defined as goodness

was something that actually conformed to the pattern of this world and was not rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Waldenström writes, “As concerns the wrath of God because of sin, we realize that this cannot be taken away through Christ. God must hate sin, and as long as he is the holy God, wrath over sin, so to speak, is the reverse of love over righteousness, for where the latter is, there must also be the former.”

My Old Testament professor at North Park Theological Seminary, Dr. Jim Bruckner, was helpful for me in talking about the wrath of God. In his classes, Bruckner commonly explained that God’s wrath is good news for those who suffer in the world, especially amid oppressive realities and where those who drive oppression are not held accountable for their sins. God’s wrath forbids the violation of the divine image in his people and will not allow the shalom that God desires for all God’s children to be thwarted. This is good news. Wrath in this sense is probably better understood or articulated today as accountability. Accountability is requisite for any understanding of justice. It is important that God hates injustice. I think we shy away from this when we describe who God is—God’s character and nature. Just as God hates injustice, the people of God should hate injustice. The hatred of injustice should drive us into a particular type of witness. It should drive us into advocating for things to be as God intended them to be.

The justice that Christians pursue is always distinguished by the fact that we are God’s children. We do not go out and pursue justice, or try to rectify systems and structures, in the same way everyone else does. We are marked by the cross of Christ, and that informs our ethic in the world. However, we should have a righteous indignation toward sin when we see sin—the distortion of the image of God in humanity, or systems and structures that infringe on collective shalom. We are called to pursue this justice that is first modeled by God, from whom we take our cues. Later on in his sermon, Waldenström explains, “For when he gave his son, it was not in order that he might find a person on whom he could slake his anger in order to be able to love the world, but in order to find a person through whom he could save man, his fallen children, whom he still loved.”

This is important because in the atonement we understand that God was not freed from wrath. We were forgiven of our sins and freed from our captivity to sin, but it was not God who was liberated from an anger that allowed God to love us. God always loved us. God’s love is unrelenting, unceasing, never ending even in the face of our sin. It was we who were actually reconciled to God, not the other way around. God’s

love was not impeded because of sin; rather, we needed to be reconciled into right relationship with God so that we could live into the mission as the people of God. This might seem like just semantics, but it is really important for our ethic and our witness in the world.

Waldenström took a unique approach to rebutting the critics of his atonement theory. Instead of quoting other theologians or reverting to a philosophical debate, he simply asked the question, “Where is it written?” Waldenström believed the truth about the atonement was rooted in God’s word, not in human theory. This is what empowered him to go against the popular discernment of the time. The question, “Where is it written?” not only served as a north star for Waldenström, but continues to be a guiding light for the Evangelical Covenant Church today.

I see parallels between the nuances that Waldenström articulates regarding atonement to the way I believe we are called to read a passage like Micah 6. In both cases, humanity is tempted to make God too much like us. The theological purpose of Micah 6 is to illustrate that Israel does not know the only authentic way to come before the Lord, which is total personal conversion. Israel, because of sin, is separated from God. Israel is therefore unable to see and recognize God’s true character. God did not want blood sacrifices like other gods at the time were understood to desire. Yahweh did not, and does not, need our material sacrifices, regardless of their extravagance. There is only one sacrifice that the Lord truly desires from us, and that is what the ever-popular Micah 6:8 encapsulates.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8, NIV)

Without understanding the attempted sacrifices of Israel in Micah 6:6–7, and the Lord’s refusal of these prideful, sinful attempts to atone for sin, the Lord’s requirements in 6:8 are incomplete and prone to be misapplied and misunderstood. The Godhead requires a change of heart, a change of lifestyle, and a disposition toward both God and neighbor. God requires us to be faithful stewards of the resources we are entrusted with, including our money, possessions, and the earth on which we live. God wants our hearts and lives. Despite the good deeds we might do or the evangelistic efforts in which we may partake, any offering that falls short of a changed heart and life is simply insufficient. This is what Micah tried to convey to the masses in Micah 6:8. The prophet aggregates the essence of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah by connecting the proper atonement

for human sin, authentic worship, and the covenantal requirements of God. Amos professes that God desires justice rather than sacrifices. Hosea depicts what it means to love compassionately with mercy. Isaiah stresses faithfulness and obedience to God which leads to social activism that produces liberation, as well as justice for the oppressed.

Because our atonement theology is important in expressing what we truly believe about God, an atonement inspired by the appeasement of God's wrath is problematic, and for a multitude of reasons. First, it declares that punishment was needed for reconciliation to transpire. It then says that Christ took on flesh, not because of love, as John 3:16 says, but to endure punishment in our stead, thereby disputing the fundamental biblical truth that God's love inspired the incarnation and reducing or eliminating the significance of Jesus's incarnation. An atonement to appease God's wrath emboldens theories like penal substitution to covertly function as gnosticism—a kind of disembodied faith, which teaches us that only our spirits truly matter, not our material bodies or the conditions and circumstances of the world in which we live. Atonement theories rooted in the view that the Passion is about the appeasement of God's wrath are reductionist. They reduce Jesus's body to punitive surrogacy.

The majority of these theories assume that Jesus merely came into the world to clean up our mess outside of establishing the possibility of reconciliation—again, not by love. These theories would have us believe that the mechanics of atonement are more important than the life, witness, and ministry of Jesus. For example, the Spirit descending on Jesus after his baptism, his inauguration of the kingdom, his calling, and the sending the disciples are all minimized in ways that are not true to scripture.

Penal substitution also fails to hold in tension the wrath and love involved in God's justice. Retribution and isolation are incapable of breeding true transformation. They merely induce vengeance and retaliation. When issued within the context of relational accountability, and done with a restorative paradigm, scripture shows that measured retribution can be an important part of holding accountable individuals who commit relational violations. We must not lose sight of the fact that justice is ultimately manifested in the restoration of righteousness within relationships, not in pain inflicted or time served behind bars.

As Christians, the cross undoubtedly frames our understanding of divine justice. Christopher Marshall, a theologian from New Zealand, writes, "The logic of the cross actually confounds the principle of retributive

justice, for salvation is achieved not by the offender compensating for his crimes by suffering, but by the victim—the one offended against—suffering vicariously on behalf of the offended.”

Penal substitution is most problematic because it makes God’s response to sin too much like our own. It recasts God in our own image as opposed to allowing the divinely inspired scriptures to speak for God’s motives. Marshall also writes that restoration, not retribution, is the hallmark of God’s justice and is God’s final word in history. Restorative justice must be the aim of the people of God. God’s intent to restore all things and all people must inform and transform our understanding and pursuit of justice in the world. God was in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self. Christ reveals that God is self-giving, relational, merciful, restorative, and just. Moreover, in restoring the world through Jesus, we see that God consistently chooses to work from within creation, pointing and moving toward salvific redemption. To redeem the world, God became contextual and intimately relatable. Jesus is the archetype of self-giving love through the redemptive power of the Trinity made manifest in the resurrection. He thereby affords us access to reconciliation with God, liberating us from the shackles of sin, death, and subordination to the powers and principalities that breed material oppression in the world. Jesus makes right relationship possible.

This undeserved grace has given us a new identity and a new missional purpose in the world. It invites us into a life with God that is empowered by the Spirit, a life in which we get the opportunity to bear witness through how we choose to live and love. This opportunity is made possible, equally accessible to all, indiscriminately and exclusively through Jesus Christ.