

# **HOLY MOLEY!:** Open Theism attacks the Atonement!

—the headline that ruined my confidence in American Evangelicalism.

One thing all open theists would agree on is this: Anselm and the penal substitution view of the atonement are obsolete, part of an outdated model they can hardly wait for the evangelical model to shed.

Another overdue and rather banal essay by  
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Of all the heated polemic that is railed against open theism there is nothing quite so disquieting as the charge that the model has no adequate theory of atonement.

The atonement is fundamentally central to the Christian faith—without the work accomplished by Jesus on the cross we have, in my opinion, nothing. There is no hope, there is no redemption, there is no reconciliation unless that Jesus achieved something on the cross that altered the relationship between God and the fallen human condition. If the work of the cross is invalidated within the open theist theological framework, then it is understandable that they are judged as being heretical. Conversely, if the atonement is effectual within open theism, then it will be necessary for critics to find other weaknesses to focus on.

In this essay I will expand on and critique the charges that say that open theism is attacking the atonement and then endeavour to establish whether the charges are reasonable.<sup>1</sup>

## POINTS OF ENTRY : A SUMMARY OF THE CHALLENGES

The point of entry for this discussion is John MacArthur's article *Open Theism's Attack on the Atonement*. In spite of its inflammatory tone, MacArthur's essay carries a lot of weight in many evangelical circles. A simple search on the internet will reveal the extent to which this essay is utilised as being a worthy 'dispenser of the adversary' and the rhetoric he employs testifies to his own confidence in being a herald of the truth. In it he states categorically:

One thing all open theists would agree on is this: Anselm and the penal substitution view of the atonement are obsolete, part of an outdated model they can hardly wait for the evangelical model to shed.<sup>2</sup>

The essay was written as a response to an article that appeared in *Christianity Today* by Robert Brow. The article *Evangelical Megashift : Why you may not have heard about Wrath, Sin and Hell recently*<sup>3</sup> summarises the paradigmatic differences between 'old model' and 'new model' theologies by contrasting how the 'old God' is characterised by law and wrath, whereas the 'new God' is characterised by love and familial discipline. Brow suggests that "no one would deny that it is easier to relate to a God perceived as kindly and loving"<sup>4</sup> an initially harmless observation but nevertheless sternly frowned upon by MacArthur who

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<sup>1</sup> I am not an open theist and nor am I a Calvinist. The truth be known, I don't really know where I fit on this theological spectrum, so I bring by own journey to the discussion, trying to navigate my way through an at times raging debate in search of my own conclusions. Whether this invalidates or strengthens my approach to this essay, is up to the reader to decide.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Open Theism's Attack on the Atonement* [PDF] (The Masters Seminary Journal, 2001); available from <http://www.tms.edu/tmsj/tmsj12a.pdf>, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Brow, *Evangelical Megashift : Why You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin and Hell Recently*. (Robert Brow, 1990); available from <http://www.brow.on.ca/Articles/Megashift.html>. Also appeared in *Christianity Today*, February 19th, 1990 pp 12–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, last paragraph.

responds by describing how “new model thinkers want to eliminate the negative connotations associated with difficult biblical truths such as divine wrath and God’s righteous retribution against sin.”<sup>5</sup> He then states that the open theists “want nothing to do with a God who demands to be feared.”<sup>6</sup>

The gist of the essay is that this redefinition of God leaves no room for substitutionary atonement: “the new model god [sic] never demands any payment for sin” so Jesus did not receive any ‘divinely inflicted punishment on our behalf at the cross.’ Substitutionary atonement is implied by MacArthur as the only valid model of the atonement. MacArthur’s reason for writing so passionately against Brow is because it is his “conviction that this error is the bitter root of a corrupt tree that can never bear good fruit . . . Church history is rife with examples of those who rejected the vicarious nature of Christ’s atonement and thereby made shipwreck of the faith.”<sup>7</sup> So much so that he believes on the basis of his arguments that open theists are ‘devising a god [sic] of their own making’ and as such they are ‘a grave threat to the cause of the true gospel.’<sup>8</sup>

The summary of his (and in his opinion the only orthodox) theory of atonement that he sees as incompatible with open theists:

. . . this is the meaning of what happened at the cross for every believer: God treated Christ as if He had lived our wretched, sinful life, so that He could treat us as if we had lived Christ’s spotless, perfect life.<sup>9</sup>

Deny this and we have denied our grounds for justification. His support for this understanding of the atonement stems from St Anselm’s formulation of the doctrine of the atonement and goes so far as to say that the *penal substitution theory* “has long been considered an essential aspect of all doctrine that is truly evangelical.”<sup>10</sup> He suggests that if there is any responsibility on our shoulders to effect salvation, even as simple as our choice to accept Jesus, then we are locked into a works-salvation

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur suggests that there is “more to the divine character than beneficence” and proceeds with the following list:

God is also holy, righteous, and angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11). He is fierce in His indignation against sin (cf. Ps 78:49; Isa 13:9-13; Zeph 3:8). Fear of Him is the very essence of true wisdom (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). And “the terror of the Lord” is even a motive for our evangelism (2 Cor 5:11). “Our God is a consuming fire” 6 (Heb 12:29; cf. Deut 4:24), and “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). MacArthur, *Attack*, 4.

This is an impressive list I agree, but it would not take much to build an equally formidable list of all the divine love, mercy and faithfulness. All MacArthur does is illustrate that there is another dimension to God that is not what we might call nice, but he does not render the nice side of God implausible. I don’t see that Brow was actually setting out to eliminate ‘divine wrath’ and ‘retribution against sin’ rather that he was trying to provide balance to a tradition that has otherwise been blind to God’s intimate expressions of love.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10.

model—an opinion that is shared by many who take a Reformed position.

MacArthur doesn't speak from a void, in fact he speaks right from the heart of the American Reformed Tradition.<sup>11</sup> The Calvinist tradition is by far the most vocal on the American scene. As examples, Bruce Ware and R.K. McGregor Wright formulate more strong arguments that discredit a valid model of atonement within an open theist theological framework.

Ware raises objections on the grounds that there can be no true substitution if God did not know exactly who and exactly what sins he was dying for.<sup>12</sup> He summarises the Gospel as follows:

God, in eternity past, foresaw the future sin and consequent just damnation (apart from his grace) of the human race that he would create, and he planned then and there to save lost, helpless, and hopeless sinners.<sup>13</sup>

Christ therefore was predetermined to go and suffer on the cross, there was no option other than for this to happen. This is God's amazing plan, not just of redemption (that's too small), but of the history of everything of this universe. Everything is decreed by God and happens according to his will. This is clearly incompatible with the open theist proposal that the future is partly settled and partly unsettled where God is responsive to human decision.

For Ware, Jesus died for specific people's specific sin:

The substitutionary nature of the atonement can obtain only if God knows not only those prior to Christ's death but also those yet future for whom Christ died.<sup>14</sup>

So unless the substitute is specifically and personally defined then the efficacy of the cross is undermined. Furthermore, the idea that Jesus bore *our* sins is called into question by open theism that requires that Jesus died for an unidentifiable mass of people.<sup>15</sup> Such an understanding of the cross argues Ware, is morally vacuous.<sup>16</sup>

McGregor Wright brings objections mainly in the area of unconditional election and limited atonement—two pillars of the famous Calvinist quinary TULIP. Citing John Owen he argues that it is unnecessary for 'all' when referring to humankind to actually mean 'all', but that it can mean 'some' thus challenging the Arminian and open theist perspective of the universality of the work of the cross.

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<sup>11</sup> It has been staggering that in researching this essay that there is so much American Reformed defence of substitutionary atonement in comparison to the defence of any other models.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce A. Ware, "The Gospel of Christ," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

Before we can go any further we need to ask a question that is so simple and fundamental that it almost seems absurd to ask it. “What actually happened on the cross that made the difference for me to be saved?”

At first it seems odd since almost all of us who call ourselves Christian believe that the crucifixion is the central component to our faith. Without it I suspect our faith would flounder. The irony is that no-one actually knows how Jesus dying on the cross actually made a difference. The mechanics of the cross is and always will be an area of speculation.

The idea of atonement has a long history within the Jewish heritage that was formalised with the ‘day of atonement’ as described in Lev 16. But in spite of the elaborate ceremony described here, the effectual atoning of sins was still an arbitrary, this is after all one of the premises of the book of Hebrews where “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins . . . Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.” (Heb 10:4, 11).

Because the mechanics of the cross that effect our atonement operate in a sphere that is removed from our experience we can only guess what happened. How do we actually know that what Jesus has done has been achieved in heaven?<sup>17</sup> We do not actually know what happened on the cross. In as much as Hebrews can say that sacrifice will never atone for sins, we could say this of the cross: except for the biblical testimony in which we have faith. But in terms of knowing the actual effect of Jesus’ death in the heavenly realms we are still left somewhat in the dark. Michael Winter comes to the conclusion that

“there is a consensus among [modern writers] . . . they all agree that the New Testament does not tell us how the atonement was effected, yet they [the modern writers] offer no explanation of it themselves to compensate for that omission. Ironically it is precisely this explanation which is so badly needed by the modern reader, who finds the violent death of Jesus so repugnant.”<sup>18</sup>

We do not know the mechanics of the cross. All we know is the result. We can make attempt at explaining the how, but like in science we don’t necessarily have the ability to know *why*.<sup>19</sup>

This mystery compounds the problem of finding a satisfactory meaning of the cross which is why we can only have *theories* of the atonement (an idea that is seemingly lost on MacArthur and Ware). Any suggestions that state “this is what happened” are in fact flawed on the

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps we can identify with Martin Luther who, as legend has it, when he reached the top of the 28 steps of the *Scala Sancta* after saying his *Pater Nosters*, and wondered, “how do I know that what has been promised has been accomplished in heaven?”

<sup>18</sup> Michael M. Winter, *The Atonement, Problems in Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 30–7.

<sup>19</sup> We know that “To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” but we don’t actually know *why* that is a law of physics.

basis that it is speculation. I am not suggesting that we don't know what happened in the sense that we know the cross contains sacrificial, priestly and intercessory elements and therefore conveys deep meanings that flow from them. I am saying though that we cannot know precisely *how* the sacrifice saves us or how Jesus' intercession made a difference to God. We can still ask without answers, why did we need a perfect high priest? Why did the cross have to happen at all? Could it not have been something else? It is in answering these questions that we enter into speculative theology for there are no clear cut answers in scripture to them.

There is a long history and tradition that tries to answer these questions. St Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*? is a brilliant piece of work, but it is nevertheless still speculative. In his work he argues that the reason God needs to redeem humans is so that he can use them to replenish the host of angels in heaven who are now in deficit since the fallen angels departed.<sup>20</sup> His arguments that follow from this lead us down a speculative track to see that Jesus died instead of us without answering why save for his own deductions (that are not easily found in the plain reading of scripture). His conclusion is as follows:

If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it.<sup>21</sup>

It is an attempt to find the answers to difficult questions, and while it resolves well in Anselm's mind, it is still left wanting as it is derived more from human reason than it is from scripture.<sup>22</sup>

My aim here is not to refute Anselm—far be it from me to assume such a task—but I merely wish to demonstrate that when we talk about the actual interface between the event of the cross and the change in how God views our sin then we are empirically defeated and left with a mystery that we can attempt to explain but never resolve in this time on earth (in the same way that cosmologists explain the mystery of the beginning of the universe).<sup>23</sup> Whenever we extract dogma from the abstract, I feel very uncomfortable.

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<sup>20</sup> Anselm's discussion with Boso about this replenishment is as follows:

*Anselm.* It was fitting for God to fill the places of the fallen angels from among men.

*Boso.* That is certain.

*Anselm.* Therefore there ought to be in the heavenly empire as many men taken as substitutes for the angels as would correspond with the number whose place they shall take, that is, as many as there are good angels now; otherwise they who fell will not be restored, and it will follow that God either could not accomplish the good which he begun, or he will repent of having undertaken it; either of which is absurd.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium; an Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo; and Cur Deus Homo* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000); available from [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic\\_works.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.html), 157.

<sup>22</sup> Which is not to say that it doesn't reflect a general tenet of Scripture. It is just not explicit enough for anyone to say that "this is scriptural" in the evangelical sense.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* demonstrates this desire to explain with an underlying sense that we will only ever be able to tread the surface of the waters of

OPEN THEISM'S CHALLENGE TO  
SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

The violence of the rhetoric that is set against open theism often colours the arguments to such an extent that at times I wonder if the arguments are being propped up by shouting louder, and the challenges over the issue of the atonement are no exception. Nevertheless, using Ware and McGregor Wright and Phil Johnson to add some weight (much needed in my opinion) to MacArthur's essay I will assess whether or not substitutionary atonement is excluded in the open theist model.

JUST WHOM DID CHRIST DIE FOR?

At the heart of the debate is the validity of the doctrines of unconditional election and limited atonement which is not unique to open theism as they share strong similarities with Arminians on these points. The idea as Phil Johnston outlines the classic Calvinist position that "God chooses who will be saved. And He does not do it because of anything good He finds in the sinner."<sup>24</sup> This is at odds with open theism because God's choice was made before time for specific people an idea that has reasonable scriptural support that alludes to this (Eph 1:4,11 and more loosely John 15:16.)<sup>25</sup>

With regard to the foreknowledge of who are the recipients of God's gift of salvation, Ware challenges open theism by suggesting that "Because each aspect of [the] future knowledge is attached to libertarian choices . . . it is impossible for God to *know* prior to their obtaining (as we shall see) just *who* will exist throughout history and, of course *what free choices* they will make, along with all the *consequences* that flow from just these particular choices and not others."<sup>26</sup> And further, "Could God have known from eternity past that *you* exist?"<sup>27</sup>

Initially it is difficult to see why this presents a problem. Today's Reformed presentation of the gospel is deeply rooted in the idea that Jesus died for us all individually and calls us into a personal relationship with him. (Which is appealing to a culture where the promotion of 'self' is the rule of life—individualised salvation is an important and attractive theme.) But is the individualisation of the proof texts warranted? After all, 'sinners' is a non-specific group, 'elect' can be a non-specific group, both in keeping with the word 'all'.

To dispute this, McGregor Wright puts forward a case where the word 'all' need not be 'all encompassing' in 1 Tim 2.6 (a classic Arminian text) but can mean "all of God's people" or "all kinds of people."<sup>28</sup> So when verse 1 uses the word 'everyone' it actually means

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history. "If we find the answer to [why the Universe exists], it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we should now the mind of God." 210

<sup>24</sup> Phil Johnson, "The Nature of the Atonement: Why and for Whom Did Christ Die?" (paper presented at the 2003 Shepherds Conference, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> This text from John is not a good proof text as in the context Jesus could be, and probably is, only talking to the disciples at this point. It is a specific dialogue rather than general.

<sup>26</sup> Ware, "Beyond the Bounds," 309.

<sup>27</sup> Emphasis his. Ibid., 312.

<sup>28</sup> R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 172.

‘all kinds of people’—something he sees as a natural reading because of what follows with the ‘kings and all who are in high positions’. But I think this runs counter to the plain reading of the text. He makes a tenuously supported assumption about the meaning of ‘all’ by appealing to the latitude of its non-descriptiveness so that he can make it specific. His exposition of these 6 verses in 1 Tim 2.1–6 becomes unhinged over this initial assumption. But as a Calvinist how else can he read it? While I can see how he arrives at his conclusion I remain unconvinced that the text needs to be read his way. He should at least understand that the text can legitimately be read other ways too. ‘All’ *can* mean everyone who will ever exist, otherwise if we were consistent with Romans 3:23 then we could say that ‘*all kinds of people* have fallen short of the glory of God . . .’ and that just wouldn’t do much the doctrine of total depravity.

What if the shoe was on the other foot? How could an Arminian or open theist interpret the word ‘many’ in Mark 10:45 (a classic Calvinist text)? They could easily say that the word ‘many’ is non-specific and Jesus could merely be admitting the actuality that not all will choose to believe. This *assumption* renders useless all those Calvinist texts that use the word ‘many’ to support particular redemption.

I express my doubt over the Calvinist interpretation of these verses in 1 Tim 2 only to illustrate that we come to the text with our own agendas. All sides of the debate need to accept the difficult texts of the other and appreciate when too much hermeneutic is just too much. There is room for dialectic in the Christian thought, it’s called mystery, and surely we can appreciate that mystery explains what can’t be explained.

Calvinism is an incredible system of thought, intricately constructed from many proof texts scattered around the bible. But, in my eyes, it fails because it does not resonate at all with our dynamic experience of God. It’s greatest weakness is that it itself becomes the matter of apologetics not the gospel itself.

The assumption that the work of the cross needed to bear *my* explicit sins is not necessary in the broad theological spectrum, though it is essential for a Calvinist system of thought. Clark Pinnock confesses that it was over this point of limited atonement that the logical system of Calvinism began to unravel. His rejection was based on how he could see in scripture that *all* could be saved and he concludes that “election is a corporate category.”<sup>29</sup>

SO IT’S TIME TO BRING IN THE BIG GUNS

McGregor Wright appeals to John Owens’ classic *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* to support his case saying that the Arminians (and by inference the open theists) “seem unconcerned to answer,”<sup>30</sup>

God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for,

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<sup>29</sup> Clark Pinnock, *From Augustine to Arminius : A Pilgrimage in Theology*; available from <http://www.biblical-theology.com/calvinism/pilgrim.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty : What's Wrong with Freewill Theism*, 172.

and so shall no man be saved; for if God enter into judgement with us, though it were with all mankind for one sin, no flesh should be justified in his sight: “If the Lord should mark iniquities, who should stand?” Psalm 130:3. We might all go to cast all that we have “to the moles and to the bats, or go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for fear of the Lord, and the glory of his majesty,” Isaiah 2:20,21. If the second, that is it we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world. If the first, why, then, are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, “Because of their unbelief; they will not believe.” But this unbelief, is it a sin, or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died from partaking of the fruit of his death? If he did not, then did he not die for all their sins. Let them choose which part they will.<sup>31</sup>

To Owen (and McGregor Wright) the question is about whether Jesus provided forgiveness for the sin of unbelief. If Jesus did effect forgiveness for this particular sin then how can anyone be excluded from being saved since it is not their fault? He deduces therefore that Universalism is the only logical end of this line of argument. It is formidable logic and to be fair, none of the open theists have really tackled this conundrum.

But again the underlying assumption is at fault. His assumption is that Jesus died for a specific person’s unbelief—an assumption which is deeply entrenched in the idea that Jesus died as a substitute for *you* and *me* and our *individual specific* sins.

It is brave to disagree with a giant like Owen but he has limited the work of the cross to three options, all sin for all men, some sin for some men, all sin for some men. What if Jesus simply died for ‘sin’? The idea being that sin is an enormous category that is not broken down into individual sins, but is a category of all that separates us from God. In the same way that the scapegoat took on the sin of all the Israelites and not their specific and individual sins is it not possible that Jesus did the same? In other words, when someone believes, and therefore leaves their unbelief behind, Jesus effects the forgiveness of all their sins, including the sin of unbelief. Until that point of decision, nothing is forgiven. Open theism allows for effective substitutionary atonement when broader categories are employed, though I do not think that the substitutionary model is one of their favourites.

The beauty of open theism is that God’s love overwhelms his wrath. Reconciliation is the *prima facie* for the work of the cross and for this to be effective the sin must be put to one side. We must be made clean. So, given that the sins are not specific on the cross (just as the sins on the scapegoat were not specific) and the people Jesus died for are not specific either, we can accept that the issue is not whether we sin or not, but whether we choose to love God.

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<sup>31</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth, 1959).

I wonder then if it does boil down to this. That the only sin that will send us to hell (whatever that is) is the sin of unbelief. The consequences of unbelief are certainly expressed in all the other sins that we commit even when we do believe, but now we can easily sustain the ‘already not yet’ of the act of redemption on the Cross. We were dead in our sin because we did not believe.

Perhaps the idea of the ultimate sin being unbelief levels the playing field again and effectively reconstitutes us in the Garden of Eden where our relationship with God depends once again on one single choice. Instead of proving our responsive love for God by restraining ourselves from eating the fruit, we have the one choice to make and that is simply to believe. When one enters into a truly believing relationship with God, then the rest of the Christian life follows.

#### WHAT DOES OPEN THEISM OFFER ATONEMENT THEORY?

John MacArthur is simply incorrect in accusing the open theists of wanting to reject substitutionary atonement as being ‘old model’.

Gregory Boyd finds the idea as an important part of his theology of the work of the cross:

I by no means want to minimise the aspect of Christ’s work, for it is a profound source of freedom and joy for the believer, and is certainly deeply rooted in Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

Boyd’s departure from MacArthur’s position is that substitutionary atonement is an aspect of the work of the cross that is subordinate to the greater cosmic significance. He states

“ . . . since Anselm, the dominant way of thinking about the atonement focused on what it accomplished for humanity (reconciliation to God), and thus viewed what it accomplished against Satan and the evil powers as a by-product, the view I am espousing . . . is that the New Testament construes the relation between these two aspects of the cross in the converse order.”<sup>33</sup>

And adds further to this that:

“the work of the cross was about dethroning a cruel, illegitimate ruler and reinstating a loving, legitimate one: Jesus Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

Boyd’s understanding of the work of the cross develops the *Christus Victor* model with impressive practical implications. One of these is the striking proposal that the purpose of the church is to prove that through foolishness God can confound the wise. We are a ‘trophy showcase’ of God’s grace and as we become effective stewards of his creation once again, then the reversal mocks the enemy. The slaves become the over-

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<sup>32</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 240.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 246.

throwers.<sup>35</sup> But in no way does he reject substitutionary atonement except in saying that it is not *the* only aspect of the work of the Cross.

Sanders approach follows the traditional Arminian position but cloaked in open theist language. Sander further says:

There is no single way of capturing the meaning of the cross because an array of images is required, but this much is clear: the cross is God's answer to sin and evil.<sup>36</sup>

He calls his model the 'fellowship model' and presents the need for salvation as reconciliation to God because sin is "the breaking of a relationship."<sup>37</sup> Taking this view, he suggests that if there is to be any reciprocity in love there must be the opportunity for rejection. A major point of difference to MacArthur et al. is that he sees that for the cross to be an effective form of forgiveness, there needs to be a certain level of pain involved. Jesus is in effect the suffering of God in the initial process of forgiveness.<sup>38</sup> This is understandably offensive to anyone who believes in the impassibility of God, but the idea of a suffering God is gaining acceptance in evangelical circles and so it is not something that could be grounds for accusing Sanders of being heretical.

Brow and Pinnock view salvation in more cosmically holistic terms without referencing the diabolical spiritual war that Boyd depicts. They suggest that we have a view of salvation that is too vertically oriented, i.e. justification by faith. They argue that "Salvation is inclusive of conversion, social concerns, healing, deliverance and even the regeneration of the universe." They also state, "Salvation includes the healing of broken relationships—with God, with others and with nature."<sup>39</sup> They too see that the significance of the cross is not simply encompassed by a judicial transaction but is found in a variety of perspectives surrounding it. Again, to see this understanding as being an attack on penal substitution is unwarranted as they actually embrace this as a valid part of the salvation story.

#### CONCLUSION

The discussion is actually more over whether substitutionary atonement is the strongest model of the work of Christ on the cross or whether it is simply one facet of a plurality of models.<sup>40</sup> The implication of these open theist writers is that penal substitution is possible (and even probable) though not in the specific and meticulous sense. To call them heretical based on atonement theory is unjustifiable.

It seems to me that the call for a "new model" of God is not necessarily a bad one. And if the heart of the issue is that a contemporary philosophy is influencing theology then there is no issue

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>36</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks : A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 104.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>39</sup> Brow, *Evangelical Megashift : Why You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin and Hell Recently*.

<sup>40</sup> Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross : Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

at all because it has and always will be a strong factor of theology. Open theism has been born in a time where the West is philosophically complacent. There are no great battle grounds for any particular 'cause', except perhaps inclusivism, and so discussions on open theism turn into a 'battle for God' as if the God of Calvinism is the one true and accurate picture of God. The beauty of our post-modern back-drop is that we can thrive within dialectics. We can live with tension and unresolved difficulties. Our dialectical continuum begins and ends with propositions with mystery holding it in tension, instead of beginning and ending with mystery and a systematic theology holding the tension. This is how we have moved.

Rather than developing a model of the atonement that is distinctively open theist, this essay does no more than show that the atonement is not at stake but broadened and deepened. It seems that the work of Jesus on the Cross is just as efficacious within the open theist theological framework and the fact that many coordinates of the atonement are on the same plain as the Reformed theologians surely makes this a questionable front-line to be trying to "wage war".

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