

# **ATONEMENT, JUSTICE AND PEACE IN ROMANS 1-6: SOME THOUGHTS IN RESPONSE TO DARRIN SNYDER BELOUSEK'S *ATONEMENT, JUSTICE, AND PEACE***

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The first words I want to offer in response to Belousek's book are words of warm appreciation. As a non-philosopher I'm grateful for his efforts to help us be aware of and explicit about the paradigms and presuppositions that we bring to Scripture; as a New Testament lecturer, I'm encouraged to see the lengths Belousek has gone to in attempting to do justice to the details and particulars of Scripture, including those that are not necessarily congenial to his case, and to read them in relation to the Bible's over-arching narrative structures and their climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus; as a pastor and teacher of pastors, I appreciate the way in which Belousek's book, from start to finish, keeps open the question of how the church's theology relates to the life of discipleship and the mission that we are called to as followers of Jesus; as an evangelical, I'm thankful for the way in which Belousek attempts to address the "double audience" that he speaks about in the opening pages of the book, and doesn't simply surrender to the necessity of a permanent schism between people who care about the gospel and people who care about peace and justice; and as a lecturer on Paul's epistles, I'm glad that he isn't content with the stereotype of Paul and his gospel as abstract, theoretical, and ethically and politically barren. There is much in this book and in what it is attempting to do that I am glad of and thankful for.

## **RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, JUDICIAL WRATH AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION IN ROMANS 1-6**

There are, however, some points of significant disagreement that I have with Belousek's reading of Scripture, on matters that are closely connected to the heart of his thesis. In this paper I want to outline several of those points of disagreement, taking as a test-case his reading of Rom 1-6, then offer some suggestions for what I think is a better way of relating atonement, peace and justice, following Paul's lead in those chapters.

The majority of my criticisms relate to Belousek's claim—crucial to his reading of Paul—that "Paul frames the cross, not by the problem of God's wrath, but by the demonstration of God's

righteousness/justice through covenant faithfulness.”<sup>1</sup> My main problem with that claim, if I understand it correctly, is that it implies a false dichotomy. I would want to ask in response: why can the cross not be **both** a demonstration of God’s righteousness and justice in fulfilment of his covenant promises **and** a resolution of the problem that is posed for us by God’s wrath and judgement? Showing that the cross fulfils God’s promises and manifests his righteousness does not amount to a disproof of the notion that the cross takes place against the background of God’s threatened judgement and as a resolution of its demands.

Underneath that unnecessary dichotomy built into Belousek’s thesis is a series of additional dichotomies that are constructed as arguments in support of it. The first and most obvious is the assumption that the cross must be the solution **either** to the problem of God’s wrath **or** to the problem of human sin, but not to both. Certainly, in Rom 3:21–26, the passage that Belousek lays out in ch. 8 as an elaborate chiasm in support of his thesis,<sup>2</sup> the explicit references are to “sin,” not to “wrath,” as the plight that is addressed by the redemption accomplished in Christ. But in the picture Paul has painted across the preceding chapters, sin and wrath are tightly bound together in a single package—as they are, for that matter, across the whole of the Old Testament, including such structurally prominent places as the covenant curses of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (e.g. Lev 26:14–45; Deut 29:22–28). To be a sinner and a slave to sin is to be under wrath, and the salvation Paul announces in the gospel addresses all of the dimensions of that plight.

Of course, Belousek does not simply ignore the question of God’s wrath altogether. But his reading of how Paul speaks about it in Rom 1 and 2, as he sets up the frame for the revelation of God’s righteousness in Rom 3, is weakened significantly by two more unwarranted dichotomies that he imposes on the text. The first is the dichotomy between **wrath against sin** and **wrath against sinners**. According to Belousek, “the object of God’s wrath [in Rom 1:18] is not human beings themselves, but their wicked ways and evil deeds.”<sup>3</sup> Once again, as was the case in Rom 3:21–26, there is a certain surface-level correctness to Belousek’s claim. But the fact that Paul talks in Rom 1:18 in terms of the wrath of God being revealed against “wickedness” and “godlessness” does not mean that Paul imagines those behaviours as neatly separable from the people who are the subject of them. There is a difference, of course, between how Paul depicts God’s stance toward sin and his stance toward sinners—it was, after all, while we were still sinners that Christ died for us, demonstrating God’s love for sinners and enemies. But there is still a sense in which, according to Rom 1–3, the wrath of God stands over against us ourselves, as sinners—on the day of wrath, there will be wrath for *us* if we do not receive God’s kindness as an invitation to repentance (2:5); the wrath of God that is revealed in the present as being against evil and self-seekingness and falsehood will be visited on the final day not just upon *practices* but upon *persons*—

<sup>1</sup> Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 129: “Penal substitution ... frames the cross of Christ by this question of the wrath of God, so that the divine-wrath-propitiating cross of Christ is the logical answer to this question: How can sinful humanity under divine wrath be saved? By contrast, Paul frames the cross, not by the problem of God’s wrath, but by the demonstration of God’s righteousness/justice through covenant faithfulness.”

<sup>2</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 129–30.

<sup>3</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 214.

upon “those who are self-seeking and reject the truth and follow evil” (2:8). The wrath against sin described in Rom 1 implies the wrath against sinners described in Rom 2.

The second false dichotomy in Belousek’s reading of how Paul describes the wrath of God is the dichotomy that he implies between **suffering as a divine penalty imposed on sin** and **suffering as the consequence of forces and actions within the natural order**. According to Belousek, if the wrath of God is to be understood as penal, it needs to be described by the biblical writers as “something external to the cause-effect order of creation, a judicial penalty imposed directly by divine intervention in the world”.<sup>4</sup> But the biblical writers know no such assumption. When God “hands people over” to judgement—whether the judgement eventuates through natural processes like plague and famine, or through the outworking of the consequences of their own sin, or through the hostile actions of others—the *meaning* of the language is still penal, regardless of whether the *means* that God employs involve direct divine intervention.

Thus, for example, in Ps 106 (the psalm that Paul alludes to in Rom 1:25), when God delivers Israel over into the hands of the nations, there is no suggestion of any direct, supernatural divine intervention—the point, if anything, is that God does *not* intervene to prevent the conquest and oppression of his people taking place—but the event is still depicted as an expression of God’s judgement and wrath.<sup>5</sup> The same language of “handing over” is also used, crucially, in Rom 8:32 to describe the death of Jesus himself, when God gave up his Son for us, delivering him over to death on a cross.<sup>6</sup> There is no divine intervention implied, but the providential purpose of God is still unmistakably at work. Even within history, the revelation of God’s wrath as Paul describes it in Rom 1 has a penal meaning, in which the escalating consequences of sin are simultaneously an expression of its judgement under the decree of God.

If the wrath of God that Paul describes in Rom 1 as being manifested within history is implicitly penal, the depiction that Paul gives in Rom 2 of the wrath of God at the end of history is explicitly and emphatically penal and retributive. In Rom 2:1 Paul turns to the person who is complacently assenting to the previous chapter’s description of pagan humanity under the wrath God and warns of the coming day of judgement, when—according to verse 6—God will “repay each person according to what they have done.” The kind of retribution that Paul has in mind here is not an iron law of strict mathematical correspondence between the visible, outward crime and the punishment that equals it; God’s final judgement, Paul insists, will involve a searching of the secret thoughts and motives of the heart, not just the wooden application of a fixed, statutory penalty. But the basic shape of the judgement that he describes within this chapter is still unmistakably retributive, paying back to the evildoer trouble and distress as a deserved punishment for the wrong that they have done.

At this point there is an important correspondence worth noting between the justice of God made known in the gospel and the broader human understanding of what justice means, including the classical

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<sup>4</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 214.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the similar language in 1 Kgs 8:46; 2 Chr 6:36; 2 Kgs 21:14; 2 Chr 36:17; Ps 78:60-61; LXX Isa 64:6; Isa 65:12; Jer 21:20; 22:25).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Belousek’s brief comment in Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 113.

Graeco-Roman accounts. Belousek is right to argue that, since the life, death, and resurrection are the culminating revelation of God's peace and justice, "we cannot assume beforehand that the life-ministry and cross of Jesus Christ will conform to our prior, natural human thinking about justice and peace."<sup>7</sup> The redemptive righteousness of God that is made known in the gospel is certainly presented by Paul as something that could never have been anticipated by the pagan cults or the speculative philosophers (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–31), and the just and peaceable way of life to be followed by Christ's people involves sharp contradictions with "the pattern of this world" (cf. Rom 12:1–21). But at the level of the fundamental retributive assumption that wrongdoing is liable to punishment, Paul's argument in Rom 1–3 assumes a basic coherence between "[what] the law says" (Rom 3:19), "[what] my gospel declares" (Rom 2:16) and what Paul depicts in Rom 1:32 as a universal, intuitive, human awareness of "God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death."

There is therefore an ample basis for the traditional reading of Rom 3:21–26, in which the depiction of Christ as a *hilasterion*, a mercy-seat, through the shedding of his blood, is understood against the backdrop of not just our sin but also the divine, judicial wrath that stood against us because of our sin. According to the vision that Paul presents in Rom 1–3, there is good reason to speak of us as being saved through Christ *from God's wrath*—as indeed Paul does in Rom 5:9—and to understand that wrath as personal, universal, eschatological, and penal.

#### JUSTICE BEYOND RETRIBUTION, RIGHTEOUSNESS BEYOND JUSTIFICATION, PEACE BEYOND THE SOUL

But that is not the only way in which Rom 1–6 describes our salvation; nor does Paul depict the sin-bearing death of Jesus and the verdict of present justification spoken over those who believe in him as if those things were the end of the story and the sum total of the revelation of God's righteousness. And here, I think, is the place at which it makes sense to speak about a number of important points of agreement that I have with Belousek, and to suggest what I think is a better way to establish some of the claims that he wants to make.

##### (i) Justice Beyond Retribution

The first and most basic point of agreement between us is on the meaning of the biblical language about the righteousness and justice of God. Whilst Belousek and I differ on whether God's justice includes within it an irreducible element of retribution, we agree emphatically that the justice of God is not limited to a *merely* retributive settling of scores. When Paul speaks in Rom 1:16–17 about the gospel as "the power of God that brings salvation" and asserts that "in it the righteousness of God is revealed," the language he uses carries multiple echoes of Ps 98:2: "The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his

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<sup>7</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 20.

righteousness to the nations.” Here and elsewhere in the Old Testament, as Belousek rightly emphasizes, the manifestation of God’s righteousness on earth is depicted as a glorious future hope, cosmic in scope and restorative in content.<sup>8</sup> In the language of the biblical writers, justice, righteousness, salvation and peace keep company together, and the revealing of God’s righteousness is cause for the rivers to clap their hands and the mountains to sing for joy. Paul’s own vision of the saving righteousness of God is no less expansive. The effect of God’s saving work in Christ, according to Paul, is to end the dominion of death over the world, and to bring in a day when “grace ... reign[s] through righteousness” in the life of the age to come (Rom 5:21). As he goes on to say in Rom 8, the whole creation groans, waiting for that day, when it will be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

## (ii) Righteousness Beyond Justification

This has important ramifications for the way in which we are to understand Paul’s language about the righteousness of believers. “Justification,” for Paul, is a fundamentally forensic metaphor, referring to a declarative event.<sup>9</sup> But “righteousness” language, as Paul employs it, can refer to realities that take place before, during and after the metaphorical law court in which the verdict of justification is pronounced. And for Paul, the righteousness of the life that is transformed by obedient faith and participates in the manifestation of God’s righteousness on earth is not just the *evidence* of our salvation but the *purpose* of it, or at least a crucial dimension of that purpose. Our salvation is not only from wrath (Rom 5:9) but also from sin (Rom 6:22), and the purpose of that salvation was “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom 6:4)—a life in which we are summoned to offer every part of ourselves to God as “instruments [or ‘weapons’] of righteousness” (Rom 6:13).<sup>10</sup>

## (iii) Peace Beyond the Soul

As for righteousness, so for peace. While the “peace” and “reconciliation” that Paul speaks of in Rom 5:1–11 are, as Belousek grants, references to the vertical reality of peace with God,<sup>11</sup> Paul’s depiction of the plight of unreconciled humanity in the preceding chapters repeatedly refers to horizontal dysfunctions: “They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice” (1:29); “their mouths are full of cursing and

<sup>8</sup> See especially *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 59–67.

<sup>9</sup> I am not persuaded by Belousek’s assertion that “full justification, in Paul’s view, is both a status of right standing before God by faith in Christ and a life of right acting by walking faithfully in the way of God through the Spirit of the risen Christ.” *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 121. Cf. N. T. Wright’s critical observations on the similar formulation proposed by Michael Gorman, in N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), 913–14, 957.

<sup>10</sup> See further in David I. Starling, “Covenants and Courtrooms, Imputation and Imitation: Righteousness and Justification in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*,” *JSPL* 4 (2014): 1–12, and “Meditations on a Slippery Citation: Paul’s Use of Psalm 112:9 in 2 Corinthians 9:9,” *JTI* 6 (2012): 241–55.

<sup>11</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 512–13.

bitterness” (3:14); “their feet are swift to shed blood” (3:15); “the way of peace they do not know” (3:17). This should come as no surprise, given the fact that Paul’s outline and defence of his gospel in chapters 1–4 is intended to prepare the way for a string of exhortations in chapters 12–16, urging the readers to live at peace with one another and with their enemies, within and beyond the Christian community.<sup>12</sup> There is undoubtedly a sense of inward tranquility that is part of the good fruit Paul sees the gospel of Jesus as bearing in the lives of those who believe it, but the peace of the gospel cannot be contained within the confines of the individual soul; it cries out for visible, concrete, social embodiment.

## CONCLUSION

There is, therefore, an important claim at the heart of *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, which needs to be heard and taken seriously by those who, like myself, are committed to the centrality of the gospel events in God’s saving economy, and to penal substitution as a crucial dimension of the meaning of the atonement. God’s justice involves more than the punishment of sins and the settling of scores; God’s saving righteousness has implications for the individual believer that involve more than the verdict of justification; God’s peace, announced and established in the gospel, offers and accomplishes more than the inward tranquillity of the soul.

But these realities, as Paul depicts them in Rom 1–6, are not alternatives to penal substitution or short-cuts past the costly integrity of retributive justice. They sit alongside and beyond the penal and retributive dimensions of Paul’s gospel, as part of the great “in order that” with which Paul accounts for the bloody necessity of the cross and summons us to live in the light of it. If we are to be faithful to the whole of Paul’s theological vision, we need not and must not choose between them.

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<sup>12</sup> See especially S. Gathercole, “Romans 1-5 and the ‘Weak’ and the ‘Strong’: Pauline Theology, Pastoral Rhetoric, and the Purpose of Romans,” *RevExp* 100 (2003): 35-51.