

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**Joining Jesus' Liberation Movement:
Toward a More Just and Holistic
Anabaptist Understanding
of Salvation**

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in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Joining Jesus' Liberation Movement: Toward a More Just and Holistic Anabaptist
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Abstract

This project seeks to articulate an Anabaptist understanding of salvation which takes women's experiences seriously and responds to their needs and aspirations. Using insights and approaches from feminist, womanist, and other liberation theologians, it also strives to remember Jesus more clearly in his economic, political, and religious context.

At the heart of this theological reconstruction is the conviction that Jesus offers salvation by making God's "shalom justice" real on the earth through the entirety of his ministry, death, and resurrection. Each aspect of Jesus' life, including the cross, demonstrates God's ultimate solidarity with those who are oppressed and violated, as well as God's capacity to bring forth healing and life out of suffering and death. This salvation is not only individual but lived out in communities which join in God's work in the world. Thus, we find salvation in "shalom justice households" which embrace and continue Jesus' work for liberation, justice, and shalom.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge at the outset that one does not do this work alone. As I have embarked on this project, I have been fortunate to be in conversation with many women across the Mennonite church. I am so profoundly grateful for all the conversations, questions, support, and feedback I have received from so many.

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Preface

This project grows out of a long journey to find a loving God and an Anabaptist understanding of salvation which attends to the needs of those who have experienced discrimination and marginalization in the church, as well as sexualized violence and/or physical and spiritual harm. As explained in the introduction, past expressions of atonement and salvation in Anabaptist and Mennonite communities have failed to address these experiences adequately, and have even caused additional harm. I also share the assumptions, perspectives, and methodology I bring to this task, along with a basic understanding of salvation, atonement, and sin.

Chapter Two begins with an introduction to salvation theology in the Christian tradition. It especially highlights the most prominent atonement theologies which continue to dominate and shape our discussion of these doctrines. I then share some of the concerns raised by women in the broader Christian community about the negative impact of some of these teachings, especially for groups experiencing violence and oppression. I also summarize some of the significant ways these women have articulated the meaning of the saving power found in Jesus and the movement that surrounded him.

In Chapter Three, I focus specifically on Anabaptist writings on the atonement and salvation, especially from the past three decades. Not only have Mennonites adopted atonement theology from the wider Christian community, but many continue to stress distinctive Anabaptist themes of sacrificial suffering and nonresistance, despite questions and challenges from Anabaptist women. I then survey the work of recent Anabaptist theologians who have proposed

alternative atonement models, and offer observations on the extent to which these writers address the realities of violence and desolation in peoples' lives.

Chapter Four addresses the fact that most Christian theology and Biblical interpretation has been done through a European, white, male, and privileged lens. It has thereby overlooked much truth and robbed the story of Jesus of much of its power. Thus, I return to the gospel stories, paying special attention to the economic, political, and religious context in which Jesus lived and died. I also lift up the narratives of women in the gospels, and what they reveal about what has been ignored and distorted. This allows us then to better remember Jesus' life and ministry, and thereby comprehend more clearly the salvation God offers through him.

Based on this re-reading of the gospel story, Chapter Five seeks to re-construct a model of salvation that is truly good news for all, but especially those who suffer oppression and violence. I emphasize God's vision of justice and shalom, and the way in which Jesus invites everyone to live into this kind of salvation. I then explore the image of loving and egalitarian "shalom justice households" as a way to visualize how God continues Jesus' saving ministry on earth. Especially important to highlight is that Jesus' entire life, ministry, death and resurrection demonstrated his solidarity with victims, his love for the earth and our bodies, his call to resistance and repentance, and the power of God's love to bring forth healing and life out of suffering and death.

Finally, Chapter Six considers some of the practical and pastoral implications of this model. This includes evaluating all elements of worship and teaching from the perspective of victims/survivors of oppression and violence, using embodied practices and rituals, engaging in nonviolent resistance to oppression, and practicing restorative justice, conflict transformation,

and participatory decision-making. It is also essential to nurture transformative spiritual practices and celebrate the beauty and imagination which nourishes and sustains life.

May the Spirit that was alive in Jesus continue to save us all.

Chapter One: Introduction

I come to this task as part of a very personal journey. So let me begin there, by acknowledging my place in the world and some of the experiences that have shaped me and my perspectives on the world.

On one hand, I am white and middle-class, and must acknowledge that I have led a relatively safe and comfortable life in the United States, in contrast to so many people of color and more recent immigrants. I have had access to adequate food, housing, education, and healthcare. I have not had to fear interactions with the police or been questioned about my immigration status. Nor have I suffered directly from the destructive policies and practices of the American empire which so often exploit and destroy the earth and its people.

On the other hand, I grew up female in a conservative Swiss-German Mennonite church community, and early in life became deeply troubled by how differently its leaders treated men and women. Men and boys were given respect and many opportunities to contribute in the church, while women were limited in the use of their gifts and not permitted to serve as church leaders or pastors.¹ Women were also required to wear special clothing, such as cape dresses and dark stockings in order to conceal the feminine features of their bodies. They were also required to wear devotional coverings over their hair, in order to symbolize “their constant openness to

1. For example, Lancaster Mennonite Conference (the conference in which I grew up) agreed to ordain women only since 2008, and still requires that bishops and conference leaders be men. Similarly, the 2015 Virginia Mennonite Conference leadership manual still includes statements like this: “The question is still open whether the headship-of-man principle, as taught in I Corinthians 11, implies that roles which involve authority and responsibility over men are unsuited to women.” From the *Leadership Handbook for Congregations, Districts, and Credentialed Leaders in Virginia Mennonite Conference*, Revised: September 2015, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://virginiaconference.org/documents/resources-congregations-leaders/>, 78.

God and their divinely-ordained submission to men.”² Throughout my life, church leaders have communicated a message that there is something so fundamentally and ontologically flawed with women that even Christ could not fully redeem them and make them worthy to participate fully in the life of the church. Consequently, I have struggled to find a God who loved me, wholly and completely as a woman.

I have also been deeply shaped by the stories and experiences of women in my community, as well as in the larger world. Although I myself did not experience overt violence or sexual assault, I came to know that many of my sisters did face these horrors. I have listened to their stories and often marveled at their efforts to find healing, justice, and wholeness. In my professional life, I also did what I could to provide encouragement and resources that would help address their experiences of marginalization, disempowerment and violence. Too often, however, I have been deeply dismayed and alarmed by the failure of church leaders to stop the violence or hold the offenders accountable.

Eventually, I came to believe that Anabaptist churches need an understanding of salvation and atonement which responds more adequately to the unique experiences, aspirations, and questions of Mennonite women. These theological concepts are so foundational that we cannot truly find freedom and wholeness in our relationships until we engage these questions more honestly and completely.

Feminist Anabaptist hermeneutics

I readily acknowledge that I do my work as a woman, seeking to find answers which address my lived experience as well as the experiences of women in similar situations.

2. Pamela Klassen, “What’s Bre(a)d in the Bone: The Bodily Heritage of Mennonite Women.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1994), 237.

I therefore draw heavily on feminist ways of knowing and making sense of the world. This includes how we understand ourselves in relation to our families and communities, as well as how we engage with the significant texts in our lives.

For most Christians, including Mennonites, the Bible is one of the most authoritative texts. Often, male church leaders have claimed the right to interpret what the Bible says and what it means for our lives. Yet, as women and other silenced voices have gained more education and influence, they have pointed out that interpretation is not a clear and straightforward process. We cannot simply read the text and know exactly what it means. Rather, we must acknowledge that the context of the text shapes what it meant at the time, and our context today influences how we read and understand it. Or as Diane MacDonald pointed out in a Mennonite forum decades ago, we need to recognize the interplay between the “world constructs” of the text and those of the interpreter.³ Thus, we need to be very aware of who mediates the meaning of authoritative texts.

It is also essential to interpret scripture with others. As Nadine Pence Frantz explains, no one voice can “understand the texts and sub-texts” but rather it “takes a community—a multitude of people who are engaged in many different vocational calls—to discern what the meaning is for them at that time.”⁴ This is especially critical for groups who try to obey the text, since interpretation is not just an intellectual exercise, but has real life consequences. Thus she argues that everyone affected by a text must have a role in defining and expressing what it means.⁵ As

3. Diane MacDonald, “The Hermeneutical Challenge,” in *Perspectives on Feminist Hermeneutics*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Willard Swartley, Occasional Papers, No. 10, (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1987), 41. This series of articles resulted from a two-day consultation in 1986 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries on the theme of feminist hermeneutics. (In 2012, the seminary renamed itself Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. See the AMBS website, accessed 19 January 2018, <https://www.ambs.edu/about/history>.)

4. Nadine Pence Frantz, “The (Inter) Textuality of Our Lives: An Anabaptist Feminist Hermeneutic,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 14, No. 2 (Spring 1996), 136.

5. Ibid.

she says, the “task of interpretation is filled too much with unconscious desires and conversations to leave to one group or one voice.”⁶

Here Frantz is also addressing the issue of power and how it functions in the interpretation of authoritative texts. She notes that those in Anabaptist and Pietist traditions have often done biblical interpretation “over against prevailing theological projects which frequently functioned as legitimations of those in power.”⁷ We should therefore clearly understand the need to evaluate and examine the politics and impact of all interpretation.

Lydia Harder concurs, urging that in hermeneutical discussions, we must engage in “self-reflection and critique” in order to identify the “institutional interests and concerns” involved.⁸ This includes recognizing “the pervasive influence of patriarchy on both our society and church.”⁹

Indeed, this is another insight of feminism. It clearly sees and names the fact that there are systems in place which privilege men and devalue women. Not only do these systems harm women, but they damage and diminish all of us. They contribute to and reinforce other oppressive systems, such as racism, heterosexism, economic injustice, and environmental devastation.

In this regard, I have learned to especially value the insights and contributions of womanist theology. Although this theology starts with and centers on the experiences of black women, it also “brings black women’s experiences into the discourse of *all* Christian theology,

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 138.

8. Lydia Harder, “Hermeneutic Community—A Feminist Challenge,” in *Perspectives on Feminist Hermeneutics*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Willard Swartley, Occasional Papers, No. 10 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1987), 49.

9. Ibid.

from which it has previously been excluded.”¹⁰ And because it speaks from the perspective of one of the most oppressed groups in our society, it is able to identify and challenge “all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical ability and caste.”¹¹ Womanist theology thus has much wisdom to contribute to other communities as they address their own questions.

In fact, I have found that womanist theology resonates with me in a special way. This does not mean I share the same experiences of injustice and oppression. What do I share in a small way is the experience of growing up on the margins of mainstream American society. As a Mennonite, I always knew that my primary identity was not as an American. Instead I was a member of a marginal group with different values and commitments. As a woman, I also experienced what it meant to live on the sidelines of this margin, not taken seriously or valued as a full member.¹²

I believe therefore that the perspectives of women and other oppressed groups are absolutely necessary in order to hear the gospel message in all its truth and fullness. In fact, I will argue that failure to hear and stand alongside those who have been silenced and violated leads to a distorted, and even false, understanding of Jesus and his offer of salvation. Too often it leads to a theology that is no longer a way to life, but instead leads to death. Especially for those on the underside of economic, political, and religious power, it can become a dangerous snare from which it is very difficult to extricate oneself.

10. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness, The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), xiv. Italics in original.

11. Ibid.

12. Lisa Schirch and Ruth Elizabeth Krall concur with this feeling of marginalization. As Schirch writes in the Preface to their recent book, *Living on the Edge of the Edge: Letters to a Younger Colleague*, “Mennonites have 500 years of history of sitting on the edge of the societies where they have lived. Mennonite women are sitting on the edge of this edge.” (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2017), xxi.

Throughout this work, therefore, I will try to ground my theology in the experiences and wisdom of those who have been marginalized or excluded from our theological discourse. I will seek to always be mindful of these questions¹³:

- Who is missing from this discussion?¹⁴
- Who is most vulnerable in this situation and how would they hear this message?
- Does this path lead to life and wholeness? This does not mean avoiding all risk. Yet it is important to ask if following this path is life-giving, or whether it enables and supports the forces of domination and death.
- Who am I accountable to and how? This question is especially important when one is in any position of privilege or authority.

Understanding salvation, atonement, and sin

Salvation refers to the transformation of life which comes through a loving and true relationship with God, oneself, and others. Indeed, it is a journey toward right relationships in all these areas. Jane McAvoy defines this as “a process of transformation that begins with personal healing and leads to social justice.”¹⁵ Further, in dialogue with medieval women mystics, she concludes that “we are saved by the satisfying love of God, which calls us from a state of

13. Linda Gehman Peachey and Elsie Goerzen, “Preparing Congregations for Collaborative Work: The Role of the Mennonite Central Committee in Strengthening Families,” in *Strengthening Families and Ending Abuse*, ed. Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fischer-Townsend, and Victoria Fahlberg, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 217-218.

14. Krall explains this question well, as she asked her students to “be aware of the missing voice, the missing individual.” Additionally, “Whose presence is urgently needed for the uncovering of truth...Whose absence means that factual truth has been obscured, distorted or otherwise compromised?” *Living on the Edge of the Edge*, 17.

15. Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 7.

abusive self-sacrifice, for a life of searching, service, and even suffering in loving relation with God and God's creation. It is a satisfied life."¹⁶

Another way to explain this is to use the Hebrew concepts of shalom and justice. As Perry Yoder explains so well, "shalom" is a Hebrew concept which includes a sense that everything is just and right, in terms of health and material well-being, social relationships and personal character.¹⁷ It envisions life that is whole and in right relationship with oneself and everyone else.¹⁸

Justice is essential too, as this describes God's efforts to create shalom. Wherever things have gone wrong, God acts to address the situation, and transform human structures so that "things might be okay."¹⁹ Thus, the biblical concept of salvation is not primarily about life after death. Rather it describes God's efforts to restore health and wellbeing, as well as provide safety, and liberation from danger and cruelty.²⁰

For Christians, atonement lies at the heart of salvation. Briefly, this is the saving work of Jesus Christ, or the ways in which we try to explain how Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection offer hope and saving power. Atonement theologies also recognize, as Malinda Berry notes, that at some deep level we must confess that we do not, and cannot, save

16. Ibid., 8.

17. Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 10-18.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 38. Also see Yoder's Chapter Four: "Salvation: shalom justice in action," 39-52.

20. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells, Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 64.

ourselves.²¹ Rather, we acknowledge that something in ourselves and in our world is wrong, and we need God's help in making things whole and healthy again.

Another way to say this is that atonement models try to address the problem of sin and how we find salvation from its grip. Most western approaches have usually understood human sin as deliberate disobedience, selfishness, and pride, by which humans turn away from God and what God requires. This comes through clearly in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, which reads in part: "Sin is turning away from God and making gods of creation and of ourselves. We sin by making individual and group choices to do unrighteousness and injustice."²²

Alternatively, the problem of human evil can be understood not only as defiant disobedience to God's commands, but rather fear of the future, and an inability to trust that God loves us and seeks our welfare. This fear questions God's love and wisdom, and turns away both from God and others in order to try to guarantee survival and the satisfaction of one's needs. As Monica Coleman puts it, "when any of us act and live as if our actions and decisions only affect us, when we deny the interdependence of the world, when we act as if we are not all connected and in need of each other, we produce evil."²³

Such evil then tends to grow into systems and structures much larger than the individuals involved. James Poling explains that, "A pattern of sinful decisions eventually creates institutions and ideologies that are enduring patterns of influence."²⁴ Not only that, but these

21. Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "Needles not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast. (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 275. Here she uses the work of Jane McAvoy in *The Satisfied Life*.

22. General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 31.

23. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 55.

24. James Nelson Poling, *Rethinking Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 2011, 34.

systems carry out evil, often reinforced by religion, and given cover by “claims to virtue, love and justice.”²⁵

This means that people not only participate in and perpetuate sinful actions, but they also often experience being sinned against. People are oppressed by social systems and structures, and often feel trapped. This makes it difficult to choose wisely or in a way that can change their situation and move toward what is life-giving and good. One woman described it this way: “Sin is distortion, a twisting of how we were intended to be, a twisting of God’s will into something that serves the empire, or the family system, someone else. We do this to ourselves, to others, to the world. The world, our families do this to us. We all participate in distortion.”²⁶

Sin also often leads to violence that is both personal and systemic. Quoting the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Elizabeth Soto Albrecht contends that violence can be both overt and covert.²⁷ People may violate others directly, but social structures may also destroy people indirectly through repressive laws, coercive social norms, and oppressive policies. In either case, violence destroys people’s lives and devastates their sense of dignity and value.

Introducing Anabaptists and Mennonites

The Anabaptist movement emerged during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in the midst of widespread social and religious ferment. Although it included people from many walks of life, this movement especially appealed to common people, who “felt

25. Ibid.

26. Focus group participant.

27. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, *Family Violence: Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 17.

alienated from the established church and exploited by the nobility and ruling classes.”²⁸ By insisting that faith should be voluntary and modeled after the life of Jesus, they rejected state control of the church and claimed the right to organize themselves and choose their own leaders.²⁹

Such beliefs and practices also had economic and political consequences. As Thomas Finger notes, one well-known Anabaptist declaration “insisted that since Christ redeemed everyone, no person can be another’s property and serfdom must be abolished.”³⁰ These peasants therefore refused to pay church tithes, rebuffed excessive demands for their labor and rents, and requested that they be given equal access to local waters, forests, and meadows.³¹

Tragically, Anabaptists were severely persecuted by more mainstream religious and political leaders who felt threatened by their insistence on such a radical transformation of economic, social, and religious structures.³² Many Anabaptist believers were killed, while others withdrew from active social involvement or migrated to safer lands.³³

28. J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist, The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 193.

29. Ibid., 20, 35-38.

30. Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 25.

31. Ibid. Also see Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, 35-36.

32. See the Anabaptist text, *Martyr’s Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660*. Originally compiled and printed by Thieleman J. van Braght in 1660, this large volume of over 1000 pages provides stories and court testimonies of those martyred because of their faith. Nearly two-thirds of the book provide details of Anabaptist and Mennonites executed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See Nanne van der Zijpp, Harold S. Bender and Richard D. Thiessen, "Martyrs' Mirror," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, 2014, accessed January 2, 2018, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Martyrs%27_Mirror&oldid=145854.

33. Cornelius Krahn, Harold S. Bender, and John J. Friesen, "Migrations," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, 1989, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Migrations&oldid=143668>.

Today, the Anabaptist movement continues in Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ denominations around the world.³⁴ Although there are many variations, this tradition emphasizes not only believing in Jesus but also following him as a disciple in daily life; commitment to discernment and life together in a community of believers; and a conviction that God desires peace, justice, and the well-being of all people on earth.³⁵

In her book, *Cooperative Salvation, A Brethren View of Atonement*, Kate Eisenbeise Crell concurs with these Anabaptist emphases, but adds several more. These include a focus on Jesus' life, ministry and teaching; that the ways of God and Jesus are nonviolent and different from the ways of empire; that God does not will suffering but is always at work to redeem and transform the world; and that following Jesus involves openness to God's creative and life-giving Spirit.³⁶

As indicated above, the term Mennonite refers to several of the current denominations which grew out of the Anabaptist movement.³⁷ Most often, I will be referring to beliefs and practices within Mennonite Church USA, my denominational home and currently one of the largest Mennonite denomination in the United States. Their website summarizes three core convictions from our confession of faith. These include: following Jesus in daily life, above

34. Many of these denominations cooperate globally through the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). According to their website, MWC represents "the majority of the global family of Christian churches rooted in the 16th century Radical Reformation in Europe, particularly in the Anabaptist movement. In 2015, this included one international association and 102 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches from 56 countries, with around 1.4 million baptized believers in close to 10,000 congregations. About 81% of baptized believers in MWC member churches are African, Asian or Latin American, and 19% are located in Europe and North America." See "About MWC," Mennonite World Conference, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://www.mwc-cmm.org/content/about-mwc>. For a full list of these groups, see MWC's "World Map" and click on each region, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://mwc-cmm.org/maps/world>.

35. For more details about shared beliefs among Anabaptist groups worldwide, see "Shared Convictions," Mennonite World Conference, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://www.mwc-cmm.org/article/shared-convictions>.

36. Kate Eisenbeise Crell, *Cooperative Salvation, A Brethren View of Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 108-109.

37. The Mennonite Church USA website explains that the word Mennonite comes from "one of our early leaders, Menno Simons, a Catholic priest who aligned himself with the Anabaptists in 1536." See "Who We Are," at <http://mennoniteusa.org/who-we-are/>, accessed March 14, 2016.

nationalism, racism or materialism; following Jesus as a peacemaker who practices Jesus' reconciling love; and living simply and in service to others.³⁸

Challenges for women

While I affirm all of these convictions and want to stay true to my Anabaptist heritage, there is a shadow side to some of these beliefs and emphases, especially for women and other oppressed groups. In fact, I believe that current Anabaptist understandings of salvation do not adequately address women's experience, and can be harmful to them and the larger community.

The most obvious reason for this reality is that most Anabaptist and Mennonite atonement theologies have been articulated by men and shaped by their experience of the world. Few women in the Anabaptist tradition have had the opportunity to publish their work, except as occasional articles in books, journals, and newsletters.³⁹

The result is that Anabaptist/Mennonite theology primarily addresses the questions and experiences men face. For example, one of the most influential writers, J. Denny Weaver, argues most vigorously for a nonviolent understanding of God and God's work in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.⁴⁰ This is reflected in the titles of two of his major works: *The Nonviolent Atonement* and *The Nonviolent God*.⁴¹ Indeed, Weaver states explicitly that his goal in *The Nonviolent*

38. Found in the introduction to the online "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective," Mennonite Church USA, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/>.

39. For example, in a bibliography of more recent Anabaptist/Mennonite sources on the atonement, only two are full length books written by women: *Executing God* by Sharon Baker and *Cooperative Salvation* by Kate Eisenbise Crell. Interestingly, neither of these women are of Mennonite background, although both consider themselves to be Anabaptist. See Appendix A for this list.

40. This assessment of Weaver's influence is based on a survey I conducted in February, 2016 of eleven Mennonite and Brethren in Christ colleges and four Mennonite seminaries about the sources currently being used to teach about the atonement. Of the many sources given, the author cited most often was J. Denny Weaver at seven times. Mark D. Baker and Joel Green were second in the list, at five times. See Appendix B.

41. See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (2011) and *The Nonviolent God* (2013).

Atonement was to “provide a fresh, new articulation of the work of Christ...with a view to making Jesus’s rejection of the sword central and visible in the articulation of his work.”⁴²

Certainly, this is an important and relevant discussion, but it responds first and foremost to the questions Mennonite men have had to face regarding military service, and whether violence is ever justified.⁴³

Again, this attention to men’s questions is not necessarily wrong. What is problematic is that this theology has often been portrayed as universal. As Rosemary Radford Ruether explains in *Sexism and God-Talk*, the myth that male experience speaks for all is clearly exposed when the focus turns toward women’s experience. When people start seeing other perspectives and asking other questions, they can finally see that what was presented as objective and universal is really based on how men (and especially white men) experience themselves, God and the world.⁴⁴

Mennonite theologian Malinda Berry goes even further to note the dangers of such exclusive attention to male experience. In assessing Mennonite constructions of Christology, she observes that “generations of Christians have constructed doctrine and other church teachings that does not resonate with women’s ways of knowing, being and doing. Moreover, these

42. Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, 218. Also see pages 198-200. On page 182, Weaver does highlight Jesus’ identification with the powerless, yet concludes this discussion by emphasizing that “Nonviolence belonged to the heart of his message about God’s reign.” Susanne Guenther Loewen also identifies this argument in her extensive examination of Weaver’s writing. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

43. To be fair, in his definition of violence, Weaver does include social and systemic realities such as racism, sexism and poverty. (*The Nonviolent Atonement*, 8.) Yet, especially in his discussion of sin (pages 93 and 213), he fails to address the defilement and desolation experienced by those who suffer the violence of these systems. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

44. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 13.

constructions have given men a sense of superiority and normativity that are false and hubristic.”⁴⁵

Carol Penner clearly attests to this dynamic in Mennonite circles, explaining that:

Peacemaking as it was taught to me was trying to find the language to answer the questions, “What does it mean to be a man and a Mennonite?” What was never talked about was, “What does it mean to be a woman and a Mennonite?” What do you do when the man you love tries to hurt you or a man in your family abuses you? How do you respond when you see a man hurting a woman? These questions just weren’t on the radar screen.⁴⁶

Similarly, Leona Stucky reflects on her experience of being caught in a physically and sexually violent dating relationship while still a young teen. In struggling with what to do, she explains:

Unlike my dad’s nonviolent stance—where he testified about his beliefs in court and important Mennonites wrote public letters of support—no one knew of my suffering, and it would never be considered honorable...If I practiced my beliefs and didn’t return violence to violence, no one but God would know, and I would remain a slut, not a religious hero of some sort. Was there a difference between nonviolent rules for Mennonite women and Mennonite men? We’d not discussed that in my Church.⁴⁷

This one-sided focus on men’s experience revealed itself again in July, 2010 at the “Peace among the Peoples” ecumenical conference planned by Mennonites and held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Initially, the program did not include any attention to violence against women, and was only added at the last minute.⁴⁸ Younger women had insisted this was absolutely necessary and in fact created a zine to distribute at the conference, entitled

45. Berry, “Needles not Nails,” 264.

46. Carol Penner, “Forging a new language” in *Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Women Concerns Report*, 164 (November-December, 2002), 6.

47. Leona Stucky, *The Fog of Faith, Surviving My Impotent God* (Santa Fe, NM: Prairie World Press, 2017), 73.

48. Early on, the planners explained that they wanted to focus on war and militarism, since there was more disagreement in ecumenical circles regarding those peace concerns. However, two weeks before the conference, I was asked to give a presentation on peace theology and violence against women.

*Breath of Hope: Addressing sexual violence in the peace movement and the world.*⁴⁹ A collection of gut-wrenching stories, definitions, and reflections, it specifically addressed “the fact that those of us who work for peace among people on the international level do not acknowledge and take into account the ways women’s voices (and bodies) have been subjugated and silenced in peace work because of sexual violence in the movement.”⁵⁰

Physical harm

As the above examples illustrate, this one-sided attention to men’s needs made women’s experiences largely invisible. It also left them without community support and few tools with which to address their experiences with violence. In addition, Mennonite doctrines of nonresistance and peacemaking often encouraged women to remain in violent situations even when their lives and well-being were at risk.

This is most visible in streams of Anabaptist tradition which have stressed Jesus’ willingness to suffer and submit to crucifixion. While those in powerful positions may need to hear this call to take up the cross, the message to those experiencing violence and oppression can be quite disempowering. In fact, the overall teaching of this paradigm seems to reinforce the status quo, by urging those in subordinate positions to embrace their suffering and servanthood as a way to be more like Christ.

Nadine Pence Frantz expresses this clearly in her introduction to the *MCC Women’s Concerns Report* issue entitled, “Women: Bearing the Cross of Discipleship.”⁵¹ In the believers’

49. As reported in its introduction, “This zine is one of the outcomes of the ‘becoming undone’ gathering,” an Anabaptist theological accompaniment to the US Social Forum, held June 22-27, 2010, in Detroit. It is available as a pdf document.

50. *Breath of Hope*, 1.

51. Nadine Pence Frantz. “Women: Bearing the Cross of Discipleship.” *MCC Women’s Concerns Report*, 89 (March -April 1990), 1–2.

church tradition, she writes, we are famous for the message that “to love God is to love others, to love others is to give selflessly to them, denying yourself in all things. To be a true disciple, one is to lose one’s life in order to gain it, take up one’s cross and follow Jesus.”⁵² Too often, however, “Women have born the cost of discipleship... We have become acquainted with grief and with sorrow. But we have not gained our life, we have found it squandered by those to whom we gave. And we have been told that we are wrong to seek it.”⁵³

Penner also highlights this emphasis on suffering in her article, “Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence against Women.”⁵⁴ In her research, Penner examined John Howard Yoder’s popular *The Politics of Jesus* and noticed a pattern in his argument. While Yoder makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering, he also repeatedly points to Jesus’ willingness to suffer. Penner argues that what Yoder’s perspective makes normative is an expectation that faithfulness to Jesus requires victims of pain and suffering to bear this quietly: “Christians suffer when they follow Jesus’ example of loving the enemy and praying for the abuser.”⁵⁵ Without a feminist framework or hermeneutic, vulnerable women in abusive relationships can easily think of their suffering as analogous to Jesus’ suffering, and it is Christ-like to accept abuse. Penner concludes, “Yoder’s book would seem to support their decision to remain in abusive relationships.”⁵⁶

52. Ibid., 1.

53. Ibid., 2.

54. Carol Penner, “Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence against Women,” in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder, 99-108 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992). This is a collection of essays from a consultation with the same title, held in the fall of 1991 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

55. Ibid., 103. This statement from Yoder is especially distressing given his own history of abusive relationships. For a detailed account of this history, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015), 7-80.

56. Ibid.

This emphasis on suffering continues to show up in the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. The words “suffer” or “suffering” appear thirty-one times, along with “the cross” fifteen times, and “loving enemies” eight times. Meanwhile, there is very little in the *Confession* about being sinned against, or of needing release, liberation, or healing. Sin is primarily individual rebellion and disobedience. Although there is some recognition of the powers which enslave people, this is not spelled out. The implied message is that if I am in bondage, it is because of my sin: “The more we sin, the more we become trapped in sin. By our sin we open ourselves to the bondage of demonic powers.”⁵⁷

Even the article devoted to Jesus never mentions his acts of resistance, his defiance of religious and political taboos, and his insistence on accountability for those with economic, religious and political power. Reading this *Confession*, one would never know why Jesus was such a threat to these powers, and why he ended up on the cross. We never meet the Jesus who was active and assertive, and even angry sometimes, in standing against the evil and injustice he saw and experienced around him.

In fact, the commentary on “Article 2: Jesus Christ,” points out explicitly that, coming from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective, this article “stresses, for example, Jesus' obedience and suffering in his work of atonement, his humility and servanthood as the pathway to exaltation,...and peace as central to the character of Christ.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, this emphasis on suffering, humility, and peacemaking has too often led to passivity and submission in the face of evil, especially for women or other vulnerable people. It

57. Ibid., 31.

58. Ibid., 15.

can also appear that God requires suffering for salvation, rather than that suffering may result from nonviolent resistance to oppression.⁵⁹

One woman describes her experience this way:

Growing up Mennonite, I was taught early in life that we were called to be peacemakers in the world. I came to believe that in following Jesus' steps, with God's love flowing through me, I could be a peacemaker and be instrumental in calming strife and conflict...But in our house the problems would not be solved...His anger and his criticism of me would grow. I would try harder to please him but he would not be soothed. I was blamed for just about everything and I got so that I accepted that blame...

A beating is a hard thing to describe. It's a hard thing to remember, not because the memories have faded, but because they are so clear and painful. I felt an inexpressible fear, my arms pinned immobile to a bed by the knees of the man I loved, his fist coming toward my face. I have looked in the mirror and not recognized myself...

Well, I was raised on forgiveness. How many times did Jesus tell us to forgive? Did he say to forgive only if it was a minor offence? Of course not! So I would forgive, wanting desperately to believe that he wouldn't strike me again. I would try again, to be a better Christian, to be a better wife...

I finally realized that I was living in a kind of hell, and that it surely couldn't be God's will for anyone to live like this. So I ran away, to the Crisis Intervention Centre in my town. That's where I began to learn to be alive again...I have learned so very much. I know now that I could have called the police the very first time and that might have done some good. No one deserves to be abused and submitting to such abuse is not the way for us to be God's peacemakers.⁶⁰

Tragically, the consequences of such violence are severe, not only emotionally, physically and spiritually, but also in terms of major disease. Studies show, for instance, that women who have experienced domestic violence are eighty percent more likely to have a stroke, seventy percent more likely to have heart disease, sixty percent more likely to have asthma, and seventy percent more likely to drink heavily than women who have not experienced intimate partner violence.⁶¹

59. Peachey and Goerzen, 213.

60. Anonymous. "My story" n.d. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) website: *Abuse: Response and Prevention*, <http://abuse.mcc.org/abuse/en/domestic/stories/change.html>, accessed June 30 2010. (MCC discontinued most pages from this site, so this story is no longer available there.) Also see Peachey and Goerzen, 203-204.

61. Peachey and Goerzen, 204. Also see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5705a1.htm>.

Spiritual Harm

There are also religious and spiritual consequences, as Anabaptist and Mennonite motifs about salvation do not adequately address the needs of women and their search for life and wholeness. Speaking very personally, the most difficult part of my faith journey has not been to find forgiveness. Rather, I have struggled most to find a God who loved me, fully and completely as a woman. Throughout most of my church experience, women were considered a problem, and their role in the church one of great anxiety, requiring endless sermons, debates, and study guides. We were a source of danger and temptation rather than potential partners, who could offer wisdom and insight to the church.

No doubt, these attitudes were linked to traditional Christian views about women based on a narrow and distorted view of Eve. As Ruth Krall explains, early Christian leaders such as Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine taught that woman “was the creature who beguiled Adam and brought human sin into the world.”⁶² Further, in the thirteenth century, Aquinas argued that “woman was created by God only to assist humanity with reproduction” and became “the source of man’s original sin, that sin which cause men to be unable to control their sexual desires.”⁶³

Sadly, such negative views continue into the present. Suella Gerber explains it this way: “From a young age, girls learn that their bodies are not okay as they are. And if our bodies are not okay, then it follows that there is something wrong with us, something fundamentally flawed about who and what we are.”⁶⁴

62. Ruth E Krall, "Christian Ideology, Rape and Women's Postrape Journeys to Healing," in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 82.

63. Ibid., 83.

64. Suella Gerber, “Learning to Love Our Bodies,” *All You Need is Love, Honoring the Diversity of Women’s Voices in Theology*, ed. Jennifer Castro (Elkhart, IN: Women in Leadership Project, Mennonite Church USA, 2016), 27.

This focus on Eve's original sin, coupled with Mennonite emphases on humility, servanthood, and self-sacrifice, led to real danger for Mennonite women. They were often admonished to submit to abuse from the men in their lives, in the hope that such sacrificial love might change them. As Krall articulates, women were to "model their lives after Christ's salvific suffering and death. In quietness and unprotesting submission, they are to accept men's violence toward their bodies."65

At the same time, there has been a grave reluctance in our churches to address violence against women as a valid and important concern. Despite much organizing and teaching by women on these issues over the past twenty-five years, the denomination is still struggling to hold accountable church leaders who sexually assault vulnerable members. Sadly, this work has included dealing with the legacy of John Howard Yoder, for many decades our most celebrated peace theologian and ethicist. In the end, the church has finally had to acknowledge that he harassed and sexually assaulted dozens of women during his ministry.

All of this has had a profound impact on women, their sense of self, and their relationship with God. Marlene Kropf, a spiritual director who has worked with many Mennonite women and men of European background, observed in an unpublished lecture on "Women's Spirituality," that a "woman's deepest experience and thus a profoundly religious or spiritual experience, is a negation of self...In our gendered world, we experience an active-passive division of reality, and so a woman's deepest experience of herself is that she should not be, or that self should be made smaller, less important, less alive, because in the culture her role is to support the dominant male."66

65. Krall, 84.

66. Marlene Kropf, "Lecture on 'Women's Spirituality'", *Lancaster Conference Spiritual Guidance Seminar*. May 9, 2002, 6. Unpublished, used by permission of the author.

The result, according to Kropf, is that women, even those who are younger, often have “a damaged and distorted spirituality.”⁶⁷ They are “‘*at risk*’ in the church and in their own relationship with God.”⁶⁸ As she guides women in spiritual direction, Kropf finds that women often experience God as judgmental and demanding, one who does not resemble “the God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁹

In addition, women often have a distorted sense of themselves and their sins. They may excel at avoiding sins such as pride and aggression, which harm relationships, but often fail to see the damage done by not valuing their own selves and their own truths. The challenge then for women is “to achieve autonomy and an appropriate relationship of worth and agency with God.”⁷⁰

Another woman describes this well:

At our core, we’ve all learned that ‘I’m not good enough.’ How do I affirm that *I* matter, not just the other person, and learn to speak my truth? But that is seen as pride, and that is the worst sin. But what about self-hatred? Sin is when you don’t own your worthiness, that you are fully loved by God. I need to express my understanding, my truth, and don’t have to back down or give in to preserve the relationship.⁷¹

Fortunately, there has been some movement in the church, and the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* does contain positive messages for women. For example, Article Six on the “Creation and Calling of Human Beings” asserts that both women and men are made in God’s image, and that “God’s will from the beginning has been for women and men to live in loving and mutually helpful relationships with each other.”⁷² Article Fifteen on “Ministry

67. Ibid., 8.

68. Ibid., 7. Italics in original.

69. Ibid., 8.

70. Ibid., 7.

71. Focus group participant.

72. *Confession of Faith*, 28.

and Leadership” also makes no distinctions based on gender but affirms that the church calls both men and women to leadership ministries.⁷³

Nevertheless, women have too often experienced a religious environment which has not valued them, but has indeed permitted or even condoned violence against them. Often therefore, women need to question some of the most basic elements of faith. As Krall puts it, “the spiritual journey of any woman must include extensive journeys into distrust, disbelief, and withdrawal of consent.”⁷⁴

In other words, for many Mennonite women, their need for salvation includes the search for a loving God, and a faith which enables them to deal with deep insecurities, shame, and anxiety, as well as an often relentless striving for perfection and reassurance. They need a doctrine of salvation which will enable them to revision who God is, what is salvific and life-giving, and what it means for them to be women who follow Jesus with freedom, joy, and courage.

Research and methodology

As a project of constructive theology, much of my work was done through reading and theological reflection. Therefore, I read widely, especially from feminist, womanist, and liberation theologians. I also re-read the gospels, and many sources on the economic, political, and religious context of Jesus and the early church.

In order to gain a better understanding of current Mennonite thinking on the atonement, I compiled and read a list of significant Anabaptist and Mennonite writings on the atonement over

73. Ibid., 59.

74. Krall, 88.

the past three decades.⁷⁵ I also conducted a survey of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ colleges and seminaries, asking professors what texts they use in teaching about the atonement and the cross. I also asked them to comment on which source, if any, best articulates an Anabaptist or Mennonite theology of the atonement.⁷⁶

Finally, I was careful not to do this work alone, but solicited conversation and feedback from many women across the Mennonite church. The most structured set of conversations was in the context of a focus group of eight women from my congregation who met with me for two hour conversations, five times over seven months in 2017. Together, we shared deeply about our understandings of salvation, where we find consolation and desolation, and how we understand Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We also discussed Biblical characters who have been important to us, as well as what we value most about our Anabaptist heritage, and what we find to be problematic or troublesome.⁷⁷

All of these women have agreed to share their names as being part of this group: Sue Aeschliman Groff, Laura Hershberger, Jean Kilheffer Hess, Margaret High, Samantha Lioi, Marilyn McKinley Parrish, Annabelle Roth, and Rebecca Weybright. I have included some of their insights and perceptions throughout this work, identified anonymously as from a focus group participant. In terms of demographics, all of these participants are white women, ranging in age from thirty-five to eighty-one. Five grew up in ethnically Swiss-German Mennonite communities, and three joined Mennonite congregations as adults.

Other relationships have been more informal, but nevertheless profoundly significant in terms of the wisdom these women have shared with me over the years. One special set of

75. See Appendix A.

76. See Appendix B.

77. For a list of these questions, see Appendix C.

relationships continues to be a group of women who have been meeting together for nearly ten years, sharing deeply in the joys, sorrows, and transitions of life. Other connections are from a distance, through work and collaboration with women from a variety of ages, contexts, and racial and ethnic identities. At least twelve individuals read several of these chapters, and shared their feedback with me, via phone, meeting, or in writing.

All of these relationships and all of this input have been invaluable in helping me to articulate and test an expression of atonement and salvation theology that is hopefully more complete and life-giving for both women and men.

Chapter Two: Atonement and Salvation in Christian Thought

Since the earliest days of the church, Jesus' disciples endeavored to explain how they found salvation and deliverance through Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. They described this in numerous ways, depending on their context and what images would be most helpful to their communities. For example, in her book, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*, Brenda Colijn examines the many metaphors these early believers used to convey how they experienced this new way of life. These include: the experience of a committed relationship with God and God's people, citizenship in a new realm, sharing in the eternal life of God, the ability to make a fresh start, being rescued from danger, liberation from captivity, restoration of broken relationships, vindication, being chosen by God for service and blessing, and commitment to a pilgrimage or struggle that requires endurance.¹ All of these images provide avenues for understanding the saving power and hope which Jesus brings to us and to the earth.

Despite these many rich and expansive metaphors, however, Christian theology about salvation has concentrated most attention on Jesus' death. Soteriology has become almost synonymous with doctrines of atonement which attempt to explain why Jesus was crucified and how this death deals with sin and our broken relationship with God. Perhaps this was inevitable, as this was the most difficult part of Jesus' life to understand and defend. Why indeed did God allow this to happen, and to what purpose? Did Jesus have to die, and if so, why? How did the

1. Brenda B. Colijn, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 23.

cross connect to “atonement,” or the experience of a restored relationship with God, oneself and others?

Here again, the New Testament church did not limit itself to one explanation. Rather, as John Driver argues, these early believers employed a variety of images and motifs to understand the cross, and the church should use all of them. All are helpful in understanding this traumatic and bewildering event.² Similarly, Peter Schmiechen insists there can be no single definitive answer on atonement, and surveys ten models in his book *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church*. As he says, “we need to recognize and celebrate this diversity. It is part of the fullness of Christ that the salvation he brings relates to so many forms of human need.”³

Traditional atonement theologies

Nevertheless, in Western Christianity, several of these atonement theories have been especially influential. They continue to dominate Christian thought and often conflate our understanding of salvation with the meaning attached to Jesus’ death. Therefore, it is important to outline them briefly, in order to make sense of the ongoing conversation around these doctrines.

One of the most prominent theories of the early church was the “Christus Victor” (Christ the victor) model, as it highlights Jesus’ victory over all demonic forces, including sin and death.⁴ Often referred to as the classic theory of the early church, as well as the ransom theory, it

2. John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1986), 15-29.

3. Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005) 8.

4. Rachel Reesor-Taylor, “Mennonite Perspectives on Atonement: A Review Article,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, 7, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 34.

was revived and restated by Gustav Aulén in his influential 1931 book, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*. Aulén stresses that Jesus' entire ministry, death, and resurrection enabled him to rescue humankind from the powers which bind and enslave us. It therefore spoke not only to the reality of human sin, but also to the experience of being trapped and sinned against by evil forces.

This theory eventually fell out of favor, however, especially after the church merged with the state under Emperor Constantine. When the church no longer understood Jesus as overcoming sinful and oppressive human systems, what remained was a cosmic, spiritual battle between God and Satan. Now God was contending, not with fallen principalities and powers on earth, but a personified devil who had gained control over humanity through the fall. In order to rescue humanity, God had to bargain with Satan, offering Jesus as a ransom for their release. But God tricked the devil and did not disclose the fact that Jesus was also divine and would be resurrected and glorified.⁵

In the early twelfth century, Anselm of Canterbury offered what is commonly known as the "Satisfaction" theory of atonement, as he sought to explain why God became human in Jesus. Written during a time of feudalism, he focused especially on honor and humanity's failure to offer proper honor to God. Schmiechen explains that this dishonor is not a private affair, but connects to worshipping God correctly and maintaining right relations in the universe.⁶ When these relationships are broken, the question becomes how to satisfy God's honor and thereby restore creation. As Schmiechen writes, "we arrive at the now famous dictum: humanity must restore the honor of God, but only God can do this. Therefore, it is necessary for God to become

5. See Schmiechen, 127-129 and Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 106-109.

6. Schmiechen, 198.

human for the restoration of the world.”⁷

Schmiechen insists that Anselm does not require Jesus’ death as a substitution for sin, as in the theory of penal substitution. Nevertheless, he admits that Anselm does focus most of his attention on the cross, and the need for ultimate obedience to God. For example, “Jesus offers his life to God as a model of obedience for all people, as part of the plan to restore the world.”⁸

Further, in the Eucharist,

Christ offers his life to God and with God offers it for the salvation of the world. The Eucharist celebrates the triumph of God in Christ over sin, death, and the devil. The central idea is that of the gift of obedience, which ultimately invites and makes possible the incorporation of humanity into a community of obedience.⁹

Several decades after Anselm, Peter Abelard responded with what came to be known as the “Moral Influence” theory. In strong reaction to Anselm’s argument, he shifted the focus from God’s need for satisfaction to the human need to see and comprehend God’s love. As Rachel Reesor-Taylor summarizes, in this theory humans do not need forgiveness as much as they need revelation. Jesus’ death saves us by “revealing to us his great love, which transforms and saves us.”¹⁰ She notes further that this theory became popular in many liberal Protestant churches during the nineteenth century.¹¹

Meanwhile, also during the 1800s, the influential Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge defended and promoted a Calvinist understanding which has come to be known as “Penal Substitution.”¹² This model further emphasizes Jesus’ obedient death as a sacrifice for our sin.

7. Ibid., 207.

8. Ibid., 215.

9. Ibid.

10. Reesor-Taylor, 34.

11. Ibid.

12. Schmiechen, 37-38, 104-109.

Schmiechen argues, however, that this explanation moved away from the Hebraic concept of sacrifice as an “act of purification (i.e. the removal of sin)” to one which views sacrifice as a “compensation to God.”¹³ In this view then, God’s primary attribute is justice, which demands death as the penalty for our sin and violation of God’s law.¹⁴ Jesus’ death stands as a substitute payment, and faith in this sacrifice to God is what frees us from God’s judgment.

This understanding is still taught widely in American evangelical churches today. In fact, it has become so dominant that, as Joel Green and Mark Baker assert, “for many American Christians, ‘penal substitution’ interprets the significance of Jesus’ death fully, completely, without remainder.”¹⁵ Ted Grimsrud also titled his book, *Instead of Atonement*, because he wanted to argue against the popular meaning of the term which understands atonement as Christ’s “sacrificial payment that makes salvation possible.”¹⁶

Challenges from women

In more recent decades, many have sought to articulate alternatives to the penal substitution model. Those seeking liberation from oppression and violence have especially questioned its portrayal of God, as well as its emphasis on suffering and obedience. The next chapter will explore the writings of those in the Anabaptist tradition. In this section, I will focus on women in the broader Christian family who have addressed these issues, insisting that if

13. Ibid., 104.

14. Ibid., 104 and 110.

15. Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 32.

16. Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible’s Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 3.

salvation is to be meaningful and give them hope, it must address their experiences of suffering, violation, and shame.¹⁷

This does not mean that they are rejecting Christian faith. Rather, as Delores Williams points out so clearly in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, theologians throughout history have written and taught out of their own questions and experiences. No one can claim to speak a universal truth that applies to all times and places. Women therefore have the right, and even responsibility, to construct an understanding of salvation that responds to and makes sense of their experience of God and the world.¹⁸

As feminist and womanist theologians have done this, they honestly acknowledge their social location and the specific questions they are seeking to answer. They explicitly address women's encounters with suffering and violation, as well as the attendant feelings of desolation, shame, anxiety, and fear with which they struggle. They also consistently name not only individual sin, but also systemic evil, and the way in which sinful structures harm people and trap them in situations of devaluation and defilement.¹⁹

Womanist theologians

Williams was one of the first to articulate an understanding of Jesus which is salvific for African-American women. Describing their experience of "coerced surrogacy," she finds much resonance in the story of Hagar, who like them, was forced into a surrogate role for the benefit of others, not only during slavery but throughout American history. Thus, Williams insists that

17. Admittedly, this overview of female theologians is not exhaustive, but concentrates on womanist, Asian and white feminist writers. Due to time and space, I regret not including theology done by African, Latina, or Native American women, among others. Obviously, those voices would also have much wisdom to share, but it was not possible to do justice to all of them.

18. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 162-164.

19. Ibid., 146.

liberation theologians must focus not only on the freedom offered by the exodus, but also address the wilderness experience of women like Hagar. They must also embrace the values of survival and quality of life.²⁰

Not surprisingly, Williams goes on to reject any image of Jesus as a surrogate or substitute figure, as this image and role serves to uphold and reinforce experiences of exploitation.²¹ Williams contends further that Jesus did not come to show God's love through his death but: "to show humans *life*—to show redemption through a perfect *ministerial* vision of righting relationships between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit."²² This does not mean we forget the cross, but we dare not glorify it. For as Williams says so eloquently: "To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their (black women's) exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement."²³

Stephanie Crumpton focuses even more deeply on women's experiences of violation in her valuable book, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology against Intimate and Cultural Violence*. Using the work of Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas, she explores how theologies which do not take Jesus' incarnation seriously have tended to assume that "Bodies are sinfully problematic" and "the cause of creation's existential separation from God."²⁴ This often leads to, or accompanies, an understanding of salvation in which "crucifixion of the Christ's flesh was the only way to redeem humanity from its ontological sinfulness."²⁵ As Crumpton goes on to

20. Ibid., 158-161.

21. Ibid., 162.

22. Ibid., 164-165. Italics in original.

23. Ibid., 167.

24. Stephanie M. Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 120.

25. Ibid., 121.

observe, one consequence for Christians is that this view “makes it very easy to overlook pain and suffering that bodies endure.”²⁶ And for those whose bodies have been dominated and exploited, it is a deep struggle to accept their bodies as good.²⁷

Williams concurs with this assessment. In her essay, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” she describes how Black women in the United States experience sin as a sense of unworthiness, created by “the elevation of white womanhood and the indifference of the U.S. legal system to the defilement of Black women’s bodies.”²⁸ This indeed is a grievous social sin committed by the society at large, which devalues Black womanhood and takes away their humanity.²⁹ It is absolutely vital then to “dislocate sin away from an ontological origin to locate it in structures that ravish, violate, sully and dishonor (defile) human lives.”³⁰

More recently, Monica Coleman offers additional reflections on salvation in her important book, *Making a Way Out of No Way*. After surveying the work of womanist theologians, she observes that they all “discuss salvation in concrete images: survival, quality of life and discipleship.” They “use the ministry of Jesus to provide action verbs to the process of salvation: teaching, healing, praying, welcoming, suffering-with. In this way they give pictures of what salvation looks like and how it is achieved.”³¹

Coleman has also found process theology helpful. This theology affirms that we can take the past, and what the present holds, and do something creative and new. We are not bound by

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in my Soul*, ed. Emilie M. Townes. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 143-144.

29. Ibid., 145.

30. Crumpton, 122.

31. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 32.

the past, but we can rely on God, who offers “possibilities to the world, urging us to choose the paths that lead to a vision of the common good.”³²

Using the work of John Cobb Jr., Coleman explains that Jesus was able to conform to God’s calling to such an extent that he was able to “bring about a distinct structure of existence in which we now participate.”³³ In this way, “the real life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus created a ‘field of force’ that people can enter. Jesus is present in this field of force, and as we participate in the field, we are conformed to some degree, to him.”³⁴ This can lead to a process of what Cobb calls “creative transformation” or what Coleman describes as “making a way out of no way.”³⁵ Common to other womanist theologians, this expression “acknowledges God’s presence in providing options that do not appear to exist in the experiences of the past.”³⁶ God works to present new possibilities which encourage humans to challenge the status quo and work toward justice and life.³⁷

Karen Baker-Fletcher is yet another theologian who highlights salvation as the “transformation of the world.”³⁸ But she goes even further to insist that this salvation includes creation and the natural world. In fact, not only must the earth be healed, but it is also an actor in the process, and she compares the “sustaining qualities of the earth” with Jesus’ ministry.³⁹ In addition, she turns to traditional African understandings of one’s ancestors and the role of

32. Ibid., 51.

33. Ibid., 88.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid. 33.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 93.

38. Ibid., 28.

39. Ibid., 29.

memory in providing additional resources toward salvation. As Coleman summarizes her work, “salvation is a holistic way of living...allowing the best of the past—the nameless ancestors, the ancestors who are known, and Jesus, the greatest ancestor—to inform the present and future ways of living.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, this is not a utopian vision. Rather, Baker-Fletcher insists it is important to acknowledge Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion: “The cross must not be forgotten because such persecution is a possible consequence of standing up for what is morally right. The resurrection, on the other hand, represents God’s ability to constantly create anew.”⁴¹

JoAnne Marie Terrell is perhaps the womanist theologian who gives most positive attention to the cross of Christ. She acknowledges the harmful results of emphasizing the cross as sacrifice, yet is compelled to try to understand why the cross has been such an important symbol for Christians, including African-Americans. In her book, *Power in the Blood?* Terrell argues that the early church gave so much attention to Jesus’ death because of their own experiences of persecution and martyrdom.⁴² Seeking to understand and explain this suffering, they attempted to “overcome the scandal of the cross not by distancing themselves from the seditious implication of Jesus’ life and message, but by affirming the salvific witness of his death, appropriating the cultic symbols of Judaism and combining them with their messianic claims.”⁴³ In a similar way, African-Americans also found much meaning in the cross, as it underscored the profound way in

40. Ibid., 31.

41. Ibid., 29.

42. Joanne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 33.

43. Ibid.

which Jesus identified with them: “Like the martyrs, they are committed to him because his story is their story.”⁴⁴

Although they often embraced the sacrificial meaning of the cross, African-Americans also understood the cross as “sacramental witness.”⁴⁵ In other words, by embracing the cross, they could understand their suffering as something partly chosen, in order to underscore the strength of their “convictions and inspire future generations to fight against injustice.”⁴⁶ It is important, however, to maintain that the cross was originally a scandal and not the primary objective.⁴⁷ Instead, the cross resulted from Jesus’ “confrontation with evil. This bespeaks a view of Jesus and the martyrs as empowered, *sacramental*, witnesses, not as victims who passively acquiesced to evil.”⁴⁸

For Terrell, this means that the God who is revealed in Christ is both “loving and challenging, human and sovereign, culturally engaged yet countercultural, personal, a healer and a mystic, a co-sufferer and a liberator.”⁴⁹ To witness sacramentally then to the character of such a God means: “loving one’s own, *not* loving others uncritically and most important, *not* being defined by one’s victimization but by one’s commitments.”⁵⁰

Nonetheless, Terrell does not neglect the reality of pain and agony. As Coleman summarizes, “Terrell affirms that there is something divine in the blood shed in suffering. When we see God’s presence in the sufferer and learn from the violence, we can be saved. Salvation

44. Ibid., 34.

45. Coleman, 25.

46. Ibid.

47. Terrell, 142.

48. Ibid. Italics in original.

49. Ibid., 141.

50. Ibid., 140. Italics in original.

comes from the lessons learned after instances of suffering.”⁵¹ Again, this does not sanction death and injustice, but rather that “God loves humanity and can be seen in the blood of those who are suffering.”⁵²

Jacquelyn Grant also highlighted this sense of Jesus’ solidarity with the experiences of African-American women. In her book, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, she explains that Christian Black women have been able to see in Jesus a “divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of injustice. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they.”⁵³

African-American women also had no difficulty in identifying Jesus as God, as this “meant that White people were not God.”⁵⁴ And since he identified with, and experienced oppression and suffering similar to theirs, he affirmed their humanity.⁵⁵ Even further, if Christ identifies with them, then he is also found among them. Indeed, quoting William Eichelberger, Grant affirms that God is now becoming manifest “in the form of the Black American Woman as mother, as wife, as nourisher, sustainer and preserver of life, the Suffering Servant who is despised and rejected of men...It appears that she may be the instrumentality through whom God will make us whole.”⁵⁶ This is not because of their suffering, however, but rather because “God becomes concrete not only in the man Jesus, for he was crucified, but in the lives of those who

51. Coleman, 27.

52. Ibid., 26.

53. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 212.

54. Ibid., 213.

55. Ibid., 217.

56. Ibid., 218.

will accept the challenges of the risen Savior the Christ.”⁵⁷

Always it is essential to stress the necessity of resistance. As Katie Geneva Cannon explains, “womanist protagonists contend that God’s sustaining presence is known in the resistance to evil.”⁵⁸ M. Shawn Copeland elaborates on this in her essay, “Wading through Many Sorrows.”⁵⁹ Suffering should not be accepted meekly, but contested, so that even in situations of great affliction, the narrative does not yield completely to despair.⁶⁰ In this sense, then, African Americans have treasured the cross, not because they valued suffering, but “because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them...because they saw the result of the cross — triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world.”⁶¹

Copeland then lifts up three primary strategies used by womanists to construct a faith which does not spiritualize or glorify suffering and oppression. First, such a theology “remembers and retells the stories of those who ‘came through’ and those who have ‘gone on to glory land.’”⁶² It also honors the ways in which Black women endured privation and pain in order to help and save their children, and thereby give meaning to their suffering. Truly, they invited “God to partner with them in the redemption of Black people.”⁶³ Finally, this theology recognizes the ways Black women resisted degradation, shame, negative images and emotional assault by using “motherwit, courage, sometimes their fists and most often sass.”⁶⁴

57. Ibid., 220.

58. Katie Geneva Cannon, “The Wounds of Jesus,” in *A Troubling in my Soul*, ed. Emilie M. Townes. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 229.

59. M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows,” in *A Troubling in my Soul*, ed. Emilie M. Townes. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

60. Ibid., 118.

61. Ibid., 120.

62. Ibid., 123.

63. Ibid., 124.

64. Ibid.

Clearly, these understandings of salvation and God's role in human experience are not utopian visions or limited to a future life in heaven. Rather, there is a deep sense that salvation needs to be practiced and embodied in the present here on earth. Further, the God revealed to us in Jesus is one who knows the pain of rejection and unjust suffering. This God sustains, empowers, and opens up a way for those who would follow.

Asian feminist theologians

Asian women have also asked who Jesus is for them, and how he addresses their need for salvation. In her book, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, Hyun Kyung Chung admits that the most common image of Jesus has been as the "suffering servant."⁶⁵ While this figure enables women to find meaning in their own suffering, it is problematic, as it can encourage passivity, urging women to "Be obedient and patient as Jesus was to his heavenly father."⁶⁶ It encourages them to endure suffering and death as he did on the cross.

As women learn to respect themselves, however, Chung observes that they are choosing Jesus, not when he insists on meekness, but "when he affirms, respects, and is actively present with them in their long and hard journey for liberation and wholeness... This Jesus is Asian women's new lover, comrade, and suffering servant."⁶⁷ His suffering can then be seen as resulting from identification with those who are oppressed, and thus provide an image which "gives Asian women the wisdom to differentiate between the suffering imposed by an oppressor and the suffering that is the consequence of one's stand for justice and human dignity."⁶⁸

65. Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 53.

66. Ibid., 54-55.

67. Ibid., 56.

68. Ibid., 57.

Wonhee Anne Joh is another Asian theologian who wrestles deeply with how to connect the meaning of the cross to her culture and its traditions. In her *Heart of the Cross*, she uses the Korean concept of *jeong* “to reimagine love on the cross not as self-abnegation or sacrifice but as a radical inclusive love that is both transgressive and emancipatory.”⁶⁹ The cross then has a double edge, revealing both God’s all-encompassing love, as well as the terror which imperial and oppressive power uses in enforcing its ways.

Further, she asserts that to claim God was crucified means that God is intimately connected to all who are abject: “those who have been repressed, expelled, persecuted, executed, oppressed.”⁷⁰ And this very claim that God is in, and with, these abject ones serves to judge and reproach those who crucify them. Indeed, the cross becomes “the site of the return of the repressed.”⁷¹ When these abject ones refuse to be silent or accept the place assigned to them, they return in judgment and invitation, bringing with them “the possibility of our own redemption.”⁷² Understanding the deep need for healing and relationships, they are the ones which recognize the self in the other and can collaborate for the welfare of all.⁷³

White feminist theologians

White women have also struggled to understand Jesus and how his life, death and resurrection offers salvation. Yet, as Grant points out, in contrast to Black women who have been able to appropriate liberating and helpful images of Jesus for themselves, white feminists have especially agonized over the way church institutions have emphasized Jesus’ maleness and

69. Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), xxvi. I will give more attention to Joh’s theology in Chapter Five.

70. Ibid., 114.

71. Ibid., 118.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 122.

thereby circumscribed women's lives.⁷⁴ Because of their own race and class privilege, they tended to start, and sometimes end, with the problem of gender and the church's institutional patriarchy. The main question became, as Rosemary Radford Reuther famously queried, "Can a male savior save women?"⁷⁵

This question of Jesus' gender is compounded by the way in which women were tied to sin and the need for redemption. Of course, Christian tradition has claimed that men and women are both created in the image of God. Yet, as Reuther explains, this affirmation has often been suppressed by a "second tendency to correlate femaleness with the lower part of human nature in a hierarchal scheme of mind over body, reason over passions. Since this lower part of the self is seen as the source of sin...femaleness also becomes linked with the sin-prone part of the self."⁷⁶

Christology is then affected by our understanding of sin and human nature. If people believe sin entered the world through Eve and continues to reside especially in women, it becomes even more problematic to emphasize Jesus' maleness. For as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza points out, this creates a dynamic of "female sinfulness and male salvific efficacy."⁷⁷

Further, since traditional, especially Anselmian, understandings of redemption focused on Jesus' death as a sacrifice, this theology served to reinforce cultural messages which idealize

74. Not surprisingly, women have responded in various ways to this question. Some want to accept the basic claims of Christianity but reform it with new understanding and Biblical interpretation, while at the other end, are those who view Christianity as too patriarchal and oppressive for women to find hope and sustenance within it. In her survey of these efforts, Grant categorizes them as reformists (Paul Jewett, Virginia Mollenkott, Nancy Hardesty and Letha Scanzoni); liberationists (Letty Russell and Rosemary Reuther); and rejectionists (Mary Daly and Carter Heyward). Grant, 4-5.

75. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 10th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 116.

76. Ibid., 93.

77. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1995), 44, 97.

suffering and self-giving love for women.⁷⁸ Fiorenza also notes that these messages enable people to accept and support the violence and death wielded by “militarist and capitalist societies.”⁷⁹ Yet, the effect is especially devastating for women, as these teachings serve to mask their exploitation by providing religious approval and justification.

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker explore these harmful effects in their pivotal article, “For God so Loved the World?”⁸⁰ As one of the first explicit attempts to address the intimate violence and sexual assault which women and children frequently experience, they challenged the dangerous implications of the penal substitution theory, as well as other atonement models which extoll suffering and sacrifice. They argue that implicitly or explicitly, these concepts encourage women and children to remain obedient and submissive even when their well-being and lives are at risk.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker followed this article with their powerful book, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Reflecting on their own lives and experiences with violence, they reject any notion that sacrifice is virtuous and redemptive. Indeed, they attempt to show how “life-denying theologies of self-sacrifice” and “theological claims about Jesus’ death have become proverbs of ashes.”⁸¹ They insist instead that the church must take seriously the suffering and trauma people experience. We cannot gloss over, neglect, or romanticize it, but must enter deeply into their pain and grieve with people.

78. Ibid., 98-105.

79. Ibid., 102.

80. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30.

81. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 10.

Reuther argues that we can avoid some of these harmful theological traps by returning to the stories of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, and the way he overturned practices of “hierarchy and dominance.”⁸² Here the emphasis is not only on gender, but rather all aspects of social relations which determine honor and shame, abundance and deprivation. Jesus’ capacity to offer liberation therefore “does not reside in his maleness,” but in the fact that he rejected these systems, and sought “to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment.”⁸³

She goes on to explain that Jesus manifested the “*kenosis of patriarchy*, the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste privilege and speaks on behalf of the lowly.”⁸⁴ This new humanity, both male and female, continues to manifest itself, and offer liberation and redemption. In this way, Reuther decenters the historical Jesus, insisting that “Christ, the liberated community, is not confined to a static perfection of one person.”⁸⁵ Instead, Christ’s work and identity continues in the community of those who offer one another liberation and redemption.

Fiorenza also places Jesus in the larger context of the community who surrounded him and continued his ministry. She contends, in fact, that western male theology has accentuated an image of Jesus as a superman, or independent, self-made, individual hero.⁸⁶ This separated him from his Jewish community and served to reproduce practices of kyriarchy and domination.⁸⁷

82. Reuther, 136.

83. Ibid., 137.

84. Ibid., *Italics in original.*

85. Ibid., 138.

86. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 21, 36.

87. Ibid., 21, 51, and 164.

By contrast, Fiorenza insists that women played a prominent role in the original Jesus movement. Although this became obscured and minimized by later church leaders and theologians, the gospels of Mark and John provide glimpses of this leadership and the struggle to live out an alternative communal practice, or “discipleship of equals.”⁸⁸ In fact, she posits an “ekklesia of wo/men” who was and continues to be at the center of Jesus’ ministry and vision.⁸⁹

In order to understand the cross then, it is essential to pay close attention to the historical context, and how Jesus’ disciples sought to make sense of this terrible event.⁹⁰ For example, the idea that Jesus’ death was a ransom did not originally suggest atonement for individual sin. Rather, a ransom was primarily an economic transaction, a payment to rescue family members from debt bondage or purchase freedom for slaves.⁹¹ At a deeper level, this was a revolutionary claim, for it meant that the goal of this ransom was to “make free citizens of many” and thereby prohibit “any relationship of dominance and submission.”⁹²

Nevertheless, Fiorenza does not center all meaning on the cross, but goes on to stress the importance of the women’s testimony of the empty tomb. As she says, this witness does not minimize the reality of suffering and death, yet it refuses to stop there or give death ultimate significance.⁹³ Instead, the empty tomb provides a space for resurrection, “a space for affirming

88. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 316-333. In Mark especially, women actually demonstrate true discipleship in contrast to the male disciples who often misunderstand, deny, and finally abandon Jesus. For example, the beginning of Mark names four male disciples, but at the end it is four women disciples who stand by Jesus and witness his death, burial and resurrection. (320-321).

89. Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet*, 24-28. By creating the term “wo/men,” she is seeking a more inclusive word which can refer not only to women but also “oppressed and marginalized men.” (191, n.1.) With the word ekklesia, she envisions an “assembly of full citizens” who participate in a process of renewal and salvation on earth that is “freed from kyriarchal exploitation and dehumanization.” (27).

90. I will give more attention to her understanding of Jesus’ context and that of the early church in Chapter Four.

91. *Ibid.*, 115.

92. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 318.

93. Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 125.

the vindication of the Crucified Ones and their agency of possibility for become the Living Ones.”⁹⁴

Again, she underscores the fact that it was the women disciples who did not abandon Jesus, but remained in solidarity with him to the end. They were the ones who first witnessed that the tomb was empty, and testified that Jesus was still with them, on the road to Galilee.⁹⁵ The empty tomb is central then, as it proclaims Jesus’ presence as the “Resurrected One” in the lives of those who struggle for survival.⁹⁶ He does not go away but rather ahead of, and with, them.

By contrast with this emphasis on resurrection, Dorothee Soelle focuses especially on what the cross means to those who suffer. In this way, she shares much in common with womanist theologians described earlier. A German citizen who lived through the Holocaust and the Second World War, Soelle saw clearly that people continue to be crucified. In such a world, there is some consolation in the affirmation that God also suffered crucifixion, and continues to be in solidarity with those who suffer injustice and death. As she says repeatedly, “God is on the side of the victim, he is hanged...God is not in heaven; he is hanging on the cross.”⁹⁷

The other side of this, of course, is what the crucifixion revealed about the people and systems who carried it out. For if God is on the cross, then it is clear that God cannot be on the side of the crucifiers. As she put it, “In the face of suffering you are either with the victim or the executioner—there is no other option.”⁹⁸ Nor is God impassive and unmoved by the suffering of

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid., 121-128.

96. Ibid., 126.

97. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 148.

98. Ibid., 32

others. Thus, like Reuther and Fiorenza, she explicitly rejects any notion of God as a mighty ruler or king, an aloof spectator or “otherworldly, intruding, self-asserting power.”⁹⁹ God is transcendent only in the ability to be free of our ideologies, not in some male understanding of detached omnipotence.¹⁰⁰

Soelle further rejects any sense that God would require punishment and sacrifice. For to believe that God was crucified, and is always with those who are suffering, means to reject “every ideology of punishment, which was so useful for the cementing of privileges and for oppression.”¹⁰¹ Rather than support oppression then, Soelle’s understanding of the cross encourages defiance. For when people believe that God’s love is present with them even in the midst of a terrible, unjust death, they can find strength to rebel against the forces that torment and exploit them. Like Fiorenza, Soelle affirms that redemption is not salvation for the individual soul, but rather it is that which “sets us free from economic, political cultural, and spiritual oppression.”¹⁰²

This understanding also encourages all Christians to stand with those who suffer. As Soelle says so well, “To attain the image of Christ means to live in revolt against the great Pharaoh and to remain with the oppressed and the disadvantaged. It means to make their lot one’s own.”¹⁰³

Yet, resistance and prophetic action are not enough. We also need a relationship with God, as found in mysticism. Soelle insists that this is not an otherworldly detachment from

99. Ibid., 43, 148.

100. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Women and Redemption, A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, 2nd ed.), 157.

101. Soelle, 102.

102. Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 283.

103. Soelle, *Suffering*, 132.

reality, but a yearning for life and beauty, a capacity to see beyond the current reality to what God sees and desires for the world.¹⁰⁴ The goal then is not just a better relationship with God, but a different relationship to the world. To know God intimately is to “See what God sees! Hear what God hears! Laugh where God laughs! Cry where God cries!”¹⁰⁵

Such a relationship with God implies deep friendship and mutuality. It is not seeking to control God or bow to God, but rather a relationship built on love. In fact, in true prayer, mutual dependence replaces domination and allows us to envision and live in a “different, domination-free model of relationship.”¹⁰⁶

Rita Nakashima Brock also emphasizes this power of relationship, not only with God but also in human communities. Like Fiorenza and Reuther, she rejects a focus on Jesus as a single individual who provides a final revelation of God and salvation. Rather, what is truly “revealing of divine incarnation and salvific power in human life, must reside in connectedness.”¹⁰⁷ This is what she describes this as “erotic power, the power of loving each other at the depths of our being.”¹⁰⁸ She argues that this power is in fact divine, present from the very beginning as the “incarnate, life-giving power of the universe.”¹⁰⁹ And it continues to be manifest not only in Jesus but in “Christa/Community,” the community which surrounded and accompanied Jesus during his life, and continues the ministry of relational power.¹¹⁰

104. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 282, 302.

105. Ibid., 293.

106. Ibid., 296. Also see Elizabeth Johnson’s description of being a “friend of God” in *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 307.

107. Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart, A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 52.

108. Ibid., 45.

109. Ibid., 46.

110. Ibid., 52.

Brock also stresses the importance of the community of women who did not abandon Jesus at the cross and after his death. Indeed, she notes that the resurrection would have been meaningless if no one had been there to witness it. So the presence of the women with Jesus was crucial. With their stubborn dedication to Jesus and what they experienced together, they were able to “transform the defeat of death into a wholeness of vision in the midst of pain and sorrow.”¹¹¹ Brock then moves beyond the resurrection to an understanding of salvation in the context of community. “Christa/community” is present in the healing power of divine love that flows between and among us, especially as we remember our broken-heartedness and care for each other in courageous, redemptive ways.¹¹²

Observations

While this survey is certainly not exhaustive, there are several important truths to keep in mind, as we continue this study. First of all, Christians must focus on life here on this earth, and affirm that God cares about people’s lives in the present. God loves life and wants to provide liberation and healing, so people can live whole and abundant lives. Survival is a worthy goal.

Secondly, God blesses strategies of resistance to evil and assists people in the struggle for life and wholeness. This means that the cross cannot be separated from Jesus’ life and ministry, or his resurrection. We cannot sanctify passivity and meek resignation, but must lift up and learn from the ways Jesus actively ministered to people and challenged all those forces, both individual and systemic, which constrained and defiled people’s lives, and kept them outside the circle of God’s grace.

111. Ibid., 100.

112. Ibid., 105. Brock uses the term “Christa/community” to point away from identifying Christ only with Jesus, and to emphasize finding salvation through relatedness rather than in “heroic individuals.” See page 113, n2 in Chapter 3.

It is also important to look beyond the Bible for guidance. While there is much value in the biblical story, one must also learn from one's own community and history about resources and strategies which have been helpful to one's ancestors. What stories and images of God affirmed their humanity and gave them strength to endure? How did they employ language, memory and community networks to resist and survive oppression and violence?

Finally, worship and spirituality must be life-giving, as these practices shape one's horizons and understanding of what is most essential and ultimate. These must always be evaluated from the perspective of those who are most vulnerable and what they need in order to become who God meant them to be. This often means finding or creating images for God and Jesus, in which people can see themselves and experience hope and salvation.

As Mercy Amba Oduyoye contends, spirituality can never be "one of acquiescence; a spirituality of empowerment that negates humanity's call to be the image of God cannot derive from God, and has to be resisted."¹¹³ Instead, as she says so well, true spirituality supports trusting confidently in God, in order to "live today as if God's reign is fully manifested."¹¹⁴ Such faith enables those who are oppressed to "*transform death into life and to open the way to the reconstruction of a compassionate world.*"¹¹⁵

113. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction," in *Women Resisting Violence; Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et.al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 164.

114. Ibid., 166.

115. Ibid., 162. Italics in original.

Chapter Three: Anabaptist Atonement Theology

Having surveyed discussions about salvation and atonement in the larger Christian community, it is now time to focus more specifically on the themes and emphases in Anabaptist and Mennonite circles. As noted earlier, the Anabaptist movement emerged during the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, and thus represents over five hundred years of history and life experience.¹ Since it would be impossible to survey all of that here, I will touch briefly on some of its early themes and then concentrate on Mennonite and Anabaptist writings from the past three decades.

Briefly then, in its beginning stages, Anabaptism was a diverse and multifaceted movement. One common theme, however, was the desire to follow Jesus' teaching and example in concrete and practical ways. As an early leader, Hans Denck put it, "no one may truly know Christ except one who follows Him in life."² Essentially, salvation was found in discipleship. For most, this included Jesus' refusal to use the sword but it also meant resisting oppression and seeking freedom from unjust and unbiblical laws and practices.³

In terms of Christ's atoning work, specifically, Anabaptists employed numerous images and models.⁴ Yet, because they focused so much attention on Jesus' ministry of compassion and liberation, Finger suggests that a central theme for them was "Christ as Victor." In fact, he

1. See Chapter One.

2. Christian Neff and Walter Fellmann, "Denck, Hans (ca. 1500-1527)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956, accessed January 19, 2018, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Denck,_Hans_\(ca._1500-1527\)&oldid=146402](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Denck,_Hans_(ca._1500-1527)&oldid=146402).

3. See Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), especially pages 21, 25 and 30.

4. Finger, 331-365.

asserts that this atonement model should still be a primary one for Anabaptists today, explaining that “Its Jesus is relevant for marginalized people especially and indeed for everyone who often feels overwhelmed by gigantic, uncontrollable forces. Through his earthly mission this Jesus provides a challenge and pattern for engaging these forces, and as risen, he provides great strength, assurance and comfort amidst the conflict, through God’s Spirit.”⁵

Similarly, in their recent book, *The Bible as Story, An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Mennonite professors Bontrager, Hershberger and Sharp posit that the “Christ the Victor” metaphor “probably best illustrates the biblical view of salvation. In all the other metaphors, sin gets ‘paid for’ but it doesn’t get defeated.”⁶ In this understanding, however, people receive not only forgiveness for sin, but also restoration and freedom.⁷ The optimal word then is healing, rather than salvation.⁸

Nevertheless, most European-American Mennonites today have embraced the penal substitution model. Following severe persecution and martyrdom in Europe, they withdrew from active engagement in society and emphasized nonresistance to evil and suffering as central to the way of Jesus. Mennonites were also greatly influenced by the fundamentalist and evangelical movements in the United States, which stressed Jesus’ death as necessary for salvation.⁹ As recently as 2008, for example, Jane Thorley Roeschley observed that many Mennonites assume a penal substitution theology of the atonement, noting that “the ‘default’ way that some Mennonites understand the atonement is that God’s anger is the issue and that this anger is/was

5. Finger, 364.

6. Marion C. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, and John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story, An Introduction to Biblical Literature* (Newton, KS: Workplay Publishing, 2016), 212.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 213.

9. See my discussion on atonement models in Chapter Two.

appeased by killing God's son...The idea is that only a substitute death can appease God's anger."¹⁰

This focus on substitutionary atonement is also reflected in the most recent articulation of Mennonite faith, the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Admittedly, the article on "Salvation" does combine this with other views of the atonement, stating: "By breaking the power of sin and death, Christ is conqueror over evil (the Christ-the-victor view). By canceling our debt of sin, Christ is a sacrifice and pays the ransom on our behalf (substitutionary atonement). By opening the way to new life, Christ shows God's love, inspiring us to receive that love and love God and others in return (the moral-influence view)."¹¹

Yet, especially when reading the *Confession* from the perspective of one who is experiencing violence or the threat of harm, it is striking how prominent the cross is, and how often it appears alongside the call to suffer willingly. Again and again, the message conveyed is that salvation comes through sacrifice and death. By contrast, there is relatively little attention given to themes of liberation and wholeness found in other atonement theologies.

In fact, the cross is mentioned fifteen times throughout the *Confession*. For example, the article on "Jesus Christ" says: "In the shedding of his blood on the cross, Jesus offered up his life to the Father, bore the sins of all, and reconciled us to God. God then raised him from the dead, thereby conquering death and disarming the powers of sin and evil."¹²

While this last sentence does promise some release from sin and death, the article on "Discipleship and the Christian Life" states: "We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to take up our

10. Jane Thorley Roeschley, "Notes for Nonviolent Eschatology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 301nn3.

11. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 36.

12. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

cross and follow him...Jesus is our example, especially in his suffering for the right without retaliation, in his love for enemies, and in his forgiveness of those who persecuted him. Yet, as we follow Jesus, we look not only to the cross, but through the cross, to the joy of the resurrection.”¹³ Again, while the resurrection is mentioned, this appears to be far in the future, at the end of time, when God brings all things to completion.

This *Confession* therefore ties the substitutionary understanding of atonement to Christian life and behavior. As Jesus suffered for us, we too should willingly suffer for others. And with less attention given to other atonement themes, such as healing and release from bondage, this message has often had costly consequences for those most vulnerable to abuse, violence, and oppression.

On a more popular level, articles in *The Mennonite* also provide insight into current Mennonite thought. Over the past ten years, this denominational publication has included at least twenty articles on the cross, atonement and resurrection, often coinciding with the observance of Holy Week and Easter.¹⁴ Of these, six articles center almost exclusively on Jesus’ death.¹⁵

For instance, in his article, “The old rugged cross changes us,” Myron Augsburger rhapsodizes about the beauty and wonder of the cross. While he acknowledges concerns about the implications of some atonement theories, he urges that we not let these differences stop us

13. Ibid., 65-66.

14. See the online archive on the website of *The Mennonite*: <https://themennonite.org/the-magazine/archive/> and <https://themennonite.org/the-magazine/previous-issues/>, from 2007 through 2016. Of these articles, fourteen were written by men, four by women and two were co-authored by a male-female team. Isaac Villegas wrote five of the pieces and Everett Thomas wrote two. In terms of ethnic diversity, almost all of the authors were white, except for two African-American women and Villegas who is Latino.

15. Interestingly, the articles which focus on the cross and appear most disconnected from the realities of suffering, were all written by white men with powerful positions in the church: a former evangelist and college president, a longtime editor of *The Mennonite*, two seminary professors, and a denominational executive.

from celebrating the cross, or “fail to emphasize the wonder of forgiving grace and its cost for God in self-substitution.”¹⁶

Augsburger does not mention Jesus’ ministry or resurrection, insisting instead that “we should move the preaching of the Christ of the cross front and center.”¹⁷ Indeed, this should be our primary image, and way of life: “By identification with Jesus at Calvary we commit ourselves to live by the will of God to the death, to accept his model of love and nonresistance so that we do not let the way of the world shape us into its mold but live by the model of our Lord.”¹⁸

Still another three articles underscore Jesus’ love for his enemies and the grace and forgiveness he offered to those who tortured and killed him. For example, in their article on the theme of reconciliation, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns emphasize that reconciliation is “the dream of God, who through Christ has modeled restorative justice as the only means of achieving it.”¹⁹

On the one hand, they do underline Paul’s call for all those who have power and privilege to renounce whatever “dominant culture privileges and prejudices we have internalized in order to become a ‘beloved community’ across lines of class, gender, sexuality, race and nation.”²⁰

Yet, the message to victims is still troubling, as Myers and Enns also stress sacrificial death, stating: “the Cross represents a restorative initiative by the divine victim toward the human offender. God absorbs the violent injustice of the offender and offers the gift of

23. 16. Myron Augsburger, “The old rugged cross changes us,” *The Mennonite*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (April 2015),

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 22.

19. Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, “Ambassadors of reconciliation: Witnessing to the restorative justice of God (2 Corinthians 5:16-21),” *The Mennonite*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (March 2011): 20.

20. Ibid.

forgiveness. This powerful notion of the ‘moral authority of victim-initiative’ is central to restorative justice.”²¹ While there is truth here, the focus on victims leaves them with a heavy burden, and fails to give enough attention to the need for repentance and accountability on the part of those who perpetrate harm and violence.

Women’s Questions

As described in Chapter One, this intersection between salvation and suffering love has had grave consequences for women and other vulnerable people. As women began to share their experiences of violence, abuse, and rape more publicly, they also sought to understand the resources and obstacles that were available to them in their faith communities. Inevitably, they started to do theology from their perspective.

One of the first church wide consultations to address these concerns was *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, held in the fall of 1991 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.²² Here Mennonite scholars and therapists struggled with the implications of Mennonite theology in the context of women’s lived reality. Carol Penner especially focused on the Mennonite tendency to stress the salvific importance of suffering, as often found in hymns and in John Howard Yoder’s popular *The Politics of Jesus*.²³

21. Ibid, 19.

22. The papers from this consultation can be found in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992). It is important to recognize that although this consultation was one of the first to specifically address this intersection between theology and abuse, Mennonite women had been sharing their experiences of violence and rape in other ways. For example, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)’s *Women’s Concerns Report* published an issue on rape in September 1977, two issues on family violence in December 1978 and January 1979, one on pornography and violence in January-February 1986, one on wife abuse in September-October 1986, one on incest in March-April 1989, and one on sex tourism and prostitution in September-October 1989.

Another primary way in which women started to organize was through conferences addressing these realities. The first was held in November 1990 in Upland, California, followed by at least five more in 1992 and 1994. These were held in: Mount Joy, PA; Winnipeg, MB; Kidron, OH; Abbotsford, BC; Hillsboro, KS and Harleysville, PA. Later, there were two conferences in Spanish, the first in 2001 in Akron, PA and in 2002 in San

Penner went on to do her doctoral dissertation on “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women.”²⁴ This work investigates further how themes of suffering, obedience, and forgiveness have been articulated in Mennonite congregations by influential Mennonite theologians, hymns sung in worship, and emerging women’s voices. Again and again, she observes a troubling refrain urging Christians to imitate Jesus’ suffering on the cross, as this suffering is what redeems humankind.²⁵ For women experiencing violence, this is not good news, as they “would find no encouragement to find safety, flee from suffering or secure justice from their abusers.”²⁶

Carolyn Holderread Heggen’s influential book, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* addresses similar concerns, especially in the context of sexualized violence. She provides resources and much practical information for understanding and responding to abuse, but also deals with religious beliefs which permit and justify violence against women.²⁷ Like Penner, Heggen challenges the widespread belief that “suffering is a Christian virtue” or that Christ’s suffering is what saves us.²⁸ She insists that we must not “idealize the results of

Antonio, TX. For more details on these efforts, see Peachey, "Naming the Pain, Seeking the Light: The Mennonite Church's Response to Sexual Abuse." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015), 113-115.

23. Carol Penner, "Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence against Women," in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 99-104.

24. Carol Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women,” Dissertation. University of St. Michael’s College, 1999.

25. Ibid., 179.

26. Ibid., 178-179.

27. Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993). See especially chapters five, seven, and nine.

28. Ibid., 94.

suffering. Many victims of involuntary suffering come out of the experience with crushed spirits and profound emotional and spiritual pain.”²⁹

Mary Schertz concurs with this assessment in her article, “God’s Cross and Women’s Questions: A Biblical Perspective on the Atonement.”³⁰ Based on her extensive study of the gospel of Luke, she argues that Jesus’ early mission did not dwell on suffering, but rather on his choice to follow God’s call at all costs. There may indeed be suffering, but salvation involved much more than the cross. What was primary for Jesus was his mission of inaugurating God’s reign on earth. For Luke then, “what is redemptive is the kingdom of God. People are saved...when they stop resisting the kingdom and become in turn, proclaimers and enactors of this kingdom. The conversion of individuals is possible because Jesus preached, taught, healed, exorcised demons, suffered, died, and was raised – all to announce and bring about the kingdom of God.”³¹

More recently, Elizabeth Soto Albrecht also addresses the question of suffering and the cross in her book, *Family Violence: Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence*. She observes that “Of all the symbols in the history of Christendom, the choice of the cross for strong emphasis has been oppressive for women suffering abuse from their husbands.”³² For her, such suffering is not salvific. Instead, she echoes the insights of Latin American liberation theology which understands Jesus’ cross as a sign of “God’s solidarity with the poor and oppressed.”³³ Further,

29. Ibid., 95.

30. Mary H. Schertz, “God’s Cross and Women’s Questions: A Biblical Perspective on the Atonement,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, (April 1994), 194-208. This article was prepared for a conference entitled *Mennonite Voices in Dialogue: Women Doing Theology*, held in June, 1994 at Bluffton College. The papers were published beforehand in this issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

31. Ibid., 206.

32. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, *Family Violence: Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 89.

33. Ibid., 91.

Jesus models a way of bringing salvation and healing that is communal, resists violence through love, and provides justice as well as peace.³⁴

This emphasis on liberation and healing also comes through in reflections on the cross and resurrection written by women for *The Mennonite*. Of the articles I surveyed, it was the women and Isaac Villegas who connect the cross with ongoing oppression and suffering in the world. Rather than glorifying such suffering, they instead highlight the hope offered by the resurrection and God's ability to bring forth new life in the midst of desperate circumstances.

Shannon Dycus, for example, links the pain of Jesus' crucifixion to the suffering of the African-American community. In her 2015 article, "What story are we telling?" she admits, "it is difficult to see mercy, the beauty of sacrifice or the promise of new life on this journey. When I look at the cross this year...I see agony and suffering, abuse of power and systemic sin."³⁵ It is essential then to lift up the resurrection and Christ's victory over death, to see and tell the whole story, that the "Christ we journey with...is a witness to both suffering and resurrection."³⁶

Likewise, Hannah Heinzeker, in her March 2016 editorial, reminds us that people today continue to be oppressed and killed, and too often we in the United States are complicit in these deaths. The cross then "is a symbol of the powers that be in this world; those oppressive systems that crucify and torture people who cry out for a new world order and a different way of living."³⁷ Nevertheless, she closes with the assurance that "the story of Jesus does not end on the

34. Ibid., 96-97.

35. Shannon W. Dycus, "What story are we telling?" *The Mennonite*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (April 2015), 12.

36. Ibid., 14.

37. Hannah Heinzeker, "Those that we crucify" *The Mennonite*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (March 2016), 40.

cross. It ends with resurrection: a clear reminder that God is with those who suffer and that God is always working toward redemption. We're called to be about this work, too."³⁸

Alternative atonement models

In addition to these articles and texts, a number of theologians in the Anabaptist tradition have published books or written dissertations over the past two decades seeking to articulate alternative understandings of atonement and salvation. They include Mark Baker, J. Denny Weaver, Darrin Snyder Belousek, Ted Grimsrud, Sharon Baker, Kate Eisenbise Crell, Malinda Elizabeth Berry, and Susanne Guenther Loewen. I will address them roughly in chronological order.

In their book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, Baker and his co-author Joel Green, endeavor to explain the cross as it was understood in its time, as a scandalous, humiliating event, designed by Rome to deter crimes against the empire.³⁹ They also seek to persuade their readers that the Bible uses many images for salvation, and the model of penal substitution is not the only, or even the most appropriate or Biblical way, to understand the atonement.

Shortly after this book, J. Denny Weaver published *The Nonviolent Atonement*, as his attempt to construct a fresh understanding of the atonement, focused on the entirety of Jesus' life and ministry, as well as his death and resurrection.⁴⁰ He firmly rejects both the penal substitution and satisfaction models, insisting that they lend themselves to viewing God as a violent and

38. Ibid.

39. Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 26.

40. J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011, 2nd edition), 85.

abusive judge, who demands unquestioning obedience. This image is dangerous as it tends to sanction violence not only by God but also in society at large.

Weaver instead constructs a “narrative Christus Victor” theory, which emphasizes Jesus’ life and resurrection.⁴¹ In fact, he tends to minimize the cross, insisting that “Jesus did not save by dying.”⁴² Rather God’s real saving act was in the resurrection and “Christians share in it through identification with the living Christ.”⁴³

Throughout his writings, Weaver insists that nonviolence was paramount for Jesus, even in his confrontation with the deadly reign of empire. This is revealed compellingly in Revelation, where Jesus as the slain and resurrected lamb is the only one who could open the seals, “the secret message of God.”⁴⁴ The church who follows this Jesus can never accommodate itself to violence or to an unjust social order.⁴⁵ Rather, he argues that this atonement motif, like the original “Christus Victor” theory, will also challenge any dominant political system and build a “church that witnesses to the social order.”⁴⁶ In this way, he does stress the importance of ethics, and “living in the story of Jesus.”⁴⁷ He also gives serious attention to Black, womanist, and feminist theology, and the concerns these theologians have raised about Christian understandings of sin, salvation, and suffering.⁴⁸

41. Ibid., 85.

42. Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2013), 26.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 38-39.

45. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 126-128.

46. Ibid., 73.

47. Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 3.

48. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Chapters 4-6.

Belousek agrees with Weaver that Jesus was nonviolent, but goes even further to insist that Jesus was also non-retaliatory. In fact, he claims that the most distinctive aspect of Jesus' life and teaching is "the renunciation of retribution as the founding principle of the justice-doing and peacemaking of God."⁴⁹ Although giving some attention to Jesus' life and ministry of healing, he focuses primarily on the crucifixion and the fact that God did not retaliate to this most profound evil done to God's own self. Belousek insists that the cross was not God's way of being compensated for humanity's sins, but rather it posed "the *question* of how God-in-Christ would faithfully right the ultimate wrong in cosmic history."⁵⁰ He then provides a very careful and detailed response to the theory of penal substitution, arguing that it fails to comprehend God's character and way of working in human history, as one who acts redemptively in solidarity with us.⁵¹

Similarly, Grimsrud and Sharon Baker attempt to construct an understanding of atonement that is restorative rather than retributive. Grimsrud argues that the theology of penal substitution laid the ground work for understanding justice as retribution, based on the belief that "retribution is God's will."⁵² This has tended to legitimize violent punishment and a punitive criminal justice system. In contrast to this system, Sharon Baker emphasizes God's love and forgiveness, and

49. Darrin Snyder Belousek. *Atonement, Justice and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 16.

50. Ibid., 10. Italics in original.

51. For the phrase "redemptive solidarity," see Belousek, 339. He spells this out further in his description of the incarnation as a seven-fold journey, including Jesus' descent/birth, baptism/temptation, ministry, agony, death, descent into hell, and resurrection/ascension, 353-359. Sadly, he spends only one paragraph on Jesus' ministry, giving this part of Jesus' life even less attention than his discussion of Jesus' descent into hell.

52. Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 5.

lifts up the parable of the prodigal son as an excellent example of how God wants to relate to us.⁵³

While this attention to restoration and forgiveness sounds attractive, all of these writers fail to give enough attention to what this communicates to those who suffer violence and harm. For example, Grimsrud refers repeatedly to self-giving or suffering love, as in this sweeping statement: “Jesus’s resurrection verifies that love that suffers and perseveres constitutes the heart of the universe.”⁵⁴ It can appear then that love must simply endure and forgive, with no need to seek liberation or hold accountable those who do evil.

Even more distressingly, in their discussions about sin, all of these writers tend to focus on willful disobedience or pride, with little room for experiences of defilement, desolation, and shame which often accompany the realities of being violated and exploited. For instance, Weaver insists that all of us need to “identify with sin...In particular, we need to acknowledge our enslavement to the powers that killed Jesus, to confess our place on the side of those who opposed the reign of God.”⁵⁵ He makes no distinction, for example, between those who ordered and carried out Jesus’ death, and the women who followed Jesus and watched him die.

Later, in his conversation with womanist writers, Weaver does acknowledge some differences between those who experience oppression, and those who oppress them. While the sins of the latter are more obvious, he argues that oppressed persons are also complicit in sin when they “acquiesce in their oppression or accept the inferior identity foisted on them by dominators.”⁵⁶ They need to acknowledge this sin, stop submitting to their oppression, change

53. Sharon Baker, *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 71-72.

54. Grimsrud, 185.

55. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 93.

56. *Ibid.*, 213.

sides, and yield to God's reign.⁵⁷ While his intention is to encourage victims to move from passivity to become active agents in the story of salvation, his words sound all too much like blaming victims for what they experience, with little empathy for the defilement and violence that has been perpetrated on their bodies and psyches.

Similarly, Sharon Baker writes that we are all "children of wrath who resort to violence whenever the opportunity or whim strikes us. We aimed our violence at Jesus. And we sinned by killing him. Our sin put him there. Our sin cursed him to suffer an unjust, horrific death."⁵⁸ She does mention later that Jesus also "transforms those who suffer by standing with them in solidarity as a fellow sufferer."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the primary weight is on those who commit sin, with little space given to those who are violated and what they might need for salvation.

Grimsrud likewise fails to distinguish clearly between various types of sin and alienation. In fact, in summarizing Paul's theology, he claims that sin is universally and "most basically expressed in the dynamics of idolatry, where human beings do not give God gratitude for what is but rather put their trust in created things and set off a dynamic where they exchange wholeness for brokenness."⁶⁰ Sadly, there is no recognition that many do not choose brokenness, but are themselves broken by the violence of others, and the systems which oppress and exploit them.

By contrast with all of the above, Church of the Brethren scholar Kate Eisenbise Crell proposes a definition of sin that is more inclusive and flexible. For her, sin is "any action or inclination that prevents us from being in right and full relationship with others—and therefore

57. Ibid.

58. Sharon Baker, 137.

59. Ibid, 153.

60. Grimsrud, 204.

with God”⁶¹ This includes all people, but will express itself in varied ways, based on a person’s experiences and how they have been socialized.

Especially salient for Crell are gender differences which affect relationships. As she elaborates, “if women follow society’s norms by always...submitting their desires to the will of others, they cannot be in full and right relationship with others because they have not brought their full selves to the relationship. Conversely, if men follow society’s norms by always asserting themselves over others, they too cannot be in full and right relationship.”⁶² This is a critical insight and could be applied to other areas such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity, and sexual orientation.

Although it would have been helpful to have more examples, this recognition of unhealthy gender dynamics does illustrate one way in which the reality of sin is built into our social systems and grows beyond any particular act or individual.⁶³ These structures affect all of us and distort our relationships without our awareness or intent. In fact, these forces become the “original sin” into which we are born and from which we need salvation.⁶⁴ For Crell then, the salvation we need is not forgiveness for individual sin, but rather “the transformation of the world.”⁶⁵

What Jesus did was to offer a model of how to live in right relationships, including a willingness to challenge the system of domination in order to lift up its most vulnerable

61. Kate Eisenbise Crell, *Cooperative Salvation, A Brethren View of Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 115.

62. Ibid., 115-116.

63. Ibid., 116.

64. Ibid., 117.

65. Ibid., 133.

members.⁶⁶ She rejects any notion that suffering is salvific or that Jesus' death was willed by God. Rather, it was caused by those who opposed his "way of living."⁶⁷ What is paramount then is Jesus' ministry and teachings, as these address what people need to live and flourish on earth, in the here and now. In this way, Jesus gives us the "the seed of salvation, and it is up to all of us to nourish that seedling until full social salvation is achieved."⁶⁸

Clearly, Crell believes strongly in human response and participation in the salvation story. In some ways, this echoes the moral influence theory of atonement, although she focuses much more on Jesus' life and teachings than on his death. She also insists that salvation is not primarily an individual matter, but entails a life of nonviolent discipleship, lived out in community, and addressed to the social order.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, God does play an essential, ongoing role. Using process theology, Crell highlights God's power to persuade and lure everything in creation to reach its greatest potential.⁷⁰ In essence, this is how she understands the resurrection. Seeking to explain this in a way that does not conflict with modern science, she affirms God's capacity to act in unexpected and creative ways.

Malinda Elizabeth Berry has also written extensively about our need for salvation from sin and oppression. In contrast to Crell, Berry is much less optimistic about our human capacity to follow Jesus and create a transformed world. As she says, "However clear an act of injustice

66. Ibid., 121.

67. Ibid., 108.

68. Ibid., 136.

69. Ibid., 108.

70. Ibid., 124.

may be, it cannot simply be overcome by human willpower to defy sin, evil, and oppression.”⁷¹ Or as noted in Chapter One, Berry recognizes that we as human beings need help beyond ourselves.⁷² We need to be realistic about the weight of sin, and the nature of power in our lives and communities.⁷³

In her 2013 dissertation, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity,” Berry goes on to thoroughly examine the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and his understanding of human nature and sin. For him, there is a deep paradox in human beings, rooted in the fact that we are finite, and yet also carry God’s image, with the capacity to see beyond ourselves and relate to God.⁷⁴ Tragically, the result of our finitude is often sin, due both to our anxiety about these limits, and our repeated acts of rebellion against God.⁷⁵

Although Mennonite peace theologians have tended to reject Niebuhr’s emphasis on such realism, Berry affirms his attention to power dynamics in the church and society, and his call for humility about our capacity to follow Jesus’ example of nonviolent love.⁷⁶ She insists that Christians must concern themselves with social justice, and calls us to nonviolent resistance to evil, not just a pacifism which maintains one’s personal and moral purity.⁷⁷

71. Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, No. 1 (Winter 2016): 64.

72. Berry, “Needles not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast. (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 275.

73. Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity.” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2013), 137.

74. Berry, “Shalom Political Theology,” 65-66.

75. Berry, “Poised to Embrace,” 25.

76. *Ibid.*, 44, 102.

77. *Ibid.*, 128

In fact, Berry claims that justice is closely related to the Hebrew word for shalom. Using the work of Perry Yoder, she explains that it is much more all-encompassing than the word peace, as it includes material well-being, just social relationships, truth and integrity, and a communal sense of living in right relationship with God.⁷⁸ Clearly, this includes much more than the absence of violence, and calls on those who follow Jesus to relate to the world in a more dynamic, committed way.⁷⁹

Berry turns then to the work and teaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. She notes that King's nonviolence grew out of his belief in the sacredness of all people, centered in God and his vision of a beloved community.⁸⁰ This community is "created cooperatively by God and human beings," grounded in life here on earth, in prophetic words of judgment, in decisions not to retaliate, and in spiritual practices which allow one to "notice how God is at work in the world."⁸¹ In these ways, King was more realistic and engaged than much of traditional Mennonite pacifism, which has tended to emphasize Jesus' suffering and obedience, but did not project a positive vision for the social order.⁸² Even more damning, such pacifism can indicate a kind of power and privilege which allows one to stand detached from the suffering and exploitation of so many of the world's people.⁸³

For Berry, the cross shows God to be fully engaged with the world and life on earth. She draws from Toni Morrison's claim that the cross is an early and universal human symbol,

78. Berry, "Shalom Peace Theology," 58-59.

79. Berry, "Poised to Embrace," 76 and "Shalom Peace Theology," 73.

80. Ibid., "Poised to Embrace," 141 and "Shalom Peace Theology," 67.

81. Ibid.

82. Berry, "Poised to Embrace," 24, 71.

83. Ibid., 196.

indicating a “standing human figure poised to embrace.”⁸⁴ As such, the cross is a sign and act of solidarity that is both personal and political, and involves both justice and love.⁸⁵ The goal is not purity or nonviolence, but always a world community built on a vision of just and loving relationships.

One practical and tangible example of this vision is found in the work of Doris Janzen Longacre who reconstructs the practice of nonconformity and Christian discipleship in the Mennonite community and beyond. In urging a less consumptive lifestyle, Longacre articulates a vision of living justly, learning from others, cherishing the earth, nurturing people, and freeing oneself from the prevailing norms and expectations of American empire. It is a vision of a community in right relationship with God and one another, and fully engaged with the world. It is a world in which we “serve as God’s midwives...to help Her give birth to the things that will turn the cosmos toward love, justice, and shalom.”⁸⁶ Of course, God remains the mother and the one who will bring forth shalom, but we as humans have a role to play in assisting in this birth.⁸⁷

Although Berry focuses less on the pathos and horror of suffering, she nevertheless reveals a passion for a world in which all are embraced and all can flourish. She calls us to a life of deep and meaningful engagement and solidarity with others, especially those who experience most directly our world’s violence and injustice. She also calls on those with power and privilege in society to be more honest and humble about our efforts to follow Jesus. And by emphasizing the work and legacies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Doris Janzen Longacre, she offers practical steps toward building the beloved community.

84. Berry, “Poised to Embrace,” 16.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., 29.

87. Ibid., 197.

Finally, Susanne Guenther Loewen also tackles these questions surrounding our understanding of the cross in her 2016 dissertation, “Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver on Nonviolence, Atonement, and Redemption.”⁸⁸ Like Penner did many years earlier, she focuses especially on women’s experiences of abuse and violence, as well as suffering more generally. Seeking to be both Mennonite and feminist, she explores these questions through careful attention to the writings of two representative figures: J. Denny Weaver, for a Mennonite perspective, and Dorothee Soelle, representing a feminist one.

On one hand, she expresses great appreciation for Weaver’s work. Yet, she also notices that he fails to mention sexual violence or give sufficient attention to the sins of patriarchy and sexism.⁸⁹ Further, it is clear that his first priority is to peace theology and proving God’s nonviolence, rather than to the experiences of victims and their suffering.⁹⁰ Desperately trying to avoid having God support either “redemptive violence” or “redemptive suffering,” he sets up distinctions between God as Father and Jesus as Son.⁹¹ This means that God “allows” Jesus to die but is not fully present in his suffering and dying.⁹² In effect, God becomes a “by-stander” to

88. Margreta Susanne Guenther Loewen, “Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver on Nonviolence, Atonement, and Redemption” (PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, 2016), 45. Also see her article, “Can the ‘Cross’ be Good News for Women? Mennonite Peace Theology and the Suffering of Women,” *Anabaptist Witness* 3, No. 2 (December 2016), 109-121.

89. *Ibid.*, 45.

90. *Ibid.*, 45, 111, 139-140, 183-184.

91. *Ibid.*, 136.

92. *Ibid.*, 138-140.

suffering, especially that which is not chosen or a result of conscious resistance to evil.⁹³

Ultimately, this depicts an “apathetic God who avoids rather than addresses human suffering.”⁹⁴

Weaver argues instead for the primacy of the resurrection. Much more than the cross, this for him represents “God’s triumph over the powers of evil, including violence and death” and thereby empowers and makes possible a life of nonviolence here on earth.⁹⁵ Weaver emphasizes that this way of resurrection is made real in the context of a church body which opposes all manifestations of violence.⁹⁶ Loewen admits that this emphasis on resurrection might be too idealistic and even triumphalist.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, she affirms Weaver’s language of “new creation,” and the possibilities for new life and compassionate, nonviolent ways of living which the resurrection offers.⁹⁸

By contrast, Soelle focuses carefully and deeply on the reality of suffering. Again and again, she emphasizes how the cross demonstrates God’s ultimate solidarity with those who are poor and oppressed. For those in such desperate situations, Soelle believed that “only a suffering God can help.”⁹⁹ Only this kind of solidarity demonstrates God’s full and complete love, which will stop at nothing to respond to human pain and oppression.

Nevertheless, this is not the end of the process, as God also seeks healing and life. As Loewen summarizes, “In unconditionally embracing those who suffer, God’s presence with them

93. Ibid., 139, 184.

94. Loewen, “Can the ‘Cross’ be Good News for Women?”, 115.

95. Ibid., 208-209.

96. Ibid., 210.

97. Ibid. 211.

98. Ibid., 228.

99. Ibid., 139.

transforms their suffering, empowering them to resist injustice and choose life.”¹⁰⁰ This allows the cross then to also represent something positive, a “tree of life,” or life-giving event in which liberation from suffering begins to be a possibility through love and shared suffering.¹⁰¹ The cross thus represents not only the pain of death but also the pain that comes from birthing new life.¹⁰²

In the end, Loewen tries to blend these two emphases, both Soelle’s “redefinition of love as shared power and solidarity” as found in the cross, and “Weaver’s redefinition of victory as nonviolent resurrection.”¹⁰³ As she says, she wants to “retain a redemptive place for the cross in salvation while naming the subversive victory of nonviolence in the entire Incarnation: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁴ She concludes then by describing the cross of resurrection, or the “emptied cross,” which speaks to both Jesus’ life and death, as well as the new life made possible by God’s ongoing presence among us.¹⁰⁵

Observations

In summary, contemporary Mennonites have engaged in much discussion about the cross and atonement. Many do emphasize Jesus’ ministry and resurrection as also necessary to our understanding of salvation, so that the gospel of Christ can truly be good news for those suffering violence and oppression. They stress God’s solidarity with us and God’s power to bring life and joy out of pain and loss.

100. Ibid., 135.

101. Ibid., 159.

102. Ibid., 226-228.

103. Ibid., 94.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid., 228.

Nevertheless, the themes about sacrificial suffering and death which were observed in the 1995 *Confession of Faith* are still present. Especially in the published books, there continues to be a major focus on Jesus' love for and willingness to forgive his enemies, especially those who tortured and killed him. Even in the texts which argue for restorative justice, the accent is on offenders, rather than on the needs of those who have suffered harm. Further, discussions about sin tend to assume willful disobedience or pride rather than experiences of defilement, desolation, and shame which often accompany the realities of being violated and exploited.

Thus, while there is much truth and value to be found in these sources, it will be helpful to explore some additional stories and themes that can speak more clearly to those in our communities who are most vulnerable to being used and abused by others. It will be especially important to look again at Jesus' life and ministry, and the ways in which we worked with and for the women in his life. It is essential to understand more clearly how he brought salvation and healing to the people in his time.

Chapter Four: Remembering Jesus Rightly

Having surveyed many attempts to understand Jesus and the salvation he offers, it is time to return again to the gospel stories, focusing especially on Jesus' relationships with women. So much has been spiritualized and interpreted through a white, male, European, theoretical lens that it is almost impossible to hear the story as it was experienced and understood originally. So much has been overlooked and ignored that we need other eyes and voices to help us see and interpret what is there.

As I will argue in more detail later, I believe we need to pay close attention to those on the margins of society who have been silenced, oppressed, and violated. Because Jesus also lived and died in such a context, those who live in similar circumstances today are the ones who can perceive most clearly what Jesus taught and did and what this means for us today. This is especially important for Anabaptists, as we center so much of our theology and practice on Jesus' ministry and teaching. Not only is Jesus our Savior, but he is our model for how to live and how to relate to one another and to God.

I will begin with my own struggle to find myself in the Jesus story. Because women in my faith community have had so little voice, it is important to take their experiences seriously, along with the narratives of women in the Biblical story. This will help uncover pieces of what has gone unnoticed and what truths have been distorted as a result. I will then sketch out an understanding of Jesus' life and ministry which pays special attention to the social and political context in which he lived and died. This will provide a strong foundation, I believe, for articulating a gospel that is truly good news for all.

Martha, Martha...

In my own faith journey, I have often been drawn to Martha, as a woman from the gospels who seems to represent my struggle to understand and follow Jesus. Sadly, as I was growing up, I mostly heard about Martha in negative terms, an example of someone so preoccupied with mundane, practical matters that she failed to do the most important work of listening to the gospel. She was a nagging housewife, who dared to complain about her sister.¹ Or as another woman shared, Martha was an example of someone “who followed all the rules but still didn’t get it right.”²

Mary, on the other hand, was the true disciple, the one who could leave behind worldly cares and focus only on Jesus. She was the truly spiritual woman whom we should emulate. What was not acknowledged was that women like Mary were not really welcome in my church. Men had monopolized those roles, as they believed God had given them the right to all spiritual learning and leadership. And if women dared to join them in any public way, like Mary did, they would be stepping out of their divinely-ordained roles.

It was a no-win situation. Mary was held up as the ideal, yet women in my community were actually expected to play the Martha role, and express their discipleship through caring for the needs of others, including serving food and cleaning up afterwards. Nevertheless, even as they spent their energies and time doing this, they were disparaged as too superficial and earthly minded.

I was astonished then to discover the stories about Martha in the gospel of John. In that gospel, Martha clearly has a warm and devoted relationship with Jesus. She is part of a family

1. Luke 10:38-42.

2. Focus group participant.

whom Jesus loved and knew well.³ No doubt, he and his followers had often found rest and hospitality in their home.⁴

In that time, such hospitality was crucial. With few hotels or restaurants along the road, travelers had to depend on hosts along the way for food and lodging. So Martha's generosity provided vital support to this growing movement, giving Jesus and his disciples a safe space in which to relax, eat, talk and organize.

This would have been especially important as tensions increased between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Already in John 5, these leaders were seeking to kill Jesus and in fact, just before Lazarus became sick, they picked up stones and tried to arrest him.⁵ Jesus then withdrew across the Jordan River to a more secluded place, roughly twenty miles from Jerusalem. So this friendship between Jesus and Martha was forged in a difficult context. Danger followed this movement, and fear filled the air.

Perhaps this is why there is so much emotion in this story. Martha and Mary were upset about the threats Jesus was facing, which had forced him into hiding and out of reach when they needed him. Perhaps they wondered if they should even dare to contact him. Yet how could they not let him know how sick Lazarus was? And so they did send word, hoping against hope that Jesus would be able to come in time and heal him.

No wonder then that both Martha and Mary lamented so bitterly when Jesus finally showed up. If only he could have been with them, Lazarus would not have died.⁶ Clearly, these women were not intimidated by Jesus but quite comfortable in his presence, able to voice their

3. John 11:1-5.

4. Luke 10:38 and John 12:1-2.

5. See John 5:16-18, 8:59, 10:31-40. Also see John 11:7-8, 47-57.

6. John 11:21 and 32.

deepest thoughts and feelings without pretense or fear. And Jesus does not rebuke them, but responds to their concerns.

Remarkably, in this account, Martha is the one who goes to Jesus first and expresses genuine faith in him. Despite her brother's death, she proclaims that "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."⁷ She believes in Jesus' power over death and declares him to be "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."⁸ Here, Martha is the one—and not Mary—who engages in this important, revealing conversation with Jesus. Here, she is the one—and not Peter—who publicly names Jesus for who he is.⁹

Why had I not heard these stories about Martha? Why only the negative one which pitted her against Mary?

Perhaps it is not surprising. In a context in which women were clearly considered to have limited roles and abilities, it would no doubt be discomfiting to acknowledge how freely and honestly these women interacted with Jesus. And it would be disconcerting to admit that a woman—especially Martha (!)—was the one who made the messianic declaration for which Peter is so renowned. So the brief story in Luke was preferable.¹⁰ It did not raise so many uncomfortable questions. And women could keep competing with one another, rather than question the restrictions placed on them by the church.

7. John 11:22.

8. John 11:27.

9. Portions of the preceding paragraphs were first published in the booklet I wrote, *Courageous Women of the Bible*, (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2013), 60-62.

10. Of course, one could ask why Luke included this story and nothing further about these sisters. One could also ask why church leaders did not notice the implications of Jesus' affirmation of Mary. For, despite normal expectations, he was making space for women to be able to sit and learn from Jesus, as full disciples, just like the men. See Kenneth Bailey, who explains that to "'sit at the feet' of a rabbi meant to become a disciple." "Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View," *Theology Matters*, Vol.6, No. 1, (Jan/Feb 2000), 2, accessed January, 30, 2018, <http://www.theologymatters.com/JanFeb001.PDF>.

Interestingly, Mennonite women have found ways to combine these stereotypical “Martha” and “Mary” roles. As Anita Hooley Yoder argues in *Circles of Sisterhood*, Mennonite women’s groups usually fulfilled dual purposes. They facilitated a way to serve others and also functioned as a venue for fellowship and spiritual growth.¹¹ In fact, one group of Russian Mennonite immigrants to Canada actually called themselves a “Maria Martha Verein” (Mary Martha Association), which met for “spiritual encouragement and to serve.”¹²

Like many others, Mennonite women have recognized the connections between an inward and an outward focus, and the deep relationship between action and spirituality. Dorothee Soelle makes this clear in *The Silent Cry*, where she highlights the work of Meister Eckhart, who argued that, in fact, Martha was ahead of Mary, because she had moved beyond contemplation to the needed actions which should result.¹³ Eckhart thus “does away with the false superordination as well as the compulsive choice between two forms of life, the spiritual and the worldly...Real contemplation gives rise to just actions; theory and praxis are in an indissoluble connection.”¹⁴ As Soelle argues later, we must engage in *orthopraxis*, refusing to prioritize spiritual life over everyday action but instead uniting them.¹⁵

In this way, these sisters offer the church important insights and wisdom. Together with their brother Lazarus, they remind us of the importance of befriending Jesus and demonstrate how to be at ease with him, able to freely ask questions and share discomfort, faith, and love.

11. Anita Hooley Yoder, *Circles of Sisterhood, A History of Mission, Service, and Fellowship in Mennonite Women’s Organizations* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 28.

12. Ibid.

13. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 200.

14. Ibid., 201.

15. Ibid., 284. Italics in original.

This household also stood by Jesus as tensions with the authorities escalated. The raising of Lazarus only intensified the danger, as the chief priests then ordered that anyone with information about Jesus' whereabouts should report to them so they could arrest him.¹⁶ Nevertheless, just a week before Passover, this family once again opened their home to Jesus and his disciples.¹⁷ This time it was Mary who confirmed Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, as she literally anointed him with oil while Martha served them all with food and fellowship.

Truly, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus all participated actively in this salvation movement. Although we know less about Lazarus, John's gospel portrays a household in which each sibling demonstrated love and care, not only for one another, but also for Jesus and the people gathered around him. I would like to propose, in fact, that this household is a model for what salvation looks like on earth: people gathered together, in mutual care and love, around a table of fellowship that is built on solidarity with those mired in poverty, illness, and violence. I will explore this image and its implications in the next chapter.

A liberation and renewal movement

But first, it is important to understand more deeply the social and political context in which Jesus and his followers lived.¹⁸ Only then can we understand what Jesus' ministry meant to those who followed and supported him. Only then can we start to appreciate what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection might mean for us today.

Here again, it is important to pay attention to the voices on the margins of our own time, as they can offer insights into aspects of oppression and liberation which can help us see and

16. John 11:57.

17. John 12:1-2.

18. See for example, Howard Thurman's arguments in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, reprint ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 15-35.

remember Jesus more clearly. In this regard, it is helpful to consider more recent social movements that have empowered people to seek justice, and release from oppression: movements like the Southern Freedom movement,¹⁹ the efforts of the United Farm Workers to gain better pay and working conditions,²⁰ Latin American liberation theology,²¹ the Polish Solidarity movement,²² or the struggle of women for the right to vote and participate in public life.²³ All of these movements built on the traditions and aspirations of their communities to imagine a more life-giving future for themselves and their children. Looking for respect and fairness, they insisted that the status quo was not God's will and must be changed.

In a comparable way, I believe that Jesus and the movement surrounding him led a renewal movement among the common people of his time, in opposition to the religious, economic, and political establishment that had betrayed them.²⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

19. This has often been called the Civil Rights Movement, but more recently, movement leaders have preferred calling it the Southern Freedom Movement, because it was a liberation movement, seeking more than certain social rights. For example, see Terry Messman, "Vincent Harding and the Legacy of the Southern Freedom Movement." *Street Spirit*, accessed January 9, 2017, <http://www.thestreetspirit.org/vincent-harding-and-the-legacy-of-the-southern-freedom-movement/>.

20. See "United Farm Workers, California, 1960s," accessed Jan. 9, 2017, <http://facingfreedom.org/workers-rights/united-farm-workers>.

21. See "Liberation Theology, Roman Catholicism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberation-theology>.

22. See "Solidarity, Polish Organization," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Solidarity>.

23. See "The Woman Suffrage Movement: The Most Significant Achievement of Women in the Progressive Era," *National Women's History Museum*, accessed February 15, 2108, <https://www.nwhm.org/resources/general/woman-suffrage-movement>. For a more global history, see "Woman Suffrage," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/woman-suffrage>.

24. For this chapter, I draw especially on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who argues that Jesus stood firmly in the prophetic tradition, acting to renew and restore those who had been marginalized and outcast by their rulers, both Jewish and Roman. She also pays particular attention to the important roles women played in the original traditions about Jesus. See "The Jesus Movement as Renewal Movement within Judaism," *In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 105-159, especially 135-136. Also see *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 140-142.

In addition, I use the work of Richard Horsley, who emphasizes the political and economic role of the temple institution in occupied Palestine, as well as Jesus' efforts to recover and reinstate the life-giving practices and traditions of Jewish faith.

explores this in detail, asserting that Jesus and his movement stood in the prophetic tradition of Wisdom/Sophia, sent especially to those who were most marginalized in that society, in order to offer “God’s gracious goodness to *all* children of Israel without exception.”²⁵

Similarly, Richard Horsley describes Jesus as a community organizer, who traveled throughout Galilee and Judea, speaking in village synagogues or gatherings, “on days that the people would be assembled for community discussion, business, and prayers.”²⁶ In those settings, Jesus urged the people to affirm and reclaim their faith traditions, particularly those of Moses and the prophets, which had fostered and sustained village life. He also healed the people, assured them of God’s love and forgiveness, and cast out the demons that sought to destroy them.

Further, Jesus sent out his disciples to extend this movement to additional communities. Like the community activists in the Southern Freedom Movement, these messengers were to live with the people and assist them in addressing urgent village concerns and renewal of their life together.²⁷

Others who have done important work in these areas include Marcus Borg, Raymond Brown, Warren Carter, John Dominic Crossan, James Douglas, Elizabeth Johnson, Donald Kraybill, and Ched Myers.

25. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 135. For examples of this prophetic wisdom tradition, see Proverbs 8 -9 and Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-30 and 11-12.

26. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire, the Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 111. As Horsley points out in his later book, *Jesus in Context, Power, People, and Performance*, “The Greek terms *ekklesia* and *synagogue* both referred to a village or town assembly that dealt with all manner of community self-governance as well as religious ceremonies. Meetings of such assemblies... would thus have been more like meetings in the civil rights or labor movement than the modern church service.” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 100.

Similarly, Fiorenza argues that *ekklesia* is “not so much a religious as a civil-political concept. It means the actual assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs.” (*In Memory of Her*, 344).

27. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 113. For information on the initiatives of these civil rights volunteers, such as teaching in Freedom Schools and leading voter registration drives, see “Freedom Summer,” Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), accessed January 11, 2017, http://www.core-online.org/History/freedom_summer.htm.

Context of oppression and violence

Jesus' mission was thus a positive one of hope and restoration among people experiencing tremendous violence and exploitation. In *Jesus and Empire*, Horsley outlines how Roman rule impacted peasant life before and during the time of Jesus' ministry.²⁸ For example, in 40 BCE, Herod used Roman troops to conquer Judea and Galilee, despite local resistance which continued for three years before being pacified. Then at the end of Herod's rule, in 4 BCE, there were more widespread protests and revolt. This resulted in massive retaliation, including the destruction of Sepphoris, a town just four miles from Nazareth. According to Josephus, Roman troops crucified 2000 people there, enslaved many others, and burned down surrounding villages like Emmaus.²⁹

Indeed, we see glimpses of such violence in Matthew 2:16 when a paranoid King Herod ordered all the male children of Bethlehem to be murdered. And in Luke 19:12-27, Jesus may have been referring to this same king, who went to a distant land to obtain "royal power" and then ordered those who "did not want me to be king over them" to be slaughtered in front of him. Similarly, in Luke 13:1, the people told Jesus "about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices."³⁰

While difficult enough, the violence people experienced was not only political and military, but also profoundly economic. In addition to collecting the tribute owed to Rome, Herod embarked on massive building projects, including fortresses and a palace for himself, the

28. Also see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom*, updated ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 71-83.

29. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 36, and James W. Douglas, *The Nonviolent Coming of God*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 70-72. Also see Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 37-40.

30. Luke 13:1.

new cities of Caesarea and Sebaste, and a newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.³¹ Later, when Herod's son, Herod Antipas, took over and settled in Galilee, he rebuilt Sepphoris and established the completely new city of Tiberius.³²

All of this had to be paid for with taxes and labor, extracted from peasant farmers and laborers. Fiorenza observes that the tax system was deeply oppressive, as Roman agents gathered produce and poll taxes, and the high-priestly aristocracy collected harvest tithes.³³ There were also "indirect taxes, import and export taxes, and taxes on all produce and leases in Jerusalem."³⁴ Farmers could thus owe one-fourth to a third of their harvest in taxes, and tenant farmers up to half of their harvest in rent, in addition to these numerous poll taxes and tariffs.³⁵ The result was that with the cost of seeds, rent and taxes, many peasants ended up "with as little as one-tenth of their produce for food and subsistence."³⁶ This is one reason why the census reported in Luke 2:1 was so significant. As Justo Gonzalez explains, this was much more than counting people, but a "total inventory...of their lands, their flocks, and any other possessions they had...to determine what taxes they were able to pay."³⁷

Unfortunately, the religious establishment, and especially the temple priesthood, did little to address the needs of the people, but instead gave cover to and bolstered a wealthy elite class.

31. Stewart Henry Perowne, "Herod, King of Judaea," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 7, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea>. Also see Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 32.

32. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 61.

33. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 127.

34. Ibid.

35. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 51-52. Also Esther de Boer quotes the Roman Christian Lactantius to illustrate the thoroughness and forcefulness of Roman tax collection, in *Mary Magdalene, Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 26.

36. Kraybill, 77.

37. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells, Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 64-65.

In fact, Horsley and Thatcher argue that ever since the Persian Empire encouraged the first rebuilding of the temple, they and succeeding empires used the resulting temple-state as a mechanism for collecting taxes and exercising imperial control.³⁸ The temple was therefore not only a place for sacrifices and festivals, but it also centralized the mechanisms for finding forgiveness and healing, served as a bank, and was the primary economic engine for Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Even more significantly, after the death of Herod the Great, the high priests were appointed by Rome and responsible for collecting the Roman tribute.³⁹ These priests were thus beholden not to their own people, but to their Roman overlords and the demands of Caesar.

Fiorenza concurs with this assessment, noting that Jesus lived in a context of “colonial oppression existing between the Herodian and Roman elite and the bulk of the people.”⁴⁰ She emphasizes further that the holiness code, as well as scribal regulations, limited the people’s “access to God’s presence in Temple and Torah.”⁴¹ This was especially true for women, but also for many others who because of illness, disability, or poverty could not keep all the purity rules or offer the required sacrifices.

Tragically, many religious leaders blamed the people themselves for their misfortune.⁴² Indeed, they insisted that people suffered poverty and illness due to their own personal sins and failures. And because the temple system also controlled the means for atoning for those sins,

38. Richard Horsley and Tom Thatcher, *John, Jesus and the Renewal of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 18. See also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus in Context, Power, People, and Performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 25.

39. Horsley and Thatcher, 18.

40. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xxxiii.

41. Ibid., 141.

42. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence, Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 183-184.

through sacrifices, tithes, and offerings, these religious answers simply reinforced the status quo and increased the wealth of the ruling class.⁴³

Israel's prophetic tradition

In effect, these leaders represented all those corrupt and unjust kings in Israel's history who had consolidated power and wealth for themselves.⁴⁴ As Samuel had warned from the very beginning, the move to kingship meant much exploitation, hard labor, and loss for ordinary people, similar to what they had experienced under Pharaoh.⁴⁵ Solomon's reign, for example, was very oppressive, despite all its positive accolades. This shows up clearly when after his death, the people appealed to his son Rehoboam to reduce their taxes and forced labor. Unfortunately, Rehoboam's ill-considered refusal to grant any kind of reprieve, led to the division of the kingdom, as the northern tribes rebelled and separated from Judah.⁴⁶

Again and again, prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah denounced such inequitable systems and urged a return to the justice and righteousness God had intended. In short, they implored the nation to reclaim the Mosaic covenant they had received after leaving Egypt. This included caring for those who are poor and vulnerable, lending freely to one another without interest, regular release of debts, rest for the land, sharing from the land's abundance

43. Ibid., 45.

44. Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 166.

45. See 1 Samuel 8:11-18, as well as developments under Solomon, Rehoboam, and Ahab and Jezebel, as recounted in 1 Kings 9:15-22; 10:14-22; 12:1-20; 21:1-29; 22:39. Note especially the emphasis on the great wealth (e.g. ivory thrones overlaid in gold and an ivory house) accumulated by these kings by using forced labor and heavy taxation, as well as by taking land through fraud and violence. Interestingly, in Amos 3:15, 6:4, the prophet specifically mentions ivory furniture and ivory houses as signs of excess and injustice.

46. See 1 Kings 9:15-22 and 12:1-20.

through gleaning, and supporting relatives who fell into difficulty.⁴⁷ Provisions like these helped to sustain village life and maintain the dignity and viability of each household.⁴⁸

Horsley argues that Jesus and the gospels built on this Mosaic covenant tradition.⁴⁹ Further, using more recent research into the practices of subjugated people, he offers that these traditions formed a “hidden transcript” or perspective on the world that nourished hope and offered resistance to the official or public transcript dictated by the ruling authorities.⁵⁰ In Israelite faith, the official transcript tended to emphasize worship in the temple and adherence to purity laws which served to justify their rule.⁵¹ By contrast, peasant traditions highlighted liberation and social justice, as exemplified by Moses and the prophets.⁵²

Recognizing these dynamics helps to understand Jesus in the larger context of prophetic tradition. Although he certainly became a central leader, he did not act alone, but was embedded within and supported by a larger community. According to Luke’s gospel, for example, Jesus was surrounded from the very beginning by people who welcomed and nurtured him. Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, all offered him their love, wisdom, and

47. For example, see Leviticus 25 and Exodus 21:1 - 23:11.

48. Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 215.

49. Ibid., 137-138.

50. See Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 53-54, and *Jesus in Context*, 17 and 178-183.

51. Horsley notes that the Romans allowed Jewish religious expression but the result was to “reinforce the focus on sin as the cause of individual and collective suffering. This in turn reinforced the importance of the sacrifices necessary to atone for sin—which, of course, were controlled by the priestly aristocracy. Given the actual structure of the imperial situation, therefore, the Roman toleration of the limited exercise of Jewish religious traditions became a repressive reinforcement of the basic structural violence and oppression.” Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 45.

52. Often such traditions are never revealed or recorded for others to hear. What is striking about the Scriptures is that these traditions were recorded and passed down, alongside and in spite of the royal and priestly traditions which they often contested. In Luke 11:49-51, for example, Jesus addressed the Pharisees and lawyers with these stern words: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.” Also see Luke 16:29-31, where Jesus states very plainly that if those with wealth and status are not able to listen to Moses and the prophets, they would not listen to anyone, even someone raised from the dead.

courage.⁵³ Surely, these people also told him the stories of his people: how God had led them and cared for them: even when they were wanderers like Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael; even when they were slaves in Egypt; even when they were oppressed by their own kings and religious leaders; even when they were exiles in Babylon.

We can also imagine that Jesus' mother, as well as others, repeated the themes of the Magnificat over and over, emphasizing how God had acted to care for them in the past, and would continue working in the world to turn things upside down and set things right. Together, Jesus' family and neighbors kept these stories alive and cultivated their faith in the God of their ancestors, the God who loved and preserved them, even in the face of all the powerful forces which treated them as exploitable and insignificant.⁵⁴

When Jesus began his ministry then, he drew on these traditions and the hopes for liberation and justice they nourished among the people. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), for example, echoes elements of the Mosaic covenant. It pledges God's blessings and care for the people (5:1-16), gives instructions based on this covenant (5:17-7:12), and concludes with promises of reward or judgement based on whether people follow these directives (7:13-27).⁵⁵

Not only does Jesus offer the possibility of renewing this covenant, but he also initiated a restored covenant meal, to remind them of the covenant ceremony at Sinai.⁵⁶ As reported in Exodus 24:9-11, Moses and Aaron, along with seventy-two elders went up the mountain and ate

53. See Luke 1 – 2 especially.

54. Portions of the preceding paragraphs were first published in my blog post, "Jesus' counter-cultural community," originally posted on Menno Snapshots, October 7, 2016, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/jesus-counter-cultural-community/>.

55. Horsley, *Jesus in Context*, 83.

56. Ibid., 158, 160. Also see Horsley and Thatcher, 70.

and drank in the presence of God, free of fear.⁵⁷ In a similar way then, Jesus invited his followers to a renewal of this original covenant with God. And by reenacting this meal, he was promising that they themselves could participate and commune fully with God, just as their elders did so many years ago.

Of course, Jesus also offered food and sustenance throughout his ministry, again echoing the ways in which God had provided for the people after their liberation from Egypt. The feedings of the five thousand and the four thousand are two clear examples.⁵⁸ Another is the miracle at the wedding in Cana. In fact, this latter event symbolized even more clearly God's promise of restoration and abundant food and wine for an oppressed people.⁵⁹ And Jesus' ability to provide plentiful (and delicious!) wine contrasted directly with the avarice and injustice he encountered immediately afterward in the temple.

Fiorenza argues in fact that the central image of this movement was not a cultic meal celebrated in the temple but "the festive table of a royal banquet or wedding feast."⁶⁰ Refusing to be bound by holiness rituals or social codes, Jesus and his disciples modeled their movement after Sophia, the wisdom of God, who repeatedly seeks people out and invites "them to dinner."⁶¹ Having themselves known hunger and hopelessness, they now "came together in the discipleship of equals, and shared their meager bread with those who came to hear the gospel."⁶²

57. See Exodus 18:10-12 and 24:3-11.

58. Matthew 14:12, 15:18; Mark 6:44, 8:9; Luke 9:14, and John 6:10.

59. See Psalm 36:5-10, 63:5, Proverbs 9:1-5, Isaiah 25: 6-9, 55:1-2, Jeremiah 31:10-12, Joel 3:18, and Amos 9:11-15.

60. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 119.

61. *Ibid.*, 133.

62. *Ibid.*, 135-136.

Jesus' liberating deeds of power

In addition to providing food, Jesus healed the people and cast out demons. Strikingly, these actions are frequently called “deeds of power” or powers that were at work in him. These words are used fifteen times in the gospels and Acts, and appear to be a specific phrase describing Jesus’ ministry of healing and exorcism.⁶³ For instance, in speaking of his visit to Nazareth, Mark 6:5 summarizes that “Jesus could do no *deed of power* there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Luke 5:17 explains that “One day, while Jesus was teaching...the *power of God* was with him to heal.” And in Matthew 11:20, “he began to reproach the cities in which most of his *deeds of power* had been done, because they did not repent.”⁶⁴

Further, in Acts 2:22 on the day of Pentecost, Peter recounted how Jesus was “attested to you by God with *deeds of power*, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you.” Again, these are acts of healing and release, as Peter describes more fully in Cornelius’ house: “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with *power*; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”⁶⁵

These references forthrightly refer back to how the people of Israel experienced God’s power in their history, especially in their liberation from slavery in Egypt. At the end of Deuteronomy, for example, the writer declares how Moses “was unequalled for all the signs and

63. Matthew 7:22; 11:20,21,23; 13:54, 58; 14: 2; Mark 6:2, 5, 14; 9:39; Luke 5:17; 10:13, 19:37; Acts 2:11, 22; 10:36-38, and 1 Corinthians 12:28.

64. Italics are mine.

65. Acts 10:36-38. Italics are mine.

wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt...and for all the *mighty deeds* and all the terrifying displays of *power* that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”⁶⁶

Similarly, many of the Psalms focus on God’s power to *save*, to *redeem* and to perform *mighty deeds*. In Psalm 77:11-15, for instance, the Psalmist declares: “I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your *mighty deeds*...With your strong arm you *redeemed* your people.” Or again, the Psalmist urges, “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is *great power to redeem*.”⁶⁷

Clearly, the gospel writers drew on these themes as they described Jesus’ ministry among the people. Just as God had been active and powerful in their history, God was acting in and through Jesus to bring hope, liberation, and salvation. God still understood their needs and cared for those who were most at risk of danger and exploitation, just as God had always promised.

While it can appear that Jesus only addressed individual needs for physical and spiritual healing, these actions did have social and political consequences. As mentioned earlier, people were taught to blame themselves for their sickness and suffering. The only way to find forgiveness and release was to accept “an institutionalized system of atonement (sacrifices and offerings) in which God’s forgiveness is conditional and is channeled through official mediators and regulators.”⁶⁸ This of course diverted attention away from the economic and political systems that were actually responsible for traumatizing the people, taking their land, exploiting their labor, and keeping them hungry and vulnerable to disease, disability, and demon possession.

66. Deuteronomy 34:11-12. Italics are mine. See also Exodus 4:21, 9:16, 15:6, 32:11, Deuteronomy 4:34, 37; 9:29, 2 Kings 17:36, Nehemiah 1:10, Psalms 67:1-2, 106:8, and 111:6.

67. Psalm 130:7. Italics are mine.

68. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 183.

Indeed, Horsley surmises that people found their distress so palpable and threatening that the only way they could explain it was to believe that “demonic agents were responsible.”⁶⁹ Such an understanding at least made it possible for them to express the extremity of their situation and not bear all the blame themselves. Or as Brock expresses it, “In the biblical image of demons, blame for self-destructive behavior is removed from the sufferer to a source outside the afflicted.”⁷⁰

When Jesus healed the people, therefore, he was addressing not only their physical symptoms, but also their internalization of this oppression and the overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, and fear they felt before God and the community. Jesus was demonstrating God’s care for them and God’s desire to free them from all that oppressed them. Just as Moses had challenged the power of Pharaoh with the “finger of God,” Jesus tapped into this power to release people from their bondage to all these evil forces.⁷¹ Like his provision of food and community, these healings and exorcisms were additional ways by which Jesus and his followers enacted “pointed alternatives to the practices of the Jerusalem temple-state.”⁷² They were specific and concrete efforts by which to make “people whole, healthy, cleansed, and strong.”⁷³ Released from such oppression, people found new self-respect and the courage to resist their degradation.

It is not surprising then that Jesus’ most provocative political act was directed at the temple, and the burdens it imposed on the people. In reality, this was not a cleansing but a

69. Ibid, 33.

70. Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 77.

71. See Exodus 8:19 and Luke 11:20. Interestingly, this language is also used to describe how the Ten Commandments were written with God’s finger. See Exodus 31:18 and Deuteronomy 9:10.

72. Horsley and Thatcher, 108-111.

73. Fiorenza, 123.

disruption of the temple's ability to function, much like the Occupy Wall Street movement attempted to draw attention to and interrupt the unjust economic activity represented by Wall Street.⁷⁴ Drawing on the prophetic traditions of Jeremiah and others, Jesus insisted throughout his ministry that the temple institution and its leaders did not speak for God.⁷⁵ Rather, God desired justice and a social order which could provide basic care for everyone, including the most vulnerable.

In addition, Jesus encouraged the people to forgive and release one another. As Horsley notes, the verb in the Lord's Prayer that is often translated "forgive" really means "release." It is the same term "used for the 'release' of captives and the 'setting at liberty' of the oppressed in Luke 4:18 (Is. 61:1; 58:6)."⁷⁶ Therefore, a better translation of the "Lord's Prayer" would be something like: "'release for us (forgive us) our debts, as we have released (forgiven) our debtors.'"⁷⁷

In all these ways, Jesus and this freedom movement directly challenged the standard argument that God required costly sacrifices and pilgrimages to the temple in order to grant healing and forgiveness. Instead, they reclaimed and re-established their own reconciling and restorative practices, free from the rulers in Jerusalem who used the temple system for their own economic and political gain. In truth, Jesus and his followers redefined holiness as wholeness for everyone. As Fiorenza explains, they insisted that one's life "must not be measured by the sacred holiness of the Temple and Torah, but Temple and Torah praxis must be measured and evaluated

74. For more information on the 2011 Occupy Wall Street action, see Jonathan Matthew Smucker, *Hegemony How-To, A Roadmap for Radicals* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 51-70.

75. See Jeremiah 7:1-15, Amos 5:21-24, and Habakkuk 2:9-11.

76. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 254.

77. Ibid.

by whether or not they are inclusive of every person in Israel and whether they engender the wholeness of every human being.”⁷⁸

This is what it meant to live in God’s *basilea*, the kingdom or empire of God, as a concrete expression of God’s will for life on earth.⁷⁹ Not only is there a new heaven, but there is a new earth, a communal way of life that by its very nature challenges and critiques the imperial and oppressive regimes of this world.

Today we might call this God’s “shalom justice.”⁸⁰ Such a term avoids the inherent hierarchy and patriarchy implied in the word “kingdom,” yet still is a powerful and fitting description of God’s will and way of acting in an unjust and violent society. Amazingly, Jesus promised that this reality was ready for them, at hand, and in fact, could be found “among you.”⁸¹ As an assembly of “full citizens,” they could create together an “alternative reality of justice and well-being for all, without exception.”⁸²

Women in the movement

What this meant for women was profound. One can only imagine the distress and violence that many of them experienced in that time. In addition to the humiliation, hunger, and hard work suffered by men, women also faced the possibility of death during childbirth, as well as the ever-present threat of rape and harassment by Herodian and Roman soldiers.⁸³ Further, if

78. Fiorenza, 120.

79. Fiorenza, xxxiii, 111.

80. See Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987). I will explore this term more fully in Chapter Five.

81. Luke 17:21.

82. Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 27.

83. Although I found few direct reports of rape from that time, we know rape is a common practice in times of war, and by occupying armies. This was certainly true of the Roman Empire, as Davina Lopez explains in her book, *Apostle to the Conquered, Reimagining Paul’s Mission*. Examining the public art and narratives of the Roman Empire, she details how these served to justify the “seizure and rape of women” as well as the ways in which all

they lost their male providers due to illness, slaughter, or divorce, they could be forced into prostitution in order to survive.

Fiorenza spells out this latter reality in detail, explaining that prostitutes were often “slaves, daughters who had been sold or rented out by their parents, wives who were rented out by their husbands, poor women, exposed girls, the divorced or widowed, single mothers, captives of war or piracy, women bought for soldiers.”⁸⁴ While western theology has usually portrayed prostitutes as immoral temptresses, it is clear from this description that these women had little control over what happened to them. They were forced into prostitution by others and/or by extreme need.

The bent-over woman mentioned in Luke 13 could, in fact, represent one of these women. Interestingly, the passage explains that this woman suffered from a spirit which had crippled her for nearly two decades. Clearly, she herself was not at fault, but something had bound her and bent her over. Was it a traumatic experience, or something ongoing in her life that kept her constrained and stooped over, unable to stand up straight and face people, or go about her daily life in a normal way?

Given that she was living in occupied territory, it is not hard to imagine that she may have been raped, or that her husband had been killed or even crucified. Or perhaps she had

conquered nations were “violated and feminized.” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, 70) Most pointedly, she quotes Tacitus, who cites the British leader Calgacus as describing their Romans overlords as “Rapists of the world.” Rome does this not only in its plunder of the wealth and peoples of the world, but also literally, for even when “our wives and sisters...escape a soldier’s lust, (they) are defiled by them pretending to be guests and friends.” (Ibid., 109).

Tal Ilan also provides a telling detail in her book *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 248. She reports that sometime between the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (168 BCE) and the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt (115 CE), there was a decree that Roman soldiers or the governor had the right to penetrate all prospective brides, before the husband did. In order to avert this disaster, the rabbis encouraged sexual intercourse by the couple before the formal marriage ceremony took place.

84. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 128.

watched this happen to her parents during the brutal crackdown which followed the Galilean uprising in 4 BCE. Is this how Satan—or sin—had bound her?

Mercifully, Jesus was able to restore her not only physically, but also socially and spiritually, and uphold her dignity, as a daughter of Abraham. This is significant, as it appears that the synagogue leader placed more value on Sabbath observance than on the wellbeing of this unfortunate woman. But Jesus calls his bluff, by insisting that she was at least as valuable as an ox or a donkey, which could be fed and watered even on the Sabbath. Fortunately, the people responded positively and gratefully, and the shame which had rested on the woman now settled on Jesus' opponents.

Mary Magdalene is another who found release from the demons which had haunted her. Like the bent-over woman, one can imagine she may also have experienced much trauma, causing numerous “evil spirits” to bind and trouble her. We know, for example, that Mary's home town of Magdala suffered dearly for its early resistance to the Roman occupation of Palestine. An uprising in 53 BCE caused a devastating reprisal, and as many as thirty thousand inhabitants were taken prisoner and sold into slavery.⁸⁵ A dozen years later, during the revolts against the installation of Herod as king, his soldiers sought out and destroyed those who hid in the caves surrounding the town.⁸⁶

No doubt, some of Mary's family members were affected by these events. Were some of them still enslaved? Did some have injuries, nightmares, and flashbacks as a result of these slaughters? And then, of course, there was the much more recent devastation of Galilee, around

85. Esther de Boer references Josephus' report about this incident, and while it is difficult to know if these figures are accurate, it is clear that a large number of people were affected. *Mary Magdalene, Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 27.

86. Ibid.

the time of Jesus' birth, and one wonders if Mary herself might have witnessed some of the fires and crucifixions that accompanied that military campaign.

No matter what lay behind Mary Magdalene's travails, we know that Jesus was able to heal her and she became one of his most devoted disciples. Joining several other women, she traveled with Jesus and other disciples in their mission to the towns and villages throughout Galilee.⁸⁷ She is also described in all four of the gospels as going to the tomb and one of the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, Isaac Villegas explains that "the leaders of the early church revered Mary...As early as the year 200, there are people writing about her as the apostle to the apostles."⁸⁸

In more recent years, scholars have discovered fragments of a "Gospel of Mary" which scholars trace back to Mary Magdalene's influence.⁸⁹ According to de Boer, there are three extant manuscripts: "two in Greek from the third century and one in Coptic from the fifth century."⁹⁰ Clearly, Mary Magdalene had a significant reputation and a community of followers who valued her understanding of Jesus so much that they translated this gospel into the local language.⁹¹

Unfortunately, our traditions tend to minimize the roles played by these women who accompanied and assisted Jesus. Yet, women were with him at the beginning and they stayed with him until the very end. Even in Mark and Matthew, where these female disciples are almost

87. Luke 8:1-3, Matthew 27:55-56, and Mark 15:40-41. These women included Joanna, Susanna, Mary, Salome, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of James and John.

88. Isaac Villegas, "Mary Magdalene, mother of our Easter faith," sermon on April 16, 2017, Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://mennonit.es/chmf/2017/04/mary-magdalene-mother-of-our-easter-faith/>.

89. De Boer, 81.

90. Ibid., 79.

91. Ibid, 81.

invisible, their contributions at the end of Jesus' life could no longer be ignored. The gospel writers had to acknowledge the women who faithfully and courageously stood by Jesus and watched him die.

I have often wondered why women were the ones who remained at the crucifixion. Perhaps they were perceived as less dangerous than the male disciples and could therefore risk associating with Jesus more easily.⁹² Still, it was a brave thing to do, for as Soelle emphasizes, crucifixion was meant to terrorize the people. Anyone who dared acknowledge being connected to the one crucified would risk similar treatment.⁹³

Perhaps these grieving women were also audacious, and outraged. Like the mother of Emmet Till, perhaps they wanted to bear public witness to what was being done to Jesus.⁹⁴ Just as Mamie Till Mobley insisted that the world should see what people had done to her son, perhaps these women wanted their leaders to know they had witnessed it all: all the horror, all the pain, and all the anguish. They saw it all, they would remember, and they would tell.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, it must have been hard for these women not to sink into despair. What did they do, and what did they say to one another after watching Jesus die and his body carried

92. See Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 139, where she notes that "it might have been easier for the women to go 'underground' than the men."

93. Dorothee Soelle, "Woman, why are you weeping?" in *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 278.

94. Emmett Till was fourteen years old when he was murdered in Mississippi in 1955 while visiting his extended family. His mother, Mamie Till Mobley, decided he should have an open casket funeral, so that everyone would be able to see what had happened to him. This event and the images of his broken, battered body shocked the nation, and helped further galvanize the civil rights movement. See "The Murder of Emmett Till," American Experience, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/till/>.

95. Brock and Parker highlight the power of courageous witnesses who are willing to stay with victims and bring attention to the "hidden life of violence." They are thus able to "help restore souls fragmented by violence. They accompany the journey to healing." Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes, Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 250.

away? Surely, they must have had so many questions and so many doubts as they faced the cruel fate of the one who had brought them so much healing and hope.

Truthfully, we do not know what these women did or felt during those long hours after Jesus' death. But the gospels do record that they were the first ones to witness Jesus' resurrection. As Fiorenza emphasizes, these Galilean women were the first to share "their experience of the powerful goodness of God who did not leave the crucified Jesus in the grave but raised him from the dead."⁹⁶ Their attentive, courageous love enabled them to see him first.

They were the ones who dared to go to the tomb, dared to encounter the guards, dared to again face the brutal reality of death. And somehow in that going, they found resurrection, new life, and new hope. Jesus was still with them, enlivening and calling them to continue on the way, toward all that God had created them to be. Nothing could separate them from God's love, and the movement born of this love and justice would go on. It did not end at the cross. It did not end.⁹⁷

96. Fiorenza, 139.

97. Portions of these concluding paragraphs were first published in my blog post, "Surely, it can't end this way," originally posted on Menno Snapshots, April 29, 2016, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/surely-it-cant-end-this-way/>.

Chapter Five: Salvation and Shalom Justice Households

We return now to considering how Jesus continues to offer life and salvation to people today. Again, it is important to remember that the biblical concept of salvation is holistic and rooted in God's will for life on earth. It embodies both shalom and justice, or a vision of life in which everyone has what they need for health and well-being. Everyone is able to live in just and wholesome relationships with themselves and everyone else.¹

Jesus called this the kingdom of God. In contrast to the empire and its allies, those who live under God's reign would carry out God's will and provide for everyone. Unlike the household of Caesar, those in God's household would respect and care for each person. Honor would flow in a circle, rather than upwards to a ruling patriarch.² God's love would embrace each one, and everyone would be able to "sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees," in peace and unafraid.³

Kelly Brown Douglas helpfully calls this all-inclusive vision, "the justice of God."⁴ As she explains, "God's justice means a restoration of the sacred dignity of all people."⁵ It "begins with the crucified class of people" and is not complete "until the least of these are freed to achieve the fullness of life that is God's justice."⁶ Elsa Tamez also embraces this emphasis in her

1. Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 10-18.

2. Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed, Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 58. Also Nijay K. Gupta, *Colossians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2013), 162.

3. Micah 4:4.

4. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand your Ground, Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 197.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

study of Romans, asserting that “the justice of God dignifies human beings and enables them to be makers of true justice.”⁷

In fact, as Perry Yoder stresses, justice is basic to who God is and in fact “*expresses the primary characteristic of God’s action in the world and its history.*”⁸ Justice describes God’s efforts to create shalom. And the comprehensive term, “shalom justice” emphasizes God’s actions to address human need, and transform human structures so that “things might be okay.”⁹ This indeed is what God’s salvation looks like.¹⁰ Where sin, greed, and violence have destroyed people’s lives, God acts to bring healing, liberation, restoration, and safety.¹¹

I would like to elaborate now on my proposal that the household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus provides an image of what salvation might look like in our world. As loving siblings, they cared for one another and also for people in their community. They were active participants in the liberation struggle which Jesus led, and which continued after his death and resurrection. Even though not mentioned in Paul’s writings or the book of Acts, it is likely this family continued to be active in the early church. In fact, as Reinhart summarizes, scholars believe that Martha and Mary likely represented female leaders in the Johannine community, who functioned on a par with Peter and the Beloved Disciple.¹²

7. Elsa Tamez, “Justification as Good News for Women: A Re-reading of Romans 1-8,” in *Celebrating Romans: Template for Roman Theology*, trans. and ed. Sheila McGinn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 181.

8. Yoder, 27. Italics in original.

9. Ibid., 38.

10. Ibid. See especially Yoder’s Chapter Four: “Salvation: shalom justice in action,” 39-52.

11. Justo Gonzalez defines salvation as that which refers “to restoration of health, to liberation from an enemy or threat, and to the reclaiming of what properly belongs to God.” Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells, Luke’s Unique Witness to the Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 64.

12. Adele Reinhartz, “From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 213-216. Reinhartz especially references the work of Raymond Brown and Schussler Fiorenza in her discussion of Martha and Mary’s role in the Johannine community.

Indeed, it is not hard to imagine a group of disciples meeting in their home and continuing the ministry Jesus began among them. No doubt, they and many people in their community continued to struggle with poverty, illness, and violence. Yet, gathered around the table, these followers of Jesus remembered his life, and continued to extend food, hope, healing, and forgiveness to one another. They continued to embrace his message of God's love and his call to transformation and right relationships. They continued to resist all those forces which lead to death, even when it was risky and difficult to do so. And they called on those who benefitted from these oppressive systems to repent and turn toward God and their neighbors. Together, they recognized and celebrated God's strong, abundant love which leads to resurrection. Together, they formed and hosted what we might call a "shalom justice household."

We might therefore picture the early church as a movement of Jesus' followers who continued to seek justice and shalom for themselves and their communities. Meeting together in small groups across the Roman Empire, these households continued to offer people a place of shelter, healing, and restored relationships. Together, they offered a strong, brave space from which to continue the struggle for dignity and wholeness.

Visualizing salvation in the context of human communities also emphasizes the reality that God does not act alone. God invites us to join in this work. We see this so clearly in Jesus' ministry, where he taught and worked alongside his disciples and the many followers who supported and extended his efforts. After Jesus was no longer physically present, these disciples continued his ministry, offering healing and the possibility of new life to those around them.

As we also seek to follow Jesus, what might these shalom justice households say to us today? Specifically, what can we learn from the household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus? What

features of their life together can assist us in embracing the good news of salvation? How might we embody a similar shalom justice household in our world?

Solidarity with victims

First and foremost, I believe Martha, Mary, and Lazarus would urge us to recognize and honor Jesus' solidarity with the victims of violence and oppression. Unfortunately, so much of western Christianity has instead given support and succor to those who use oppressive power. Too often it has focused on Jesus' death, but failed to acknowledge why the authorities crucified him. It made his cross into a doctrine, but failed to honor his life and ministry. It overlooked and downplayed how much he resisted those who participate in structures of aggression and domination which harm the people.

By contrast, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus chose to link themselves to Jesus' liberation movement, even when it was dangerous to do so. They could have continued to align themselves with the temple authorities who emphasized purity and sacrifice as the way to salvation. Instead, they welcomed Jesus' emphasis on justice and shalom for all, even those considered to be impure and sinful, and unworthy of God's attention and care.

If we are to build a theology of good news and healing today, we need to have this kind of solidarity with victims as our foundation. While this can sound like God has chosen sides, giving partiality to some at the expense of others, this is actually good news for everyone. All of us face vulnerability and suffering at some time in our lives. We never know when we might lose health or physical ability, or when we too might face financial loss, violence, and dislocation. Thus, it is essential to build our understanding of salvation on the solid ground of God's presence in and with the weakest members of society. If God's grace and strength is present there, then it can be available everywhere, and for everyone.

Nevertheless, this is still a radical claim. As James Cone summarizes so well, to see God acting in and with these oppressed ones is to say that “God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering.”¹³ But this is what Jesus and the early church insisted was true. God was at work in and through those which our worldly systems treat as exploitable and of little value.

Indeed, this is the surprising reality which Paul had to recognize. As Davina Lopez argues so convincingly, Paul’s conversion was not primarily from Judaism to a new religion, but from an orientation that blessed power over others to an understanding that God is in and with those who had been conquered, those considered weak and helpless.¹⁴

Again, this is not to discount God’s love for those who have wealth and privilege. But we have to acknowledge that in an unjust world, justice can happen only if power and resources are rearranged. Or as Yoder explains, since “*God’s justice sets things right*,” God’s justice will break the systems and structures which enable oppression.¹⁵ Those who are content with the way things are, will not readily perceive or approve these changes. So again, it is precisely where people feel most alone and vulnerable that they can see the need for change and look to God for help. Jesus’ mother Mary demonstrated this beautifully in the Magnificat where she embraced God’s rejection of injustice and committed herself to “solidarity with divine outrage over the degradation of life and with the divine promise to repair the world.”¹⁶

13. James Cone, “God is Black” in *Lift Every Voice, Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 105.

14. Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered, Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), xiv, 141.

15. Yoder, *Shalom*, 33.

16. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 272.

Such solidarity is not just a romantic notion. Nor, as Yoder says, is it love at a distance or love in the abstract.¹⁷ Rather this kind of love is an engaged, “militant love struggling for human liberation, justice, and shalom which is God’s will for the world.”¹⁸ It resides with and understands the world from the point of view of those who have been silenced, violated, and oppressed. It supports their efforts toward change and addresses what they need for healing and abundant life.

Such a commitment to justice for victims and survivors of oppression would have profound implications for our church life.¹⁹ It would mean struggling to better understand what God’s justice looks like. It would recognize that righteousness and justice are deeply intertwined, and refuse to pit justice against love and mercy.²⁰ It would accept and honor Cornel West’s assertion that “justice is what love looks like in public.”²¹

It would also mean paying close attention to our worship life just as Jesus and the prophets evaluated worship practices in their communities.²² It would mean searching for and practicing more egalitarian and participatory communal processes, to make sure all voices are heard and taken seriously. It would require leadership like Jesus demonstrated, which serves, empowers, and heals broken bodies and communities.

17. Yoder, 146.

18. Ibid.

19. More detailed implications of this commitment will be discussed in the next chapter.

20. There is a close connection between justice and righteousness in the Hebrew Bible, as they are paired together roughly one hundred times. Sometimes they are used together in a phrase (as in Leviticus 19:15, 2 Samuel 8:15, and Isaiah 9:7), and sometimes in parallel phrases (as in Psalm 72:1-2, Isaiah 32:1, 5:7 and Amos 5:24).

21. See quotes found on “Good Reads,” at https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6176.Cornel_West, accessed September 19, 2017.

22. See the prophetic critiques of temple worship found in Jeremiah 7:1-15, Amos 5:21-24, Habakkuk 2:9-11, Matthew 21:12-14, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:41-46 and John 2:13-17. Again, more specific implications will be spelled out in the next chapter.

Wrestling with power

This orientation toward victims and God's justice would also help us discern and identify more clearly what is wrong, what is sinful. For victims understand most clearly what needs to be changed and mended in ourselves and in society. They have a clear-eyed and deeper understanding of our reality, and can help us address not only personal acts of harm, but also the systems that enable and perpetuate injustice and violence.

Unfortunately, so much of western theology has focused attention in the wrong places. This shows up clearly in how the church has responded to survivors of rape and childhood abuse. For example, Mary Pellauer explains that Augustine claimed that those who survived rape during the fall of Rome had committed the "sin of adultery."²³ Further, he reasoned that God allowed this to happen to good Christian women because they "may have had unconscious pride and that therefore God humbled them so that they would not in the future commit the sin of pride."²⁴ Rather than deal with how the rapist sinned and what the victim might need for healing, Augustine focused instead on the potential sins of the woman and how she may have been responsible for her trauma.

Similarly, Mary Potter Engel argues the need to reframe our questions and answers about evil, especially in the context of violence against those who are vulnerable. We need to see that moral callousness and lack of outrage is more sinful than anger and resistance. Betrayal of trust

23. Mary D. Pellauer with Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Conversations on Grace and Healing: Perspectives from the Movement to End Violence Against Women" in *Lift Every Voice, Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, Revised and Expanded Edition, 1998), 183.

24. Ibid., 184.

by parents and spouses is more harmful than disobedience. Distorted boundaries on the part of caregivers can be more damaging than pride or self-love on the part of weaker ones.²⁵

In each of these examples, traditional understandings of sin have placed the victim at risk. Survivors have been told they must not be angry, resist, or disobey. They must not love themselves too much, or acknowledge their own needs. Meanwhile, little has been done to discourage those with institutional authority from misusing the power of their positions in the family, church, or government. Too often, leaders are free to betray, exploit, or manipulate others for their own benefit, without serious consequences. Too often, these leaders have defined sin to their own advantage.

Tragically, such actions end up reproducing themselves. They become principalities and powers, embedded in the institutions, customs, and practices of our society and our lives. These systems then give preference and benefit to some at the expense of others. They shape the way we think and experience the world.²⁶ Or as Tamez puts it, “injustice gains autonomy and generates structures of social relations that are sinful, uncontrollable, and enslaving of all human beings.”²⁷ We all become “accomplices” even when we do not want to be.²⁸

Sin then is not just an individual offense against God or other individuals, but is built into our social, political, and religious systems. It is not just individual acts of violence against women, but social and religious structures which treat women as objects or resources to be used by men. It is not just personal prejudice against people of color, but political decisions and

25. Mary Potter Engel, “Evil, Sin, and the Violation of the Vulnerable” in *Lift Every Voice, Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, revised ed., ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 163-169.

26. See Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way, A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 55.

27. Tamez, 179.

28. Ibid., 178.

policies which benefit white people at the expense of others. It is not just individual chauvinistic behaviors, but national strategies and practices which destroy other peoples and nations.

Margins versus the center

Anabaptists have often discussed this in terms of the world versus the church, the coercive powers of the state contrasted with the freedom and life found in the body of Christ. Of course, the first Anabaptists experienced hostile state power used directly against themselves, so it was natural for them to assume a deep and abiding discrepancy between the church as God's "holy nation," and the nations of the world.²⁹ Although called to act justly, governments tend to "become idolatrous and rebellious against the will of God."³⁰

What is often not acknowledged is the extent to which Christian churches, including Mennonite congregations and institutions, can become corrupted as well, using power in harmful ways. They too can become idolatrous and fail to live up to their mandate and responsibility. The concept of the church against the world is thus no longer adequate. Not only does it fail to admit that the church is also a flawed power, but in the United States especially, the church and state have become totally enmeshed. Many American Christians support the most militaristic and nationalistic political leaders, while those who actually live more in line with Jesus' life and witness might be from other faith traditions or claim no faith at all.

It is more useful then to see a divide between those in the center of national and cultural life, and those on the margins of society who are seeking liberation and justice. Rather than focusing only on church/state questions, we must attend to issues of power and privilege.³¹ In any given situation, we must ask who is speaking and whose voice is missing? Whose interests

29. *Confession of Faith*, 85.

30. Ibid.

31. Additional implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

are being served and whose are being neglected? Will these policies and procedures safeguard and assist those who are most vulnerable, or cause more harm? Only such honest attention to the dynamics of power, and how it is used, can help us clearly name what is sinful and how evil operates. Only such a focus on the most vulnerable can lead to wholeness and life for all.

Bodies matter

Given this solidarity first with victims and survivors, a second key feature of a shalom justice household is the affirmation that bodies matter. God loves our bodies and cares deeply about what happens to them. Martha especially understood this truth, and used her skills and energy to help care for others, and address their needs for food and fellowship. Unfortunately, western Christianity has often denigrated our bodies and life on earth, just as many theologians have belittled Martha. This is truly a terrible irony since one of the central claims of Christian faith is that God entered into our world as a human person, with a body. Jesus also cared deeply about bodies: touching them, healing them, feeding them, restoring them. Further, he taught his followers to pray that God's will would be done on earth as in heaven, and to ask for bread and deliverance from evil. Clearly, Jesus demonstrated that God cares about our physical earth and our physical bodies.

Anabaptist believers have also affirmed this truth, emphasizing that faith is not just about getting to heaven, but it also changes life here on earth. Salvation is for us in the here and now, and shapes how we live and relate to one another every day. What we do is more important than what we say or claim to believe.

Wrestling with dualism

Nevertheless, our Anabaptist heritage of martyrdom has often served to minimize our bodily needs, and the value we place on life here on earth. Stephanie Krehbiel explores this

reality in her challenging article, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior.”³² In her experience, Anabaptist martyr stories have stressed a ready willingness to die for one’s beliefs. As she says, “every account I’d ever read in the *Martyr’s Mirror* emphasizes the courage, even ecstasy, with which they faced their gruesome fates.”³³ Unfortunately, contemporary Mennonites have understood Anabaptism primarily as a spiritualized religious movement, without fully articulating the ways in which their practices of adult baptism and voluntary church membership challenged an unjust social order. Thus, it is difficult for these stories to provide helpful guidance for how to create positive change in the world today.³⁴ Indeed, Krehbiel argues that she has had to look elsewhere for such wisdom.

Regrettably, this focus on martyrdom has also made us more susceptible to the broader heritage of western Christianity that was shaped by Greek philosophical dualism. This tradition pits the body against the spirit, earth against heaven, passion against the mind and reason, and female against male. As Douglas explains so clearly, Christianity’s acceptance of this dualism resulted in minimizing the value of life on earth, and betrayed its “incarnational identity.”³⁵

In fact, as Christianity became platonized, God and all things spiritual were linked to heaven, the mind, and a certain kind of masculinity. Meanwhile, women and oppressed peoples were sexualized, and viewed as earthly, emotional and full of creaturely temptations. This helps explain why images of God are so overwhelmingly male, and why there is so much resistance to

32. Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior,” in *Mennonite Life*, 61 (December 2006), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-61-no-4/article/staying-alive-how-martyrdom-made-me-a-warrior/>, accessed July 20, 2017.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 73. On page 76, she writes further that the incarnation made clear “that the body, far from being intrinsically evil, is what potentially participates in making the ways of God known in human history.”

using feminine images, even those used in the Bible. For in this understanding of reality, divinity could be represented only by masculine traits of authority, rationality, and transcendent distance.

At the same time, such dualistic hierarchies make it much easier to denigrate and exploit certain bodies and the earth, as these are viewed as inferior and even demonic. Augustine especially deplored the way our bodies sometimes act impulsively and passionately. Bodily parts and emotions do not always obey the mind. Since reason found it especially difficult to control sexuality, Augustine asserted that this was God's way of punishing Adam and Eve's disobedience.³⁶ In his view, sexuality was no longer part of God's good gift of creation, but rather proved the need for external control over all unruly members. And as Elaine Pagels explains, this fear of bodily chaos served to justify "male domination of women, coercive government, and slavery."³⁷ Such oppressions were considered necessary evils in order to maintain stability in the world. Needless to say, such logic has resulted in ongoing and devastating consequences, especially for those on the underside of these tyrannies.

Wrestling with shame and entitlement

Another result of platonized Christianity has been a debilitating sense of shame for women and others whose bodies have been demeaned and exploited. Many grow up fearing that there is something so ontologically wrong with them that nothing can save them. They feel totally unworthy of love and care, simply for who they are. Stephanie Crumpton describes this as the "global, overwhelming sense that who she is—not what she has done (as is the case in feelings of guilt)—is bad and wrong, and it occurs when there is failure to meet an important rule

36. Elaine Pagels, "Adam and Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 1-3," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, edited by Karen L. King, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 418-419.

37. Ibid., 420.

or standard.”³⁸ Especially when one’s faith community enforces such norms and assumptions, it can be extremely difficult for women to see themselves as bearing God’s image.³⁹

One woman describes, for example, how she was forced to confess sexual sin to her congregation after she became pregnant outside of marriage: “I went home to hate myself, to feel the emptiness of ritual forgiving, to understand, once and for all, that love did *not* conquer all.”⁴⁰ There was no redemption or safety for her, as the only option available was to marry this brutally abusive man who raped her and repeatedly threatened to harm her and her family.

Ironically, there is a double message here. On the one hand, western theology minimized the value of life on earth for some people, while on the other, it gave license to certain bodies and certain races to exploit and destroy others. By insisting on strict binaries, it nurtured a hierarchy of creatures and values which gave privileged bodies the belief they were entitled to the bodies of others. This in turn encouraged the development of a materialistic, selfish, and violent culture which grants ultimate comfort and honor to a small elite at the expense of others.

As Davina Lopez explains so well, such hierarchies are necessary for creating and sustaining the ways of empire. For example, from her study of Roman imperial art, she found that it repeatedly portrayed the Roman conqueror as male, vigorous, invulnerable, and much superior to the nations they conquered. Not surprisingly, the bodies of subject nations were shown as weak, defeated, penetrated, and female.⁴¹ In the end, such a culture sacrifices its own

38. Stephanie M. Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 159.

39. Ibid., 93. A female friend who works as a spiritual director stated that this is one of the most difficult problems many women face in their spiritual journeys, continuing to plague their relationship with God over many, many years.

40. Leona Stucky, *The Fog of Faith, Surviving My Impotent God* (Santa Fe, NM: Prairie World Press, 2017), 98. Italics in original. Here she is referring to a placard that had hung on her bedroom wall, which read, “LOVE CONQUERS ALL.” 74.

41. See Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered, Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 17-25. She also writes: “In visual representation, the personification of nations as women’s bodies and

values of justice, fairness, and even reason itself, as it works to protect the wealth and comfort of “exceptional” bodies at all cost.

No doubt, this is why Jesus is such a loving presence in the lives of those who struggle to believe they are worthy. For he reached out to and welcomed everyone, especially those scorned by the empire. One woman put it this way: “Jesus gave us the message that we are okay. I am okay, I am enough. We can be loved for who we are, with no pretense.”⁴² Another said: “I resonate with Richard Rohr’s ideas of the true and the false self, and this is tied to salvation, that there is a part of me that was okay from the beginning and I don’t have to reject that completely.”⁴³

Suffering is not God’s will

Still another effect of platonized Christianity has been the temptation to glorify suffering, or even require this of some people for the sake of others. Since this kind of theology can be truly dangerous, it is essential that discussions about suffering always stay grounded in the reality of people’s lives, especially those who have experienced degradation and trauma. As I have listened to women, for example, one thing I have heard is that “It’s very cruel to tell someone that your pain has some larger purpose.”⁴⁴ Or again, “It’s so horrible to do that to people, to make suffering into a math problem, a formula: your pain plus this equals meaning.”⁴⁵

conquerors as men’s bodies communicates hierarchical power relations between Romans and nations, as well as reinforcing those existing between male and female, masculinity and femininity, free and slave, colonizer and colonized, and cosmos and chaos.” 51

42. Focus group participant.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

Instead, we need to be able to confess that “things have happened that should not have happened; your pain should not have happened.”⁴⁶ We need to be able to say that some things are wrong. Like Martha and Mary, we can protest when family members die before they should. People should not die because they cannot afford medical care. People should not be violated. They should not be hungry, dishonored, and shamed. They should not be tortured or raped. We must be able to say this about Jesus too. He should not have been crucified. No one should be crucified. No one deserves to suffer such a cruel and humiliating death.

But of course, these things do happen. People do hurt each other in terrible ways. And there are real and devastating consequences. For instance, one woman described how she died when she was raped by her boyfriend: “The loss was total, but I dealt with it piecemeal...I was so busy trying to stay alive that I didn’t know that I had died. That’s why it took me years. But everything was gone. My sense of safety. My sense of trust. My faith. The woman I was for twenty-one years ceased to exist.”⁴⁷

It is natural then to search for some meaning in this suffering, for ways to redeem and transform the pain and agony. But we must be very careful not to be glib about this or insist on certain answers. We need to admit that too often our answers do not help, but are a way to get us “off the hook; they are a way to control, to make us feel that it won’t happen to me.”⁴⁸

What we need to do instead is to remain in that uncomfortable place of silence and lament, giving people the space and time they need in which to grieve and find their own answers. We need to accept that sometimes there is no answer that will ever be enough. And

46. Ibid.

47. Monica A. Coleman, *Bipolar Faith, A Black Woman’s Journey in Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 219.

48. Focus group participant.

sometimes, even when God's presence is helpful, that alone does not necessarily give meaning or purpose to the experience.⁴⁹

We need to say that suffering is not what redeems us. This is not God's will. Like Martha and Mary, we can seek healing for our loved ones. We can protest and mourn when they die. Still, we hope and pray that God will provide a way through the pain. Just as we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, we can have faith in God's ability to nourish life even in the deepest valleys and bleakest places of our lives.

The meaning of the cross

Still the reality of the cross haunts us, and it is natural to search for what it meant that Jesus was killed this way. Certainly, all those who followed him and found so much hope in him had to make some sense of what had happened. How could it be that Jesus would be destroyed, the very one in whom God had been so present with them?

No doubt some concluded that Jesus could not be God's anointed one. For if God were truly present with him, he would have escaped death and his movement would have succeeded in establishing justice in the land.

His followers dared to insist, however, that God was truly present in him and still present with them. In fact, they proclaimed that the cross revealed just how deeply God loved them and all those who are crucified. The cross signified God's ultimate and complete solidarity with the most vulnerable and most despised, those which our worldly systems treat as exploitable and of little value.

49. Ibid.

So it was not Jesus who failed but the empire. The crucifixion demonstrated clearly that the ruling authorities did not care for its people and their bodies. In reality, they will use and destroy the bodies of those it considers dangerous and disposable. Jesus suggests this contradiction himself. In his farewell address to his followers, he promises that the advocate to come “will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.”⁵⁰ God’s powerful love would reveal just how mistaken the earthly authorities were about comprehending and implementing God’s will.

Wonhee Anne Joh, a Korean theologian, wrestles deeply with this truth and what it means for the church to affirm that God was not on the side of imperial power, but rather with the abject, all “those who have been repressed, expelled, persecuted, executed, oppressed.”⁵¹ For her, the cross points in two directions. On the one hand, it acknowledges the power of domination to oppress and kill while at the same time revealing God’s radical and all-inclusive love.⁵² As she says, it “pays homage to the power of horror/abjection while at the same time using mimicry to make present the transgressive and transforming power of love.”⁵³

Joh addresses not only the political and social implications of such love, but also some of the deeply rooted psychological realities which undergird and result from oppression. Using the work of Julia Kristeva and Melanie Klein, she explores the contrast between maternal love and the “Law of the Fathers” which often tries to repudiate our connections to others.⁵⁴ Too often,

50. John 16:8.

51. Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross, A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 114.

52. Ibid., 118

53. Ibid. xxvi.

54. Ibid., 114.

she argues, the maternal or semiotic (pre-thought) aspects of life are considered dangerous and without any validity or agency.⁵⁵

Such rejection of maternal love is harmful as it leads to a denial of the fundamental connections between human beings. In a patriarchal and imperial society, love then becomes subversive, as it insists on the importance of our relationships with one another, rather than on the “construction of a self in opposition to the other.”⁵⁶ It consents to vulnerability and the need to include all people, as well as “the often negativized and shadowed parts of ourselves.”⁵⁷

As a symbol of ultimate solidarity, the cross thus incorporates these rejected parts of ourselves and our society. It represents the return of those elements that have been forced into hiding, but which are needed for a healthy self and a healthy community. When we can recognize that God was on the cross, we can see the possibility of reconnecting, reintegrating, and even resurrecting, parts of ourselves and our society that are needed for our redemption.⁵⁸ Indeed, this concept of dangerous relationality “allows us to reimagine love on the cross not as self-abnegation or sacrifice but as a radical inclusive love that is both transgressive and emancipatory.”⁵⁹

Of course, this understanding of love and connection can be misused and exploited to maintain the status quo, and demand that women especially sacrifice themselves for others. Joh argues however, that women must be able to maintain their own identity and their “embodiment

55. Ibid., 107-108.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 122.

58. Ibid., 113-118.

59. Ibid., 78.

of *jeong* is dynamic, empowering, subversive, disruptive, sly, insurgent, and most often oriented toward sustaining life.”⁶⁰

Thus, Joh agrees with Elizabeth Johnson, that love and power should not be divided, but that ““we seek to integrate these two, seeing love as the shape in which divine power appears.””⁶¹ In this way then, the collaboration between oneself and another “is not one that seeks to maintain the status quo or to perpetuate oppression. Rather, such collaboration, born out of connectedness, seeks to work towards emancipatory praxis for all.”⁶²

Dorothee Soelle also claims that love is a strong, dynamic power. It does not avoid conflict but “must necessarily seek confrontation, since its most important concern is not the avoidance of suffering but the liberation of people.”⁶³ Further, “the more we love, the more people in whom we take an interest, the more closely we are bound to them, the more likely it is that we get into difficulties and experience pain.”⁶⁴

What Soelle is describing is again solidarity and an unflinching choice to embrace all of reality. As she explains, this kind of suffering “arises from a relationship to the world that is not immersed in the I alone...but the risk contained in every partiality for the victims of history and every commitment to the cause of the losers.”⁶⁵ While such a decision is costly, the price for avoiding such commitment is even higher. It means that “then we forsake others and ourselves;

60. Ibid., 127. Joh uses the Korean word “jeong” to encapsulate that which “fosters life-giving relationality through the transformation of the heart.” 122.

61. Ibid., 128, quoting from Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 1994.

62. Ibid., 122.

63. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 164.

64. Ibid., 165.

65. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 140.

we have sold our souls. Then we affirm only a little slice of reality, not the whole of reality in whose midst stands the cross.”⁶⁶

In this sense then, the cross was necessary, in order for God to enter completely into the realities of life and death on earth. It was not payment to an angry or offended God for our sins, but rather God’s willingness to enter fully into the sins of our world and reveal them for what they are.

Resistance and repentance

The cross is also the cost of resistance. It is the inevitable result of seeking life and wholeness for all God’s people, especially when this threatens the status quo. Too often it is the price that is paid for challenging the systems of exploitation and refusing to back down. It is the cost of standing with those who have felt in their bones the reality of being disparaged and viewed as dangerous or of no consequence.

This then is the third characteristic of a shalom justice household: resistance to the forces of oppression and death. In Chapter Four, we saw how Martha, Mary, and Lazarus continued to host Jesus in their home, even though the authorities were searching for him, and were now also threatening to kill Lazarus as well.⁶⁷ Clearly, they understood that love is not neutral but stands with the vulnerable, tends to their needs, and follows their wisdom. Along with others in the movement, they turned away from the false gods of empire and domination, toward the true God who loves and cares for all. They embraced an understanding of God as one who grants justice as

66. Ibid. 170.

67. John 11:27-12:2

a gracious gift to all, rather than reserving this just for those with enough wealth and status in the empire.⁶⁸

Wrestling with idols

No doubt, this is why the scriptures struggle so hard against idolatry. For idolatry is really the “civic worship of the one master of the world.”⁶⁹ It means submitting to the principalities and powers who claim ultimate allegiance, submission, and sacrifice from the people. It makes sense then that the early church urged people to turn away from all idols and misplaced worship. For as Lopez explains, in order to birth a new creation, a new community, people had to turn away from honoring the ways of empire and turn instead toward the true God, “the God of Israel, the creator of the world, who will reconcile them with one another and end war forever.”⁷⁰ This included all those, both Jews and Gentiles, who had acquiesced to the dominant culture which revered the emperor and credited his rule with their wellbeing.

As elaborated in Chapter Four, in Jesus’ day, even the temple and its leaders had bowed to the god of Roman conquest. Although they claimed to speak and act for the one true God, in reality their first loyalty was to Caesar and his demands. And they used their interpretation of the law and temple worship to oppress and exploit the people for their own benefit.

This is why Jesus resisted these rulers so persistently and strenuously. To be sure, he was nonviolent, yet his teaching and ministry clearly threatened the power and authority of the ruling powers, much like the southern freedom movement threatened the legitimacy and rule of white supremacy. By freely offering healing and deliverance, Jesus subverted the ability of the temple authorities to use God for their own purposes. By freely offering forgiveness and community, he

68. Tamez, 178.

69. Lopez, 150.

70. Ibid.

undercut their ability to use shame and guilt to stigmatize or blame the people for their suffering. By freely offering food and a liberating vision of God's justice, he offered hope and courage, rooted not in dominating power, but in God's love and generosity.

Such resistance is still so very necessary. Again, this is not resistance for its own sake but rooted in the need to reject the logic and seeming inevitability of violence and domination. Over many generations, Mennonites have emphasized nonresistance as opposed to violence. While this has been positive in that it encouraged Mennonite men to refuse participation in war and military institutions, it nevertheless cultivated too much passivity toward other kinds of oppression. Too often it encouraged a withdrawal from the larger society and a deep reluctance to engage in social justice movements, such as struggles for racial justice, labor rights, or safety for women. Too often it cultivated submission to violence rather than creative and courageous resistance. Too often it urged suffering as an end in itself rather than as a cost to be borne in the movement toward life and wholeness.⁷¹

Turning toward God's shalom justice

Ironically, such an emphasis on nonresistance not only fails to resist evil, but it also often fails to urge repentance on the part of those who hurt and destroy others. Mennonites have focused so strongly on peace, reconciliation, and loving one's enemies that we have often overlooked the call to justice. We have urged peace at all costs without charting the way to right and equitable relationships. We have failed to invite change and transformation, responsibility and accountability.

For example, after the violent and racist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, Mennonite pastor Jon Carlson wrote a blog urging that Christians not only denounce such hate,

71. See Chapter One and Chapter Three where this is explained in more detail.

but also reach out in self-giving love to the perpetrators.⁷² While it is important to offer grace and love to all, nowhere in the blog did he mention repentance or the need for the white supremacist demonstrators to change their ways. Perhaps he considered this self-evident, yet when insisting that victims offer themselves in sacrificial ways, it is important to also urge repentance and change for those who cause harm.

Truly, this was a central aspect of Jesus' message: "repent, and believe in the good news."⁷³ He invited all to turn away from trying to satisfy an unjust order and to live instead into the reality of God's will, God's justice. He invited tax collectors like Zacchaeus to join with their neighbors rather than continue to use the system for their own benefit.⁷⁴ He urged Pharisees like Nicodemus to be born again, to let God transform their worldview and assumptions, so they could see and experience what God intended for the world. Of course, Jesus urged his followers to love their enemies, but he also encouraged and admonished those with wealth and privilege to join this justice movement as allies and repentant partners.

In a very real sense, Jesus offered salvation from all those forces which twist and deform who we are and how we relate to God, ourselves and one another. As one woman explained, "We are saved from being distorted and participating in the ongoing distortion."⁷⁵ This of course manifests itself in different ways, depending on one's station in life. For some, this means

72. Jon Carlson, "I pity the fool," *The World Together*, August 18, 2017, accessed September 11, 2017, <http://mennoworld.org/2017/08/18/the-world-together/i-pity-the-fool/>.

73. Mark 1:15 and 6:12. See also Matthew 4:17, 11:20, Luke 10:13, 11:32 and Acts: 2:28, 3:19.

74. William Herzog II argues that Jesus' invitation to tax collectors was "a way to interrupt the cycle of exploitation" and recruit them as allies of the poor and common people. By repaying what he had cheated from people, Zacchaeus demonstrated how to return to right relationship with his neighbors and help create a more just, life-giving community. William R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 223.

75. Focus group participant.

learning to overcome deep shame, while for others, it means resisting privilege and the assumptions of entitlement.

But this is never simple or clear-cut, and all of us will need to do the careful, intersectional work of sifting through where we have been wronged, and also where we have benefited from oppressive systems.⁷⁶ We will need to discern when to be assertive in caring for ourselves and when to step back, learn, and take leadership from those who are more vulnerable. We will need to be humble and alert, willing to challenge and be challenged as we all seek God's will.

Baptism into resistance and new life

This is why baptism is such an important Christian practice. On the one hand, it represents a washing away of sin that is both personal and political. As Brock and Parker explain, baptism in Jesus' time "offered a path by which people separated and purified themselves from the corruptions of the Roman occupation and its client-king."⁷⁷ But baptism also promised new life. Rising out of the baptismal waters and being clothed in new garments signified being reborn into God's worldwide community and returned to the promise of paradise.⁷⁸

Of course, we do not know if the household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus actually practiced baptism. Yet, having joined themselves to Jesus, their actions of welcome and hospitality signaled these commitments. They chose to embrace God's vision of justice and

76. The term intersectionality was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, and refers to the complicated way in which different types of discrimination overlap, combine, and accumulate for marginalized groups of people. From "Word We're Watching: Intersectionality," Merriam-Webster, accessed September 22, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/intersectionality-meaning>.

77. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise, How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 41.

78. Ibid., 133.

shalom. They also demonstrated their willingness to separate from the violence and oppression of the ruling powers in Jerusalem and Rome, despite the costs.

Traces of this understanding still show up in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*: “Baptism by water is a sign that a person has repented, received forgiveness, renounced evil, and died to sin, through the grace of God in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately, we have come to understand sin and forgiveness primarily in personal moral terms, and thereby lost the sense of renouncing the destructive ways of empire, and being released from its control. We have failed to demonstrate how to resist violence and degradation, and to walk together in a journey of rebirth and transformation to just and loving ways. This is what we must recover in order to truly become a shalom justice household.

The power of love

In the end, we want to focus not only on the cross and resistance to evil, but on God’s power to redeem, to take on suffering, and bring forth life even in the midst of death. This was Martha’s remarkable testimony: that despite her brother’s death, she still believed in Jesus and in God’s power to bring forth life.⁸⁰ And of course, Lazarus himself was living proof of this power.⁸¹

A fourth dimension then of a shalom justice household is its faith in the power of God’s love. Here I use the word power deliberately. Power often has a negative connotation because it has been identified with coercion and domination, expressed in having power over others. However, I believe there is also enormous power and authority to be found in love’s capacity to

79. *Confession of Faith*, 46.

80. John 11:21-27.

81. John 11:43-45.

do great things with and for others. Thus, I seek to reinforce the strength and dignity of the love that is found in relationships and in the regard we give ourselves and others.

We have already explored how Jesus' healing ministry was a powerful expression of this love and connected people back to how their ancestors had experienced God's liberating power in their history.⁸² Just as God had led them out of slavery in Egypt and helped them survive during and after exile, God was acting in Jesus to bring restoration and liberation. God was restoring their health and their communities, and providing nourishment that was both physical and spiritual.

These deeds of power also meant that God was not the one punishing them. God was not the one demanding sacrifice and suffering. Instead, God was forgiving their sins and affirming that they were worthy of love and care. This God, the one their ancestors had always relied on, was full of compassion and grace. And this God, as Jesus said, longed to care for them as a mother hen cares for her chicks.⁸³

Again, it is important to emphasize that the biblical concept of salvation is not primarily about life after death. Rather it means restoration of health and wellbeing, as well as safety and liberation or rescue from danger and cruelty.⁸⁴ Today, this continues to be a meaningful way to think of salvation. One woman commented that "I have learned to really appreciate the fact that in Greek, salvation equals healing: healing me, the world and the cosmos. Liberation is still important, but there is this sense of going deeper, dwelling in God, dwelling in love."⁸⁵

82. See Chapter Four.

83. Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34.

84. Justo Gonzalez defines salvation as that which refers "to restoration of health, to liberation from an enemy or threat, and to the reclaiming of what properly belongs to God." Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells, Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 64.

85. Focus group participant.

Communion as generous solidarity

Such generous love finds expression in the Eucharist or thanksgiving service often known as communion or the Lord's Supper.⁸⁶ This service now often focuses especially on Jesus' death.⁸⁷ But in the early church, this observance also linked to Jesus' miracles of providing food for the people and pointed them to the paradise which God originally created.⁸⁸ As Brock and Parker argue, "The ancient Eucharist was designed to capture the wholeness of beauty and to imprint right relationship to the world...The ritual feast initiated people into *this* world unveiled as paradise."⁸⁹

Again, we do not know details about how those who met in the household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus practiced communion. Yet, we can imagine people continuing to meet together around a table, just as they did when Jesus was among them. We can imagine them sharing food as they remembered and celebrated Jesus' words and ministry among them. We can imagine them recommitting themselves to his invitation to continue this work in their own homes and communities.

As Brock and Parker note further, such practices of sharing food and fellowship directly challenged the Roman emperors who curried favor by giving food to the poor. The ability of Jesus and his followers to feed people signaled that God, and not Rome, was the "true source of life."⁹⁰ These practices, therefore, along with ministries of healing, liberation, and forgiveness

86. Eucharist means thanksgiving in Greek. See "Eucharist" on the website of The Episcopal Church, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/eucharist>.

87. See *Confession of Faith*, page 50. The article on "The Lord's Supper" begins by saying it is a "sign by which the church thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death."

88. Brock and Parker, 30-31.

89. *Ibid.*, 158. Italics in original.

90. *Ibid.*, 30.

continued to demonstrate that people could find release and restoration, not through the temple or submission to Rome, but rather through God's love for all people and their solidarity and care for one another. These ordinary believers—and not the ruling elite—were the ones capable of offering life and healing to others. They were the ones who could show the way.

Again, Lopez highlights the contrast between this message and that of the Roman Empire. Rome promised fertility and wealth through “conquering and plundering the nations,” whereas Jesus and the early church demonstrated that health and wellbeing would come through their struggle together and mutual care for one another.⁹¹ As Lopez says, “The new creation, once born, is marked by solidarity and mutual relationship among defeated nations.”⁹² This is life born from the underside of history, rather than manufactured by those who claim to manage and control the world.

In this context then, Jesus' willingness to go all the way to the cross is not primarily about sacrifice, but the power of love to release people from bondage to sin and oppression, and restore them to a sense of well-being and worth. Together with Jesus' ministry and his resurrection, it signaled God's power to bring salvation not through Roman armies, but through those who appear weak and disposable, who dare to propose another way, a way not of domination and conquest, but of love and solidarity.

Love holds us

Amazingly, such love often has the capacity to hold us, even during our most difficult hours. This of course, is not a panacea. There are times when it appears that all is lost, God is

91. Lopez, 145.

92. Ibid., 147.

nowhere to be found, and love does not conquer all.⁹³ Surely, Martha and Mary felt this keenly when Jesus was too far away and failed to show up in time to heal Lazarus.

Nevertheless, this image of being held by God is one that comes up repeatedly in women's stories. One woman described how she had always heard about the need to hold onto God. Yet, she found herself responding deeply to the idea that God was holding her. "Just be held. That's beautiful! That's what we need to hear when we are in pain, instead of those stupid sayings, like 'God needed a flower in his garden.'"⁹⁴

Another talked about a time when she was struggling with post-partum depression and not sleeping at night. "It was horrible, but then one night, I had this very strong impression that Jesus was holding me as a baby."⁹⁵ That feeling is still very meaningful to her and brought tears to her eyes when describing it many years later.

Still another woman shared an experience that helped her survive, despite her father's sexual abuse. Although feeling that God could never "forgive a girl who 'fucked her daddy,'" she "talked about going down into the abyss, further and further down until she touched bottom, and the bottom *held her up*. That there was something coming up from underneath her that held her up and without that she would not have been alive."⁹⁶

Rebecca Parker also recalls a time when she was being orally raped as a child and thought she was going to die. Yet, in that moment "I knew that there was a Presence with me that

93. Stucky, 98, referring to her experience of brutal intimate partner violence.

94. Focus group participant. In some communities, people use sayings like this when trying to offer comfort to someone who has lost a loved one.

95. Focus group participant.

96. Pellauer, 189. Italics in original.

was ‘stronger’ than the rapist and that could encompass my terror.”⁹⁷ She felt this presence had the power to save her and in fact believes this Presence did stop this man and saved her life.

Parker concedes, however, that her rapist could have denied this Presence and he could have killed her: “Molesters do kill. The Nazis did kill. Batterers do kill spouses and children.”⁹⁸ Thus, as noted earlier, we should never ever minimize the reality of evil or its consequences. There are times when it really does appear that God is absent and love is not enough. No doubt, this is what Jesus felt when he cried out, asking why had God forsaken him.⁹⁹ Here the gospel of Mark is especially realistic. In that gospel, these are Jesus’ final words and the story ends with very little hope the movement would survive.

Wrestling with doubt and fear

Where do we find hope then? How do we perceive resurrection and affirm that God does offer a way through? Here process theology offers some helpful perspectives. It understands God not as a being who can force things to go according to some predetermined plan. Rather, God is a persuasive power, who “influences, persuades, lures or ‘calls’ us to embrace the principles of God’s vision in every context.”¹⁰⁰ When terrible, terrible things happen, God does not give up, but constantly works to find the best possible outcome in each situation. God continues to offer new possibilities, and call each of us to choose the path to life and wholeness. As Coleman says

97. Rebecca Parker, “The Unblessed Child,” in *Proverbs of Ashes, Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 211.

98. *Ibid.*, 212.

99. Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34. Also see Stucky, 303.

100. Monica A. Coleman, “Introduction to Process Theology,” in *Creating Women’s Theology, A Movement Engaging Process Thought*, ed. Monica A. Coleman, Nancy R. Howell, and Helene Tallon Russell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 17.

so eloquently, “We are not bound by our past...We can do something new.”¹⁰¹ Life is constantly changing and while some aspects of ourselves might perish, we are also “constantly reborn.”¹⁰²

It is also helpful to recognize that God operates this way, not because God is aloof or unloving. Rather, God covets and relishes relationships with genuine, creative persons, people who are able to interact with and contribute both to God and the larger world. Just as we would find it quite wearisome to live in a world full of dolls or robots, so too God did not settle for a world full of beings who did not have the freedom and ability to think and act on their own. In other words, as early church leader Irenaeus articulated, free will is the positive capacity to live and love out of an ability to freely choose what is good.¹⁰³

God also delights in difference and diversity. This inevitably means that there will be various levels of strength and ability, with some needing care from those who are stronger or more experienced. Tragically, where there is vulnerability and freedom, there will likely be abuse, injustice, and violence. But can one really imagine a world without choice and possibility? A world without the intrigue of potential growth and the joy which comes from authentic relationships? Thus, even though the current state of our world often leads to deep despair and grief, it is also difficult to imagine a world in which there are no children and no elders, no vulnerability, and no freedom to create and respond as a unique individual.

This process understanding recognizes further, that we cannot survive and thrive alone. We need relationships. We cannot enjoy creativity and diversity individually. And because there are varieties of gifts and abilities, we depend upon each other for our very lives. This means that

101. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way, A Womanist Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 51.

102. Coleman, *Bipolar Faith*, 239.

103. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: HarperCollins, revised edition, 1977), 213.

our free will, our choices, will affect others in profound ways. As Coleman explains, “Sin is easily perpetuated and systematized because we are so influential. We shape our futures and those around us. They have to live with what we have done. We have to live with what others have done.”¹⁰⁴

Truly, these are the profound consequences of living in a world in which relationships are absolutely vital and built into the very nature of things. Where we depend on others and they depend on us. Where we cannot ultimately control others, even as we do not want to be compelled. Where we all have freedom to choose and the best we can do is to love, encourage, and persuade.

Of course, in a world where so much is so wrong and so much needs to change, it is tempting to long for God to somehow step in dramatically and decisively to make things right. But this too easily succumbs to seeking some coercive power that could turn everyone into compliant dolls who would smile and sit up straight. And the truth is this is the very type of power which causes so much destruction and death in our world.

Continuing to make a way

So we must learn to rely on a God who exercises a different kind of vulnerable and relational power. God is present with us. God know us and feels with us even in the midst of death and crucifixion. Even when it appears that all is lost, God’s Spirit is resilient and offers life and healing.¹⁰⁵ Even when God is crucified, there is resurrection.

Mysteriously, grief and hope intermingle. As Jones explains, “In our grief and in our hope, we embody the glory of God, for our grief bears witness to what *should not be* and

104. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 55.

105. James Newton Poling, *Rethinking Faith, A Constructive Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 69.

therefore to what *actually is* and *should be*, according to God's creative and redemptive intentions."¹⁰⁶ In this way then, "God saves the world through the vision that comes to each of us in God's calling. God saves the world by offering Godself to the world."¹⁰⁷

God also chooses to do all this in relationship with us. God needs us to be part of the work of redemption and salvation. We are part of the process. But we cannot do it alone; we need to work together with others. As Coleman emphasizes, "Combating evil, fighting injustice, resisting violence, questing for wholeness and health – these things are never about the actions of a single individual. Salvation is about the activity of communities."¹⁰⁸

So it is essential to join with others, to create shalom justice households. Households that are located in the midst of suffering communities and built on God's solidarity with the most vulnerable among us. Households who demonstrate God's love for our bodies and our physical world. Households committed to resisting the forces of oppression, violence, and death. Households inviting all to repentance and transformation. Households willing to believe that, despite so much evidence to the contrary, love is the ultimate power, offering healing, hope, and restoration to those whose lives have been disregarded and destroyed.

Just as we receive God's generous love and power in communion with God, so too we can act in solidarity with others to promote renewal and transformation. We can trust that love will hold us and lead us to resurrection.

106. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace, Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 121-122. Italics in original.

107. Coleman, 61.

108. Ibid., 100.

Chapter Six: Practices of a Shalom Justice Household

I would now like to sketch out some implications of what it would mean for the church to embrace being a shalom justice household. I will identify some pastoral concerns as well as practical steps to take. These will follow the four principal markers of shalom justice discussed in the previous chapter: solidarity with victims, affirming our bodies, strategies of resistance and repentance, and strengthening the power of love.

Certainly, these suggestions are not exhaustive or complete. I offer them as proposals which can be useful in building the capacity of everyone to hear and respond to God's gracious offer of salvation, life and wholeness.

Solidarity with victims

Choosing solidarity with victims of sin and evil would, of course, mean working with them to attend to their needs and priorities. This would affect where we put our energies and how we spend our resources. It would determine where we live and worship, and who we partner with. It would not allow us to profess neutrality, or insist on reconciliation as God's ultimate priority. Rather, we would seek God's will, God's justice, as a way of life in which all could live and thrive as God intended.

In our congregations and church institutions, this would mean closely examining how policies and decisions affect those who are most vulnerable. It would mean working to create environments of safety, and dismantling systems which allow perpetrators to act in secret and with no accountability. It would mean first seeking repentance and responsibility from offenders before demanding forgiveness and reconciliation from those who have been injured. It would

mean insisting on justice for survivors, encouraging them to grow, explore their options, and use their power.¹

Worship

Another important task would be to evaluate our worship services, as these shape our horizons and perceptions of what is most essential and ultimate. It is vital then to examine what these words and practices communicate to those who are most vulnerable, and whether they provide assurance and strength to become who God meant them to be.

This calls for creativity and constant vigilance concerning all aspects of Christian worship. Sheila Redmond urges ministers to: “Think about every prayer, sermon, scripture. Put yourself in the shoes of a battered woman and try to understand her experience. Remember what it was like to be a child, and experience through a child’s eyes and ears what you are going to say.”² What messages do these vulnerable ones hear about suffering and the kind of salvation Jesus offers? Do these words, uttered in sacred space, lead to hope and life, or to more death?

Communion

One of the central practices of Christian worship is communion or the Eucharist. Unfortunately, this service now focuses almost exclusively on Jesus’ death as a sacrifice. Thus, as Marjorie Proctor-Smith argues in her essay, “The Whole Loaf: Holy Communion and Survival,” this offering of salvation has become “not a source of nourishment and pleasure, but an eating and drinking of suffering and death. The eating of broken bodies and the drinking of

1. See Mary D. Pellauer with Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Conversations on Grace and Healing: Perspectives from the Movement to End Violence Against Women,” in *Lift Every Voice, Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, (Revised and Expanded Edition, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 186-187.

2. Sheila Redmond, “‘Remember the Good, Forget the Bad’: Denial and Family Violence in a Christian Worship Service,” in *Women at Worship*, ed. Marjorie Proctor-Smith and Janet R. Walton (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 79.

spilled blood appears to spiritualize and justify the real life broken bodies and spilled blood of women and children.”³

She therefore urges that churches recover a more “liberative and joyful emphasis in the communion service in place of a penitential or sorrowful approach.”⁴ This can include more emphasis on the stories of Jesus’ miraculous feedings, and our anticipation of the great messianic feast in order to shift the primary focus from suffering and death to life and community. Further, we can use the language of struggle and liberation, rather than of sacrifice. We can stress that God does not require suffering for our salvation, but rather suffering is always in the service of life and wholeness. God does not need death but brings forth life and transformation “*in spite of* suffering and death.”⁵

Hilary Scarsella has also done much work on ways to make the communion service more life-giving, especially for survivors of trauma and sexualized violence. A group working with her has proposed some alternative language for the words of institution. One option focuses especially on remembering Jesus, using these words:

Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it (*break the bread*) and said, “When you share bread together, remember me.”

Jesus took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant. When you drink it together, remember me.”⁶

The second alternative from Scarsella’s work provides more context, so that Jesus’ words are clearly connected to his life and ministry on earth:

3. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, “The Whole Loaf: Holy Communion and Survival,” in *Violence Against Women and Children*. ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 474.

4. Ibid., 475-476.

5. Ibid., 476. Italics are in the original.

6. Janie Beck Kreider, “A new Mennonite communion liturgy addresses concerns of sexual abuse survivors,” posted on August 26, 2015, accessed September 23, 2017, <http://mennoniteusa.org/news/wearemenno-a-new-mennonite-communion-liturgy-addresses-concerns-of-sexual-abuse-survivors/>.

Anticipating that he would be killed for offering life and liberation; anticipating that his crucifixion would be an attempt to silence and discourage his followers, to erase his name from their lips; anticipating that those who had him crucified expected to demonstrate their strength by taking control of his body and the divine energy pulsing in the blood of his veins...anticipating this, on the night when he was betrayed Jesus took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it (*break the bread in two parts*) and said, "This is my body for you. When you share bread together, remember me." (*bring the two parts of the bread back together*)

In the same way, he took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; when you drink it together, remember me."

In choosing to entrust his body to those who loved him, Jesus denied crucifixion the ability to destroy him fully. In giving the energy of his veins to many Jesus denied crucifixion the ability to drain that energy from the world. The presence of his body and the energy in his veins lives on in the relationships of those who share bread and cup together. The one who was crucified lives, and the life he offers abounds. The powers of destruction failed to erase Christ's message of love, for as often as you share this bread and cup you proclaim that message until he comes.⁷

These words clearly grow out of the wisdom of survivors. By paying attention to their voices, we all benefit. Here Jesus' message is not co-opted or turned upside down to reinforce oppressive power. And by continually reminding ourselves of the real world in which Jesus lived and died, we also better remember our pledge to join in the work Jesus undertook and continues in us today.

Confession

Another key Christian practice is our confession of sin. However, as Proctor-Smith argues, most Christian prayers of confession fail to make a distinction "between one who commits sin and one who is the victim of sin."⁸ Instead, they focus almost exclusively on our sins against God. Even when they do mention offenses against others, they rarely suggest that we need to confess these sins or make amends to anyone but God.⁹ She argues therefore that we need to make our rituals of confession more appropriate and meaningful. This should include

7. Ibid. Italics in original.

8. Proctor-Smith, 469.

9. Ibid., 467- 468.

rituals which include holding accountable those who violate and abuse others, as well as “ritual opportunities for healing of the injury done to the victims.”¹⁰

Lament

Finally, it is essential to create space for lament and mourning, as Phillis Sheppard argues so convincingly. In her work as a therapist, she observed that those who are unable to mourn the past found it impossible to imagine an alternative future but remained stuck in living “a reenactment of the past.”¹¹ But mourning cannot be done alone. To do its transformative work, mourning requires honest engagement with and care from others. In such a context, mourning “creates a psychic and relational space that allows for a new way of seeing one’s self and culture as beautiful, complex and lovable.”¹²

Serene Jones also emphasizes the need to mourn, as a way to turn private grief “into public, shared loss.”¹³ But this is difficult, excruciating work which “requires a willingness to bear the unbearable.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, Jones argues that this is also its gift, for in the ability to acknowledge the depth of loss, one is able to learn “perhaps for the first time, that you can hold the loss: you can bear terrors of heart and body and still see your way forward with eyes open.”¹⁵

One example of such mourning was held in 2004, when many were urging Lancaster Mennonite Conference to permit the ordination of women. In the midst of that struggle, a group of concerned members organized a service entitled “Song of Mary, Vision of Joel: A service of

10. Ibid., 474-475.

11. Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, Culture and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), 141.

12. Ibid.

13. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace, Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 163.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

lament, witness, and yearning for mutual leadership in the church.”¹⁶ While this effort did not change conference practices, it was a powerful service which allowed many to express their sorrow and share their hopes for a church that would welcome and acknowledge women’s leadership gifts.

Regrettably, such laments are still needed. We still need to mourn the fact that in many churches, women have not been fully recognized as created in God’s image, and their needs for nurture and leadership have not been met. The church has too often not been a safe place in which women can speak and be heard, and their perspectives taken seriously. Women still need to alter the words and do convoluted maneuvers in order to find themselves in images and language about the divine.

Such honesty and acknowledgement of loss could provide the basis for hope. Indeed, for the church to clearly say that women are not a problem would be a wonderful relief! And for the church to confess that they have taught and acted wrongly toward women would be a profound and blessed admission. As Donald Shriver has observed in the context of corporate wrongs, “one way to convince others that you are making a clean break with the past is to recall it clearly and publicly.”¹⁷ Such a mourning process could indeed acknowledge that we were going down the wrong road and are now truly turning around, changing course and consciously moving in a different direction.

16. From bulletin in personal files.

17. Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 116.

Affirming our bodies

Another essential set of practices for a shalom justice household will attend to God's presence in and love for creation and our bodies. This is especially important for those who have suffered oppression, and need healing and restoration. Stephanie Crumpton emphasizes this clearly, based on her work with women who had experienced intimate violence. What was critical to their healing journey, she found, was "some form of embodied practice and ritual."¹⁸

For instance, Crumpton lifts up the example of "Baby Suggs, holy" from Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*. As Crumpton describes the scene, this dear woman "calls women, men and children who had been beaten, raped, and assaulted to come worship in secret, out in the woods."¹⁹ Baby Suggs, holy then tells them to love their flesh: "Love it. Love it hard. Yonder, they do not love your flesh. They despise it... *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you."²⁰

Similarly, Monica Coleman stresses that after her rape, spiritual healing came through learning traditional African dances. As she explains, "This was where I began to feel God again. After the crying. Outside of the Bible and church... The dance did for me what years of ministry, church, and Bible reading did not. It returned me to God. It returned me to God the same way I lost God—through my body."²¹

18. Stephanie M. Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 136.

19. Ibid., 131.

20. Ibid., 131-132. Quoted from Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 104-105.

21. Monica A. Coleman, *Bipolar Faith, A Black Woman's Journey in Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 214-215.

Jones also highlights the need for faith practices which take the body seriously. In her own journey, she found that working with her body through acupuncture and yoga led to much healing. In both cases, they represented surprising grace. While on the one hand, the needle prick and the yoga positions threw her off-balance, she discovered that she was also “supported and held steady by something unexpected. It is a *strange, unprecedented form of embrace*.”²² It did not end there, however, but led to what she describes an ability to “reconnect” with herself and her surroundings. As she says, “At the same instant that you are undone and held, you are *thrown wide open*. With each breath and needle prick, the world around you and within you becomes more spacious and boundlessly present to you.”²³

In more routine ways, women have talked about the importance of learning to appreciate the strength and resilience of their bodies—through walking, biking, working hard, and giving birth.²⁴ One even mentioned that she can feel especially connected to God “during a really great dance party: letting loose, being happy, moving my body.”²⁵

Singing

For ethnic European Mennonites, one of the most acceptable bodily expressions of worship happens through music. Indeed, when discussing with women when they experience the greatest sense of consolation or closeness to God, one of the most common answers is that this happens during congregational singing. As one said, “Goosebumps and tears happen for me during singing.”²⁶ Another commented that “singing is always a very real part of worship; it

22. Jones, 160. Italics in original.

23. Ibid. Italics in original.

24. From personal conversations with the author.

25. Focus group participant.

26. Focus group participant.

inspires and nourishes me to faithfulness. Sometimes I sing during my personal devotions, praising and lifting up my soul to God.”²⁷ Still another observed that “music is energy and connects us to the Holy Spirit, which I think of as the energetic form of God. I can feel the energy in my body, an aliveness.”²⁸

Singing hymns together also creates and sustains a sense of community with others. As one woman noted, “Acapella singing is so important; it’s like a cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Hearing the other people around me is very powerful.”²⁹ At times, this connection can be almost tangible: “I am carried by the people, and need to stop and just listen and be carried by the body.”³⁰ Another described it this way: “When we sing together, it carries me into the realm of ‘awe’ with both the music and the words, and provides a wonderful setting for worship. It also gives me a glimpse of what heavenly music might be like.”³¹

Further, music can provide comfort and healing. As one noted, “It can come to me and speak, trying to tell me something.”³² Another commented, “During my recent hospital stay and subsequent uncertainties, I often sang songs in my mind. The words of many of our songs are peaceful and healing and help to reduce anxiety. I find it easier to repeat lyrics than scripture passages.”³³

Given how important this aspect of worship is in Mennonite congregations, it is critical to pay attention to the theology of our songs. The combination of music and words means that

27. Female interviewee.

28. Ibid.

29. Focus group participant.

30. Ibid.

31. Female interviewee.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

hymns can be remembered more easily than simple text or speech. In this way, they have a profound and lasting impact on people. As a dear friend once said, “Hymns are a powerful teacher of theology, good and bad, because the words and concepts, sung repeatedly over many years, stick.”³⁴ Another agreed, saying “I have trouble singing words I don’t believe. Even more than with regular speech, it’s important to believe what you sing.”³⁵

It is essential then to sing hymns which are compatible with and confirm our theological commitments. Interestingly, despite the Anabaptist emphasis on following Jesus’ life and teaching, the “Table of Contents” of the current Anabaptist *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, includes only fourteen hymns in the section “Jesus’ Life/Ministry.” This is ten fewer than the twenty-four hymns listed under “Jesus’ Passion/Death.”³⁶ Fortunately, the more recent supplement *Sing the Story* contains an additional twenty-three hymns in the section, “Ministry of Jesus: Follow the Way.”³⁷

There is also some movement to more active peacemaking and engagement with the world in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. For example, the index includes categories for “Courage” (twenty-two hymns), “Justice” (twenty hymns), “Liberation” (seventeen hymns), “Peace” (twenty-five hymns), “Service” (twenty-nine hymns) and “Social Concern” (four hymns).³⁸

Still, it is instructive to realize how comparatively few hymns actually focus on Jesus’ life and ministry of healing and teaching, and how few connect faith to a life of resisting oppression and struggling for social justice. Also, very few hymns use female or non-male

34. Male interviewee.

35. Female interviewee.

36. *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), v.

37. *Sing the Story* (Scottsdale, Pa: Faith & Life Resources, 2007), iv.

38. *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 870-874. In the index, the section on “Peace” is distinguished from “Peace, inner.”

images of God, and some are difficult to sing because of the male images and the mental gymnastics necessary to include oneself in the song.

We would do well therefore to pay close attention to the role of congregational music in our lives, especially in the words we sing. We could also do more intentional training in various styles of music and learn how to use our bodies more easily in songs that call for rhythm and dance. Indeed, this could be an excellent avenue for learning to appreciate and use our bodies more fully in individual and corporate worship.

Female role models and images of the Divine

Another helpful step on this journey is to encounter positive and powerful female role models in church. As one woman explained to Crumpton, “As I got older, I think that the art that really saved me, that really helped me progress was really the art of watching women preach.”³⁹ In addition to providing positive role models, women pastors demonstrate God’s affirmation of women and “the Divine’s will to show Herself from distinctly female bodies.”⁴⁰

There is also much work to be done in recovering and reclaiming stories of women in the Bible and the Christian tradition who have embodied a robust faith. For example, we might stress the positive ways that so many women over the generations interacted with God and participated in God’s work in the world: women like Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam, Huldah, Jesus’ mother Mary, Martha and Mary, the Samaritan woman, Priscilla, Phoebe and Lydia, to name a few.

We can also retrieve all the diverse images of God used in the Bible and by Christian mystics throughout the centuries, to give a more complete and inclusive understanding of God. These include images of God as a mother giving birth, a comforting mother, a nursing mother, a

39. Crumpton, 97.

40. Ibid.

woman in labor, a midwife, a mother hen, and a wise homeowner urging people to learn Wisdom at her table.⁴¹ Mystics such as Julian of Norwich also used the image of Jesus as a mother who gives birth to and nourishes us.⁴²

Indeed, perhaps one of the most important pastoral tasks of the church is to reimagine our understanding of God and God's power. We need to turn away from an image of god whose power is divorced from love, who can do whatever it wants regardless of how it affects others. Rather, we need to cultivate an image of God who is intimately connected to the world, influencing and enlivening creation, but also capable of being influenced, capable of engaging in authentic relationship. We need an image of God who models what it is to love and care for ourselves and others, a God who nurtures and calls us to be our best selves, a God who is truly worthy of our love and worship. We need an image of God as mother, as much as God is father; a God who is energizing spirit as much as stalwart defender; a mother bear as much as faithful shepherd.

Healing touch

Another practice we may want to recover is that of anointing and healing touch. While little attention has focused on this in western theology, scholars such as Bruce Chilton argue that Jesus and his followers anointed people as part of their healing and exorcism practices.⁴³ Women especially were skilled in using olive oil to cleanse the skin and care for wounds. In the Jesus' movement, anointing took on additional meaning as a way of "conveying Spirit and removing

41. See Isaiah 42:14, John 3:3-5, Job 38:29, Deuteronomy 32:18; Psalm 131:1-2, Isaiah 66:13, Hosea 11:3-4; Isaiah 49:15; Isaiah 42:14; Psalm 22:9-10; Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34; and Proverbs 8:1-9:7.

42. Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life, Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 22-23.

43. Bruce Chilton, *Mary Magdalene, A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 49 and 54-55.

impurity.”⁴⁴ Obviously, we understand health and healing quite differently today, but we could still give more attention to rituals of anointing with oil and healing touch. These could emphasize the unity between our spiritual and physical selves, and the need for a spirituality which can touch our bodies as well as our minds.

Strategies of resistance and repentance

As noted in chapter five, baptism is a sign and pledge of our entry into a counter-cultural movement that embraces God’s will for life on earth, in contrast to the ways of violence and domination. For this to be meaningful, the church will need to provide significant preparation prior to baptism, as well as ongoing education and training. Some of the positive aspects of such training will be highlighted in the next section. But first it is important to mention the elements of resistance and repentance which are necessary for turning away from, and standing against, imperial systems and structures. These too must be integral practices of a shalom justice household.

Anti-oppression work

One of the most basic tasks is to work against oppression. In a world which assumes domination and control as the norm, it is essential to resist those narratives, and demonstrate clearly that there is another way. We must learn to see, and expose the ways in which oppression is taken for granted, and masked with good intentions and claims to righteousness.⁴⁵

We must also learn to analyze the way oppression works, and understand its history. This means examining the systems and institutions of our society, and how they determine who benefits and who is harmed. Of course, this is often complex and various types of oppression

44. Ibid., 69.

45. James Nelson Poling, *Rethinking Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 34.

overlap and intersect.⁴⁶ We will therefore need to carefully sort through the various types of privilege and power we have been given or denied. We will need to discern when to ask questions, and when to listen; when to challenge, and when to learn.

Always, this requires prioritizing solidarity with those who suffer discrimination, abuse and violence. It means making sure they always have a seat at the table and their voices are heard. It means paying close attention to them, and following their lead in making decisions. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, it is helpful to ask these questions⁴⁷:

- Who is missing from this discussion?⁴⁸
- Who is most vulnerable in this situation, and how would they hear this message?
- Does this path lead to life and wholeness? This does not mean avoiding all risk, but asking ourselves if following this path is life-giving, or whether it enables and supports the forces of domination and death.
- Who am I accountable to and how? This question is especially important when one is in any position of privilege or authority.

In addition, we will need to act together to interrupt oppressive policies and assumptions, and implement practices that are more just and equitable. This might include affirmative action policies, safe church policies and procedures, collaborative decision making practices, as well as many others.

46. See the discussion in the previous chapter on intersectionality, a term first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, referring to the complicated way in which different types of discrimination overlap, combine, and accumulate for marginalized groups of people. From “Word We’re Watching: Intersectionality,” Merriam-Webster, accessed September 22, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/intersectionality-meaning>.

47. Linda Gehman Peachey and Elsie Goerzen, “Preparing Congregations for Collaborative Work: The Role of the Mennonite Central Committee in Strengthening Families,” in *Strengthening Families and Ending Abuse*, ed. Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fischer-Townsend and Victoria Fahlberg, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 217-218.

48. Krall explains this question well, as she asked her students to “be aware of the missing voice, the missing individual.” Additionally, “Whose presence is urgently needed for the uncovering of truth... Whose absence means that factual truth has been obscured, distorted or otherwise compromised?” *Living on the Edge of the Edge: Letters to a Younger Colleague*, (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2017), 17.

No doubt, the church will also need to learn from secular groups, who have valuable experience and expertise in addressing oppressions such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Here again, the sign to look for is not an ideological or theological statement. Rather, it is important to observe how attentive the group is to victims and survivors, and who is designing and leading their programs. Always, the primary focus must be on those most clearly victimized by a given oppression.

Restorative justice

We can also learn restorative justice practices to address situations where people have experienced harm. Rather than focusing on rules that have been broken, restorative justice attends first to the people who have been hurt and what they need. It gives them space in which to share their experience, and state what the offender can do to repair the harm. Restorative justice also gives space for the offending one to share, repent, and explain how they will make things as right as possible. Ideally, it can create space for the relationship to be mended and restored.⁴⁹

While this can sound unrealistic, such processes can be life changing for those involved. For example, in their remarkable book, *South of Forgiveness: A True Story of Rape and Responsibility*, Thordis Elva and Tom Stranger share how they addressed the fact that he had raped her when she was sixteen, and how this had affected their lives.⁵⁰ It is not an easy journey, but through honesty, her willingness to engage with him, and his willingness to accept

49. For more information, see Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses, Restorative Justice for our Times* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015) or Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (New York: Good Books, 2014.) These processes can also be used in schools and institutions as the basis for restorative discipline as explained by Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy Mullet in *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools: Teaching Responsibility; Creating Caring Climates* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005.)

50. Thordis Elva and Tom Stranger, *South of Forgiveness: A True Story of Rape and Responsibility* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017).

accountability without defensiveness, they are able to find some hope and healing. With these ingredients, there can be hope and transformation, and even true forgiveness, in situations where great violence was done.

Forgiveness

It is important to stress, however, that forgiveness is one of the most contentious and difficult questions survivors face. Often there is tremendous pressure placed on a victim to quickly forgive the one who harmed them. Often they are told that their own salvation is dependent on their willingness to forgive, for this is what Jesus taught. Yet, as we saw in Chapter Four, a better translation of Jesus' model prayer would be that we are asking God to release us from our debts, just as we have released our debtors.⁵¹ In a context where people thought God could forgive them only if they made expensive sacrifices in the temple, it was liberating to think God could release them from these burdens, just as they were able to do this for one another. It was freeing not to need to make the costly, time-consuming, and debt-inducing trip to the temple.

In our context, however, demands for forgiveness and recompilation are too often used as a way to maintain the status quo. Too often, the pressure to resolve things quickly circumvents the difficult process of exposing the extent of the harm done, and what needs to change in order to make the relationship just and safe. It eases the discomfort and pain felt by people around the victim, and allows life to go on as before. Yet, such quick forgiveness and reconciliation, without true repentance and accountability on the part of the perpetrator, is not helpful for anyone, and short-circuits the healing process. It does not address the reality of what was done, and what is needed to make things right.

51. Ibid.

Nevertheless, forgiveness is an important step for survivors. It can be a way to let go of the terrible burden caused by the abuse and violation. Often such a step is needed in order to move on and not allow the experience to continue to dominate one's life.⁵²

Sometimes, as described above, it is even possible to achieve reconciliation or an ongoing relationship with the perpetrator. Yet again, we must emphasize that such efforts should always be guided by the survivor. Especially in situations where there has been severe violence, victims should be the ones to initiate contact with the perpetrator, and careful attention must be given to their safety. Otherwise, survivors can be re-victimized and manipulated in ways that may give solace to the perpetrator, but fail to truly address the harm that was done, and bring healing to the survivor.

Often it is not possible to restore the relationship, especially if the situation continues to be unsafe, and the perpetrator refuses to take responsibility for his or her actions. Unless the offender is willing to change, it is not possible to rebuild trust, and a relationship of mutual respect. In these situations, it is helpful to mourn the relationship, and what might have been.⁵³

Circles of support and accountability

For offenders who are willing to be held accountable, one specific strategy that has emerged out of restorative justice approaches are circles of support and accountability, or CoSA. This model began in 1994 in Hamilton, Ontario, when a man who had served multiple sentences

52. For more information, see Marie Fortune and Joretta Marshall, ed. *Forgiveness And Abuse: Jewish And Christian Reflections* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2002); Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Seventy Times Seven: Abuse and the Frustratingly Extravagant Call to Forgive," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015):129-152; and Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

53. See *Abuse: Response and Prevention* booklet (Mennonite Central Committee, 2008), 10, accessed February 13, 2018, available to download at <https://mcc.org/media/resources/1134>.

for child sexual abuse was released from prison.⁵⁴ Leaders in the community were eager to find ways to prevent more victims, and created a circle around this man to help him reintegrate into society, and hold him accountable for his behavior. This program is now used in many communities, especially in Canada, to walk with those who have served prison time for child sexual abuse, hold them accountable, and help them avoid re-offending.

Some congregations also use aspects of this model when dealing with convicted sex offenders who would like to attend services. In these situations, it is important that such individuals are honest about their past actions, accept responsibility, and seek to do all they can to prevent re-offending or causing any further harm. This often includes signing a contract which clearly outlines what they are permitted to do in the church building, and who will accompany them. It also means complying with all restrictions and requirements placed upon them by the legal system, and sharing this information with church leaders. Finally, as part of their journey of repentance and search for new life, it means being sensitive to the needs of others, and not insisting on participating in activities which would cause anxiety or distress to survivors or parents of young children.⁵⁵

Nonviolent resistance to violence and domination

Finally, part of learning to follow Jesus should include learning nonviolent resistance strategies. Interestingly, we are starting to train our children about how to say no, and what to do

54. For more information, see “CoSA Canada,” at <http://cosacanada.com>. For links to programs in the United States, see “Durham CoSA,” at <http://www.durhamcosa.org/circles-around-the-world.html>, accessed October 3, 2017.

55. Additional guidelines can be found at *Dove’s Nest: Faith Communities Keeping Children & Youth Safe* (<http://dovesnest.net/>), and their document, “Protection and Inclusion: Guide for Churches on Safely Including Persons Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses,” accessed October 3, 2017, http://dovesnest.net/sites/default/files/Protection%20and%20Inclusion%202016-10-27_FINAL_0.pdf.

when they feel uncomfortable or threatened by people in their community. But we also need to know how to use these tools as adults.

We should know the history of nonviolent movements in our country and around the world. We should understand and practice methods of advocacy such as letter writing and speaking to policy makers. We should learn how to organize in our communities, and be able to discern when public witness is needed. We should know how to intervene as a bystander when others are harassed or attacked. We should know what to do when we ourselves are threatened or attacked with violence. We should practice how to respond nonviolently but in ways that protect ourselves and others as much as possible.

At times, there will be costly decisions to make, as resistance may involve taking risks in order to stand for peace and justice. We may feel called to resist paying taxes used for war. Or we may risk arrest in order to protest war, racist demonstrations, or the destruction of our environment. We may end up suffering injury, imprisonment, or even death. In these ways, we might take up the cross which Jesus bore as a result of his resistance to evil and his commitment to God's loving will for all of us.

Strengthening the power of love

But of course resistance is not the end goal. Rather, we want to celebrate the power of love, as expressed so clearly in Jesus' life and ministry. As explored earlier, this power of love and solidarity can be observed most tangibly and deeply in the service of communion. This central ritual of Christian faith not only urges us to remember Jesus' death, but also the life-giving love, food, and fellowship which his followers shared together. In many ways, this meal represents the many meals Jesus shared with those who walked with him, listened to his teaching, and found healing and hope in this liberation movement. It also symbolizes the banquet

of rich food and wine which God intends for all people and prefigures the beloved community which God's justice wants to make real in the world.⁵⁶

Celebrated in this way, communion can help build community, encouraging us to make real in our lives the life we share in God and with each other around the communion table. It can help us extend congregational fellowship meals into times when we share food and companionship with our neighbors. Or it can inspire us to participate, like the household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, in movements working for justice and peace in our communities and world. Communion can thus encourage and strengthen practices needed to tap into the power of God's love, and join in God's redeeming activity in the world.

Active peacemaking

One vital step in building community is to practice active ways of building peace and understanding. This includes embracing our differences, and learning how to discuss contentious topics in ways that encourage participation by everyone, and promote deeper engagement and empathy. One example is the circle process which provides for everyone to speak while the others in the group listen carefully and respectfully.⁵⁷

Of course there are times of conflict, when disagreements cannot be resolved easily. Rather than avoiding this, we need to learn ways of approaching difficult issues honestly, and in ways which can transform disputes, and create deeper understanding and better solutions. Again, many resources are available, and many persons have been trained to facilitate in conflictive situations. Mennonite Church USA created a statement of guidelines entitled "Agreeing and

56. See Isaiah 25:6-8. Also Psalms 36:8, 63:5, Proverbs 9:1-5.

57. See Christina Baldwin, *Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998) and Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

Disagreeing in Love” which outlines attitudes and actions that can support productive approaches to conflict.⁵⁸ Two introductory books include: *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* by John Paul Lederach, and *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding* by Lisa Schirch.⁵⁹

Additionally, peacemaking includes the way we make decisions in our families, congregations, communities, and denominations. The Society of Friends has led the way in thinking about this, and over the years has learned much about making group decisions that reflect their theology. Listening to the wisdom of all their members, and the leading of the Spirit, they seek a “sense of the meeting” that all can live with.⁶⁰ Other groups have worked on developing large group processes which can also promote more inclusive, thoughtful decisions. For example, *Seeds for Change* and *Consensus Decision-Making* both encourage more effective organizing and decision-making with training and online resources.⁶¹ This does not necessarily mean that everyone must agree to a decision, but that all voices are heard and considered as the decision is made.

In all cases, it is important to be sensitive to power dynamics and ensure that certain voices do not dominate or cut off conversation. Often, outside trained facilitators can provide

58. “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love,” Mennonite Church USA, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/agreeing-and-disagreeing-in-love/>.

59. Lederach (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003) and Schirch (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004).

60. See for example an explanation provided by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting about their decision-making process, at “Discernment, Clearness and Decision-making,” accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/faith-reflected-practice-daily-life/discernment-clearness-and-decision-making/>.

61. See for example their resources on “Consensus Decision Making,” Seeds for Change, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consensus>. Also see “Consensus Decision-Making, A Virtual Learning Center for People Interested in Consensus,” *Consensus Decision-Making*, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://www.consensusdecisionmaking.org/>.

much helpful guidance and assistance to ensure that all efforts are as fair and constructive as possible.

Beauty and imagination

Beauty and imagination are additional elements which help build God's beloved community. They open us up to God's love and generosity, fill us with gratitude, and prompt us to mend and repair that which is broken. In a recent biography about Dorothy Day, for example, Day's granddaughter Kate Hennessy wrote that one of her grandmother's favorite quotes was from Dostoyevsky: "the world will be saved by beauty."⁶² Day herself had been led to faith through the beauty of nature, and the birth of her daughter.⁶³

Women in my congregation also mentioned they often feel close to God in the midst of nature, among trees, rocks, the moon, the ocean. There is the feeling of "being part of something infinite, big, and the mystery that comes through creation."⁶⁴

These women also mentioned the importance of art. As one woman remarked, "Art helps to open up one's mind; we need to expose ourselves to it every couple months."⁶⁵ It provides a way of "reorienting, or opening us up to a different way of seeing the world, or a reality we don't often see."⁶⁶

62. Kate Hennessy, *Dorothy Day, The World Will Be Saved by Beauty: An Intimate Portrait of My Grandmother* (New York: Scribner, 2017), ix.

63. James Allaire and Rosemary Broughton, "An Introduction to the Life and Spirituality of Dorothy Day," The Catholic Worker Movement, accessed October 8, 2017, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/life-and-spirituality.html>.

64. Focus group participants.

65. Focus group participant.

66. Ibid.

All of this is crucial for providing a vision for life which can be more whole, more joyous, more true and good. We are not bound to what the powers have decreed. We can hope and work for a different world: “another world is possible.”⁶⁷

Spiritual practices

Finally, we need to cultivate a relationship with God built on trust and love. This often involves healing our image of God. Too often, this image is of someone transcendent and authoritarian, demanding and self-righteous, who is always watching and judging everything we do. Unfortunately, as the Linns explain in their book, *Good Goats*, this image is quite dangerous for we end up becoming “like the God we adore.”⁶⁸ So if we imagine God as a supreme ruler who is quick to punish those unable to keep the rules, that gives us permission to do the same.

Yet, this is not what Jesus taught us about God. Indeed, the Linns argue that the core of Jesus’ mission was to change “our image of God from child abuser to child lover.”⁶⁹ Jesus invites us to trust God’s love and share it, rather than use God’s name to reinforce our own power and privilege, and hoard the earth’s abundance for ourselves. Or as Cynthia Borgeault puts it, “Jesus’s teachings resonate with an extraordinary trust in the divine abundance and generosity, and Christians are asked to emulate that trust.”⁷⁰

Borgeault goes on to explain that there was a wisdom tradition in the Jesus movement which included transformative spiritual practices of prayer and worship. These practices helped recognize God’s presence in the world and in one’s life. They assisted in purifying one’s heart in

67. This is a translation of “Otro mundo es posible,” one of the phrases on a beautiful poster I bought in southern Mexico, where social justice groups have been working over many years for a more just society.

68. Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Good Goats: Healing our Image of God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 7.

69. Ibid., 14.

70. Cynthia Borgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene, Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 52.

order to live in line with one's true self, which thrives only when it stays connected to God.⁷¹

While this concept of a true nature or eternal image can sound dualistic and platonic, Borgeault insists that this tradition instead affirms God's presence in creation. As she says, it is a "profoundly incarnational, warm-hearted, and hopeful path, where the realms support and interpenetrate each other and divine fullness is accessed simply by keeping the heart in natural alignment with its invisible prototype."⁷²

To maintain this alignment, this singleness of heart, requires letting go of false expectations and requirements, and sustaining a relationship with the divine which is life-giving and whole. For Borgeault, this happens through centering prayer, and its training in kenosis. But, she emphasizes, this relinquishment, this letting go, is not a sacrifice, but rather a pouring of oneself into the larger life of the world and of God. The result is perichoresis, the ongoing spilling of love that happens between the persons of the Trinity, as each empties itself into the other, passing on the love and allowing it to circulate fully among them.⁷³ Similarly, emptying oneself through prayer connects us to "the great watermill of love, through which God shows us his (sic) innermost nature and bestows this vital energy upon the world in a cascade of divine creativity."⁷⁴

Amazingly, this type of love is often expressed by women like Martha and Mary. Through hospitality, through careful listening, through giving birth, and compelling, courageous action, women share of themselves so that life can continue in a miraculous and wonderful way. It is life, not apart from the world, but present in the world truly and lovingly. It is life, not apart

71. Ibid., 40-41.

72. Ibid., 52.

73. Cynthia Borgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 153.

74. Ibid.

from others, but in relationships that both give and receive. These models are truly worth celebrating.

Just as the church has traditionally honored the gifts and ministries of Peter and Paul, we need to allow the wisdom of women like Martha and Mary to inform our understanding of God and God's relationship to us. Paying close attention to how they found hope and life through Jesus and actively participated in his work, can lead us to a fuller experience of the good news of salvation that is available to all.

Afterword

Anabaptists have long recognized that no single individual can discern and articulate God's will alone. It is essential to do this work in community. That is why I used the word "toward" in my subtitle. I intend this reconstructive project to contribute toward further communal discussion, research, and reflection on these important teachings. Hopefully, this is another step toward making sure that what we teach and preach about sin and salvation can be more life-giving, whole, and just.

In that spirit, I recognize there are many themes which require further exploration and elaboration. For example, it would be good to give more attention to the reality of individual sin and guilt, for which we need God's forgiveness. How do we find healing from our brokenness before God and members of our families and communities? How do we repent of these sins and change our ways? What is the relationship between grace and repentance? How do we avoid using these teachings in order to maintain the status quo and our own power?

We also need to understand more clearly how individual sin intersects with systemic sin and the misuse of power and privilege. How do our teachings about sin and salvation apply to the ongoing legacies of slavery, racism, patriarchy, colonialism, economic oppression, and militarism? Another way to state this is to ask what people of privilege need in terms of a doctrine of salvation. What do we need to be saved from and to? How do we receive Jesus' call to repentance as a gracious invitation to transformation? What does it mean to step away from participation in these evil systems? And what does it mean to hold ourselves accountable to those seeking liberation and justice? Indeed, what does it mean to be in solidarity with those who are victims? How do we listen, learn, and live together?

Finally, what spiritual and worship practices do we need to develop further? What teachings and practices can nourish our faith in the power and beauty of God's love? What tools and beliefs do we need in order to practice repentance and resistance in ways that are life-giving and wholesome, rather than full of perfectionism and judgment?

These are some of the many questions still before us. Yet, like the women who met Jesus at the tomb, may we receive the good news that Jesus did not leave us alone. Rather, he still goes before us, beckoning us to follow in amazement, commitment, and joy.

Appendix A

Anabaptist and Mennonite Writings on the Atonement since 1990

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Appendix B

Survey of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Colleges and Seminaries

Linda Gehman Peachey, February 2016

This survey was sent to eleven Mennonite and Brethren in Christ colleges/universities and four seminaries: Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Bethel College, Bluffton University, Canadian Mennonite University, Conrad Grebel University College, Eastern Mennonite University, Eastern Mennonite Seminary (also including their Lancaster campus), Fresno Pacific University and Biblical Seminary, Goshen College, Hesston College, Messiah College, Rosedale Bible College and Tabor College.

I received responses from 16 individuals, representing all but one of these institutions. However, since I was able to find a course outline from that college on their web site, the following report includes information from all of them.

1. The first question was: *“What texts or other sources do you use in classes which teach about the atonement and the cross?” (Feel free to attach a class syllabus, if that is easier.)*

Below are the answers to this question. I tried to separate between college and seminary level but this is a bit arbitrary and may not be completely accurate. I also indicated which sources were mentioned more than once in that list.

2. The second question was *“Which source, if any, best articulates your understanding of an Anabaptist or Mennonite theology of the atonement?” (If this text is mentioned above, you may simply highlight it in some way.)*

The authors listed as most representing an Anabaptist or Mennonite atonement theology included: Mark Baker, Sharon Baker, Darrin Belousek, John Driver, Ted Grimsrud, Mark Gorman, Mary Schertz and J. Denny Weaver (2x). One mentioned that he thought the motif of “...‘moral example’ makes the most sense when talking about an Anabaptist theology of the atonement.” About half the group however felt quite uncomfortable with trying to define a particular Anabaptist theology and prefer to use a range of images and views for understanding the atonement.

| <u>At the college level</u> | <u>At the seminary level</u> |
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One observation is that most of these sources are written by men, although the list does include sixteen women, including those who wrote articles in journals or edited volumes. There are very few people of color represented. The authors mentioned most often were: J. Denny Weaver (7 x), Mark Baker (5x), Joel Green (4x), Rebecca Parker (5x), Rita Nakashima Brock (4x) and John Driver (3x). Darrin Belousek, Hans Boersma, James Cone, Alistair McGrath, Scot McKnight and Leanne Van Dyk were each mentioned twice.

Appendix C

Focus group questions

East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church,
Lancaster, PA

- ❖ How do you understand salvation, or what it means to be saved? How does this affect your life in ongoing ways?
- ❖ How do you understand who Jesus is and what he did?
- ❖ What does Jesus' life and ministry mean to you? What about his death? And resurrection?
- ❖ When do you experience the greatest desolation and when the greatest consolation in relation to God?
- ❖ Which Biblical character, if any, has been important to you? Is there one which especially resonates with you?
- ❖ What resources have been especially formative for you in your faith journey?
- ❖ What do you value most about our Anabaptist heritage? What, if anything, do you find problematic or troublesome?

Linda Gehman Peachey
2017

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