



**The  
Liberating  
Crucifixion  
of  
Neil  
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Paul**

A  
*Subjective  
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# The Liberating Crucifixion of Neil Elliott's Paul: A Subjective or Objective Genitive?

Few books have had a more profound impact on my understanding of the significance that Jesus' first followers ascribed to his death and the original context in which he was proclaimed as crucified and risen Lord than two by Neil Elliott. The first of these is *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*, originally published in 1994 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; reprint Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). The second is *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, published in 2008 (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

Two things in particular impressed me as I recently reread through Neil's books, focusing primarily on the understanding of Jesus' death that they reflect. The first is the amount of research that Neil put into his historical reconstruction of the Roman imperial world in which Paul proclaimed his gospel of a crucified Savior. While of course there is now a great deal that other New Testament scholars have written on this subject, a second characteristic also caught my attention: Neil's willingness to draw numerous comparisons between the political and social reality of Paul's day and that of our own time, including especially events and figures from modern history and recent decades that have shaped and transformed our world. From my perspective, this practice is still not as common in New Testament scholarship as it should be, and I believe that *Liberating Paul* not only broke new ground in this regard but also provides an excellent prototype for others to follow, as Neil himself

does in *The Arrogance of Nations*. In both of these works, Neil draws extensively on the writings of Latin American and feminist liberation theologians, whose understanding of the cross opened my own eyes during the 1980's, as it did those of many others in the previous and following decades.

At the heart of Neil's analysis of Paul's understanding of the cross in *Liberating Paul* (hereafter *LP*) is the argument that, for Paul as for the rest of the New Testament, Jesus' crucifixion was an "unequivocally political event" (*LP* 93). Paul viewed the cross "as an instrument of political terror" and did not mute or suppress its "politically engineered horror" in order to "mystify" it (*LP* 93). The practice of crucifixion was a form of "extreme brutality" imposed by Rome upon any who called into question the legitimacy of its imperial rule in order to maintain tight "social control" (*LP* 96). Pointing to numerous parallels with oppressive political regimes in recent history, Neil stresses that the manifold forms of "systemic violence" through which Rome secured and maintained what it called "peace" were intended to have a "cumulative psychic effect... upon subject peoples":

The "peace" that Rome secured through terror was maintained through terror: through slavery, fed by conquest and scrupulously maintained through constant intimidation, abuse, and violence; through the ritualized terror of gladiatorial games, where the human refuse of empire—captives of war, condemned criminals, slaves bought for the arena—were killed in

stylized rehearsals of conquest, their fate decided by the whim of the empire's representatives; through the pomp of military processions, which often culminated in the execution of vanquished captives; and on the ideological plane, through imperial cult and ceremonial, the rhetoric of the courts (where the torture of slaves was a routine procedure for gathering evidence), and an educational system that rehearsed the "naturalness" of Rome's global hegemony. It was within this civilization that crucifixion played its indispensable role (LP 98).

For Neil, Paul's theology of the cross is built upon an awareness of these realities and led him to an interpretation of Jesus' death that "has an irreducibly political dimension" (LP 107). After citing passages from his epistles in which Paul stresses that Jesus did not merely die but was *crucified*, Neil continues: "That very emphasis on the manner of Jesus' death, shameful and horrific, yes, but also unavoidably political in its connotations, stands in sharp tension with the view that Paul sought to obscure or mystify Jesus' death. The cross was for Paul the signature in history of the forces that killed Jesus, a signature as distinctive in the eyes of his hearers as the handprint in white paint over the victims of a Salvadoran death squad in our own time" (LP 110).

From my perspective, there can be little doubt that Neil has captured well here and elsewhere in *LP* the thoroughly political dimension of Paul's understanding of Jesus' death. Several tendencies in Neil's thought, however, raise problems for his argument.

The first of these is the artificial and unwarranted distinction between the "political" and the "religious" in ancient

thought. Oddly, this is a distinction that Neil himself questions in *The Arrogance of Nations* (hereafter *AN*; see 4). Nevertheless, in his earlier work, Neil cites with approval the claim of Jon Sobrino that "Jesus was actually executed as a *political rebel*, not as a blasphemer" (LP 100). Similarly, he affirms that "the passion narratives provide a sophisticated coverup for the political nature of Jesus' death" (LP 100). "[T]he Gospels have obscured the political nature of the conflict that led to Jesus' death, by shifting responsibility for that death from the Romans (who in fact crucified Jesus) onto the shoulders of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, or the Jewish population of Jerusalem, or at last, simply 'the Jews'" (LP 101). Besides agreeing with Paula Fredriksen that "holding the Jews responsible for Jesus' death is 'scarcely credible as history'" (LP 101-2), Neil presupposes here that any Jews who played a role in having Jesus crucified—especially any of the Jewish authorities, as the Gospels maintain—did so for *non-political* reasons, which by default must evidently have instead been *religious*. After pointing out that "the same theologians who offer 'political' readings of Jesus' crucifixion also criticize the early 'sacrificial' interpretation of Jesus' death as a failure of nerve that would have fateful consequences for the subsequent tradition," Neil follows Sobrino in claiming "that Jesus' death has been 'toned down and stripped of its scandalous aspect' already in the Gospels..." (LP 104). From my perspective, the distinction between the "political" and the "sacrificial" or "religious" interpretations of Jesus' death that Neil embraces here proves to be one of the most problematic aspects of his work.

Neil himself would seem to offer a corrective to this distinction in his discussion of the religious and sacrificial dimension of Roman imperial theology in Chapter 4 of *AN*. After noting that the “imperial cult and patronage went hand-in-hand,” he adds: “The spread of civic cult to the Roman gods and the genius of the Caesars institutionalized a new religion, ‘the religion of the Empire taken very broadly,’ across disparate cultures in a new hybrid culture of the Roman Empire” (*AN* 122). Imperial imagery presented the emperor’s power as “just and holy” (*AN* 122). As “the embodiment of unparalleled justice, mercy, and reverence for the gods,” for example, Augustus claimed the title of “*pontifex maximus*” and repeatedly sought to be depicted at sacrifice or prayer, performing his religious duties (*AN* 122-23). As Neil rightly stresses, “the point of the ubiquitous imagery of Augustus as sacrificer was not the proliferation of sacrifice as such; it was the identity of the *one offering sacrifice*, the emperor.... [T]he point is to identify the person of the emperor as the supreme officiant in sacrifice” (*AN* 124). The “particularly potent representation of piety” associated with the imperial cult and the emperor’s rule in that cult “sanctifies the violence necessary to order the world, the warfare that achieves peace” (*AN* 128).

These observations make it clear that in Roman imperial theology, therefore, the distinction between the political and the religious or sacrificial is an artificial and misleading one imposed by modern Western scholars on an ancient worldview that is in many ways foreign to our own. The Roman emperor was just as much of a *religious* figure as he was a *political* one, and *his act of offering sacrifice was thoroughly political*. In *LP*, Neil also

rightly speaks consistently of Roman imperial *theology* rather than simply using the term *ideology*: Rome justified its dominance not merely by appealing to a system of ideas or principles that it claimed to be true, but by means of a system of *theological beliefs* that it perpetrated. The gods themselves had established Rome and the emperor in power and had given them authority to rule over the world.

Yet just as we need to see the religious dimension of Roman politics, so also must we underscore the political dimension of what has commonly been called Jewish “religion.” The religious leaders who stood at the center of the worship of Israel’s God at the Jerusalem temple were anything but apolitical. They were defenders of the same oppressive and violent system that prevailed elsewhere in the empire of Paul’s day. The Jewish high priesthood kept itself in power through its complicity with Roman rule, which was said to be sanctioned by the God of Israel whom the high-priestly aristocracy claimed to represent. The daily sacrifice that the high priests presented on behalf of the Roman emperor (financed by the emperor himself) was the clearest and most visible expression of this complicity.

In this regard, Jewish scholar Eyal Regev writes:

From a political perspective, the Jerusalem Temple was a Roman temple. The high priest was nominated by the Roman authorities (in 6-41 CE); the high priestly vestments of the Day of Atonement ritual were held by the Roman governor; a daily sacrifice was dedicated for the sake of the Emperor (instead of the conventional pagan imperial cult); and [the] Roman army was stationed in the Antonia watching the

temple (Acts 21:30-37). Indeed, the Romans regarded the temple as the symbolic center for their dominion in Judea, quite like their use of the imperial cult in other provinces, but even more so due to the central role of the temple in ancient Judaism (and in the diaspora). Proclamations about its coming destruction or an act against its status quo were taken as attempting to disturb Roman patronage.<sup>1</sup>

The charge of blasphemy leveled against Jesus in the Gospels must therefore be understood as *political* in nature and not merely *religious*. For Jesus to claim to be God's unique representative and spokesperson would be seen as a challenge not only to the authority of the Jerusalem hierarchy but to that of Rome as well. His action in the temple would be interpreted as a prophetic protest against an oppressive and corrupt system that was due just as much to Roman imperialism as it was to the collaboration of the Jewish leadership with Roman rule. As Regev notes, "One need not take into account Jesus' teachings, his call to repentance, and his eschatological pronouncements in order to explain why he was considered a potential threat to *Caiaphas and Pilate*."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eyal Regev, "The Trial of Jesus and the Temple: Sadducean and Roman Perspectives," in *Soundings in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and Methods in Jewish and Christian Scholarship*, ed. Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 105. On this point and the relation between the Jewish "religious" establishment and Roman imperial theology, see also Chapter 5 of my two-volume work *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought* (Mexico City: Comunidad Teológica de México, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Regev, "Trial of Jesus," 106 (emphasis added).

For the same reasons, to claim that the Gospels downplay the political aspects of the process against Jesus in their passion accounts is to misunderstand them entirely. Everything that the Gospels present Jesus saying and doing in his last days, from the time he rides into Jerusalem up until his last moments on the cross, as well as the things that are said and done *to* him, must be viewed as unequivocally political and not merely religious in nature. How else are we to understand things such as his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, his parable of the wicked tenants, his response regarding paying tribute to Caesar, his refusal to participate in the sham of a "trial," his claim that Caiaphas and others would see him "seated at the right hand of Power," his condemnation as Messiah and King of the Jews, his mocking in a purple robe with a reed as a scepter, the crown of thorns placed on his head, and above all his crucifixion on a Roman cross? How could the political message of the Gospel passion accounts be any more obvious or explicit? Even things such as the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus' affirmation of the resurrection of the dead (according to which it is God, not Rome, who has the power of life and death), his description of the destruction of Herod's temple and the tribulation preceding the coming of the Son of Man in glory, and his being crucified among "rebels" (*lēstai*) are thoroughly political.

This brings us to a second tendency that raises problems for Neil's consideration of the significance of the cross for Paul's thought. As just noted, reflecting a general trend in contemporary New Testament scholarship, he essentially denies any Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death and the subsequent persecution of his followers. He points once more

to the “scapegoating’ of the Jews in the Gospel passion narratives, increasingly acknowledged by biblical scholars and lamented by Christian theologians in the wake of the Holocaust...” (LP 102; cf. 104). Apparently, in light of the Holocaust, any interpretation of the New Testament that might be seen as contributing to anti-Semitic or supersessionist attitudes on the part of Christians must be rejected out of hand. The allusion to the Jews having “killed the Lord Jesus” in 1 Thess. 2:15-16 must therefore be dismissed as a later “interpolation made by a Christian scribe” (LP 110; cf. 25, 27). Neither Jesus nor Paul had any issues with “Judaism.” By definition, Paul’s theology cannot be seen as critical in any way of Jewish (or “Judean”) people or their law, which Paul neither questioned nor blamed for Jesus’ death (LP 144-45). Rather, what Paul protests is the scapegoating of Jews by gentile believers in Christ. Thus, for example, Neil writes: “Paul’s ringing affirmation of Israel’s future is an inclusive vision that shatters the incipient scapegoating theology and practice of the gentile church. False ‘boasting’ on the part of gentile Christianity (Romans 11), and the abuse of Jewish sensibilities at the common table, which constitutes the ‘scapegoating’ of the Jews (Rom. 14:1–15:14), must be overcome so that Gentiles can fulfill their function in God’s purpose, which is nothing less than the salvation of Israel” (LP 175).

This tendency is reflected even more strongly in *AN*. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Ben Witherington III, William S. Campbell, and N. T. Wright, Neil argues that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in response to gentile misunderstandings about Jews and Jewish Christians, a “nascent anti-Judaism among the Roman Gentile Christians,

and local anti-Jewish sentiments” (*AN* 20). After defining Romans as a “hortatory or paraenetic letter,” Neil observes that “Paul never addresses himself to actual Judeans in the course of the letter” (*AN* 19-20). It is not clear whether Neil regards the reason for this to be that Paul considered that the only ones needing exhortation or paraenesis were the sinful gentiles (in contrast to the “innocent” Jews in Rome?) or because Paul would not have been so presumptuous as to claim any moral authority over his fellow Jews as his “equals,” though of course he might have had other reasons for addressing only gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

Further on in *AN*, Neil insists that in Rom. 3:1-9, Paul is not indicting any Judeans but teaching his non-Judean audience “an important lesson about Judeans,” namely, that their “subjugated, present circumstances in Rome had little to do with genuine mercy or the justice of God” (*AN* 106). Whatever “error” the Judeans (or Jews) had committed “had nothing to do with a flaw inherent to their culture or religion. To the question, ‘What is wrong with Judaism?’ Romans provides no answer.” The “error” of the Judeans was to believe that Roman law was trustworthy and a “law of justice” (*AN* 140-41). Elsewhere, Neil writes: “The fault of Israel, if one may call it that, is one of zealous impatience. Not knowing God’s timetable, Israel has tried prematurely to bring about the conditions of the messianic age; they have ‘pursued their own justice’” (*AN* 117). Evidently, however, we must be careful to

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<sup>3</sup> For my own views on the audience and purpose of Romans, see my online article “‘To Gentiles for Jewish Ears’: Readdressing Paul’s Audience and Purpose in Romans,” on my site <https://94t.mx>.

distinguish between an “error” or a “fault” – “if one may call it that” – and a “sin,” a term which apparently should be used only to characterize the activity of “gentiles” and not that of Judeans.

Curiously and perhaps unwittingly, however, Neil provides all the material that one needs to challenge the notion that Paul saw nothing wrong with the Judaism(s) of his day or criticized the Jewish communities he encountered for their rejection of Christ and the cross when he cites with approval the work of Paula Fredriksen in order to defend the claim that the Jews of Paul’s day would not have excluded non-Jewish believers from their synagogues, and much less would have persecuted them (*LP* 144-48). Supposedly, prior to his Damascus experience, Paul had persecuted the “messianic movement” that was beginning to take root in certain circles of the Jewish diaspora population (such as that in Damascus) “because their preaching posed a threat to the precarious position of the Jewish community within a gentile population” (*LP* 148). What had concerned Paul was “one of the most urgent concerns of Jews living under Roman rule, namely, survival” (*LP* 148).

Yet precisely because the “messianic movement” centered on belief in the crucified Jesus represented a threat to the Jewish community, it was rejected by many Jews. Citing Fredriksen, whose reconstruction of this reality he considers “compelling,” Neil writes:

[T]he enthusiastic proclamation of a Messiah executed very recently by Rome as a political troublemaker—a *crucified Messiah*—combined with a vision of the approaching End *preached also to*

*Gentiles*—this was dangerous. News of an impending Messianic kingdom, originating from Palestine, might trickle out via the ekklesia’s Gentiles to the larger urban population. It was this (by far) larger, unaffiliated group that posed a real and serious threat. Armed with such a report, they might readily seek to alienate the local Roman colonial government, upon which Jewish urban populations often depended for support and protection against hostile Gentile neighbors. The open dissemination of a Messianic message, in other words, put the entire Jewish community at risk (*LP* 148).<sup>4</sup>

If this was the case—and like Neil, I find this reconstruction compelling—then when Paul began to proclaim his gospel regarding a crucified and risen Messiah and it was rejected by many Jews, he *must* have been highly critical of at least some of the members of the Jewish communities with whom he came into contact. Their reason for rejecting Paul’s gospel would have been that it was politically dangerous for them and put them at risk. Their concern was for their *political and social survival*, and this was more important for them than any concern regarding the truth claims that Paul was making regarding Jesus.

Naturally, it is highly unlikely that those Jews who rejected Paul’s proclamation because of the political and social risks and perils involved would have explicitly stated this as the reason for their rejection. One can hardly believe that any would say openly,

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<sup>4</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 42:2 (1991), 556; *From Jesus to Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 154.

“Paul, the messianic claims you are making about this crucified man sound very convincing and are probably true, but we can’t accept them because we might put our social welfare in jeopardy and alienate our gentile neighbors and the government authorities, who might accuse us of being ‘political troublemakers.’” If they had, Paul would hardly have accepted such an argument as valid, as his own willingness to be branded a “troublemaker” and to endure persecution for Christ and his cross makes clear. Instead, those rejecting Paul’s gospel would almost certainly have given other reasons to justify that rejection. Those reasons would undoubtedly have been grounded in their interpretations of the Mosaic law and their understanding of Jewish tradition, customs, identity, and beliefs. The refusal to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah must also have been understood by Paul and others as an explicit or implicit assent to Jesus’ crucifixion as a “troublemaker” who deserved what he got.

And if that was the case, how could Paul *not* have been critical of those interpretations of the law and those understandings of Judaism? His own letters provide evidence that he faced persecution repeatedly at the hands of the Jewish authorities and some Jewish communities (see especially 2 Cor. 11:22-27). This persecution can hardly have been for reasons that were solely “religious” and in no way “political.”

For Paul, then, the question that his gospel forced both Jews and non-Jews to address was whether they would *identify with the crucifiers and the oppressive systems that crucified those who opposed them*, “taking a stand with the crucified” in terms that were “not

purely religious” (LP 198), or whether they would *identify with those crucified by those people and systems*. Of course, the oppressive Roman imperial system was “crucifying” people not only in a literal sense, but in a metaphorical sense as well. Clearly, as Neil argues, there were non-Jews in the communities with whom Paul worked who were accepting the imperial theology according to which Jews in general (including both those who believed in Jesus and those who did not) were deserving of the suffering and humiliations they had endured at the hands of the imperial authorities. However, Paul must have been just as critical of those Jews who *also* identified with the oppressive imperial system by failing to show solidarity with their fellow Jews who endured persecution, as well as the non-Jews who suffered at the hands of that system. Any Jews, therefore, who responded to Paul’s message by aligning themselves with the system that had crucified Jesus solely out of a concern for their “precarious” social position would have been sharply criticized by Paul, since they were adhering to the God of the Empire rather than the God of Israel, who had sent Jesus and raised him from the dead after the Romans had crucified him.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is significant that, according to Robert Jewett, among the synagogues that existed in Rome in Paul’s day were ones named after Augustus, “who was perceived to be a patron,” Agrippa (“either Augustus’s son-in-law or one of the two Jewish kings of this name”), and perhaps even Herod the Great (*Romans: A Commentary; Hermeneia*; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, 57). To name synagogues after these figures can hardly be seen as anything but a desire to manifest openly solidarity, support, and gratitude in relation to the Roman imperial authorities and those Jewish rulers closely



Paul's concern was therefore not simply anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism, just as it was not simply "anti-gentilism," "pro-Judaism," or "pro-gentilism." Rather, Paul was "anti-oppression" and "pro-justice." Paul undoubtedly appeals "for gentile Christian solidarity with Israel," as Neil states (*LP* 216). But for some reason, Neil virtually ignores the Jewish solidarity with non-Jews that must have been just as central to Paul's message. If "Paul made 'solidarity with the victim' the criterion of life together" (*LP* 203), was this solidarity to be only that of non-Jewish believers in Christ with Jews, many of whom must have been victimized not only by the Romans but also by many of their fellow Jews who sided with Rome, or that of Jewish believers with non-Jews as well, who also must have suffered at the hands of both non-Jews and at least some Jews? Both groups were also to show solidarity with those who shared their same ethnic identity but endured persecution and exclusion for *any* reason, and not only for confessing Jesus as Messiah. Neil himself states his rejection of the conventional view among New Testament scholars that "*the heart of Paul's thought is his theological opposition not to oppression but to the structures of the Jewish religion*" (*LP* 72), yet this affirmation seems to overlook the fact that the structures of *any* "religion," be it Roman, Jewish, or Christian, will inevitably be oppressive at many different times and in many different ways, often due to concerns that are just as much political as they are religious, if not even more so.

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aligned with them, placing themselves in no uncertain terms on the side of Rome's empire for all to see.

These observations take us to the heart of Paul's thought regarding not only the cross but his understanding of his apostolic mission and the gospel. As I have argued in my two-volume work titled *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought* (hereafter *JDNTT*), Paul and Jesus' first followers in general believed that the objective of God throughout history and in particular in the sending of his Son had been to form a worldwide community of people who would be fully committed to living in loving solidarity with one another and the world. Jesus' activity on behalf of this objective and his faithful dedication to it led to his ministry and ultimately to his death on a Roman cross.

Neil rightly characterizes the communities that Paul sought to establish and strengthen as communities of "discernment," "resistance," and "solidarity" (*LP* 189-214). These communities undoubtedly were *political* in nature, even though their aim was not to establish political dominance over others, replacing the lordship of Caesar with their own. Commenting on Paul's allusions to believers in Christ having died with Christ in baptism in Romans 6, Neil stresses that the letter's message to the Roman congregation is clear:

*The justice of God is not what the empire calls justice. Those who have been baptized into Christ are to understand themselves as "demobilized" from the Roman order, having left the "dominion of sin" behind. While others suppress the truth in the service of injustice and violate one another's bodies in unspeakable acts, Christians are to yield their bodies to God "as instruments [hopla, 'weapons'] of justice" (6:13-14). They must practice an ideological intifada, refusing to be coerced into conformity with*

the world and allowing their minds to be transformed (12:1-2) (LP 195).

Elsewhere, Neil writes: "Paul appeals to the Christians of Rome to throw off the mental shackles of the empire's theology, to resist conformity to the world and embrace the transformation of their minds, and to come at last to share in God's compassionate purposes toward humanity, and more particularly toward the covenant people of Israel" (LP 190).

At the same time, and in fact precisely *because* these communities are political in nature, they are also *religious*. As Neil notes, drawing on John Barclay's discussion of Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Paul seeks to solidify the Christian community as an alternative to the *politeuma* of the synagogue, *not because he is an apostate from Judaism*, but because... the ultimate horizon of his apostolate among the Gentiles is an apocalyptic 'evangelization' of Israel. He struggles against the timidity of those gentile converts who would rather acquiesce in the religious roles dictated by their society than live out the challenge of the gospel" (LP 197). Their "refusal to participate in the intricate web of local cults that gave sacred legitimation to the empire" and in "routines sacralizing the Roman city" undoubtedly led to "the ostracism of their neighbors" and accusations of "disloyalty to the empire" (LP 197). Neil recognizes that the thoroughly *political* nature of Paul's gospel inevitably brought in its wake not only the suppression by the Roman authorities of the "false belief" adopted by those non-Jews who accepted Paul's message but also "hostility from their neighbors. Paul takes pains to remind each congregation that he prepared them for this struggle in advance; he, and they, knew full well that resisting the empire's

claims on their loyalties and their bodies would cost them dearly" (LP 198).

What is not clear, however, is why Neil does not apply the same observations to the realities of Jewish believers in Christ. Were they not also under intense pressure to "acquiesce in the religious roles dictated by their [Roman-Jewish] society" or community to avoid hostility from their Jewish neighbors and suppression and persecution at the hands of both the Roman and Jewish authorities who claimed loyalty over their bodies and souls as well? Were they not also to be involved in forms of struggle and resistance that would cost them dearly, throwing off the "mental shackles" not only of the empire's theology but also any form of Jewish theology that called on them to take the side of the *crucifiers* over and against the *crucified*? If Paul called on gentile believers "to resist those—probably gentile converts to Christianity—who advocate the protective camouflage of a Judaizing way of life," since at the time "Rome officially recognized the right of Jews, alone in the Empire, to honor Caesar by prayers to their own solitary God in his behalf" (LP 197), why would Paul not also have called on his fellow Jews to resist those who refused to show publicly and unreservedly their solidarity with both Jews and non-Jews who suffered injustices at the hands of Roman power, in spite of the price they would pay, rather than clinging to the protection and security that their "Judaizing [or Jewish] way of life" afforded them so as to avoid persecution? To affirm that Paul touches on these points only with non-Jews but not with Jews because he saw his ministry as aimed solely at "gentiles" ignores the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament that, even if Paul saw himself as "apostle to

the gentiles," his ministry was aimed at Israel as well—an idea Neil himself stresses in his work.

According to Neil, what led Paul to stop persecuting believers in Christ and instead join their ranks was precisely his realization that he had been siding with the crucifiers rather than the crucified, thereby allying himself with the oppressive Roman system. Speaking of Paul prior to his "conversion," Neil writes that Paul's "'zeal for the ancestral traditions' was oriented not around some peculiar perspective on law observance but around political considerations with which any Jew under Roman rule would have been intimately familiar.... [Fredriksen's reconstruction] posits the same motive behind Paul's persecuting activity that scholars increasingly recognize behind the betrayal of Jesus by agents of the Temple—namely, to suppress the sort of political unrest that might provoke Roman punishment" (LP 148).

Yet, as Neil himself then stresses, Paul came to *repudiate as sinful* this activity of regarding "zeal for the ancestral traditions," "political considerations," concerns for "survival," and the suppression of "political unrest that might provoke Roman punishment" as more important than a commitment to solidarity with those "crucified" by the oppressive system—a commitment that would inevitably bring both Roman and Jewish persecution upon those who assumed it. Neil writes:

The cross showed Paul the extent of the violence he was willing to tolerate, even to promote, in order to maintain the balance of power vis-à-vis Rome. In this light, the vision of the crucified Jesus raised from the dead could only have brought to an end the world in which Paul had lived: "I have been

crucified to the world and the world to me." Paul's conversion to the cause of the crucified, and the theology of the cross that flows from it, are thus profoundly political (LP 227).

Thus it was not merely acquiescence to Roman oppression that Paul came to oppose vehemently in light of his adherence to the crucified Christ, but also acquiescence to any type of *Jewish* oppression, and especially acquiescence to any type of oppression that believers in Christ—whether Jewish or non-Jewish—might justify in Christ's name. Paul calls on *all* who hear his message to join together in solidarity with the victims of injustice, no matter who the perpetrators of that injustice might be. Furthermore, this involves much more than protesting against such injustice. Paul's concern is not merely to denounce and unmask, but to *build up communities of people willing to struggle alongside of one another to promote discernment, solidarity, compassion, and justice as defined by God and Christ rather than by Rome or even certain currents of the Jewish ancestral tradition*. Those who heard and accepted Paul's gospel were to see themselves as now belonging "to a different realm, the 'kingdom [*basileia*] of God...," and to define their relationship to one another in terms of a new kinship that went beyond and at times even dissolved previous kinship relations (LP 196).

Given these realities, it is not clear why Neil affirms that "Paul's letters do not outline a program of social transformation" (LP 201). The communities of discernment, resistance, and solidarity Paul sought to establish were intended to be *profoundly* transformative of the society of Paul's day. Undoubtedly, Paul did not advocate the type of violence practiced by Rome (and often by the Jewish communities

as well, as 2 Cor. 11:24-26 demonstrates). Nor did he seek to use means other than the gospel to promote his "program of social transformation." What confuses and clouds Neil's argument on these points is his unfortunate acceptance of the "principle of nonviolence" advocated by scholars such as Walter Wink (LP 116-24).

As I have argued elsewhere, the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the authors of the New Testament writings was anything but nonviolent. To interpret the message and praxis of Jesus and Paul as nonviolent in reality serves to promote forms of violence that can be just as cruel as other forms of violence.<sup>6</sup> It is thus surprising, therefore, that Neil writes: "In encouraging a cruciform vulnerability to the world, Paul envisions Christian existence 'as a living out of the nonviolent life of the divine victim in the world of sacred violence,' in Robert Hamerton-Kelly's words...." (LP 200). While Paul undoubtedly accepted that "cruciform vulnerability" was a part of Christian life, far from *encouraging* such a vulnerability, Paul did everything in his power to *discourage* it. He was not calling on others to make themselves vulnerable or get themselves crucified, but to *resist* the "world of sacred violence" and stand up to it with all their might. How in the world can Neil express his support for Hamerton-Kelly's claim that for Paul the ekklesia is "a 'new community of non-acquisitive and nonconflictual agape love'...." (LP 200)? True agape love is *extremely* acquisitive, in that it seeks to acquire the

power necessary to resist, survive, and overcome the power and violence of empire. Such love is also *anything but* "nonconflictual." It produces and promotes *tremendous conflict* by standing up to injustice, calling it by name, and refusing to give in to it.

Integral to Paul's gospel was his awareness that Jesus had been crucified precisely *because* he sought to establish himself in power for the good of others and because, far from *avoiding* conflict, he intentionally *generated* it in his struggle against "the Powers" who had him crucified. What Jesus had sought was not vulnerability but *invulnerability*. His objective, and that of his Father, was that Jesus be "declared Son of God in power" (Rom 1:4). For Paul, Christ himself is "the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), as is the gospel Paul proclaims (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). Yet the word of that gospel is so powerful precisely because it rests not on human wisdom but on the power of God himself (1 Cor. 2:4) Paul announces a kingdom that "depends not on talk but on power" (1 Cor. 4:20). While the gospel's power appears to be mere weakness and vulnerability in the eyes of those who view it from the perspective of Rome, the fact that the "treasure" that believers possess is hidden in "clay jars" makes it clear that "this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:7-11). Thus the "power of Christ" that dwells in Paul and his fellow believers

<sup>6</sup> On this point and what follows, see especially my online article "Resurrecting and Rearming the Warrior God Crucified by Gregory Boyd," available at <http://94t.mx>.

makes them “strong” in the midst of the “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” they endure for Christ’s sake (2 Cor. 12:9-10). For Paul, Christ is “powerful” in believers precisely because “he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God,” and thus enables them to “live with him by the power of God” (2 Cor. 13:4-5).

Paul therefore exhorts his readers, not to “cruciform vulnerability” or “nonviolence,” but to what I have called “violent nonviolence” or “nonviolent violence.” This is the type of violence that they practice when they live out of the power of God in Christ and when they engage in conflict with the powers of this world. As they do this, what they seek is not to get crucified but to “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Of course, as a result of this struggle, they may indeed be “crucified,” either literally or metaphorically. But this will demonstrate, not their weakness, but the power of God in them, that is, the power of a resistance that is nonviolent in violent ways and violent in nonviolent ways.

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While in certain passages of *LP* Neil seems to grasp and communicate well many of these ideas, in others he fails to capture adequately Paul’s views regarding the power of the cross. Undoubtedly, Neil is correct in affirming that for Paul the cross represents brutality, terror, scapegoating, torture, and sacrifice in the sense of victimization at the hands of the violent “Powers” that include both human and non-human authorities (*LP* 93-99, 103-5). This does not mean, however, that for Paul the cross is *only* “weakness,” whereas the real “power” lies in the hands of those doing the crucifying, both in antiquity

and in the modern world. While Neil rightly recognizes that Jesus’ crucifixion has a “political dimension,” at times he implies that the only “political” message that the cross communicates is that the empire crushes any who dare to stand up to it: “The cross was for Paul the signature in history of the forces that killed Jesus...” (*LP* 110; cf. 116-20). Even though he can also speak of the cross as the *defeat* of those forces in some sense, Neil insists that, properly speaking, that defeat took place only in Jesus’ resurrection. After recalling the way in which Benigno Aquino was killed by assassins at the service of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1983, Neil argues:

I contend that *the cross of Jesus*, like the murder of Aquino, *by itself shows only the power of violence*. It therefore serves the purposes of the crucifiers quite well. *The cross alone does not, cannot, reveal the defeat of the Powers....* [T]he crucifixion alone would only rehearse, not expose, the logic of founding violence. *It is the resurrection of Christ the crucified that reveals the imminent defeat of the Powers, pointing forward to the final triumph of God* (*LP* 118, 123-24).

Nowhere is this (mis)understanding of the cross more evident than in Neil’s treatment of Colossians and Ephesians, which he considers not merely “deutero-pauline” but “pseudo-pauline” and even “forgeries” (*LP* 28-30). According to Neil, these epistles represent a perspective on Jesus’ death that is entirely at odds with that of Paul himself:

To the extent that these letters do not confront the outer aspect of the Powers as obstinately hostile to the rule of God (“our struggle is not against flesh and blood . . . but against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”), their theology is

inherently liable to an otherworldly spiritualization that distracts us from the web of this-worldly power relations, or else baptizes those power relations as already "obedient" to Christ (*LP* 121; cf. 115-24).

Of course, Neil is entirely correct to insist that for Paul the "powers of this age" remain just as "active and insubordinate to God" as ever (*LP* 114-15) and have not actually been defeated (*LP* 116-22). Furthermore, for Neil Jesus' crucifixion also exposes those powers for what they are: "The death of Jesus unmasks the rulers of this age as intractably opposed to the wisdom of God, but *they are not yet overcome*" (*LP* 123). In essence, here Neil is rejecting the *Christus Victor* interpretations of the cross as traditionally expounded. As I stress repeatedly in *JDNTT*, I concur wholeheartedly that such interpretations do indeed run contrary to the thought of Paul and the New Testament as a whole.

Where I believe that Neil errs, however, is in his failure to capture the fact that Colossians and Ephesians are in full continuity with the interpretation of Jesus' death that we find throughout the undisputed Pauline epistles, even though these two letters undoubtedly also develop further Paul's thought on the subject. Once again, this failure is somewhat curious, given the fact that elsewhere Neil cites a number of passages from other scholars who provide the basis necessary for understanding what Colossians and Ephesians say regarding the manner in which Jesus overcame the forces of evil in his death. He looks to Richard Horsley's work to note how Jesus "criticized and resisted the oppressive established political-economic-religious order of his own society" and "aggressively intervened to mitigate or undo the effects of institutionalized violence...."

While in a sense Jesus "opposed violence," in another he entered actively into the sphere in which violence was being used to torture and subjugate people in order to struggle against that violence, "and even exacerbated the conflict" (*LP* 100).<sup>7</sup> In these ways, Jesus sought to defeat the powers of his day, not in some otherworldly realm, but in *this one*, by bringing others to refuse to live in fear under their domination. And while there is certainly a sense in which Jesus himself was defeated, there is also a sense in which he was victorious over those powers *prior to and independently of his resurrection*.

Even Horsley's words are subject to misinterpretation, however, when he writes that "Jesus and his followers... were prepared to suffer violence themselves and to allow their friends to be tortured and killed for their insistence on the rule of God" (*LP* 100). Strictly speaking, neither Jesus nor his friends "allowed" themselves to be tortured and killed, though they were certainly *willing* to endure these things due to their commitment to the rule of God. On the contrary, they resisted every form of torture and murder with all the strength they could muster. By going to Gethsemane, for example, and not attempting to flee or fight when those sent by the authorities came to arrest him, Jesus was not "allowing" himself to be tortured and killed. He was not giving the authorities permission to abuse him, granting his consent, and much less "encouraging a cruciform vulnerability to the world" when he stood "trial" and was condemned to the cross. Rather, he was standing up to his torturers

<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 319.

and murderers and in essence telling them, "You cannot defeat me. Nothing that you can do to me will make me back down. You can kill and maim my body, but you cannot touch my soul, because I am free. I will not cower in fear to your torture or your cross. And just as you cannot truly kill or defeat me, neither will you ever be able truly to kill or defeat those who follow me by trusting in the same God in whom I trust and refusing to submit passively to evil in order to continue the struggle on behalf of the justice of God."

Neil points to Walter Wink's account of Aquino's return to the Philippines from his exile in the context of his discussion of the same ideas. When Aquino was shot to death by forces loyal to Marcos even before Aquino descended from the plane, in reality "Marcos fell when Aquino toppled to the tarmac," since this incident would lead to Marcos' downfall two and a half years later (LP 116).<sup>8</sup> Wink's logic is that the people became so incensed and outraged at what Marcos had done that they lost the fear that had held them in bondage to Marcos. According to Wink, Paul understood the power of Jesus' death over people in the same way: "Those who are freed from the fear of death are, as a consequence, able to break the spiral of violence" (LP 117).<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as noted above, both Wink and Neil see all of this as a demonstration of "the power of nonviolence" rather than grasping that what both Jesus and Paul practiced was instead "nonviolent violence" and "violent nonviolence." What Aquino sought was something *very* violent:

the overthrow and destruction of a suffocatingly repressive regime. Yet he sought to accomplish this objective through what I regard as violent forms of nonviolence and nonviolent forms of violence.

The point is, however, that if the purpose for which the powers of this world "crucify" people is that of "breaking the will of conquered peoples" (LP 94) or attempting to "terrify and coerce submission" (LP 96), in Jesus' case, they failed. They could not break his will. While in one sense he was left no choice but to "submit" to their power, in another sense he remained free up until his very last breath. And in this way, he was able to bring about a community of people who are willing to take the same kind of stand and will not be broken in their commitment to the reign of God and the justice and solidarity associated with that reign. Neil acknowledges his agreement with Wink's affirmation that "the cross robs the Powers of Death of their 'final sanction,' exposing the Powers 'as unable to make Jesus what they wanted him to be, or to stop being who he was,'"<sup>10</sup> though he adds that this insight was possible to Paul only after the resurrection (LP 123-24). Of course, to claim that this was Paul's understanding of the cross is by no means to maintain that this is the understanding of the cross that has predominated among Christians since Paul's day. In fact, as both Neil and many others have argued (including myself), it has been much more common to misinterpret and distort Paul's thought on the cross than to understand it properly.

Undoubtedly, Neil is correct in affirming that in the eyes of the powers who crucified Jesus and have continued to "crucify" or

<sup>8</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

assassinate figures such as Aquino, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it is those powers themselves who won the victory. However, he does not look through the eyes of people such as Jesus, Paul, Jesus' first followers, and those who were led to rise up in resistance to those powers as a result of such "crucifixions." Independently of their eschatology or their belief in the resurrection, if one asked these figures if they were already free in some sense in *this* lifetime and in *this* world, in spite of the oppressive and enslaving conditions that they endured, they would have no doubt responded, "Yes, by all means! No matter what the oppressors and assassins may do to us, we are not and will not be defeated, because we have chosen life over death!" To affirm the contrary would be to promote a mindset and praxis that is exactly what Neil is criticizing. One would need to tell the oppressed and those who struggle for justice, "Your efforts and struggles in this world are now and always will be entirely futile, because you will know nothing but defeat. So your only options are either to submit passively and obediently to your oppressors and wait until they kill you so that some day you may rise from the dead, or to continue to beat your head against the wall and let yourselves be tortured further, because in this life you will never be free." That is plain and simple defeatism.

The fact that in places like the Philippines and El Salvador the repressive regime overthrown was replaced by a regime that was also oppressive does not change this fact (LP 118-21). Those who refuse to be paralyzed by fear are able to live freely in this world, even though that freedom will always be relative (no one in this world ever enjoys

"absolute freedom," in spite of Neil's defense of such a notion in AN 52-53). And while belief in the resurrection undoubtedly helps people lose that fear, people who do *not* adhere to that belief may also "defeat the defeatism" that the oppressors attempt to impose on them and insist on living as free people in spite of the various types of slavery that *all people*, both oppressors and oppressed, experience. In fact, only when we recognize that each of us is not only oppressed but is also an oppressor and acknowledge the manifold types of slavery under which we inevitably live in this world can we truly discover what it means to be free.

Contrary to Neil, therefore, I would argue that the message of both Colossians and Ephesians is just as political and subversive as that of the other Pauline epistles. Colossians is making subversive, counterimperial claims when it speaks of believers being delivered from the authority of darkness and transferred into the reign of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13), all things being reconciled to God now that he has made peace through the blood of Jesus' cross (Col. 1:20), and God "disrobing" or "stripping naked" the rulers and authorities, "exposing" them on the cross (Col. 2:15).<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the empire, which supposedly brings peace and reconciliation through the blood of swords and crosses, through Jesus' faithfulness to the task given him even to the point of shedding his blood, God has established a community in which Jesus' followers are able to live in peace among themselves rather than darkness and see the oppressive rulers and authorities for what they really are. While the empire still exercises

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<sup>11</sup> I have argued this and the following points extensively in Chapter 13 of *JDNTT*.



its domination in the world, those who identify with Jesus and his cross now live in faith and hope rather than fear and thus refuse to be intimidated by the imperial violence they continue to face. Because they have attained this freedom even in the midst of ongoing crucifixion, and also because the crucified Jesus himself now lives exalted in heaven, they can be said to have already risen with Christ (Col. 3:1), and have full certainty that it is God and Jesus rather than the empire who will have the final word over life and death.

The language of Ephesians can and should be understood on the basis of the same ideas. Believers are now seated next to Christ in heaven, not in some literal or ontological sense, but in the sense that through their identification with Christ and the cross they have been freed from the spiritual bondage to Rome's oppressive system which also kept them in bondage physically; this allows them to experience true life in the present (Eph 2:4-6). Of course, they must still struggle against the "cosmic powers of this present darkness" and the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12), yet this should be understood in terms of waging war against the imperial ideologies and theologies that enslave people and keep them in subjection. They wield their nonviolent weapons violently, taking up "the whole armor of God" so as to "stand firm" clad with the "belt of truth," "the breastplate of justice," "the helmet of salvation," and shoes that allow them to be "ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." They not only defend themselves with the "shield of faith" from the "flaming arrows of the evil one" – arrows which are directed at them not from some otherworldly sphere but from the human powers of *this age* through whom the

"evil one" fights in this world – , but they also strike out at the powers opposing them with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:13-17). This is anything but "cruciform vulnerability," "nonviolence," or "non-acquisitive and nonconflictual agape love." On the contrary, this agape love is *extremely* violent, acquisitive, and conflictual, and it is also invulnerable because it is firmly *anti*-cruciform.

Of course, neither Colossians nor Ephesians call on believers to rise up in arms literally against the powers of the present age to establish political regimes in Christ's name that supposedly manifest his lordship in the present world. As history has shown and as Neil has argued, any such regimes are just as oppressive as those that they succeed in replacing, if not more so. However, neither do either of those two epistles regard the present lordship of the crucified and risen Jesus as irrelevant to the present historical and political realities. On the contrary, Neil is correct to affirm that Jesus' resurrection and exaltation play a vital role in giving believers the courage to stand firm, unmask, and defy the oppressive powers of the present age. The fact that Jesus was raised and exalted as a result of his active resistance to the politics and religion of empire provides them with the assurance and confidence they need to continue to live boldly as members of a community committed to the same type of discernment, resistance, and solidarity that they encounter in Jesus' own life and death as they live under his lordship. Naturally, this has very strong political implications both for the present and the future, yet in itself it does not result in the establishment of God's reign or the actual defeat of the powers in the present age.

Furthermore, contrary to many of the understandings of apocalyptic that are prevalent in modern biblical scholarship, neither Christ nor believers are presented as doing battle in some otherworldly sphere. Their struggle against the spiritual forces, rulers, and authorities allied with darkness and oppression takes place in *this* world, and that struggle involves engaging those powers only *indirectly* by the way they relate to other human beings, rather than *directly* by flailing away at invisible realities that remain hidden from their sight or withdrawing into their own little world in order to practice some type of "spiritual warfare" through prayer and seclusion. It must be remembered that, according to the ancient worldview we see reflected in the New Testament, heaven and earth are simply two parts of a single world in which both human and non-human beings live and interact (including God himself), rather than constituting two different and separate worlds.

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After discussing the role of the "Powers" in Jesus' crucifixion and the sense in which they can be said to have been overcome, Neil addresses what many would consider the most weighty objection to his argument that at the heart of Paul's understanding of Jesus' death is the conviction that his crucifixion was an "unequivocally political event" and "has an irreducibly political dimension" (LP 93, 107). The claim that in certain passages of his epistles Paul presents Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice that made atonement for human sin has long been axiomatic among New Testament scholars. After citing Rom. 3:24-26, which many consider the *locus*

*classicus* for such an interpretation of Paul's thought, Neil writes:

Here it would appear that Jesus' death is no longer understood as the consequence of his own struggle against social and political injustice in Roman occupied Judea. Rather, the reason for Jesus' death is a necessity on God's part, for it is God who "put Jesus forward" to be killed. Jesus' blood provides expiation (*hilastērion . . . en tō autou haimati*) for "sins previously committed," which God had "overlooked." These sins consequently presented a challenge to God's righteousness that could only be satisfied through bloodshed; thus God offered Jesus as a sacrifice "to prove that he is righteous"....

Although the origins and provenance of these sacrificial ideas continue to excite vigorous debate, clearly *some* sacred logic of expiation through bloodshed is apparent in the juxtaposition of the *hilastērion* and Jesus' blood. The pressing question is, What role did such expiatory logic play in Paul's thinking?

The Christian theological tradition has relied heavily on the letter to the Romans as the place where Paul articulated a doctrine of salvation through the atoning death of Christ. Just this traditional interpretation raises the most serious questions about Paul's possible mystification of Jesus' death (LP 124-25).

Following many other scholars who find such an interpretation of Jesus' death unacceptable and extremely problematic, Neil affirms that this interpretation was handed down to Paul, who repeated it (perhaps uncritically) as part of the tradition he had received, yet without fully embracing it as his own (LP 104). Looking to a series of other

passages from Romans in which Paul alludes to Jesus' death, Neil comments:

While Paul can speak of the expiatory significance of Jesus' death "for us sinners" (5:8), through which we are "justified by his blood" (5:9; 3:25), he evidently considers that truth by itself to be inadequate and potentially misleading.... The atoning significance of Christ's death for Paul is less important than the apocalyptic significance of his obedience (5:18, 19).... This is why the atoning significance of Jesus' death disappears in Romans 6, supplanted by an apocalyptic scheme of fields of power. Here the significance of Jesus' death is that through baptism it causes Christians to die to the dominion of sin, just as Christ died to the dominion of sin (6:2, 6-7, 11-14)....

Paul was more concerned with the life-giving power unleashed by the death and resurrection of Jesus than with Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice. To be sure, he did not deny the expiatory significance of Jesus' death, but he, apparently for the first time in early Christianity, sensed how vulnerable that expiatory christology was to misapprehension and abuse (*LP* 128-29).

Neil insists that these passages from Romans be understood in the context of Paul's argument in 1:18–4:25, according to which "no human being may raise a claim against God's justice." Paul thus alludes to the expiatory interpretation of Jesus' death in an attempt to "secure, rather than imperil, God's justice" (*LP* 128). Paul sought to dissuade the "gentile Christian population" in Rome from "scapegoating the Jews in their midst" by "insisting on God's impartial justice for all (1:16-17; 3:21-31)" (*LP* 130). Neil then concludes,

It would appear from this analysis that far from being the author of the "sacrificial hermeneutic" in earliest Christianity, Paul was its first critic. Romans simply does not support a reconstruction of Paul's theology as a doctrine of salvation moving from "plight" (sinfulness without remedy before God) to sacrificial "solution" (the necessity of death before God can atone for sins). Although Paul apparently could not conceive, as Girard does, the inherent inadequacy of all sacrificial thinking—for he did not repudiate the expiatory theology he inherited—he nevertheless intuited, and sought to expose and correct, the latest susceptibility of that theology to human presumption and rivalry (*LP* 131).

Paul accepts the expiatory theology of the Christian movement into which he was baptized (Rom 3:21-31), but reconfigures this in the light of his own conviction that God's justice must triumph over all human boasting, even that of the gentile church. The thrust of Paul's letter to the Romans goes against the inclination of gentile Christianity to dissipate this apocalyptic vision, to absorb the cross of Jesus within a cult of blood that saves the initiate while abandoning the people of the ancient covenant to the vicissitudes of Roman power....

Paul has not obscured the nature of the cross as historical and political oppression; rather he has focused it through the lens of Jewish apocalyptic. Only a gentile church unaccustomed to that perspective, and more familiar with the sacrificial logic of the blood cults, could have transformed Paul's message into a cult of atonement in Christ's blood (the letter to the Hebrews) and a charter of Israel's disfranchisement (the *Letter of Barnabas*). Paul's own letters show

that he recognized these tendencies within the gentile church of his own day, and opposed them (LP 139).

Neil also feels obliged to address Paul's words in Gal. 3:13, where Christ is said to have "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Here again, it would appear that Paul is working with an understanding of Jesus' crucifixion that divorces it from its original historical and political context. Noting that traditional interpretations of this passage have been "no less troubling... than the soteriological reading of Romans," Neil writes that it appears to affirm that, because

deliverance from the plight of the law is impossible through the Law itself, those living in Judaism are in a no-exit situation. They can be "redeemed from the curse of the law" only through an intervention from outside their relationship to the law. The "solution" requires that someone else stand in for them, bear the curse that properly falls upon them; and this Christ has done by dying a particular form of death accursed by the Torah, namely, crucifixion. In this understanding Christ's death is propitiatory: He bears God's curse, deflecting it from others, and thus delivers them (LP 133).

Unfortunately, in order to resolve the problems raised by this interpretation of the passage and argue that for Paul the Jewish law and covenant are not "flawed from the beginning" (LP 133), Neil turns to the work of N. T. Wright. Citing a passage from Wright's book *The Climax of the Covenant*, Neil explains:

Because the Messiah represents Israel, he is able to take on himself Israel's curse and exhaust it. Jesus dies as the King of the Jews, at the hands of the Romans whose

oppression of Israel is the present, and climactic, form of the curse of exile itself. The crucifixion of the Messiah is, one might say, the *quintessence* of the curse of exile, and its climactic act (LP 137).<sup>12</sup>

On this basis, Neil concludes: "One result of Wright's interpretation is that the argument in Galatians 3 is not about the nature of Torah in itself, or about the characteristic failure of the Jews to keep the covenant. Rather, it concerns what God has accomplished in the death of Christ. Paul's argument 'actually depends on the validity of the law's curse, and on the propriety of Jesus, as Messiah bearing it on Israel's behalf'" (LP 137).<sup>13</sup> "Paul's doctrine of the cross is thus a doctrine of God's justice and God's partiality toward the oppressed. In the crucifixion of the Messiah at the hands of the Roman oppressors, God has recapitulated the history of Israel's exile and brought it to a decisive climax; indeed, in a slave's death on a cross (Phil. 2:8) the enslavement of the whole creation is embodied (Rom. 8:20-22)" (LP 138-39).

As I have argued extensively in *JDNTT*, in point of fact, this understanding of Jesus' death as an act of expiation, propitiation, and substitutionary atonement is nowhere to be found either in Paul's epistles, the tradition passed down to him, or the New Testament as a whole. It represents a grave misreading not only of Paul's language regarding the cross but his teaching on justification as well. At the heart of this misreading is a false alternative between two understandings of Paul's phrase

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 151.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

“the justice of God” (*dikaiosynē tou theou*).<sup>14</sup> Following many Pauline scholars today, Neil rightly questions the traditional Protestant assumption that in passages from Paul’s epistles in which that phrase appears (such as Rom 1:17), Paul is referring to “the way God imputes righteousness to individuals, his doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ in its supposed opposition to Jewish works-righteousness...” (LP 191). According to this understanding of Paul’s words, God’s righteousness is a quality or attribute that believers in Christ come to possess in a purely forensic sense: by virtue of Christ’s atoning death and their faith in that death, God graciously *reckons* them as righteous in spite of the fact that they possess no righteousness of their own. However, Neil then sides with those Pauline scholars (such as N. T. Wright) who claim that, when Paul spoke of the *dikaiosynē tou theou*, he had in mind a *divine* quality or attribute:

But we are now increasingly aware that the phrase “the justice of God” meant much more to Paul than God’s justification of unrighteous individuals (the *iustificatio impii*). The *diakosynē tou theou* is God’s justice; the phrase speaks “of the God who brings back the fallen world into the sphere of his legitimate claim” (Ernst Käsemann). The justice of God is God’s integrity, faithfulness to God’s own being and purposes. Those purposes, according to the broad sweep of the biblical tradition, are the

redemption of the creation and the fulfillment of the covenant with Israel (which has the redemption of creation as its horizon) (LP 191).

There can be no doubt that in certain passages, most notably Rom. 3:3-5, Paul does indeed have in mind a divine quality or attribute when speaks of the *dikaosynē tou theou*. Yet as I have shown in *JDNTT* (see especially Chapters 11 and 12), there is a third understanding of the phrase that New Testament scholars have consistently overlooked or ignored, due precisely to their obsession with the notion that justification by faith must exclude any type of “works-righteousness.” In several Pauline passages, the “justice of God” must be understood as *the just and righteous way of living and behaving that God desires and commands of human beings for their own good*. For Paul, believers are to present their members to God as instruments of justice and even live as “slaves of justice” (Rom. 6:13, 18-19). Similarly, they are to bear “fruits of justice” (2 Cor. 9:10; Phil. 1:11). In Phil. 3:4-9, after claiming that in his previous life he had been “blameless with regard to the justice that comes through the law,” Paul speaks of now possessing a justice that is not his own as a result of his conformity to the law but “the justice based on faith that comes from God” (*tēn ek theou dikaiosynēn epi tē pistei*). In all these passages, “justice” should not be understood merely as a righteous forensic standing before God (though it certainly includes this), but as a *new way of living and behaving*. In other words, through faith in Christ (rather than through submission to the Mosaic law alone), Paul has received from God *the just and righteous way of life that God desires and commands of all people*. This way of living involves dedicating his body and

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<sup>14</sup> In AN 75, Neil notes his reasons for translating *hē dikaiosynē tou theou* as “the justice of God,” rather than “righteousness,” a practice with which I concur and will follow here in this article as well, though at times I find it helpful to use both terms together rather than opting solely for one or the other.

himself to the practice of justice as its “slave” and bearing “fruits of justice.”

Of course, because this new way of living and behaving is brought about by God alone through Christ, the Holy Spirit, and faith within the community of those who look to Christ as their Lord, it is a gracious gift rather than the result of human works or efforts. To “believe with one’s heart” in Jesus and the God who raised him as Lord leads intrinsically to this life of justice and righteousness (*kardia gar pisteuetai eis dikaiosynēn*; Rom. 10:9-10). In fact, when one looks at Paul’s use of the phrase *dikaiosynē tou theou* in Rom. 9:30–10:10, it becomes clear that only the interpretation of the phrase just mentioned can make sense of Paul’s words. What the gentiles did not strive for but have attained through faith is not merely a forensic declaration of righteousness, and much less God’s own “covenant faithfulness,” but *the just and righteous way of life that God both demands and graciously gives* through Christ. In contrast, Israel did indeed strive to live a life of justice and righteousness so as to be declared righteous by God, yet because they did not look to Christ the “stumbling stone” but only to the law, they did not attain that way of life.

When in 10:3 Paul refers to those who, being ignorant of the *tou theou dikaiosynē*, sought to establish *their own dikaiosynē* and thus failed to submit to the *dikaiosynē tou theou*—the righteousness of God in contrast to *their own*—he is not claiming that they were ignorant of God’s covenant faithfulness, sought to establish a covenant faithfulness of their own, or failed to submit to God’s covenant faithfulness. Rather, his words must be interpreted in the sense that those who

sought to define the just and righteous way of living that God desires of all on their own, on the basis of the law alone, failed to submit to the way of life that is truly just and righteous in God’s eyes; this is because Christ is the end or goal of the law through whom that just and righteous way of life is given to all who believe (10:3-4). In order to attain the life of justice and righteousness that the Mosaic law commanded but could not produce on its own (Rom. 8:3-4), one need not seek to bring Christ down from heaven or up from the abyss, but merely must look to him in faith as the risen Lord (10:5-10). Thus the “free gift” given by God through Christ and his *dikaiōma*—the commitment to justice that led to his death on the cross—is not merely a declaration that one is just and righteous before God but more importantly *the new life of justice and righteousness on the basis of which God makes that declaration* (Rom. 5:15-21).

This is not to say, however, that for Paul and the authors of the other New Testament writings, Jesus’ death is salvific merely because it provides an example, model, or pattern for others to follow or imitate. Strictly speaking, it is *God* who brings about the new life of justice and righteousness through *all* that he has done and will do through his Son. While this includes his Son’s teaching and example, it also involves all that Jesus did to establish the type of community described above, characterized by things such as “discernment, resistance, and solidarity.” Many of the things Jesus did in the past during his ministry made this community possible: his calling of disciples to “follow him,” his training of leaders who would train other leaders, his sending out of apostles, his interpretations of the law, the faith and trust he manifested in God, his denunciation and

unmasking of the oppressive systems, structures, and beliefs of his day, the vision of God he communicated, his subversive parables, his reaching out in fellowship to those marginalized as “sinners,” his acts of healing the sick and exorcising demons, his harsh condemnation of the hypocrisy and injustice of those who claimed to be God’s chosen representatives, his definition of what healthy relationships are to consist of, his proclamation of God’s reign and the hopes associated with that reign, his intercession on behalf of others, his call to put the gospel of that reign above all else, including family and friends, and his refusal to back down from all this activity on behalf of others even when threatened with violent death. *All of these things contributed in various ways to his death, yet they also made possible the existence of the community God intended to establish through him and the practice of God’s righteousness among all who belong to that community.*

Likewise, all of Jesus’ ongoing and future activity make it possible for those who live under his lordship to practice the justice and righteousness of God. Jesus continues to speak to his followers, not only directly through means such as prayer, but also indirectly through other members of his community, through their reflection on what he said and did in the past, through the Holy Spirit, through both the “miraculous” and the ordinary happenings in their everyday lives, and even through people who do not belong to his community of followers. He intercedes to his Father on their behalf, asking God not only to forgive and accept them in spite of their ongoing sinfulness but also to provide them with the guidance, wisdom, and strength they need in order to live in ways that bring them and others wholeness and

healing. At the same time, he listens and responds to their prayers and fills their hearts with joy, peace, hope, and love. He constantly points them to the future to give them hope and accompanies them in different ways with his presence, especially in times of pain and hardships. He puts certain people in their path as his instruments to touch their lives. Through his Spirit he pours out gifts on believers so that they may all contribute to the mutual building up of his body and reach out to others in love and solidarity. He continues to provide his community with leaders, at the same time that he enables his people to understand more clearly God’s will and calls their attention to the sin and injustice that continue to be present in their lives as individuals and communities, constantly calling on them to change their ways. The list of things that Jesus *has done* and *continues to do* to make it possible for his community of followers to take the shape he and his Father desire could go on and on.

For Paul, *all of this* is what Jesus sought in life and death. All of the activity to which he dedicated himself during his ministry was aimed at laying the basis for the existence, consolidation, and expansion of a worldwide community in which all might be committed to living under Jesus’ lordship so as to practice the justice or righteousness of God. His dedication to the task of establishing such a “community of communities” inevitably generated conflict, resistance, condemnation, hatred, enmity, and persecution, and his adamant refusal to put an end to all of this activity ultimately led to his crucifixion in Jerusalem at the hands of the powers who opposed him and sought to silence him. However, rather than seeking to “save his life” and avoid the violent death that his

activity on behalf of others would inevitably lead to, Jesus placed his life, his ministry, his present and future community of followers, his projects and hopes, and everything he was and had, together with all that he had lived for and all that he was dying for, in the hands of the God he called "Abba." He trusted in God, convinced that God would see to it that all that he had done in obedience to his Father would bear the fruit that God desired to see, and he prayed to God, "Not my will, but your will be done." Of course, Jesus did not wish to die, and much less to die on a Roman cross. On the contrary, he wished to continue to live for others and even to be empowered by God through resurrection to continue and consummate the work he had begun on their behalf. As noted above, for that reason, he sought *invulnerability and power*, not for *his own sake*, but for *the sake of others*.

According to the gospel proclaimed by Paul and his fellow believers, God responded to this petition as well as all that Jesus had done in life and death by raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him in power as Lord so that he might indeed continue to serve as God's instrument to bring to pass everything that he had sought all the way up to his last breath, and all that God had sought through him. Those who look to him in faith and trust so as to live under his liberating lordship as members of his community can therefore be assured that in and through the crucified and risen Jesus they will attain the life of justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit that God has promised them, in part in the present world and in its fullness in the world to come.

It would be a mistake, however, to claim that it is only what God has done and will continue to do *through Jesus* that makes this

new life of justice and righteousness possible. From my perspective, Neil errs in affirming that "Paul sees in the cross the beginning of the destruction of the evil powers—but only its beginning," and that "Paul interprets Jesus' death as *the beginning of God's final 'war of liberation' against all the Powers that hold creation in thrall* through the instruments of earthly oppression" (LP 123). Such affirmations pass over the ministry that eventually led to Jesus' crucifixion, a ministry that from the very start was already a "war of liberation" against those powers. They also overlook the early Christian conviction that *all* that God had been doing in history since the moment of Adam's transgression also contributed to the new reality that has now come to pass. The events narrated in Genesis, the calling and life of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law through Moses, the message of Israel's prophets, Israel's exile at the hands of foreign nations, the diaspora of God's people, their partial restoration in Palestine under Persian kings such as Cyrus and Darius, the conquests of Alexander the Great, the establishment of Greek as the *lingua franca* throughout much of the world, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, the building of Roman roads, and countless other events prior to Jesus' coming also served as means by which the new reality that believers experience has come into being throughout the world. God's "war of liberation" against the evil powers thus began long before Jesus' crucifixion, and it did not enter a "final" stage either then or after Jesus' death, because it has *always* been just as intense and ongoing from the time it began until the time it will come to an end. In Paul's thought, that "war" continues on into the future, since God remains active in human history throughout



the world among peoples of all nations and will continue to accomplish his purposes until the consummation of all things.

Yet for Paul even the activity God has carried out and will continue to carry out *independently* of Christ nevertheless revolves around Christ and the cross. All that God did prior to Christ's coming in some way laid the foundation and constituted a preparation for what would take place in Christ, whom God sent "when the fullness of time had come" (Gal. 4:4). And it is through Christ that God's ongoing activity throughout the world will reach its final objective, when the Son will subject all things to God so that God may be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

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All of this brings us back to the language of redemption, expiation, and propitiation (*hilastērion*) that Paul uses in relation to Christ and his death. When Paul says that the justice of God attested by the law and the prophets has now been revealed apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-22), his idea is that the just and righteous way of living that God desired to bring about in people becomes a reality in those who embrace Jesus in faith and entrust their lives to him so as to live under his lordship. By means of the gracious redemption or liberation that is now to be found in him—a liberation from their previous way of thinking and living and from their subjection to the powers that oppose God—they are "justified as a gift," since both that liberation and their faith are entirely the work of God (Rom. 3:24). Of course, while they are committed to living a life of justice and righteousness under Jesus their Lord, they remain sinners and are not entirely free from the power of sin.

Nevertheless, God accepts them as just and righteous by virtue of their relation to Christ, "whom God put forward as a *hilastērion*-through-faith by means of his blood" (Rom. 3:25).

As noted above, according to Roman imperial theology, those whom God or the gods had put forward as mediators of salvation were the emperors such as Augustus and those who served under them with their approval. In order to obtain divine acceptance, it was necessary to submit obediently to the emperor whom the gods had placed over all. Any who refused to do so were rebelling not only against the emperor but against the gods who had established him as *pontifex maximus*, and therefore would be objects of their wrath. Furthermore, through his intercessions and sacrifices on behalf of those who acknowledged him as the divine guardian of peace and justice, Caesar attained the favor and blessings of the gods for the people under him, as well as clemency and pardon for those who had failed to subject themselves to Roman rule previously but now acknowledged their error and repented of it so as to practice "justice and righteousness" as defined by Rome. Justification, therefore, was granted by the gods through the emperor.

According to Roman imperial theology, then, Caesar was the *hilastērion* whom the gods had put forward so that he might serve as the means through whom people expiated their sins and propitiated the wrath of the gods so as to obtain their favor and acceptance. In order to establish and preserve Caesar in this position for the benefit of all, however, the gods had mandated the shedding of blood. They had sent Caesar and the armies under him to impose Roman rule

over the world through the bloodshed of warfare, which required the sacrifice of the lives of both Roman soldiers and Rome's enemies. Yet because this bloodshed had supposedly brought *pax*, *securitas*, and *prosperitas* for all of those who were subjected to Rome's benevolent rule, it had been a sacrifice well worth making. The preservation of that benevolent rule also required further bloodshed, since only by brandishing a sword against those who rose up against the divinely-established system and at times crucifying them could that system be held in place. The sacrificial blood necessary to keep the gods content and reconciled to those who lived under the rule of Rome was not only that of the human victims of Roman violence, but also that of the slaughtered animals offered up to the gods by the pious Caesar and other priests who acted under his authority and in his name.

According to Jewish thought, however, those whom God had put forward to fulfill the role of mediator and *hilastērion* were the priests of Israel, and in particular Israel's high priest. It was through their intercessions and the sacrificial offerings they presented that they obtained God's favor and blessings, not only for the Jewish people throughout the empire, but also for the empire as a whole and even for the emperor himself. Sacrificial blood was also the means by which the priests of Israel expiated the people's sins and put away God's wrath at those sins, yet because all those Jews who participated in the sacrificial worship carried out at the Jerusalem temple through their prayers, offerings, tithes, and the payment of the temple tax thereby made that worship their own, they too contributed to the sacrificial bloodshed. From the perspective of many Jews, their support for

the prayers and sacrifices offered up to God on behalf of the emperor and the empire also played a vital role in perpetuating and safeguarding the benevolent rule of Rome.

Whether it was Caesar or Israel's high priest who was regarded as the one whom God had put forward as *hilastērion* in order to obtain God's blessings, favor, and forgiveness through the shedding and offering of blood, the sacrificial activity carried out under that *hilastērion* was *just as much political as it was religious*. Both the Roman imperial theology and the Jewish theology that validated the worship of Israel's God through the high priests subservient to Rome ultimately served to sanction and sacralize a *political, social, and economic system* that kept itself in place by shedding blood and crucifying "sinners."

As I make clear in Chapter 12 of *JDNTT*, in Rom. 3:25 Paul does not affirm that Jesus' death expiated sins or propitiated God's wrath. It is not *Jesus' blood* that constitutes the *hilastērion* put forward by God, but *Jesus himself through his blood*. By being faithful to the task given him of bringing into existence and consolidating a people committed to practicing the justice of God all the way to his death, Jesus obtained God's acceptance of all who now form part of that people, in spite of their sins, and has been established at God's right hand as the one who continues to serve as the means through whom God brings believers into conformity with his will and grants them the forgiveness of their sins.

In other words, through Jesus and his willingness to give up his life so that all that God had sought to bring about through him might become a reality, God has provided the world with a *hilastērion* who constitutes an alternative to those who are falsely regarded

as fulfilling the role of *hilastērion* in relation to God or the gods. Those who now look to Jesus as the one whom God has established as mediator through his life, death, and resurrection find in him a *hilastērion*-by-faith. They can have full assurance that God accepts them as just and righteous, offers them forgiveness, and puts away his wrath at their sins because their faith in Jesus as Lord brings about in them the life of justice and righteousness that neither the Jewish law alone nor Roman rule or law could produce. Furthermore, their submission to *Jesus* as God's representative rather than to Caesar or the Jerusalem hierarchy enables them to participate in a community and a system that is *thoroughly political in nature*, since this participation involves a rejection of the predominant, oppressive political system associated with Rome and the Jerusalem high priesthood and a resistance to all of the injustice and bloodshed which that system represents and perpetuates. They now deposit their *pistis* or *fides* in Jesus and the God he called "Father" so as to practice the true *dikaioσynē* or *ius* – that of God – rather than that of Rome and those who submit obediently to Rome's rule as if it were God's own.

These same ideas lie behind Paul's affirmation that through Jesus' blood God put Jesus forward for the world as a *hilastērion*-through-faith "in order to manifest his justice, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed – to manifest his justice in the present time, so that he might be just and might justify all who live out of faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26). The logic here is the same that we find in Acts 17:30, where Luke presents Paul as affirming that, "while God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, he now commands all

people everywhere to repent." The reason God had overlooked or tolerated human sinfulness in the past was that he had not yet manifested fully to the world the just and righteous way of living he desires and commands of all. He could hardly have expected people to live in accordance with his justice and righteousness if he had not made that justice and righteousness known fully or made it possible for people to live such a life. This has changed, however, now that he has sent Jesus to be the *hilastērion*-through-faith for all people and established him in that role as a result of his faithfulness unto death to his God-given task of bringing into existence a new community of people wholeheartedly committed to practicing the justice of God. God wished to manifest his justice, not merely in the sense of showing his faithfulness to his promises (although Paul may also have had this idea in mind), nor in the sense of showing that he does not leave sin unpunished or graciously declares undeserving sinners "not guilty" or righteous, but in the sense of bringing about in people a way of life that is truly just and righteous. This happens as they live their lives grounded in their faith in Jesus and all that he signifies and represents (*ek pisteōs Iēsou*, "Jesus-faith"). That new life, which is from beginning to end brought about by God's grace rather than human works or efforts, constitutes the basis upon which God accepts believers as just and righteous, even though they are far from perfect and still depend on Christ as the one who mediates their relationship with God.

Paul's repeated allusions to Jesus' death in Romans 5 and 6 must also be understood on the basis of the idea that Jesus died as a result of his dedication to the task of bringing into existence a community of resistance,

discernment, and solidarity in which all would be committed to practicing the justice of God rather than conforming their lives to the "justice" imposed by Rome. Contrary to what Neil affirms, Paul does not ascribe any expiatory significance to Jesus' death in Rom. 5:6-11. Jesus died for the ungodly and sinners, not in the sense that his death expiated or made atonement for their sins, but in the sense that he was willing to pay the ultimate price, that of his own life, in order that through him alternative communities such as that which now existed in Rome might be brought into existence. These communities would be characterized by a commitment to God's justice, not only because the love of God would be poured into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), but also because the love of others that led Jesus to offer up his life so that such communities might become a reality would constitute the foundation and lifeblood of those communities. Therefore, by definition, any who through faith come to identify themselves as members of the communities that Christ gave his life to establish also identify with the love of Christ for others that is the very *raison d'être* of those communities and makes them not merely *religious* but *political* in nature, since they serve as instruments for God's justice in the world.

For Paul, believers are "justified in (or by means of) Jesus' blood" (Rom. 5:9) in the sense that, as they identify with the love and commitment to God's justice that led Christ to give up his life so that they and others might be integrated into a community characterized by that same love and commitment to justice, they not only begin to practice that justice but are graciously accepted as just and righteous by God. The basis for this gracious acceptance is precisely that their faith in Christ as their

Lord leads them to live under his lordship and thus to live according to his will, even though they remain in constant need of divine forgiveness. As long as they adhere to Christ in faith, however, God overlooks their sin, knowing that they sin against their own will and that they long to be freed completely of that sin so as to be perfected in justice. Their relationship to Christ brings God to forgive the sins they continue to commit, since that relationship ensures that Christ will eventually transform them into the people that God wants them to be and the people that they themselves wish to be for their own good. Because God has gone to such great lengths to make them into the people they are now becoming, even to the point of giving his Son over to death, they know that they "will be saved through Christ from the wrath of God" (5:9). God would hardly have paid such a high price to bring them into the community of which they now form part only then to condemn or destroy them.

All of this is also profoundly political. While their identification with Jesus' blood and cross makes them acceptable to God and just and righteous in God's eyes, at the same time it makes them *unacceptable, unrighteous sinners* in the eyes of the powers of this world, who accuse them of *subverting* the justice that their system promotes rather than upholding it. Those powers define love for neighbor in terms of unconditional loyalty and unquestioning obedience to the political and religious authorities who according to the theology of empire have been given the responsibility of defending the divinely-sanctioned and thus "holy" system. This blasphemous self-identification with the God of heaven and earth and the injustice and bloodshed it fosters is precisely what

provokes the “wrath of God” from which believers will be saved. It is *that* wrath, rather than the wrath of the oppressive rulers and their system, that is to be feared and in fact even yearned for, since it alone will bring the true justice and true peace that the entire creation “awaits with eager longing” (Rom. 8:19-23).

According to Roman imperial theology, Rome had reconciled the world to God or the gods by imposing its dominion over its enemies, who as enemies of Rome were by definition also enemies of the gods. Rome had also “reconciled” these enemies to itself and to one another within the empire by imposing its own brand of “peace” through bloodshed. According to Paul, however, it is *believers in Christ* who have truly been “reconciled to God,” and the means through which this has taken place is “the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). This is because, by remaining faithful to the end to his God-given task of laying the basis for a community in which all would live in true peace with God and one another, Jesus has now made it possible for that community to exist and for the believers in Rome to form part of it. This too is political rather than expiatory theology. Now reconciled to God through their adherence to Jesus as their crucified and risen Lord, they will also be “saved by his life” (5:10) in the sense that they will be delivered both partially in the present and fully in the future from the oppressive system and powers that seek to enslave them, as well as from their own sinful collusion with that system and those powers. What makes this deliverance possible is the fact that their crucified Lord is also a living Lord who brings their lives to conform to his and promises to bring an end some day to the oppressive system that they now struggle to resist.

Thanks to Jesus’ own commitment to justice and to bringing about in others that same commitment, even at the cost of his life, and thanks to the fact that God responded to Jesus’ faithfulness to that commitment by raising him from the dead, Paul can assure his Roman readers that “the abundance of grace and the free gift of justice and righteousness” that they receive will enable them to “exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ,” and to obtain the “justification of life” that God intends and has now made accessible for all people everywhere through Christ by sending out his apostles into the entire world (*eis pantas anthrōpous*, Rom. 5:18-19). His obedience to the task of making it possible for others to live a life of justice and righteousness through everything he did and on that basis to be justified before God has ensured that “many will be made just and righteous” (5:19). It is therefore not obedience to the rule of Rome or the Jewish law in itself that makes people just and righteous in God’s eyes, but the “obedience of faith” which looks to God and his Son in order to receive as a gracious gift a life that conforms to the justice of God to which the law and the prophets attested (Rom. 1:5; 3:21-22; 5:19-21; 16:26).

Neil’s affirmation that “the atoning significance of Jesus’ death disappears in Romans 6” is correct in that Paul does not ascribe atoning significance to Jesus’ death in that chapter, but also incorrect in that it presupposes that such an interpretation of Jesus’ death *does indeed* appear in the previous chapters of Paul’s epistle. I believe that Neil also errs in affirming that in Romans 6 Paul speaks of “an apocalyptic scheme of fields of power” (LR 129). For Paul, it is not Jesus’ death and resurrection in themselves that possess a power to cause Christians to die to

the dominion of sin, enables the baptized to “walk in newness of life” and “live to Christ Jesus,” or transfers believers “from the cosmic sphere of the power of sin and death to the sphere of God’s justifying, sanctifying, and life-giving power.” Nor is it faithful to Paul’s thought to speak of a “life-giving power unleashed by the death and resurrection of Jesus....” (LR 129). God did not send Jesus to die nor raise him from the dead so that those events might exert some type of mysterious power or influence on people or create some new invisible “sphere” or “realm” in which they might now live or enter. The practice of sending people to the cross for the purpose of creating a powerful impact on the populace was that of Rome, not the God of Jesus or Paul. Believers did not participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection through some type of mystical union so as to be transferred from “the cosmic sphere” in which sin and death reign into some other “divine” sphere that is independent from the “cosmic sphere” or located outside of that sphere.

Rather, according to Romans 6, believers attain true life as through faith and baptism they identify, not (strictly speaking) with Jesus’ death *per se*, but with the life he lived to God and the denunciation and rejection of sin that ultimately led to his death. What God sought was not that his Son die on a cross so that, once raised, his death might have an impact on people, unleash some life-giving power upon them, or transfer them into some supernatural sphere. Rather, what God sought was to establish through his Son a community of people who would be committed to breaking with sin so as to practice God’s justice in love. His goal was that they cease to live as slaves to sin and no longer dedicate their bodies to sin and injustice in order to

present themselves instead to God in body and soul as instruments of God’s justice (Rom. 6:10-23). It is not the cross itself or even the cross and resurrection taken together that brings about in them this new life. Rather, it is God himself, working through the crucified and risen Jesus, his Spirit, and the community of believers, who enables them to cease to be slaves to sin and injustice in order to become slaves of God and of justice and righteousness. Believers are not called to commit themselves to the cross, trust in the cross for salvation, or conform their lives to the cross; they are called to commit themselves to their crucified Lord, trust in him for salvation, and conform their lives to that which he lived on earth and now continues to live from heaven. It is *Jesus*, not his crucifixion and resurrection, who is life-giving (1 Cor. 15:45), though he has *become* life-giving *by means of* his willingness to give up his life so that this new community of resistance, discernment, and solidarity might now exist. It is not the cross that is the “power of God,” but the crucified and risen Jesus himself (*estaurōmenos*, 1 Cor. 1:23-24), yet he constitutes and possesses that power precisely because of the love that led him to give his life so that a community in which that same love would reign supreme might now exist, a community in which all receive from him the power necessary to stand in opposition and resistance to the sinful systems of this world that enslave and crucify people.

It was not God, therefore, who had Jesus crucified in order to effect some change in human beings, reveal something to them, or make it possible for him to declare believers righteous or forgiven. In Paul’s thought, there was no “divine purpose” to the cross. God did not send his Son to the cross for the purpose of showing people how much he loves them,

inspiring them to greater love, laying down an example for them to imitate, or revealing some important truth to them, even though by handing his Son over to death, God did in fact bring all these things to pass. To affirm that God had his Son crucified for some such purpose, such as to impact the lives of people, appease his own wrath, or satisfy divine justice would make of God a crucifier akin to the Romans, who sought to achieve their “benevolent” purposes by crucifying people.

Undoubtedly, in Paul's thought, God gave his Son over to those who crucified them, as Rom. 8:32 and perhaps 4:25 affirm. Yet it is important to understand the logic behind this idea. God had sent his Son to bring into existence a worldwide community of people fully committed to living in love, justice, and solidarity under Jesus' lordship (that is, the *ekklesia* of which Paul repeatedly speaks). The conflict that Jesus' absolute dedication to that task generated in relation to the powers of his day reached the point where both Jesus and God had to choose between putting an end to Jesus' activity in order to avoid crucifixion—in which case the community God desired to establish would never become a reality or take the form that God wanted it to take—or having Jesus continue to carry out boldly that activity, in which case he would end up on a Roman cross. God chose the latter alternative and willed that his Son do the same, while for his part Jesus submitted obediently to that will. *Only in this way could such a community be brought into existence.* How could God withhold his Son and act to “spare” him while at the same time calling on people everywhere to be committed to living a life whose very essence is love, justice, and solidarity that know no bounds or limits and hold nothing back? How could God demand that others be

willing to pay any price in seeking wholeness and well-being for all when God himself was unwilling to do so?<sup>15</sup> How could Jesus in effect say to his followers, “You must be willing to love others so much that if necessary you would give up your life for them, both figuratively and at times even literally,” if Jesus himself was not willing to love others in the same way and to the same extent? In that case, whatever community might have resulted from his ministry would certainly not have had an unswerving commitment to justice, solidarity, and the well-being of all as its primary and defining characteristic.

Thus, while in Paul's thought God handed his Son over to be crucified, he did not do so because in itself Jesus' crucifixion would accomplish some purpose or objective. Rather, he did so because the purpose or objective he sought to accomplish—that of establishing the alternative community he desired to see—could be achieved only by delivering his Son up rather than holding him back. Similarly, Jesus by no means sought to be crucified, as if his crucifixion would serve some good purpose. Nevertheless, he embraced the cross

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<sup>15</sup> As I affirm in Thesis 24 of my *94 Theses*, “For God to have intervened to save Jesus from being crucified by taking him up into heaven before that could happen would have been tantamount to God saying to the world, ‘I love you all very much and I want you to love one another, but when your activity on behalf of others leads to the threat of suffering and death at the hands of others, then stop immediately what you are doing and run as fast as you can to a safe place where you can hide out permanently so that no one can ever bother you again.’ From my perspective, a God who really loves us could never ever say such a thing. If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than his?”

rather than fleeing from it because otherwise the type of community he had dedicated himself to bringing into existence would never become a reality. Jesus' willingness to give up his life undoubtedly revealed his love and that of God, provided an example of absolute dedication to God's will for all to imitate, and inspired his followers to love others without holding anything back, yet his objective was not to get crucified so that these things might be brought about. Jesus accepted death on a cross *because of* his commitment to these things, and he undoubtedly accomplished them *by means of* his death or blood, yet he never sought death or crucifixion as a means to accomplish them. While his death was exemplary and inspiring and revealed his love and that of God for the world, it was not a suicide; and had it been a suicide, it would not have been exemplary or inspiring or have revealed the love of Jesus or God for anyone. On the contrary, it would have been a sick and detestable act on the part of both God and Jesus.

We may understand this same truth by looking to Paul's ministry.<sup>16</sup> Paul's objective in traveling throughout the world, proclaiming the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus, and writing letters to the communities and people he sought to serve was to carry on Jesus' same work of establishing and consolidating communities of resistance, discernment, and solidarity such as those described by Neil. Paul was willing to suffer endless hardships and even pay the price of his life in order to accomplish that objective. In this regard, he too provided an example for others to imitate,

inspired others to commit themselves to the same type of solidarity, and revealed to others his own love for them as well as that of God and Christ his Lord. Yet he never sought to be beaten, imprisoned, stoned, or killed, thinking that in that way he would show others how much he loved them and bring them to see him as an inspiring and exemplary figure to be emulated. On the contrary, he did everything in his power to remain alive and well so as continue to spread his gospel, though at the same time he refused to do anything that might compromise or deny that gospel. It was this, and not his suffering in itself, that was exemplary and inspiring and revealed to all his love.

Once these things are clear, it also becomes evident that N. T. Wright's interpretation of Gal. 3:13 runs totally contrary to Paul's thought and makes God a crucifier. If God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel had led him to have his people endure exile at the hands of foreign powers so that they might be brought to put away their sinful ways and practice the justice and righteousness he desired and commanded of them, then God would only bring that exile to an end when he deemed that the change of heart and life that he desired to see in his people had or would finally become a reality. It is therefore sheer nonsense to affirm that, in Paul's thought, God brought the curse of exile to an end by having Jesus endure that curse in the place of others in the form of death by crucifixion or to claim that, since Jesus as Messiah "embodied" those under that curse, they have now endured it as well and on that basis are no longer subject to it

For Paul, what was necessary for people to be saved from "the curse of the law" or any

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<sup>16</sup> On what follows, see especially the last section of Chapter 11 of *JDNTT*, "The Sufferings and Death of Jesus and Paul."



type of “exile” was not that a messianic substitute or representative endure that curse or exile in their place—what good would that do anyone, or how would it serve justice?—but that they be brought to live in conformity with God’s will and be enabled to practice God’s justice. God sent his Son at the “right time” so that he might dedicate himself to serving as God’s instrument to accomplish that objective, redeeming people from their slavery to sin and injustice so that they might live as his own (Gal. 4:4). Jesus’ total dedication to that task eventually put him in a position in which he had to choose between putting an end to his activity aimed at seeing God’s promises brought to fulfillment through him or enduring a type of death upon which the law of Moses had pronounced a curse. He chose the latter, since only by embracing such a death rather than seeking to evade it could all that he had lived for and was willing to die for become a reality.

In this way, he “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). His willingness to pay the ultimate price to bring about such a community led God to raise him as Lord over that community, so that now through him, “the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles,” and those forming part of that community marked forever by the love of their Lord “might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14). In other words, by being faithful even to the point of giving up his life to his God-given task of laying the foundation for a worldwide community of people committed to practicing God’s justice under his lordship and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus made it possible for them to cease to live as slaves to the “weak and beggarly” systems and powers

of the “present evil age” and instead live in freedom as children of God (Gal. 1:4; 3:6–4:10). The reason that this is now possible is that Jesus has been enthroned as Lord at God’s side as a result of his total commitment and obedience to God’s will for others and is therefore able to transform the lives of believers through his past, present, and future activity until the time comes when their “hope for justice” is fulfilled in its entirety (Gal. 5:5).

The same ideas are reflected in Paul’s affirmation that “for our sake,” God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the justice of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Contrary to what Wright has argued, Paul is not claiming that believers become God’s “covenant faithfulness,”<sup>17</sup> but that those who adhere to Christ in faith come to practice and embody the justice that characterizes God’s activity in the world as well as the just and righteous way of life that he desires to see in all. This new reality is possible thanks to God’s sending of his Son to serve as his instrument to bring about a community dedicated to living out that justice and his willingness to hand his Son over to death on a cross as if he were a sinner so that he might continue to serve as God’s instrument through his death and resurrection, rather than having him put an end to his activity on behalf of others in order to avoid the suffering of the cross.

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In the end, while Neil captures and articulates extremely well the fact that Paul understood Jesus’ crucifixion as revealing and

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<sup>17</sup> N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God, 2 Cor. 5:21,” in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 2: *1 & 2 Corinthians* (ed. David Hay; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 200-208.

unmasking the “extreme brutality” and “systemic violence” of Rome and the powers aligned with it, his contention that the cross “by itself shows only the power of violence” (LP 118) leaves him unable to ascribe any positive meaning to the cross other than as an expiatory and atoning sacrifice for sins. Yet, for very good reasons, this latter idea is one that makes him extremely uncomfortable. Nevertheless, because such an interpretation of Jesus’ death has become so deeply entrenched in New Testament scholarship over the centuries, Neil finds it impossible to claim that it does not appear in Paul’s epistles. Therefore, like other scholars who find that interpretation highly problematic, he reluctantly ascribes it to Paul, reiterating the common claim that Paul was merely repeating an idea he had inherited from the tradition handed down to him, apparently with the same reluctance, as “its first critic,” since it did not reflect his own understanding of Jesus’ death.

Neil does hint at another positive meaning that may be ascribed to the cross: that of “God’s compassionate solidarity with the crucified people” (LP 180). At the same time, however, he affirms that such an idea is “unrealistic” today, as it was in Paul’s day. Such an understanding of the cross is also problematic in that it simply reduces God to the rank of one more crucified victim alongside countless others. What those being crucified need is not a fellow victim to “sympathize” or “commiserate” with them, but a liberator to chop down the cross, pull out the nails, and provide them with what they need for their wounds to be healed and their strength restored.

Of course, Neil does consider the cross to be liberating if it is viewed in combination with Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation as Lord. The problem, however, is that, following other New Testament scholars, he finds the concept of Jesus’ lordship or “kyriarchy” just as oppressive as it is liberating, if not more so. In AN, he suggests that Paul saw in Jesus’ lordship simply another version of the lordship of emperors such as Augustus, affirming that we must “recognize the thoroughly kyriarchal texture of his rhetoric in Romans as the effect of the ideological constraints of Roman imperialism” (AN 52). He then continues:

But, if for Paul, God is the source of the world’s coming liberation, *God is also the one who has imposed the present subjection* (8:20). Here we see the constraining power of kyriarchal ideology upon Paul’s thought. At least implicitly, he opposes the reigning kyriarchy of Rome, and can speak with fervor of a coming liberation from it. But he seems incapable of imagining the end of Roman kyriarchy without describing the ascendancy of a new and better kyriarchy, that of the Messiah, the *kyrios*, who will subdue and rule, *archein*, over the nations with justice. He cannot describe the steps the elect might take toward the day of liberation; theirs is only to “wait for it with patience” (8:25). He does not dwell on the social characteristics of a redeemed world, and never describes the “glorious liberation” of the children of God as a realm of absolute freedom. A world without kyriarchy is for Paul *almost* unutterable (AN 52).

According to Neil, the problem with such kyriarchal thinking is that it still requires constraint, obedience, and submission rather

than offering people “absolute freedom” (AN 53). Like the Roman emperor, God threatens with violence any who do not submit to his reign. In reality, this makes oppressors of both God and his “viceregent” Christ, the risen and exalted Lord who sits at God’s side.

Nevertheless, while on the one hand Neil criticizes Paul’s kyriarchal thinking, on the other he justifies it by claiming that the social and political context in which Paul lived made it impossible for him to think in non-kyriarchal terms. In a situation in which the only theology or ideology that exists is imperial, Paul had no choice but to conceive of Christ as a *kyrios*, albeit one who was distinct from Caesar (AN 157). “Paul’s confidence in the inevitability of a just future, the future of the Messiah, was constrained by the kyriarchal ideology of the Roman tributary order, and these constraints prevented him from assigning a significant historical agency to the poor” (AN 164). On this basis, Neil concludes: “I submit that the kyriarchal constraints on Paul’s thinking are constraints we cannot afford to perpetuate.” Even though Paul called on believers to question the imperial ideology of Rome and exhorted them to solidarity with the poor, these things could at best “point in the direction of an alternative civilization,” yet they could not bring such a civilization about: “because of the kyriarchal constraints on his thinking, Paul never ascribed to these efforts the power to bring about another world” (AN 164). Thus “Paul’s messianic convictions precluded just the sort of reflection on historical agency that is needed today” (AN 166).

Here we run into the same problems we have seen previously. According to Neil, because for Paul Jesus’ death on the cross “by

*itself shows only the power of violence*” (LP 118) and serves primarily to reveal the cruelty and brutality that powers such as Rome employ in order to impose on others their own perverse version of *ius*, *pax*, and *securitas*, only the power of resurrection can liberate the oppressed. Yet because this resurrection lies in the future, *beyond* the realm of history, it cannot liberate us now or bring about a world of “absolute freedom,” and thus is of little help for us in our present struggles for a different world. All that Neil’s Paul can tell us is to wait patiently for God to bring about the longed-for liberation. Rather than leading us to reflect on the “historical agency that is needed today,” his “gospel” of the crucified and risen Lord can only preclude such reflection. Such a “gospel” can only teach us what we already know—that empires and their theology crucify people and call this “justice”—and inspire hopes regarding a better future that lies beyond history, outside of our reach.

It almost seems that for Neil we must improve on Paul’s gospel by making up our own that will correct the deficiencies inherent to his. We appear to be better off listening to “the prophets in our own day” than to Paul, apparently because, unlike Paul, they “advocate and militate for the sort of structural change that is so urgently needed” (AN 166). To be sure, Paul’s message of a crucified Messiah can be of some help to us, as long as we realize that “we must yield to his appeal for solidarity with the oppressed. We must answer his call for resistance to the sacred routines legitimating the course of empire” (LP 230). Yet we could probably learn the same thing just as well from our modern-day prophets, and even the Maccabean martyrs or figures such as Judas of Galilee,

whose “resolute call for defiance in the face of torture anticipates by twenty centuries the program of nonviolent resistance outlined by Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others...” (LP 154; see 149-75).

Ultimately, then, not only does Paul’s proclamation regarding the cross seem to be of little value for us in our present contexts, but the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection and lordship as well. In fact, from Neil’s perspective, such a proclamation can lead to oppression, passivity, and conformity with the present historical reality rather than promoting liberation and solidarity.

What then is the solution? Apparently, for Neil it is to take God and Jesus off of the cross and keep them at a good distance from that cross. In other words, we must “decrucify” or “uncrucify” not only Jesus but God as well. One way to do this is to emphasize Jesus’ resurrection rather than his crucifixion as the *true* act of liberation that points us to the imminent (but not yet present) defeat of the “Powers,” as Neil does (LP 123-24). Yet we have already seen the problem with this solution: it cannot truly transform the here and now.

A second way is to do away with any Pauline passages that affirm that Jesus’ crucifixion represents a victory over the evil powers by claiming that those passages are actually pseudo-Pauline forgeries. Such passages are unacceptable because to affirm “that the cross itself is God’s triumph risks mystifying the violence of crucifixion into a distinctly otherworldly, spiritual ‘victory’” (LP 118); “their theology is inherently liable to an otherworldly spiritualization that distracts us from the web of this-worldly power relations, or else baptizes those power relations as

already ‘obedient’ to Christ” (LP 121). It would appear that the cross represents only a *defeat* for God and Jesus, albeit one which God reversed shortly thereafter by raising Jesus and taking him as far away as possible from Golgotha into heaven.

A third yet closely-related way of distancing God and Jesus from the cross is by eliminating as much as possible, not from Paul’s letters, but from our *reading* of Paul’s letters, any mention of a connection between the cross and the love of God and Christ. After all, to see Jesus’ willingness to give up his life on a cross as well as God’s willingness to give up his Son to death on the cross as expressions of love would imply that to let others crucify us is an act of love.

Thus, for example, we may quote at length Rom. 8:15, 18, 31-39 to argue that Paul was willing to “live under a constant threat, facing death daily” because he believed that “the power of death was broken for all in whom ‘the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives’ (Rom. 8:11),” and then on that basis affirm that he encouraged resistance to Roman cruelty (LP 173-74). Yet in doing so, evidently we should follow Neil in omitting v. 32 of that passage, which lies at its very heart: “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” Why does Neil omit this verse – and *only* this verse – from his lengthy citation of Paul’s words in Rom. 8:31-39? The only reason I can discern is to keep God at a distance from the cross: for God to deliver up his Son to death would be to subject him to Rome’s cruelty, and thus to call on others to subject themselves in the same way, rather than to resist that cruelty. In spite of the fact that throughout the passage Paul is

emphasizing the immensity of God's love for believers, he must either have misunderstood what true love is about or have had a twisted understanding of love that is unacceptable today, perhaps even considering God as a "divine child abuser." Unfortunately, "Paul apparently could not conceive, as Girard does, the inherent inadequacy of all sacrificial thinking" (LP 131). So perhaps we would be better off reading René Girard than Paul, at least on the subject of sacrifice.

The same uneasiness with Paul's understanding of Jesus' death as an expression of the love of God and Jesus himself must lie behind the fact that, after looking repeatedly for allusions to Jesus' death in the 166 pages of the main text of *The Arrogance of Nations*, I was able to find only four allusions to that event or anything related to the idea of crucifixion. This was especially surprising given the fact that Neil discusses extensively there topics such as Roman imperial ideology (a term he suddenly prefers to "theology"), Paul's language of "redemption," his subversion of the imperial gospel, his contrast between Christ and Caesar, the Roman imperial understanding of mercy (*clementia*) and pardon, Augustus's claim to be the "supreme officiant in sacrifice" as the *pontifex maximus*, and the brutality of Rome and its tax agents, who "sought to extract impossible burdens from the wretchedly poor through mass kidnappings, public torture and executions of family members, even holding for ransom the bodies of murdered relatives on threat of mutilating them savagely" (AN 93; see 53, 63, 72-73, 79, 87-91, 122-28). Astonishingly, Neil does not even mention Jesus' death when he discusses Jon Sobrino's observations regarding the "incredible silence" in both Latin America and the "world

of the north" regarding martyrdom, that is, the way in which martyrs are "ignored" (AN 161). Why would one not wish to mention Jesus' violent death at the hands of the murderous powers of his own day when insisting that we must not keep silent in our own day regarding martyrdom or ignore the death of the martyrs that our murderous systems continue to generate?

The reason why Neil alludes so infrequently to the cross in AN does not appear to be any type of "shame" over it. On the contrary, discussing Rom. 1:16, he notes that "Robert Jewett writes that Paul here is refusing the shame that Roman culture would have attributed to him as the apostle of a crucified man. Paul's sharply ironic language regarding 'the shame of the cross' in 1 Cor. 1:18-31 shows that he rejected the definitions of honor and shame current among the Roman elite" (AN 51).

I suspect that the reasons for Neil's reticence regarding the cross in AN is related to the interpretations of passages such as Rom. 3:21-26 that have continued to prevail among biblical scholars. Reflecting once again his discomfort with notions such as expiation, sacrifice, and atonement, he touches on this passage only once in his book, where he writes:

The "expiation" achieved in Christ's blood is not an expression of divine forbearance, but an *end* to God's forbearance of *previous* sins that were "passed over" but will be no longer (3:21-26). Now, God justifies—sets persons right—out of the faithfulness of Christ in which they have been made to participate; this demonstrates God's justice in a way that previous divine forbearance did not, as the clauses in 3:25-26 make clear (AN 100).

Precisely how this is “clear” is for me “unclear.” His allusion to believers being “made to participate” in “the faithfulness of Christ” reflects the participatory soteriology so common among Pauline scholars today, which I have criticized rotundly in Chapter 11 of *JDNTT*. The implication here is that Christ’s objective in suffering and dying was to generate some type of “faithfulness” that might enable others to be justified by “participating” in it. It is as if God had said, “Son, I want you to be faithful [though exactly to whom or to what is not clear] by letting yourself be crucified so that others can then participate in your faithfulness, since I require absolute and perfect faithfulness, and any faithfulness that people may produce on their own is not good enough for me. Thus I cannot and will not justify or set right any who strive to be faithful by their own power, no matter how hard they try or how great a degree of faithfulness they may attain, but only those who participate in your perfect faithfulness.” Here again we have a God who in essence crucifies his Son, evidently because only in that way will his justice allow him to justify anyone. My best guess as to Neil’s logic here is that he is claiming that, in Paul’s thought, the idea that Christ’s blood made expiation for sins shows, not that God now “passes over” sins and injustice, but rather that God will do so no longer, since he now demands and expects all to participate in Christ’s faithfulness. Even so, that logic continues to escape me.

On p. 137 of *AN*, Neil alludes to “the unique role of Christ’s sacrifice as the event that makes it possible for new members to be incorporated into the community of Abraham’s descendants.” He also contrasts there “Augustus the pious, whose vengeance

against his father’s murderers secured peace for all who share ritually in his sacrifice,” with “Christ, whose death made possible the incorporation of ‘many nations’ as Abraham’s descendants.” Exactly *how* Christ’s sacrificial death makes it possible for people of other nations to be incorporated in the community of Abraham’s descendants is by no means clear, and Neil offers no further explanation.

Discussing Rom. 14:1–15:13, where Paul addresses the “issue between ‘weak’ and ‘strong,’” Neil insists that we must not read into this passage the idea of “Christ’s cancellation of the law (either by his word, Mark 7:19, or through his death, Eph. 2:11–16)” (*AN* 151). His only concern here appears to be that we not read back into Romans an idea from one of the “pseudo-Pauline forgeries” that actually run contrary to Paul’s thought. Evidently, for Neil Paul’s affirmation that one must not let what one eats “cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15) and his apparent reference to the insults Christ endured in his passion and death in Rom. 15:3 are not important enough to mention, just as Paul’s repeated allusions to Jesus’ death for others and the death of believers to sin in Rom. 4:25–6:14 are apparently for Neil virtually irrelevant to the discussion of Paul’s argument in Romans.

Try as I might, I could find no passages in either *LP* or *AN* in which Neil relates explicitly Jesus’ death to his love for others or the love of God for all. Undoubtedly, he relates Jesus’ death to his solidarity with other victims of crucifixion and speaks of “God’s compassionate solidarity with the crucified people” (*LP* 180), as noted above, yet this seems to involve solidarity with their suffering rather than a solidarity that seeks actively to transform the

lives of others through a love that takes constructive forms through historical agency. While he certainly stresses this latter idea as well in his books, I do not find him grounding it in Paul's theology of the cross. He also sees Jesus' death in terms of a resistance to the powers of evil and injustice that appears to encourage and empower others to practice the same type of resistance, yet Neil never explicitly identifies this as an act of love on Jesus' part. Whereas Paul repeatedly sees in Jesus' death "for others" an act of love on the part of both God and Jesus himself (Rom. 5:6-11; 8:32; 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:11; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 2:1-8; 1 Thess. 5:9-10), these passages merit little if any attention or discussion on Neil's part, not even in *Liberating Paul*, where Neil insists that the cross lies "at the heart of Paul's proclamation" (LP 227).

One could, of course, argue that Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the brutal system imposed by Rome is omnipresent throughout *AN*, even though Neil rarely alludes to it explicitly. When I read his book, in fact, I do see allusions to it everywhere. I think, however, that the main reason why Neil prefers to avoid not only discussions regarding Jesus' cross in his book on Romans but also the mention of "love" in relation to the cross in *LP* is to be found in what I have written in my Conclusion to *JDNTT*:

For the same reason, in the churches in which the penal substitution interpretation of Jesus' death that has prevailed in the West since Reformation times is no longer proclaimed, it is extremely rare to hear biblical phrases such as those just cited except when they are found in a reading from Scripture. Because those phrases have almost invariably been understood on the

basis of the idea of penal substitution, rather than being heard as allusions to the love of God and of Christ, they instead evoke the image of a God of strict holiness and justice whose wrath at human sin could be appeased only by sending his Son to die on a cross. Rather than being a God of pure and unconditional love, such a God is concerned primarily that human sin receive its due punishment. Supposedly, his "love" leads him to inflict the punishment we deserved on his Son instead of inflicting it on us, and it is expected that believers be grateful to this God for delivering them from his own wrath....

How sad and tragic it is that the expressions that the first believers used to voice their awe and admiration at the immensity of the love of God and Christ have now come to be understood as expressing the exact opposite, communicating the idea of an oppressive, tyrannical God whose righteous wrath can be placated only with the blood of his Son! The misuse of the biblical expressions and New Testament formulas that refer to Christ dying for us and for our sins has made it impossible for them to be used today to articulate the ideas that were originally behind those expressions and formulas—ideas that deeply transformed people's lives and led to communities whose primary characteristic was the unconditional love of which the New Testament repeatedly speaks (*JDNTT* 1255-56).

Only when we see Jesus' death on the cross as the consequence of his unbending and uncompromising commitment to establishing and solidifying a worldwide community that is also characterized by an unbending and uncompromising commitment to the "justice of God"—that is, the just and righteous way of

being that characterizes God and Jesus and is to characterize each of us as well—can we rightly see the cross as the supreme symbol of the love of God and Christ, as Paul did. Furthermore, we then come to understand that for Paul the “kyriarchy” of the crucified Christ is not merely a “new and better version” of the type of “kyriarchy” of Rome and its emperors, but its most radical antithesis.

As I argue in Chapter 6 of *JDNTT* in response to the claims of Richard Horsley, Warren Carter, and Tat-Siong Benny Liew that the New Testament idea that all are now to submit obediently to the sovereign lordship of the risen Christ tends to promote and justify the same type of oppressive exclusion, imperial domination, and coercive violence associated with ancient Roman rule, I believe that this problem instead results from a misreading and misunderstanding of the New Testament and Pauline texts. There can be no doubt that the idea of Christ’s lordship or “kyriarchy” has indeed been misused and abused throughout history to perpetrate the worst kinds of injustices, oppression, and even atrocities in Christ’s name. Yet I believe we can guard against this by stressing two ideas: first, that when we see God and Christ alone as having the power and right to define and determine what true justice consists of, by definition God and Christ *cannot* promote any type of injustice or oppression. As Neil affirms, for Paul “the justice of God” is “*real justice*” (AN 51), unlike that practiced or promoted by any human being or group, including Christians themselves. For anyone else—including Paul himself, who was inevitably a sinful and oppressive human being like the rest of us—to presume to define for others what the justice of God consists of

in any particular human context or situation is to arrogate to oneself a prerogative that belongs to God alone.

If this is the case, then to submit obediently to the lordship of God and Christ—the one who as risen and exalted remains *forever crucified* as a result of his unwavering commitment to God’s justice—is by definition to submit obediently to whatever is right and just and to renounce anything that is *unjust* and oppressive.<sup>18</sup> Of course, in order to practice justice, we must seek to define it in each particular context and situation. Yet precisely for that reason we need the “kyriarchy” of a risen, living Lord who is continually active to guide and direct us, not merely through some past revelation given through the cross or some other means, but through his living Word, his living Spirit, and the living community of those who look to him and listen to him as their *kyrios* to discern together his will for today and draw from him the strength to carry out that will. In reality, “absolute freedom” does not exist. As Paul knew very well, the question is never *whether* we will submit obediently to some “lord” or serve some type of “lord” as that lord’s “slaves,” but rather *to whom or to what* we will submit obediently as our lord, that is, *which* lord we will serve as slaves (see especially

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<sup>18</sup> With regard to the question of God’s use of violence, I regard this as a problem related to that of theodicy, which from my perspective admits of no solution that is entirely satisfactory; see my book *Redeeming the Gospel: The Christian Faith Reconsidered* (Studies in Lutheran History and Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 180-85. However, on this problem I would once again point the reader to my online article “Resurrecting and Rearming the Warrior God Crucified by Gregory Boyd.”



Rom. 6:11-22). And for Paul, the only Lord who can liberate us and enable us to live freely is God, together with his Son Jesus Christ. Paradoxically, in Paul's thought, only by enslaving ourselves to God and Christ as our Lord rather than to some other lord can our slavery actually be freedom.

As I write in *JDNTT*, "The second idea that must be stressed when considering the New Testament teaching regarding the sovereignty of God and the lordship of Jesus is that no human being or human group represents or speaks for God or Jesus exclusively. The oppression and injustices to which Horsley, Carter, and Liew allude are the result of the claim that certain people represent or speak for God in a way that others do not" (*JDNTT* 386). In other words, rather than *promoting* the "kyriarchy" of others in the world, which would inevitably be oppressive, the exclusive and unique lordship of Christ as Son of God by definition *precludes* any other "kyriarchy." Thus any person, group, structure, or system—even (or *especially*) those who claim to represent a "democratic majority"—must always be *subject* to Christ's lordship rather than claiming to *personify, represent, or embody* that lordship, which would in fact constitute blasphemy.<sup>19</sup>

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How, then, are we to respond to the question posed in the title of this article, "The Liberating Crucifixion of Neil Elliott's Paul: A

Subjective or Objective Genitive?" On the basis of the reconstruction of Paul's interpretation of the cross offered by Neil, should we affirm that for Neil Paul experiences and proclaims the crucifixion of Christ and believers in Christ as something that is liberating for human beings in general and for those believers in Christ in particular? This would involve regarding the crucifixion of Neil's Paul as a *subjective* genitive, since Paul is the one who does the liberating by means of his message of the cross, according to which both the historical event of Christ's crucifixion and the crucifixion of believers with Christ through faith and baptism result in their liberation. Or should we instead understand the phrase as an objective genitive, in which case the Paul Neil presents us with is or must be liberated by being crucified, either by Neil himself or by others such as us—unless perhaps it is *we* who find liberation by crucifying Neil's Paul?

Given Neil's insistence that Jesus' crucifixion "*by itself shows only the power of violence*" and "*does not, cannot, reveal the defeat of the Powers*" (*LP* 118), since only his resurrection can do this, it would seem clear that for both Neil and the Paul whom he reconstructs, in and of itself, the crucifixion is not liberating. On the contrary, because for Paul the cross was "the signature in history of the forces that killed Jesus" (*LP* 110)—the same type of forces that kill those who struggle for what is just and right today—the cross represents the violent efforts of those in positions of power to *enslave and subjugate* others, rather than any type of liberation. According to Neil, "the nature of the cross" must be defined in terms of "historical and political oppression" (*LP* 139). Thus, while it is "thoroughly political," Paul's proclamation of the cross and the crucifixion

<sup>19</sup> In light of passages such as Eph. 5:22-24, one could question whether Paul himself or the authors of the other New Testament writings themselves were faithful to this principle, though that is a debate for another time and place.

liberates no one, except perhaps by revealing to them how oppressive violence works. Even this revelation, however, is not liberating unless those who receive it use the knowledge given them to resist the powers that seek to enslave them; and in that case, ultimately any liberation they attain is *their own work* rather than that of God, Christ, or Paul's message of the cross. This would seem to rule out understanding the "liberating crucifixion of Neil Elliott's Paul" as a subjective genitive, because for his Paul Jesus' crucifixion is *not* liberating.

However, the fact that Paul repeatedly speaks of both believers and himself suffering and being crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6-8; 8:17; Gal. 2:19-20; 6:14-17) raises the question of whether for Paul the crucifixion of *believers themselves* might be liberating. Once again, however, commenting on Romans 6, even though Neil concedes that for Paul "the significance of Jesus' death is that through baptism it causes Christians to die to the dominion of sin, just as Christ died to the dominion of sin," he insists on adding: "This new possibility is created not by the death of Christ alone, but by God's power to raise the crucified Jesus from the dead.... Through baptism, the death *and resurrection* of Christ transfers men and women from the cosmic sphere of the power of sin and death to the sphere of God's justifying, sanctifying, and life-giving power" (LP 129; the emphasis is Neil's). In fact, Neil even characterizes Paul's words about being crucified with Christ to the law in Gal. 2:19-21 as "troublesome" (LP 132). Nowhere in either of the two works under consideration does Neil speak of the crucifixion of believers with Christ as liberating in and of itself, then, or attribute such an idea to Paul.

It would appear, therefore, that we must opt for one of the objective genitive interpretations to affirm that what is liberating is the

crucifixion of the Paul whom Neil presents in his work. This too, however, is problematic. As we have seen above, for example, Neil himself feels forced to acknowledge that the "atoning," "expiatory," or "sacrificial" interpretations of Jesus' death are found in Paul's letters, despite his own rejection of such interpretations and his insistence that Paul was merely repeating—probably somewhat reluctantly—ideas that had been passed down to him: "he did not repudiate the expiatory theology he inherited," but accepted it, even though he did "reconfigure" that theology and "sought to expose and correct" its susceptibility (LP 131, 139). This seems to suggest that Neil would be in favor of "crucifying" or putting to death in a metaphorical sense the Paul who affirms such interpretations of Jesus' death insofar as he accepts those interpretations and incorporates them into his thought—or at least "crucifying" and putting to death those interpretations themselves—, and that to do so would be liberating for us. In a sense, however, the Paul who affirms and accepts such interpretations is not really *Neil's*, since Neil wishes to distance himself as far as possible from that Paul, just as those interpretations are not really *Paul's* but those of his predecessors.

Of course, I would insist once more, as I have above and in my work *JDNTT*, that the idea that Jesus' crucifixion in itself was an expiatory sacrifice that made atonement for human sins is in reality *foreign* and *contrary* to Paul's thought, as well as the thought of the New Testament as a whole. Thus I would disagree strongly with Neil and all those who attribute such an idea to Paul, though I would not want to *crucify* them in any sense. That would make me a crucifier. Instead, I would claim that it is those who ascribe such an idea to Paul who have "crucified" him in a sense in which he did not want to be crucified, since they

in essence nail the *real* Paul to a cross, thereby killing him so as to replace him with a *false* Paul of their own making. To the extent that Neil aligns himself with those interpreters of Paul, I guess I would have to say that he joins them in crucifying Paul, even though he does so with great reluctance and does his best to liberate Paul from such interpretations of Jesus' death.

Yet while he would not wish to be crucified in that way, there *is* a sense in which Paul *does* choose to be crucified, as the passages from Romans and Galatians mentioned above demonstrate. It must be stressed, however, that this is not because he regards crucifixion or being crucified with Christ as something *good in itself*. Such an idea is implied by the participatory interpretations of Paul's language of dying with Christ, which Neil unfortunately replicates by understanding what Paul says about dying with Christ in baptism in terms of undergoing a "transfer" from the sphere of the power of sin and death to the sphere of the power of God (LP 129). In that case, Paul would *want* to be crucified with Christ so as to begin the transfer from one sphere to another, just as Christ himself and the God who sent him would have *wanted* Christ to be crucified in order to make such a transfer possible for others once he had subsequently been raised. As I have shown in Chapter 11 of *JDNTT*, such an interpretation of Paul's language regarding baptism has no basis in his thought.

I would side entirely with Neil in affirming that there is nothing good or liberating about crucifixion itself, though I would add that Paul would make the same affirmation. Even though Paul repeatedly speaks of himself and Christ as "crucified," he repeatedly does so with the use of the *perfect tense*: they not only *were* crucified, but *remain* so (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; Gal. 2:19; 3:1; 6:14; cf. Rom. 6:5). It must be remembered, however, *why* Jesus and subsequently Paul were and are

crucified. Here Neil is right on the money: the reason is that both Jesus and Paul stood in opposition to the powers of this age and sought to establish the communities of "discernment," "resistance," and "solidarity" of which Neil speaks. They were crucified because they chose to stand together with those crucified by the oppressive system of their day rather than standing actively or passively with the crucifiers, whose goal was to keep that system in place.

It would therefore be unfaithful to Paul or the New Testament in general to affirm that Jesus *desired* to be crucified, and that this is something that believers are to desire as well, in company with Christ. According to Paul, the only crucifixion believers should seek is that of their sinful flesh or their old person (Rom. 6:6, 11; Gal. 5:24; cf. Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:5-9). What Jesus and Paul wanted, and believers want as well, is the *downfall* and *destruction* of the oppressive system generated by that sinful flesh and the old person associated with it. But the only way to attain this objective is to oppose, resist, and struggle against that system, and when you do so, sooner or later you will end up crucified, whether literally or metaphorically. So it is not a question of seeking death by crucifixion, as if that were good in some way. Rather, the choice is between taking a stand *against* the system and being crucified as a result, or siding *with* the system in an attempt to *avoid* crucifixion. In reality, as both Jesus and Paul knew, those who side with the system not only become *crucifiers* but also end up *crucifying themselves*, since they deprive themselves of true life in this world by excluding themselves from the communities of loving solidarity in which they would discover what true life actually consists of alongside a host of sisters and brothers committed to the well-being of all together with their own.

Because living as a member of this community under Jesus' lordship leads to true life in *this* world and not only the world to come, the condition of being "crucified with Christ"—and with Paul and all other true believers in Christ, I would add—is liberating *independently of the resurrection to come*, contrary to what Neil maintains. Of course, the resurrection makes the crucifixion of believers in this world even *more* liberating, since it provides them with the assurance that their suffering for and with others out of solidarity with them will someday give way to a new life free of suffering. But because loving solidarity with others brings in its wake not only a resurrection in the future but a crucifixion in the present, such a crucifixion *can* in fact be liberating *prior* to the resurrection, though strictly speaking it is not the crucifixion that is liberating but the solidarity of which it is the consequence.

For this reason, it is by no means "un-Pauline" or "pseudo-Pauline" to affirm that believers have *already* been raised and exalted to sit with Christ in the heavenly places and that Christ has been placed far above the powers of this world, over whom he triumphed on the cross (Eph. 1:19-23; 2:4-6; Col. 1:15-20; 2:12-15; 3:1-3). The idea behind these passages is that the powers of this world were unable to prevent him from creating the communities of discernment, resistance, and solidarity that now exist throughout the world, *not even by crucifying him*. By choosing to be crucified rather than backing down from his commitment to doing everything necessary on his part to make such communities a reality, he did indeed triumph over those powers. In fact, as Ephesians and Colossians both affirm, his death at the hands of those powers was precisely *the means by which such communities were brought into existence*, because his total commitment to laying the basis for those communities, even to the point of

enduring death on a cross, has made it impossible for any to truly form part of his "community of communities"—that is, his "body"—without assuming the same commitment to living in solidarity with others that he manifested in life and death. Those who live as members of that "body" or community can in fact be said to experience the life of the world to come at Christ's side *even now*. In that sense both they and Christ himself can be said to have overcome the powers of this world through the cross, since believers now live freely and boldly under Christ as their Lord rather than living in subjection to those powers, trembling in fear under their tyranny.

To speak in these terms is neither to "mystify" the cross nor to preclude "the sort of reflection on historical agency that is needed today" (AN 166). Rather than promoting disengagement with the realities of the present, historical world in which believers still find themselves, such an understanding of the cross impels believers in Christ to resist even more strongly the powers of this age and struggle against them. The way in which we "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1) is *not* by "mystifying the violence of crucifixion into a distinctly otherworldly, spiritual 'victory'" in a way that "distracts us from the web of this-worldly power relations" (LP 118, 121), but by taking up the "whole armor of God" to fight like hell against the "rulers," "authorities," "cosmic powers of this present darkness," and "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," all of whom wage war against human beings, not by remaining "up there" in those places out of our reach, but through their activity "down here" precisely from *within* that very "web of this-worldly power relations" (Eph. 6:12-17). And as we do so, we say to those powers what Jesus in essence told

them regarding himself, not *after* he had been raised from the dead, but *before and during his crucifixion*: "You will never make us become what you want us to be, or stop us from being who we are. You may still be able to do us great harm and even kill many of us, but you can do so only from the tarmac to which you have toppled, from which you will never rise again. Because we belong to Christ crucified, we fear you no longer and live as free people. You will never defeat us, because through our faith in him and the God who did not shrink from the cross but 'gave his Son up for us all,' it is *we* who have defeated *you* and will *continue* to defeat you by means of your own cursed crosses."

Thus to set our minds "on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2) is not to disengage from historical reality, but to dedicate all that we are and have to the objective of seeing that historical reality conform to the heavenly reality that is its goal and destiny. As I say in thesis 23 of my *94 Theses*, what Jesus wanted "was not to shed his blood, but to head up an army of rebels who will not rest until the rivers of living water that pour forth from their veins turn Golgotha into Eden." This "army of rebels" to which we belong is what he attained by means of his death on a cross, as well as through our own willingness to be "crucified" with him as we work and fight under and alongside of him to make that "heaven on earth" a reality.

Of course, we know that this new reality will never be consummated in the "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). However, that does not stop us from dedicating ourselves fully to doing whatever we can to advance toward our goal of living in a world in which people are

no longer mercilessly crucified by the powers and systems of this age. We do that, not merely by *embracing* the crosses that result from our efforts in favor of that world, but paradoxically by also *despising, disdain*ing, and *repudiating* those crosses in the sense of adamantly refusing to let the threats of crucifixion we face daily stop us from pursuing *true* justice in the world, the "justice of God" of which Paul spoke.

In reality, as Neil would remind us, the crosses we choose to bear as a result of our solidarity with others are crosses that we loathe and detest with all our heart, body, and soul in the same way that God and Jesus loathed and detested his cross. We know that when we take up the cross, it will leave us scarred and branded with its mark forever, just as it did Jesus, Paul, and all others who have embraced and carried it. As both Jesus and Paul knew very well, crosses are indeed hideous, chilling, horrific, and terrifying, and therefore are something that we must constantly seek to avoid out of love for both ourselves and others. Yet as both Jesus and Paul teach us, they are not something to be avoided *at any cost*, since there is something of much greater worth than the avoidance of crosses: the sharing in and building up of the type of communities of discernment, resistance, and solidarity of which Paul and Neil speak, communities that all the crosses and crucifixions in the world can never defeat, precisely because they defy and scorn those crosses and crucifixions and resolutely refuse to let them put a halt to their struggle to beat swords into plowshares, spears into gardening tools, and nails into rakes.

At the same time, it is important to stress that to seek this "true justice," the "justice of

God," in spite of the crosses we must endure as a consequence, is *an act of love*, not only for those crucified and oppressed *like us and with us*, but for the oppressive crucifiers as well. What this love seeks is the *liberation of all* from a system that in reality *favors no one*. The fact that Paul repeatedly sees Jesus' death on the cross as *the supreme expression of the love of both Jesus and God* makes any gospel that does not associate that cross with God's love a false, adulterated, and incomplete gospel, sabotaging its power to liberate. God and Jesus took up the cross they loathed and detested *purely out of love for the world*, due to their desire to see that world transformed by means of the communities that would spring up everywhere as a result of Jesus' willingness to give up his life in order to bring such communities into being. Unfortunately, Neil's refusal or reluctance to relate the horrific cross with the love of God and Christ can also be seen as the crucifixion of the *real* Paul and his replacement with a *different* Paul. We must not follow Neil in extirpating from Paul's letter to the Romans his allusion to the love God showed when he "did not spare his Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). As noted previously, in Paul's mind, God gave his Son up because, had he refused to do so, the communities of discernment, resistance, and solidarity he sought to establish through him would never have become a reality. God therefore embraced together with his Son the cross he so deeply despised because his love for all people would not let him desist from that objective. He refused to be stopped by the cross and instead turned it into the instrument by which his love might be reproduced many times over throughout the world.

Yet even though we must follow God and Jesus in embracing the cross that we loathe

and detest with all our being in order to be liberated from it and overcome it, as both Jesus and Paul knew well, there are also times when we must instead do all that we can to *escape* crucifixion if we wish for that liberation to take place. When one cross after another is planted in our path as a result of our commitment to seeing communities such as those described above sprout, bloom, and thrive in the midst of all the thorns and thistles that seek to strangle them, Paul would insist together with God and Jesus that we must look for every possible way to get around those crosses or plow them over so as to continue to forge ahead as best we can. We want to *stay off* of those crosses, just as Jesus and Paul did, because like them we want to *live*, not to *die*. Yet we wish to live for the same reason they did, not for our sake alone, but for the sake of others as well, whose life we value as we value our own. We do not "allow" others to crucify us or give them our consent and permission to do so out of "love." Instead, we seek to discern and devise strategies to defeat and disarm the crucifiers and prevent them from carrying out their heinous deeds against us and others, yet without compromising what we stand and fight for.

There come times, however, when in spite of our best efforts to avoid it, we end up having to choose between cross and compromise. And I am certain that Paul and even Jesus would be the first to tell us that there are situations in which compromise is entirely acceptable and can be an act of love and solidarity toward others, since it is motivated by a commitment to continuing to work on their behalf and on behalf of justice. During his ministry in Galilee, Jesus repeatedly sought to stay away from dangerous situations, even when this meant temporarily

suspending his work on behalf of God's reign, and the Paul of Acts and his epistles also at times found it necessary to flee to safety, avoid jail when possible, and withdraw from confrontations with those opposing him even from within the church (as he apparently did at Corinth).

As both Jesus and Paul discovered, however, there are also times when we must refuse to compromise and must gird our loins to go up to Jerusalem, even when we have been warned of the dangers that await us there. At those times, rather than backing down, hiding, or keeping quiet, we must walk boldly into the olive gardens or onto the temple grounds where that danger lurks, trusting that if God chooses to let us fall into the hands of those who seek to harm and crucify us, God will also give us the strength to endure. We must also trust that God will some day get us off of the cross even when others put us on it—or rather, when our love for others puts us on it in spite of our steadfast resistance to the cross, which God and Jesus abhor just as much as we do. When we are led by God's Spirit to the decision that it is time not to compromise but to be "willing against our will" to be hung on a cross with God, Jesus, and Paul, then—and *only* then—is it an act of love (and not suicide) to embrace that cross, however large or small, literal or figurative it may be.

There are at least a couple of senses, then, in which it might be said that the "liberating crucifixion of Neil Elliott's Paul" should be understood as an objective genitive. Because Neil presents us with a Paul who adheres to the idea that Jesus' death was a sacrifice of atonement that expiated human sins and who sees no connection between the love of God

and the harrowing crucifixion of his Son at the hands of the Roman oppressor, one might conclude that it would indeed be liberating to see Neil's Paul crucified. While there may be some truth to that conclusion, however, I would argue against it for one simple reason: in reality, the Paul just described *never existed*. He is an illusion, a false Paul fabricated over the centuries by biblical interpreters who have misunderstood and misrepresented Paul's thought, including especially his understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus' death on the cross. It is impossible to crucify someone who does not exist.

If the real Paul has been crucified over the centuries in the sense of being done away with violently, such a crucifixion has been anything but liberating. The fact that Neil is aware of this is evident from the title of his book, *Liberating Paul*: Neil's objective throughout his book is that of challenging the oppressive readings of Paul that have prevailed among biblical interpreters and showing either that those readings are not faithful to Paul's thought or that the historical context in which Paul found himself immersed left him no choice but to develop a theology that was not entirely liberating but at times oppressive. This leads Neil to question and challenge not only certain *interpretations* of Paul but also *Paul himself* on a number of points, in addition to rejecting as inauthentic much of the material ascribed to Paul in the New Testament. In other words, in Neil's mind, Paul must be liberated not only from *his interpreters* and his *pseudepigraphers* but on occasion *from himself and his own views as well*.

While I find most of what Neil writes concerning Paul profoundly liberating and thus tend to agree strongly with many of his

interpretations of Paul's thought, where I part company with Neil is that I would not presume to be Paul's liberator by correcting his theology where I find it objectionable and in conflict with my own, as if I knew better than Paul what is liberating and what is oppressive. Unlike Neil, I would not simply discard as forgeries or later interpolations the passages in the writings ascribed to him that I find problematic or point to figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, René Girard, Judas of Galilee, or other past and present prophets as correctives to Paul. From my perspective, the attempt to reconstruct the "historical Paul" by combing through the epistles attributed to him and rejecting as inauthentic much of that material in order to make "my" Paul normative rather than the writings that bear his name is just as misguided as the attempt to reconstruct the "historical Jesus" from the four Gospels so as to make that reconstruction of Jesus normative over and against those Gospels themselves.

This is not to say that I am in full agreement with Paul on everything that he or those who wrote in his name had to say and would therefore defend him on all points, as if everything in the epistles that claim him as their author is liberating and nothing is oppressive. On the contrary, like Neil I regard as problematic many of things that those epistles affirm. In my case, however, rather than attempting to resolve, eliminate, or correct those problems, I would prefer to let them stand and merely do my best to figure out why Paul or someone writing in his name considered the ideas that appear in those epistles to be liberating rather than oppressive in the contexts in and for which they were composed. From my perspective, *that* is how we allow and enable Paul and the other

authors of the Scriptures we regard as sacred to liberate rather than oppress.

I must also add once more, however, that while I regard as problematic many of the same ideas that Neil does, I believe that to a large extent those ideas are not actually Paul's but have mistakenly been read back into his writings. In other words, just as I do not believe that Paul reproduced and repeated ideas that he inherited from the tradition handed down to him even though he was in disagreement with those ideas, I also do not believe that many of the traditional interpretations of Paul that Neil reproduces and repeats, despite the fact that he finds them problematic, actually represent Paul's thought faithfully. Thus, if Neil is at fault, it is only because he accepts uncritically much of the tradition handed down to him instead of questioning it, thus making the same mistake that he and others accuse Paul of making. While in Paul's case I think such an accusation is unfounded, primarily because I am convinced that the tradition handed down to him did not contain ideas that he found disagreeable or were not in accordance with his own, I fear that in the case of Neil, he has to some extent fallen into that trap, as has virtually every other modern interpreter of Paul whose work I have read. However, this is because certain interpretations of Paul's thought on the salvific significance of Jesus' death have become so axiomatic and ingrained in the history of Pauline scholarship that any who dare to question them are simply dismissed as misconstruing or denying what is obviously Paul's thought. From my perspective, this is a dare that we must not back away from, since what many have held to be self-evident in Paul's thought is actually a mutilation and betrayal of his thought.



Ultimately, therefore, I would answer the question posed by the title of this article with the word: "Neither." It would be inaccurate and incorrect to understand the liberating crucifixion of Neil Elliott's Paul as either a subjective or objective genitive. While for Paul the crucifixion of Christ and believers is liberating, for Neil's Paul it is not. Undoubtedly, Neil is entirely correct in maintaining that there is nothing liberating about crucifixion in itself. Yet, as already noted above, when Paul alludes to the crucifixion of Christ and those who believe in him, he has in mind not merely the *act* of being crucified but also the *ongoing condition* of Christ and believers, who have been and remain liberated by opting to stand with the crucified—which actually means *not* standing but being hung from some type of cross alongside of them—rather than with the crucifiers. Only those who follow Christ in living in loving solidarity with others—particularly those who suffer under the burden of an oppressive system—and refuse to be intimidated by the cross that they will inevitably endure as a result of that life of loving solidarity truly know what it means to be free. That is the gospel, the word of the cross, that Paul was not ashamed to proclaim, but instead affirmed and announced undauntedly, fully convinced of its truth. And the reality is that unjust and oppressive systems crucify *everyone, including the crucifiers themselves*. This means that the question is not whether we will be crucified, but whether we will make that crucifixion a liberating one through our solidarity with others in the struggle to create the alternative communities and societies of which Neil and Paul speak, or instead experience that crucifixion merely as a slow, prolonged, agonizing death out of which nothing good results. In that case, we

die alone, and that death is nothing but one more cruel execution that serves only to keep the sinful system that does the crucifying firmly in place.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, yet for different reasons, we must conclude that neither we nor Paul can be liberated by crucifying Neil's Paul or seeing Neil or others carry out that crucifixion. To the extent that the Paul presented to us by Neil represents the apostle faithfully and accurately, rather than *crucifying* him, we must instead *resurrect* him so as to *listen* to him. And the reason why that Paul needs to be *resurrected* is that, as Neil has argued so convincingly in these two books and his other writings on Paul's thought, the "real" Paul has been so brutally crucified and butchered by countless Pauline scholars who have *not* represented his thought faithfully and accurately, but have instead insisted on reading back into his writings oppressive ideas that are not actually his. Yet because Neil himself at times fails to capture certain liberating aspects of Paul's thought, especially on the subject of the crucifixion of Christ and believers, we must conclude either that on occasion he crucifies Paul in ways that are not liberating for anyone or else that he has *not* actually crucified Paul, because the Paul of whom he speaks is in certain regards a Paul who never existed.

So while I would say that whether we understand the crucifixion of Paul as a subjective or objective genitive, it is a crucifixion—that is, a state of being forever "crucified with Christ"—which he regarded as liberating, and which can also be liberating for us today. At the same time, however, together with Paul and Neil I dream of and long for a world in

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<sup>20</sup> On this point, see thesis 19 of my *94 Theses*.

which people can be liberated without having to be crucified—or better yet, a world in which they do not have to be crucified *or* liberated, because they are already free. Sadly, at present, only by embracing the cross can we work to bring about such a world.

But as we embrace that hideous cross that we detest with all our heart and soul, let us at the same time use every ounce of strength in our body to push against it in an effort to knock it over, nail it to the ground, cover it with dirt, and then stomp all over it so as to bury it for good. Or perhaps rather than burying it, we can hack it to pieces to use as firewood or put it through a buzz saw and a

planer to turn it into lumber in order to build something that promotes life rather than destroying it. Crosses are indeed wretched things that have no place in our world; but if you can find some way to bring them down and then handle them properly, you might just end up making good use of them after all.

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