Excerpt From Chapter 12 of Bryan Sirchio's Book, The 6 Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music

Different Ways of Understanding The Death Of Jesus

In A Better Atonement, Tony Jones helps us to understand that Church doctrines—even doctrines as pervasive and deeply rooted as "Original Sin" and penal substitutionary atonement— were created and established by human beings who lived in particular contexts, had their own biases, and who often developed their positions in response to specific historical circumstances.

The doctrine of original sin for example—the idea that all humans are "born into sin"—that all human beings genetically inherit sin and deserve eternal damnation because of the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden-- was not embraced fully or widely by the Church until Augustine of Hippo formulated his version of it in the 4th century. It is one possible way of making sense of what happened as a result of the man and woman eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden, but it is not the only way. Christians did just fine without this doctrine for close to four hundred years.

Most scholars agree that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as we know it was not developed until 1098 when it was articulated by St. Anselm. According to Tony Jones,

> *While some might argue otherwise, penal substitutionary atonement was unknown before its development by Anselm of Canterbury in his 1098 book, Cur Deus Homo (Why a God-Man?). Therein, Anselm introduced the first substitutionary explanation of the atonement.*3

Anselm's expression of PSA was his response to the "problem" raised by Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, which split from the Western Church in the late 11th century, did not embrace the doctrine of Original Sin at all, and so there are many Christians throughout the world who have never believed in either of these doctrines.

The key point here is that doctrines are human inventions. Centuries of devoted Christians did just fine before Augustine and Anselm came up with their positions. Doctrines are not "objective truth." They are not "simply what the Bible says." They are potential ways of understanding the biblical message, put together by people. Faithful people in most cases. Leaders of the Church. But certainly not infallible (no offense Roman Catholic brothers and sisters!). Doctrines evolve. They ebb and flow over time. They can be changed or corrected or even deemed heretical.

Again, I don't want to get into too much detail that won't serve our purposes here. So here's the point.

A doctrine such as PSA is at best one possible way among many of trying to understand what the Bible says to us, of trying to resolve the dilemma posed by the doctrine of Original Sin (how God deals with the sin that St. Augustine insisted we've inherited from Adam and Eve), and of

understanding the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. But there is no one "correct biblical way" to understand these things.

I know this is hard for many of us to accept, because we have been taught that things like Original Sin and PSA are what the Bible says, period. But that's not the case. They are *possible* ways of *interpreting* what the Bible says. But they are not the only way.

In fact, there are at least five *other* ways in which the Church over the past two thousand years has attempted to come to terms with the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. They are *all* based on interpretations of Scripture. I'll list them here, but you'll have to do your own research and/or read A Better Atonement if you'd like to know more about each of them. Here are five additional theories of the atonement that are mentioned by Tony Jones;

1. Union with God (Jesus' death unites us with God)
2. Ransom Captive (Jesus' death pays off a debt; not a punishment)
3. Cristus Victor (Jesus' death defeats the powers of sin and death)
4. Moral Exemplar (Jesus' life is our example; he was killed because he represented a challenge to the powers that be)
5. The Last Scapegoat (Jesus' death was to *end* the system of blood sacrifice)

Tony Jones suggests that there is no need for us to choose one theory of the atonement over others. He quotes author Scot Mcknight who argues that we can learn about all of these doctrines and use them like "…clubs in a golfer's bag. None is superior to the rest; each is appropriate for a different circumstance."4

Where I Am With Jesus' Death and The Meaning of the Cross

As I write these words, I'm a few days away from my 54th birthday. I first heard Jesus' call to "follow me" when I was 17 years old. So I've been at this Christian discipleship thing for a while now. Interestingly, as the years go by, I find that I'm less and less focused on the whole area of "atonement" in general, and I find myself less and less concerned with "believing the right stuff" in order to avoid God's anger or wrath.

But please don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to be flip, irreverent, biblically irresponsible, theologically sloppy, or disrespectful of concerns regarding what it takes to "be right" with God. When I say that I'm less focused on atonement, I'm not saying that I don't care about the subject. I care more than ever to help people understand that they are never truly separated from God unless they somehow choose to try to ignore God's presence and love for them. But even then the Divine is always reaching out with love and trying to get through to us. I'm more into following Jesus and to trying to spread the Gospel than ever. I love God and the Christ revealed in and through Jesus more each day. I have tremendous respect and affection for the Bible (some who know me best sometimes call me a "Bible nerd"), and I'm more blown away than ever by the depth and beauty of God's love for me and for all humankind and for Creation.

But as time goes by, I'm convinced that God's Grace is even more all-encompassing and radical than most of us will dare to allow ourselves to believe. In other words, I'm less concerned with what it takes to "be right with God" because I'm more convinced that it's virtually impossible to "be wrong with God." That doesn't mean that our lives are necessarily in alignment with God's will or purposes or God's dream for our individual lives and the well-being of the universe. We may be radically and tragically lost or alienated from our true selves and engaged in all kinds of horrible patterns and behaviors and systems that break God's heart and bring unimaginable suffering into our lives, into the lives of others, and into this world.

But I think the Bible and our own open hearts reveal to us a God who is just plain crazy in love with all of us—much the way healthy parents are with their children—except magnified exponentially beyond anything we can imagine.

Again, to quote Richard Rohr—who obviously is one of my favorite sources of inspiration—I have a deep feeling that "the Good News is much 'gooder' than most of us can possibly accept!"5

I really do believe that God's Love for us is so relentless and unconditional that every human being is going to have a profoundly beautiful surprise when life in these bodies of ours reaches an end. That's my heart's deepest spiritually and biblically educated hunch, and while I know that many well intentioned and deeply committed Christians will disagree with me here, I'm owning this educated spiritual hunch of mine and proclaiming it more and more. People really need to know how loved we all are. That's where we find the healing and the hope and the power for personal and social transformation that we all need—in the wild and "unreasonable" love of God.

Of course I could be wrong, and if I am I trust that God will reveal my errors to me whenever the time is right. I'm open, and I'm listening. I guess I'll have to write another book if that happens! And I'm not trying to be cavalier here at all. Believe me, I'm well aware of James' words (James 3:1) about "teachers being judged with greater strictness." I have no desire at all to mislead anyone, and I take my responsibility as a teacher of Scripture and the Christian faith very seriously.

But if the Bible and my own faith journey help make anything clear, it is that God is unconditionally wild about us all. God is passionately and unconditionally in love with *you.* There's nothing to be afraid of—plenty to respect and approach with awe and great reverence—but nothing to fear. We are all "perfectly loved," and as it says in 1 John 4:18, "perfect love casts out all fear."

By the way, the Hebrew word that is often translated with the English word "fear," as in "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10), could also just as legitimately be translated with the word "reverence." I have great reverence and respect for God. But I do not think God is interested in frightening us, and I certainly do not think that God has any desire to try to threaten us into a relationship.

At the same time, I do think that what we believe matters tremendously. I obviously have spent a lot of time and energy coming to terms with what I believe and why.

In light of what I've just written, it might surprise you now to know that I'm actually more traditional in many of my Christian beliefs than you might imagine, and more so than many of my progressive Christian friends. I'm able to embrace and sometimes redefine or re-imagine many traditional Christian doctrines and find profound meaning, beauty, and life-changing power in them.

The End Of Sacrificial Killing (The Last Scapegoat)

For example, while I do not believe that Jesus had to be put to death in order for God to be willing to forgive us, I also do not agree with those who want to somehow simply ignore the whole reality of blood sacrifice throughout Scripture. Jesus certainly could not just ignore it. Whether our modern ears and sensibilities like it or not, the Jews were elaborately wrapped up in the practice of ritual sacrifice. It's a significant part of the biblical narrative. And, there are very important aspects of Jesus' story, such as the cleansing of the temple, that are intimately connected to the practice of animal sacrifice and some of the problems that went along with it.

This is where the doctrine which Tony Jones refers to as "The Last Scapegoat" appeals to me. It's a relatively new doctrine historically, and it's articulated very powerfully by Rene Girard. Again, read A Better Atonement for a really nice summary of this position.

But to state it simply, Girard suggests that Jesus may have embraced the role of "Lamb of God" in order to put a complete end to the system of blood sacrifice, and in order to end all forms of "penal substitutionary atonement." Perhaps Jesus was saying something like, "Look—this animal sacrifice thing isn't pleasing to God, it never really was, and it isn't working anyway! It stops here and now with me. Never again will anyone or anything—innocent or otherwise-- be slaughtered in the Name of God! Stop this! No more of this! It ends now, here, with me."

So in that sense, I can imagine Jesus laying down his own life (as opposed to God insisting that he be sacrificed) in order to end the entire system and practice of ritual sacrifices altogether. In that light, Jesus as The Lamb of God makes beautiful sense to me. He brilliantly fulfilled all of the elaborate requirements of priestly blood sacrifices—the Lamb "without spot or blemish"—not in order to *be* the ultimate sacrifice, but to *put an end to the ritual practice of blood sacrifice* completely.

The Psychological Power of the Cross

Sometimes I think of God, the One who designed and created human beings, as an Ultimate Psychologist of sorts. Obviously the Creator knows what makes human beings tick. God knows that one of the hardest things psychologically for many of us is to *believe and accept* that we are loved unconditionally and that we are truly and fully forgiven when we screw up.

And I mean *really screw up*. God knows how excruciatingly difficult it is for many of us to be able to fully forgive ourselves for some of the things we've done. For many complex reasons, the burden of guilt and shame that countless people carry around is impossible to overstate.

Incidentally, there is a distinction between guilt and shame I've recently heard and/or read in several places that I think is helpful;

> *Guilt is feeling bad about something we've done; Shame is feeling bad about who we are.*

I like this distinction. There is good guilt which is meant to help us look at ourselves and take responsibility for choices that "miss the mark." We might call this "conviction." It's meant to get our soul's attention and point us in the right direction. But shame is another matter, and it is rarely (if ever) healthy in my opinion, and certainly should not ever be used as a disciplinary tactic—especially in the name of God.

But back to my point.

I won't take too much time to develop what I'm getting at here, but sometimes I wonder if God knew that it was going to take something very extreme and radical and "messy" for some of us to be able to *allow ourselves* to be set free from our own shame and resulting self-hatred. I've met so many people over the years who simply cannot believe that God truly loves them, and they simply cannot let themselves off the hook for things they've done and about which they feel horribly ashamed. For many such people, it is deeply powerful for them to think of the cross as an expression of just how far God is willing to go in order to show us how wildly loved we truly are.

Author Brennan Manning has influenced my thinking a good deal regarding the psychological power of the cross. He's a recovering alcoholic, and in one of his books called The Ragamuffin Gospel6 he describes an AA intervention in which a man was present who had done something so horrible that he couldn't forgive himself. On a Christmas Eve, this man had taken his daughter out to buy a special present. He stopped at his favorite tavern on the way home at about three in the afternoon, left the motor running so the heat would be on, told his young daughter to stay in the car, and locked the doors from the outside. He went in the bar, ran into some old army buddies, and started drinking.

You guessed it. He got drunk and forgot his daughter was in the car. Hours went by. The car stalled. When he finally came out at midnight, his daughter had nearly frozen to death. Her hands and ears were so severely frostbitten that her thumb had to be amputated and her hearing was permanently damaged. They were lucky she did not freeze to death.

Once the man got out of denial and fully faced what he had done, he was beside himself with grief, shame, and self-loathing. He could not believe that anyone--including God--could or would ever forgive him, and he certainly could not forgive himself.

Brennan initially shared this story to explain the importance of getting out of denial and honestly facing the truth about ourselves and some of our actions. But then he went on to explain that it

was the cross of Jesus that began to open up a way out of this man's dungeon of shame. The cross somehow proclaimed the mind-blowing truth that God loved this man—despite his unspeakable failures and catastrophic mistakes--so much that God would even take on human flesh and become a bloody mess in order to show this man (and all of us) how radical, deep, extreme, messy, and all-encompassing God's love for every human being truly is.

This enabled this broken man to begin to believe that just perhaps he was still worth being loved, even though he'd screwed up so badly that he could barely face himself or his family. If God in Jesus would literally die for him—knowing full well the truth about this man's life—then maybe there was hope for him somehow. It enabled him to begin the process of forgiving himself, or to at least believe that such forgiveness was possible. It enabled him to take responsibility for his actions, to humbly face his family and the drastic consequences of his actions, and to begin the long journey of trying to somehow rebuild relationships and his own sense of dignity and self-worth.

So again, it wasn't that Jesus was sacrificed so that God could forgive this man. It was more about helping this man begin the process of understanding that *he was worth being forgiven.* Under this understanding of the cross, God, in Jesus, willingly laid down God's own life in order to show this man and all of us how unconditionally loved we truly are. It was God's way of saying, as Brennan Manning often preaches, "I love you so utterly, so completely, so extremely, that I would literally rather die than ever be without you. There's nothing—absolutely nothing—you could ever do that would make you unacceptable or unlovable to me."

We could probably pick apart the psychology and theology of that last paragraph for a long time, and feel free to. But what I'm saying here is that there is something about this notion that "God would die for us" that is very psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually powerful and liberating for many people. In the important process of rethinking doctrines such as penal substitutionary atonement, I don't want to lose the spiritual power and depth of the concept of God's "sacrificial love" altogether. That's why the word "penal," which is about punishment, is important in the phrase "penal substitutionary atonement." I don't believe that God requires that anyone be punished, let alone tortured, in order for forgiveness to be extended to us. But I do believe that God would gladly die for us.

So you see I can say that I believe "Jesus died for me—and for all of humankind," and mean that with deep conviction. Jesus' death on the cross illustrates as graphically as anyone or anything ever could that there's nothing God won't do to show us how loved we are. There are times when I've needed to know that I'm loved this wildly, especially when I've messed up and am feeling guilty and having a hard time letting myself off some hook. But this in no way implies that I believe Jesus *had* to be slaughtered *in order for* God to forgive me or anyone else.

The Cross As God's *Way* of Overcoming Evil

Another way in which the death of Jesus on the cross holds deep meaning for me and many progressive Christians is that it reveals God's way of confronting and ultimately overcoming the

power of evil. There are aspects of the Christus Victor theory in what I'm about to articulate here.

Quite simply—Jesus used what is sometimes referred to as "Lamb Power"—the paradoxical power of love that is willing to suffer and be *apparently* defeated in order to ultimately win over and even liberate an adversary or some opposing force. This is the kind of costly Love which Jesus embodied and revealed to the world.

This is the kind of "power" that Mahatma Gandhi learned from Jesus and which he used to non-violently overcome the British Empire in India. This "Lamb Power" was also employed powerfully by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement in the United States. It's the opposite of "kicking butt for Jesus" or for anyone or anything else.

This kind of power is not passive or weak. Neither is it violent or coercive.

To me this is profoundly important. There have been and continue to be too many attempts historically to somehow see Jesus as a macho, militaristic figure in whose name nations or churches can "win something" or "take something back" for God.

This understanding of Jesus as one who "kicked butt for God's sake" is what some people have referred to as the "Rambo Jesus."

It is at the heart of what author and scholar Walter Wink so aptly coined, "the Myth of Redemptive Violence."

This myth, which Walter Wink explores powerfully in his books (I suggest The Powers That Be7 for the most succinct overview), is basically the whole notion that "might makes right."

Wink makes a very compelling case that this Myth of Redemptive Violence is really the official religion of the American Empire. He claims that the primary "catechism" of this American religion of redemptive violence is Saturday morning cartoons!

I can relate. I'm dating myself here, but I grew up watching the cartoon character Popeye eat his spinach so he could find his butt kicking mojo and beat the you know what out of his nemesis Bluto. That show used to make my blood boil! I can remember the downright lust for "redemptive violence" that those cartoons caused to make rage within my little red blooded American boy's body. By the time Popeye finally got to that can of spinach I was practically beside myself with a desire to see Bluto get righteously destroyed.

After all, Popeye was the good guy, and Bluto had it coming.

And isn't this the "juice" behind just about every action movie plot, every cop TV show, and just about every attempt to sell a foreign policy of going to war?

Some bad person or enemy or nation or group always seems to "have it coming." It's okay to use extreme force to beat the bad or evil people into submission—or so we believers in the myth of redemptive violence always claim.

But didn't Jesus tell us to "love our enemies?" It's amazing how skilled we are at figuring out ways not to "hear" that teaching, let alone take it seriously enough to attempt to live it out.

This idea of righteous violence is so deeply ingrained in most of us that it's hard for us to even consider the true power of Jesus' non-violent and radically loving methodology for confronting, disarming, and ultimately overcoming the power of violence and injustice in this world.

If you'd like to read more about "Lamb Power" and God's overcoming evil in and through the power of sacrificial love, I highly recommend a book by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw called Jesus For President.8 They brilliantly explore this theme and many others closely related to it. The following quote, which I find pretty amusing, is from this book on page 194. These words were uttered by a pastor named Mark Driscoll and were originally published in *Relevant Magazine (January-February 2007).* They are a great expression of the Rambo Jesus mentality;

> *Some emergent types want to recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in His hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes. In Revelation, Jesus is a prize fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.*

Progressive Christians reject the notion of the Rambo Jesus. Violent, militaristic imagery will rarely be used in Progressive Christian Worship Music. We reject what is often referred to as "Christian triumphalism."

Yes, Jesus "exposed and defeated" the powers of evil. But his only "weapons" were Love and Truth and his own willingness to suffer and even die for others—including those who opposed him—and those who put nails through his hands and feet. He refused any and all attempts to use military might or any other form of worldly might in order to overcome enemies and impose the divine will. This is not about Jesus being "a wimp." It's about redefining what true strength—the strength of Love—is all about.

The Cross As The Cost of Speaking Truth To Power

The point here is simply that progressive Christians find lots of meaning in the "prophetic" interpretation of the cross as well. This explanation of why Jesus was crucified tends to fall into the "Moral Exemplar" theory mentioned by Tony Jones.

According to this understanding, Jesus spoke truth to the religious and political powers in first century Palestine, and was therefore regarded to be a threat to the status quo. He did not call for violent revolution, but he challenged the hypocrisy of the established religious authorities, and when he overturned the tables in the temple, he challenged the whole religious and economic machine at the heart of religious and political power in Jerusalem.

As it's often put, Jesus "spoke Truth to power in Love."

He spoke out on behalf of the poor, and challenged the privilege and power of the wealthy. So the "powers that be" got together and conspired to do away with him, just as they do in any historical context to prophets whose clear voices and positions represent a threat to the systems which are built upon injustice, inequity, greed, and dishonesty.

When threatened strongly enough, the established powers and authorities will ultimately kill those who stand for love and justice and compassion. The history of the Church is full of faithful and courageous men and women who were put to death for following Jesus' example in this regard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King Jr. are recent examples of Christians put to death for challenging the established powers. There are countless other women and men whose names we will never know—at least not on this side of the grave.

Jesus--who paid the ultimate price for being a loving but strong champion of the poor and advocate for justice--will be very present in Progressive Christian Worship Music.

The Cross As Part of The Pattern of Death and Renewal

Another way in which the cross of Jesus is deeply meaningful to me is because it helps reveal a pattern of sorts that is woven into the very fabric of the universe itself. I'm talking here about the processes of death and renewal through which growth and transformation happens. Once we begin to recognize this pattern, we see it everywhere. It's in the rhythm of the seasons. The vital lush life of summer gives way to the "death" of fall and winter, and then the renewal of spring, and then back into new the life and growth of summer. This is how creation itself progresses, and this is how humans also grow—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Every cell in our bodies dies and is replaced by new cells. I've been told that within a seven year period, all the cells in our bodies are replaced and we are literally "new beings."

Theologically, this pattern is classically referred to as "the paschal mystery." I'll spare you too much detail about the origins of this term, but suffice it to say that it's all about this pattern of death and resurrection. I don't want to in any way romanticize or spiritualize the agony of Jesus' death on the cross. It was a horrific experience of capital punishment through torture. But the point here is that death is not the final word. The agony of Good Friday was what preceded the incredibly joyful surprise of Easter Sunday. The paschal mystery is all about how grief, loss, and excruciating pain so often leads to joy, learning, new life, fresh insights, and transformation.

As is so often the case for me, no one articulates the deep truths of this pattern better than Fr. Richard Rohr, who wrote;

> *Paul spoke of "reproducing the pattern" of his death and thus understanding resurrection (Phil. 3:11). That teaching will never fail. The soul is always freed and formed in such wisdom. Native religions speak of winter and summer; mystical authors speak of darkness and light; Eastern religion speaks of yin and yang or the Tao. Seasons*

transform the year; light and darkness transform the day. Christians call it the paschal mystery, but we are all pointing to the necessity of both descent and ascent.

The paschal mystery is the pattern of transformation. We are transformed through death and rising, probably many times. There seems to be no other cauldron of growth and transformation.
*We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. Unless we face a major disaster like the death of a friend or spouse or loss of a marriage or job, we usually will not go there. As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent. That is the great language of religion. It teaches us to enter willingly, trustingly into the dark periods of life. These dark periods are good teachers. Religious energy is in the dark questions, seldom in the answers. Answers are the way out. Answers are not what we are here for. When we look for answers, we're looking to change the pattern. When we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation. The good energy is all in the questions, seldom in the answers. Fixing something doesn't usually transform us. We try to change events in order to avoid changing ourselves. Instead we must learn to stay with the pain of life, without answers, without conclusions, and some days without meaning. That is the path, the perilous dark path of true prayer.*9

Jesus told his disciples at several points throughout the gospels that following him will involve "taking up their own crosses" (Matthew 16:24). He was letting them and us know that while living in the Way of Jesus will involve times of pain and suffering (as will life itself), the pain we experience will lead us into new life and joy and growth if we are willing to let that be the case. The cross leads to resurrection. As professor, author, and evangelist Tony Campolo often puts it, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." That's the pattern.

This understanding of the cross has helped me many times when I've been in the midst of something difficult. I'm reminded that God, in Christ, knows what it's like to be in pain. And I'm reminded that if I stay with it, the pain will eventually pass and something beautiful will emerge as a result. This can sound trite if it's reduced to some pious platitude and thrown at someone who is hurting terribly when he or she is not ready to hear it. But it can be a profound source of comfort and strength and wisdom when we live our way into the depths of this pattern.

This theme of new life that comes out of suffering and pain will certainly be part of the theology which is at the heart of Progressive Christian Worship Music.

I Was There When They Crucified My Christ

Yes, that was an inclusive quote of the old spiritual, "Were You There When They Crucified My *Lord?"*

I don't believe that Jesus had to be sacrificed in order for God to forgive our sins.

But I do believe that Jesus went to the cross *because* of our sins.

By "our," I'm referring to humankind.

No, of course neither you nor I were literally "there" when Jesus was crucified.

But in a general sense, it was human sin that put Jesus on that cross. The fear, pride, envy, selfishness, stubbornness, and lust for power that led the Pharisees, scribes, and Roman authorities to kill Jesus are representative of the fear, pride, envy, etc.—the sin—that is in all of us.

In some mystical sense which I'll never be able to adequately explain, I believe that God was in Jesus, on the cross, absorbing into God's own being all the wrongs of all people that have ever been committed or ever will be committed.

He didn't do this because he had to in order for us to be acceptable to God. Christ did it because God loves us and wants us to know that there are often severe consequences for choosing against the ways of Love.

We can't kid ourselves about this.

As Dr. James Loder, a professor of mine at seminary once said during a lecture which I've remembered for close to thirty years now;

> *It's kind of like spiritual mathematics; two negatives equal a positive; on the cross, Jesus negated all the things that negate life. He put an end to the things that put an end to us. It's as if Jesus was hanging on the cross saying to us, 'Don't you see what you are doing to yourselves? Don't you see how much you hurt yourselves by living this way? This is what happens when you reject Truth and Love—you bring about suffering and death. What you're doing to me on this cross—this is what you're doing to yourselves, to the human race, and to all of creation.'*

I don't know if that's helpful to you or not, but it's meaningful to me. I'm probably not much different from most folks, but the truth is I've made plenty of mistakes in my life. I've rejected God and God's Truth and intention for my life countless times—usually quietly and privately, and usually without fully realizing it and without malice.

But there have been times when my rejections of God's will have been reckless and foolish and deliberate. Times when I knew better. In those times, I rejected the "Light that came into this world (John 3:19)." In those times, in a very personal spiritual sense, I was among those who turned their backs on Jesus, and I was among those whose "sins" sent Jesus to the cross.

Some of what I'm trying to articulate here will probably sound over the top to many of my progressive Christian friends, but I think it's important to be real about the consequences of the selfishness which can sometimes cause us to make choices to do things that we never dreamed

we'd be capable of doing. Maybe it's only those of us who have really messed up who will get this. I count myself among this number. I'll just leave it there.

But one of the reasons why I'm so drawn to Jesus and to his way of knowing and embodying God's love is that the God of Jesus takes sin—"missing the mark"-- and evil very seriously. I'm talking about the sinful acts and choices of individuals here, but also about the brokenness and mess of this entire world—all its people and all of its systems and structures—for all time.

I've lived long enough and traveled widely enough to know that as beautiful as life is, this world is also full of incredible suffering and cruelty. Much of it is attributable to human sin. I'm drawn to the whole story of Jesus as the "Savior" of the world because it seems painfully obvious that individual persons and this broken world all need some "saving." The root of the biblical word "salvation" by the way is the same root for the word "salve." In other words, it's more about healing and restoration to wholeness than rescue or escape.

To me, Jesus beautifully embodied and reveals the Way, the Truth, and the Life that leads to healing and wholeness and transformation of individual persons and also of this world. For individuals, this Way involves a process of acknowledging and owning our own sinful acts and choices and the painful consequences of those choices. We do this not to beat ourselves up, but to honestly recognize and deal with our own capacity to miss the mark. Then we can let God's amazing grace remind us that we are loved unconditionally, pick up the pieces, learn from our mistakes, and keep learning, growing, and working to make God's Dream for the world a present reality.

Moving Toward A Conclusion

Well, if you've read this entire chapter, congratulations and thank you for hanging in there! I know I threw a lot at you. But as I said at the beginning, I felt like I owed you some depth. I have no doubt that some readers will be troubled by all of this questioning of penal substitutionary atonement, and for that reason I wanted to help you understand how I and many other progressive Christians still find life-transforming and world-healing meaning in the cross of Jesus Christ.

If it came across as self-indulgent on my part to invite you to journey through some of this theology with me, well, my apologies, and thanks for reading in any case.

But I hope and pray this chapter also helped you realize that even though we are choosing not to emphasize doctrines like penal substitutionary atonement in Progressive Christian Worship Music, there is still so much deep, joyful, gutsy theological truth and meaning for progressive Christians to celebrate and to write and sing about!

I also hope I've made it very clear that proponents and creators of Progressive Christian Worship Music have no agenda to somehow tell people for whom doctrines such as penal substitutionary atonement are central that they must abandon their beliefs in any way. If that doctrine speaks to

your heart and rings true to your soul, by all means embrace it. I will not love or respect or desire to work with you on behalf of God's intentions any less!

Finally, let me just own once more that the thoughts and opinions expressed in this chapter are primarily my own. I think many progressive Christians will resonate with lots of what I've written, but I am not trying to speak for others or to create some kind of progressive orthodoxy. My intention has simply been to help you understand some of the deeper reasons why progressive Christians don't tend to find the doctrine of PSA to be compelling, and why you won't find it promoted in and through the worship music we create.