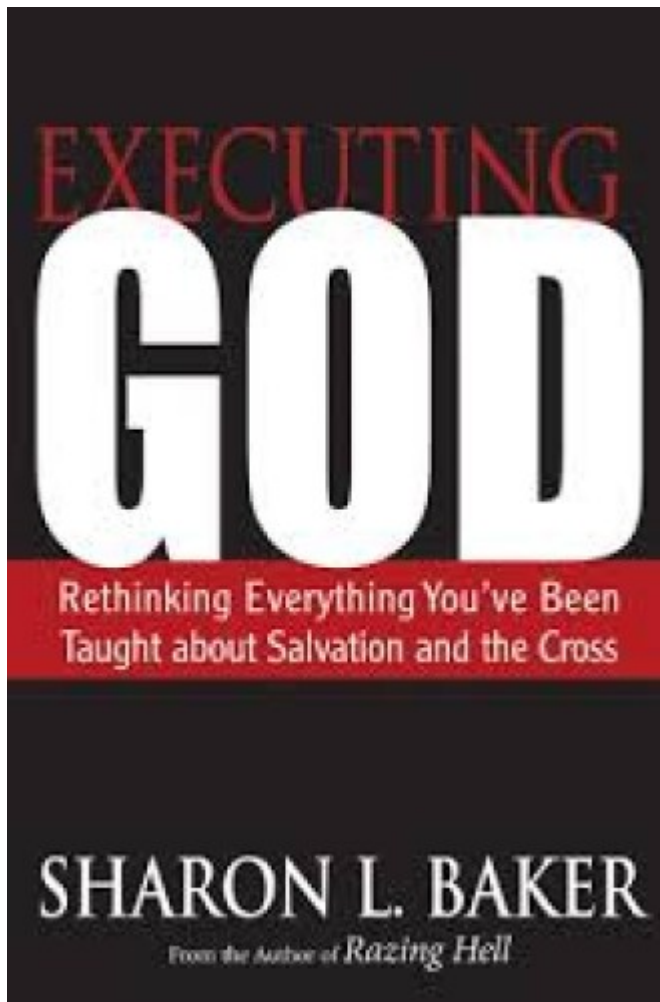


Executing God, by Sharon L. Baker

reviewed by [Deanna A. Thompson](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Executing God

By Sharon L. Baker
Westminster John Knox

And what if Jesus said:

A man had two sons. The younger son demanded his inheritance from his father, left home, squandered it, and returned home, admitting to his father that he had sinned and begging for forgiveness.

The father responded, “I cannot simply forgive you for what you have done. You have insulted my honor by your wild living. Simply to forgive would be to trivialize your sin. Justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation cannot occur unless the penalty for your sin is paid. Either you must be punished or you must pay back the honor you stole from me.

The older brother spoke up, telling his father he would pay the debt of his younger brother. The brother worked day and night to pay the debt until he died of exhaustion. The father’s wrath was finally placated against the younger brother, and they lived happily until the end of their days.

If the parable had read like this, traditional Christian theories of atonement would make much more sense, argues Sharon Baker in *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross*. To claim that God requires the death of an innocent son to restore God’s honor—or that God punishes a blameless Jesus instead of us sinners—leads to a portrait of God very different from the one presented by Jesus. For Baker, theological consistency is essential, and not just for consistency’s sake but because “our perception of God influences how we behave.” A professor of theology in the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, Baker builds a case “for a compassionate, peace-loving God who abhors violence and wants human beings to live peaceful, loving lives.”

Executing God is the sequel to *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment*. Both books were written not for scholars but for anyone asking big theological questions about difficult topics. Baker invites readers into her theology classroom to eavesdrop on her “Atonement Day” debates about whether God had Jesus murdered. Having joined the ranks of Southern Baptist fundamentalists when she became a Christian in her twenties, Baker admits she didn’t start out asking such questions. “I knew with absolute certainty how God acted and why God acted in certain ways.”

Then two of her sons got sick, she went to seminary, and the bottom dropped out of her I-have-all-the-answers box. She began to ask big questions of God, questions

that caused her to rethink everything she believed. With a Ph.D. in hand and classrooms full of students with theological backgrounds similar to her own, she began to share her rethinking of central—and centrally problematic—Christian teachings in hopes that students would craft theologies consistent with a God who saves through love rather than through violence and coercion.

Before Baker tackles atonement theories directly, she is clear about two things: one, all theology is built on canons within the canon, and two, the Bible's language about atonement and many other things is metaphorical. These two points are in part likely responses to critics of *Razing Hell* who worry that Baker privileges certain parts of scripture over others ("We all do it," she cautions) and those who insist that her claims are inconsistent with the literal word of God ("the New Testament mixes its metaphors . . . to explain the work of Christ"). If biblical language about Christ's sacrifice is metaphorical, and if major theories of atonement privilege particular passages and images while ignoring others, then there's room not just for alternative interpretations of the major theories but for new theories altogether.

When Baker unpacks the "most popular" theories of atonement, she is careful to review the biblical support on which they rest, and she's thoughtful in her assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. She reassures readers that although she critiques all of the models, she is "in no way suggesting that we discard" them. But Baker also candidly reviews how each theory ultimately endorses violence. In ransom theory, God needs the violent death of Jesus to be victorious over evil; in satisfaction theory, God requires Jesus' death to restore God's honor; in penal substitution theory, God's forgiveness is contingent on an innocent man being punished for the sins of others; and in the moral example theory, God puts forward an exemplary way of living and Jesus' life must end with the cross. God always seems to be colluding with violence, and this is the God, in all the various manifestations, that Baker is determined to execute.

At the constructive heart of the book, Baker rethinks justice and forgiveness in the story of God's atoning work in Christ. Because atonement theories are "windows into divine character," Baker is committed to telling an alternative story of God's restorative justice and nonretaliatory forgiveness. Using "the interpretive lens of Jesus," she lifts up biblical passages that feature this view of justice and demonstrates that they "harmonize with the justice Jesus taught and practiced." In "fathoming forgiveness," she creatively retrieves the biblical metaphor of sacrifice, showing how in both Old and New Testaments the metaphor ultimately aims at an

inward state rather than just external acts. Then Baker persuasively argues that forgiveness is perhaps the most costly sacrificial act there is, for in forgiving we “sacrifice getting paid back.”

Here the parable of the forgiving father takes center stage: the father forgives his son sacrificially. This reading of justice and forgiveness becomes the foundation for Baker’s alternative atonement theory; its centerpiece—consistent with restorative justice and nonretaliatory forgiveness—is Jesus’ sacrificial act on the cross of forgiving those who put him there, “for they know not what they do.” It’s a compelling rethinking of atonement, worthy of serious attention by scholars, pastors, and laypeople alike.

However, Baker’s emphasis on consistency compels me to register a caution. The desire to streamline the story is an ancient one; in the second century a Christian writer named Tatian harmonized the four Gospels into a single narrative. Interestingly, though, the church stuck with the messier, less consistent four-narrative option. If we’re committed to listening most closely to Jesus’ portrayal of God, what happens to our tidy theories of atonement when we attend to a few other words uttered by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I propose that Jesus’ plaintive cry of forsakenness stubbornly interrupts our strivings for theological consistency with respect to at-one-ment with God. Even as I nod approvingly at Baker’s painfully beautiful version of atonement, I wonder how the breach opened up by the “why?” of Jesus fits in. Beyond consistent explanations of the cross, the “why?” of undeserved suffering lingers. And Jesus’ own questioning of the sufficiency of theories and explanations becomes a vital point of connection when we suffer undeservedly because of the sinful actions of others, or because we get sick, or just because.

Knowing that God does not endorse the suffering and death integral to Christ’s atoning work might indeed help us live differently; and knowing that Jesus questioned God in the midst of his suffering might help us not be overtaken by the parts of life that consistency simply can’t reach.