

All atonement theologies are contextual

God is known not in abstraction but among those we police, punish, and forget.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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A worn yard sign that says "Love your neighbor"

Century illustration

Rowan Williams's essay on Evagrius of Pontus was splayed across the dashboard. I finished the last pages of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* before pulling out of the Home Depot parking lot to drive through the apartment complexes in my heavily immigrant neighborhood, watchful for rental SUVs, the preferred vehicle of the masked Customs and Border Protection agents dispatched to my city to kidnap and deport my neighbors. The scene unfolding that day—children absent from school and frantic texts between volunteers patrolling the city—would not stay politely outside the theological texts I was reading.

During my academic preparation for ministry, I was under the impression that the writings of philosophy and theology could be insulated from the stuff of ordinary life, that the life of the mind floated above all that was churning close to the ground. I imagined theologians developed ideas about God that they passed down to church folk like me to implement. If we based our preaching and teaching on their scholarship, the church would be better for it.

Pastoral ministry—the practice of God-talk among living, breathing communities—taught me otherwise. Academic theology at its most fruitful recognizes the life of the church as the source, not the receiver of theological inquiry. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson described the relationship between the practice of the church and the study of theology as a difference of orientation. The work of the church is “the speaking of the gospel,” while the work of the theologian is to reflect on this labor. Theologians go astray, Jenson writes, when they think of themselves as having an objective, third-person perch from which to assign meaning to God and God's people. The distinction of labor is not meant to distance theology from life but to keep theology wary of mistaking its own constructions for God.

Often the discipline gives a special name to theologies that announces in advance their subjectivity and the central place of their flesh-and-blood communities. These are labeled “contextual theologies,” a designation that falsely leads us to think that elsewhere someone is doing theology that doesn't occur within context, that there is theology that has somehow gotten past the fleshy stuff of life to the real core mystery of God, imagined to exist outside our aching, trembling lives.

The failure of theologians to acknowledge that theology comes from somewhere not only leaves the discipline bereft but can mask dangerous beliefs that we normalize as objective. I remember reading Linn Marie Tonstad's work on the Trinity and realizing how I'd normalized certain patriarchal images in classic trinitarian theology. One figure of the Godhead was constantly invading and penetrating, asserting himself in gendered hierarchies that demanded submission. Did I think this imagery came from nowhere? Was that really what God was like?

Similarly, theologians like Karen Kilby warn against the temptation to grasp hold of God's inner life as Trinity through the model of our interpersonal relationships. At first, it sounds lovely to claim that, for instance, the

Trinity is a relational community. Who wouldn't want ethical lives that mirror a God who is a community of mutual recognition? But what happens when we smuggle less desirable human relationships into God's being? What happens when those relationships are coercive, violent, or abusive? What if those relationships are hierarchical or demand submission from certain members? Rather than paying attention to the life of God, we're back to trying to look behind the curtain to see what God is really like. It turns out, God looks like whatever we have decided is a normative human relationship.

As we loop back around in the liturgical year to Lent—a season that ends in Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution by the Roman state—we confront a parallel temptation to the one Kilby identifies: the tendency to allow familiar human arrangements to harden into theological necessity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way penal systems have structured Christian accounts of atonement.

For centuries, theologians from Anselm to Calvin to Hodge inscribed carceral logic onto God's redemptive work. In penal substitution, this logic of prison becomes the grammar of God's action: just as the state seeks satisfaction for crime through punishment, God seeks satisfaction for sin through death. Theologians insert carceral arrangements into God's relationship to us and to all of creation and, in turn, offer theological justification to a state that shows us an image of God when it punishes crime.

What would it look like to treat the stuff of human life as the material for knowing God without projecting our human agendas into God's being and act? In her new book *No Godforsaken Place: Prison Chaplaincy, Karl Barth, and Practicing Life in Prison*, Sarah Jobe traces this question across the final decade of Barth's theology, shaped by his ministry among incarcerated people. Barth's worship among incarcerated people, as a person who himself was justice-involved during the Third Reich, intensified his theological attention. In his writing, an image emerges of Jesus as the judge judged in our place. Prison encounters transformed Barth's account of atonement. Jesus does not absorb a transferable punishment for our sin; he takes the place of the condemned, the accused, and the criminal. Jobe argues that this shapes the whole of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation.

At its best, theology doesn't retreat into metaphysical abstraction or insert our normative concepts for God's being. Instead, it keeps its feet on the ground, listening for God's self-speech in the places we would rather not look, to see where judgment is borne rather than imposed, where criminality is constructed rather than pronounced. There we meet the God who is known not behind the curtain of our explanations but in the flesh of those we are taught to fear or forget. Theologians need the church because it is where God-talk is risked among real bodies, where abstractions give way to exigence, and where the power of God's redemption is tested, contested, and proclaimed.