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The Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel

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THIS PAPER on the problem of violence and the possible contribution of Christian Scripture to its solution is an experiment in biblical interpretation. Specifically, it is an attempt to bring biblical material, theological reflection, and contemporary intellectual resources from other disciplines into meaningful interaction around a religious and spiritual issue that is of major importance not only for the church but for society as a whole.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the late Harvard scholar of comparative religion, entitled his immensely erudite study of the role of canonical religious texts and their interpretation in all the major world religions *What Is Scripture?*¹ He concluded, in a nutshell, that canonical texts in any believing community are a privileged medium for engaging, from within a shared tradition with its accepted categories, symbol system, language, and practice, questions of ultimate concern. Scripture, then, is not a thing—for example, the biblical text—but a process that he called “scripturing.” Through its sacred texts, the believing community engages its own current experience in the effort to find life and to live well, which for Christians means to live by the Spirit as the body of Christ in and for the salvation of the world.

This article is the presidential address delivered at the Seventy-third International Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, held at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California, July 31–August 3, 2010.

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

My process, then, will entail engaging a critical contemporary question, the escalation of violence, by bringing the work of two contemporary scholars, the German depth psychologist-theologian-exegete Eugen Drewermann and the French cultural historian, literary critic, and anthropologist René Girard and their respective followers, particularly in the biblical and theological academies,² into dialogue with three clusters of material from the Gospel of John: the Johannine understanding of “the sin of the world”; the identity and role of Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away” that sin; and the ecclesial community’s participation in this liberation through “the forgiveness of sins,” which is the work Jesus committed to his followers in the great commission in the Fourth Gospel: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven” (see John 20:21-23).

I. Violence and Religion

No documentation is really necessary to prove that violence is a societal scourge of monumental proportions and that it is escalating at a terrifying pace domestically, locally, nationally, and globally. And no one seems to have any idea how to stem the increase except to mobilize more and more “good” violence by arming more people, building more prisons, and declaring more wars, to combat the “bad” violence.³

Many people inside and outside the Christian tradition have suggested that monotheistic religion in general and Christianity in particular might be *a* or even *the* primary instigator and legitimizer of violence, at least in the West. Theology struggles to explain the divine violence inherent in the vernacular version of Anselmian soteriology,⁴ according to which God required Jesus’ horrendous death

² The relevant biblical work of Eugen Drewermann is virtually unavailable in English except in the excellent book-length synthesis of Matthias Beier, *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004). René Girard’s work, on the other hand, is widely available either written originally in English or translated. For a full bibliography of his books, see Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2005) 126-30. This book also contains information concerning Girard’s articles and contributions to collections, articles about him, and scholarly discussions of his work. An invaluable resource on Girard is *The Girard Reader* (ed. James Williams; New York: Crossroad, 1996). Among theologians and biblical scholars who have found Girard’s contribution critical to an understanding of sin, forgiveness, and especially the theology of atonement are James Alison, Gil Bailie, Robert Daly, Stephen Finlan, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, S. Mark Heim, Raymund Schwager, Miroslav Volf, and Walter Wink.

³ I supplied some illustrative data on this subject in my Bellarmine Lecture (delivered at Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, November 2, 2008), “Before It’s Too Late . . . Violence, Reconciliation, and the Church,” *Theology Digest* 54 (2010) 5-23, esp. 5-6.

⁴ Anselm’s own theology is much more subtle and nuanced than the “catechetical” version many Catholics have internalized. Moreover, Anselm’s theory, worked out within the framework of medieval feudal law, was carried forward by Luther in his theory of Jesus as representative of humanity in bearing the punishment demanded by God’s wrath and especially by Calvin, who made

to divert God's just wrath from sinful humanity, which was incapable of expiating its own infinite offense against God. Within this framework of understanding, Jesus, by his silent complicity in his own victimization, which God required as the price of our redemption, appears to condone by example the passive acceptance of violence by the oppressed.

Biblical scholars are also increasingly faced with questions about the seemingly ubiquitous violence in the sacred text. God, the warrior king in the OT obliterating peoples and handing their seized lands over to his chosen people and then avenging himself on Israel itself for its unfaithfulness, and God, the ruthless sacrificer of his own Son in the NT, seems to model and encourage violence as a legitimate, necessary, and finally only way of handling the human predicament.

As we know, a growing volume of work in both theology and biblical studies is being devoted to trying to untangle this Gordian knot of the implication of God in human violence.⁵ Because the dilemma of violence lies at the very heart of human experience, with implications for all of creation, we are not only justified in asking but compelled to ask if our sacred texts are actually part of this problem or if they have anything constructive to contribute to its solution.

II. The Divine–Human Drama in the Fourth Gospel: The Structure of the Sin of the World

Although Jesus' identity as the Messiah is affirmed in John's Gospel⁶ and there are discussions about his relation to Abraham,⁷ Moses,⁸ and David,⁹ the pri-

use of the framework of medieval criminal law, in which Jesus becomes the substitute who bears the condemnation and punishment God rightly imposes on the human race for its violation of the divine law. All of this development was involved in the formulation of the late medieval theology of salvation by vicarious suffering that held (and still holds) sway in the imagination of many modern believers.

⁵ A particularly fine work on the subject is S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Heim makes excellent use of both biblical and theological resources and references much of the best work on the subject in the past few years. He supplies an excellent and extensive bibliography.

⁶ Jesus affirms the tentative identification of himself as Messiah by the Samaritan woman (4:26); Martha confesses Jesus as Messiah just before the resuscitation of Lazarus (11:27); the Gospel ends with the statement that its purpose is to bring readers to believe that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God (20:31). Other references to Jesus as Messiah in the Gospel are primarily in the context of people arguing over Jesus' identity, challenging him to claim his messianic identity, or denying it.

⁷ The discussion in John 8:31-59 ends with Jesus' assertion that "before Abraham was, I am."

⁸ See John 9:28-29 as typical of the "greater than Moses" theme in John. Just as his priority in relation to Abraham makes Jesus not primarily a descendant of Abraham from whom he draws his identity but the one from whom Abraham's significance in salvation history is drawn, so Moses is not primarily the one who legitimates Jesus' claim to authority but rather the one whom Jesus surpasses and who thus bore witness to Jesus by word and work even without knowing it.

⁹ In John 7:42 there is a question about Jesus' descent from David, since he is not from Beth-

mary identity of Jesus in John is as Son of God or Sent One manifest in and as the Son of Man. Jesus' true origins are "in the beginning" (ἐν ἀρχῇ) as the Word of God in whom and for whom and according to whom all things are made. The Word becomes human in time, but the Word comes from the depths of God's eternity on a divine mission not just to a chosen people but to the whole world that "God so loved" (3:16). The Word comes into the world not merely to fulfill the hopes of Israel but to enlighten "every human being" [my translation] (1:9). Jesus is the "Savior of the *World*" (4:42), who, when he is lifted up, will draw "all people to himself" (12:32).¹⁰

The Fourth Gospel, then, is structured as a cosmic drama being acted out in history rather than as a historical event with cosmic implications. This cosmic drama is a struggle to the death between God's love for the world and a personal evil agent who, in John, is called "the Devil" (6:70; 8:44; 13:2); "Satan" (13:27); the "Ruler of this world" (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) (12:31; 14:30; 16:11), who is a liar and a murderer from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς [8:44]). Satan's project, the alienation of all creation from God, began in the Garden of Eden and proceeds toward its goal, the destruction of Jesus, who is the incarnation of God's eternal and infinite love for the world, under the designation of what John calls "the sin of world" (ἡ ἁμαρτία τοῦ κόσμου).

In striking contrast to the dramatic launching of his public ministry by Jesus himself in the Synoptic Gospels, for example, in the synagogue scene in Luke 4, the Johannine Jesus emerges on the stage of history in silence. As Jesus walks by, the Baptizer proclaims, in what has been recognized as a revelation formula in the Fourth Gospel, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29).¹¹ The Baptizer then expands eloquently on Jesus' identity and mission as they were revealed to him by the One who sent him to baptize with water. John recognizes the One sent to baptize with the Holy Spirit by the visible and permanent descent of the Spirit on Jesus (see 1:31-34). But Jesus himself says nothing. Somehow, everything is contained, like the oak in the acorn, in this foundational identification, which will be unfolded throughout Jesus' ministry and especially in his glorification in and by his violent death on the cross.

lehem, but no conclusion is drawn. Jesus in John is not a king from David's line but becomes a king when he is glorified on the cross. The question of Jesus' kingship is very important in John, but it is not centered on the Davidic line. Jesus' transcendent kingship offers an alternative to the Davidic understanding of kingship.

¹⁰ See Enno Edzard Popkes, "The Love of God for the World and the Handing Over ('*Dahingabe*') of His Son: Comments on the Tradition-Historical Background and the Theological Function of John 3, 16A in the Overall Context of Johannine Theology," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. G. van Belle; BETL 200; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007) 609-23. Popkes says, "Although the motif of the love of God for the world is unique in the Johannine writings its importance for the overall understanding of Johannine theology can hardly be overestimated" (p. 623).

¹¹ M. de Goedt, "Un schème de révélation dans le quatrième évangile," *NTS* 8 (1962) 142-50.

“Lamb of God” (ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) is a *hapax legomenon*, appearing only in this verse, John 1:29 (repeated verbatim in 1:36), and nowhere in the OT. The clue to understanding the meaning of the title lies in understanding what the Lamb comes to “take away,” namely, “the sin of the world.” Raymond E. Brown, expressing the scholarly consensus on this subject, states that in this verse and elsewhere in John “sin” in the singular denotes a “condition” rather than an act.¹² Sin in John is not a juridical concept referring to an infraction or a transgression of law. At the end of the Gospel, in 20:21-23, the risen Jesus will empower his disciples to carry on his mission with the words “As the Father has sent me [i.e., to take away the sin (singular) of the world], so I send you. . . . Whose sins [plural] you forgive, they are forgiven to them.”¹³ The contrast in this *inclusio* (1:29 and 20:23) that embraces the whole Gospel is between Jesus’ absolutely unique mission to “take away” definitively a fundamental state of affairs or condition affecting the whole human race, namely, “the sin of the world,” and the mission of his disciples throughout subsequent history to deal with the residual effects and contingent expressions of this condition, which, in principle, has already been abolished by Jesus, whose salvific glorification has “cast out” (ἐκβληθήσεται ἔξω) or expelled the Ruler of this world (12:31).

In what, then, does the fundamental alienation of humans from God consist? In theology this is the classical conundrum of original sin. What is the nature of that fundamental choice by which humans, made in God’s own image and likeness, turned away from their Creator and thereby perverted their relation to themselves, to one another, and to the whole created universe?

The story of the Fall in Genesis 3 is a profound mythological exploration of this question, and chaps. 4–11, from the fratricide of Cain to the Tower of Babel, picturesquely describe the trajectory of that original disaster unfolding in the “sins” that sprang from it like Hydra heads until God “regretted” having created humanity (6:5-8). The sin in the Garden of Eden is “original” not because it was chronologically anterior to any other sins but because it is the root, the source, that which gives rise to and basically structures all the sins to follow.

On this subject the thought of Eugen Drewermann is enlightening. Drewermann is a German polymath, born in 1940, who has been the most prominent and probably most controversial Catholic religious intellectual in Europe for the past two decades.¹⁴ His voluminous writings, including more than seventy books and

¹² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (2 vols.; AB 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 1:56.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts are cited from the *NRSV*. The exception is John 20:19-23, which I translate because the translation is critical to my argument, namely, that the traditional translation of part of this pericope is questionable.

¹⁴ For a brief synopsis of Drewermann’s career and a review of his biblical work, see Wayne G. Rollins, review of Beier’s *Violent God-Image* [see n. 2 above] in *Review of Biblical Literature* (<http://www.bookreviews.org>), April 2005.

numerous articles and essays on a wide range of topics, have been translated into nearly a dozen languages, but unfortunately not into English. That language barrier has been partially overcome by Matthias Beier, in his excellent synthesis of Drewermann's work entitled *A Violent God-Image*.¹⁵

Drewermann's work spans and integrates theology, philosophy, biblical exegesis, cultural anthropology, and depth psychology on a variety of subjects. He is also well known for his antiwar activism, which grows out of his personal concern with the issue of violence. His most important work, a three-volume treatise based on his doctoral dissertation on Genesis 2–11, entitled *Strukturen des Bösen* (The Structures of Evil) is a search for the real theological-anthropological-psychological meaning of original sin.¹⁶ A single, but central, insight from Drewermann's work illuminates John's perception of the "sin of the world."

Drewermann calls up the "usual suspects" for the motivation of our first parents' sin—greed, lust, pride, disobedience—and finds all these hypotheses incoherent. He proposes that the fundamental motive for the originating sin was fear—existential fear of annihilation born of the ontological "wound" of creaturehood. What humanity rejects, Drewermann says, is contingency, the fact that we are not God. Our existential terror stems from our realization that—even though made in God's image and likeness—we, unlike God, are not the source of our own existence. The serpent, the liar from the beginning, insinuates into the idyllic context of the "original" couple, endowed by a loving God with all the good humans could desire, the suspicion that they are not really safe, that they are vulnerable to the whims of a capricious and untrustworthy, but all-powerful deity. God, who had called them out of non-being into life, could, at any moment, plunge them back into the abyss of nothingness over which God holds them by the thread of the divine will.

Of course, this Fall scene is not a historical description of an actual event. It is a psychologically sophisticated theological analysis of our existential experience in the face of life's uncertainties, our own vulnerabilities, the inevitability of death, and the unknowability of death's aftermath. We might say that Adam and Eve are, in a sense, the pure essence of creaturehood. They have no parents from whom to have inherited anything—life, or power, or talents, or property. They have not

¹⁵ See n. 2 above.

¹⁶ Eugen Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen: Sonderausgabe. Die jahwistische Urgeschichte in exegetischer/psychoanalytischer/philosophischer Sicht* (3 vols.; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1985–86). Theologian James Alison, seemingly unaware of Drewermann's development of this theme (since he does not cite Drewermann nor enter into dialogue with him in his writings), offers an illuminating complementary analysis, based on René Girard's thought, in *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). They differ in that Drewermann is dealing with the biblical account as "myth," which he analyzes primarily in terms of depth psychology, whereas Alison sees the biblical account as pointing in some way toward the actual anthropological/historical origins of mimetic desire and its fallout.

achieved or produced anything they can call their own. They, having no history, have literally nothing they have not received. They are not so much the recipients of divine gifts; they *are* gift, totally and exclusively, a fact that can be disguised for their progeny, who, in fact, all have ancestors and a history that can supply a causal masquerade. Adam and Eve, completely devoid of anything that can even appear to come from themselves or anything else, are a pure instance of God's causality as self-bestowing love, as love that creates the object of its love in order to love it.

Under the serpent's deceitful tutelage, they begin to realize that God has one thing they do not have, something God wants to keep them from acquiring, lest they should become "like God." Of all the trees in the garden they may eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they are not to eat, "lest they die" (Gen 3:2-5). God's seeming protection *of* them from death, the serpent tells them, is in reality God's self-protection *against* them. Thus, God, the source of life for human beings, becomes, in fallen human consciousness, the ultimate threat to their life. This existential fear, Drewermann suggests, is the origin of the violent God-image. Humans project onto God their own desire violently to seize divine autonomy, and they see God as violently protecting the divine prerogatives. God and humanity become, in human perception, rivals. In Girardian terms, the first case of mimetic rivalry is the first couple's competition with God.

This penetrating analysis of the existential fear born of the ontological condition of creaturehood is strikingly reflected, in reverse, in the hymn in Philipians 2:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, *though he was in the form of God,*
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking *the form of a slave,*
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross. (vv. 5-9)

Jesus is God's incarnate overture to alienated humans grasping for divinity as the only security against the contingency of creaturehood. In Jesus, God demonstrates that divinity, equality with God, is not something to be coveted, because divinity is not something God exploits at our expense. In Jesus, God takes on the very form that humanity, instructed by the tempter, regards as slavery, namely, creaturehood, to demonstrate that creaturehood is not a condition of existential peril rooted in ontological deficiency. Even when drunk to the dregs to which

humanity can be reduced by evil itself, namely, violent death on a cross, creaturehood remains the locus of glorification, exaltation, inextinguishable union with God. To be fully human, including experiencing annihilation's "look-alike"—death—is not a deprivation of divinity but a privileged way to participate in divinity. God conquers death not by avoiding it, as Adam and Eve hoped to do by seizing divinity, but by embracing it. In the outstretched arms of God's love on the cross, death is finally slain. The Ruler of this world, who never actually had any power over Jesus (see John 14:30) but did have power in "the world" (12:31), is finally cast out. The cosmic struggle is over.¹⁷

The nature of the "sin of the world," illuminated by Drewermann's analysis, emerges in the Gospel of John as the refusal to believe that God is infinite self-bestowing love¹⁸ offering eternal life, God's own life communicated to those who are born of God (see 1:12-13), to all who will accept it. Jesus, in John, is the gift of God (see 3:16; 4:10), first offered in creation but now coming as a human being, into the world that God so loved. By his words and deeds he reveals both the fact and the meaning of God's creative love and what creaturely acceptance of that love means. The incarnation, in John, is not plan B, God's salvage operation on the wreckage of creation. It is the fulfillment of creation, which was always, from the beginning, in and for and according to the Word that is now made flesh.

John's term for accepting God's self-gift, which is Jesus himself, is "believing." It is the self-gift, in Jesus, of the human to God that responds to God's self-gift, in Jesus, to the world. In Jesus himself, humans see not just the possibility but the existential reality of human participation in divine life that the serpent tempted them to believe was not possible except by seizing what God jealously withheld from them. Jesus is, at one and the same time, in a single person, the presence of the self-giving God ("I and the Father are one" [10:30]; "whoever sees me sees the one who sent me" [12:45]) and the total receptivity of the creature ("the Father is greater than I" [14:38]; I do always the will of the one who sent me [see 8:29 and elsewhere]). This coincidence of giving that does not diminish the being of the Giver, who therefore has no need to defend it against the creature, and receiving that does not endanger the receiver, who therefore has no need to seize divinity as self-protection, makes Jesus the way, the truth, and the life (see 14:6) not only for those who know his name and story but for every human being, for the whole world. He, not Satan, is the savior of the world.

¹⁷ See the very convincing argument in John Dennis, "The 'Lifting Up of the Son of Man' and the Dethroning of the 'Ruler of this World': Jesus' Death as the Defeat of the Devil in John 12,31-32," in *Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. van Belle), 677-91, esp. 690-91.

¹⁸ See Popkes, "Love of God for the World." Popkes evokes John 3:16; 1 John 3:16; and 1 John 4:8, 16 in his overall argument that God's motive in the sending of Jesus and Jesus' self-gift in his death is the love of God for the world, which is not restricted to Israel. See especially his conclusion, pp. 622-23.

This victory over the "sin of the world" is succinctly summarized by Jesus at the Last Supper (16:8-11). Jesus says that, when the Paraclete comes to continue his presence and action in the world through his disciples,¹⁹ the Spirit's witness will be an exposure that "the world," which here means the satanic project as a whole, was radically wrong about the entire human project, that is, about *sin*, about *justice*, and about *judgment*.

First, about sin. The Ruler of this world, acting through the leaders of the Jews, declared that Jesus was not the revelation of God's absolute love for the world but a blasphemer (see 19:7). The Spirit reveals that the *real sin* was precisely not to believe that Jesus was God's gift.

Second, about justice. The world, under Satan's inspiration working particularly through Judas (see 13:2), thought that executing the blasphemer was the just vindication of God's jealous honor. But *true justice* was accomplished in Jesus' glorification by his going to the Father, which took place right within the crucifixion.

Third, about judgment. The world, acting through Pilate in league with the leaders of the Jews (see 19:7-10), rendered the judgment of execution on Jesus even though he knew Jesus was innocent of any crime. But the *true judgment* was the final condemnation of the Ruler of this world, who was judged by and in and through the death of Jesus. Jesus' death, which in John is his glorification by God, is the victory not only of Jesus over Satan but of God's love for the world over the satanic "sin of the world."

III. Mimetic Desire and Violence: The Dynamic of the Sin of the World

If Drewermann discloses the basic *nature and structure* of the sin of the world as the disordered human desire to "be like God" by seizing divinity rather than accepting it as the gift of God, Girard has offered a remarkably fruitful analysis of the *dynamics* of the sin of the world in his theory of the connection between human desire run amok and violence. Girard, who taught for much of his career in the United States, was born in 1923 and began his academic career in medieval cultural studies, branching out into interdisciplinary studies in comparative literature and cultural anthropology. Beginning in the 1970s, Girard's theory of the religious origin and nature of social violence has generated widespread interest among scholars in such diverse fields as literary studies, critical theory, anthropology, cultural stud-

¹⁹ Brown says, "It is our contention that John presents the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit in a special role, namely, as the personal presence of Jesus in the Christian while Jesus is with the Father" (*Gospel according to John*, appendix V, "The Paraclete," 1:1139. I think that this is exactly right, and I base my argument at this point on Brown's position.

ies, sociology, economics, psychology, philosophy, and especially theology and biblical studies.²⁰

The theory Girard has elaborated is not something he invented. Like Darwin's theory of evolution, or Jung's archetypal theory of the unconscious, or Einstein's theory of relativity, Girard's theory of the nature and role of religiously legitimated social violence in cultural evolution was discovered in the material he was studying, particularly in the fields of literature and anthropology. Such theories, although comprehensive, are not totalizing grand narratives, the ideological straitjackets or procrustean beds of which postmodernity is rightly very suspicious. They are extremely illuminating and fruitful insights into the structure and dynamics of particular areas of human experience. They are like Paul's classic and comprehensive description in Romans 7 of the human moral dilemma: the battle of the spirit between the good we espouse and the evil we so often choose and especially our experience of being controlled in such choices by something that both is and is not ourself. Such comprehensive theories cannot be validated by authority or even by argumentation. They can validate themselves only by their explanatory power.

An extraordinarily wide range of scholars, including some of the most creative biblical scholars in recent years, have found Girard's theory of the role of sacralized violence in the development of human culture extremely illuminating, no doubt partly because an act of horrendous violence, the crucifixion of Jesus, is at the very heart of the Christian religion and this presents serious problems for many believers.²¹ The misunderstanding and misuse of this central datum of the Christian story, especially to promote terror of God and blind obedience in the service of the tyranny of human religious authority, to romanticize suffering especially among the powerless, or to encourage passivity in the face of oppression, are so prevalent and so destructive that a new way of looking at the crucifixion, which Girard's theory offers, is more than worth investigation.²²

²⁰ Works by René Girard, specifically on the issue of violence and religion, that have had an enormous influence on religious studies are the following: *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

²¹ One of the most developed theories that relies heavily on Girard's work is Walter Wink's trilogy on the Principalities and Powers: *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (1983); *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (1986); *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (1992), all from Fortress Press. Robert T. Fortna called Wink's third and concluding volume "[a] masterwork [that] combines skillful biblical exegesis with prodigious knowledge of our modern world to produce a radically new understanding of Christianity as victory over the Powers that dominate and enslave."

²² Two of the most original and fruitful extensive uses of Girardian theory to deal with the widespread and dangerous misunderstanding of the crucifixion of Jesus as salvific are the following: James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1993; repr., 1998), and Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*.

I will first synthesize Girard's theory about sacred violence²³ and then exploit that synthesis in relation to the "paradox (or perhaps we could say the koan) of the cross," namely, that the immeasurable good of the salvation of the world was brought about by unqualified evil, namely, the murder of Jesus.²⁴ This paradox or enigma is a Gordian knot, because every effort to render it coherent seems to make the problem more intractable. Girard's theory in conjunction with John's unique take on the death of Jesus as exaltation holds, I think, some promise in dealing with this conundrum.

The interconnection of three dynamics is at the heart of Girard's thesis. The first dynamic is *mimetic or imitative desire*, which causes social and cultural breakdown. The second is *scapegoating violence*, in which social reconciliation and unity are restored through the execution of a designated victim. The third is the *creation of a myth* that disguises the murder of the scapegoat as a divinely sanctioned and necessary sacrifice to an offended deity and that is embodied in a *ritual* by which the mythologized sacrificial death can, in bloody or unbloody manner, be repeated when later crises threaten the group.

First, Girard points out that the world's great literature, especially the tragedies of the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare, and the novels of Dostoevsky, as well as our own experience, show us that we humans do not straightforwardly desire things because we see them as good. Rather, we learn to see something as desirable because someone else has or desires that object. Desire, in other words, is mimetic or imitative. The mother persuades the baby to desire mashed carrots by pretending that she finds the orange mush delicious. The teenager covets a particular brand of sneakers because the most popular boy in the class wears them. The same dynamic drives adults "to keep up with the Joneses" even when they neither need nor want the bigger car or the more exotic vacation. International conflicts arise when one nation covets the assets—territory, resources, labor, markets, power—of another. But in many cases, especially when only one entity can have the coveted object, whether in the schoolyard, in the boardroom, or on the battlefield, conflict ensues. Victory only incites retaliation against the winner, which keeps the cycle of violence going.

Imitative or mimetic desire, leading to acquisitive rivalry, leading to competition and eventually to conflict in a society, tends inevitably toward the war of all against all as everyone struggles to be at the top of some mimetic pileup. As violence escalates, social chaos threatens the survival of the group—small groups such as a family struggling over an inheritance or big ones such as Iraq and the

²³ For a more detailed summary of Girard's thought, see Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*; or James Alison, *Joy of Being Wrong*, chap. 1 "René Girard's Mimetic Theory."

²⁴ I will be particularly dependent in this section on the work of Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*; see esp. chap. 4, "The Paradox of the Passion: Saved by What Shouldn't Happen," on this subject.

United States struggling over oil in the Middle East. Enter the second dynamic in Girard's theory, the remedy for contagious, escalating violence, namely, scapegoating. Something must be done to arrest mutual destructiveness and channel the violent energy of all into a common and unifying effort. The age-old remedy for social chaos, for the disunity of "all against all," is the unification of "all against one," against the beautiful older sister who has always pretended to be more devoted to their rich father than the other siblings or against Saddam Hussein, who is surely hiding weapons of mass destruction that he fully intends to use. Nothing unites like a common enemy. The scapegoat is simply the designated enemy.

It is vitally important to realize that the structurally and dynamically simple scapegoat mechanism really does work. In a group convulsed by mimetically inspired social chaos, someone, by the mere fact of being somehow different from the majority, is identified as responsible in some way for the social disarray. Almost any kind of difference will do to constitute the scapegoat: skin color, sexual orientation, gender, a speech defect or foreign accent, size, poor grooming, coming from the wrong part of town, or even just being "new" in the schoolyard. The point is that someone must be responsible for the trouble in the group, and it cannot be anyone like "us" because that would suggest that "we" might be the source of our problem, that "we have met the enemy, and it is us."²⁵ We have only to look at the wars we are currently waging, at the attempts to deal with the current experience of economic crisis in our country or moral crisis in the Catholic Church, to recognize the recourse to this scapegoating dynamic.

The antagonism toward the scapegoat spreads by contagion and turns the crowd into a mob, a single collectivity like the gang of bullies on a playground or a Ku Klux Klan posse descending on the home of a black family or the country gearing up for preemptive war, moved by motives for which no one feels personally responsible at the time, although by "the next morning"—literal or figurative—some individuals might begin to wonder how they ever could have participated in "what happened (not 'what we did') last night." But the peace that miraculously descends on the group now that the mission is accomplished, the victim gone, "proves" that the destruction of the scapegoat was something that "needed to happen." Things are back to normal. The scapegoat principle is vindicated: "it is expedient that one person die to keep the whole group from perishing" (see John 11:50).

The third dynamic in the scapegoat process is the mythic and ritual appropriation by which the murder of the scapegoat is transformed into religious sacrifice.

²⁵ After defeating the British fleet in the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, Oliver Perry, commander of the American fleet, dispatched his famous message to Major General William Henry Harrison: "We have met the enemy, and they are ours." In 1970, cartoonist Walt Kelly famously paraphrased the statement as "We have met the enemy, and he is us" in an Earth Day poster that featured characters from his long-running strip *Pogo* to lament the sad state of the environment.

In the classic ancient society, the reunited community disguises the violence and injustice of the victimization by creating a myth or sacred story that retells the event not as the lynching that it was but as an expiatory sacrifice offered to placate an offended deity whose punishment of the community in the form of war, disease, famine, and the like, is now lifted. They then create a ritual or sacred drama that allows the sacrifice to be reenacted, in bloody or unbloody form, whenever social chaos, crop failure, plague, war, or some other catastrophe makes renewal necessary. In modern societies, the "gods" are different—patriotism or "the American way of life"—and the myths and rituals are often secular, for example, toppled statues, flags, and yellow ribbons flying. But the process and its purposes are the same: reunification of fractured social solidarity through the "all against one" dynamic.

The function of the sacrificial myth is to render the scapegoat's unjust victimization invisible either through vilification of the scapegoat as one who deserved to die because he or she had imperiled the community, or through posthumous exaltation of the victim as the selfless savior of the people who willingly offered his or her life for the community. In some cases the myth begins as vilification and is later transmuted into divinization. Jesus enraged his opponents by pointing out to them how often they had killed the prophets God sent to them, who, like Jesus himself, destabilized the community by the proclamation that God was not pleased with their behavior. Later the vilified and murdered prophet was honored as a voice that had been crying in the wilderness even as the descendants of the murderers claimed that *they* would never have done what their ancestors did. Jesus, of course, was warning them that they were already plotting to do to him precisely the same thing their forebears had done to the prophets before him (see Matt 23:29-39 and Luke 11:47-51), namely, to scapegoat him "for the sake of the people."

Scapegoating, however, is always a temporary fix. It has to be renewed, actually or ritually, again and again because the cure is identical to the disease. Supposedly "good" violence is used against "bad" violence, begetting first renewed unity and then, inevitably, more violence.

IV. Jesus' Execution as Scapegoating Violence

No great stretch of the imagination is necessary to see how this Girardian analysis applies to the passion and death of Jesus. The crucifixion was a classic case of scapegoating, and Jesus is the paradigmatic scapegoat, who enters freely into the dynamic in order to subvert it at its root and definitively conquer the Ruler of this world on his own turf. Satan is condemned, John says, by the judgment he inspires against Jesus, the Scapegoat who will expose once and for all the evil and futility of this strategy for self-salvation and will offer humanity an alternative.

The religious and political chaos threatening Jerusalem at Passover the year of Jesus' death was precisely the kind of social situation for which the scapegoat mechanism is a solution. And Jesus was "different" enough in the eyes of his contemporaries to make him a natural scapegoat. In John's Gospel he is regarded as a Galilean (see 7:40-52), a native of the hotbed of social and political resistance to Roman occupation, and a leader of the *ʿam hā'āreš*, "those common people" despised by the religious purebloods of Jerusalem. It was even suggested that he might be a hated Samaritan (see 8:48). He was quite possibly illegitimate. His dealing with evil spirits looked much like demon possession (John 8:48; Matt 10:25; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15-19). He was in his thirties and not married, which could have several unsavory explanations. His teaching and actions challenged the law and especially its established interpreters and enforcers. Someone had heard him say something threatening about the temple, although no one could remember exactly what, and his claim to be the Son of God was a challenge to the emperor, who claimed that title, and certainly blasphemous to pious Jewish ears. Who needed a trial? (see Matt 26:63-65 in relation to John 7:46-53). Obviously, the riot simmering in the streets was due to this "odd man out," this messianic pretender, who must be eliminated.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, and in John's Gospel he announces it three times (18:38; 19:4; 19:6). So did Caiaphas, who had baldly declared to his colleagues that if Jesus were allowed to go on, the whole world would follow him and the Romans would wipe out "our place [i.e., the temple] and our nation" (see 11:48). The scapegoat principle was clearly enunciated by Caiaphas, "It is expedient that one man die rather than that the whole nation perish" (see 11:50 and 18:14). The real guilt or innocence of that one man, which the Pharisee Nicodemus challenged his colleagues to establish by the just procedures demanded by the law (see 7:50-53), was intrinsically irrelevant. What was important was the mob catharsis that would pacify the people and avert the chaos that would precipitate Roman retaliation.

Pilate and the Jewish hierarchy play off each other in the scenes in John 18-19. They whip the Passover crowd into a mindless mob screaming for the death of someone against whom most have not even heard the charges and for the release of Barabbas, already convicted of the very crimes for which Jesus will be killed (see 18:39-40). Pilate offers them the scapegoat, dressed as a fool, so brutalized that he in no way resembles their respectable religious selves (see 19:5). Civil and religious resolution of impending chaos clearly lay in the unification of all against one. Nothing short of death would do: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (19:6, 15).

A few hours later, after the lynching on Golgotha, calm descends over the land. In all three Synoptic Gospels one of the executioners acknowledges that their victim was innocent, a Son of God (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47). Luke says that the crowd dispersed beating their breasts (23:48). In John, Pilate is

relieved to get Jesus' body out of sight before people come to their senses and realize what they have done (see John 19:38). The pious go "off to church," that is, home for the solemn celebration of the Sabbath, which, this year, was Passover, while the Roman soldiers wash their hands of another gruesome tour of duty, just following orders. The important thing for everyone is to relish the restored order, the religious and social calm, the closure that the scapegoating sacrifice has accomplished, and to try not to think too much about the details.

Jesus, in other words, was not sacrificed by or to God, nor did he will his own death. He was murdered as a scapegoat by the collusion between the Jerusalem hierarchy manipulating a hysterical mob and the Roman power structure represented by a self-serving but terrified tyrant for their respective religious and political purposes. There was, in other words, nothing good about Jesus' violent victimization. Therefore, to understand it theologically as that by which God in Jesus takes away the sin of the world, it is crucial to identify it properly as the scapegoating murder that it was. As James Alison forcefully put it:

God gives his Son, out of love for the world, which sacrifices him. . . . [T]he self-giving is prior, anterior to the sacrifice, and the sacrifice is incidental, accidental, to the self-giving. So Jesus did not give himself so as to be a victim, he gave himself, in the full awareness that he was to be a victim, but did not want this at all. . . . This is why John stresses particularly Jesus' freedom with relation to his "hour."²⁶

The religious mythologizing and ritualization of the crucifixion in Christian history, presenting it as a sacrifice demanded and willed by God, is part of the self-delusion of those—namely, humanity, including ourselves as well as our forebears—who are responsible for that murder. As Jesus warned his disciples on the eve of his passion, they would later experience what he was about to undergo and it would be made invisible by the same religious rhetoric and ritual invoked in Jesus' death: "an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so *they are offering worship to God*" (John 16:2). This religious justification of scapegoating murder is of the essence of the scapegoating dynamic. The scapegoat nature of Jesus' execution reveals it as the incarnation of the sin of the world, the refusal to believe that God is all-sufficient salvific love. The only alternative to the acceptance of God's love is to seek our own salvation by violent resistance to whatever is threatening or oppressing us. The only alternative to love is violence. Jesus had to enter into that dynamic in order to undo it.

VI. Interpreting Jesus as Scapegoat: The Lamb of God

The conundrum for Christian theology and spirituality is how the salvific power of God operates through the intrinsically evil action of the scapegoating

²⁶ Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 49.

murder of Jesus. The OT category of the “lamb,”²⁷ used in John to designate Jesus as the one who “takes away the sin of the world,” is, I believe, a Johannine hermeneutical sword for cutting through this Gordian knot.

Johannine scholars generally recognize three OT passages as the possible background for this uniquely Johannine title:²⁸ the “sacrifice of Isaac,” in which God provides the lamb (πρόβατον) for the holocaust (Gen 22:1-20); the paschal lamb (πρόβατον), whose blood saves the Hebrews in Egypt and whose flesh becomes their Passover communion meal (Exod 12:1-14); the Suffering Servant, who is compared to a silent lamb (πρόβατον and ἀμνός) led to slaughter (Isa 53:7-8).²⁹ Most scholars opt for one of the three as dominant, with one or both of the others as possible references.³⁰ The fact, however, that there is explicit textual reference in John to all three OT types suggests to me that all three, in interaction, are necessary to make sense fully of the Johannine use of the lamb typology.

²⁷ Jesus is associated, perhaps, with the paschal lamb in 1 Cor 5:7, which refers to Christ as τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν (our Passover [lamb or meal or feast understood]) and by comparison in 1 Pet 1:19, which says that we were ransomed τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ (“with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish”), which is a clear evocation of the paschal lamb. But there is no explicit reference in the NT to the “lamb of God” or to Jesus as “lamb of God” outside the Fourth Gospel. Since both of these NT texts actually refer to an OT type, my search for the precise significance of the “Lamb of God” designation is properly focused on the OT.

²⁸ C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* [2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 176–77) gives most of the relevant exegetical data. For a more developed interpretation of the symbol of the “Lamb of God,” see Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 216–24.

²⁹ The “Songs of the Suffering Servant” are poems describing the scapegoat death of an innocent victim. The four songs or poems are found in Isa 42:1–7; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; and 52:13–53:12. The Servant, like other “suffering just ones” in the OT such as Jonah, Susannah, and the Wisdom hero, suffers unjustly and, in the case of the Servant, is killed but is ultimately vindicated by God, and his suffering plays some mysterious role in the salvation of his people, Israel. The theory of the scapegoat helps to illuminate the causality of the redemptive power of unjust suffering.

³⁰ Most commentators see some reference to the paschal lamb (e.g., Barrett, Brown, Earl Richard, Francis J. Moloney, et al.) because of the clear evocations of the paschal lamb in the Johannine passion narrative, though all point out that the paschal lamb was not an expiatory sacrifice but the food of a communion meal, which I will try to show is precisely the point. The Suffering Servant is probably the most widely accepted OT type because there is a direct citation from one of the Servant Songs (Isa 53:1) in John 12:38. There is little acceptance of the Isaac typology. Leon Morris (*The Gospel according to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971] 143–48) gives a concise summary of major positions, indicating that for each candidate text there are reasons both for and against accepting it as typological. He concludes: “The lamb figure may well be intended to be composite, evoking memories of several, perhaps all, of the suggestions we have canvassed. All that the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed was perfectly fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ” (pp. 147–48).

The most universally accepted reference is to the Suffering Servant in Isa 52:13–53:12. The Servant is described in Isa 52:13 as ὁ παῖς μου καὶ ὑψωθήσεται καὶ δοξασθήσεται σφόδρα, “my servant [or son] who is raised [lifted] high or highly exalted and glorified.” This is clearly the background for the consistent and uniquely Johannine description of the death of Jesus, the servant and son, not as a *kenōsis* or abasement but as a “lifting up” on the cross, which is both an exaltation and a glorification.³¹ In the continuation of this Servant Song, in 53:1, we have the text about the Servant that is applied verbatim to Jesus in the summary of the Book of Signs in John 12:38, recognizing and lamenting his final rejection by his own: “This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” Besides the pervasive allusions in the Johannine passion account to the images in the Servant Songs, for example, Jesus’ marred appearance (see 19:4–6), his placement among the evildoers (see 18:30), his being pierced for our offenses (19:37), and the grave assigned to him among the rich (19:39–41),³² this is the one OT text (Isa 53:7) in which both Greek terms for “lamb,” πρόβατον and ἀμνός, occur in the LXX.³³ The comparison of the Servant to the lamb silent before its shearers finds echo in Jesus’ silence before Pilate, who condemns him to death (see 19:9–10).

The reference to the Passover lamb is quite clear in the Johannine passion account. John’s chronology of the passion departs from that of the Synoptics, so that Jesus dies not on Passover but on the Preparation Day, at the very hour when the paschal lambs were being slain in the temple in Jerusalem (19:14). The wine he is offered in his thirst is raised to his lips on a branch of hyssop (19:29), whose symbolic significance is emphasized by the fact that a literal hyssop branch would not be solid enough to bear the weight of a soaked sponge. But hyssop was the instrument by which the blood of the paschal lamb was applied to the doorposts of the Hebrews in Egypt to protect them from the angel of death (see Exod 12:22) as they prepared, by eating for the first time what would later be the Passover meal, to leave the land of slavery. When the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus are broken to hasten their deaths, Jesus’ legs are not broken (19:33), to fulfill, we are

³¹ Jesus’ death is referred to as “exaltation” or “lifting up” in 3:14; 8:28; 12:32 and as “glorification” in 7:39; 11:4; 12:16, 23; 13:31–32.

³² The LXX, which was probably the OT text used by the Fourth Evangelist, gives “rich” where the Hebrew has “evildoers.” John seems to have picked up the LXX nuance by having Jesus buried by the rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, with a large quantity of expensive spices provided by Nicodemus and in a “new tomb” (19:39–41). In other words, Jesus is accorded a royal burial.

³³ Some scholars consider this reference weak because the “lamb” is not equated with the Servant but is used as a metaphor or comparison. I find this unconvincing since, obviously, a person cannot be literally a lamb.

told explicitly, the text of Exod 12:46, which specifies that no bone of the Passover lamb is to be broken.³⁴

Finally, the account of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 is invoked by a few scholars but regarded by most as the weakest background and by a few as irrelevant.³⁵ There is only one fairly explicit allusion in the passion account to this OT passage, namely, that Jesus goes out to Golgotha “carrying the cross himself” (19:17), as Isaac had borne to Mount Moriah the wood for Abraham’s sacrifice. However, Geza Vermes, in reference to John 1:29, the Lamb of God text, says, “For the Palestinian Jews, all lamb sacrifice, and especially the Passover lamb and the Tamid offering, was a memorial of the Akedah [i.e., the binding of Isaac] with its effects of deliverance, forgiveness of sin and messianic salvation.”³⁶ I will argue that the sacrifice of Isaac is crucial for understanding the salvific character of the death of Jesus and especially the role of God as Jesus’ Father in that death.

Each of the three OT references that John clearly evokes contributes something important to an interpretation of Jesus’ death not as God’s sacrifice of Jesus but as Jesus’ free use of our scapegoating sacrificial mechanism to take away of the sin of the world. I want to attend specifically to three problematic aspects of Jesus’ death that the symbolism of the lamb can illuminate: God’s role in Jesus’ death, the role of suffering in the salvific work of Jesus, and the commission of the ecclesial community to continue Jesus’ saving work.

A. God’s Role in Jesus’ Death

The *role of God in the death of Jesus* is perhaps the most consistently and dangerously misinterpreted aspect of the passion in Christian tradition. Many people raise the deeply disturbing question of why God required the death of Jesus to save the world, “the death of a son to save a slave” as the paschal proclamation poetically puts it? In John’s Gospel, God does not send Jesus into the world to be sacrificed, to be killed. As we have already seen, the motive of the incarnation in John is not expiation, the repair of an original creation gone wrong through original

³⁴ Some scholars, despite these clear references in John to Jesus as the paschal lamb, reject this typology because the paschal lamb was not an expiatory but a communion sacrifice. In my opinion, this strengthens the argument I am making. The ritual that will become central to Christian celebration of the paschal mystery is not an “unbloody reenactment of a bloody expiatory sacrifice” but a communion sacrifice in which the sharing of the meal is central. As with the paschal lamb, the death of Jesus precedes and, as it were, supplies the food. It is not Jesus as dead but precisely as living who is the sustenance of the community.

³⁵ See n. 29 above.

³⁶ Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (2nd rev. ed.; SPB 4; Leiden: Brill, 1973) 225.

sin, but the *very same love* that motivated God's creation of all things "in the beginning." God's gift of Jesus to the world, and Jesus' self-giving to us, precede the murder, which is read theologically, after the fact, as Jesus' willing sacrifice of himself. But the killing of Jesus was wholly the work of his persecutors. From God's point of view, "in the beginning was the Word" in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created. It was that eternal Word that God gave to humanity and who became flesh in the incarnation, grace upon grace (see 1:16-17), fulfilling—not replacing or repairing—creation.

John says that God so loved the world that God *gave* God's only Son "so that everyone who believes in him . . . might have eternal life" (3:16). Jesus identifies himself to the Samaritan woman in these same terms: "If you knew the *gift of God*, [namely] . . . the one who is speaking to you" (4:10). Jesus both incarnates God's self-gift and espouses its divine motive, God's self-bestowing love, as his own motive for coming into the world and, eventually, entering into his passion, which was not God's plan but the way humans responded to the gift. Speaking of himself, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). Note that Jesus in John is not sentenced to death by God. He lays down his own life, not for his enemies but precisely for his friends, because he himself loves them with the very love of God.

Jesus lays down his life in complete freedom. "No one takes my life from me," he says. "I lay it down of my own accord" (see 10:17-18). Not only is Jesus not overpowered by those who kill him, but John is emphatic that there is no tension between God's will to give the Son to us and Jesus' desire to give himself even unto the laying down of his life for us. The gift of eternal life originates in the creative love of God and is expressed in the completely free salvific love of Jesus. God, not Moses, Jesus says, gives the true bread from heaven that gives life to the world. That bread, which comes from God, is Jesus: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51). To give his flesh is a Semitic way of saying to lay down his life. So Jesus' death is not a sentence God lays on Jesus, but Jesus' free participation in the Father's gift to the world. The horrendous human response to that gift is what kills Jesus.

Unlike the Synoptic Jesus, the Johannine Jesus actively rejects the thought of praying that he might be spared the cup of suffering (see 12:27). His whole life, he says, has been a preparation for this hour. By his freely accepted death, he will glorify the Father; by allowing that very death, the Father will glorify Jesus. Jesus' death, in other words, is the locus of the mutual glorification of Father and Son. It is the apex of revelation. As Jesus reveals God's love for the world in his death, so God, in that same death, reveals Jesus' true identity as the very incarnation of the self-giving God. Therefore, there is no agony in the garden in John. Indeed, except

for Simon Peter's misguided outburst of violence, which serves only to emphasize by contrast that Jesus is freely undertaking this work (see 18:11), there is no violence in the scene.³⁷ Jesus' would-be captors, Roman and Jewish,³⁸ are twice leveled to the ground by his majestic "I am" in response to their statement of whom they seek. With sovereign calm Jesus secures the release of his disciples, rejects Simon Peter's defense of him by the sword, and then freely hands himself over to those whose saber-rattling approach is revealed to be as unnecessary as it is impotent. In other words, Jesus is completely one with God, and entirely free in undertaking the passion (see 18:3-12). As Alison puts it, Jesus freely moves into the place of the scapegoat and takes up its role in order definitively to destroy from within this primary and ultimate weapon of the Ruler of this world.³⁹

The story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:1-18) helps to illuminate this aspect of Jesus' passion. Abraham assures Isaac that "God will provide" the sacrificial lamb. As the story proceeds, it becomes clear that the true "lamb," the sacrifice God desires, is not Isaac but Abraham's holocaust of the heart. But that interior holocaust, that complete entrusting of everything he holds dear to God, is not to be signified by the literal murder of Isaac. God does not require the death of Isaac any more than God wanted Micah to sacrifice the fruit of his loins for the sin of his soul (see Mic 6:6-7). God does not want or need, is never pleased or glorified by, the destruction of what God has created. The only holocaust worthy of God is that which mirrors God's own "holocaust" in giving to us, in Jesus, God's very self.

Abraham, therefore, is and is not a God-figure, and both the positive and the negative dimensions are important for our understanding of God's role in Jesus' death as it appears in John. Like Abraham, who so loves God as to give his only son, God so loves the world as to give God's only Son. But, unlike Abraham, God does not give by destroying. It is those to whom God offers the Son as gift who reject the gift and kill the Son. God, in ironic contrast, rejects Abraham's offer to kill the son, and gives back to him the gift, the son of promise, which Abraham thought God was reclaiming. The revelation is not of a violent God taking back a gift by demanding murder, but that of the holocaust of God's own heart, the unstint-

³⁷ See the very interesting article on this subject by Eben Scheffler, "Jesus' Non-Violence at His Arrest: The Synoptics and John's Gospel Compared," in *Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. van Belle), 739-49.

³⁸ It is interesting that in all three Synoptics the group that arrests Jesus consists of only Jews, whereas in John it consists of Jewish officers from the chief priests but also, strikingly, a σπεῖρα (between two hundred and six hundred Roman soldiers). Thus, Jesus is the victim not simply of "the Jews" but of humanity. The universalization of the passion in John is often missed because of the Johannine symbolic use of "the Jews" to denote (with the same ambiguity and necessity for careful interpretation) "the world."

³⁹ See esp. Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, chap. 3. For a much fuller explanation, see his *Joy of Being Wrong*, esp. part 2. See also Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, chap. 5.

ing love of God for humanity, that does not withhold even God's beloved Son from us. Even more amazing, God does not withdraw the rejected Gift but gives the slain Jesus back to us in resurrection as God returned to Abraham the son he thought he had lost.

Likewise, Isaac is and is not a Christ-figure. Like Isaac, Jesus is the beloved Son bound for death. But unlike Isaac, Jesus is not a passive victim bound by a distraught father, and he is not rescued from death by God. Jesus is not a victim of God any more than was Isaac. As Isaac was the victim not of God's violent demands but of Abraham's misunderstanding of God's will, so Jesus is the victim not of God's wrath but of human scapegoating, our misguided and futile effort to control reality through violence. The mysterious interaction among Abraham, Isaac, and God illuminates once and for all the invalidity of the disguise of human sacrifice as religious worship. There is no violence in God's repertoire. God's role in Jesus' death is to accompany Jesus in his self-giving and to glorify him as the revelation of God's love by finally raising him to life and giving him back to those who killed him. God takes no part in the murder of Jesus. And God's love cannot be neutralized or abrogated by our violence. Murder is our work from which *this* murder will finally free us.

B. The Role of Jesus' Suffering in Salvation

The second question concerning Jesus' identity and mission as the Lamb of God, namely, why Jesus had to die as he did to take away the sin of the world, is illuminated by the figure of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, the lamb led silently to slaughter. The Isaian passage makes it very clear that it is not God's will but human malice that victimized the Servant. God responds to this malice by exalting and glorifying the Servant, making him a remedy for that malice itself:

He was *oppressed*, and he was *afflicted*,
 yet he did not open his mouth;
 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
 so he did not open his mouth.
 By a *perversion of justice* he was taken away.

He had done no wrong . . . spoken no falsehood . . .

[but] if he *gives his life as an offering for sin*
 he shall see his descendants in a long life,
 and the *will of the LORD shall be accomplished through him.* (Isa 53:7-9, 10)

As in all scapegoating violence, the victim is *oppressed and afflicted*. Although the slaying of the victim is always disguised by justifying rhetoric such as penal justice, or necessity for the common good, or God's will, in fact all scapegoating

is a *perversion of justice*. The scapegoat, as we will see, is always innocent of that for which he or she is scapegoated, but in this case the scapegoat *freely offers himself for the sin of his persecutors*. With the power and generosity that advocates of nonviolence have learned, he accepts suffering by refusing to inflict it.⁴⁰ He will not have recourse to violence to save himself; however, God is not impotent before human evil. Through this death God's will, not that of the murderers, will be accomplished. God does not share their murderous design but is able to make God's salvific design emerge through and despite it.

How, then, does Jesus' death "take away the sin of the world," humanity's refusal of divine love revealed in God's gift of the only Son? Theologian S. Mark Heim, in his remarkable book *Saved from Sacrifice*, says that two features of Jesus' death make it possible for him to confront and defeat, once and for all, the sacrificial dynamic, the scapegoating mechanism of reconciliation through violence by the collective murder of an innocent victim. There was no way other than through suffering, and that is the answer to the question of why Jesus had to suffer. Jesus had to be simultaneously a victim *like all other scapegoats* and at the same time utterly *unique among them* so that by entering into and taking on the role of the scapegoat, he could render it forever impotent by exposing once and for all its satanic mechanism.

First, Jesus was *one more victim like all the others* in the long line stretching back to Abel, the innocent victim of Cain's mimetic rivalry. If Jesus were not like other scapegoated victims, framed and lynched for crimes of which he was innocent, his death would not be relevant to theirs. And although he freely accepted what was done to him, as do many of the bravest and noblest of humanity's victims who lay down their lives for others, it could have been prevented only by a miracle, something that is not accessible to other victims. And this is why so many find consolation in Jesus' suffering. They do not rejoice in his suffering any more than they do in their own. Nor are they seeking suffering in order to imitate him. But as they are helpless, doomed, unable to escape, they know that he experienced everything they are experiencing and therefore that his resurrection offers real hope for theirs.

But, at the same time, Jesus was *not like other victims* in two important respects. First, Jesus was an absolutely, rather than a relatively, innocent victim. All scapegoated victims are, like all of us, guilty of something, even of many things. But scapegoats are innocent of that for which they are persecuted, namely, being the sole and real cause of the social chaos in the community that the scapegoating process intends to bring to closure through the death of this one person.

⁴⁰ An excellent analytical study of the spirituality of nonviolence across religious traditions is Terrence J. Rynne, *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) esp. chap. 5.

The accusation against the scapegoat is a double disguise. It hides the innocence of the victim (by imputing to him or her such enormous guilt that it has brought ultimate threat upon the community, which only the scapegoat's death can eradicate). Moreover, it hides the guilt of the persecutors (who think that, because they are not guilty of the sin of which the victim is accused, they are therefore innocent and their murder of the victim gives glory to God, whose wrath can be pacified only by such vengeance). The perception of absolute moral difference between the guilty victim and the innocent executioners (like the woman taken in adultery and the Pharisees prepared to stone her in John 8)⁴¹ establishes that the victim deserves to die and that the murderers are licensed, indeed obliged, to kill in the service of "justice." The "rightness" of this transaction, this "sacrifice" to the offended justice of God, reestablishes social and moral order. The execution of the victim brings "closure," which reunites the fractured community.

But, alone among humans, Jesus was actually not guilty of anything. He was the absolutely innocent victim. This difference between the person justly accused of a finite offense for which the person might actually be justly punished and the innocent victim who is being scapegoated was clearly expressed in Luke by the "good thief" on the cross to his partner in crime, "we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done *nothing* wrong" (Luke 23:41). Jesus as scapegoat is unique in his total innocence and, as such, he strips away the rationalization and reveals the innocence of all scapegoats and the guilt of all those who sacrifice them. The crucifixion, in the words of the Girardist social critic Gil Bailie, unveils the violence once and for all.⁴² Jesus, by freely taking on the role of the scapegoat, exposes the inner mechanism of the scapegoating process, which can only function as long as its true nature is hidden from those who are carrying it out, as long as they "know not what they do" (see Luke 23:34). Once it becomes clear to us that we are murdering the powerless and the innocent in order to justify ourselves and thus unify the society fractured by mimetic rivalry and conflict, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain that there is some real difference between the "good violence" of the executioners and the "bad violence" they are supposedly expunging. What is the difference, really, between the killer being hanged and the executioner who opens the trap door beneath him?

⁴¹ This is the point of the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-11). When Jesus forces the stoners to recognize that they are no more innocent than she (whether their sins were the same as hers or not), they realize that she is no more guilty than they. They are not innocent enough to execute her. Jesus does not say that the woman is sinless. He just points out that no one is, and thereby Jesus stops the scapegoating process. He reveals the intended execution for what it truly is, murder.

⁴² This is the thesis of Bailie's very important work *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

Second, Jesus is unique as victim because he did not remain in the grip of death. He truly died. But, unlike any other victim in human history, he rose from the dead. In the resurrection God gave back to us the gift we had rejected. Jesus returned with forgiveness on his lips to his disciples who had been complicit in his unjust death by their betrayal, denial, and abandonment.

“Peace be to you,” he greets them, and they “rejoiced at seeing the Lord” (John 20:19-20). He comes into their fear, their shame, their infidelity, and their cowardice not to accuse or retaliate, not to extract a confession or demand reparation, not to do to them what they have done to him. He sets no conditions for their rehabilitation.⁴³ Vengeance has no role in reconciliation. The risen Jesus comes only to forgive and, by forgiving, to give his disciples, as he had promised at the Last Supper (see 14:24), the peace the world by its mechanisms of violence cannot give or take away. This is a qualitatively different peace, the peace that takes away, once and for all, the “sin of the world.” It enables his disciples to accept the utterly free and unconditional love of God, which they could never deserve or earn. This is the peace that finally defeats the Ruler of this world, that reveals as false the primeval lie that humanity must seize divinity in order to be immune to death. The truth that defeats that lie is that God is infinite, self-bestowing love, love that is stronger and deeper than any refusal of it, love that even the murder of the gift cannot defeat. To believe, to finally accept this, is to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent, which is to have eternal life (see 17:3). The risen Jesus, returned to his own in the full integrity of his glorified humanity, is forgiveness incarnate, the very embodiment of reconciliation that is radical and permanent, of union with God, which is eternal life.

VI. Conclusion: The Banquet of the Lamb and the Forgiveness of Sins (John 20:21-23)

I turn now to the third aspect of Jesus’ identity and mission as the Lamb of God, namely, his commitment to his followers of his own salvific mission. Immediately after reconciling his disciples, Jesus says again, “Peace be with you.” His divine peace now becomes the solid foundation for the challenging mission he commits to them, namely, to make effective in the world his overcoming of “the sin of the world” by mediating into the life of believers the forgiveness they have just received from him. He explicitly draws them into his own mission. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And, as the Father had poured forth the fullness of the Spirit on Jesus to identify and empower him as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, so Jesus now breathes⁴⁴ into his disciples that same

⁴³ For an excellent extended treatment of this point, see Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, chap. 1, “The Resurrection.”

⁴⁴ The verb “breathe” in this text (ἐμφυσᾶω) is a *hapax legomenon* in the NT and occurs sub-

Holy Spirit to re-create them as the new Israel, the community of reconciliation, which replaces scapegoating violence with forgiveness.

Here the third OT reference, namely, to the Passover lamb, is especially revelatory. The death and resurrection of Jesus will remain salvifically effective in his community in the eucharistic celebration whose prefiguration they saw in Israel's Passover meal.⁴⁵ On the night before God rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, each Hebrew household was to take an unblemished lamb, slaughter it, sprinkle its blood on the doorposts of their homes, and share its flesh in a communion meal. Thus were they saved from death through the blood of the lamb and united as one liberated community through the sharing in its flesh (see Exod 12:1-14).

The symbolism of the paschal lamb in the account of Jesus' death must be read in light of John 6:26-66, the Bread of Life discourse, which functions in John as the institution narrative does in the Synoptics, that is, as a catechesis of Jesus' saving work on Calvary of giving his flesh (that is, his human life) for the life of the world. It takes place after the multiplication of the loaves for the crowd at Passover time. The Passover meal, as we have just seen, was not an expiatory ritual but a communion meal. The point was not the killing of the lamb but the sharing in the meal. In John 6 Jesus says that his flesh and blood, that is, his living self, will become the food and drink of the community. But it is as symbolizing bread that he gives himself not as meat, as some of his shocked hearers (then and now!) misunderstood. He says, "I am the *living bread* that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this *bread* will live forever; and the *bread* that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51).

"Flesh" here, as commonly in Semitic anthropology, refers not to a part of a dead organism, but to Jesus himself as living mortal. Because he is mortal, Jesus can be killed and thereby become, through his resurrection, the spiritual or living food that gives life to the world. As in the typology of the binding of Isaac and the Suffering Servant, the paschal lamb is and is not identical to Jesus. Like the paschal

stantively only twice in the LXX. In Gen 2:7, God, at the first creation, breathes life into the earth-creature and it becomes the first living human being. In Ezek 37:9-10, God commands the prophet to breathe on the dry bones of the decimated house of Israel "that they may live," that is, that the people Israel might be re-created. Thus, the scene of Jesus' commissioning of his disciples would appear to be a "new creation" of the new people, the church, who will be the community of salvation in the postpaschal time. I have developed this thesis at greater length in "The Raising of the New Temple: John 20.19-23 and Johannine Ecclesiology," *NTS* 52 (2006) 337-55.

⁴⁵ Alison (*Knowing Jesus*, 85-86) says succinctly, "The principle [*sic*] way by which all this is kept alive in our midst is: the eucharist. . . . The real presence of Jesus in the eucharist is the real presence of the crucified and risen Lord, giving himself, founding the new Israel, making possible the conversion of those who participate. It is the real presence of the grace which justifies. In all the other celebrations which we call sacraments, one or other dimension of this presence of the crucified and risen Lord is emphasized. In the eucharist however, the whole package is present, if only we have open eyes and hearts to perceive it, and to receive him!"

lamb, Jesus must be slain to become food for the community; but unlike the paschal lamb, it is not dead and bloodless, as physical flesh or meat, that Jesus becomes their food. And the sacrifice does not need to be repeated year after year because the “lamb” that is Jesus is not dead or consumed as ordinary food. It is as “living bread” that Jesus gives himself, his flesh-and-blood self, in real symbol to his disciples.

The symbolism of the lamb draws the believer through and beyond the intended bloody sacrifice of Abraham and the literal murder of the Suffering Servant into a communion meal in which all partake of the risen One, who dies no more. The Eucharist is not an unbloody reproduction, like the pagan scapegoat rituals, of a bloody sacrifice carried out in the past, but a sharing in the actual life of Jesus by a community that has repudiated all sacrifice, all trafficking in blood, all sacralized violence. We eat the bread and drink the cup to participate in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and we live by that which we eat just as Jesus lives by the One who sent him (see 6:57).

This brings us to the formulation of the great commission in John, which forms an *inclusio* with the original identification, in 1:29, of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is important to start with an explicit recognition that Jesus, in this resurrection scene (20:19-23), addresses his *disciples* (see 20:17-18)—not, as some interpreters suggest, the Twelve, the apostles, or some specialized group representing later church officials. “Disciple” in John is an inclusive term.⁴⁶ The community of the Fourth Gospel clearly includes Jews, Samaritans, and gentiles, women and men, known members of the Twelve and many who are not in that group, married and single people, itinerants and householders. In other words, the great commission of the risen Jesus, in John, is given to the whole church, who will be, henceforth, Jesus’ real presence in the world. Jesus says to all of them: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins [plural] you shall forgive they are forgiven to them.” The second member of v. 23 is usually translated, erroneously I will argue, “If you retain the sins of anyone they are retained.” I begin with a structured display of this problematic verse so that the subsequent argument will be clear.

20:23a	ἄν τινῶν	ἀφήτε	τὰς ἁμαρτίας	ἀφένται	αὐτοῖς
	Of whomever	you forgive	the sins	they are forgiven	to them
	(poss. gen. pl.)	(subj. aor. act.)		(ind. perf. pass.)	
20:23b	ἄν τινῶν	κρατῆτε		κεκράτηνται	
	Whomever	you hold fast		are held fast	
	(obj. gen. pl.)	(subj. pres. act.)		(ind. perf. pass.)	

⁴⁶ I have dealt with this issue at some length in two chapters in *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd rev. and expanded ed.; New York: Crossroad, 2003). See chap. 8, “Inclusive Discipleship in John (4:1-42),” 126-48, and chap. 15, “Because of the Woman’s Testimony . . .,” 233-54.

Although there is not space here to mount the argument in complete detail, I am convinced that the "traditional" translation of 20:23b is untenable. A more adequate reading would be the following: "Of whomever (*possessive* genitive plural) you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; whomever (*objective* genitive plural) you hold fast [or embrace], they are held fast." In other words, the sins in the first member are "possessed" by the forgiven. It is the persons, not sins, in the second member who are the "object grasped or held fast."

My reasons, besides a suspicion of the influence of ecclesiastical apologetics on the traditional translation, are theological in general, the theology of John in particular, the basic hermeneutical principles governing the relation of John to the Synoptics, Johannine style characteristics in relation to ellipsis and parallelism, and the grammar and vocabulary of the text in question.

The definition of this verse, John 20:23, as the institution of the Catholic sacrament of penance (confession) including a power possessed by the sacramental minister to retain sins within the penitent dates back only to the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and is plainly in the service of protecting the Roman rite of individual confession from the challenge of the Reformers.⁴⁷ The early church, even during the controversies over the possibility of forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, never invoked this verse in defense of sacerdotal power to forgive or retain sins, and the sacrament itself was not only not instituted by Jesus but did not exist as an individual ritual until it was developed during the fifth to the seventh centuries in the Celtic (Irish, Scottish, Welsh) churches in the context of monastic asceticism. The private, frequent, individual form of the sacrament was not accepted by the Roman church, which considered the sacrament by nature public and communal, and available only once after baptism and only for heinous crimes such as murder, apostasy, and public adultery. Not until much later, even in the Celtic church, was the administration of the sacrament limited to the ordained. In other words, it is completely anachronistic, if not theologically suspect, to interpret

⁴⁷ For an excellent history and theology of the sacrament of penance in the Catholic Church, see Kenan B. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (1990; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), esp. chap. 8 on the Tridentine developments of the theology and practice of the sacrament. Osborne discusses each of the Tridentine canons on the sacrament of penance (pp. 161-85). Of concern for our purposes, he maintains (as does Brown [*Gospel according to John*, 2:1044-45]) that canon 3, which defines John 20:22-23 as the institution of the sacrament of penance, cannot be accepted at face value today. Osborne argues this on the basis of proper hermeneutical principles for the interpretation of doctrinal texts within their proper historical contexts and concludes: "with these words of the New Testament there is no 'proof' of an immediate and direct institution of the sacrament of penance by Jesus himself. John 20:22-24, neither textually nor contextually, allows such an interpretation. The focus of this canon, therefore, cannot be centered on some 'historical fact' regarding the institution of the sacrament of penance" (p. 167). He then goes on to suggest what the canon can reasonably be held to affirm and deny in the context of the Reformation's challenge to the Catholic sacramental system.

John 20:23 in terms of the Catholic sacrament of individual confession, which did not develop until long after the writing of the Fourth Gospel. The apologetic agenda argues against the traditional translation.

Theologically, and particularly in the context of John's Gospel, it is hardly conceivable that Jesus, sent to take away the sin of the world, commissioned his disciples to perpetuate sin by the refusal of forgiveness or that the retention of sins in some people could reflect the universal reconciliation effected by Jesus.

Attempting to interpret this text as a Johannine version of Matt 16:19 and/or 18:18 by supplying words, in this case both the direct and the indirect objects of v. 23b, that are supposedly missing in the Johannine text and mistranslating the verb κρατέω ("hold fast") to make it equivalent to δέω ("bind") is a move that should meet with general objection among Johannine scholars. In general, John cannot be legitimately read through Synoptic eyes unless there are actual literary contacts, which, in this case, are nonexistent. Both of the Matthean texts use δέω ("bind") and λύω ("loose") where John uses, in reverse order, ἀφίημι ("forgive") and κρατέω ("hold fast" or "embrace"). Even more serious, there are no theological contacts between Matthew's clearly juridical text on interpretation of law (binding and loosing in relation to legal obligations) and John's theological concern with spiritual reconciliation reflected in the words "forgive" and "hold fast" or "embrace."

Furthermore, whereas in both Matthean texts the subjunctive member ("whatever you bind . . . loose") is an active aorist, indicating a punctual act, followed in the indicative member by a passive perfect ("is bound . . . is loosed") indicating the resulting, ongoing condition, in John there is a significant variation in the tenses. As in the Matthean texts, in the subjunctive member relating to forgiveness ("of whomever you forgive the sins . . .") the verb is an active aorist indicating a punctual act (probably baptism) followed by a passive perfect ("they are forgiven to them") indicating the resultant ongoing condition (membership in the community of reconciliation). Unlike Matthew's text, however, John's verse on "holding fast" has an active *present* in the subjunctive member, indicating, as is very common in John, an ongoing active behavior. This is followed by a passive perfect, indicating the ongoing condition of the one(s) who are the object of that action. The meaning would seem to be "Those whom⁴⁸ you are holding (embracing, including in the ongoing life of the community) are indeed held fast in the communion of reconciliation."

Much more appropriate parallels to John 20:23 are found in the Fourth Gospel itself. The evangelist makes frequent use of explicit and complete synthetic or

⁴⁸ Brown (*Gospel according to John*, 2:1024) says, "It is not absolutely clear whether the object held is the men who committed the sins (OS^{sin}) or their sins." He thinks the latter is "more likely by reason of parallelism," but that parallelism is what I am questioning.

explicative parallel constructions, for instance, in 6:37, 39; 10:27-29; 17:12; 18:19, in regard to this subject matter. I would argue that there is a clear pattern in which Jesus, receiving disciples from his Father and guarding them in communion with himself and the Father, is the model for the action of the disciples. My hypothesis is that this pattern is formalized and made explicit in the paschal commission to receive, through baptism for the forgiveness of sins, those whom Jesus gives to the community and to hold them fast in that communion unto the "raising up on the last day" when believers will participate fully in the resurrection of Jesus.

Among the grammatical and syntactical problems with the traditional translation I would single out the translation of κρατέω. This verb normally takes an object that can be either an accusative (but there is none in this verse) or, as in this case I would submit, an objective genitive, τινῶν. The verb means "to clasp" or "to take hold of," as of a hand (objective genitive in Matt 9:25); to hold fast, as to a confession of faith (objective genitive in Heb 4:14); to hold firmly, as to hope (objective genitive in Heb 6:18); to embrace or clasp, as feet (accusative in Matt 28:9). No one to my knowledge has found any other text in ancient Greek, secular or biblical, in which κρατέω means retaining something interior to someone else.

If we read the text as we have it, using a normal meaning for κρατέω and standard grammar and syntax, and as John normally uses parallels, in content as well as form, we get a theologically rich and coherent meaning for John 20:23, namely, that the disciples are commissioned by the risen Jesus to make effective throughout time his once-for-all salvific liberation of humanity from the sin of the world, that is, from humanity's refusal of God's totally gratuitous self-bestowing love. Just as Jesus received his disciples from the Father and holds them fast in communion with himself despite their weakness and infidelity, so his church will draw into one through baptism those whom Jesus commits to it, and will maintain them in communion through ongoing mutual forgiveness of sins. In that community, feeding on the Lamb who has taken away the sin of the world and freed from all need for sacred violence, whether physical or spiritual, they will live and offer to the world the peace that the world cannot give.