The God who cannot be contained chose to contain Himself in a womb. The God who made skies, rivers, forests, galaxies, and seas and everything in them became one of His creatures, so that in Him humanity might find life. At the heart of the Gospel is a triune heart of mercy; Yahweh seeking to spare those who have rebelled Him. Because He is just, He must judge these sinners. Yet His mercy and love compels Him to satisfy their penalty and take it on Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. However, a central question lies lurking in the backdrop of the Cross: is justice really satisfied? How is it just for Jesus, the Righteous One, to be punished for sins He did not even commit? Why is the Cross a triumph of justice rather than a mockery of it? The answer lies in Christology; the very nature of Jesus and His atonement uphold justice. Justice is satisfied only because of the hypostatic union and the union of humanity with Christ.  
 In order to defend the justice of the Cross, justice must first be defined. According to theologian Thomas McCall, "[Justice] is fundamentally the treatment of other persons with all due respect for who they are.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, justice upholds the intrinsic value of its object. Just penalties, then, must uphold the value of the victim by way of communicating the seriousness of the crime. It must extract something from the perpetrator which corresponds to the crime. For example, if a man were to murder a small child, he ought to undergo a trial and experience a penalty of some sort. A fine of $5 would be a ludicrously light penalty; the penalty would not reflect the seriousness of the crime. Life in prison or death[[2]](#footnote-2) both may be appropriate, because both correspond to the seriousness of the offense. Both penalties communicate the seriousness of the offense by virtue of their severity, as both force the perpetrator to give something corresponding to the offense. Both would satisfy justice, as the penalty would uphold the value of the victim, treating him or her with due respect. Thus, if humans are culpable for sinning against God, God must act in a way to vindicate His value. He must deliver a penalty to uphold His own worth, so as to treat Himself with due respect.  
 This is enabled by the doctrine of the hypostatic union. The hypostatic union is the teaching that Jesus possesses two complete natures. Scripture "leaves absolutely no room for doubt: Jesus Christ is fully and truly divine"[[3]](#footnote-3), as well as fully and truly human. These natures, according to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, are "distinct yet inseparable", perfectly joined together without losing either nature. In the atonement on the Cross, the God-man "takes punishment for sin that is not His"[[4]](#footnote-4). God the Father put God the Son "forward as a propitiation for sins" (Romans 3:25 ESV); therefore, God the Son turned away the Father's wrath against the sins of men. Why is it that Jesus can make the exchange without perverting justice? If Jesus did not become a sinner in the atonement[[5]](#footnote-5) , then why should He be punished for sin He did not commit? Jesus can take humanity's sin because He "lays down His life of His own accord" (John 10:18 ESV); thus He willingly chooses to become humanity's representative before God. God the Father "made Him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in Him [humanity] might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21) in accord with the Son's free choice to become humanity's guarantor. How does the hypostatic union render the Cross just? If just penalties reflect the severity of the crime, then Jesus bears a just penalty against humanity's sin. The punishment Jesus bears is infinitely severe since He is humiliated infinitely; the divine Son of God dies as a cursed man. His infinite glory is veiled in humanity's infinite shame.   
 Nevertheless, if atonement were to stop merely at the representational level, then true justice would fall short of being served. Why should Jesus bear an infinite penalty? The Cross is not an act of divine child abuse; God the Father is not, strictly speaking, punishing *Jesus*. If Judge delivered a life-sentence a courtroom against a criminal, and yet chose to take the sentence while allowing the criminal to go free, would this really be just?   
 The grace of God in Jesus Christ runs deeper than mere legal representation. In the atonement, Jesus *unites* those who would believe on Him for salvation to Himself. “In his life all [of God's people's] lives are enclosed and anticipated in their purified, healed, and elevated mode.”[[6]](#footnote-6) According to the Apostle Paul, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin." (Romans 6:5-7 ESV) Thus, in the death of the Son of God, the Father is not pouring out His wrath on *Jesus* per se; He is pouring out His wrath on sinners *in* Jesus. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, unites those who believe with His death so as to kill their old, sinful selves in His death. He also unites them to His resurrection, so as to give them new, renewed life, guaranteeing their future resurrection through His resurrection life. Thus, the Judge has taken the criminal into Himself at the courtroom, has killed the criminal's sinful nature that led him or her to commit the crime, and has risen from the dead so as to guarantee new life. In fact, these rebels are so completely changed and cleansed by the Father through the Son in the Spirit, that “corresponding to Christ’s own resurrected life, some final glorification awaits us, then in which the perfections of God’s won life and light will be perfectly reflected back to God in us.”[[7]](#footnote-7)   
 How does this fit with the above definition of justice? If God is to treat sin in accord with its seriousness, and thus uphold His worth, He must deliver a sentence that reflects His infinite value. Thus, it must be the case that the punishment of sin and sinners *in* Jesus is infinitely serious. Indeed, because of the incarnation, this is exactly what happens at the Cross. God delivers a sentence so severe against sinners, that the One who bears them must be infinitely humiliated. When God's wrath touches and opposes sin in Jesus, that is infinitely seriousness; for divine punishment meets humanity's sin in an infinitely valuable One. The severity of the penalty (punishment of sin in an infinitely valuable sacrifice), therefore, corresponds to the severity of sin. Additionally, those in Christ bear the severity of this penalty by having their sinful identities completely opposed and reconstituted in the person of Christ. That is, God does not simply condemn sinners in the abstract; He condemns them by killing them in the death of the Son and renewing them in His resurrection. And since God does this all in Christ, He both delivers a penalty that satisfies the demands of justice and upholds His value. He displays just how serious sin is by putting sinners' old natures to death in the divine Son. If Jesus were any less than God, the punishment Jesus bears would not be infinitely serious; for anything less than God is less than infinite.   
 The justice of the Cross, then, can be articulated using this analogy: a Judge once signed on to be the guarantor of his friend, Bob. He chose to take on the legal consequences of whatever Bob would do. Yet his Bob became a progressively worse person; one day, Bob attempted to murder the Judge himself! The penalty of the land for such an action was death. The Judge, therefore, chose to suffer death on behalf of his friend. Yet, by a mysterious power, the Judge was able to unite his friend to his own death. The Judge, in his death, completely changed Bob's heart. No longer was Bob an evil person; his old affections were somehow killed with the Judge. Equally mysteriously, the Judge rose from the dead, renewing Bob's heart and granting him new affections. In this analogy, justice is satisfied. The seriousness of the crime corresponds to the severity of the penalty: the death of the criminal's sinful self in the death of the Judge.   
 Likewise, Jesus is God and thus He is the divine Judge. Humans have sinned against Jesus, one with Father and Spirit, and thus have offended the triune God. Yet the Judge chooses to become incarnate by taking on a human nature. Furthermore, He chooses to represent them, and because of this representation, chooses to unite them to Himself. As the wrath of God falls on sin in an infinitely glorious Sacrifice, the infinite severity of sinfulness was displayed: sin is so bad that it requires *this kind* of death. In fact, sin is so serious that it requires the death of the sinner in the humanity of the Son of God.

1. *Forsaken* by Thomas McCall p.130 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regardless of whether one thinks the death penalty is just, the concept underneath this example is concept of justice as upholding one's value. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McCall p.111 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McCall p.112 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McCall p.111 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* by Kathryn Tanner, p.55 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tanner p.59 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)