

36/07 Penal substitutionary atonement

(A report of the Sydney Doctrine Commission.)

The referral and this report

1. Resolution 36/07 of the Sydney Synod requested the Doctrine Commission to prepare a report “which explores the importance of penal substitution in understanding the Bible’s teaching on the atonement.” The context of this request was the intensification of a long-standing and ongoing debate about the meaning of the death of Christ, and particularly about the propriety of describing it as a penal substitution.¹ However, while this report will inevitably be read in the context of such recent controversy, it is not intended merely as another explanation as to why the latest series of attacks against it are inadequate.

2. Because the death of Jesus has a central place in Christian thought and Christian living, it is our ongoing responsibility to carefully consider its significance. What does it mean to describe the atonement as a penal substitution and what questions does this doctrine answer? Is there more to the atonement than penal substitution? And if so, how does this doctrine relate to other components of the gospel message, and other ways of describing what Christ achieved on the cross? In the end, we need to deepen our understanding of this foundational doctrine, not only so that we may weather current and future attacks upon it, but so that we may preach and teach the gospel of Christ crucified in a clearer and more compelling way. It is the “word of the cross” that brings the sinner an assurance of salvation that liberates the heart and transforms all of life.

The critical background to penal substitution

3. Often discussions of the meaning of Jesus’ death have been cast in the language of logic. Some theologians have spoken of what is “necessary”, or “fitting”, or “possible” and “impossible” in an attempt to outline the “logic” of Christ’s death, especially in light of the character of God. Others have countered by charging that all such talk is inappropriate and irrational. Sometimes Christians have mistakenly responded to rationalist critique with a rationalist response. While this is mistaken, it is undoubtedly true that the use of philosophical categories and methods of argument can help to clarify thought and articulate doctrine. Furthermore, in some form or other this is both welcome and unavoidable. Yet care is needed. As with other doctrines, when it comes to the view that atonement between God and humanity is brought about by Christ’s penal death as a substitution for others, the arguments of both advocates and critics should be informed by the biblical teaching on the atonement and the Bible’s own inner “logic”.² This will indeed reveal a certain “necessity” to the cross (e.g., Mark 8:31) and even a “fittingness” (e.g., Heb. 2:10), but rather than these terms being understood philosophically, they need to be located within the flow of biblical thought, against the backdrop of God’s self-revelation for the salvation of human beings.

The character of God

4. The doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement can only properly be understood in the light of the Bible’s teaching regarding the character of God and his eternal purpose to unite all things in Christ, his beloved Son, through whom and for whom he created all things (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16). It is the love of God which is the ultimate explanation of the atonement. Out of love he provides a means of salvation for sinful men and women who can do nothing to deserve it (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). Yet God’s love, precisely because it is perfect, both knows and wills what is in the best interests of men and women individually and in society. There is thus no tension between God’s love and his holiness, between his goodness and his righteousness. Nor should God’s wrath against sin be understood as mere personal pique. The same evil which constitutes an attack upon his person also represents an attempt to overthrow his purposes, purposes which secure the lasting welfare of his creation, especially humanity. For this reason, God cannot and will not tolerate that which stands opposed to all he is and does. His wrath is a powerful expression of his love for the world he has made as well as a “personal divine revulsion to evil”.³ He looks with compassion on those who are lost and without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36), while remaining of purer eyes than to see evil without always acting in judgement upon it (cf. Hab. 1:13). His mercy in the midst of wrath means that evil and all its consequences are not simply judged but overthrown. It is in this way that mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13). The same God who will “by no means clear the guilty” (Exod. 34:7) and who has set a day on which he will judge both the works and secrets of every human being by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17: 30–31; Rom. 2:6, 16), has provided the means of propitiation by the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25). God the Lord and Judge is himself the Saviour.

The universal human predicament

5. But what is it that defines and objectifies human sin? God’s perfect will for humanity is expressed initially in the promises made in the Garden of Eden. Later, at Sinai, a covenant was made with Israel that provided a proper context for the Law as an expression of God’s intention for his people. Ultimately, though, it is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who came “not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them” (Matt. 5:17), that we are given the climactic expression of God’s purpose. In Jesus we see most clearly that God’s expressed will not only reflects his character (e.g., “be holy, for I am holy” [Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16]), but

expresses his loving purposes for humanity in general and for his chosen people in particular. He desires us to share his likeness “in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Consequently, sin is a defiance of God and a rejection of his will for human life. This is why John writes: “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4 NIV).

6. The Bible repeatedly attests the seriousness and heinousness of human sin. In an age in which the reality of sin is either denied or domesticated, the recovery of this biblical perspective is crucial. Sin is a direct and personal assault upon the God who made all things and sustains all things. It reaches its nadir in the crucifixion of God’s Son “by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23), and continues today, not least in the rejection of his saving gospel. Sin’s basic character, however, is seen in the very first instance recorded in the Bible. The “original sin” in the Garden involved doubting, denying and disobeying God’s word. It involved disputing the goodness of God’s word and so the good and loving nature of God and his rule. It was an attempt to know good and evil without reference to God and ultimately in opposition to God (Gen. 3:1–6). It was an assertion of moral and spiritual autonomy.

7. In the early chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of such an assertion as the universal characteristic of all human life. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God ...” (Rom. 3:23). Those who were given the privilege of possessing the law of God have repudiated it by the way they lived (Rom. 2:17–24). Those who were not given the law are just as culpable since their behaviour demonstrates their determination to set their own standards (Rom. 1:18–31). As a result, the whole world is to be held accountable to God (Rom. 3:19). We all face the dreadful consequences of sin, not simply because of the rebellion of the first man and woman in the Garden but because in different ways we all do what they did (Rom. 5:12). The judgement we deserve, in all its various aspects, is the result of our own sin.

Condemnation

8. Our sin is an offence against God for which we are properly accountable. It is a personal offence and not merely a legal one, because God himself is the ultimate object of our rebellious thoughts, words and acts (Ps. 51:4). Yet the reverse must be emphasised as well: this consequence of sin is inescapably forensic as well as personal. Since God is not only the creator of all but also the just judge of all, sinful human beings stand guilty before him. Every mouth is stopped and the whole world is “under verdict” (*hypodikos*), with no-one innocent (justified) before him (Rom. 3:19–20). Outside of Christ we live our lives “under his wrath” (Ps. 90:9; Eph. 2:3). The day of God’s wrath is coming on which “his righteous judgement will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5). Meanwhile, an appropriate penalty is already operative in this world: “the wages of sin is death ...” (Rom. 6:23).

Corruption

9. Sin not only renders us all liable to condemnation before God, it corrupts us together with those around us. God’s very good creation (Gen. 1:31) is polluted and distorted by humanity’s choice to be independent of God in God’s world. The first casualty of the sin in the Garden was the blessed relationship between the man and woman God had created. Their relationship was now distorted by shame and mutual recrimination (Gen. 3:7). But, as the rest of the Bible’s story makes clear, the problem is even more basic. Sin not only corrupts everything we enjoy but ourselves most of all. At every level of our existence the pollution of sin is evident. Even the good things we do and say are tainted with self-interest and impure motives. Jesus told his first disciples, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him ... What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:18, 20–23). The most telling consequence of this deep defilement and inner corruption is another kind of corruption: the dissolution of our bodies at death. Our mortality leads to enslavement.

Enslavement

10. A third consequence of human sin, then, is enslavement. In the first instance this is an enslavement to sin itself. Jesus told the Jews who believed him that “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Sin so distorts our wills as to hold us captive. Seeking fulfilment and security outside of a relationship of faith in God is habit-forming in the worst possible sense. This is what the apostle Paul means when he describes unredeemed humanity as being “in the flesh” (Rom. 7:5). As dire as this situation is, however, the full biblical picture is even worse. Sin traps us in “the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13), and makes us subject to him who is called “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). Once again death, or rather our common fear of death, is not only an expression of our enslavement, but also the means by which our slavery continues to be brought about (Heb. 2:15).

Death

11. God’s response to sin has been clear from the very beginning. When the first human beings, out of envy of God’s sovereignty, chose to grasp at equality with him, the penalty was death (Gen. 2:17). In perfect

consistency with his own goodness and the goodness of his creation, God justly required that these rebellious human beings forfeit the gift of life that he had extended to them. While they had previously been allowed access to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22), their mutinous behaviour towards God and their subsequent failure to master sin (Gen. 4:7) now led to the ominous refrain of the Genesis genealogy – “... and he died” (Gen. 5 *passim*). As death spread to all people because all people sinned (Rom. 5:12), a tragic summary of human wickedness underlines the justice of God’s retribution in the flood: “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). So the Genesis narrative makes clear that the presence of death in the human race is not natural but penal.⁴ It is not just that death came into the world through sin, but human death is God’s punishment for sin. As Paul declares: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

12. The awful reality of death lies at the very heart of all the consequences of our sin. Indeed, these consequences are in some measure caught up in that reality. We have already seen the way death is understood as the penalty for sin. Our guilt before the righteous judge of all the earth and our death are bound together. Death is also itself the most profound form of our corruption: “to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). There is a “law of sin and death” which corrupts us from within, causing a life-struggle from which we cry, with Paul, “who will deliver us from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24, 8:1). Furthermore, death is a triumph of “the one who has the power of death, the devil” who hold us in life-long slavery “through fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-15).

13. The narrative of the entire Old Testament makes clear that human beings are unable to save themselves from the consequences of sin. Israel went into exile because of their sin, and because God poured out his wrath on their sin (2 Chron. 36:15–17). Israel’s decline into this national “death” of exile stands as a perpetual reminder of human inability to ransom ourselves from the consequences of our sin, for what can possibly make dry bones live (Ezek. 37)? We are unable to deal with our just condemnation before God, the corruption of our nature, or our enslavement to sin and the evil one. We cannot overcome death. No matter how powerful or wealthy we might be, no human being has the power to ransom a life from the grave (Psalm 49:7–8). The New Testament explicitly confirms this assessment. So if we are to be delivered from sin and its effects, the full extent of our condition and each aspect of it must be addressed. Just as God in his goodness will not allow human wickedness to overthrow his good purposes, so he will not allow his wrath and judgement on human sin to be the last word. In the very midst of it all stands Jesus, who on his own account knows no guilt, no corruption and no enslavement. And yet he dies. He has no sin of his own for which to die. Rather, his death lies at the heart of God’s saving intention for those who rightly stand under wrath and condemnation, corruption and enslavement, and who will and should die. God himself has come to deliver us by dealing with sin in all its dimensions. Any doctrine of the atonement may be measured by its capacity to understand Christ’s work in accomplishing the most complete salvation of sinners.

14. This biblical perspective intensifies the questions surrounding the death of the Christ. Just as John the Baptist had difficulty understanding why Christ should be baptised by him (Matt. 3:14), Peter could not accept Jesus’ declaration that he was to die, even declaring “this shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22). To Saul the persecutor, the fact that Jesus died on a cross — universally understood (by both Jews and Gentiles) to mean that he died under the curse of God — made nonsense of the claim that he was the Christ.⁵ How could God’s Messiah die, especially in such a shameful way? After himself becoming the risen Christ’s apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was well aware that the gospel of a crucified Christ was roundly mocked, since it was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). In biblical thought, since death is the penalty for sin, the death of the Christ would be tantamount to a declaration that he was a sinner (dying, as he did, “in the likeness of sinful flesh”, Rom. 8:3). How then could he be the Christ? How could he then be acknowledged as God? So, given that death is *already* and *always* penal in this profound sense, the real issue is *why did the Christ die?*

The meaning of penal substitution

15. Penal substitutionary atonement makes three substantial claims about the meaning of the death of Christ. First, it is an *atonement*; that is, the death of Christ was an act by which reconciliation between God and humanity was achieved (2 Cor. 5:18–19), and the basis on which reconciliation continues to take place (2 Cor. 5:20–21). It does not simply broadcast an existing state of affairs nor is it merely an exposition of unchanging eternal principles. The death of Jesus (which cannot properly be isolated from either the incarnation or his resurrection) makes a genuine difference. Second, it was an act of *substitution*; that is, Christ acted in the place of others for their benefit. Substitution is a broad term that covers the idea of someone acting on behalf of another (or others) and doing what they would otherwise have to do themselves; acting “one instead of another”. This is what is meant by such statements as Christ died “for us” (Rom. 5:8) or “for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6) or “for a brother” (1 Cor. 8:11) or “for all” (2 Cor. 5:14), or, with even stronger language, Christ’s death as a “ransom in the place of many” (Mark 10:45). The third claim about Jesus’ substitutionary death is that it was *penal* in character; that is, it involved punishment, penalty or judgment. The doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, therefore, makes the claim that Christ’s death is fundamentally an act by which reconciliation between God and man is achieved by Christ acting in place of, or taking the place of

sinners, by undergoing the punishment, penalty or judgment which was due to them.

16. The doctrine of the atonement known as “penal substitution” says that, on the cross, Christ paid the penalty of death in the place of sinners. As the Scripture says: “Christ died *for our sins* according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3); “He himself *bore our sins* in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24); “... we have concluded this: that one has *died for all*, therefore all have died” (2 Cor. 5:14); “God made him who knew no sin to be sin *for us ...*” (2 Cor. 5:21). This is not everything that can or should be said about the cross of Christ. The work of the cross is also described in the Scriptures as a ransom paid to redeem those in slavery (Mark 10:45; compare Psalm 49), as a victory over the spiritual powers of evil (Col. 2:15), and as a washing or cleansing from the guilt and pollution of sin such that we may now enter the holy presence of God (Heb. 10:19-22). However, just as death is the over-arching sentence of God’s judgement against us because of our sin (see para. 8), so Christ’s bearing of sin’s penalty of death as our substitute is the central achievement of the cross. The death that Christ died in the place of sinners is the basic reality that undergirds and integrates the other ways in which the wondrous achievement of the cross is described.

17. The conceptual background for this understanding the atoning work of Christ is found in the Old Testament. This explains Paul’s insistence that “Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3). The idea of atonement through a substitutionary sacrifice is prominent throughout the Old Testament. It taught and exemplified the truth, summarised in Hebrews 9:22, that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (cf. Lev. 17:11). The Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) is perhaps the most significant example of this. This annual sacrifice, “to make atonement for all the sins of the Israelites” (v. 34), taught both the seriousness of sin and the necessity of a substitute who would bear the penalty for sin if Israel was to survive. This understanding is given a further dimension in the song of the suffering servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12). This prophecy speaks of the servant of the Lord who was “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities.” “Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed”, precisely because “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5–6). Interestingly, the Septuagint version of this text has “the Lord handed him over [Gk *paredoken*] for our sins” (v. 6). Or, again, “his life was handed over into death and he was reckoned amongst the lawless and he offered up sins of many and because of their sins he was handed over [*paredothe*]” (53:12 LXX). Not surprisingly, the New Testament writers repeatedly take up both the language and imagery of Isaiah 53 and apply it directly to the cross of Jesus (Mark 8:31; 9:32; 10:33; Heb. 8-10; Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32-35; Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 2:24).

18. Against the backdrop of the Old Testament, it is highly significant that John the Baptist should introduce Jesus to his contemporaries as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The image of a sacrificial lamb was a readily recognisable one in the context of first century religion (both Jewish and Gentile). More particularly, time and again throughout Jesus’ ministry his own explanation of what he came to do includes citation of or allusion to the prophecy of the suffering servant. This is the case most obviously during the Last Supper. Distributing the wine at that meal, he spoke of his blood being “poured out for many” (Mark 14:24), an echo of Isaiah 53:12. This is confirmed as Jesus goes on to prepare his disciples for what is about to happen. He quotes from Isaiah 53:12 (“he was numbered with the transgressors”) and then continues “what is written about me has its fulfilment” (Lk. 22:36–37). Even Jesus’ enemies testified to the substitutionary nature of his death, though without fully understanding its purpose or dimensions (John 11:49–53).

19. A central concern of the apostolic testimony to Jesus is an exposition of the significance and consequences of his death and resurrection. The cosmic scope of these apocalyptic events requires that they be viewed from multiple perspectives. The cross of Jesus is his decisive triumph over the powers of evil (Col. 2:15), the only effective cleansing of all that pollutes us (Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7), an example of humble obedience and self-sacrifice (Phil. 2:5–11), a ransom for all people (1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 9:15), and God’s loving act of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–19). And yet it is also undeniably a propitiatory sacrifice, one which deals with the holy wrath of God and at the same time demonstrates God’s justice — for sin has not simply been passed over (Rom. 3:25–26). Moreover, by Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, not only was sin condemned in his flesh but the law was silenced, its righteous requirement being fulfilled and our record of debt completely cancelled (Rom. 8:3; Col. 2:14). As Paul puts it elsewhere, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ...” (Gal. 3:13; cf. Heb. 9:25–28). It is no wonder, then, that in Paul’s grand summary of the matters “of first importance” he begins “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3).

20. There are five features of the biblical presentation of Christ’s death as a penal substitution which demand attention if we are not to caricature this doctrine. The first is that this saving act has its origins in the love of God. It is not the case that God loves us because Christ died for us, but that Christ died for us because God loves us. As John says: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10; cf. John 3:16). Moreover, the loving self-giving of the Father is matched by the loving self-offering of the Son through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14). There is no suggestion in the New Testament that God has to be made loving by the sacrifice of Christ. God himself, in an act of unfathomable love, has provided the propitiation his own just wrath demands.

21. Secondly, the necessity of a penal substitution arises from God's own holy character rather than any law or code external to his person. Indeed God is not bound by anything apart from his own nature. His demand for holiness in his creatures, therefore, is precisely because he is holy (Lev. 11:44–45; 1 Pet. 1:16). For this reason he could not ignore or set aside the penalty our sin deserves without injury to his own character as the holy and just judge of all (Hab. 1:13). This is the burden of Paul's argument in Romans 3, where God puts Christ forward as a propitiation "to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (v. 26).

22. Thirdly, Jesus' act of substitution does not make him a third party to a transaction between the triune God and sinners. While it is vital that a proper distinction between Christ and his Father be understood and affirmed (for it is Christ Jesus whom God put forward as propitiation by his blood: i.e., it is not the Father who died, and Jesus is truly the "one mediator between God and humanity" 1 Tim. 2:5), it is critical that this distinction is not pushed to the point of separation. Jesus' identity as the eternal Son, who is "of one being with the Father", cannot be separated from his work as the substitute for sinful humanity. In other words, in Christ God himself bore the penalty we deserve; he did not inflict it upon a third party. The unity of the three "persons" of the Trinity is inviolable: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Thus, far from sin's penalty being overlooked as if it were insignificant, the fullness of that penalty is exacted and exhausted as it is borne by God himself in the person of his Son.

23. Fourthly, it is equally critical to stress Jesus' solidarity with us. For the only reason he can effectively act as our substitute is because he shares fully in our humanity. This is the import of Hebrews 2:17: "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." It is this truth that is expressed by the important notion of representation. Indeed without representation, substitution is impossible (for unless he is one with us he cannot die instead of us), just as without substitution representation is inadequate. Jesus' death then is both an inclusive place-taking death, in that he shares the "flesh and blood" of our mortality, and an exclusive place-taking death, in that he is the one who dies for the many. His genuine humanity was necessary for him to die (Heb. 10:5) and for him to die our death (Heb. 2:9). In the concrete circumstances of his death, he bore the wrath of God on our behalf, in our place.⁶ The man Christ Jesus, then, is truly the "one mediator between God and humanity ... who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

24. Finally, the New Testament repeatedly stresses the voluntary nature of Jesus' self-offering. In other words, he chose to "give his life" (Mk 10:45), he freely "gave himself" (Gal. 1:4; Eph. 5:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14) and "offered himself" (Heb. 7:27; 9:14) up to death. This is a vital point of emphasis for a true understanding of the Christian gospel, and one which protects the biblical teaching regarding Jesus' penal substitutionary death from needless caricature. Any thought of a vindictive Father forcing his innocent Son to undergo a punishment he is not willing to bear is completely alien to the New Testament. The life of Jesus given in death is a gift freely given and a gift lovingly given by Jesus himself "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14). As Jesus said: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn. 10:16). This is why Paul speaks of "the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

The function of penal substitution in a biblical understanding of the atonement

25. Each element of the biblical teaching on the nature and consequences of the cross of Christ must be given due weight if we are not to end up with a truncated view of the atonement. The various elements are not alternative explanations, nor are they simply shapes and colours in a kaleidoscope that fall together as the doctrine is turned and examined. Penal substitution is not just one image among many. It has a foundational role to play in a holistic biblical description of the atonement and relates in a particular way to the other elements of that account.

26. As already mentioned, penal substitution is that aspect of the atonement which deals most directly with our guilt or, more specifically, the penalty we all deserve as a result of our sin. A doctrine of the atonement that does not face squarely the judicial consequences of our sin is ultimately inadequate. Of course, the other personal, social and cosmic consequences cannot be ignored either. Nevertheless, given the Bible's depiction of guilt and judgement as consequences of our sin, it is essential that a Christian doctrine of the atonement be *penal* in the first instance.

27. An important corollary of this has also been observed already. God's own character as perfectly just and holy requires that sin and its consequences are not simply ignored. Penal substitution, then, functions also to answer how mercy can be extended to guilty sinners without compromising God's character. It grounds not only the justification of the ungodly (Rom. 4:5) but also the justification of God (Rom. 3:26). The penalty which our sin deserves has not been ignored, nor has it been absorbed or overcome by the sheer force of divine love. It has, rather, been taken with total seriousness and borne to the full, exhausted and extinguished by the death of the incarnate Son in our place. In Christ Jesus, God himself pays the penalty that brings atonement.

28. Penal substitution is therefore the nucleus which enables the other images of atonement to become an organic whole. The suffering servant was promised vindication, precisely because he was willing to lay down his life for the justification of many others (Isa. 53:10–12). And in fulfilment of this prophecy, Paul proclaimed that he "was handed over because of our transgressions, and raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:25). The cross represents a victory over the evil one and all that stands against us because, as Paul insists, the triumph of the cross over the powers and authorities is tied to the forgiveness of sins. The cross a cancelled "the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (Col. 2: 13–15). Once this "record of debt" is cancelled, Satan has no grounds of accusation to demand the sinner's death, and so he is neutralised (Heb. 2:14–15). Finally, the death of a man on a Roman instrument of torture and execution is a demonstration of love precisely because this insurrectionist's death is what we deserve. Yet, Christ has taken it in our place: he is the propitiation *for our sins* (1 John 4:10).⁷ The Spirit-wrought awareness of God's love for us in sending his Son to die for us, then becomes the enabling power to transform all of life, and the Christian life takes on a "cruciform" shape (putting off/putting on; dying/rising with Christ). Thus all other images of the atonement (such as sacrifice, moral example, victory over evil powers) derive their true power from having at their core the fact that Christ as our representative, became sin for us and bore the wrath of God when he took the penalty of death, in our place, on our behalf, instead of us, for us.

Engaging criticisms of the notion of penal substitution

29. Although ultimately bringing tremendous comfort to the sinner, penal substitutionary atonement has repeatedly attracted criticism. Some of those criticisms arise through simple matters of misunderstanding or through receiving an inaccurate presentation or even caricature of the doctrine. Other, more serious, criticisms arise through a rejection of key concepts contained within the doctrine. Only the most significant of these objections are indicated below, together with an outline of a response.

Biblical Criticisms

30. Some have argued that a penal substitutionary view of the atonement cannot be found in Scripture and in fact imposes elements of pagan thinking upon the biblical view of the atonement. However, close examination of the biblical texts, and especially a sensitivity to the way the New Testament makes use of the categories provided by the Old Testament in its explanation of the cross of Christ, leads to quite the opposite conclusion.

31. Firstly, we must heed the warning against an anachronistic reading of modern difficulties back into biblical times, where they may well not exist. Martin Hengel writes, "When fundamental difficulties in understanding arise, they are felt not by the audience of ancient times, Jewish or Gentile, but by us, the men [and women] of today. However, precisely because of this difficulty in understanding today, we must guard against limiting, for apologetic reasons, the fundamental significance of the soteriological interpretation of the death of Jesus as vicarious atonement in the context of the earliest Christian preaching."⁸ In part, it was the "pagan notions" of sacrifice that made the message of Christ's vicarious atonement immediately understandable to the first-century Graeco-Roman world just as Old Testament categories enabled Jewish converts to understand the death of Jesus in this way.

32. Secondly, these pagan ideas of sacrifice are nevertheless subverted, not only by the insistence that love motivates the atonement rather than simply being a consequence of it, but most importantly by the identity of the one who is the sacrificial "victim". More pointedly, whilst the categories of the Old Testament sacrificial system may well be employed at a number of points in the New Testament, at each point they are transcended, not least by their association with the prophecy of the suffering servant. This substitutionary sacrifice is the reality to which those shadows were pointing. Each of the elements of penal substitution — notions of sacrifice, propitiation, the payment of the required penalty — is amply attested in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 22; Rom. 3:21-31; 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 8-10; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 4:9-10).

33. Attempts have been made to accept as biblical the notion of substitution while denying that the death of Christ is a specifically *penal* substitution.⁹ However, the contexts of those passages which speak of Christ "bearing sin", alongside the Old Testament texts which provide their background, make clear that this "bearing sin" is to be understood as "bearing sin's curse or penalty" (e.g., Isa. 53:6, 12; Lam. 5:7; Mark 10:45; Gal. 3:13). As the Gospel of Mark, for example, narrates Jesus' death, it draws upon imagery from the Old Testament which speaks loudly enough of God's wrath (e.g., Jesus was "handed over to the nations"; he had a cup to drink, and a baptism to undergo; he endured mockery and scorn; the darkness at noon; the cry of dereliction). We could go further and say that it is a nonsense in biblical thought to speak of non-penal death. Nor does it take into account the clear sense, to both Jew and Gentile, that Jesus died "under the curse of God", because he died upon a cross. For all the world to see, he was "Jesus, accursed" (1 Cor. 12:3). The explanation of this most fundamental scandal of the earliest Christian preaching was quite simple: the curse he bore was not his own, but he bore the curse of God *for us* (Gal. 3:13).

Theological Criticisms

34. The chief theological difficulties have been touched upon several times already. The first is the suggestion that the doctrine of Christ's penal substitutionary death introduces a tension within the life of the Trinity. Penal substitution (it is claimed) portrays a loving and self-surrendering Son doing what is necessary to placate a wrathful and vindictive Father. Polemical writing suggests that this involves God in "cosmic child abuse — a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed."¹⁰

35. Firstly, we should note that this kind of objection, if sound, would apply to any doctrine of the atonement which held that the suffering of the Son was the will of the Father. Even if the suffering were not penal, it is still suffering that the Father has willed in some way on the Son who is innocent, and so "abused" him. In other words, the objection proves too much.

36. However, the objection does not hold at all. Love is the motivation of both the Father's sending of the Son (John 3:16) and the Son's self-sacrifice (Eph. 5:2). The atonement is a loving act of the triune God, whose life and purposes are undivided. There is no sense in which the Father inflicts punishment on an unwilling, uninvolved or unsuspecting Son, or in which the Son persuades a reluctant Father to forgive. What Jesus *does* is never separated from who Jesus *is*, and it is his identity as the incarnate Son, who is "of one being with the Father" in his divine nature, which exposes as a caricature any suggestion that the Son is merely the "object" of the Father's action.¹¹ The one who bears our sin and endures its consequences never ceases to be the beloved Son of the Father with whom he is well pleased (Mark 1:11). He certainly shuddered at the horror of what lay before him and hung there in the place of the forsaken (Mark 15:34), but we must also reckon with the cost to the Father, his giving of his Son and what might be called the pain of forsaking-ness (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32).¹² This all adds up to just one certain fact: because the triune God himself (Father and Son, through the eternal Spirit [Heb. 9:14]) has entered into his own wrath on our behalf, "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38).

37. Thus, it is completely misguided to suggest that penal substitution involves a serious compromise of God's loving nature. Some argue that everything the Bible says about God has to be "tempered, interpreted, understood and seen through the one primary lens of God's love."¹³ Thus, through this lens, any understanding of the death of Christ which relies upon biblical expressions such as "the wrath of God", "the curse of God", or "propitiation" is flawed because it has not understood the deeply metaphorical nature of this language.¹⁴ However, this objection too fails at a number of levels. Firstly, it ignores the fact that the Bible is not at all reluctant to speak about the wrath of God (e.g., Isa. 51:22; Hos. 8:5; Rom. 1:18ff. Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10). Secondly, it gives no convincing criteria for determining that the language of divine wrath and a penalty for sin is metaphorical while the language of divine love is not. Thirdly, it misunderstands the nature of metaphor, which for all its distinctiveness as a mode of speech remains a means of describing reality.¹⁵ Fourthly, it suggests love and wrath are mutually incompatible in a way that the Bible and classic theology does not.¹⁶ Finally, it is simply reductionist. God reveals so much more about himself than the wonderful truth that he loves the creatures he has made. John writes that "God is love" but in the same letter he insists "God is light" (1 John 4:8, 16 and 1:5). God's love and righteousness are complementary, not contradictory aspects of his character. And the substitutionary penal death of Christ is exactly the point at which this is centrally demonstrated (Rom. 3:25-26; 5:8-9).

Ethical Criticisms

38. A number of contemporary critiques insist that a penal substitutionary view of the atonement is profoundly immoral. One criticism is that it relies upon an unacceptable theory of retributive punishment.¹⁷ It is true that penal substitutionary atonement relies on the notion that punishment is properly retributive; that is, it is punishment that is inflicted because it is deserved. If this idea were to be rejected then the concept of penal substitution would fail. Often it is just such a rejection of retributive punishment that leads people to deny the morality of penal substitutionary atonement. However rather than being immoral, the notion of retributive punishment is more sound than other notions that understand punishment primarily as a way of deterrence or of reformation. While punishment may properly involve these elements, unless it is controlled by what a person deserves it would be immoral. Retributive justice has the virtue of correlating acts and consequences, and in the broader context of God's righteous character and the free of the grace in the gospel it is resistant to labels such as "punitive and vengeful."¹⁸

39. But this can lead to another serious objection on moral grounds. Just because the doctrine depends on the concept of retributive (that is, deserved) punishment, how can there be an imputation or a transfer of guilt from one person (the sinner, who deserves it) to another (Christ, who does not)? It is objected that sin and its consequences cannot legitimately be transferred in this way.¹⁹ Two responses can be made briefly. Firstly, a certain lack of clarity is bound up in the objection. It is important to insist that "what was transferred to Christ was not moral qualities but legal consequences: he voluntarily accepted liability for our sins."²⁰ Secondly, the objection is captive to an individualism which is at odds with biblical thinking. It fails to take into account the two-fold nature of the bond between the believer and Christ, which makes the transfer of the legal

consequences of our sin perfectly appropriate. In the first place Christ is united to us as our representative (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). He is the one appropriate mediator between God and humanity. An analogy exists here with the way a legally constituted representative may incur — or even bear — consequences for those he or she represents. However, even more significant is the believer's union with Christ, which is effected by the Spirit through faith. Paul's great exposition of the benefits of Christ's death in Ephesians 1 strikes this note repeatedly. Our real spiritual identification with Christ ensures the propriety of his bearing our sin.²¹

40. A further ethical objection arises from noting the violent nature of atonement through substitutionary sacrifice. It is feared that this introduces violence — which (it is claimed) is always wrong — into the being of God and that such an introduction then justifies other violence.

41. In response to this objection, we do well to listen to the words of Miroslav Volf: "One could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? A counter-question could go something like this: Is it not a bit too arrogant to presume that our contemporary sensibilities about what is compatible with God's love are so much healthier than those of the people of God throughout the whole history of Judaism and Christianity [...] one could further argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God *not to wield* the sword; if God were *not angry* at injustice and deception and *did not* make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship."²²

42. Rather than divine violence justifying human violence, properly understood it does the exact opposite. Divine violence removes the justification for human violence. As we see in Paul's words, "Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, as it is written, "'Vengeance is mine' says the Lord, 'I shall repay'" (Rom. 12:19). Volf argues that "in a world of violence we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence. Most people who insist on God's "non-violence" cannot resist using violence themselves (or tacitly sanctioning its use by others)."²³ The accounts of Jesus' death should not be isolated from the rest of the Gospels in which his teaching against violence and self-assertion are significant factors.

43. We could go further. Violence has been helpfully defined as unjustified or illegal force. On such a definition, a death sentence at the end of court proceedings (even if the modern mood is against such things) is not violence, since it is the use of proper legal processes. The issue in the New Testament is not that Jesus died "violently", but that the human courts (representing both Jew and Gentile, so that the whole world is involved through our proper representatives) *wrongly* put this innocent man, God's Messiah, to death. This was understood theologically as the fulfilment of Psalm 2, the great cosmic act of rebellion against the Creator (see Acts 4:25–30). In response to this massive miscarriage of justice, God declared his verdict by raising Jesus from the dead (see Acts 2). Thus to speak of "violence" actually misunderstands that there was an even greater issue going on, the oppressive use of properly constituted authority to declare war upon the Creator! But, despite the designs of wicked human beings, God worked his purposes to bring out of their evil (Acts 2:23-24), the greatest good: the forgiveness of sins, now proclaimed amongst the nations.

Conclusion

44. The death of the righteous incarnate Son, Israel's Messiah and the one true mediator between God and humanity, has both a cosmic scope and unfathomable depths. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians he was determined "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1). Martin Luther told his students, "the cross alone is our theology."²⁴ Article 2 of the Thirty-nine Articles speaks of one Christ, very God and very Man, who "truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men." The cross rightly lies at the heart of the Christian message today as it has for the past two thousand years. In this single event, inextricably tied with Jesus' perfect incarnate life and his glorious resurrection, lies our hope of redemption in the fullest possible sense.

45. Penal substitution is an indispensable element in the Christian proclamation of the cross. It does not say everything about the atonement but it says a crucial thing, one which also helps to illumine every other facet of the Bible's teaching on the subject. It has been treasured all through Christian history because it enables us to see how the atonement which reconciles us to God can be at one time an act of love, an act of justice and an act of triumphant redemptive power. What has been done for us was truly, morally done. What was done for us was complete and entire, addressing every dimension of the predicament we have created for ourselves. What was done for us secures our freedom and gives us a solid ground for assurance and hope. Precisely because in this penal substitution the consequences of human sin have been dealt with for those who belong to Christ, the words of Jesus from the cross are cherished above all others: "it is finished" (John 19:30).

46. The current attacks upon penal substitution should come as no surprise to us. In order for penal substitution to be taken seriously, human sin and its consequences, the loving justice of God, and the

indissoluble unity of (as well as the proper distinction between) the Father and the Son all need to be taken seriously. Each of these have proven unpalatable to those who remain committed to their own capacity to determine their own future. However, as John Stott put it: "... the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."²⁵ This is why, with the apostle Paul, we are able humbly to place at the head of any list of those things of first importance, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3).

MARK THOMPSON
Chairman

On behalf of Peter Bolt, David Hohne, Robert Forsyth, Tony Payne, Robert Smith and John Woodhouse.

24 August 2010

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- ¹ Fresh controversy had arisen in the United Kingdom following the publication of Joel Green & Mark Baker's *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) and, more especially, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). These books generated heated debate in many places around the world, not least in Britain, leading to a symposium held in London in 2005 and sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance. Nearly all the papers from this symposium were published as D. Tidball, D. Hilborn, & J. Thacker (eds), *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). Subsequent to the London symposium, an extended defence of penal substitution was published by S. Jeffrey, M. J. Ovey & A. Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007). This was then critiqued by N. T. Wright on the Fulcrum website in 'The Cross and the Caricatures: A Response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John and a new volume entitled *Pierced for our Transgressions*', available online at www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070423wright.cfm?doc=205. The debate continues, with a steady flow of books and internet comment. Of course, this intra-evangelical debate is only a very small part of a long-standing and wide-ranging debate over this aspect of the atonement. In the Australian context, Sydney Anglicanism has been vigorously criticised for propagating a penal substitutionary view of the atonement: see P. Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tension in the Contemporary Anglican Church* (Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2001), chpt. 4.
- ² It is just such biblical logic which Jim Packer sought to expound in his 1973 Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture, 'What did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution', most recently reprinted in *Collected Shorting Writings of J. I Packer 1: Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 85-123.
- ³ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (1965; repr. Exeter: Paternoster, 1976), 190.
- ⁴ 'The Bible everywhere views human death not as a *natural* but as a *penal* event. It is an alien intrusion into God's good world, and not part of his original intention for humankind.' J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), p. 65.
- ⁵ The evidence for this is convincingly marshalled by Martin Hengel in his book *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977).
- ⁶ P.G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel*. Leicester: IVP, 2004, p. 141.
- ⁷ So Leon Morris: 'One thing I am concerned to contend for is that, while the many-sidedness of the atonement must be borne in mind, substitution is at the heart of it.' L. L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, pp. 404-5. Twenty years later John Stott would say the same thing: 'They are not alternative explanations of the cross, providing us with a range to choose from, but complementary to one another, each contributing a vital part to the whole ... My contention is that "substitution" is not a further "theory" or "image" to be set alongside the others, but rather the foundation of them all, without which each lacks cogency. If God in Christ did not die in our place, there could be neither propitiation, nor redemption, nor justification, nor reconciliation.' Stott, p. 168.
- ⁸ Martin Hengel, *Atonement* (London: SCM, 1981), p. 220.
- ⁹ Amongst these are works by J. McLeod Campbell, H. Bushnell, and R.C. Moberly, but similar concerns were expressed by Abelard in the twelfth century and Socinus in the sixteenth. Stott, pp. 141-143.
- ¹⁰ Chalke & Mann, p. 182.
- ¹¹ 'The reason that no conscientious advocate of penal substitution thinks of the Son simply as the object of the Father's action is that the doctrine has been formed within a conscious, mature doctrine of the Trinity.' G. Williams, 'Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms', in Tidball, Hilborn & Thacker (eds), p. 178. However, as Williams goes on to say, this is not to deny that the Son is *willing* object of the Father's action. Indeed "there is plain biblical testimony to the Father's acting on the Son at the cross" (p. 179).
- ¹² This needs to be affirmed without falling into the ancient heresy of patripassianism, in which the Father is said to suffer on the cross.
- ¹³ Chalke & Mann, p. 63.
- ¹⁴ Indeed some go so far as to claim that '... perhaps we attribute "anger" to God only because we have no language other than human language with which to comprehend God.' Green & Baker, p. 54.
- ¹⁵ '... a more plausible account [of metaphor] is that it is the way by which we are enabled to speak about the real world.' C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study in Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p. 36.
- ¹⁶ 'For, in some ineffable way, God loved us and yet was angry with us at the same time, until he became reconciled to us in Christ.' John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.27.2.
- ¹⁷ Alister McGrath suggests this is the result of an Enlightenment assault upon 'the entire soteriological framework' of classical theology, especially the introduction of Thomas Hobbes' theory of punishment as deterrence and reformation into Protestant theology by Johann Konrad Dippel and others. A. E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (3rd edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 365-371.
- ¹⁸ See C. F. D. Moule, 'Punishment and Retribution: Delimiting their Scope in N. T. Thought', repr. in B. Jersak & M. Hardin (eds), *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 252. The words cited come from an introduction to the reprinted article by Pierre Allard.

- ¹⁹ T. Smail, 'Can One Man Die for the People?', in J. Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 85. 'Moral responsibility is ultimately incommunicable.' Church of England Doctrine Commission, *The Mystery of Salvation* (London: Church House, 1997), p. 212.
- ²⁰ J. Stott, p. 149.
- ²¹ Garry Williams highlights the irony of those who criticise penal substitutionary ideas as too heavily indebted to individualism being trapped themselves in individualism at this point. Williams, pp. 182-3.
- ²² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 304.
- ²³ Volf, p. 304. His final bracing paragraph is worth citing. "My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (which is where a paper that underlies this chapter was originally delivered). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and levelled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. As one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind."
- ²⁴ Luther's lecture on Psalm 5:12 in *Operationes in Psalmos (1519-21)*. WA 5: 176.32-33.
- ²⁵ J. Stott, p. 160.