THE SCRIPTURAL NECESSITY OF
CHRIST’S PENAL SUBSTITUTION

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This introductory essay overviews the indispensable theme of Christ’s penal substitution on Golgotha’s cross. The subject unfolds in two parts; the first section provides background and context for this essential theological truth. The second section reasons that three compelling biblical necessities require a true believer in Jesus Christ to understand scripturally and accept the Savior’s penal substitution on behalf of redeemed sinners, especially oneself. The landscape/backdrop for this article provides (1) a definition of “Christ’s penal substitution,” (2) statements by representative defenders and objectors to this doctrine, and (3) an introduction to subsequent and more focused writings in this issue of TMSJ. Then follows the proposition that Scripture must necessarily be understood as consistently (in both OT and NT) teaching Christ’s penal substitution, which rests on three convincing biblical lines of thinking: (1) revelational evidence, (2) lexical evidence, and (3) theological evidence. The writer thus concludes that this teaching is clear, not obscure, thoroughly biblical, not humanly contrived, and essential to personal salvation, not optional.

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America’s highest military honor, given for conspicuous gallantry at the risk of one’s life above and beyond the call of duty, has been since 1863 the Congressional Medal of Honor (hereafter CMH). To date 3,467 heroes have earned this medal associated with gallantry that more times than not cost the recipients their lives. Over 60% (522) of the 850 CMH awarded from WWII until now have been received posthumously. Unquestionably, the awardees have rendered the greatest act of human courage and sacrifice, i.e., being willing to die so that others might live. So why is the ultimate sacrifice of Christ’s penal substitution objectionable?

Was this not the precept that Christ taught his disciples, “Greater love has
no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13)?

Was this not the Savior’s practice on behalf of those whom He loved? “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us....” (1 John 3:16).

Was this not Paul’s polemic, regarding God’s means of salvation through Christ’s death in Rom 5:6-8? “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Why then would anyone question the superlative, greater act of Christ’s penal substitution on behalf of sinners who would inherit eternal life as the result, while applauding the lesser, rare human act honored by the CMH?¹

**CONTEXT FOR CHRIST’S PENAL SUBSTITUTION**

The context for this great truth will be explored by first defining penal substitution as it relates to Christ’s atonement.² Secondly, a brief survey of recent defenders for this doctrine will be examined. Finally, a representative sample of objectors will be exposed.

**Definition**

Three samples offered here will adequately define the basic issue at hand. These elaborations represent the church’s understanding regarding the meaning of and necessity for “penal substitution” as it relates to Christ’s atonement.

On the cross God treated Jesus as if He had lived our lives with all our sin, so that God could then treat us as if we lived Christ’s life of pure holiness.³

The idea that Christ’s death is a sacrifice offered in payment of the penalty for our sins. It is accepted by the Father as satisfaction in place of the penalty due to us.⁴

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¹For an example, see Steve Chalk and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 182-83.


The notion of substitutionary sacrifice, widely attested in Scripture, means that Christ died in the place of sinners. The perfect obedience God required from his creatures, Jesus fully gave. In bearing the penalty of human sin as our substitute he made full payment to God for all our failures and misdeeds.  

In other words, Christ (perfectly and eternally righteous in death) received from God the Father the eternal punishment due to all the unrighteous who would believe in Him for eternal life. He was the believer’s substitute; He who deserved no condemnation received eternal condemnation on behalf of condemned sinners who repented in His name. Without Christ’s penal substitution on behalf of sinners, an efficacious atonement rendered by Christ to redeem sinners would not be real.

Defenders

In recent years, a new series of articles and books has appeared which elaborate convincingly on the biblical necessity and scriptural truthfulness of Christ’s penal substitution. For the sake of quickly making the point that from the earliest centuries of church history to this present hour “penal substitution” has been embraced by those who take the Bible seriously, four representative statements are offered here.

The Christian world as a whole believes in a substitutionary atonement. This has been its belief ever since it began to think. The doctrine was stated by Athanasius as clearly and fully as by any later writer. All the great historic creeds which set forth the atonement at any length set forth a substitutionary atonement. All the great historic systems of theology enshrine it as the very Ark of the Covenant, the central object of the Holy of Holies.

The idea of vicarious, penal substitution is embedded in the warp and woof of Scripture.

The idea of substitution is unmistakable.

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2For example, Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, _III, The Glory of the Atonement_ (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004); Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, _Pierced for Our Transgressions_ (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 2007); J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, _In My Place Condemned He Stood_ (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007); and Ian J. Shaw and Brian H. Edwards, _The Divine Substitute_ (Leominster, England: Day One, 2006).


penal substitution is an indispensable part of the scriptural revelation.\textsuperscript{10}

**Objectors**

For illustrative purposes, the following quotes which appear in current volumes take issue with penal substitution as an essential element of Christ’s atonement. Brian McLaren puts the following words in the mouth of a fictional character who is in a dialogue concerning penal substitution and challenges the doctrine’s modern relevance.

For starters, if God wants to forgive us, why doesn’t he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?\textsuperscript{11}

Steve Chalk cannot reconcile the righteous wrath of God with His redemptive love. He explains his solution of eliminating God’s justified anger and focusing instead on God’s love.

John’s Gospel famously declares, “God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). How then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son?

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love”. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.

The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love. It is a perfect example of Willard Waller’s thesis that in any relationship the one who loves most has the least power.\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{11}Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) 102. For a full discussion of objections, see Erickson, *Christian Theology* 815-17.

The Scriptural Necessity of Christ’s Penal Substitution

Theories relating to the atonement of Christ come and go. In the end, however, divine revelation must be given the final say over the best of human reason when they differ from one another. Let this writer suggest that one’s understanding of penal substitution is scholastically deficient without yielding to the teaching of Scripture and is not even rational without being informed by God’s revelation. Leon Morris makes the point succinctly.

We should not expect that our theories will ever explain it fully. Even when we put them all together, we will no more than begin to comprehend a little of the vastness of God’s saving deed.14

Subsequent Articles

Each of the following essays was first prepared and delivered as part of the 2009 Faculty Lecture Series in January-February. This first article is designed to present a brief overview of the subject contemporarily, biblically, lexically, and theologically.

The second article, “Penal Substitution in the Old Testament,” explores the OT concept of “sacrifice” and interprets Exodus 12 (Passover), Leviticus 16 (Atonement), and Isaiah 53 (Substitutionary Savior). The third article, “Penal Substitution in the New Testament,” plumbs the depths of 1 Pet 1:2, 1:18-19, 2:24, and 3:18. The fourth article, “Penal Substitution in Church History” establishes the dominance of believing in penal substitution throughout church history. The final article discusses the implications of embracing penal substitution as a necessary element of true worship.

COMPELLING NECESSITIES FOR CHRIST’S PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Revelational Necessity

Why would anyone believe in a blood sacrifice rather than a love sacrifice? Why would anyone believe that an innocent person died efficaciously for a multitude of convicted sinners? Simply put, because that is what both the OT and NT teach

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and what church history confirms.

Old Testament

Christ’s penal substitution appears as an authentic *shadow* of the real truth in the OT. Three key passages include: 1) Christ as *Savior* in Exod 12:3-13 (cf. 1 Cor 5:7, “Christ our Passover”); Christ as *Scapegoat* in Leviticus 16 (cf. 2 Cor 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf….”); and Christ as *Substitute* in Isaiah 53 (cf. 1 Pet 2:24, “…and He Himself bore our sins in His body…”).

Of particular interest is Isaiah 53, the *textus classicus*, where on no less than nine occasions the declaration of penal substitution appears.

1. v. 4 – “our griefs He…bore”
2. v. 4 – “our sorrows He carried”
3. v. 5 – “He was pierced…for our transgressions”
4. v. 5 – “He was crushed for our iniquities”
5. v. 5 – “by His scourging we are healed”
6. v. 6 – “caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him”
7. v. 8 – “He was cut off…for the transgression of my people”
8. v. 11 – “He will bear their iniquities”
9. v. 12 – “He Himself bore the sin of many”

New Testament

While the OT revealed the *shadow*, the Gospels unveil the substance of penal substitution in Christ’s atonement. Three specifically clear texts teach this truth. First, Christ’s words from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1). Second, in the Upper Room Christ taught that the bread symbolically pictured “My body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19). And third, Jesus also taught that the grape juice symbolically represented “My blood of the covenant…shed on behalf of many” (Mark 14:24). None of these three statements by Christ make any sense outside of the context of penal substitution!

Whatever explanations the Gospels lacked, while being unmistakable about the *substance*, the epistles provide abundant *substantiation* that the OT *shadows* and the NT *substance* consistently teach the inseparable element of penal substitution in Christ’s atonement. At least four different biblical authors contribute to this conclusion.

1. Paul – Rom 3:21–4:5; 4:25 with 5:6, 8; 8:32; 14:15; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-15, 21; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Thess 5:10; 1 Tim 2:6; Titus
2:14
3. Peter – 1 Pet 2:21, 24; 3:18
4. John – 1 John 3:16

The triangulation of the shadows of the OT, the substance of the Gospels, and the substantiations of the epistles perfectly pinpoint the verity of penal substitution. This being the case, one would expect to find penal substitution being taught by the Apostolic Fathers.

Early Church Confirmation

Clement of Rome (c. AD 95-105) wrote, “Jesus Christ our Lord hath given His blood for us by the will of God and His flesh for our flesh and His life for our lives.”

Ignatius (c. AD 100-120), writing to the church at Smyrna, taught that Christ was “truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes.” Again he stated, “He suffered all these things for our sakes.”

Polycarp (c. AD 110-120) explained that it was “Jesus Christ who took our sins in His own body upon the tree, who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, but for our sakes, He endured all things, that we might live in Him.”

As anticipated, the earliest Christian writers after the apostles repeated what had been written in both the OT and NT. And why did these post-apostolic authors come to believe in penal substitution? Because that is what Christ’s disciples taught them, just as they had been taught by Jesus.

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13Lightfoot, ibid., “To the Smyrnaeans” I:82.

14Ibid., 2:82.

Lexical Necessity

A study of Greek prepositions used in conjunction with and in the context of Christ’s redeeming work point decidedly to penal substitution as being an irreplaceable component of Christ’s atonement. With rare exceptions (when a theological bias ignores lexical evidence), ὑπὲρ and ἐντὶς are believed to be used synonymously concerning Christ and His work when translated “on behalf of” and/or “in the stead of” sinners.20

A most compelling piece of evidence appears in the comparison of Matt 20:28 and Mark 10:45 (“to give His life a ransom for many”) with 1 Tim 2:6 (“who gave Himself a ransom for all”). The gospel passages employ ἐντὶς while the Pauline text employs ὑπὲρ with an intensified form of “ransom” (ἐντὶσλυτρον). Both passages, in context, are addressing Christ’s dying on behalf of instead of sinners; thus, the synonymous use of these two prepositions in a redemptive context.

Most noteworthy, perhaps, is the use of ὑπὲρ in 1 Cor 15:29 where one who lives is baptized in place of/in the stead of one who is dead. Or, consider Paul saying that Onesimus was serving him in place of/in the stead of Philemon (Phile 13). Therefore, if one follows the ὑπὲρ/ἐντὶς prepositional trail in the NT, the concluding destination will be that Christ died on behalf of/in the stead of sinners, i.e. penal substitution.

Theological Necessity

Consider the following theological facts:

1. God’s inviolable holiness and justice.
3. The human race’s need for ransomed redemption to restore a right relationship with God and obtain God’s pardon for sin which results in eternal life.

How can mankind, then, be rescued to the satisfaction of and non-contradiction of God’s holiness and justice? How can this be accomplished and not violate God’s

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The answer must be that God the Father, out of His infinite grace, mercy, and love provides a sacrifice who satisfies God’s righteous wrath, upholds God’s pure holiness, and sustains His perfect justice. Who is able to be that sacrifice? Only God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is able! He does so by bearing the wrath that believing sinners deserve but which Christ does not so that Christ’s undeserved righteousness can be imputed to sinners. The only other alternative? HELL!

Leon Morris has reasoned and stated this truth more vividly with fewer words than any author encountered.

To put it bluntly and plainly, if Christ is not my Substitute, I still occupy the place of a condemned sinner. If my sins and my guilt are not transferred to Him, if He did not take them upon Himself, then surely they remain with me. If He did not deal with my sins, I must face their consequences. If my penalty was not borne by Him, it still hangs over me. There is no other possibility. To say that substitution is immoral is to say that redemption is impossible. We must beware of taking up such a disastrous position.…. In the process of salvation God is not transferring penalty from one man (guilty) to another man (innocent). He is bearing it Himself. The absolute oneness between the Father and the Son in the work of atonement must not for a moment be lost sight of. When Christ substitutes for sinful man in His death that is God Himself bearing the consequences of our sin, God saving man at cost to Himself, not at cost to someone else. As Leonard Hodgson puts it, “He wills that sin shall be punished, but He does not will that sin shall be punished without also willing that the punishment shall fall on Himself.” In part the atonement is to be understood as a process whereby God absorbs in Himself the consequences of man’s sin.21

Penal substitution in Christ’s atonement makes possible three soteriological outcomes.

1. The Father’s Divine satisfaction that results from…
2. The Son’s Divine substitution as sin-bearer and sacrifice that results in…

These are the Trinitarian implications and validations of Christ’s penal substitution.22

21Morris, The Cross 410
22For further theological discussion, see Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, Integrative Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 2:371-434; Erickson, Christian Theology 781-823.
CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING CHRIST’S PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Who or what prompted Philip Bliss to write the classic lines of stanza 2 for “Hallelujah, What a Savior!”?

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood—
Sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!23

Undoubtedly, the authors of Scripture in both the OT and NT made Christ’s penal substitution in His atonement so unmistakably obvious that Bliss and other writers of doctrinally-driven hymns followed the path of Scripture. Not being trained theologians, they nevertheless easily identified with an obvious major doctrine.

This introductory essay has laid the groundwork for the more detailed articles to follow. After setting the theme’s context, three compelling evidences showed that Scripture teaches penal substitution. These included: (1) abundant mention/discussion of penal substitution throughout the entire Bible; (2) the interchange of ἀντί and ὑπὲρ in NT redemptive passages which require the concept of substitution; and (3) penal substitution being the only theological requirement that reconciles the equal demands of God’s justice and holiness with God’s love.24

Charles Hodge, venerable theologian of the 19th century, provides a striking remark to conclude this brief beginning to the following crucial discussions concerning penal substitution in Christ’s atonement.

[The transfer of guilt as responsibility to justice, and of righteousness as that which satisfies justice, is no more impossible than that one man should pay the debt of another. All that the Bible teaches on this subject is that Christ paid as a substitute, our debt to the justice of God. The handwriting…Christ has cancelled, by nailing it to his cross. His complete satisfaction to the law, freed us as completely as the debtor is freed when his bond is legally cancelled.25

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24This essay only introduces the subject and has not dealt with the abundance of theological and personal implications for penal substitution. See Packer and Dever, In My Place 97 (this chapter, “What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution” first appeared in the Tyndale Bulletin 25 [1974]:3-45), and Erickson, Christian Theology 822, for these discussions.