

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 Second, 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

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

²For background reading on this subject, the reader should consult the following sources: Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); John Murray, *The Atonement* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962); George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (1870; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), esp. 568-607 and 722-35; and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1960), esp. 2:480-591.

³John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 2003) 217.

⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 126.

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷

The idea of vicarious, penal substitution is embedded in the warp and woof of Scripture.⁸

The idea of substitution is unmistakable.⁹

⁵Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997) 171-75. See also Simon Gathercole, "The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement," *SBET* 21/2 (Fall 2003):152-65.

⁶For 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).

⁷Franklin Johnson, "The Atonement," in *The Fundamentals*, ed. R. A. Torrey et. al. (1917; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) III:65.

⁸Demarest, *The Cross* 171. Cf. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1986), esp. chapter 6, "The Self-Substitution of God" 133-63.

⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 813.

...penal substitution is an indispensable part of the scriptural revelation.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?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.¹²

¹⁰Gary Williams, "The Cross and the Punishment of Sin," in *When Wrath and Mercy Meet*, ed. David Peterson (London, England: Paternoster, 2001) 68.

¹¹Brian 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.

¹²Chalk, *The Lost Message* 182-83. Cf. D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 185-87 for a brilliant rebuttal to Chalk's thinking. For a saner, but equally wrong discussion, see Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000). See Henri Blocher, "Le Sacrifice de Jésus Christ: la situation théologique actuelle," *EuroJTh* 8/1 (1999):23-26, and Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006) 67-98, who respond effectively to show the errors of associating divine penal substitution with

Theories relating to the atonement of Christ come and go.¹³ 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

human child abuse.

¹³Summaries of various theories of the atonement can be found in most standard theologies, e.g., Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 322. Additional helpful material is provided by Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947) 339-51, and B.B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) IX: 261-97.

¹⁴Leon Morris, "Atonement, Theories of the," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) 100-102. See also Roger Nicole, "Postscript on Penal Substitution," in Hill and James, *The Glory* 445-52.

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

2:14¹⁵

2. Anonymous – Heb 2:9; 9:28
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.”¹⁶

Ignatius (c. AD 100-120), writing to the church at Smyrna, taught that Christ was “truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes.”¹⁷ Again he stated, “He suffered all these things for our sakes.”¹⁸

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.”¹⁹

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.

¹⁵Simon Gathercole, “Justification by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21–4:5,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) II:177-81.

¹⁶Clement of Rome, “To the Corinthians,” in J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (1891; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) 49:34.

¹⁷Lightfoot, *ibid.*, “To the Smyrnaeans” 1:82.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 2:82.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, “The Epistles of S. Polycarp” 8:98. For additional discussion on the history of this doctrine see Laurence William Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester, England: Longmans, Green, 1920); Dyson Hague, “At-One-Ment by Propitiation,” in *The Fundamentals*, ed. By R. A. Torrey et al. (1917; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) III:86-94; Jeffery, Orey, and Sach, *Pierced* 161-204; and Shaw and Edwards, *Divine Substitute* 54-143.

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), ὑπέρ and ἀντί 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 ἀντί while the Pauline text employs ὑπέρ with an intensified form of "ransom" (ἀντίλυτρον). 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 ὑπέρ 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 ὑπέρ/ἀντί 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.
2. Mankind's non-exceptional sin problem with no human cure.
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

²⁰R.E. Davies, "Christ in Our Place—The Contribution of the Prepositions," *Tyndale Bulletin* 20 (1970):71-91, excels any other lexical resource known to this writer on the subject. Other helpful writings include Erickson, *Christian Theology* 813-14; Leon Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 30-31, 59; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* 2d ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 64-65; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 572-74, 628-32; A. T. Robertson, *A Minister and His Greek New Testament* (1923; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 35-42; R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1865; repr., Grand Rapids: AP&A, n.d.) 290-91; and Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 365-67, 383-89. Also see standard articles in BDAG, DNTT, and TDNT for ἀντί and ὑπέρ.

love?

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...
3. The Spirit's Divine *sanctification* of repentant human sinners.

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 *ὑπέρ* 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.

[T]he 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

²³Cf. stanza 1, "What Wondrous Love Is This!"; stanza 3, "It Is Well With My Soul"; stanza 2, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"; stanza 2, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus"; stanza 2, "At the Cross", stanza 1, "Arise, My Soul, Arise"; stanza 1, "And Can It Be?"; and stanza 2, "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed?" for other great hymns that extol Christ's penal substitution in the atonement.

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.

²⁵Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871-1873; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975)2:540-41.