

PENAL SUBSTITUTION IN CHURCH HISTORY

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Recently, at least since the eighteenth-century liberalism gained a place in Protestantism, the penal-substitution view of Christ's atonement has come under attack. The claim that the doctrine was unknown in the ancient church has emerged along with the idea that such a teaching was invented by the Reformers. The fact that the first thousand years of ancient Christianity frequently espoused the teaching that Jesus suffered death, punishment, and a curse for fallen humanity as the penalty for human sin shows the falsity of such a claim. The fact that early Christians supported other views of the atonement did not exclude the possibility of their supporting penal substitution also. Other views of the atonement include the classic/ransom, the satisfaction, the moral influence, and the governmental theories. Without discussing penal substitution thoroughly, the following church fathers and writings expressed their support for the theory: Ignatius, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistle to Diognetus, Justin Martyr, Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Emesa, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Cyril of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, and Oecumenius. Martin Luther wrote during the second Christian millennium, but he too endorsed penal substitution. Available writings show clearly that the early church supported a penal-substitution view of Christ's death.

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Since the rise of Protestant liberalism in the eighteenth century, it has become common for some to claim that penal substitution, the view that Christ died on behalf of sinners, is not a biblical doctrine. In recent years this position has been accompanied by assertions that the church of the first fifteen hundred years did not hold to penal substitution. So in addition to claiming that penal substitution is not found in the Bible, a growing chorus is arguing that this doctrine was not taught by the church of the Patristic and Medieval eras. Instead, the belief that Jesus died on behalf of sinners, becoming a curse on their behalf, was a creation of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. For example, in his work on the atonement,

Paul Fiddes claimed that the doctrine of penal substitution was “developed in the Reformation period.”¹ In addition, some like Gustaf Aulen have argued that objective views of the atonement, of which penal substitution is one example, are a creation of the Latin West church of the early twelfth century.² Aulen and others have claimed that the early church held to a classical view of the atonement in which Christ’s death was primarily a victory over the powers of darkness and a ransom paid to Satan, but the early church did not hold to penal substitution.

This assertion is quite serious. If those like Fiddes and Aulen are correct, those who believe in penal substitutionary atonement are accepting a doctrine that is relatively new, and by implication, something foreign to the church of the first thousand years. While Protestant Christians have often emphasized that the Bible, not church history, is their authority, they have usually held that new doctrines should be scrutinized. They also believe that Christians should be skeptical of holding positions not believed or addressed in the early church. Is penal substitution one of those novel views? Is it true that many believe a doctrine of the atonement that began with the Protestant Reformation?

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that penal substitution was taught in the early church. Consequently, it will also refute the claim that penal substitution was not taught in the church of the Patristic and Medieval eras. Though acknowledging that the early church held to a classical view of the atonement, it will argue that critics of penal substitution are in error when they claim that the pre-Reformation church did not also believe in penal substitution. Ample and even overwhelming evidence proves that Christians of the Patristic Era and beyond held that Christ died on behalf of sinners to pay the penalty for their sins.

Before surveying what the early church believed about penal substitution, some clarifying points are necessary. First, the emphasis will be on the church of the first one thousand years and especially the church of the Patristic Era (A.D. 100-500). This is where the heart of the controversy lies. That after Anselm in the twelfth century an objective view of the atonement was taught is not debated. Also, That Calvin and the Reformation tradition clearly taught penal substitution is established. The controversy is over whether the church of the first thousand years taught penal substitution, so this time period will be the focus.

Second, penal substitution needs to be defined. Penal substitution is the doctrine that Jesus suffered on behalf of sinners the death, punishment, and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin. As Millard Erickson defines the doctrine, “By offering himself as a sacrifice, by substituting himself for us, actually bearing the punishment that should have been ours, Jesus appeased the Father and effected a

¹Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989) 89.

²Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

reconciliation between God and humanity.”³ Penal substitution, then, emphasizes that the punishment from God provoked by human sin was borne by Jesus Christ with His sacrificial death.

Third, this is not to deny that earlier Christians held views of the atonement other than penal substitution or that the early church did not hold to a classical or ransom view of the atonement. When some early Christians emphasized a certain implication of Christ’s death, they could also teach or believe in penal substitution. To claim that because some theologians advocated a classical view of the atonement, they denied or knew nothing about the penal substitution view is a logical fallacy. Yet such error is occurring today. Some say that because the early church affirmed and emphasized one aspect of the atonement—the classical or *Christus Victor* view—they knew little or nothing about penal substitution. Even today those who strongly view penal substitution as the primary meaning of the atonement usually affirm other facets of the atonement as well. As Leon Morris has pointed out, “the atonement is vast and deep” “and we need all the theories.”⁴ Thus, the fact that Christ died on behalf of sinners is not inconsistent with the ideas that Christ’s death was a victory over the powers of darkness or that Christ’s death is an example for us.⁵

Historical Views of the Atonement

Before looking in the early church at evidence for belief in penal substitution, a brief summary of the major atonement views in history will serve as a backdrop for discussion.

Classic or Ransom Theory

The classic view sees the atonement of Christ as a cosmic victory over Satan and the forces of evil. A subset of this view is the ransom view of the atonement. With this perspective, with His death Jesus paid a ransom to the devil. At the cross, God handed Jesus over to Satan in exchange for the souls of humans held captive to Satan. Satan believed he could hold Jesus in death, but the resurrection proved him wrong as Jesus triumphed over Satan. This view was popular in the early church. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa were the two major early developers of this perspective. Gregory of Nazianzus and Athanasius, on the other hand, rejected the ransom theory. Later, John of Damascus would reject this view as well believing that it was impossible for God to offer Jesus to the devil. This ransom theory of the atonement

³Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 833.

⁴Leon Morris, “Theories of the Atonement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 102.

⁵Those who believe in penal substitution usually deny a sense in which Christ’s death was a ransom to Satan. One can hold to a cosmic victory of Christ over the powers of darkness and not hold that the atonement was a payment to Satan.

fell out of favor during the time of Anselm and Abelard around the twelfth century. More recently, Gustaf Aulen (d. 1977) has defended this view of the atonement.⁶

Satisfaction Theory

The satisfaction theory views the atonement of Jesus as compensation to the Father. Thus, Jesus' death satisfied God's wounded honor. This approach was promoted by Anselm in the early twelfth century. Anselm's satisfaction theory appears to rely on the idea of a feudal overlord, who, to uphold his honor, insisted that there be an adequate satisfaction for his assaulted honor. Anselm promoted this view in his work, *Cur Deus Homo?* ("Why God Became Man?"). He rejected the classic view that Satan had a right of possession over humanity and that God had to use Jesus to pay a ransom to Satan. Anselm held that sin is the failure to render God His due honor. Since Jesus was divine, He was able to offer adequate satisfaction in this area. Anselm's view became associated with the Latin view. The primary way to distinguish this view from the penal substitution view of the atonement is that the satisfaction theory views the atonement more in relation to God's *honor* while the penal substitution position views Christ's atonement more in relation to God's *law*.⁷

Moral Influence Theory

The moral influence theory views the atonement primarily as a demonstration of God's love. Christ's death was not a payment to the Father to satisfy God's wounded honor. It was a demonstration of God's love, and, thus, a motivation for Christians to show love in return. This theory was promoted by Peter Abelard (d. 1142) in reaction to Anselm's satisfaction view. For Abelard, the major effect of Christ's death was on humans—not God or Satan. God is viewed as mostly love and His attributes of justice and holiness are not emphasized. God's love is so strong that it overcomes the resistance of sinners. The power of divine love compels human love toward God. Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), the father of modern liberalism in the United States, popularized the moral influence theory in the United States.⁸

The Governmental Theory

With the governmental theory the atonement is a demonstration of divine justice. Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) promoted this view in detail in his work *Defensio fidei catholicae de satisfactione Christi adversus F. Socinum*. According to Demarest,

Grotius maintained that objectively Christ by His death made a token, rather than a full or equivalent, payment to God for human sins. Through the death of His Son, God upheld the moral governance of the universe while setting aside the requirement of the law that

⁶See Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997) 149-51.

⁷See Morris, "Atonement" 102.

⁸Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* 153- 54.

sinner must be punished. The Ruler of the universe could have relaxed his law altogether and not punished Christ, but this would not have achieved the maximum deterrence against future sins.⁹

This governmental theory claims that the punishment of Christ communicates God's hatred of sin and motivates a person to repentance and godly living.¹⁰ According to Grotius it was possible for God to relax His law so that an exact punishment for each human sin was not necessary. For Grotius, the death of Christ was not a punishment. Instead, it made punishment unnecessary. Thus, there are two elements to the atonement. Objectively, Christ's death satisfies the demands of justice. There was a real offering made by Christ to God. Subjectively, Christ's death is viewed as a deterrent to sin by emphasizing the seriousness of sin.

Penal Substitution Theory

As mentioned earlier, according to the penal substitution view, with His death Jesus Christ bore the just penalty for human sins, and in doing so became a curse on man's behalf. With this perspective sin is primarily a violation of God's law, thus Christ's death pays the penalty for sins that God's holiness requires.¹¹ This position has been held by Christians throughout church history as will now be discussed.

Penal Substitution in Church History

The concept of penal substitution in which Christ's death is viewed as being on behalf of sinners to satisfy divine justice was a common belief of the church of the first thousand years. Many theologians of the early church held to a penal substitution view.¹² In a survey of these statements, one point should be understood. Many of the statements do not come within extended discussions of salvation. They appear to be noncontroversial at the time uttered. The nature of the atonement was not a major item of controversy or debate in the early church. Thus, the statements are most probably declarations of generally accepted truths, adding more credibility for the

⁹Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997), 154-55.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹See Erickson, *Christian Theology* 833; Leon Morris, "Theories of the Atonement" 102.

¹²Garry Williams points out that even by a narrow criterion the doctrine of penal substitution was taught by the following: Justin Martyr, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, and Gregory the Great (Gary J. Williams, "A Critical Exposition of Hugo Grotius's Doctrine of the Atonement in *De Satisfactione Christi* [D.Phil. thesis, Faculty of Social Studies, University of Oxford, 1999] 70). Williams has done significant work unearthing the statements of penal substitution in the early church. He has also addressed the anachronistic demands of those who insist that penal substitution was not taught in the early church because this doctrine was not expressed precisely as it would be later during the Reformation (67).

case that the early theologians held to penal substitution. As Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach observe, “[I]f a writer makes a passing, but nonetheless explicit, reference to the doctrine of penal substitution in a work largely devoted to another subject, this probably indicates that penal substitution was both widely understood and fairly uncontroversial among his contemporaries.”¹³ Plus, it would have confused the readers for the author to bring up any other view of the atonement.¹⁴

Clement of Rome (d. 96)

Clement was a bishop in Rome. Eusebius says Clement became bishop in A.D. 92. Like the apostle Paul, Clement wrote a letter to the Corinthians to deal with their schisms. His *Epistle to the Corinthians* (c. 95) is the earliest extant Christian writing after the NT. Clement declared that Jesus gave His life in His atonement: “Because of the love he felt for us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave his blood for us by the will of God, his body for our bodies, and his soul for our souls.”¹⁵

Ignatius (d. 107)

Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria. He may have been a personal disciple of the apostle John, and had a special fondness for Paul whom he quoted and of whom he spoke highly. Ignatius is known for refuting Docetism, an early heresy that claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human. Ignatius believed that Jesus died on behalf of sinners when he declared: “Now, He suffered all these things for our sakes, that we might be saved.”¹⁶

Epistle of Barnabas

The *Epistle of Barnabas* is a Greek treatise with features of an epistle. It has been traditionally ascribed to Barnabas who is mentioned in the Book of Acts, though some ascribe it to Barnabas of Alexandria or another unknown early Christian teacher. The epistle was probably written in Alexandria, Egypt, between A.D. 70 and 135. In it are several explicit statements concerning Jesus’ sacrificial death for sins:

For to this end the Lord endured to deliver up His flesh to corruption, that we might be sanctified through the remission of sins, which is effected by His blood of sprinkling. For it is written concerning Him, partly with reference to Israel, and partly to us; and [the Scripture] saith thus: “He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our

¹³Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007) 163.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Clement, *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 49, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter ANF), eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994) 1:18.

¹⁶Ignatius, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 2, ANF 1:87.

iniquities: with His stripes we are healed. He was brought as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb which is dumb before its shearer.”¹⁷

Moreover, when fixed to the cross, He had given Him to drink vinegar and gall. Harken how the priests of the people gave previous indications of this. His commandment having been written, the Lord enjoined, that whosoever did not keep the fast should be put to death, because He also Himself was to offer in sacrifice for our sins the vessel of the Spirit, in order that the type established in Isaac when he was offered upon the altar might be fully accomplished.¹⁸

Epistle to Diognetus (2nd century)

The *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* is a second-century work that some believe is one of the earliest examples of Christian apologetics. It also reveals early thinking in regard to Christ’s atonement. This epistle declared that “when our wickedness had reached its height. . . . He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, he gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous.”¹⁹ It then goes on to say, “O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation, O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors.”²⁰ This epistle stands as a clear example of early belief that Jesus paid the price for unjust sinners so that they could be forgiven of their sins.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165)

Justin was arguably the greatest apologist of the second century, defending Christianity from both Jewish and pagan critics. He also emphasized that Christ became a curse for the whole human race:

For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them’ [Deut 27:26]. And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes? If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the

¹⁷*Epistle of Barnabas* 5, ANF 1:139.

¹⁸*Epistle of Barnabas* 7, ANF 1:141.

¹⁹Mathetes, *The Epistle to Diognetus* 9, ANF 1:28.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves? For although His Father caused Him to suffer these things in behalf of the human family, yet you did not commit the deed as in obedience to the will of God.²¹

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 275-339)

Eusebius was the most important church historian of his time and a religious advisor to the emperor Constantine. He evidenced his belief that Christ became a curse for sinners when he stated,

Thus the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, became a curse on our behalf." He then stated, "And the Lamb of God not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down upon Himself the appointed curse, being made a curse for us."²²

He also declared: "But since being in the likeness of sinful flesh He condemned sin in the flesh, the words quoted are rightly used. And in that He made our sins His own from His love and benevolence towards us."²³

Eusebius of Emesa (c. 300-360)

This bishop of Emesa and leader in the Greek church said in regard to 1 Pet 2:24, "But his wounds became our saviors."²⁴

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300-368)

Hilary was Bishop of Poitiers and one of the more important Latin writers before Ambrose. In his *Homily on Psalm 53*, Hilary affirms Christ's sacrificial death and how Jesus became a curse for other human beings:

For next there follows: *I will sacrifice unto Thee freely*. The sacrifices of the Law, which consisted of whole burnt-offerings and oblations of goats and of bulls, did not involve an expression of free will, because the sentence of a curse was pronounced on all who broke the Law. Whoever failed to sacrifice laid himself open to the curse. And it was always necessary to go through the whole sacrificial action because the addition of a curse to the commandment forbid any trifling with the obligation of offering. It was from this curse

²¹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 95, ANF 1:247.

²²Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 10.1, trans. W. J. Ferrar, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/fathers/eusebius_de_12_book10.html (accessed June 29, 2009).

²³Ibid.

²⁴Eusebius of Emesa, "Catena," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT XI* (hereafter ACCS), ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000) 96.

that our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed us, when, as the Apostle says: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made curse for us, for it is written: cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree* [Gal. 3:13]. Thus He offered Himself to the death of the accursed that He might break the curse of the Law, offering Himself voluntarily a victim to God the Father, in order that by means of a voluntary victim the curse which attended the discontinuance of the regular victim might be removed.²⁵

This statement from Hilary includes the major elements of the penal substitution view. Jesus offered Himself on behalf of sinners becoming a curse on their behalf.

Athanasius (c. 300-373)

Athanasius is probably the most important Christian theologian before Augustine. This theologian of the Eastern church is recognized as the champion of orthodox Christology as he defended the deity of Christ against Arianism that was so influential in the fourth century. Yet Athanasius was also an explicit promoter of penal substitution. As William C. Weinrich states, "Athanasius frequently says that Christ suffered and died 'for all' or 'in the stead of all.'"²⁶ For instance, Athanasius stated,

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.²⁷

Athanasius also said,

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice

²⁵Hilary, *Homilies on the Psalms* 13, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *NPNF*), Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 9:246.

²⁶William C. Weinrich, "God Did Not Create Death: Athanasius on the Atonement," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008):301.

²⁷Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. and ed., A Religious of C.S.M.V., Intr. by C. S. Lewis (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996) 34.

free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required.²⁸

In his *Four Discourses Against the Arians* he said: “Formerly, the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffering in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all.”²⁹ And then,

For, as when John says, ‘The Word was made flesh we do not conceive the whole Word Himself to be flesh, but to have put on flesh and become man, and on hearing, ‘Christ hath become a curse for us,’ and ‘He hath made Him sin for us who knew no sin,’ we do not simply conceive this, that whole Christ has become curse and sin, but that He has taken on Him the curse which lay against us (as the Apostle has said, ‘Has redeemed us from the curse,’ and ‘has carried,’ as Isaiah has said, ‘our sins,’ and as Peter has written, ‘has borne them in the body on the wood.’³⁰

Athanasius also said, “He also carried up our sins to the Tree.”³¹ In *Ad Epictetum* he said, “For what John said, ‘The Word was made flesh’ has this meaning, as we may see by a similar passage; for it is written in Paul: ‘Christ has become a curse for us.’ And just as He has not Himself become a curse, but is said to have done so because He took upon Him the curse on our behalf, so also He has become flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because He assumed on our behalf living flesh, and has become Man.”³² Thus, Athanasius stands as a clear promoter of penal substitution.

Basil the Great (330-379)

Basil was one of the most important defenders of the Trinity in the fourth century. In regard to Christ’s death he declared, “By the blood of Christ, through faith, we have been cleansed from all sin.”³³

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-390)

Known as the “Trinitarian Theologian,” Gregory also argued that Jesus became curse for humanity and took human disobedience upon Himself:

²⁸Ibid., 35.

²⁹Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, *NPNF*² 4:341.

³⁰Ibid., 4:374.

³¹Athanasius, *Letter to Maximus*, *NPNF*² 2:4:578.

³²Athanasius, *Ad Epictetum*, *NPNF*² 4:573.

³³Basil, “On Baptism,” in *ACCS NT XI*, 96.

Take, in the next place, the subjection by which you subject the Son to the Father. What, you say, is He not now subject, or must He, if He is God, be subject to God? You are fashioning your argument as if it concerned some robber, or some hostile deity. But look at it in this manner: that as for my sake He was called a curse, Who destroyed my curse; and sin, who taketh away the sin of the world; and became a new Adam to take the place of the old, just so He makes my disobedience His own as Head of the whole body. As long then as I am disobedient and rebellious, both by denial of God and by my passions, so long Christ also is called disobedient on my account. But when all things shall be subdued unto Him on the one hand by acknowledgment of Him, and on the other by a reformation, then He Himself also will have fulfilled His submission, bringing me whom He has saved to God. For this, according to my view, is the subjection of Christ; namely, the fulfilling of the Father's Will.³⁴

Ambrose of Milan (339-397)

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, was a mentor for Augustine and one of the most important theologians of the Patristic Era. His views on the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement are evident in the following statements:

Who, then, is He by the wound of Whose stripes we are healed but Christ the Lord? of Whom the same Isaiah prophesied His stripes were our healing, of Whom Paul the Apostle wrote in his epistle: "Who knew no sin, but was made sin for us." This, indeed, was divine in Him, that His Flesh did no sin, nor did the creature of the body take in Him sin. For what wonder would it be if the Godhead alone sinned not, seeing It had no incentives to sin? But if God alone is free from sin, certainly every creature by its own nature can be, as we have said, liable to sin.³⁵

A glorious remedy—to have consolation of Christ! For He bore these things with surpassing patience for our sakes—and we forsooth cannot bear them with common patience for the glory of His Name! Who may not learn to forgive, when assailed, seeing that Christ, even on the Cross, prayed,—yea, for them that persecuted Him? See you not that those weaknesses, as you please to call them, of Christ's are your *strength*? Why question Him in the matter of remedies for us? His tears wash us, His weeping cleanses us,—and there is strength in *this* doubt, at least, that if you begin to doubt, you will despair. The greater the insult, the greater is the gratitude due.³⁶

Let us bethink ourselves of the profitableness of right belief. It is profitable to me to know that for my sake Christ bore my infirmities, submitted to the affections of my body, that for me, that is to say, for every man, He was made sin, and a curse, that for me and in me was He humbled and made subject, that for me He is the Lamb, the Vine, the Rock, the

³⁴Gregory, *The Fourth Theological Oration* 5, *NPNF²* 7:311.

³⁵Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit* 9, *NPNF²* 10:108.

³⁶Ambrose, *Of the Christian Faith* 9, *NPNF²* 10:236.

Servant, the Son of an handmaid, knowing not the day of judgment, for my sake ignorant of the day and the hour.³⁷

John Chrysostom (c. 350-407)

John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, was known for his preaching eloquence. With this quotation he discusses the concept of the transfer of sin from one to another:

If one that was himself a king, beholding a robber and malefactor under punishment, gave his well-beloved son, his only-begotten and true, to be slain; and transferred the death and the guilt as well, from him to his son (who was himself of no such character), that he might both save the condemned man and clear him from his evil reputation; and then if, having subsequently promoted him to great dignity, he had yet, after thus saving him and advancing him to that glory unspeakable, been outraged by the person that had received such treatment: would not that man, if he had any sense, have chosen ten thousand deaths rather than appear guilty of so great ingratitude? This then let us also now consider with ourselves, and groan bitterly for the provocations we have offered our Benefactor; nor let us therefore presume, because though outraged he bears it with long-suffering; but rather for this very reason be full of remorse.³⁸

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Augustine is widely recognized as the most important and influential theologian of the Patristic Era. He explicitly states that Jesus bore the curse for man's sins with His death:

If we read, 'Cursed of God is every one that hangeth on a tree,' [Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut 21:23] the addition of the words 'of God' creates no difficulty. For had not God hated sin and our death, He would not have sent His Son to bear and to abolish it. And there is nothing strange in God's cursing what He hates. For His readiness to give us the immortality which will be had at the coming of Christ, is in proportion to the compassion with which He hated our death when it hung on the cross at the death of Christ. And if Moses curses every one that hangeth on a tree, it is certainly not because he did not foresee that righteous men would be crucified, but rather because He foresaw that heretics would deny the death of the Lord to be real, and would try to disprove the application of this curse to Christ, in order that they might disprove the reality of His death. For if Christ's death was not real, nothing cursed hung on the cross when He was crucified, for the crucifixion cannot have been real. Moses cries from the distant past to these heretics: Your evasion in denying the reality of the death of Christ is useless. Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; not this one or that, but absolutely every one. What! the Son of God? Yes, assuredly. This is the very thing you object to, and that you are so anxious to evade. You will not allow that He was cursed for us, because you will not allow that He died for us. Exemption from Adam's curse implies exemption from his death. But as Christ endured

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸John of Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 6, *NPNF'* 12:335.

death as man, and for man; so also, Son of God as He was, ever living in His own righteousness, but dying for our offences, He submitted as man, and for man, to bear the curse which accompanies death. And as He died in the flesh which He took in bearing our punishment, so also, while ever blessed in His own righteousness, He was cursed for our offences, in the death which He suffered in bearing our punishment. And these words ‘every one’ are intended to check the ignorant officiousness which would deny the reference of the curse to Christ, and so, because the curse goes along with death, would lead to the denial of the true death of Christ.³⁹

Augustine also said that Christ’s blood was shed for sins: “For then that blood, since it was His who had no sin at all, was poured out for the remission of our sins.”⁴⁰ In summing up Augustine’s views on the atonement, Stephen Finlan observes, “[T]he crucified Christ provides that satisfaction, dying as a substitute for sinful humans.”⁴¹

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 378-444)

Cyril, a theologian of Alexandria, wrote that Jesus bore human sin on the cross:

The Only-begotten was made man, bore a body by nature at enmity with death, and became flesh, so that, enduring the death which was hanging over us as the result of our sin, he might abolish sin; and further, that he might put an end to the accusations of Satan, inasmuch as we have paid in Christ himself the penalties for the charges of sin against us: ‘For he bore our sins, and was wounded because of us’, according to the voice of the prophet. Or are we not healed by his wounds?⁴²

Gregory the Great (c. 540-604)

A powerful pope of the Western church, Gregory built upon Augustine’s substitutionary views. As Finlan observes, “Gregory the Great taught that sin requires sacrificial payment, so that *human* sin necessitated a *human* sacrifice.”⁴³ In *Morals on the Book of Job*, Gregory declared,

When then the first man was moved by Satan from the Lord, then the Lord was moved against the second Man. And so Satan then moved the Lord to the affliction of this latter, when the sin of disobedience brought down the first man from the height of uprightness. For if he had not drawn the first Adam by wilful sin into the death of the soul, the second

³⁹Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon* 6, *NPNF* 4:209.

⁴⁰Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15, *NPNF* 3:177.

⁴¹Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007) 55.

⁴²Cyril, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate* iii, 100–102, in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, vol. 68 (Paris, 1857-) 293, 296.

⁴³Finlan, *Options on Atonement* 55 (emphases in the original).

Adam, being without sin, would never have come into the voluntary death of the flesh, and therefore it is with justice said to him of our Redeemer too, *Thou movest Me against him to afflict him without cause*. As though it were said in plainer words; 'Whereas this man dies not on his own account, but on account of that other, thou didst then move Me to the afflicting of this one, when thou didst withdraw that other from Me by thy cunning persuasions.' And of him is it rightly added, *without cause*. For 'he was destroyed without cause,' who was at once weighed to the earth by the avenging of sin, and not defiled by the pollution of sin. He 'was destroyed without cause,' Who, being made incarnate, had no sins of His own, and yet being without offence took upon Himself the punishment of the carnal.⁴⁴

Gregory's views on Christ's sacrificial atonement were influential. Finlan states that Gregory's "atonement logic" became the "standard in Western Christendom, backed up by the authority of this persuasive pope."⁴⁵

Severus of Antioch (d. c. 512)

Severus was a Greek monk, theologian, and patriarch of Antioch. In regard to 1 Pet 2:24 he declared: "The one who offered himself for our sins had no sin of his own. Instead he bore our transgressions in himself and was made a sacrifice for them. This principle is set out in the law, for what sin did the lamb or the goat have, which were sacrificed for sins and which were even called 'sin' for this reason."⁴⁶

Oecumenius (c. 990)

An author on various books of the New Testament, Oecumenius explicitly stated that Christ died for our sins: "The righteous person suffers for the salvation of others, just as Christ did. This is why Peter mentions our Lord's example, since Christ did not die for his own sins but for ours. This is the point he makes by adding 'the righteous for the unrighteous.'"⁴⁷ He then goes on to say, "So great was his passion that however often human beings may sin, that one act of suffering is sufficient to take away all our transgressions."⁴⁸

Martin Luther

At this point it has been established that the concept of penal substitution was firmly held by the church of the first thousand years. Yet one more individual in the debate over penal substitution must be mentioned—Martin Luther. Luther is

⁴⁴Gregory, *Morals of the Book of Job*, in Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (London: Oxford, 1844) 1:148.

⁴⁵Finlan, *Options on Atonement* 55-56.

⁴⁶Severus of Antioch, "Catena," in *ACCS NT XI*, 96.

⁴⁷Oecumenius, "Commentary on 1 Peter," in *ACCS NT XI*, 107.

⁴⁸Ibid.

important in the debate over penal substitution since Gustaf Aulen claimed that Luther broke with Anselm's satisfaction view in favor of the *Christus Victor* view.⁴⁹ But Luther did affirm penal substitution also as the following statements show:

Therefore Christ was not only crucified and died, but *by divine love* sin was laid upon him.⁵⁰

He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood.⁵¹

For you do not yet have Christ even though you know that He is God and man. You truly have Him only when you believe that this altogether pure and innocent Person has been granted to you by the Father as your High Priest and Redeemer, yes, as your slave. Putting off His innocence and holiness and putting on your sinful person, He bore your sin, death, and curse; He became a sacrifice and a curse for you, in order thus to set you free from the curse of the Law.⁵²

Timothy George comments on Luther's view of the atonement: "Luther makes clear that there was no remedy for sin except for God's only Son to become man and to take upon himself the load of eternal wrath thus making his own body and blood a sacrifice for sin."⁵³ Wolfhart Pannenberg said of Luther that he saw "with full clarity that Jesus' death in its genuine sense is to be understood as vicarious penal suffering."⁵⁴ In an orthodox view, Aulen draws too sharp a distinction. Luther was not inconsistent. He saw both views—classical and penal substitution.⁵⁵ As Luther's Larger Catechism says:

He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor in grace. . . . Christ suffered, died, and was buried that

⁴⁹Aulen, *Christus Victor* 101–2.

⁵⁰Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, et al. 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986) 26:279.

⁵¹*LW* 26:277.

⁵²*LW* 26:288.

⁵³Timothy George, "The Atonement in Martin Luther's Theology," *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004, 273). See also Finlan, *Options on Atonement* 58.

⁵⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 279.

⁵⁵See Timothy George, "The Atonement in Martin Luther's Theology," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004) 275.

he might make satisfaction for me and pay for what I owed, not with silver and gold, but with his own precious blood.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach rightly point out that the doctrine of penal substitution has “an impeccable pedigree in the history of the Christian church.”⁵⁷ The assertion that the doctrine of penal substitution is a latecomer, a development of the Reformation, is not true. It is refuted by many statements from theologians of the first thousand years that Jesus died on behalf of sinners, becoming a curse on their behalf to satisfy God’s righteous requirements. Recent opponents of penal substitution are correct that many in the early church believed in the classical or *Christus Victor* view of the atonement in which Christ’s death is a victory over the powers of darkness, but often the early theologians also believed in the penal substitution view as well. This is a “both/and” scenario, not an “either/or.” The opponents of penal substitution have erred in thinking that belief in the classical view meant that the early church did not believe in the penal substitution position, but that is not the case. Nor are these opponents correct in claiming that Martin Luther held to the classical view but not the penal substitution view.

The evidence showing that the early church believed and taught penal substitution is impressive and as Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach have put it, “quite overwhelming.”⁵⁸ Those who hold to the doctrine of penal substitution can be encouraged that their belief has been clearly articulated throughout church history. It is not an invention of the Protestant Reformation or the result of common cultural beliefs of the day.

One can only speculate as to why any would claim that penal substitution was not taught in the early church. Perhaps those who have a theological aversion for this doctrine want it to be the case that penal substitution is a more recent invention. Or, opponents have not taken into consideration that statements in favor of a classical view of the atonement are not mutually exclusive with the view that Christ died on behalf of sinners. Either way, they are in error and need to take an honest look at the evidence.

Regardless, Christians should not be confused on this matter. From a historical perspective, penal substitution has been widely held throughout church history. The declaration that “the myth of the ‘late development’ of penal substitution has persisted quite long enough. It is time to lay it to rest for good”⁵⁹ is correct.

⁵⁶*Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 414.

⁵⁷Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions* 31.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 163–64.