

WORTHY IS THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN: PENAL SUBSTITUTION AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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By labeling penal substitution as “redemptive violence,” some have rejected the biblical view of the cross of Jesus as substitutionary and penal by claiming that His death was the ultimate example of pacifism. Others want to relegate penal substitution to the category of being only a metaphor of Scripture. Such distortions of the Bible have adverse effects on true Christian worship as a close survey of ritual offerings under the Mosaic Covenant reflect when carried forward into what the NT says about worship. Sacrifice has always been fundamental as a basis for true worship. The OT book of Leviticus devotes itself to explaining how sinful Israelites through sacrifices could make themselves pure in approaching a holy God in their worship. Four of the five offerings described there—the whole burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, and the sin offering—had the purpose of dealing with sin and with guilt. Holiness achieved through sacrifice was paramount in having one’s sacrifice acceptable by God and effective in worship. The effective offering was costly to the worshiper and brought him into covenant fellowship with God. In the NT Christ came to be the ultimate sacrifice in fulfillment of all the OT offerings. Beginning with John 1:29, the NT uses sacrificial imagery in a number of places in anticipation of His work on the cross, particularly in His institution of the Lord’s Supper. The author of Hebrews in particular portrays Jesus as the perfect atoning sacrifice in fulfillment of the OT system of sacrificial worship. Christian worship without the doctrine of penal substitution is impossible.

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Introduction: The Message of Atonement

The principle of penal substitutionary atonement has come under significant challenge in recent years, even among those who fall into the broad category of

evangelicalism. Widespread discomfort has arisen with viewing the efficacy of Christ's cross in terms of bloody death that propitiates the wrath of God on behalf of sinners. The sentiment seems to follow that of the old laundry detergent commercial: "There's gotta be a better way!"

One recent example is Daniel Bell, who argues that the penal substitution interpretation of the atonement is an endorsement of what he calls "redemptive violence." For Bell and those who adopt his ideology, the concept of penal substitution has been used by the church to sanction, or at least tolerate, all sorts of violence and abuse. But how does he explain the cross in light of the strong tradition in favor of penal substitution? An extensive quotation will paint a clear picture.

Any effort to make the case that God does not demand blood cannot simply skip over the cross but instead must pass right through it. This is the case not just because efforts to circumvent the cross run against the grain of the tradition and jettison significant portions of scripture, but because discarding the cross and talk of atonement through the blood of the Lamb also undercuts the laudable goals of those who reject blood sacrifice. In other words, we need the cross of Christ in order to reject the logic of blood sacrifice.¹

What, then, is the meaning of the cross? Bell continues to advance his agenda as follows:

The work of atonement is God in Christ bearing human rejection and extending the offer of grace again, thereby opening a path for humanity to recover blessedness. In this sense, Christ's faithfulness even to the point of death on the cross marks not a divine demand for retribution, but a divine refusal to hold our rebellion against us. God offers us life and we reject it. God continues to offer it, in the form of love incarnate, and we crucify him. Yet even now, God will not lash out against us but instead raises Jesus up and sends him back with the same offer of life.²

The goal for Bell is clearly to deny that Christ's substitutionary role on the cross was not only *not* penal, but rather the opposite—the ultimate example of pacifism.³

A similar approach is taken by Brian McLaren in *A Generous Orthodoxy*. To set up his understanding of the cross, he summarizes what it means for Jesus to be Lord:

¹Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "God Does not Demand Blood: Beyond Redemptive Violence," in *God Does not..Entertain, Play Matchmaker, Hurry, Demand Blood, Cure Every Illness*, Kindle e-book ed., ed. D. Brent Laytham (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009) locations 478-81. Elsewhere Bell strengthens this assertion: "Far from reinforcing blood sacrifice and redemptive violence, Christ's work on the cross is nothing less than the divine refusal of blood sacrifice, as well as any notion that suffering violence is or can be redemptive" (ibid., 512-13).

²Bell, Jr., "God Does Not" locations 532-38.

³A disturbing implication of Bell's argument (and one that is not lost on Bell) is that those who continue to advocate the penal substitution view are somehow in favor of violence in general, or at least accepting of it.

We live in danger of oppression and deception, so Jesus comes with saving judgment. When God shines the light of justice and truth through Jesus, the outcome is surprising: the religious and political leaders often turn out to be scoundrels, and the prostitutes and homeless turn out to have more faith and goodness than anyone expected. Through parable, through proverb, through invective (“Woe to you!”), and most powerfully through the drama of his life story culminating in his death and rising, Jesus, wherever he goes, shows things to be what they really are—bringing a saving judgment-with-forgiveness (or justice-with-mercy) to all who will accept it.⁴

From this theological basis, McLaren then summarizes the meaning of the cross in terms of atonement:

This is a window into the meaning of the cross. Absorbing the worst that human beings can offer—crooked religiosity, petty political systems, individual betrayal, physical torture with whip and thorn and nail and hammer and spear—Jesus enters into the center of the thunderstorm of human evil and takes its full shock on the cross. Our evil is brutally, unmistakably exposed, drawn into broad daylight, and judged—named and shown for what it is. Then, having felt its agony and evil firsthand, in person, Jesus pronounces forgiveness and demonstrates that the grace of God is more powerful and expansive than the evil of humanity. Justice and mercy kiss; judgment and forgiveness embrace. From their marriage a new future is conceived.⁵

McLaren espouses a view of the cross that is similar to Bell’s, but without the explicit commitment to an ideology of nonviolence. In both cases, a clear picture of postliberal soteriology in full bloom is evident.

Other challenges to the penal-substitution theme of the atonement are less extreme. Authors like Joel Green and Scot McKnight do not want to deny penal substitution, but rather appreciate it as one of many metaphors in Scripture and church history that have been employed to describe the redemptive efficacy of the cross.⁶ Now, it is important to see the multicolored richness of the biblical doctrine of the atonement—indeed, Scripture does describe atonement via motifs such as ransom, victory, satisfaction, and example—but it is equally important to see that

⁴Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/conservative, Mystical/poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 105.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity 2000); Joel B. Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Belby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006) 157-85; Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

penal substitution is the central and organizing theme.⁷

But can the penal substitutionary motif of the atonement be disposed of, reinterpreted, or pushed to the side so easily? What are the consequences of such a denial? This study will draw a connection between the doctrine of penal substitution and the worship life of the people of God. Within the biblical account of redemption, the worship of the faithful reflects the content of the faith—*lex orandi, lex credendi*. So the question is this: What does the doctrine of atonement look like as it is reflected in the worship of God's people? And in light of this connection, can a denial or deemphasis of penal substitution stand?⁸

In order to address these questions, we will survey the ritual offerings prescribed under the Mosaic Covenant, noting the themes of atonement and substitution, and show that these acts formed the core of the worship of OT believers. From there, we will observe key thematic passages in the NT which demonstrate that the concept of sacrifice—and particularly the atoning sacrifice of Jesus—is still integral to worship that is acceptable before God. This study will show that the principle of sacrifice has always been fundamental to true worship. Consequently, because the reality of penal substitution arises directly from the theology of sacrifice, any denial or diminishing of the doctrine of penal substitution is devastating to worship as God intends.

Sacrifice as Worship in the OT

In his significant contribution to the study of worship theology, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allen Ross demonstrates that the concept and act of sacrifice is woven into the story of God's interaction with the human race. He concludes that "sacrifice is at the center of worship as the basis and expression of it."⁹

While cases of offerings to God occur a number of times prior to the Exodus, this study will focus on the core of the sacrificial system in the Mosaic covenant, because the NT specifically portrays Jesus Christ as the fulfillment and terminus of that system. It is not our purpose to analyze these prescribed offerings in great detail or to engage in various technical debates regarding the procedures involved in them. Rather, the goal will be to understand these offerings as worship experiences (as they were surely intended to be) and to relate them to Christian worship (as the NT apparently does).

⁷For a balanced and sensitive argument for the centrality and prominence of penal substitution among the variety of other biblical atonement themes, see Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* 67-98.

⁸While an extension of this study into the postbiblical history of Christian worship would certainly strengthen the case being made, the scope will be limited to aspects of worship in biblical times.

⁹Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006) 505.

Sacrifice as Requirement

The beginning for this study will be the first seven chapters of Leviticus, but before surveying the sacrifices legislated there, it is necessary to remember the redemptive historical context. The book of Leviticus continues the story of the exodus and the establishing of God's covenant with the nation of Israel through His mediator, Moses. As Leviticus opens, the people have entered into this covenant and have followed God's instructions to build the sanctuary and its furnishings, through which God will maintain his covenant presence with the nation and have fellowship with them. Indeed, "the presence of the Lord is not only the primary theological concern of Leviticus but also the motivating force and the occasion of the book."¹⁰

The book of Leviticus is largely occupied with specific instructions for the sacrificial activity that will take place within the confines of the newly built tabernacle. Theologically, the book takes as its theme the holiness which is characteristic of God and to which the people must aspire to receive the blessings of God's covenant presence among them. Because YHWH, the Holy One, has taken up residence among the people, they must be holy in honor of their covenant Lord (19:2).

The problem with all of this, of course, is sin. The people were emphatically *not* a holy, pure, or clean people. Leviticus presents the pattern that God established in order to facilitate holiness and remove impurity from his treasured people so that they might dwell with him in covenant fellowship. And this is where the nexus between atonement and worship begins to appear. For the people to commune with God, atonement for their sin must be achieved. Atonement was accomplished by means of sacrifices which were—when offered from a heart of faith—acts of worship.

Atonement as Worship

The sacrifices in the Mosaic system "served many purposes, but the primary purpose was to maintain communion between God and the supplicant(s)."¹¹ Since four of the five main sacrifices in the system were intended to deal with sin and guilt, it is clear that the theological principle in force here is that for God and mankind to have fellowship, man's sin must be cleansed in order for him to approach God.¹² The following summary will seek to show certain features of the sacrifices that

¹⁰Richard E. Averbeck, "Leviticus, Theology of," in *NIDOTTE*, 4:910.

¹¹John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992) 1xix.

¹²Some OT scholars want to maintain a categorical difference with the English terms "offering" and "sacrifice," emphasizing that the latter is a subspecies of the former (e.g., Richard E. Averbeck, "Offerings and Sacrifices," in *NIDOTTE*, 4:996-97 and W. A. Van Gemeren, "Offerings and Sacrifices in Bible Times," in *EDT*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 788). However, major commentaries on Leviticus (e.g., Hartley, Milgrom, Rooker, and Wenham) apparently do not find this categorization important, choosing rather to emphasize distinctions based on the applicable Hebrew terms. This study will follow their lead in using the English words as more or less synonymous.

demonstrate these acts of sacrifice for atonement were also acts of worship.¹³

The first sacrifice presented in Leviticus (1:1-17) is the whole burnt offering (הֶלֶל, *ḥôlâ*), the most common of the sacrifices.¹⁴ This offering could be from the herd (1:3-9) or the flock (1:10-13), or in the case of the poor, it could be turtledoves or pigeons (1:14-17). The one bringing the sacrifice did so “that he may be accepted before the LORD” (1:3), a purpose which clearly indicates the atoning significance of the ritual.¹⁵ Having approached the altar, the offerer identified with the offering by laying his hand on the animal’s head before it was slaughtered (1:4), an act which the worshiper himself usually performed (1:5, 11).¹⁶ The worshiper did the butchering prescribed in the ritual, while the priest applied the blood to the altar and burned the cut-up animal on it.

The *ḥôlâ* was an offering designed to deal with sin or impurity so that fellowship with God might be established, or more specifically, renewed. When the offerer brought the sacrifice, he did so to be accepted by God in spite of his own sinfulness. The complete destruction of the sacrifice pictures the total submission and self-giving of the one bringing the offering. In short, this offering was “intent on expressing the dedication of the worshiper before God, within which the step of atonement would be necessary.”¹⁷

The grain (or cereal) offering—the מִנְחָה (*minḥâ*)—described in the second chapter of Leviticus is somewhat obscure in its purpose,¹⁸ but one statement in its description is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Whether the *minḥâ* is presented as an uncooked offering of “fine flour” (2:1) or as a cooked offering of “unleavened cakes” prepared in an oven, griddle, or pan (2:4, 5, 7), it is said to produce “a soothing aroma to the LORD” when it is burned on the altar (2:2, 9, cf. 1:9, 13, 17). This phrase points to the atoning efficacy of the grain offering in that it brings peace between God and the offerer, a sinner who is seeking fellowship and acceptance before YHWH in an act of sacrificial worship.

¹³For a helpful distillation of the main features of these basic sacrifices in the Mosaic system, see the chart in Averbeck, “Offerings and Sacrifices” 4:1020–21.

¹⁴Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 51–52.

¹⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in English are from the NASU.

¹⁶Hartley provides a thorough entry point into the discussion about the meaning of laying one’s hand on the sacrificial victim (Hartley, *Leviticus* 19-21). This study assumes rather than seeks to establish that these sacrifices pictured penal substitution. Other treatments of the topic have done this ably (for a guide to the discussion among the more recent contributions, see Emil Nicole, “Atonement in the Pentateuch,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004] 35-50).

¹⁷Timothy M. Pierce, *Enthroned on Our Praise: An Old Testament Theology of Worship*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B & H, 2008) 99; cf. Wenham, *Leviticus* 58.

¹⁸Some see it as an accompaniment to the burnt offering in order to complete it as a “food offering.” This is perhaps suggested by the collocation of the burnt offering and grain offering in passages such as Lev 14:20 (Averbeck, “Offerings and Sacrifices” 1021; Pierce, *Enthroned* 100).

The same phrase is used to describe the peace offering — the זָבַח שְׁלָמִים (zebah šĕlāmîm), also called a fellowship offering (Leviticus 3).¹⁹ The precise function of this sacrificial ritual is debated, but important general conclusions for the present study can be drawn from the occasions on which the peace offering was made.²⁰ This offering, perhaps more than the others, portrays the covenant fellowship that the worshiper sought with God. After the sacrifice was presented and slaughtered, a portion of the animal would be offered up by the priest on the altar, then the remainder of the animal would be consumed in a meal by those offering the sacrifice (7:11-16), while portions would be given to the priest for him and his family (7:31-34). Though the peace offering contains some of the same elements as those that are more obviously oriented toward substitutionary atonement for sin, such as placing the hand on the head of the animal and sprinkling its blood on the altar (3:2), the emphasis seems to be on communion with God and other worshipers—a “horizontal” as well as a “vertical” dimension.

The sin offering (חַטָּאת, *hattâ't*) is described in 4:1–5:13 and applies to cases of inadvertent sins, sins of omission, and the cleansing of ritual impurity.²¹ Two recurring themes for the topic at hand bear mentioning: first, even when transgression of the law is inadvertent—even unknown to the perpetrator—that person is still guilty in the eyes of God and must deal with the consequences according to God’s revealed will. Whether the sinner is immediately aware of his guilt or not, the result has been the pollution of God’s people and sanctuary, and this pollution must be cleansed.²² To accomplish this, certain features of this ritual, as with other atoning sacrifices, point to the concept of substitution—the laying on of hands, slaughtering, and sprinkling of blood.

A second and related theme is that some ceremonial uncleanness is inevitable. The holiness code in later chapters of Leviticus prescribes this offering for purification after giving birth (12:6-8) or recovering from a skin disease (14:19). These and other circumstances serve to emphasize the complete and unspotted purity of God and the ease with which His people can become contaminated.

Finally, the guilt offering’ (אֲשָׁם, *’âšâ’m*), described in 5:14–6:7 (MT, 5:14-26), deals with sins with economic repercussions in the community. “It was in the guilt (or perhaps better named ‘reparations’) offering that the civil issue of economic

¹⁹Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 100–101; cf. the more extensive discussion in Wenham, *Leviticus* 76-81. Some prefer the more interpretive “offering of well-being” (Hartley, *Leviticus* 33ff; cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1991] 202ff.).

²⁰These occasions are developed further in Leviticus 7, but will not be discussed in detail here.

²¹Because this offering was used to cleanse ceremonial defilement, it is often called a purification offering (Hartley, *Leviticus* 55-57; Wenham, *Leviticus* 88-89).

²²Wenham, *Leviticus* 94.

payment for the failures of humans was addressed.”²³ In such cases the guilty one was required to pay back what was sinfully appropriated, plus an additional 20 percent (6:5). Again, in these cases, atonement is made for the sin, unintentional though it may have been, through the slaughtering of a sacrificial animal and offering of its blood.

No survey ever seems adequate; the foregoing is no exception. Much more should be said regarding the OT sacrifices as acts of worship that bring atonement for sin and impurity, especially on the Day of Atonement, the centerpiece of the book of Leviticus. But the description above is enough to make possible some thematic observations for the purpose of this study.

Summary: Sacrifice as Drawing Near

Five observations about the Mosaic sacrificial system will crystallize the relevant OT theological input for the present study and provide a reference point for the continuities and discontinuities to be found in the NT portion of the discussion to follow.

First, *purity, or holiness, was of paramount concern to God* and therefore to the worshiper. Besides the pervasive emphasis on the opposition of pure/impure and clean/unclean, this principle is evident in the order in which the sacrifices were practiced:

Emphasis was first placed on sin which needed to be forgiven, to heal any breach of relationship with God. This was followed by an expression of personal consecration in the burnt offering, with its accompanying cereal and drink offerings in many instances. Thus, finally, the peace offering could symbolize the restoration of communion or fellowship with God and with others in the community of his people. Purification and purity were clearly the prerequisites for living in God's presence.²⁴

A desire to commune with God, receive blessings from God, be delivered from circumstances by God, was never divorced from the consciousness of sin that disrupted the relationship between the believer (or family, or nation) and YHWH. Sins must be purified for the relationship to continue to develop. This overarching principle leads naturally to the next observation.

Second, *the supplicant came as a sinner to be accepted by God*. In most

²³Pierce, *Enthroned* 104.

²⁴David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 39. The consistency of the order of sacrifices in the OT has been well noted by others, such as A. F. Rainey, “The Order of Sacrifices in the Old Testament Ritual Texts,” *Bib* 51 (1970):485-98, and Wenham, *Leviticus* 66. For further discussion, see Michael A. Farley, “What is ‘Biblical’ Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship,” *JETS* 51/3 (2008):604-5.

cases, the impetus for the sacrificial act is sin or uncleanness on the part of the supplicant. The goal of acceptance is stated explicitly at the beginning of the description of the sacrificial code, where YHWH tells Moses that the one who offers his burnt offering “shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD” (Lev 1:3). However, the supplicant could not come to the altar disinterestedly. The assumption of the sacrificial system is that the offerer knows that he needs forgiveness and is seeking it honestly and from the heart. Ample evidence in the Writings and the Prophets shows that the attitude of the worshiper’s heart mattered more than the physical performance of the sacrificial ritual (e.g., Ps 51:16-17; Prov 15:8; Isa 1:13-17; Amos 5:21-24).

This leads to a third observation: *God is the one who grants the effective result of the sacrifices*. Speaking of the laws governing offerings, Wenham says, “[M]any of the laws conclude with the remark, ‘the priest shall make atonement for him and he will be forgiven’ (or be clean) (e.g., 4:20, 26, 31; 12:7, 8). The addition ‘he will be forgiven’ (clean) is significant. Mere performance of the rite by the priest is inadequate. God is the one who grants forgiveness and cleansing.”²⁵ Acceptance with God is not automatic upon the execution of the ritual’s physical procedures. This observation underscores the vital truth that the Levitical sacrificial system was an expression of God’s grace—the means by which God’s people could draw near to Him in covenant fellowship and worship. God was not manipulated by the rituals, but responded to them in free generosity. “One cannot totally divorce the act from the result achieved, but the recognition that God is the one who makes the sacrifice effective lends itself quite explicitly to the idea that sacrifice has always been grounded in grace, not ritual”²⁶

Fourth, *the offering consisted of things that were costly to the offerer*. “In the overfed West we can easily fail to realize what was involved in offering an unblemished animal in sacrifice. Meat was a rare luxury in OT times for all but the very rich (cf. Nathan’s parable, 2 Sam. 12:1-6). Yet even we might blanch if we saw a whole lamb or bull go up in smoke as a burnt offering. How much greater pangs

²⁵Wenham, *Leviticus* 27.

²⁶Pierce, *Enthroned* 86. It is widely acknowledged in the Christian tradition that Mosaic sacrifices did not “save” the supplicant—i.e., one did not become a believer by animal sacrifice. Rather, the sacrifices were the faithful expression of the believing heart’s desire to draw near to God in refreshed covenant fellowship. Or, as Rooker succinctly puts it, “It could be said that these sacrifices pertained to the believer’s sanctification rather than justification” (Rooker, *Leviticus* 54). See also Allen P. Ross, “The Biblical Method of Salvation: Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) 174-47, and H. E. Freeman, “The Problem of the Efficacy of Old Testament Sacrifices,” *BETS* 5/3 (1962):73-79. Pierce goes further to say that faithfully practicing the prescribed sacrifices resulted in personal transformation as well, since purity/cleanness was the goal of all of life under the Mosaic covenant. Atonement therefore “involved a life-changing process by which the people sought to preserve fellowship” (*Enthroned* 87).

must a poor Israelite have felt.”²⁷ Even David, as king of Israel, perceived that an offering to God must be costly. Presented with Araunah’s donation of land and materials for sacrifice, David insisted upon paying for them, for “I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing” (2 Sam 24:24). The worshiper approached the altar of YHWH with a significant piece of his earthly wealth—and gave it up completely to God.

Finally, *the offerer came to commune with God in covenant fellowship*. The sacrificial rituals involved not just a simple request for forgiveness of sins—a simple act of “keeping short accounts with God.” The request for and granting of forgiveness was one (critical) part of the overall process of covenant fellowship. Offerings were also a way for the worshiper to celebrate God’s goodness and share that celebration through feasting and rejoicing with other worshipers (e.g., Pss 107:22; 116:17-19). This sense of fellowship with God is clear in the various biblical psalms where the writer is looking forward to “being with” God in the tabernacle or temple precincts (e.g., Psalms 27, 42/43, 84). The worshiper could hardly wait to enter into the special covenant presence of YHWH in YHWH’s own house. So the offerer was not interested only in atonement for sin, but also in other celebratory worship activities.

To summarize, then, OT sacrificial worship involved a sinner offering to God something of value out of a heart of faith, in response to revelation, in order to draw near to God for forgiveness and fellowship. OT worship was sacrificial worship, the conceptual center of which was the atonement of sin by blood sacrifice in order to draw the believing sinner and God closer together.²⁸

Worship as Sacrifice in the NT

It must not be forgotten that the worship environment just surveyed provides the vivid backdrop against which NT worship language is set. Jesus’ disciples, their followers, and the NT authors thought about and experienced worship as the development and fulfillment of the sacrificial system they had practiced until Jesus came. The selective survey that follows seeks to show that the NT presents Jesus as the culmination of OT atoning sacrifices (and of OT worship), and therefore as the sacrificial basis for NT worship.

Christ, the Ultimate Sacrifice

From the earliest direct revelations about Jesus’ life on earth, He is presented as the solution to the problem of unholiness. The angel who announced

²⁷Wenham, *Leviticus* 51.

²⁸This does not exclude the private piety of the OT saint—rather, it assumes it. As mentioned above and attested amply in the Psalms, the OT believer lived life in the knowledge of God’s constant personal attention and covenant faithfulness. It was on this basis that such a person sought to engage with YHWH in sacrificial worship.

Jesus' birth to Joseph said that the baby conceived in Mary would "save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). But how would he do this? The answer of the NT is, consistently and holistically, by fulfilling the OT sacrificial system as the sacrifice to end all such sacrifices.

Sacrificial terminology is applied to Jesus sparingly in the Gospel accounts, but the language is poignant when it appears. At the inception of His earthly ministry, Jesus is introduced by John the Baptist as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36), likely an allusion to the sacrificial role that Jesus would play in His death. Though the Baptist's understanding of his own utterance is widely contested, probably John's words were more pregnant with redemptive significance than even he was aware. He may not have anticipated a suffering Messiah (cf. Matt 11:2-19), but the inclusion by the apostle John of this introduction of Jesus does seemingly show the allusion to OT sacrifice.²⁹

Jesus also used sacrificial imagery to refer to Himself in Matt 20:28 and Mark 10:45, where, chiding his disciples for seeking prominence, He asserted that He came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Referring to Himself as a ransom for others is clearly a way of speaking of His redemptive ministry in terms of atoning sacrifice and likely carries an allusion to Isa 53:5, 6, and 11, where the Suffering Servant bears the sins of many.³⁰

But the clearest cases of Jesus' references to Himself as a sacrifice for sins cluster around the Last Supper. The Synoptics record Jesus' mention of the cup as "the blood of the covenant" (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24) and "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). All three refer to His blood being "poured out," and in Matthew's account Jesus specifies that this pouring out is "for the forgiveness of sins." The reference to the OT sacrificial system is unmistakable, with the phrase "the blood of the covenant" appearing in Exod 24:8 as the Mosaic Covenant is being enacted by blood being applied upon the people.³¹ In the context of the upper room with a company of pious Israelites, blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins must be speaking of an atoning sacrifice—the means of fellowship with God and, above all, an act of worship.

What Jesus instituted on that night He intended to be practiced by His followers after His death. Paul makes this clear in 1 Cor 11:24-26 as he gave remedial instructions to the Corinthian church regarding this most important ritual. He emphasized that the celebration of the bread and cup memorializes the death of Christ, and that this celebration is to be regular: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Moreover, in the

²⁹D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 148-50; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 66-68.

³⁰Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1995) 582, cf. 579-80; cf. Jesus' own identification of Himself with the Servant when, referring to Himself, He quotes Isa 53:12 in Luke 22:37.

³¹*Ibid.*, 773.

previous chapter Paul refers to the taking of bread and cup as a *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*) in Christ's blood and body, the sacrificial giving of which are celebrated in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16). Paul himself drew a direct connection with the animal sacrifices of the Levitical system: "Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?" (10:18). In this stern warning against syncretism, Paul revealed the deep significance of celebrating the Lord's Table: it is a commemoration of—even a mutual fellowshiping in—the sacrificial death of Jesus as the culmination of the OT sacrificial system.³² Here we see in vivid colors the connection between the principle of penal substitution and Christian worship. In fact, in light of the foregoing discussion and given the claims of Bell, McLaren, and others, those who question the penal-substitution nature of the atonement must respond to the following question: Can the Table make much sense at all without the doctrine of penal substitution?³³

Christ, the Sinner's Access to God

Any discussion of Christ as the culmination of the OT sacrificial system would be inadequate without some discussion of the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Hebrews presents the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the New Testament. All the important categories of Old Testament thinking on this subject—sanctuary, sacrifice, altar, priesthood and covenant—are taken up and related to the person and work of Jesus Christ."³⁴ Further, the author of Hebrews relates all this to the worship of the NT church. In what follows we will see the

³²Thiselton's translation of *koinōnia* as "communal participation" is better than "sharing" or "participation," as rendered by many English translations. "*Fellowship* fails to convey the 'vertical' dimension of Paul's meaning, as if to imply that the emphasis fell on the 'horizontal' bonding of a likeminded group." Rather, *koinōnia* here "denotes having an active *common share* in the life, death, resurrection, and presence of Jesus Christ as the Lord who determines the identity and lifestyle of that in which Christians share" (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 761 [italics in the original]; see his broader discussion and bibliography on 96, 752-67). Robertson and Plummer have a related idea in mind when they show concern for "the difference between having a share and having the whole. In Holy Communion each recipient has a share of the bread and of the wine, but he has the whole of Christ" (Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2d ed, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914] 212). This point is important because of the common mistake made by evangelicals, who in their well-intentioned effort to avoid the appearance of sacerdotalism often tend to fall into the opposite error: a kind of bare memorialism that leaves no space for a genuine *koinōnia* in the body and blood of Jesus.

³³Also, the NT doctrines of propitiation (Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:20) and union with Christ (Rom 6:1-10 and throughout the Pauline Epistles) further bolster this connection. Jesus is the sacrifice that averted divine wrath; he is the substitute whose death counts as that of believers and whose resurrection life is granted to them. That is what the Table celebrates; what biblical meaning can it have apart from penal substitution?

³⁴Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* 228. This discussion is especially indebted to Peterson's excellent work on the book of Hebrews.

connection between penal substitution and the church's worship by summarizing the relevant teachings of Hebrews concerning Jesus Christ as the perfect sacrifice and high priest that brings believers to God.

First, the author of Hebrews shows that Jesus is the perfect atoning sacrifice. In chapter 9, the writer begins in verses 1-10 by summarizing the OT worship system in terms of sacrifice and priesthood. Prominent features of this arrangement included the continual offering of sacrifices by priests (v. 6); the necessity of blood sacrifice to gain entrance into the presence of God (v. 7); the symbolic nature of this arrangement until "the present time" in which Christ has fulfilled its imagery (v. 9); and the inadequacy of the old system in that it could not "make the worshiper perfect in conscience" (vv. 9-10).³⁵

Having thus prepared the negative side of the contrast he is developing, the author focuses on Christ as the better sacrifice, the substance that fulfills the shadow. He shows that Christ entered on Christians' behalf as high priest into the presence of God (the "greater and more perfect tabernacle," v. 11, cf. 24) by means of His own blood, which is superior to that of sacrificial animals, and so His entrance was "once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (v. 12). This effective and enduring sacrifice is indeed competent to cleanse the conscience (v. 14).

The writer then emphasizes these same points in a variety of ways. In 9:11-28 the dominant theme is the blood of the covenant, the blood of Jesus being the once-for-all effective blood that cleanses the sinner.³⁶ The key distinction, of course, is that Jesus offers His own blood, whereas the OT priest offered that of an animal (vv. 12, 25 and 10:1-10).

The above is a quick summary, because though various interpretive difficulties exist in these texts,³⁷ the main outline as presented is relatively uncontroversial: Christ is the fulfillment of the OT system of sacrificial worship that pictured the principle of penal substitution. The main point at hand is how all this relates to the worship of the redeemed in the NT.

After expounding on how Jesus is the perfect high priest and sacrifice, the *τέλος* (*telos*) of the OT sacrificial system, the writer turns to exhort the reader in 10:19-25. The actual command is in vv. 22-23: "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith . . . let us hold fast the confession of our hope."³⁸ "The appeal is based on the fact that Christ is the perfected and enthroned high priest, who

³⁵On being perfected in conscience, see especially David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews,'* SNTS Monograph Series (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 135-36.

³⁶Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* 235-37.

³⁷On which see Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 445 ff.; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 211 ff.

³⁸A similar twofold exhortation occurs in 4:14-16.

has entered the heavenly sanctuary by means of his sacrificial death and heavenly exaltation and opened up 'a new and living way' into that sanctuary for us. This challenge brings us to the heart of the writer's concern."³⁹ What the animal sacrifices of the Levitical code provided in shadow, Christ brings in substance—access to and fellowship with God.

But the writer is vivid and emphatic in his language. Christ's provision gives His people boldness (or "complete freedom," as Ellingworth suggests⁴⁰) to approach God. The new and living way Christ has opened is the path of access for His people to "draw near" to God freely and confidently—here, προσέρχομαι (*proserchomai*) is a worship word, as it is typically in Hebrews (4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 11:6; 12:18, 22) and often in the LXX (among many, see e.g., Lev 9:5, 7; 21:17, 21).

Here we see how the perfect substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus provides the connecting point between OT worship and NT worship. The author of Hebrews states it simply in 13:15: "Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." New Testament believers can draw near to God in worship only by means of the "new and living way" that Jesus opened up by offering Himself as the perfect, spotless Lamb of God. Of course, NT believers do not sacrifice Jesus like OT believers sacrificed the animal—Jesus has already done that—but they enter into His sacrifice by faith and are thus brought near to God in worship. In other words, "praise is offered to God through or by means of Jesus . . . just as it is through Jesus (7:25), more specifically, through his sacrifice (9:26), that believers have access to God."⁴¹ So, "no longer in association with animal sacrifices, but through Jesus, the sacrifice of praise [is] acceptable to God."⁴²

There is nothing in the foregoing to limit its application to corporate worship. Although praise is often envisioned biblically as a corporate activity ("magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together," Ps 34:3), it is also practiced individually throughout the biblical narrative. But more comprehensively, Paul exhorts Christians to present their very selves as "a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom 12:1, NET). Using more sacrifice words that are also worship words, Paul shows that the daily activities of the believer are to be sacrificial worship. The writer of Hebrews concurs as he continues in 13:16: "and do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." In other words, Christians are constituted as "a holy priesthood to offer

³⁹Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* 238.

⁴⁰Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 517.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 720.

⁴²Bruce, *Hebrews* 383.

up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).⁴³

Worship in the NT, then, is not fundamentally different from worship in the OT, which (to recap) involved a sinner offering something of value to God out of a heart of faith, in response to revelation, in order to draw near to God for forgiveness and fellowship. The problem is sin; the approach is by faith through sacrifice that atones for sin; the worshiper responds sacrificially in love and gratitude to a holy God who reaches out to him in grace. The key difference in NT worship is that the blood of bulls and goats has been once for all fulfilled and superseded by the blood of Christ, who as the substitute and faithful high priest brings sinners near to God.

Synthesis: Sacrifice, Substitution, Service

“Sacrifice is still absolutely essential to worship, for the sacrificial death of the Lamb that the Father has provided is the basis of salvation, the means of sanctification, the focus of fellowship, and the hope of glory.”⁴⁴ This is the central truth that Christians—a chosen band of living sacrifices—gather around when they assemble as God’s people to worship; the principle that drives them to offer their very selves as devotional sacrifices to God.

True worship in the Bible is consistently the worship of the *redeemed*.⁴⁵ It is not sinners trying to impress God or appease Him on their own. Worship arises from those who know in their heart that they need a substitute to avert the displeasure of their holy Creator. Only one path leads into fellowship with God: a substitute who will stand in the place of sinners. This principle, penal substitution, is pictured in the animal sacrifice and embodied in the divine one. Worship is possible because of what He has done. Therefore, worship is still a sacrifice—of life, praise, thanks, and self-consecration—offered to God through Jesus. Because worshipers come through Jesus, and because His cleansing sacrifice continually qualifies them to draw near to him,⁴⁶ they can draw near with confidence.

Sacrifice, then, is the basis and substance of worship. The penal substitution of Jesus for sinners is to be woven into the worship of God’s people. It is to be pictured in the church’s ordinances and celebrated in her gatherings. Christian worship without the doctrine of penal substitution is, quite simply, oxymoronic. A distaste for violence—much less a fashionable ideology of redemptive nonvio-

⁴³See also Eph 5:2 ff., where Christ’s self-sacrifice is held up as the model for believers to follow; and Phil 2:17, where Paul describes his service to God as a drink offering that is poured out on the sacrifice of the Philippians’ service, which is also called a sacrifice in 4:18. It seems the NT is replete with descriptions of both individual and corporate Christian activity as sacrifice.

⁴⁴Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* 217-18.

⁴⁵Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* 26.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 241.

lence—cannot eviscerate the central truth which constitutes access to God. The sinner's desire for forgiveness without justice cannot overshadow the inexorable truth of the wages of sin. And the central and organizing principle of the atonement cannot be reduced to just another metaphor in the crowd. The recent suppression of the doctrine of penal substitution appears to be an effort to put forward a kinder, gentler gospel. But can there be anything kinder than a God who provides a substitute so that the sinner need not face divine wrath; anything gentler than being brought into the presence of God by the Son who paid the price of access?

This is the Savior the people of God worship today, the once-for-all substitutionary sacrifice to whom an innumerable host will sing with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev 5:12).