
PENAL SUBSTITUTION REVISITED

By J.I. Packer¹

Throughout my 63 years as an evangelical believer, the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross of Christ has been a flashpoint of controversy and division among Protestants. It was so before my time, in the bitter parting of ways between conservative and liberal evangelicals in the Church of England, and between the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now UCCF) and SCM in the student world. It remains so, as liberalism keeps reinventing itself and luring evangelicals away from their heritage. Since one's belief about the atonement is bound up with one's belief about the character of God, the terms of the gospel and the Christian's inner life, the intensity of the debate is understandable. If one view is right, others are more or less wrong, and the definition of Christianity itself comes to be at stake.

An evangelical theologian, dying, cabled a colleague: 'I am so thankful for the active obedience (righteousness) of Christ. No hope without it.' As I grow old, I want to tell everyone who will listen: 'I am so thankful for the penal substitutionary death of Christ. No hope without it.' That is where I come from now as I attempt this brief vindication of the best part of the best news that the world has ever heard.

It is impossible to focus the atonement properly until the biblical mode of Trinitarian and incarnational thought about Jesus Christ is embraced. The Trinitarian principle is that the three distinct persons within the divine unity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, always work inseparably together, as in creation, so in providence and in every aspect of the work of redemption. The incarnational principle is that when the Son took to himself all the powers and capacities for experience that belong to human nature, and began to live through his human body, mind and identity, his sense of being the Father's Son was unaffected, and he knew and did his Father's will, aided by the Spirit, at all times. It was with his own will and his own love mirroring the Father's, therefore, that he took the place of human sinners exposed to divine judgment and laid down his life as a sacrifice for them, entering fully into the state and experience of death that was due to them. Then he rose from death to reign by the Father's appointment in the kingdom of God. From his throne he sent the Spirit to induce faith in himself and in the saving work he had done, to communicate forgiveness and pardon, justification and adoption, to the penitent, and to unite all believers to himself to share his risen life in foretaste of the full life of heaven that is to come. Since all this was planned by the holy Three in their eternal solidarity of mutual love, and since the Father's central purpose in it all was and is to glorify and exalt the Son as Saviour and Head of a new humanity, smartypants notions like 'divine child abuse', as a comment on the cross, are supremely silly, and as irrelevant and wrong as they could possibly be.

¹ Reprinted with permission from *Reformation21. The Online Magazine of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*, 23 (July/August 2007).

As in all the Creator's interacting with the created order, there is here an element of transcendent mystery, comparable to fog in the distance hanging around a landscape, which the rising sun has effectively cleared for our view. What is stated above is clearly revealed in God's own witness to himself in the Bible, and so must be given the status of non-negotiable fact.

Again, the atonement cannot be focused properly where the biblical view of God's justice as one facet of his holiness, and of human willfulness as the root of our racial, communal and personal sinfulness and guilt, is not grasped. Justice, as Aristotle said long ago, is essentially giving everyone their due, and whatever more God's justice (righteousness) means in the Bible, it certainly starts here, with retribution for wrongdoing. We see this as early as Genesis 3, and as late as Revelation 22:18-19, and consistently in between. God's mercy to guilty sinners is framed by his holy hostility (wrath) against their sins.

Human nature is radically twisted into an instinctive yet deliberate and ineradicable habit of God-defying or God-denying self-service, so that God's requirement of perfect love to himself and others is permanently beyond our reach, and falling short of God's standard marks our lives every day. What is due to us from God is condemnation and rejection.

The built-in function of the human mind that we call conscience tells everyone, uncomfortably, that when we have misbehaved we ought to suffer for it, and to that extent conscience is truly the voice of God.

Both Testaments, then, confirm that judicial retribution from God awaits those whose sins are not covered by a substitutionary sacrifice: in the Old Testament, the sacrifice of an animal; in the New Testament, the sacrifice of Christ. He, the holy Son of God in sinless human flesh, has endured what Calvin called 'the pains of a condemned and lost person' so that we, trusting him as our Saviour and Lord, might receive pardon for the past and a new life in him and with him for the present and future. Tellingly, Paul, having announced 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation (i.e. wrath-quencher) by his blood, to be received by faith', goes on to say: 'This was...to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be *just and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Romans 3:2-26, my emphasis). *Just* justification- *justified* justification - through the doing of justice in penal substitution, is integral to the message of the gospel.

Penal substitution, therefore, will not be focused properly till it is recognized that God's redemptive love must not be conceived - misconceived, rather - as somehow triumphing and displacing God's retributive justice, as if the Creator-Judge simply decided to let bygones be bygones. The measure of God's holy love for us is that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' and that 'he...did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all' (Romans 5:8, 8:32). Evidently there was no alternative to paying that price if we were to be saved, so the Son, at the Father's behest 'through the eternal Spirit' (Hebrews 9:14), paid it. Thus God 'set aside...the record of debt that stood against us...nailing it to the cross' (Colossians 2:14). Had we been among the watchers at Calvary, we should have seen, nailed to the cross, Pilate's notice of Jesus' alleged crime. But if, by faith, we look back to Calvary from where we now are, what we see is the list of our own unpaid debts of obedience to God, for which Christ paid the penalty in our place. Paul, having himself learned to do this, testified: 'the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

This text starts to show us how faith in Christ our penal substitute should be shaping our lives today; which will be my final point for reflection. Thirty years ago I wrote an analysis of in-

sights basic to personal religion that faith in Christ as one's penal substitute yields. Since I cannot improve on it, I cite it as it stands.

- (1) God, in Denney's phrase, 'condones nothing', but judges all sin as it deserves, which Scripture affirms, and my conscience confirms, to be right.
- (2) My sins merit ultimate penal suffering and rejection from God's presence (conscience also affirms this), and nothing I do can blot them out.
- (3) The penalty due to me for my sins, whatever it was, was paid for me by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in his death on the cross.
- (4) Because this is so, I through faith in him am made 'the righteousness of God in him', i.e. I am justified; pardon, acceptance and sonship (to God) become mine.
- (5) Christ's death for me is my sole ground of hope before God. 'If he fulfilled not justice, I must; if he underwent not wrath, I must to eternity' (John Owen).
- (6) My faith in Christ is God's own gift to me, given in virtue of Christ's death for me: i.e. the cross procured it.
- (7) Christ's death for me guarantees my preservation to glory.
- (8) Christ's death for me is the measure and pledge of the love of the Father and Son to me.
- (9) Christ's death for me calls and constrains me to trust, to worship, to love and to serve.

(Cited from *Tyndale Bulletin* 25. 1974, pp42-43)

A lawyer, having completed his argument, may declare that here he rests his case. I, having surveyed the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Christ afresh, now reaffirm that here I rest my hope. So, I believe, will all truly faithful believers.

In recent years, great strides in biblical theology and contemporary canonical exegesis have brought new precision to our grasp of the Bible's overall story of how God's plan to bless Israel, and through Israel the world, came to its climax in and through Christ. But I do not see how it can be denied that each New Testament book, whatever other job it may be doing, has in view, one way or another, Luther's primary question: 'How may a weak, perverse and guilty sinner find a gracious God?'; nor can it be denied that real Christianity only really starts when that discovery is made. And to the extent that modern developments, by filling our horizon with the great meta-narrative, distract us from pursuing Luther's question in personal terms, they hinder as well as help in our appreciation of the gospel.

The Church is and will always be at its healthiest when every Christian can line up with every other Christian to sing P. P. Bliss's simple words, which really say it all:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude
In my place condemned he stood,
Sealed my pardon with his blood-
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*