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Next

What is the penal substitution theory

According to the apostle Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the “first things” of the gospel (1 Cor 15:3-4). [1] Christians have debated both of these first things throughout the history of the church. Regarding Jesus’ death, they have debated whether the New Testament teaches penal substitution and (if so) whether penal substitution should be understood as the central atonement model in the New Testament. [2] Recent work on substitution has simply argued for the presence of substitution in the New Testament with specific reference to selected texts in Paul’s letters. [3] In this article, I argue that the New Testament teaches Jesus’ death was a penal substitute for sinners. Elsewhere I defined penal substitution in the following way: Jesus died a violent, substitutionary death to be a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of Jews and Gentiles. By this death, Jesus took upon himself God’s righteous judgment and wrath against the sins of those for whom he died. By dying as their penal substitute, Jesus paid the penalty for their sins, and he therefore both propitiated God’s wrath against their sins and expiated their sins so that the sins of Jews and Gentiles would be forgiven and so that they would be justified by faith, forgiven of their sins, reconciled to God, reconciled to each other, participate in the future resurrection, and saved from God’s wrath. [4] I support the above thesis and definition by analyzing Romans 5:6-10. I make one primary argument from the preceding text to support my thesis. Namely, Jesus died for sinners to justify them by faith, to reconcile them to God, and to save them from God’s eschatological wrath. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF ROMANS 5:6-10 Paul’s remarks about Jesus’ death in Romans 5:6-10 occur in the context of providing a reason why Christians have hope in suffering. In Romans 5:1-5, Paul says Christians have hope in suffering “because we have been justified by faith,” and consequently “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (5:1-2). The theological truth of our right standing before God because of justification by faith in Christ leads Paul to say Christians can “boast” in God when they suffer (v. 3), because suffering produces perseverance (v. 3), perseverance produces tested and proven character (v. 4), and tested and proven character produce hope (v. 5). Paul quickly declares that hope will not put the hopeful to shame in the judgment (v. 5), because all who have love for God through Christ likewise have the Holy Spirit living in their hearts (v. 5). Then, in verses 6 to 10, Paul gives the undergirding reason why those who have been justified by faith have hope and have the Spirit living in their hearts: Christ died for their sins to give them specific saving benefits. JESUS’ DEATH FOR SINNERS AND ITS SAVINGS BENEFITS In Romans 5:6, Paul asserts Jesus died for the weak in the appropriate time while they were “still weak.” The “weak” in verse 6 refers to the “ungodly” in verse 6 and to the “sinners” in verse 8. Humans are conceived in sin because of Adam’s transgression (v. 12), and humans willingly participate in sinful actions (Rom 3:23). Contrary to the person who dies a noble or patriotic death for a righteous or good cause (5:7), Jesus died for “weak” and “ungodly” “sinners” (vv. 6, 8). His death for sinners achieves justification (v. 9), reconciliation (v. 10), and salvation (v. 9) for those for whom he died. In Romans 5:9, Paul infers from his remarks in verse 8 that God’s love for sinners is chiefly seen by means of Jesus’ death for them while they were still in a state of sin. In verse 9, Paul says, “therefore,” future deliverance from God’s wrath is certain “because we have been justified by his blood.” Jesus’ penal substitutionary death is evident here not simply because Paul uses the phrase “for us” when he refers to Jesus’ death, but because Jesus’ sacrificial death “for us” justifies us in God’s law-court by faith and guarantees future deliverance from God’s wrath. Christians have debated justification for centuries. The important point for my thesis is God declares “weak” and “ungodly” “sinners” not guilty. That is, he justifies them by faith because he does not reckon their transgressions against them (Rom. 4:6-8) since Jesus’ blood purchases the justification of all sinners who have faith in Christ (5:9, cf. 3:21-4:25). His death for them, which provides both forgiveness of sins (hence, the reference to blood) and justification (cf. also Rom 3:24-25; 5:9), also guarantees deliverance from God’s future wrath (i.e. salvation) (5:9), because Jesus died for sinners while they were sinners. In the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us...” Or in the words of Romans 8:4: God made Jesus a sin-offering and condemned sin in Jesus’ flesh so that “the righteous requirement of the law would be fulfilled in us who are not walking according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” The concept of salvation (or soteriology) in Paul’s theology is complex. For the purpose of this article, I use the term salvation to refer to God’s future deliverance of his people from his eschatological wrath. Jesus purchased this deliverance by taking upon himself the penalty of those sinners for whom he died so that they would be declared not guilty in the day of judgment because God reckons to their account the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:1-25). His death for sinners then in turn results in God’s deliverance of those for whom Jesus died from God’s final distribution of wrath at the end of history, a wrath that is stored up for all sinners who refuse to trust in Jesus by faith (cf. Rom 2:7-10). Prior to Jesus’ wrath-bearing death for our sins, sinners hated God (Rom 5:10) and God hated them (Ps 5:5). This is why Paul says “we were enemies” prior to our becoming reconciled to God through the death of his son (Rom 5:10). But because Jesus died for our sins and took upon himself our wrath that we deserved, the “weak” and “ungodly” “sinners” and “enemies” of God now experience soteriological peace, which will result in exoneration in God’s law court and deliverance from God’s wrath on the last day (Rom 5:10). Because Jesus suffered God’s wrath for us, those who are justified by faith in Christ will receive the benefits of his saving death both now and in the age to come. CONCLUSION Jesus died for sinners to be their penal substitute. Future justification and salvation have already been realized now in the current age by faith in the lives of every Christian because Jesus died as our penal substitute and because God raised him from the dead (Rom 5:10; cf. 4:24-25). Evidence of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the life-giving and indwelling presence and power of the Spirit living in the hearts of and flowing freely by specific deeds of obedience in the lives of everyone who has been justified by faith (Rom 5:6; 8:1-11; cf. Gal 2:16; 3:13-14; 4:4-6; 5:16, 22). May every preacher far and near preach with absolute clarity the penal substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death for sinners scattered throughout the world. [1] Unless otherwise indicated, translations of biblical texts are my own. [2] For examples, see essays in James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (eds.), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007); J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007). [3] E.g. Simon J. Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015). Gathercole’s work is helpful since he engages some of the challenges to substitution in biblical scholarship and since he responds to each challenge with clear and accessible exegesis of selected texts. He also provides some practical application of the doctrine of substitution to the Christian life. [4] With a few modifications, quote comes from Jarvis J. Williams, “Violent Atonement: The Foundation of Paul’s Soteriology in Romans.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53/3 (September 2010): 579-99. I was raised in the kind of evangelical church that drummed into us as children that Jesus died to save us from our sins. The cross of Jesus was the center of the message at summer camps, holiday Bible clubs, and youth group talks. Jesus had died in my place, bearing my sin and its punishment for me, so I could know God and live with him forever. When I began reading theological books and exploring the faith for myself, I grew suspicious of the beliefs I’d been raised with. I read some thoughtful authors who raised serious questions about the way I’d always understood the cross and salvation. I read Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*. I read Steve Chalke and Alan Mann’s now-famous line in *The Lost Message of Jesus*: Advertise on TGC The cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed. . . . If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies. . . the idea that God was an angry deity, requiring a sacrifice to propitiate his wrath was surely more like an ancient pagan god than the Father of Jesus Christ. I read critiques of Anselm’s theory of satisfaction, which revealed how influential it had been, yet how it was bound to its medieval, Western, forensic categories. More than that, the idea that God is an angry deity—requiring a sacrifice to propitiate his wrath—was surely more like an ancient pagan god than the Father of Jesus Christ. If anything, early church writers apparently steered away from these pagan motifs and spoke about the cross in ways that didn’t focus on God’s wrath, sin’s penalty, and substitution. Such a picture seemed to emerge only as “a courtroom drama of Calvin’s imagination,” as Bradley Jersak put it. It made God out to be angry, his Son a victim, and me a grateful but (slightly shaken) beneficiary of the crucifixion’s violent horrors. The vision of the atonement I’d grown up with seemed horribly distorted, simplistic, and not historically supported. It was time to move on. There and Back Again As I kept reading over the years, however, I sensed my theological revolution had been hasty. Was my childhood understanding of the cross simplistic and naive? Sure—I was a child, after all. So it was easy to read adult-level critiques of Sunday school illustrations and scoff. It was easy to deconstruct my “youth group” faith and proudly ditch it for the enlightenment of my new favorite authors. Was it really a theological revolution if I never had a serious atonement theology to begin with? But was it really a theological revolution if I never had a serious atonement theology to begin with? I hadn’t read much Calvin, Irenaeus, Anselm, or Athanasius. I hadn’t spent much time digging into Scripture either—which should’ve been a warning to me. Doing theology this way has a funny way of exposing us. I began to realize that the vengeful, pagan, loveless god I’d supposedly believed in bore no relation to the real God I had come to trust as a little boy. Just how reliable had my new guides been? Three significant things have shaped my thinking about the death of Christ, and I’m now much closer to where I started than I imagined I might be. 1. Actually Reading the Bible Anyone can point to the “clobber” verses that present Jesus as a substitute for sin’s penalty, such as Isaiah 53:5 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. Plenty of people find ways around these to read the cross another way—and with proof texts, that’s always possible. Yet as I began to read Scripture more deeply, I came to see these texts in the light of Scripture’s great themes and typologies. I could see no other way to interpret them—the animal skins in Genesis 3, the ram in Genesis 22, the Passover lamb and the firstborn sons, the darkness of judgment the night of the exodus from Egypt and the darkness that fell as Jesus died, all the undeniable language of propitiation and the blood on the mercy seat, and so much more. Actually reading the Scriptures in their cohesive entirety, and seeing the Old Testament repeatedly preview the gospel, showed me that Jesus bearing our sin and its penalty is central—not peripheral, and not artificially imposed—to the story’s vast sweep. 2. The Trinity It’s fair to say that some explanations of the cross I heard as a child weren’t Trinitarian. “God” was angry at sin but wanted to find a way to save us, and “Jesus” was a third party who stepped in to make it work. It’s partially true, it’s simplistic, and it can lead to a distortion of the gospel and the Trinity. Yet, none of my Sunday school teachers was theologically trained, and I was 10. A little grace and patience can perhaps be afforded to us all. It’s no use pitting ‘vindictive God’ against ‘innocent Jesus,’ for the one nailed to the tree is himself the sin-hating, sinner-saving God. According to Scripture, all three persons of the Godhead are offended by sin. All three persons are committed to destroying sin and to liberating humanity and the world from the curse. Jesus is the eternal Son, and when he died on the cross, he was there because he’d chosen to lay down his life, a plan devised in eternity. Philippians 2:6-8 clearly shows the pre-incarnate Son of God deciding to take on flesh, become a servant, and go to his death for sinners. His prayer in Gethsemane, contemplating the cup of wrath, is that the Father’s will would be accomplished through his death (Matt. 26:42). It’s no use pitting “vindictive God” against “innocent Jesus,” for the one nailed to the tree is himself the sin-hating, sinner-saving God. The Son’s complicity in his own condemnation as our substitute is one of the gospel’s most glorious truths. Being clear about this truth doesn’t just safeguard our faithfulness; it displays Christ’s beauty and love. 3. The Witness of the Historic Church For all the bluster that penal substitution is a late arrival to the party of atonement theory, I was surprised to read ancient writers offering plain expositions of it. And there were none of the distortions and childish lispings I’d been told to expect from exponents of this theology. For example, here is one of the earliest Christian apologetic texts we have, The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, dated sometime in the second century: 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! In his exposition of Psalm 51, Augustine (AD 354-430) wrote, For even the Lord was subject to death, but not on account of sin: He took upon him our punishment, and so looseth our guilt. . . . Now, as men were lying under this wrath by reason of their original sin . . . there was need for a mediator, that is for a reconciler, who by the offering of one sacrifice, of which all the sacrifices of the law and the prophets were types, should take away this wrath. . . . Now when God is said to be angry, we do not attribute to him such a disturbed feeling as exists in the mind of an angry man; but we call his just displeasure against sin by the name “anger,” a word transferred by analogy from human emotions. Even ancient songs celebrated the wrath-bearing sacrifice of Christ. Written 1,500 years ago, Venantius Fortunatus’s (AD 530-607) beautiful hymn, “See the Destined Day Arise,” begins: See the destined day arise! See a willing sacrifice! Jesus, to redeem our loss, hangs upon the shameful cross; Jesus, who but you could bear wrath so great and justice fair? Every pang and bitter throe, finishing your life of woe?

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