

# Why I have changed my mind about Penal Substitution

I was brought up 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 centre of the message at summer camps, holiday Bible clubs, and youth group talks. The message was that Jesus had died in my place, bearing my sin and its punishment for me, so that I could know God and live with him forever. We kids could recount the story of the train driver whose son had fallen into the machinery; we could draw the bridge diagram; we had seen the big book on the preacher's hand transferred to the other hand a hundred times. If you've been there, you know what I'm talking about.

## Big questions

When I first began reading theological books and exploring the faith for myself, I soon began having suspicions about the beliefs I'd been raised with. I read some very thoughtful authors who raised serious questions about the way I'd understood the cross of Jesus and salvation. I read Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*. I read Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's now famous line,

'The cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence 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...' [\[1\]](#)

I read critiques of Anselm's theory of satisfaction, which revealed how influential it had been, yet how bound to its medieval, Western, forensic categories. More than that, 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. As Brian Zahnd has written more recently:

'God did not kill Jesus. God's action on Good Friday was to surrender his beloved Son to our system... The cross is the end of sacrifice. It's not the appeasement of a vengeful deity but the supreme demonstration of God's everlasting love.' [\[2\]](#)

If anything, the 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 Jesus as a substitute for us. Such a picture seemed to emerge as a 'courtroom drama of Calvin's imagination' as Bradley Jersak has put it.<sup>[3]</sup> It made God out to be angry, his Son a victim, and me a grateful but (slightly shaken) beneficiary of the violent horrors of the crucifixion.

The vision of the atonement I'd grown up with seemed horribly distorted, simplistic, and not even historically supported. I knew it was time to move on.

## There and back again

As I read on over the years, I sensed that my theological revolution had been a bit hasty. Was my childhood understanding of the cross simplistic and naïve? Sure – I was a child after all! It was easy to read adult-level critiques of Sunday School illustrations and scoff at them. It was easy to deconstruct my 'youth group' faith and proudly ditch it for the enlightenment of my new favourite authors. Was it really a *theological* revolution at all if I never had much serious atonement theology in place to begin with? I hadn't read much of Calvin or Irenaeus, Anselm or Athanasius. I hadn't spent much time digging into scripture either, which might have been a warning to me. Doing theology this way has a funny way of exposing us. I began to realise that the vengeful, pagan, loveless god I had supposedly believed in bore no relation to the God I had actually come to trust as a little boy. So just how reliable had my new guides been? How productive was my revolution?

Three significant things have shaped my thinking about the death of Christ since this time, and I've found myself much closer to where I started than I imagined I might.

## Actually reading the Bible

Anyone can point to the 'clobber' verses that teach Jesus' being a substitute for our sin's penalty. Isaiah 53:5, 'The punishment that brought us peace was on him.' 2 Corinthians 5:21, 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.' Plenty of people have plenty of ways of getting around these to read the cross another way, and with prooftexts, that's always possible. Yet, as I began to read the Bible more deeply, I understood these explicit texts in the light of the great themes and typologies of scripture. I felt I could see no other way to interpret them. The animal skins in Genesis 3, the ram of Genesis 22 (and the Lamb that was prophesied), the Passover lamb and the firstborn sons, the darkness of judgment the night of the escape from Egypt and the darkness that fell as the Lord died, all the undeniable language of propitiation and the blood on the Mercy Seat, the reality of God's wrath – his loving, settled, desperately needed response to the evil and wickedness that has filled his beautiful creation.<sup>[4]</sup> Actually reading the Bible — and reading the *whole* Bible together, seeing the Old Testament present the gospel of Jesus as

clearly as the New – showed me that the doctrine of Jesus bearing our sin and its penalty is profoundly central to the vast sweep of the story.

## Thinking about the Trinity

It is fair to say that some explanations of the cross I heard as a child were not sufficiently 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. More care needed! Yet none of my Sunday School teachers were theologically trained, and I was ten years old. A little grace and patience can perhaps be afforded to us all.

What is clear from scripture is that the living God – Father, Son, and Spirit – are all offended by sin. All three Persons of the Trinity are committed to its destruction and to the liberation of the world and humanity from the curse. Jesus Christ is none other than the eternal Son, and when he died on the cross, he was there because he had chosen that course of action as part of his *own* plan of salvation, devised in eternity. Philippians 2:6–8 clearly shows the pre-incarnate Jesus deciding to take on flesh, become a servant, and go to his death for sinners. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, contemplating the cup of wrath, is that the Father’s will would be done through his death (Matthew 26:42). It is no use pitting ‘vindictive God’ against ‘innocent Jesus’, for the one nailed to the tree *is himself* the sin-hating, sinner-saving God. The complicity of the Son in his own condemnation as our substitute is one of the most glorious truths of the gospel. Being clear about this not only safeguards our faithfulness<sup>[5]</sup>, but also displays the beauty and love of the Son of God.

## The witness of the Church

For all the bluster I’d read about penal substitution being a late arrival to the atonement theory party, I was surprised to read in ancient writers some very plain expositions of the doctrine. Here were none of the distortions and childish lispings I’d been ready to expect from exponents of this theology.

The following is from 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!’

Later, Augustine 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.'<sup>[6]</sup> Also,

'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.'<sup>[7]</sup>

Cyril of Alexandria, a theological hero of mine, wrote that 'this chastisement, which was due to fall on sinners... descended on him.'<sup>[8]</sup> Again and again, the theologians of the ancient Church seemed to teach this doctrine (even the ones who I'd heard did not). Somewhere amongst it all, I read the contemporary evangelical classics, John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* and J.I. Packer's *What did the Cross Achieve?* and found them to be entirely consonant with my historical reading.

Perhaps my childhood understanding had been thin. No great surprise there. But in scripture, in theology, and in the history of the Church, I had found the death of Jesus for my sin, in my place. There were tweaks to make to illustrations, care to be taken with language, other concepts to take into account: representation, headship and union, the victory of the cross, and so on. Yet these considerations only strengthened, honed, and enriched the 'good deposit' that was given to me as a child.

## What a Saviour!

This article isn't a careful defence or exposition of the doctrine of penal substitution. It is more of a personal reflection on a long journey. Despite my 'revolution' some years ago, I have come to see this aspect of the death of Jesus as theologically vital, historically attested, and biblically grounded. It is also a jewel in the crown of the gospel. Here, God, in his love, deals with his own holy wrath at our sin, as Father, Son, and Spirit together act to save, justify, and redeem us. In the blood, death, and cross of God the Son is our glory, our salvation, and our only hope.

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

*Philip P. Bliss*

## Endnotes

[1] Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, p. 182–3.

[2] Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, p. 114–115.

[3] Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, p. 268.

[4] It is worth reading Tony Lane's excellent article, [\*The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God\*](#) if you want to consider this more.

[5] Beware Nestorianism and Arianism!

[6] *Exposition of Psalm 51*.

[7] *Enchiridion*, X.33.

[8] *Commentary on Isaiah 53*.



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[Cross, Atonement, Wrath, Judgment](#)