

Your Student Number	1125832			Module number	TH6932
Assignment Title	Is there a biblical basis for a doctrine of penal substitution and can it be explained and defended today?				
Submission deadline date	18/03/2013	Actual Submission date	18/03/2013	Word-count limit	2000
				Your word count	2199
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Submit two copies of the assignment each with a completed cover sheet. One copy is to be submitted electronically by the submission date. The other has to be submitted as a hard copy and must be either posted to the WTC Course Administrator (100-102 Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham, GL52 2NW) or handed in to your Hub Director on the Hub night on or immediately after the submission date.

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Is there a biblical basis for a doctrine of penal substitution and can it be explained and defended today?

What is Penal Substitution?

Penal substitution is a way of thinking about the atonement, and in part developed from the judicial atonement metaphors found in the bible. It carries the idea that when we sin we incur the wrath of the Father against us, and that this sin creates a debt which needs paying. Jesus Christ, innocent since he never sinned, took upon himself that wrath at the cross, and paid off our debt. There he endured the full anger of God on our behalf, and as Calvin thought 'took what we deserve in terms of punishment and hell'.¹ Penal substitution, although not featuring in Eastern Orthodoxy, has become the dominant theory of the atonement in the west since the time of Calvin,² and grew out of Anselm's satisfaction theory.³ It can be heard from the pulpit, in our hymnody, in our media (often negatively) and in conversations.

¹ Lucy Peppiatt, *TH6932 Christian Doctrine Lecture Notes* (Cheltenham: Westminster Theological Centre, 2013), The Atonement: Handout.

² Wayne Northey, "The Cross: God's Peace Work towards a Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 358.

³ Theopedia, "Penal substitutionary atonement", no date given, <http://www.theopedia.com/Penal_substitutionary_atonement>(17 Feb 2013).

Is Penal Substitution Biblical?

Jeffery, Overy and Sach describe the intense debate there has been over the doctrine of penal substitution in recent history.⁴ There are strong feelings on both sides as Jersak, commenting on Garry Williams demonstrates when he sums up thusly '[Williams] is saying that we must break fellowship with those who knowingly reject penal substitution as their doctrine of the atonement'.⁵

What do the gospels say?

Within the Synoptic Gospels Jesus rarely mentions the atonement. In Mark 10, just after Jesus predicts his death, we read of a squabble caused by the request of James and John for positions of high status. Jesus responded to this is by saying 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mk 10:45)

The Greek word for 'ransom' is *lytron* and has to do with 'deliverance or salvation'.⁶ Such a ransom might serve as the price for a slave's freedom. Additionally, the audience of Jesus would have been reminded that in Ex 6:6 God says 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them.'

⁴ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 21-32.

⁵ Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 25.

⁶ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 41.

With all this in mind it would seem that Jesus is saying that his 'life goal' was to go against the prevailing direction of his society (and ours) in becoming a servant, and to thus deliver many from some form of slavery.

Green and Baker point out that metaphors can have a wide range of meaning, and warn against pushing them beyond their intended remit. They suggest that in this ransom metaphor there is no penal substitution and that to conclude an angry God or even the devil is being paid off more likely comes from the 'traditions of ancient Greece or even ancient Israel, but not [from] the Gospel tradition'.⁷

On the other hand Jeffery, Ovey and Sach argue that when set within its context this ransom saying is clearly referring to a substitution. Jesus responds to James and John by saying

You do not know what you are asking, are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I will be baptised? (Mk 10:38)

Their argument rests on Jesus reference to the 'Cup that I drink.' They quote a number of references suggesting that the cup is the cup of 'God's wrath', and that this wrath is against the variously 'wicked of the earth'. Linking verses 38 and 45 they suggest that the ransom 'works' because Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath which was aimed at evil doers, thereby effecting the ransom or deliverance of the slaves.

Jeffery, Ovey and Sach clearly link the wrath of God and the ransom, but are they describing penal substitution as it is widely taught? Whilst there is clearly a ransom motif there is nothing in their argument to speak of my debt being paid on my behalf.

Mark 14 has Jesus saying 'Take: this is my body' (22) and 'this is my blood ... poured out for many' (24). Jeffery et al see a clear connection with the Passover

⁷ Ibid., 42.

lamb, which they say was a penal substitute⁸ making the link that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Passover festival.⁹ Green and Baker put the emphasis differently in that they suggest Jesus is pointing towards his death as the fulfilment of the whole exodus narrative, namely deliverance, rather than just the Passover element.¹⁰ This appears to present a more holistic explanation, but doesn't preclude the penal substitution element. However, I agree with Green and Baker when they say

The line from the scant evidence for an atonement message in Jesus own words to the later atonement theories of Anselm or Luther is neither straight, nor easily drawn.¹¹

Propitiation verses Expiation

Another key passage that those in favour of penal substitution refer to is

... and [we] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom 3:24,25)

The Greek word for propitiation, *hilastērion* is difficult to translate, sometimes being rendered as 'expiation'. However, since these are both words are not in general usage many bible translations avoid both altogether. According to Morris expiation is an impersonal process by which the effects of sin are removed, It is a means of forgiveness, but carries no reference to the anger or wrath of God. On the other hand propitiation is a personal process, God is angry and something needs to be done with that anger.¹² Clearly then, the word used, or at least the meaning to be

⁸ Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 38.

⁹ Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 39.

¹⁰ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 151.

conveyed, is critically important, and Morris states 'as for the general run of Greek literature it means to propitiate'.¹³

Romans 1:18, 2:5 and 3:5 suggest that the wrath of God is active against ungodliness and therefore personally against us in our pre-ransomed state. If this is a correct interpretation of wrath, as those in favour of penal substitution claim, then God's anger is turned towards us and needs to be dealt with. In the light of this they would surely prefer propitiation rather than the "wrath-free" expiation. As Morris puts it 'if we reduce *hilastērion* to expiation what has become of God's wrath?'¹⁴

Was Jesus Punished

The punishment of Jesus on our behalf has been central to teachers like Calvin, Knox and Brunner.¹⁵ However McIntyre states that he

'cannot find any NT statements which out rightly affirm that the death of Christ was a punishment visited upon Jesus rather than upon the mass of sinful mankind.'¹⁶

He goes on to suggest that if you put verses together it is easy to find these doctrines. For example 'For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor 5:21) combined with Rom 6:23 'for the wages of sin is death' would suggest that Christ died the death which was punishment for the sins of others. These two verses though are not saying that God is punishing Jesus, just that if he becomes sin, he will die. This appears to me to be more about 'cause and effect'

¹³ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴ Ibid., 169.

¹⁵ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 44.

¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

than about God smiting Jesus. Given the things Jesus did, in the political and religious atmosphere of his time it was no surprise that people would murder him.

The Awful Gulf

McIntyre states a foundational tenant of the penal substitution model by contrasting the holiness of God with the 'awful gulf of guilt that sin sets'¹⁷ between man and God. Where does this concept of the gulf created by sin actually come from? Time and again we see in the lives of the bible characters that God comes after the sinner - think of Adam and Eve hiding in the garden, David and Nathan the prophet, and Jesus re-instating Peter. The parable of the prodigal son shows us that although the son sinned, the father recognises no gulf and rushes to meet the son, seemingly without any payment being required or punishment being inflicted. Jeffery, Ovey and Sach rightly urge caution at this point, reminding us that we must not lift a small number of passages out of their context and conclude from them that the atonement is superfluous,¹⁸ but added together these examples suggest that there is no gulf caused by sin, at least not in the 'God can't look at sin' way we have understood it.

The Trinity and Penal Substitution

Mat 27:46 records Jesus as saying 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me.' It is clear that Jesus in some way became sin on the cross (2 Cor 5:21), and according to penal substitution the result of this was that God had to withdraw from Jesus. The Father is pitted against the Son, and if the awful gulf exists, then a rift must develop between the trinity because the Father has "done something" to the Son, in this case punished him. Augustine suggested that while the persons of the trinity do not

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 265.

always carry out the same acts, they never act independently.¹⁹ Thus they would argue that all three members of the trinity were always fully involved in the events that unfolded, and it therefore cannot be said that Father was pitted against son.

It is interesting to consider that Jesus was quoting from Ps 22:1 which goes onto say in vs 24

For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he
cried to him.

Could it be that Jesus was pointing his 'audience' towards the triumphant end of the psalm and implying that far from God turning his back on Jesus, he was there answering, even being crucified with him?

Forgiveness and Penal Substitution

Penal substitution requires a payment to be made in order to release forgiveness. Bartlett would suggest that if there was a re-payment it cannot be forgiveness - 'God forgives without payment because that is the nature of forgiveness'.²⁰ Adherents to penal substitution would claim that forgiveness indeed came by the payment of a debt, but since it was He himself as Father who received the payment and He himself who made the payment this does not cancel out the 'free' forgiveness.²¹ This argument seems a little 'thin' to me.

¹⁹ Ibid., 285.

²⁰ Anthony Bartlett, "Atonement: Birth of a New Humanity," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 412.

²¹ Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 265.

Penal Substitution Today

Green and Baker present ‘five constellations’ of metaphors with which to understand the atonement.²² A metaphor, by its nature, cannot present a complete picture of what it describes. Penal substitution is based on the judicial metaphors which rose to prominence around the time of Calvin.

Culture effects how we see things, and will therefore naturally raise some of the metaphors to pre-eminence. So, a metaphor that was highly significant 500 years ago may no longer be so today. Penal substitution is by its nature an individualistic theory – Jesus took my sin, so that I can be forgiven. According to Green and Baker our postmodern culture is moving away from stressing individualism,²³ with for example the rise of the green movement, communal accountancy and social media empowerment against the mega-corporations. Our ideas about justice have changed since Calvin, as have our notions regarding our place within the ‘creation’. They also suggest there are significant populations of people for who guilt is simply not an issue.²⁴ Perhaps it’s time to re-examine the constellations and question if penal substitution deserves its place as the pre-eminent theory of the atonement in the west.

It is hard to defend the violent picture of God that penal substitution presents. Baker, speaking of such theories in a brilliantly provocative article, suggests that

²² Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

‘lurking behind ... is the ghost of a punitive father, haunting the image of forgiving grace by finding the death of his own son an agreeable way to negotiate forgiving the world.’²⁵

I suspect this is how many people today react when they hear about a God who punished his own, innocent son. How we think about God is one of the most important things about a person, and I suspect that Baker’s lurking ghost is quite prevalent.

Bartlett builds further on this by saying that ‘the violent message of salvation works its way out into our society’.²⁶ Is it possible that much of the violence in our western society, some of which appears to be sanctioned by the church, occurs because we have embedded a violent, punitive God into our way of thinking?

Rightly or wrongly our sense of justice is offended. We need to ensure firstly that our theology is biblical, but recognise that cultures through the ages will certainly influence how the bible is interpreted, and therefore be aware that we could have more effective approaches.

Conclusion

As with most doctrines there is biblical evidence to oppose and support penal substitution. However, it is open to interpretation and the theory rests on many suppositions, for example that we have understood the wrath of God correctly, and our own leanings towards a judicial way of looking at things. It is not universally accepted, and there are many other exciting metaphors.

²⁵ Sharon Baker, “The Reception of Reconciliation: Satisfying Justice, Mercy and Forgiveness,” in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 222.

²⁶ Bartlett, *Atonement, Birth of a New Humanity*, 406.

We have lost out on much richness by over stating the judicial metaphor. Perhaps something of the power of other metaphors and models has been lost to us. Penal substitution's focus on the atonement has meant that we have lost the depth of the meaning of the incarnation and identification of Christ with us and us with him. I think McIntyre is correct when he states that 'it is a pity that so much theology tends to be of the "either – or" variety and so little is of the "both-and" character.'²⁷

²⁷ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, 28.

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