

The *SBJT* Forum: The Atonement under Fire

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Thomas R. Schreiner, Bruce A. Ware, and James Hamilton have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are some of the reasons why the doctrine of penal substitution is again coming under attack?

D. A. Carson: A book could usefully be written on this subject. To keep things brief, I shall list a handful of developments that have contributed to this sad state of affairs.¹

(1) In recent years it has become popular to sketch the Bible's story-line something like this: Ever since the fall, God has been active to reverse the effects of sin. He takes action to limit sin's damage; he calls out a new nation, the Israelites, to mediate his teaching and his grace to others; he promises that one day he will come as the promised Davidic king to overthrow sin and death and all their wretched effects. This is what Jesus does: he conquers death, inaugurates the kingdom of righteousness, and calls his followers to live out that righteousness now in prospect of the consummation still to come.

Much of this description of the Bible's story-line, of course, is true. Yet it is so painfully reductionistic that it introduces a major distortion. It collapses human rebellion, God's wrath, and assorted disasters into one construct, namely, the degradation of human life, while depersonalizing the wrath of God. It thus fails

to wrestle with the fact that from the beginning, sin is an offense *against God*. God himself pronounces the sentence of death (Genesis 2-3). This is scarcely surprising, since God is the source of all life, so if his image-bearers spit in his face and insist on going their own way and becoming their own gods, they cut themselves off from their Maker, from the One who gives life. What is there, then, but death? Moreover, when we sin in any way, God himself is invariably the most offended party (Psalm 51). The God the Bible portrays as resolved to intervene and save is also the God portrayed as full of wrath because of our sustained idolatry. As much as he intervenes to save us, he stands over against us as Judge, an offended Judge with fearsome jealousy.

Nor is this a matter of Old Testament theology alone. When Jesus announced the imminence of the dawning of the kingdom, like John the Baptist he cried, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). Repentance is necessary, because the coming of the King promises judgment as well as blessing. The sermon on the mount, which encourages Jesus' disciples to turn the other cheek, repeatedly warns them to flee the condemnation of the gehenna of fire.

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The sermon warns the hearers not to follow the broad road that leads to destruction, and pictures Jesus pronouncing final judgment with the words, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (7:23). The parables are replete with warnings of final judgment; a significant percentage of them demonstrate the essential divisiveness of the dawning of the kingdom. Images of hell—outer darkness, furnace of fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, undying worms, eternal fire—are too ghastly to contemplate long. After Jesus’ resurrection, when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he aims to convince his hearers that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that his death and resurrection are the fulfillment of Scripture, and that God “has made this Jesus, whom you crucified [he tells them], both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). That is every bit as much threat as promise: the hearers are “cut to the heart” and cry, “What shall we do?” (2:37). That is what elicits Peter’s “Repent and believe” (3:38). When Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household, the climax of his moving address is that in fulfillment of Scripture God appointed Jesus “as judge of the living and the dead”—and thus not of Jews only. Those who believe in him receive “forgiveness of sins through his name”: transparently, that is what is essential if we are to face the judge and emerge unscathed. When he preaches to the Athenian pagan intellectuals, Paul, as we all know, fills in some of the great truths that constitute the matrix in which alone Jesus makes sense: monotheism, creation, who human beings are, God’s aseity and providential sovereignty, the wretchedness and danger of idolatry. Before he is interrupted, however, Paul gets to the place in his argument where he insists that God has

set a day “when he will judge the world with justice”—and his appointed judge is Jesus, whose authoritative status is established by his resurrection from the dead. When Felix invites the apostle to speak “about faith in Christ Jesus” (Acts 24:24), Paul, we are told, discourses “on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (24:15): apparently such themes are an irreducible part of faithful gospel preaching. Small wonder, then, that Felix was terrified (24:25). The Letter to the Romans, which many rightly take to be, at very least, a core summary of the apostle’s understanding of the gospel, finds Paul insisting that judgment takes place “on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, *as my gospel declares*” (Rom 2:16). Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that Jesus “rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10). This Jesus will be “revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the *gospel* of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7-10). We await “a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ”—and what this Savior saves us from (the context of Phil 3:19-20 shows) is the destiny of destruction. “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph 2:3), for we gratified “the cravings of our sinful nature . . . following its desires and thoughts” (2:3)—but now we have been *saved* by grace through faith, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph 2:8-10). This grace thus saves us both from sins and from their otherwise inevitable

result, the wrath to come. Jesus himself is our peace (Ephesians 2; Acts 10:36). “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18). But God presented Christ as a propitiation in his blood” (3:25), and now “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (5:1-2).

Time and space fail to allow reflection on how the sacrifice of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is what alone enables us to escape the terror of those who fall into the hands of the living God, who is a consuming fire, or on how the Apocalypse presents the Lamb as the slaughtered sacrifice, even while warning of the danger of falling under the wrath of the Lamb.

This nexus of themes—God, sin, wrath, death, judgment—is what stands behind the simple words of, say, 1 Cor 15:3: as a matter of first importance, Paul tells us, “Christ died for our sins.” Parallel texts instantly leap to mind: “[Christ] was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6). The Lord Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet 3:18). Or, as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15:2, “By this gospel you are *saved*.” To be saved from our sins is to be saved not only from their chaining power but from their consequences—and the consequences are profoundly bound up with God’s solemn sentence, with God’s holy wrath. Once you see this, you cannot fail to see that whatever else the cross does,

it must rightly set aside God’s sentence, it must rightly set aside God’s wrath, or it achieves nothing.

(2) Some popular slogans that have been deployed to belittle the doctrine of penal substitution betray painful misconceptions of what the Bible says about our Triune God. The best known of these appalling slogans, of course, is that penal substitution is a form of “cosmic child abuse.” This conjures up a wretched picture of a vengeful God taking it out on his Son, who had no choice in the matter. Instead of invoking the Triune God of the Bible, this image implicitly pictures interactions between two separable Gods, the Father and the Son. But this is a painful caricature of what the Bible actually says. In fact, I do not know of any serious treatment of the doctrine of penal substitution, undertaken by orthodox believers, that does not carefully avoid falling into such traps.

Consider Rom 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us.” This verse is coherent *only* if Christ himself is God. The cross is not Christ’s idea alone, conjured up to satisfy his bad-tempered Father. The Triune God, our Creator and our Judge, could have, in perfect justice, consigned us all to the pit. Instead, the Father so loved us as to send his Son, *himself God*, to bear our sins in his own body on the tree. Moreover, the Bible speaks of this mission not only in its bearing on us lost sinners, but also in its reflection of inner-Trinitarian commitments: by this mission the Father determines that all will honor the Son, even as they honor the Father (see John 5:16-30): where does this insistence fit into crass language about cosmic child abuse?

(3) In recent years there has been a

lot of chatter about various “models” of the atonement that have appeared in the history of the church: the penal substitution model, the *Christus Victor* model, the exemplary model, and so forth. The impression is frequently given that today’s Christians are free to pick and choose among these so-called “models.” But for any Christian committed to the final authority of Scripture, this approach is *methodologically* flawed. It allows historical theology to trump Scripture. Surely the right question to ask is this: Which, if any, of these so-called “models” is exegetically warranted by the Bible itself? For instance, are there passages in which biblical writers insist that Christ in his death triumphed over the powers of darkness? Are there passages in which Christ’s self-sacrifice becomes a moral model for his followers? Are there passages in which Christ’s death is said to be a propitiation for our sins, i.e., a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God? If the answer is “Yes” to these three options—and there are still more options I have not mentioned here—then choosing only one of them is being unfaithful to Scripture, for it is too limiting. Christians are not at liberty to pick and choose which of the Bible’s teachings are to be treasured.

(4) There is another question that must be asked when people talk about “models” of the atonement. Assuming we can show that several of them are warranted by Scripture itself, the question to ask is this: How, then, do these “models” cohere? Are they merely discrete pearls on a string? Or is there logic and intelligibility to them, established by Scripture itself?

One recent work that loves to emphasize the *Christus Victor* “model”—Christ by his death is victor over sin and death—somewhat begrudgingly concedes that

penal substitution is found in a few texts, not least Rom 8:3. But this work expends no effort to show how these two views of the atonement should be integrated. In other words, the work in question denigrates penal substitution as a sort of minor voice, puffs the preferred “model” of *Christus Victor*, and attempts no integration. But I think it can be shown (though it would take a very long chapter to do it) that if one begins with the centrality of penal substitution, which is, as we have seen, grounded on a deep understanding of how sin is an offense against God, it is very easy to see how all the other so-called “models” of the atonement are related to it. The *way* Christ triumphs over sin and death is by becoming a curse for us, by satisfying the just demands of his heavenly Father, thereby silencing the accuser, and rising in triumph in resurrection splendor because sin has done its worst and been defeated by the One who bore its penalty. Moreover, in the light of such immeasurable love, there are inevitably exemplary moral commitments that Christ’s followers must undertake. In other words, it is easy to show how various biblical emphases regarding the atonement cohere if one *begins* with penal substitution. It is very difficult to establish the coherence if one begins anywhere else.

(5) At least some of the current work on the atonement that is proving so scathing of penal substitution reflects discouraging ignorance of earlier theological study and reflection. Few interact any more with standard works by J. I. Packer, John Stott, and others—let alone classic works produced by earlier generations. But a new generation is rising, forcing readers to take note that historic Christian confessionalism will not roll over and play dead. I heartily commend the recent book

by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (InterVarsity, 2007)

¹This essay is also available in digital form at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.