

Why “Substitutionary Atonement” Remains Crucial

by Michael Horton

When it comes to interpreting Christ’s saving work, everything turns on our view of God’s character and the seriousness of sin. God’s law is not merely a reflection of his will but of his moral nature. God cannot relax his holy will or righteous demands. Death is not merely an example of his displeasure or an arbitrary punishment. Rather, it is the legal sentence for violating his covenant (Ezek 18:4; Rom 6:23).

Yale theologian George Lindbeck says that at least in practice, Abelard’s view of salvation by following Christ’s example (and the cross as the demonstration of God’s love that motivates our repentance) now seems to have edged out any notion of an objective, substitutionary atonement. “The atonement is not high on the contemporary agendas of either Catholics or Protestants,” Lindbeck surmises. “More specifically, the penal-substitutionary versions...that have been dominant on the popular level for hundreds of years are disappearing.”¹ This situation is as true for evangelicals as for liberal Protestants, he observes. This is because justification through faith alone (*sola fide*) makes little sense in a system that makes central our subjective conversion (understood in synergistic terms as cooperation with grace), rather than the objective work of Christ.² “Our increasingly feel-good therapeutic culture is antithetical to talk of the cross” and our “consumerist society” has made the doctrine a pariah.³ Similarly, Princeton Seminary’s George Hunsinger notes, “The blood of Christ is repugnant to the Gentile mind, whether ancient or modern. This mind would prevail were it not continually disrupted by grace.” If it isn’t disruptive, it isn’t grace.⁴ In contemporary discourse on the atonement and justification, Hunsinger judges, “The social or horizontal aspect of reconciliation...eclipses its vertical aspect.”⁵ Gustaf Aulen observed,

¹ George Lindbeck, “Justification and Atonement: An Ecumenical Trajectory,” in Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden, eds., *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde* (Eerdmans, 2004), 205

² *Ibid.*, 205-206. He adds, “Those who continued to use the *sola fide* language assumed that they agreed with the reformers no matter how much, under the influence of conversionist pietism and revivalism, they turned the faith that saves into a meritorious good work of the free will, a voluntaristic decision to believe that Christ bore the punishment of sins on the cross *pro me*, for each person individually. Improbable as it might seem given the metaphor (and the Johannine passage from which it comes), everyone is thus capable of being ‘born again’ if only he or she tries hard enough. Thus with the loss of the Reformation understanding of the faith that justifies as itself God’s gift, Anselmic atonement theory became culturally associated with a self-righteousness that was both moral and religious and therefore rather nastier, its critics thought, than the primarily moral self-righteousness of the liberal Abelardians. In time, to move on in our story, the liberals increasingly ceased to be even Abelardian” (207).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 16-17

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21

The subjective type has connections with Abelard, and with a few other movements here and there, such as Socinianism; but its rise to power came during the period of the Enlightenment... with the disintegration of the 'objective' doctrine....In the Middle Ages it was gradually ousted from its place in the theological teaching of the church, but it survived still in her devotional language and in her art...The theologians of the Enlightenment were the declared enemies of orthodoxy; and a chief object of their assault was just the satisfaction-theory of the Atonement, which they described as a relic of Judaism surviving in Christianity.⁶

At the center of such criticism stood the doctrines of vicarious atonement and justification, which Kant regarded as morally debilitating.⁷

Protestant liberalism repeated the Socinian arguments against any judicial concept of the cross. "And so it came about," notes Colin Gunton, "that various forms of exemplarism took the field, under the impulses provided by the rational criticism of traditional theologies by Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. In place of an act of God centered in a historic life and death, towards the otherwise helpless, the emphasis came to be upon those who by appropriate action could help themselves."⁸

At least implicitly combining various subjective theories already mentioned, this trajectory is especially represented in the work of Jürgen Moltmann and liberation theology but also in much of the popular preaching and teaching in contemporary evangelicalism.⁹ In much of evangelicalism today, the emphasis falls on the question "What Would Jesus Do?" rather than "What Has Jesus Done?" Jesus provides the model for us to imitate for personal or social transformation. Especially in some contemporary Anabaptist and feminist theologies, the theme of God's wrath against sinners is regarded as a form of violence that legitimizes human revenge. Rather than see Christ's work as *bearing a sentence* that we deserved, it is seen as *moral empowerment* for our just praxis (good works) in transforming the world.¹⁰

⁶ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1975), 3, 6, 7

⁷ See for instance Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, op. cit., 65-66, 134. However, for his own part, Kant was not motivated by a suspicion of the concept of divine judgment; on the contrary, the fear of final judgment was meant to motivate moral effort, which the substitutionary satisfaction by Christ was thought to subvert.

⁸ Colin Gunton, "The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices: From Metaphor to Transcendental?", Plantinga and Feenstra, *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame, 1989), 211

⁹ See, for example, Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), esp. 49-80; Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), esp. 100-105.

¹⁰ I interact at length with these views in *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 178-207. On feminist critiques, see Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989). Incorporating these critiques, along with the pacifist perspective of Anabaptism and the cultural theory of René Girard, see Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001).

Like some Arminian theologians in the past, Clark Pinnock dismisses the doctrine as if it were simply a curious and dangerous hold-over from Calvinism.¹¹ However, as Roman Catholic scholar John Knox observes, “The concept of the cross as sacrifice belongs to the very warp and woof of the New Testament, while there is no evidence whatever that the early Church entertained the view that the purpose of Christ’s death was to disclose the love of God.”¹²

The Reformation interpretation of Christ’s work cannot be simply equated with Anselm’s satisfaction theory. Anselm’s formulation properly directs our attention to the objective character of the atonement: *God’s* problem with sin. It is God who has been offended. We need to know something about the distinctive character of this God who has been offended by our sin and the covenantal relationship in which he created us as image-bearers. Sin reaches every nook and cranny of human relationships, but it is treated throughout Scripture as primarily a transgression of God’s command. Sin’s character is not sufficiently appreciated when it is reduced simply to broken lives and relationships between human beings or even to the individual’s subjective sense of anxiety, guilt, and alienation from God. Apart from Christ’s saving work, we are objectively enemies of God and subject to his just condemnation.

Nevertheless, the Anselmian interpretation has certain exegetical and doctrinal weaknesses. Louis Berkhof explains, “The theory of Anselm is sometimes identified with that of the Reformers, which is also known as the satisfaction theory, but the two are not identical.”¹³ While Anselm grounds the atonement in the need to satisfy God’s offended *dignity*, Reformation theology recognized that it was God’s *justice* that was at stake. There is no room in Anselm’s theory for Christ meriting life for us by his active obedience or for suffering the penalty for our sin; only the offer of a tribute that more than compensated for human offence—“and this is really the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance applied to the work of Christ.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Reformed theology has faulted the theory for reducing the atonement to a commercial

¹¹ For example, John Wiley refers to “The Penal Satisfaction Theory, generally known as the Calvinistic theory,...” (*Systematic Theology* [New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892], 241). Pinnock observes that his adoption of Arminianism led him to reject the classical doctrine of the substitutionary atonement: “Obviously it caused me to reduce the precision in which I understood the substitution to take place...It caused me to look first at the theory of Anselm and later of Hugo Grotius, both of whom encourage us to view the atonement as an act of judicial demonstration rather than a strict or quantitative substitution as such....It is my strong impression that Augustinian thinking is losing its hold on present-day Christians. It is hard to find a Calvinist theologian willing to defend Reformed theology, including the views of Calvin and Luther, in all its rigorous particulars now that Gordon Clark is no longer with us and John Gerstner is retired.” Pinnock concedes that his changes are part of a growing accommodation to the secular mind: “We are finally making peace with the culture of modernity” (“From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology” in Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 23, 26, 27).

¹² John Knox, *The Death of Christ: The Cross in the New Testament History and Faith* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 145. Of course, Christ’s death does disclose God’s love, more than any other divine work. However, it does so precisely because its purpose is not only to disclose or reveal God’s love but to save sinners by God’s loving movement toward us in Jesus Christ.

¹³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 385

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 386

transaction between God and Jesus Christ without any treatment of its communication to sinners.¹⁵

Calvinists have always affirmed that the nature and effects of Christ's saving work cannot be reduced to *solely* a substitutionary sacrifice that brings forgiveness of sins. Recognizing the vastness of sin's effects, Reformed theology interprets Christ's saving work as including the recapitulation of Adam's disobedience, fulfilling all righteousness in our place as our federal head. "In short," noted Calvin, "from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."¹⁶ Atonement cancels debts, but justification raises us upright in God's presence, with Christ's righteousness credited to our account. Atonement bears away our guilt, but justification gives us that positive standing in God's court so that we are not only forgiven but wholly acceptable, righteous, holy, and pleasing to God for Christ's sake. Therefore, rather than accept a false choice between a substitutionary death and a saving life, there is much in the Irenaean theory of recapitulation that belongs to the warp and woof of vicarious substitution itself. Christ's penal substitution is not the whole of Christ's work, but without it nothing else matters. Therefore, his incarnation and obedient life are as necessary as his voluntary death. Furthermore, Christ's death conquers the powers of Satan, evil, and death that hold this present age in bondage, and his saving work encompasses the resurrection of ascension, and his return to make all things new.

Reformed theology has always encouraged a richer and more integrated understanding of Christ's saving work that encompasses his incarnation, obedient life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection. However, this tradition has recognized that Christ's victory over the powers of evil and the cosmic renewal that will be consummated when Christ returns depend on the success of his vicarious satisfaction of God's justice. In Christ's cross, the love and the righteousness of God are equally revealed in the triumph of grace. After all, Satan and his demonic forces, including death, hold sway only as long as there is a legal basis for God's own case against us. In Colossians 2:13-15, the *locus classicus* for the *Christus Victor* view, Christ's conquest over the principalities and powers is based on his having borne our debt for violation of the law, nailing our debts to his cross. Clearly, then, far from being an alternative, Christ's victory over the powers is based on its character as penal substitution. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 15:53-56 the gift of immortality is attributed to Christ's having taken away the legal basis for death's dominion: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁷

The truth in these other models is therefore not only affirmed but integrated into Reformed treatments of Christ's atonement. However, these other aspects can only be true because Christ has fulfilled all righteousness and borne the entire sentence of the law's judgment

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5

¹⁷ I explore this cosmic-eschatological aspect in *Covenant and Salvation* (Louisville and London: WJK, 2007), 289–302.

in our place. That is what these passages clearly affirm. Sin is not merely on the surface of things: following Adam's negative example. Sin is not merely negative behaviors that need to be reformed; it is a condition from which we cannot extricate ourselves and it incurs a penalty that a just and righteous God must execute. Death results from sin and sin is defined by the law. It is the law's sentence that must be reversed if we are to share in everlasting life. The legal issue must be resolved if the symptoms of the curse are to be lifted.

Therefore, the doctrine of penal substitution has always been at the heart of Reformed (as other) accounts of Christ's redemptive work. Briefly defined, this work is *penal* not chiefly as punishment for God's offended dignity, but because God's holy justice requires payment of the debt incurred against his covenant law. It is *substitutionary* because someone else, namely, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, bears the sanctions (curses) of this law in our place.

Thus, reconciliation is not first of all subjective but objective. Because God can now legally forgive and justify the ungodly—in other words, is objectively reconciled to the world—he can simultaneously reconcile the world to himself (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:19-20). Other New Testament terms employed for this sacrifice (*lutron* and *antilutron*) as well as the prepositions *peri*, *huper* and *anti* (in the place of) underscore the substitutionary, vicarious nature of this sacrifice. Martin Hengel observes that “dying for” is a Pauline formula rooted in the earliest Jerusalem community (cf. Acts 6:13). The Jewish council accused Jesus, Stephen, and Paul of attacking the Temple, which suggests, according to Martin Hengel, that the heart of the church's earliest proclamation was “the death of the crucified Messiah, who had vicariously taken upon himself the curse of the Law, had made the Temple obsolete as a place of everlasting atonement for the sins of Israel....” “Therefore the ritual Law had lost its significance as a necessary institution for salvation.”¹⁸ Apart from the notion of appeasement of God's wrath, the joyful announcement, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29) is inconceivable. It is the sinless substitute for the sinful people that is of central importance in the biblical doctrine of atonement (Mt. 26:28; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24, 3:18, etc.).

It is not only the love of the Father, but of the Son, that secures this substitution. In Isaiah 53, Yahweh is the one who offers up the Servant on behalf of the people. And the Good Shepherd himself says that *he* lays down his life for the sheep, even adding, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (Jn 10:18). While those involved in carrying out the execution, both Jews and Gentiles, can be blamed in one sense, ultimately they did “whatever [God's] hand and [God's] plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:28). As “a lamb without defect or blemish,” Peter declares, “He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake” (1 Pet 1:20-21). That God's wrath required punishment underscores his justice, but the fact that he himself gave what was required in the place of our punishment underscores his merciful love. And in both cases it is God who gives up his Son to the cross and the Son who gives himself up in the Spirit.

¹⁸ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 36-8, 49

Renewed debate concerning Christ's vicarious substitution has occasioned a fresh stream of helpful articulations of this central truth. In fact, I have the pleasure of joining a number of evangelical speakers in New York City, August 4-5. It's called the John 10:16 Conference and registration is still open. See this link for more information: www.john1016conference.com.