

Rethinking the Logic of Penal Substitution¹

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Introduction

The Christian understanding of the atonement vexed human minds from the start. The apostle Paul records that the crucifixion of Christ, commonly taken to be central to the atonement, was a “stumbling block” to the Jews and “foolishness” to the gentiles. But he goes on to claim that it was “the power of God and the wisdom of God” to those called.² It is my assumption that while the doctrine can certainly be perceived as a stumbling block or as foolishness, its actual nature displays the power and wisdom of God. The problem is to explicate exactly how this is so. More precisely, the problem of the doctrine of the atonement is to provide a rationally defensible explication of how Christ’s person and work are efficacious for the salvation of human persons.

I will begin this paper with a brief overview of four historically noteworthy attempts to provide such an explication, and then turn to Richard Swinburne’s reformulation of one of these. I will point out a weakness of Swinburne’s approach, which is avoided on a modified theory of penal substitution.

Four Historically Dominant Theories

The New Testament possesses both a unity and diversity when it comes to its atonement teachings. There is agreement in the univocal proclamation that Christ is *the* savior of humanity, but difference in the ways this salvific work is described. For instance, Christ is said to be a “ransom” for many (Matt. 20:28); he “saved” sinners from the “wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9); he “reconciles” the world to

¹ I would like to thank Doug Geivett, John Hare, Jeff Jensen, Michael Murray, Alicia Porter, and Richard Swinburne for helpful comments relevant to this essay.

² I Corinthians 1:23-24. Some take the longer passage in which these verses are a part to be a biblical argument against philosophical inquiry into the nature of revealed truth. I find this interpretation erroneous for reasons I cannot go into here.

God (II Cor. 2:19); he “redeemed” humanity (Gal. 3:13); he is the “mediator” between God and humans (I Tim. 2:6); he makes “propitiation” for sins (Heb. 2:17); and he is the perfect “sacrifice” for sin (Heb. 9:26). Since there is no early orthodox formulation of the atonement which authoritatively synthesizes these and other relevant passages, the various biblical ideas have provided the theological fodder for the construction of a variety of atonement schemes. Here I will briefly outline the four dominant theories in church history.³

The ransom theory, put forth by such early fathers as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, was the first detailed account of the atonement.⁴ Due to a rightful emphasis upon Jesus’s own claim to be a “ransom for many” as well as a vivid awareness of the reality of evil, the ransom theorists saw Christ as delivering humanity from the powerful foes of sin, death, and Satan by giving up his life as a ransom paid to Satan.

Origen asserts of Christ:

To whom gave He His life “a ransom for many”? It cannot have been to God. Was it not then to the evil one? For he held us until the ransom for us, even the soul of Jesus, was paid to him, being deceived into thinking that he could be its lord, and not seeing that he could not bear the torment of holding it.⁵

Gregory of Nyssa initiates the use of bait and hook metaphors as a means to explain the theory.⁶ Christ’s perfect human life is the bait which lures the ravenous fish (i.e. Satan) to turn over to God his rightful possession of sinful humanity in exchange for the possession of Christ. But Christ’s divinity is the hook veiled beneath his humanity which snares Satan and crushes him in the resurrection. Since Satan’s dominion over fallen humanity kept humans in bondage to sin and death, the overcoming of Satan entails the vanquishing of these forces as well.

While the ransom theory clearly presents a mechanism for how the life, death, and resurrection of Christ accomplishes salvation, it has been consistently rejected since Anselm. This is largely due to the

³ For an overview of these and other theories see L.W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: University Press, 1920).

⁴ For more on this theory, see Grensted, 32-55; Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1953) 32-76.

⁵ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, xvi.8. As quoted in Grensted, 38.

⁶ See Grensted, 39-44.

questionable supposition that Satan had just rights over fallen humans, as well as doubts that God would deceive Satan.

In *Why God Became Man*, Anselm of Canterbury proposes several objections to the ransom theory which are summed up in his statement, “Finally, just as there is no injustice whatsoever in a good angel, similarly there is absolutely no justice in a bad one. There was nothing in the devil, therefore, which made God obliged not to use his mighty power against him for the purpose of liberating mankind.”⁷ Since God could have justly overthrown the devil, the notion of Christ’s life being a ransom paid to Satan loses its rational force.

In its place Anselm develops the satisfaction theory of the atonement positing Christ’s obedient suffering and death as the necessary satisfaction of the debt sinners owe to God.⁸ Anselm argues that humans have not rendered to God the honor due him, and thus, are in a position of debt. Justice demands that God punish human debtors with eternal death unless adequate satisfaction is provided. Anselm writes, “It is a necessary consequence, therefore, that either the honour which has been taken away should be repaid, or punishment should follow.”⁹ The problem is that God’s creatures already owe God perfect obedience, and so, they cannot engender any positive merit to restore the honor they have taken. But if punishment occurs, then all humans will be eternally separated from God, which would be a state unbecoming God. So it is necessary that satisfaction be made. And yet, while only humans ought to make satisfaction, only God is able to make it. Thus, writes Anselm, if “no one can pay except God, and no one ought to pay except man: it is necessary that a God-Man should pay it.”¹⁰ The obedient suffering and death of Christ is of such great worth that it restores the dignity owed to God, and thus makes possible the forgiveness of sins.

⁷ Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” in Brian Davies and G.R. Evans, eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 274/I.7.

⁸ For more on Anselm’s view, see Robert S. Franks, *The Work of Christ* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1962) 126-141; Steven S. Aspengren, “In Defense of Anselm,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990) 33-45.

⁹ Anselm, 286/I.13.

¹⁰ Anselm, 320/II.6.

Of the many objections that have been proffered against Anselm's theory, there are two that often reappear. The first is that there is absent from Anselm's account a delineation of the principle of justice which necessitates God's requiring either satisfaction or punishment in order to forgive. Second, granting this necessity, there is some question as to how Christ's suffering and death is an appropriate satisfaction of the debts sinners owe to God. Peter Abelard, Anselm's contemporary, puts the essence of these objections poignantly:

Indeed, how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain - still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!¹¹

In order to avoid this troubling outcome, Abelard emphasized the subjective effects of the work of Christ in his explication of the atonement. In so doing, he initiated the third dominant atonement theory, viz. moral exemplarism.¹² The essence of this theory is that the cross is solely an exemplification of God's love, which serves to inspire others to love God in return. There is no objective mechanism that secures salvation, rather, it is purely the manifestation of God's love that subjectively influences sinners to turn to God.

But while the cross of Christ presumably bespeaks the love of God, the question for atonement theorizing is how it does so. If there is no good purpose for Christ's voluntary suffering and death as regards salvation, then there is no basis for it demonstrating God's love. A theory which provides an objective purpose for the crucifixion is needed to ground the subjective influence Abelard emphasized. The Reformer's theory of penal substitution endeavors to furnish such an account.

¹¹ Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," Gerald E. Moffatt, trans., in Eugene R. Fairweather, ed., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 283.

¹² For more on Abelard's view, see Grensted, 103-110; Philip L. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: 'Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It,'" in Eleonore Stump, ed., *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) 281-300.

The theory of penal substitution, as presented by Calvin, dissolves Anselm's disjunction of 'satisfaction or punishment' in favor of the sole necessity of punishment.¹³ Calvin writes, "for God's wrath and curse always lie upon sinners until they are absolved of guilt. Since he is a righteous Judge, he does not allow his law to be broken without punishment, but is equipped to avenge it."¹⁴ Since the just punishment for sin is eternal damnation, the demands of God's justice must be met in God's forgiveness of guilty sinners. Hence, the guilt of sinners is transferred to the innocent Christ and he vicariously suffers the punishment due sinners, thereby appeasing God's wrath and satisfying his justice.

But seeing the cross as fulfilling necessary punishment rather than necessary satisfaction does little to answer the objections posed earlier for the satisfaction theory. There still appears to be no justification for the necessity of God exacting punishment before he is able to forgive. And, given this strict view of the necessity of punishment, it is difficult to conceive how the punishment of Christ instead of sinners suffices the demands of justice. One sinner's necessary punishment of eternal damnation (let alone millions of sinners' necessary punishment) does not appear to be the kind of penalty that can be transferred to another.

Theoretical Quandaries: Myth, Mystery, or Rational Investigation

How should one respond to the seemingly intractable problems that face each of the four atonement theories presented? One might decide that the Christian doctrine of the atonement is hopelessly implausible and that the truth about the conditions of salvation lie elsewhere than in the atonement myths generated by traditional theology.¹⁵ Or one might maintain the traditional understanding of salvation through Christ while relegating the actual nature of the atonement to the realm of metaphor and mystery.¹⁶

¹³ For a more on Calvin's view, see Franks, 333-347; Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1983).

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans. (London: James Clarke and Co., 1957) Book II.16.1.

¹⁵ For example, see John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993) 112-126.

¹⁶ For example, Thomas F. Torrance considers the atonement an "ineffable mystery." See Torrance's *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

I believe there are difficulties and dangers with both of these responses, but I will reject them both here for the single reason that they are default positions to be taken after one has exhausted rational investigations into the nature of the atonement. If there are still moves to be made in thinking more clearly about the atonement, then it is far too early to reduce the doctrine to either myth or mystery. Hence, to continue in the long tradition of careful reflection on the possible rationale for Christ's atoning work is the best response to the array of atonement theories.¹⁷

Rethinking Satisfaction

Of the four theories considered above, the satisfaction and penal substitution theories have received the greatest amount of attention by contemporary philosophers and seem to offer the most hope for the development of a rationally defensible atonement scheme.¹⁸

But, as presented earlier, Anselm's version of the satisfaction theory is problematic. The principal worry pertains to the grounds for it being necessary that God receive either full satisfaction for human sins or else deliver full punishment in order to justly forgive. Assuming that sin is like defaulting on a debt humans owe to God, then it seems God would have a right to collect on those debts. But it also appears consistent with divine justice for God to forego his right and freely forgive. Anselm needs to explain why this merciful option is unavailable to God.

The explanation Anselm gives is that forgiveness without repayment or punishment would be intolerable in God's morally ordered universe.¹⁹ But how so? Human persons often forgive without demanding satisfaction or punishment, especially when the wrongdoer is apologetic and repentant, and this

¹⁷ Of course, the nature of the atonement might still be somewhat of a mystery at the end of the day. Rational investigation into the nature of reality, including theological reality, while capable of getting one to the truth about things, at times only gets one to the best approximation of that truth. So while the precise nature of the atonement may not be known with certainty, there are nevertheless better and worse models of this reality.

¹⁸ Both of these theories mainly emphasize the relevance of Christ's death to the forgiveness of sins. While this narrow focus is beneficial for the purpose of analysis, it is also perilous in that it seemingly reduces the gospel to a message of the remission of sins. Certainly there is much more to salvation than the forgiveness of sins and much more to Christ than his sacrificial death. On this point I am in complete agreement with Dallas Willard's critique of myopic atonement theories. See Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998) 42-50.

¹⁹ Anselm, 286-287/Book I.13.

does not appear to be morally egregious. There is seemingly no moral principle available which would ground Anselm's position that either satisfaction or punishment is a *necessary* precursor to divine forgiveness.

This worry can be overcome though with a slight modification of Anselm's view. For if it is not necessary that God receive full satisfaction, but only good that he receive some satisfaction, then some sense could be given to the idea that God mercifully accepts the crucifixion as a sufficient payment for the debt of sin. Swinburne provides just such an account of the atonement and in so doing goes some way towards buttressing the satisfaction theory.²⁰

Swinburne argues at length for an understanding of forgiveness between human persons which involves the process of repentance, apology, reparation, and penance. Swinburne writes that these four components are "all contributions to removing as much of the consequences of the past act as logically can be removed by the wrongdoer."²¹ When a wrongdoer intentionally harms another, Swinburne contends that the wrongdoer ought to repent and apologize for his offense. To repent is to own privately the wrong act and resolve to one's self not to act in such a way again, while to apologize is to express publicly this inner resolution. It is good that the victim withhold forgiveness until the wrongdoer repents and apologizes, for to forgive without this would be to treat the situation without due moral seriousness.

In certain cases Swinburne holds that it is good for forgiveness to be withheld until reparation and penance are provided as well. In reparation the wrongdoer seeks to repair the damage done to the victim as much as is logically possible. In penance the wrongdoer goes beyond what is required in reparation and gives a gift to the victim as an attempt to show that his previous steps towards reconciliation were deliberate and serious. Requiring the acts of reparation and penance for forgiveness is good in that it treats the wrongdoer as a responsible agent and takes the harm done and its consequences as seriously as they can be taken.

²⁰ Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). For an extended treatment see Philip L. Quinn, "Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Christian Redemption," in Alan G. Padgett, ed., *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 277-300.

²¹ Swinburne, 81.

Swinburne applies this general view of human forgiveness to the divine/human relationship. The idea here is that human sinners have acquired guilt before God, which is like being in debt, in failing to live their lives well. Swinburne argues that it would be good of God to forgive repentant and apologetic sinners their debt of guilt without requiring any further satisfaction. But it is also good of God to require reparation and penance in order to take the wrongdoer and his act with due seriousness. The problem is that it is difficult for sinners to provide substantive reparation and penance, for they owe God good acts anyway. So while God is free to choose any supererogatory act as a fulfillment of substantive reparation and penance, it is good of God to provide this through Christ's supererogatory life and death. For it was fitting for a life lived perfectly to be offered as reparation and penance when the wrong done was a life lived imperfectly. So, Christ offered up his life as a sacrifice to the Father as a means of reparation and penance for human persons. When sinners combine their repentance and apology with pleading the atoning work of Christ as a means of reparation and penance, God forgives them their sins and their guilt is removed.

Swinburne's view is an improvement on Anselm in that it replaces the necessity of satisfaction with a cogent moral framework in which repentance, apology, reparation, and penance are good as conditions for forgiveness. But this otherwise plausible move generates a weakness. On Swinburne's theory God could freely choose any valuable act to serve as reparation and penance. God could have required merely Christ's valuable life for this purpose without requiring the crucifixion. Since the goods obtained by Christ offering reparation and penance on behalf of sinners could be accomplished without his suffering and death, it is implausible to think that a good God would require such an event for forgiveness.

Of course, there might be some other good which the cross served which made it a valuable act, and thus, rendered it capable of being a part of the reparation and penance offered to God on behalf of sinners. But Swinburne does not suggest what this other good may be, and this is worrisome.²²

²² Swinburne does maintain that Christ's life and death are a peculiarly appropriate means for reparation and penance in that they make up a perfect human life offered up for persons who led ruinous lives. Swinburne, 157. But, first, why is suffering and death by crucifixion a part of a perfect human life? And second, even if it is, I question whether such a result would by itself justify God's requiring the crucifixion. Wouldn't it have been better for God to provide substantive reparation and penance through Christ's meritorious life alone and leave the whole mess of the crucifixion out of it?

Yet even if such a good is developed, God's choice of conditioning his forgiveness on the crucifixion in particular would be for an arbitrary reason.²³ For, on Swinburne's view, there is nothing about Christ's suffering and death which adds to the effectiveness of Christ being the means of substantive reparation and penance. Of all the valuable acts of Christ that God could have chosen as a means of reparation and penance, there is no reason given why God chose the suffering and death of Christ in particular. This arbitrariness forges a rift between the cross and the forgiveness of sins. On Swinburne's view, the reason for the crucifixion is not the forgiveness of sins. The notion that "Christ died for our sins" must be taken to mean that Christ died for some other good purpose besides the forgiveness of sins which then makes his death suitable as a means for such forgiveness. There is nothing about the cross taken apart from God's choice to condition salvation upon it which has any meaning or significance pertaining to the forgiveness of sins. This disconnection as well as the ultimate arbitrariness of the cross weakens the explanatory force of Swinburne's theory. What is needed is a theory that avoids the Anselmian problems as Swinburne does, and yet intimately connects the crucifixion with the forgiveness of sins.

Rethinking Penal Substitution

On the theory of penal substitution the crucifixion of Christ is morally necessary as punishment for sins.²⁴ But, as with Anselm, there is no clear justification of why it is that God must punish sinners and cannot simply forgive them. God has the right to demand full punishment, but there is seemingly no moral necessity obligating him to exercise that right.

Yet, even if some divine mystery makes punishment necessary, the additional problem arises as to how it is that the punishment of Christ suffices for the debt sinners owe. It is difficult to get away from the idea that the strict justice of morally necessary punishment would also demand that the guilty party pays his

²³ In this instance Swinburne is more Scotist than Thomist in his theory of the atonement in that the crucifixion is chosen arbitrarily rather than for a fitting reason. For a discussion of this difference between Aquinas and Scotus see Grensted, 158-163.

²⁴ Calvin thought that the necessity of the crucifixion was conditional on God's decree, but later proponents of the penal theory clearly take the punishment of Christ to be necessary in an absolute sense. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 368-370.

or her own debts. It has been suggested that God was lenient in mercifully allowing Christ to be the just substitute for the penalty due to others. But then one wonders why God could not have been lenient in withholding such severe punishment altogether? Is God lenient enough to let sinners escape their own punishment, but not lenient enough to let Christ avoid the pain and anguish of the cross?

I think the best response to these troubles is to maintain that God did exercise leniency in letting Christ take the punishment due sinners, and indeed, that he could have withheld punishment altogether, including the punishment of Christ. But God didn't do the latter because it was good of him to punish Christ as a substitute for sinners. On this modified theory of penal substitution, it is good that God punish sinners (not necessary), and good that Christ take the punishment due sinners as a condition of God granting forgiveness (not necessary that he do so). It remains the case that salvation is necessarily through Christ, but this necessity is conditioned upon God's good decision to offer salvation only through the person and work of Christ.

Such a view of the crucifixion connects the nature of Christ's atoning work with the forgiveness of sins. It is not just any valuable act that Christ performs upon which forgiveness is based, but it is Christ's taking the penalty of human sins upon which forgiveness of those sins is based. The punishment of Christ is a fitting condition for the forgiveness of sins. So this view avoids the problem I pressed against Swinburne as well as the main objections to the traditional penal substitution view.

There are three main features of modified penal substitution. The first is the claim that punishment is not necessary for the forgiveness of sinners. There are many reasons to think this. First, there is a strong leaning in church history towards the view that God could have affected atonement for sins in any way that he pleased, but that the way he did was fitting for this or that reason. Almost all of the early church fathers, including Augustine, and the majority of mediaeval theologians, including Aquinas, took this line.²⁵ Second, that God is free to forgive without punishment squares with widespread moral intuition and moral experience that forgiveness without punishment is not only possible, but virtuous.

²⁵ For the point about the church fathers, see Grensted, 54. For Augustine, see *De Agone Christi*, c.xi; *De Trinitate*, xiii.10. And for Aquinas, see *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.46.2 ad 3.

Third, a traditional Christian belief is that God is sovereign over all things, and while there are some logically impossible things that even a sovereign God cannot do, it seems odd that one of these impossibilities is forgiveness without punishment when humans do this regularly. In fact, Jesus taught that persons should forgive without demanding recompense, and more significantly, he practiced this teaching in his own life.²⁶ Finally, I will simply have to assert that I do not find the theological arguments in support of the necessity of punishment compelling.²⁷ So I propose that it is a reasonable shift to maintain that divine punishment of sinners is not morally necessary for forgiveness.

The second claim of modified penal substitution is that God is just and has good reasons to withhold his forgiveness until sinners receive some punishment. I say ‘some’ punishment because it is not my contention here that God is just and has good reasons to punish sinners for eternity in hell. What I will assume is that God is just to withdraw his providential care from rebellious sinners and abandon them to their ways for a time. At the very least, sinners deserve punishment of this kind for their wrongs against God and their fellows.²⁸ But what reasons might there be for God to execute this kind of punishment upon repentant and apologetic sinners?

First, as Swinburne holds, it is good of persons to demand substantive reparation and penance from repentant and apologetic wrongdoers. This takes the harm done and the process of reconciliation seriously. One way to accomplish this good is to punish wrongdoers. Punishment, then, is the infliction of harm for the intended purpose of exacting reparation that is owed for wrongdoing. Punishment is particularly appropriate as the means of reparation and penance when the wrong done is such that the damage cannot be repaired by positive means (e.g. rape or adultery). Punishment can take seriously the

²⁶ See Matthew 5:38-48, Mark 2:5, Luke 7:40-50, Luke 15:20-24, etc.

²⁷ The biblical proof texts for the *necessity* of divine punishment seem lacking. The fact of divine punishment as a penalty for sin is clear in Scripture. But it does not follow from the fact that God has and will punish sins that it is morally necessary that he do so. What does follow is that it must be good of God to punish sins. For an example of the type of argument I do not find compelling see Berkhof, 370-372.

²⁸ I largely assume here that punishment of wrongdoing is justified on retributive grounds. The main question at this point is whether it is good of God to exercise his right to punish, and if so, whether transferring the punishment to Christ is justified. For a discussion of the justification of retributive punishment, see C.L. Ten, *Crime, Guilt, and Punishment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 38-81. For a discussion of the justice of hell, see Michael J. Murray, “Heaven and Hell,” in Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 287-317.

nature of the loss and 'undo the past' in a way that positive forms of reparation cannot. For instance, for a wife to be offered an expensive gift from her unfaithful husband as a means to make reparation for his adulterous betrayal seems petty in a way that her demanding her husband to move out for a period of time does not.

Fundamental to sin is a prideful usurpation of God's rightful place in one's life and thereby a rejection of God's offer of intimate friendship. Hence, sin is a form of rebellion that cannot be repaired by positive efforts, and thus, reparation and penance can be better captured *via* punishment. If God demanded some punishment prior to his forgiving repentant and apologetic sinners, this would treat sinners as responsible agents and take the wrongs done seriously, and it is good that God do this.

Second, such punishment would be good as an objective correction of the expression of distorted values in human sin. On the expressive theory of punishment, the chief end of retributive punishment is the vindication of the victim's value. John Hare writes of this view:

The basic idea here is that the offender's wrongdoing demeans the victim by giving expression to the view that the offender's value is high enough to make this treatment of the victim legitimate or permissible. . . . The demand for retributive punishment is then the demand that this false elevation of the offender's value be corrected visibly. . . . it is the insistence on the recognition of a moral value, the correct relative value of wrongdoer to victim.²⁹

For example, when little Johnny intentionally pushes sister Susan to the floor, he is considering himself to be more valuable than his sister. There is a devaluing of Susan and a corresponding overvaluing of Johnny expressed in the act. In this act a denial of the moral truth of Johnny and Susan's equal human worth is expressed. It is good that such a distortion of values be corrected as much as is logically possible so that the moral truth of equality is reaffirmed. Thus, it is good that Johnny be reprimanded and sent to spend time alone. The punishment is meant to inflict suffering on Johnny as a way of expressing his defeat. One good of punishment, then, is to express a correction of the original distortion of values by expressing a lowering of the overinflated value of the offender.³⁰

²⁹ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 247. I am deeply indebted to Hare's work on the connection between expressive punishment and penal substitution. See Hare, 243-259.

³⁰ For more on the expressive theory, see Jean Hampton, "The Retributive Idea," in Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, eds., *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 111-161.

In the case of human sin, one of the victims is God in the sense that the sinner expresses a devaluing of God and an inflated valuing of his own self in his prideful attempt to live independently of God. The point is not that God's value is actually reduced, but rather that the wrongdoing objectively expresses a distortion of values which is a denial of the moral truth of God's infinite value relative to a human individual's finite value. And it is good that this distortion and denial be recognized and corrected through the punishment of the sinner. If the sinner suffers a penalty proportionate in some measure to his offense, his elevated value is shown to be false, and the moral truth is reaffirmed. This objective good can be called the expressive good.

The expressive good serves the further good purpose of providing an opportunity for the sinner to recognize in his punishment the true value of God, his own pride, and the gravity of his wrong, which in turn draws the sinner towards healthy shame and virtuous humility. So on the expressive view of punishment there is the possibility of the further subjective good of what might be called moral education and moral formation.

Hence, on the view I am proposing, there are at least three kinds of goods that would be accomplished by God punishing sinners: the goods of substantive reparation and penance, the expressive good, and the goods of moral education and moral formation. So, I conclude that it would be just and good of God to punish human sinners to some degree as a condition of granting forgiveness of sins.

The third element of modified penal substitution is the claim that the goods derived from the punishment of sinners are better served when Christ voluntarily takes the punishment instead. But how might both the justice and greater goodness of this substitution be defended?

It is often purported that it would be unjust of God to punish Christ in the place of sinners. The main idea is that punishment is only just if the one being punished deserves the punishment, and Christ did not. Yet, if punishment is seen as a free exercise of a retributive right to punish in order to accomplish certain good ends, then how one goes about executing this punishment appears somewhat flexible. Since one does not have to punish at all, leniency of various kinds is allowable. The justification of God's right to punish lies in humans being in a position of debt before God, but his decision whether and how to execute that punishment is effected by the moral worth of such punishment. And if the good ends of

punishment are better served by inflicting the punishment deserved by sinners onto the voluntary substitute of Christ, then while Christ does not deserve the punishment himself, there is no injustice in him taking it.

So while just punishment must always be directed towards a wrong that deserves such punishment, there is no injustice in someone else voluntarily serving that punishment if there are good reasons for such a transfer and the victim agrees to accept such a substitution as fulfillment of the offender's debt. It is simply that in most cases of serious crime there are few good reasons, and often very bad ones, for transferring the punishment. Given that deterrence and incapacitation are the main potential goods of criminal punishment, it is probably never good that such a penalty be transferred, for there is little hope of achieving these goods through a transfer.³¹ But the same derivative goods are not at issue in the divine/human situation, and so it may be better for Christ to voluntarily serve the punishment that is due sinners.

Indeed, there are at least three reasons to think that it would be better for Christ to receive the punishment due sinners. First, Christ's vicarious punishment is a more costly form of reparation and penance than the direct punishment of sinners. That God himself is willing to suffer the punishment due sinners demonstrates just how seriously he takes the divine/human relationship and the process of reconciliation. For those repentant and apologetic sinners who are willing to see Christ's life and death as the means of entry into God's kingdom, the goods of substantive reparation and penance are more fully realized *via* the punishment of Christ.

Second, if God punished sinners to some degree, there would likely be further alienation between God and humans. It seems safe to assume that most persons are not mature enough to take punishment well. But if Christ is able to bear the punishment well, then persons will have cause to be exceedingly grateful for this substitution rather than bitter towards God.

Third, the expressive good would be better served through the punishment of Christ. For in human sin the view is expressed that a finite human is more valuable than an infinitely valuable God. So,

³¹ This is part of the answer to David Lewis's query in his "Do We Believe In Penal Substitution?," *Philosophical Papers* 26 (1997) 203-209.

any amount of punishment inflicted on a finite being would not suffice to express the degree of value distortion in human sin. While punishment as expression does not have to be quantitatively exact, it does need to adequately vindicate the value of the victim.³²

But the punishment of Christ allows for an adequate expression of the value of God. The defeat on the cross of God incarnate gets at the value distortion in sin. For what is being expressed on the cross (i.e. finite humans ruling over an infinitely valuable being) is the exact kind of value distortion as is expressed in human sin, only this time it occurs for the purpose of fulfilling the punishment sinners deserve, thereby expressing the true value of God. So Christ taking the debt of punishment on behalf of sinners makes possible the expressive good, and thus, the goods of moral education and moral formation. For when a sinner considers the cross and realizes that his sins were so grievous that it was good for God incarnate to suffer and die in response to those sins as a condition of divine forgiveness, the cross serves as an abiding expression of human depravity and the holiness of God. Further, the cross exemplifies the mercy and love of God for sinners in that God chooses to treat sinners differently than they deserve because of the cross. But whether the sinner subjectively appreciates the meaning of the cross or not, Christ's suffering the punishment due sinners objectively expresses the great moral truth of God's value relative to rebellious sinners. So, for all these reasons, it is just and a greater good for God to visit on Christ the punishment that it would be just and good to visit on sinners.

Conclusion

Much more needs to be said. I hope enough has been said to demonstrate that the doctrine of the atonement is a burgeoning area of theological and philosophical inquiry, and that it is far from clear that the doctrine should be reduced to either myth or mystery. Moreover, my intention has been to present a theory of modified penal substitution as a fruitful way to articulate the traditional theory of penal substitution, and thereby provide a rationally defensible explication of how Christ's person and work are efficacious for human salvation.

³² See Hampton, 134.

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