



(1Co 15:1-3)

*Paul's words in 1 Corinthians fifteen make it clear that how we understand Christ's death directly affects whether the "gospel" we believe is "in accordance with the Scriptures" (and saving) - or false (and damning). It is therefore (as Paul states) of "first importance"; a doctrine the Church cannot afford to get wrong. This unfortunately has been the plight of many within Evangelical or Reformed Christianity who espouse the false doctrine of Penal Substitution.*

**Penal Substitution** = A theory which states that Jesus in His death was punished for our sins (*penal*) in our place (*substitute*) so that God could extend forgiveness (or justification) to us.

### 1. Why the theory of Penal Substitution must be rejected as false:

#### **1.1. It is was invention of the Protestant Reformers to support their false gospel of Sola Fide.**

Though several of the Early Church Fathers did preach Christ's cross-work as substitutionary (e.g. Justin Martyr, Athanasius, Ambrose, Gregory the Great), they did not view it as penal (i.e. Christ taking our place in punishment). It isn't until the Reformation - 1,500 years after the inception of Christianity, that such teaching emerges. And this to support their other invention: the Sola Fide gospel - or the notion that all a person needs to do in order to be saved is put faith in the person and work of Jesus. For such a gospel to be taken seriously, required that Jesus not only be the substitution for the sacrificial lamb, but also our substitution in relation to justice - to satisfy our obligation to serve the justice established by God's Law.

*"... Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon and their reforming contemporaries were the pioneers in stating it [i.e. the penal substitutionary theory]..." - J.I. Packer (What Did The Cross Achieve? The Logic Of Penal Substitution)*

*"We may pause to sum up briefly the main points of teaching on Christ's work of redemption to be gathered from the patristic literature of the first three centuries as a whole. And first, as to what it does not contain. There is no trace, as we have seen, of the notions of vicarious satisfaction, in the sense of our sins being imputed to Christ and His obedience imputed to us, which some of the Reformers made the very essence of Christianity; or, again, of the kindred notion that God was angry with His Son for our sakes, and inflicted on Him the punishment due to us ; nor is Isaiah's prophecy [Isa 53] interpreted in this sense, as afterwards by Luther; on the contrary, there is much which expressly negates this line of thought. There is no mention of the justice of God, in the forensic sense of the word." - H.N. Oxenham (The Catholic Doctrine of the atonement)*

*"The Early Church had no concept of God imputing the guilt of our sins to Christ, and he, in our place, bearing the punishment we deserve. Christ making payment for our sins, which satisfies the wrath and the righteousness of God so that He could forgive sinners without compromising his holiness, is a late addition to Christian thought." - Dn. Thom (Live Orthodoxy)*

*"The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible." - Steve Jeffery, (Pierced for Our Transgressions)*

#### **1.2. Neither Christ's sacrifice nor His predecessors – the OT sacrifices (for atonement), are ever identified as penal, the penalty for sins, the punishment for sins or as paying for sins.**

It is not uncommon to hear people refer to Christ's death as paying for our sins - or that He was punished for our sins, yet the Scripture never speaks this way when referring to the sacrifice of Christ or His predecessors – the animal sacrifices of the OT. This includes using words which communicate these ideas. How disappointing it is then, to discover the translators of the ESV using words that imply these sacrifices to be penal or compensatory – though once more, the original language doesn't allow for it (e.g. Lev 5:6-7, 15, 6:6, 19:21; "compensation" [חַטָּאת = "guilt"]; See its usage/translation in Gen 26:10)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The ESV is the only literal translation guilty of this (KJV – "trespass offering"; NAS – "guilt offering"). The closest comparison to the ESV in this respect is the very non-literal translation of the NIV ("penalty") – a poor choice to follow.

### **1.3. God doesn't punish His food or abandon His sacrifice for atonement.**

Based on their penal understanding of Jesus' cross-work, Evangelical/Reformed Protestants therefore must also conclude that what the OT priests were doing in slaying the animal sacrifices was actually to punish and abandon them<sup>2</sup>. As such, penal substitution creates a picture of God that is sadistic and twisted. He must abuse His food before He can eat it. He loves what must be abandoned as vile. According to Scripture however, God comes near and receives such sacrifices as good or precious food possessing a pleasing aroma. Hence the reason so much care is to be taken when considering the animals to be sacrificed and preparing them (Num 28:1-4 = Notice God's attitude toward the sacrifice. It is one of care, concern for quality and holy pleasure. Notice also His concern for when the sacrifice take place. Animals are less alert in the morning and evening and therefore under less stress at the time of God's appointed slaughter [See for example, *How Cattle Stress Affects Tenderness and Flavor*]. God desired His sacrifices to be treated humanely. Hence the reason Jesus was not pleased w/betrayal and murder as the method to accomplishing His sacrifice [Luk 22:42]; Pro 12:10; Lev 22:28; Deu 14:21 = kosher killing; Lev 16:1-16 = God doesn't run from the sacrifice but just the opposite. It instead allows Him to come [again] into close proximity [to "meet"] w/His priest/people. Through it, He "breaks bread" or feasts in fellowship w/His people. Is this not the way Jesus communicates His Passover for us [Luk 22:15]?; Mat 27:46 w/Psa 22:1-31 = Jesus' reference to the first verse of Psalm 22 is to be understood according to rest of what it says. Given the author's current plight, it would seem as though God had abandoned him. However as the author reveals, such conclusions can only be drawn based on appearances. In reality, God is close at hand and accomplishing His servant's deliverance. The author as a result, rejoices and calls for His people to do the same).

### **1.4. Identifying the atoning sacrifices of the Bible as penal in nature (i.e. punishment for sin) violates the Bible's definition of sin.**

In the OT, atoning sacrifices were required whenever a woman gave birth, or a person touched a dead body, had an emission or suffered certain illnesses (e.g. leprosy) (Lev 12:1-8 w/Luk 2:22-24 = Mary was a sinner for having Jesus if the sacrifice was penal; Num 31:48-50; Lev 15:16-32; Lev 14:1-20). If the sacrifices were meant to function as punishment for sin, then this implies that even good things – or events beyond of our control, can be sinful. Such thinking stands in direct opposition to what the Scripture defines as sin or sinful (1Jo 3:4).

### **1.5. Jesus' substitution is in relation to the sacrificial lamb not us with respect to justice.**

The Bible identifies Christ as "the lamb who takes away the sin of the world" (Joh 1:29) *not* "the patsy who paid our penalty."<sup>3</sup> If Jesus had intended to be our substitute for justice, then why did He continue to enforce the long-standing OT obligation of serving justice *before* presenting God w/our sacrifice for atonement (Mat 5:23-24)?

### **1.6. If God allowed another person to receive our punishment – or pay the penalty due to us in order to serve justice, it would not only violate His Law, but make Him a corrupt judge.**

The Evangelical/Reformed view of Christ's death as penal confirms the world's criticisms of God as the "Cosmic Child-Abuser" and their religion as the West's most unethical or immoral (e.g. Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins on scapegoating and Christ). According to Scripture, allowing somebody to take our place in punishment or pay the penalty for our sins is strictly and explicitly prohibited (Num 35:31-34; Deu 24:16). For God to allow Jesus to function in that way would therefore make Him a corrupt judge (Deu 27:25).

### **1.7. If Christ is our penal substitute, then the Christian's obligation to seek and serve justice is destroyed.**

The reason there is so much confusion within Evangelical/Reformed Christianity regarding the issues of discipline, punishment for crime (or sin), forgiveness and repentance is b/c each of these are grounded in a robust obligation to seek and serve justice which is removed the moment one views Christ's cross-work as penal. True Christianity however - the one defined by the pages of Scripture, knows no such problem. Jesus' reaffirming of the Law's continuing authority means that justice remains the foundation of not only God's throne but also the practice of His people (Psa 89:14; Deu 16:20; Luk 13:1-5 w/Luk 3:8-14 and 18 = Repentance means seeking and serving justice and is at the core of the biblical gospel; Hence Luk 19:1-9 "salvation has come to this house!").

### **1.8. If Christ is our penal substitute, then the Christian's suffering and eventual death are not only unnecessary but also unjust.**

The Bible teaches that we suffer (and die) b/c of our sins. In other words, those things represent (one of) the ways God punishes - or makes humanity serve justice, for what they have done (1Pe 4:16-19). This (then) also proves that Jesus' did not serve as our penal substitute. If so, then all suffering – and even death, in relation to Christians is not only unnecessary but the injustice of double jeopardy (Deu 17:11; Mat 20:23).

**CLOSING CONTEMPLATION:** If Jesus' death - or sacrifice for our sins, is not penal, how then does the Bible teach us to understand - or view it?

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<sup>2</sup> This is especially true as it relates to the issue of abandonment. Evangelical/Reformed Christianity teaches that the Father had to momentarily abandon (or "forsake") the Son while on the cross. This reveals an incredibly poor (embarrassing?) understanding of Jesus' words in Mat 27:46.

<sup>3</sup> Consider this statement by Matt Slick of CARM.org, "Jesus did what we could not. He took *our place* (emphasis mine) and bore our sins in his body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24 - "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree")." Notice however, Peter doesn't say Jesus took our place on the cross (or "tree"), only our sins. There is a big difference.