

PENAL SUBSTITUTION: A RESPONSE TO RECENT CRITICISMS

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I. CONTEMPORARY CRITICISMS OF PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

Relationships within the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom have been disturbed recently by the publication of a work entitled *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, in which the authors strongly criticize the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement.¹ The book, which may be known to readers in the United States since it is now available on both sides of the Atlantic, only touched briefly on this subject. Nevertheless, the issue became the focus of controversy, especially when Chalke published a further article criticizing penal substitution in *Christianity*, a popular British magazine.² In order to address this debate, the Evangelical Alliance organized a symposium in London in July 2005 and invited a number of theologians and practitioners to speak on the subject of penal substitutionary atonement. Chalke would not claim to be an academic theologian, and to ensure a more substantial series of papers a number of academics were invited to speak at the symposium. Here the American connection became stronger, since the leading speaker opposing penal substitutionary atonement was Professor Joel Green of Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky. As a proponent of penal substitutionary atonement who had already written a brief article replying to Chalke, I was invited to give a paper at the symposium. Knowing that Green would be speaking at the start of the symposium and would be the doctrine's most significant critic, I tailored my paper to engage with some of the arguments which Green had already published on the subject as well as the criticisms levelled by Chalke.³ This article is based on my paper at the symposium and may be of interest to a wider readership given that the debate is not limited to British soil.⁴

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¹ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). The explicit criticism of penal substitution appears on pp. 182–83.

² Steve Chalke, "Cross Purposes," *Christianity* (September 2004) 44–48.

³ See Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁴ I am very grateful to Dr. Steve Jeffery for his meticulous technical contributions to the process of revising this piece for publication.

The criticisms of penal substitutionary atonement which have arisen even within this recent debate are legion, and in works on the subject they often come like machine gun fire. I focus here on four main charges, reducible to the three categories of God, the individual, and doctrinal isolationism. The first charge is that penal substitution entails a mistaken doctrine of God, principally in that it ascribes retributive justice to him. The second, also a charge relating to the doctrine of God, is that penal substitution conflicts with the doctrine of the Trinity by severing the Person of the Father from the Person of the Son. The third is that penal substitution grows out of modern Western individualism with its conception of “autobiographical justice.”⁵ The fourth is that penal substitution is guilty of doctrinal isolationism—an inability to look beyond itself. In this last charge we have a cluster of three sub-criticisms with a common core. The claim is that penal substitution cannot embrace three vital aspects of the Christian faith. It has no place for the life of Jesus; it cannot account for the cosmic scope of the work of Christ on the cross; and it undermines the need for moral renewal in the life of the believer subsequent to conversion. In its stronger form, this last sub-criticism develops into the charge that penal substitution not only cannot support sanctification, but also mandates wrong, abusive behaviour.

II. GOD: DIVINE RETRIBUTION

1. *Faustus Socinus, Steve Chalke, and the example of Jesus.* A key argument used by opponents of penal substitution is that retributive punishment is ruled out by Jesus’ own teaching on how we should relate to one another. A form of this argument was used as far back as Faustus Socinus in 1578, but it has been used more recently by Steve Chalke.⁶ The principle operating in the argument is that there must be a fundamental continuity between the way God acts and the way he commands us to act. Chalke judges that this kind of continuity is disrupted by penal substitutionary atonement because it depicts a God who himself exacts punishment, yet at the same time commands his people not to do so. This, he fears, turns God into a hypocrite: “If the cross has anything to do with penal substitution then Jesus’ teaching becomes a divine case of ‘do as I say, not as I do.’ I, for one,

⁵ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 29.

⁶ Faustus Socinus, *De Iesu Christo Servatore*, iii. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, Vols 1–2 of *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum Quos Unitarios Vocant*, 8 Vols (Irenopoli: post 1656) 2.115–246: *Paulus itidem, ut alibi vidimus, monet nos, ut imitatores Dei sumus: et quemadmodum is per Christum peccata nobis condonavit, sic nos invicem condonemus. Quod si Deus ita per Christum nobis peccata condonavit, ut interim ab ipso Christo eorum poenas repetierit, quid vetat, quo minus eos, ex Pauli praescripto, Deum imitate, pro offensis proximi nostri non quidem ab ipso, se dab alio quopiam, ut modo dicebamus, nobis satisfieri curemus?* = “As we saw elsewhere, Paul likewise instructs us to be imitators of God: just as he forgave our sins through Christ, so we should forgive each other. But if God so forgave our sins through Christ, that he yet demanded the punishments of them from Christ himself, what prevents us, on the basis of Paul’s command, as imitators of God, from seeking satisfaction for ourselves for the offences of our neighbour not from the man himself, but from anyone else, as we were just saying?” (my translation).

believe that God practices what he preaches!"⁷ In short, Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, so how could God punish in a way that exacts satisfaction for sin? If God denies retribution to us, he must eschew it himself.

For many, the background here is found in the work of Walter Wink.⁸ He argues that the pattern of violence on earth reflects the pattern of violence which is believed to occur in heaven. He cites the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* myth as an ancient instance of the view that violence is "the central dynamic of existence" which "possesses ontological priority over good."⁹ In this ancient "myth of redemptive violence," it is the spiral of heavenly violence which triggers the creation itself and then continues through history: "Heavenly events are mirrored by earthly events, and what happens above happens below."¹⁰ As in heaven, so on earth. Applying this model to penal substitutionary atonement suggests that divine retribution must be mirrored by human retribution, and therefore that the doctrine either fails to reckon with the mirroring of heaven on earth when it resists this conclusion, or else that it contradicts the teaching of Jesus when it accepts it.

In reply to this Socinian argument there is a clear counter-case which implies a quite different construal of the relationship between divine and human justice. The apostle Paul distinguishes sharply the different ways that justice should operate between human beings on the one hand, and between God and creation on the other. At the end of Romans 12 he follows Jesus in teaching that we must not take revenge. This would be the perfect opportunity to point out that we must not because God does not, but in a striking move Paul does the opposite. He explains that individuals must not take revenge precisely because God *is* going to do so: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom 12:19, quoting Deut 32:35). From here Paul moves to argue in Rom 13:1–7 that God has given a limited remit to the governing authorities to implement this final justice in the present time by the power of the sword. Thus Paul denies vengeance in the sphere of relationships between individual people, and at the same time ascribes it to God, who shares it in limited part with the ruling authorities. Where Chalke infers that God would never do what he tells us not to do, Paul argues exactly the opposite. God tells us not to do what he does precisely because he does it. God says, "Do as I say, not as I do," and justly so, since he is God and we are not.

2. Stephen Travis and retribution

a. *The definition of retribution.* It is argued, most notably by Stephen Travis in *Christ and the Judgment of God*, that retribution has little place in the biblical doctrine of punishment as a whole. This argument has been

⁷ Chalke, "Cross Purposes" 47.

⁸ For example, in the recent debates Stuart Murray Williams has cited Wink in a number of his oral critiques of penal substitutionary atonement.

⁹ *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 13, 15.

influential, and Green draws on Travis's work. Travis writes that "the judgment of God is to be seen not primarily in terms of retribution, whereby people are 'paid back' according to their deeds, but in terms of relationship or non-relationship to Christ."¹¹ Everything in Travis's work rests on the definition of the nature of retribution itself. This should not surprise us, since it is obvious that whether or not we find retribution in Scripture depends on how we first define it. At the start of his book Travis defines retribution as having five key characteristics. His list is drawn from W. H. Moberly's work, *The Ethics of Punishment*, where it is given as an expansion of Hugo Grotius's definition in *De Iure Belli ac Pacis*. Punishment, Grotius states, is "The infliction of an ill suffered for an ill done." Travis summarizes Moberly thus:

- (1) What is inflicted is an *ill*—something unpleasant.
- (2) It is a *sequel* to some act which has gone before and is disapproved by authority.
- (3) There is some *correspondence* between the punishment and the deed which has evoked it.
- (4) The punishment is *inflicted from outside*, by someone's voluntary act.
- (5) The punishment is inflicted on the *criminal*, in virtue of his offence.¹²

The emphasis on "act" or "deed" here is vital to Travis's project. He explains:

We may pose the question whether there is any real place for retribution (in the sense defined above) in the context of personal relationships. People are rewarded or punished not because of their character, but because of some specific overt act which they have done. Retribution thus operates on a less than fully personal level, and it deals with externals.¹³

b. *Retribution flowing out of a deed.* I wish, first, to take exception to point (4), the claim that the punishment being *inflicted from the outside* is integral to retribution. It is clear that a punishment can in a strong sense flow out of a deed and still be retributive. In a human system of justice we cannot redesign the natural order so that our acts have internal consequences. But with God the Creator, it is quite possible for a punishment to be intrinsic, to follow from an act, and yet still to be retributive in character. Such an intrinsic result might still have all of the other characteristics of punishment: it might be an ill, following an act, corresponding to it, being imposed on the criminal. The kind of process described in the Proverbs where someone digs a hole and falls into it can, when the process is created and sustained by God, still be understood as retributive.

There is something very strange going on here in Travis's use of his sources. The difficulty is that Moberly himself agrees with my reading at

¹¹ Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), Preface.

¹² Travis, *Christ* 3 (italics original), summarizing W. H. Moberly, *The Ethics of Punishment* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) 35–36.

¹³ Travis, *Christ* 5.

this point, and explicitly qualifies his fourth point in a way that distances his position from that taken later by Travis. When Moberly states the fourth element, he expresses it like this: "(4) The punishment is *inflicted*. It is imposed by somebody's voluntary act." So far Travis is reading him accurately. But then Moberly continues: "Disagreeable consequences which follow wrongdoing by natural causation, as disease or poverty sometimes follow, are not 'punishment' unless they are supposed to be deliberately brought about by some superhuman personal agency."¹⁴ In other words, Moberly, in his very definition, states that point (4), externality, would not be required to find retribution in the actions of a superhuman being like God. According to Moberly, if a punishment is internal rather than external then it may, if it comes from God, still be retributive.

As we realize this, a crack shatters out through much of the exegesis in *Christ and the Judgment of God*, because the use of externality to deny retribution is pervasive. Take this comment for example: "the Jesus of the synoptic gospels sometimes uses retributive words, and some of these judgment-sayings are expressed in talionic form. But the *content* of such sayings generally undermines a strictly retributive interpretation."¹⁵ How so? Because, to take the example of the treasure in heaven passage, "Jesus pictures people's destinies as the end-result of their desires rather than as a recompense imposed from outside."¹⁶ According to Moberly's definition, this kind of connection between act and consequence, if established by God, may still be understood as a retributive process.¹⁷ The interposition of a mediating natural means between God and the sinner which brings about the punishment does not remove the retributive role of God, it simply shifts the moment of its imposition. Instead of being imposed at the moment of punishment, it is set up at creation. Or rather, because God sustains the creation, it is still imposed by God as it happens. In him we live and move and have our being, and that includes the penal processes of creation.

We should also note in passing that Travis's claim that divine punishment always flows out of the act by itself will not account for a great deal of the biblical evidence, most notably events such as the plagues on Egypt and the last judgment.¹⁸ The plagues involved natural phenomena, but in terms of their occasion and intensity did not just happen according to the normal operation of biological processes. The era of the exodus was not just a good time for frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts, let alone for the death of firstborn children. Even more clearly, on the last day Jesus Christ will intervene in history as judge. He will stop the progress of world history, raise the dead, and pronounce judgment on them. Left to itself, this would not happen to the world. Much punishment in Scripture is irrefragably extrinsic.

¹⁴ Moberly, *Ethics* 35–36.

¹⁵ Travis, *Christ* 134 (italics original).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ At the Evangelical Alliance Symposium, Graham MacFarlane and Stuart Murray Williams also adopted this naturalist view of punishment where it is reduced to being the organic consequence of an action. They, too, fall prey to the same criticism: if God created the process, then God is involved, and it is his process.

¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall also made this point at the Evangelical Alliance Symposium.

c. *Retribution as responsive to character as well as acts.* Second, Travis is wrong when he claims that on a retributive understanding of punishment, "People are rewarded or punished not because of their character, but because of some specific overt act which they have done." The biblical accounts of retribution make clear that this is a false antithesis, since according to Scripture punishment is imposed both for acts and the character behind them, and the acts serve as evidence of the character. For example, in Matt 25:31–46 we find that on the day of judgment Jesus will reward those who have shown kindness to others. He will judge them on the basis of their acts as public evidence, but these acts will be taken as an indication of the individual's disposition toward Christ himself. The acts reveal the disposition, so that the deed of giving a drink serves as evidence of a saving attitude to Jesus himself. Here we are dealing with the theological link between the tree and its fruit (cf. Matt 7:16–20). To hold that God is interested in the disposition behind the deed does not mean that he cannot therefore punish retributively. There is nothing to prevent God retributively punishing a person for his disposition as well as his acts, using the acts as evidence for the disposition.

d. *Retribution as relational punishment.* Third, it is clear in Scripture that when God punishes retributively, he punishes relationally. Many critics of penal substitution view retributive punishment as non-relational and impersonal. For example, consider the contrast drawn by Travis: "the judgment of God is to be seen not primarily in terms of retribution . . . but in terms of relationship or non-relationship to Christ." According to Travis, retribution and relationship are alternatives; retribution cannot be relational. There is, however, no reason why non-relationship to Christ should not actually be a retributive punishment. Travis posits an antithesis where none need be found. Retribution entails two elements, as Grotius made clear in the work upon which Moberly draws. First, it entails "an ill suffered *for* an ill done," that is, an ill which is responsive to an ill. Second, it involves an "*ill suffered for* an ill done," that is, the infliction of some kind of proportioned pain. So long as the non-relationship with Christ is the deserved result of character or conduct, and so long as it involves some kind of pain (which separation from Christ most surely does), then it is retributive *and* relational. The category of exclusion from a loving relationship with Christ *is* a relational category. The sinner stands in a relationship of hostile confrontation with Christ. For these reasons we have no grounds for holding that retribution is incompatible with the justice that God exemplifies or demands in Scripture.

III. GOD: THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Joel Green and Mark Baker argue that "any atonement theology that assumes, against Paul, that in the cross God did something 'to' Jesus is . . . an affront to the Christian doctrine of the triune God."¹⁹ Following Stephen

¹⁹ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 57.

Sykes, they explain that the problem is with the idea of Jesus as the object of the Father's action:

The New Testament portrays Golgotha along two story lines—one with God as subject, the other with Jesus as subject. It will not do, therefore, to characterize the atonement as God's punishment falling on Christ (i.e., God as subject, Christ as object) or as Christ's appeasement or persuasion of God (Christ as subject, God as object).²⁰

Or again, specifically on Paul: "Paul does not treat God as the subject and Jesus as the object of the cross."²¹ If penal substitution depicted the cross as simply "God as subject, Christ as object," as Green and Baker characterize it, then it would indeed be problematic. But it does not, and no thoughtful proponent of penal substitution has ever portrayed it in this fashion. Witness John Stott, for example: "We must never make Christ the object of God's punishment or God the object of Christ's persuasion, for both God and Christ were subjects not objects, taking the initiative together to save sinners."²²

The reason that no one thinks of the Son simply as the object of the Father's action is that the doctrine of penal substitution has been formed within a conscious, mature doctrine of the Trinity. Penal substitution in fact relies on a careful grounding in Augustine's principle that since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they work inseparably.²³ The principle is plainly stated and applied to the work of Christ by Reformed theologians. John Owen, for example, in *The Death of Death*, puts it like this:

The agent [i.e. the subject] in, and chief author of, this great work of our redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are of the Deity are undivided and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed.²⁴

The Reformed conception of the covenant of redemption between the Persons in eternity shows how Christ is in every action of God *ad extra* the subject. The Persons of the Trinity covenant with each other in eternity to act together in all of their purposes.²⁵

Scripture also plainly depicts Christ as the subject in going to the cross. Jesus insisted, "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17–18), and Paul

²⁰ Ibid. 113; cf. S. W. Sykes, "Outline of a Theology of Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology* (ed. S. W. Sykes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 282–98 (pp. 294–95), cited in Green and Baker, *Recovering* 96.

²¹ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 96.

²² John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (2d ed.; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1989) 151. Given Stott's position as a whole, I understand this statement to exclude only the notion that Christ was the object without being the subject, not the notion that he was in any sense the object.

²³ *De Trinitate*, I. iv. 7.

²⁴ *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, i. 3, in *The Works of John Owen* (ed. William H. Goold; 23 vols.; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967) 10.163.

²⁵ Hence Owen speaks of "An authoritative imposition of the office of Mediator, which Christ closed withal by his voluntary susception of it, willingly undergoing the office" (*The Death of Death*, i. 3, 10.164).

wrote that Jesus “gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). So, in agreement with Green and Baker, we must reject the ludicrous railroad illustration where the father switches the points to rescue his passengers and in so doing kills his wandering son.²⁶ The son has no idea of what is going on, and presumably should not have been standing around on a railway track in the first place. Taken with its full implications, this illustration is a total travesty of penal substitution. Even if such implications are excluded and the illustration is intended solely to demonstrate the Father’s generosity in giving his Son instead of others, the picture is still misleading. But it is not enough for critics of penal substitution to engage with such caricatures of the doctrine; they have a responsibility to distinguish more carefully the crude from the sophisticated, and to deal with it at its best.

Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ was the subject of the atonement. But can he also be the object of the Father’s act? Clearly, as Stott explains, he cannot be the object in an unqualified sense, because such an object does not will what happens to him. But might he not be the willing object? Might he not be the subject purposing what happens to him as the object? It should be obvious that we cannot on the basis of Trinitarian theology say that the Son can never be the willing object of the Father’s activity. Witness the description of the multiple activities where the Father is the subject and the Son the object in Scripture: “the Father loves the Son” (John 3:35); the Father “sent the Son into the world” (John 3:17); the Father “has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26); the Father set forth the Son as a ἰλαστήριον (Rom 3:25). No one can deny that the Father acts on the Son, provided we are clear that the Son also wills the action.

More likely, then, the problem is thought to be specifically with the activity of the Father causing the Son to suffer. The difficulty here is that there is plain biblical testimony to the Father acting on the Son at the cross, in the suffering of the cross, and specifically in the penal suffering of the cross. Isaiah 53 speaks of the suffering of the “Servant of the Lord,” which is understood in the NT as a description of the suffering of Christ (e.g. 1 Pet 2:21–24). Verse 6 says that “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” and verse 10 that “it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.” In Mark 14:27 and Matt 26:31 Jesus quotes Zech 13:7: “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Interestingly, the Hebrew and the LXX have a second person imperative here, addressed to Yahweh’s sword: “Awake, O sword . . . Strike.” But in the Gospels this is changed to the first person future, πατάξω, thus actually emphasising the personal involvement of Yahweh rather than the more impersonal image of the sword: “I will strike.”²⁷ Joel Marcus notes this in a book edited by Green himself. He explains that in the Gospels “divine re-

²⁶ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 141.

²⁷ The Hebrew reads הָיָה (hifil imperative masculine singular of נָסַח), the LXX πατάξατε (second person plural aorist imperative active of πατάσσω), and the NT πατάσσω (first person singular future indicative active of πατάσσω).

sponsibility for the attack on the shepherd is made explicit” in what he describes as a “forthright acknowledgement of the divine role in the wounding of the shepherd.”²⁸ Here then are two statements that the Father purposes the suffering of the cross, indeed that he wills the crushing and striking of the Son, who also wills the same acts.

It is of further significance that in the context of Isaiah 52–53 the suffering in question is specifically penal. This emerges at the end of chapter 53 with the use of two expressions: “and he shall bear their iniquities (וְעָנָהּם הוּא יְסַבֵּל)” (v. 11), and “yet he bore the sin of many (וְהוּא הִטָּא רַבִּים נֶשְׂא)” (v. 12). The verb-noun combinations in these phrases (and the reversed pairings of יְסַבֵּל with אָטָה and נֶשְׂא with עָוֹן) are used widely in the OT to describe bearing sin, guilt, and punishment (e.g. *inter alia* Gen 4:13; Lev 5:17; Num 5:31; 14:34; Lam 5:7). Here, in Isaiah 53, it is evident from the connection with sin and the suffering of the Servant that they have a penal connotation. Thus we find in verses 6 and 10 statements that the Lord willed the suffering of the Servant in a context where that suffering is defined as being penal, and indeed atoning (v. 5). Likewise, in the NT we read that the Father “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3) of his Son. There is therefore biblical testimony to the action of the Father toward the Son, specifically in laying iniquity on him and condemning it in him. To state what ought to be obvious: he punished the sin that had been transferred to Christ, not Christ regarded in and of himself, with whom in this very act he was well pleased.

We must also note that the reverse is the case with the Persons of the Trinity. Just as the Son cannot be the object in an unqualified sense, but he can be the subject and the *willing* object, so the Father cannot be the object in an unqualified sense, but he can be the subject and the willing object. This emerges most clearly in the intercessory work of the Son and the Spirit. The Son intercedes with the Father for us (Rom 8:34). So, too, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us (Rom 8:26). The Father is the willing subject and object of the intercessory work of the Son and the Spirit. Furthermore, if we deny that the Persons of the Trinity can be at once the willing subject and object of one another’s actions, then we must deny not only penal substitution, but also the love of each Person for the others, and the sending of the Son, who comes willingly. Ultimately, the logical implication of the denial that one Person of the Trinity can act on another is the denial of the distinction between them, namely modalism.

IV. THE INDIVIDUAL

Joel Green and Mark Baker assert that penal substitution coheres “fully with the emphasis on autonomous individualism characteristic of so much of the modern middle class in the West.”²⁹ This is a very strange line of

²⁸ Joel Marcus, “The Role of Scripture in the Gospel Passion Narratives,” in *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (ed. John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 205–33 (pp. 225, 226).

²⁹ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 213.

criticism of penal substitution, since penal substitution itself *relies on* a denial of individualism. No proponent of penal substitution has ever conceived of it as the transfer of punishment between two wholly unrelated persons. Indeed, the more individualistic penal substitution becomes, the less tenable it is, since it holds precisely that the guilty individual is not punished for his or her sins as an individual. Rather, corporate categories are powerfully at work in the historic doctrine of penal substitution.

The corporate-covenantal context of penal substitution is clearest in the seventeenth century, the period when it reached its zenith in response to the Socinian critique. Here is John Owen setting out his emphasis on the corporate Christ as the ground for substitutionary punishment:

He [God] might punish the elect either in their own persons, or in their surety standing in their room and stead; and when he is punished, they also are punished: for in this point of view the federal head and those represented by him are not considered as distinct, but as one; for although they are not one in respect of personal unity, they are, however, one,—that is, one body in mystical union, yea, *one mystical Christ*;—namely, the surety is the head, those represented by him the members; and when the head is punished, the members also are punished.³⁰

This account of penal substitution is far from being individualistic. Rather, it is mystical, stressing the spiritual bond between the believer and Christ.

It is also notable that there are patristic examples of the consciously reflective use of union with Christ. Here, for example, is Eusebius of Caesarea, introducing the theme of union with Christ to explain the justice of penal substitution:

And how can He make our sins His own, and be said to bear our iniquities, except by our being regarded as His body, according to the apostle, who says: “Now ye are the body of Christ, and severally members?” And by the rule that “if one member suffer all the members suffer with it,” so when the many members suffer and sin, He too by the laws of sympathy (since the Word of God was pleased to take the form of a slave and to be knit into the common tabernacle of us all) takes into Himself the labours of the suffering members, and makes our sicknesses His, and suffers all our woes and labours by the laws of love. And the Lamb of God not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf (ὕπερ ἡμῶν κολασθεῖς), and suffered a penalty (τιμωρίαν ὑποσχών) He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls? And so the oracle says in our person: “By his stripes we were healed,” and “The Lord delivered him for our sins,” with the result that uniting Himself to us and us to Himself, and appropriating our sufferings, He can say, “I said, Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee.”³¹

³⁰ John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice*, ii. 15, in *Works*, 10.598 (italics original).

³¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, x. 1; *The Proof of the Gospel* (ed. and trans. W. J. Ferrar; 2 vols.; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001) 2.195–96. Likewise Cyril of Alexandria:

Hence we find even in the early church a thoroughly theological account of the unique justice of penal substitutionary atonement that repudiates the individualism with which proponents of the doctrine are erroneously charged. It is certainly not the case that penal substitution is, as Chalke says, “not even as old as the pews in many of our church buildings.”³²

There is an irony here. It is in fact the critics of penal substitution who have embraced individualism, not its proponents. Here is the view, for example, of the Church of England’s 1995 Doctrine Commission report *The Mystery of Salvation*: “in the moral sphere each person must be responsible for their own obligations. Moral responsibility is ultimately incommunicable.”³³ Penal substitution is denied in this report because the authors endorse this species of individualism. If, as Green and Baker argue, we are heading into a postmodern culture which holds to “a communal accounting of human nature,” then, contrary to his expectation, penal substitution has a bright future and will preach well.³⁴ This is, of course, not to say that we should ever determine what we preach by what we think the natural mind will accept: presumably everyone involved in this controversy has more confidence in the power of the Spirit than to do that.

V. DOCTRINAL ISOLATIONISM

1. *Penal substitution and the life of Jesus.* The first criticism here is that penal substitution cannot make sense of the life of Jesus. If Jesus needed to die this death, why did he need to live this life? It may be true that the link between penal substitutionary atonement and the life and ministry of Jesus has not always been made with sufficient clarity, but it certainly can be made, and needs to be made. One important example will suffice to illustrate how the connection can be established. Recent NT scholarship, for instance the work of N. T. Wright, has emphasised how Jesus is depicted in the Gospels as the one in whom the destiny of Israel is fulfilled. Jesus, the representative Messiah of Israel, is the New Israel. As such, like Israel, he is tempted in the wilderness. Yet, unlike Israel, he stands firm in the face of temptation. In significant senses, Israel in the first century remains in exile. Jesus is

γέγονε δὲ ἄνθρωπος ὁ Μονογενῆς καὶ τῷ θανάτῳ φυσικῶς ἐνεχόμενον πεφόρηκε σῶμα, καὶ κεχημάτικε σὰρξ, ἵνα ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἀνατλάς τὸν ἐξ ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν ἐπαρτηθέντα θάνατον, καταργήσῃ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν, καὶ παύσῃ λοιπὸν ἐγκαλοῦντα τὸν Σατανᾶν ὡς ἐκτετικὸτῶν ἡμῶν ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ Χριστῷ τῶν εἰς ἁμαρτίαν αἰτιαμάτων τὰς δίκας· αἴρει γὰρ ἡμῶν τὰς ἁμαρτίας, καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνάται, κατὰ τὴν τοῦ προφήτου φωνήν. Ἡ οὐχὶ τῷ μῶλωπι αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς ἰάθημεν; = “The Only-begotten was made man, bore a body by nature at enmity with death, and became flesh, so that, enduring the death which was hanging over us as the result of our sin, he might abolish sin; and further, that he might put an end to the accusations of Satan, inasmuch as we have paid in Christ himself the penalties for the charges of sin against us (ὡς ἐκτετικὸτῶν ἡμῶν ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ Χριστῷ τῶν εἰς ἁμαρτίαν αἰτιαμάτων τὰς δίκας): ‘For he bore our sins, and was wounded because of us,’ according to the voice of the prophet. Or are we not healed by his wounds?” (De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate, iii. 100–102; PG, 68:293, 296; my translation).

³² Chalke, “Cross Purposes” 45.

³³ *The Mystery of Salvation* (London: Church House, 1995, repr. 1997) 212.

³⁴ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 29; cf. p. 32.

the one who, as the representative of Israel, is exiled on the cross and in his resurrection returns from exile. He thus renews Israel and opens the way for the blessing to come to the nations. As Wright has shown, this theme explains much of the teaching and many of the symbolic actions of Jesus.³⁵ Here, then, is a dominant aspect of the life of Jesus. Yet here too we have, rooted in the life of Jesus, the pattern of penal substitutionary atonement. Jesus is Israel and he is exiled. Exile is the punishment for Israel's disobedience, and Jesus takes it on himself as the new Israel. Having borne the penalty for sin, he then rises to life and brings forgiveness. From this historical basis penal substitution explains how the curse borne by Jesus was not just the curse of the Jews, but the curse of all those under bondage. And so the doctrine of the atonement is very clearly tied to the life of Jesus as the new Israel. This is just one example, but it begins to make the point.

2. *Penal substitution, cosmic renewal, and the resurrection.* Second, it is asserted that penal substitution cannot make sense of the cosmic scope of the work of Christ on the cross. Green and Baker write: "A gospel that allows me to think of my relationship with God apart from the larger human family and the whole cosmos created by God—can it be said that this gospel is any gospel at all?"³⁶ Related to this we find the charge that penal substitution cannot cohere with an emphasis on the resurrection: "because of the singular focus on penal satisfaction, Jesus' resurrection is not really necessary according to this model."³⁷ Let it be said that we must affirm the importance of an individual's personal relationship with God: every individual's greatest need is reconciliation with God. But clearly the *merely* personal is, as Green and Baker argue, inadequate. Penal substitution actually explains very well the cosmic effect of the cross, and in so doing demonstrates the centrality of the resurrection. The narrative of Genesis 2–3 shows that the fall disordered the whole creation, with the serpent seeking to rule Eve, Eve seeking to rule Adam, and Adam seeking to rule God. The whole resulting complex of woe was the death threatened in Gen 2:17. The serpent said that man would not die, but he was wrong. Though he did not die bodily at once, he died spiritually. To put the entire creation right, to reverse the effects of sin, to reorder all of the different relationships, something had to be done with that curse of spiritual death. Penal substitution teaches that on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ exhausted the disordering curse in our place. It is for this reason that there can be resurrection and new creation, because the obstacle to it has been removed. Penal substitution is therefore the prerequisite for a strong

³⁵ These themes recur many times in Wright's work, but a good starting point for exploration is chapter 12 of *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996). Wright is, of course, repeatedly negative about the idea that we find in the Gospels "an abstract and timeless system of theology" (p. 603), but this is just the point: his work shows that by beginning with the history of Jesus and his vocation it is possible to lay out a biblical theology which grounds a penal substitutionary understanding of the cross.

³⁶ Green and Baker, *Recovering* 213–14.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 148.

doctrine of the resurrection as the beginning of the new creation, not a detractor from it. If the penalty has not been born by Christ, then the creation is still under the curse, still disrupted, incapable of being renewed. It is those who deny penal substitution who advocate an atonement doctrine that fails to account for the impact of the work of Christ on the whole cosmos, not those who uphold it.

3. *Penal substitution and the moral renewal of the believer.* Third, it is alleged that penal substitution provides no basis for moral renewal in the life of the believer subsequent to conversion. Here we need to remember the link in Paul's theology between the definitive death of the believer in Christ and the ongoing death to sin of the believer day by day. This is particularly clear in Romans 6, where Paul argues that since we have been baptised into the death of Christ (v. 3) and have died with him (v. 5), we must consider ourselves dead to sin (v. 11). This idea of being united to Christ in his death is integral to penal substitution. Union with Christ explains the justice of the transfer of sin to Christ: we are "one body in mystical union, yea, *one mystical Christ*," as Owen put it. So, the logic of the Gospel runs, if we have died with him as he died, as he bore our penalty for us, so we must reckon ourselves dead to sin. The foundational doctrine of union with Christ forges an indissoluble link between penal substitution and personal sanctification.

4. *Penal substitution and abuse.* Finally, what about the dark side of this criticism, the accusation that penal substitution is tantamount to child abuse, a charge levelled by some feminist theologians and taken up by Steve Chalke?³⁸ The claim appears to be that the infliction of pain on a child by a parent is unjust, and that penal substitution mandates such infliction. There is an immediate problem here with the criticism, namely that when the Lord Jesus Christ died he was a child in the sense that he was a son, but not in the sense that he was a minor. As an adult, he had a mature will and could choose whether or not to cooperate with his Father. So we are in fact looking at a father and an adult son who will together for the father to inflict suffering on the son, as we have seen in our Trinitarian exposition.

But there is a major problem here for the critics of penal substitution. While they have taken up and used the feminist critique of the cross as a critique of penal substitution, that criticism originated as a critique not of penal substitution but of the Christian doctrine of redemption generally. It attacks the general idea that the Father willed the *suffering* of the Son, not the specific idea that he willed the *penal substitutionary* suffering of the Son. Here is the criticism, as found in the work of Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker:

The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. . . . The message is complicated further by the theology that says Christ suffered in obedience to his Father's

³⁸ Chalke, "Cross Purposes" 47; Chalke and Mann, *The Lost Message* 182.

will. Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers “without even raising a voice” is lauded as the hope of the world.³⁹

Furthermore, it is evident that Brown and Parker attack, not just the idea that Jesus was a passive sufferer, but even the idea that he was the active subject of the cross, an idea Green and Baker endorse. Brown and Parker argue that if Jesus was active in accepting his suffering, then we have a model of the victim of suffering being responsible for it, and that such a model would mandate blaming victims. They make this move when they criticize Jürgen Moltman’s statement that Jesus suffered actively: “Jesus is responsible for his death on the cross, just as a woman who walks alone at night on a deserted street is to blame when she is raped.”⁴⁰

For many feminists their criticism results in the rejection of Christianity, because the religion undeniably involves the idea that God purposed the sufferings of Christ. Others try to rescue a reinvented theology, but the effort is futile. In the end, if purposed redemptive suffering is regarded as unacceptable, Christianity has to go. The reason is that the child abuse problem, as understood by these feminist theologians, remains with any model of the atonement that maintains divine sovereignty, even in a limited form. Unless we remove the suffering of the Son from the realm of events over which God rules, then God wills it. A similar point is made by Hans Boersma:

Only by radically limiting Christ’s redemptive role to his life (so that his life becomes an example to us) or by absolutely dissociating God from any role in the cross (turning the crucifixion into a solely human act) can we somehow avoid dealing with the difficulty of divine violence.⁴¹

Hence there is a trajectory from unease with penal substitution to a denial of the sovereign rule of God over the cross, and thence, we may presume, the world. In the more frank writers, this trajectory emerges clearly. J. Denny Weaver, for example, in arguing for a non-violent view of the atonement which he terms “narrative Christus Victor,” sees that to succeed he must remove the cross from the plan and purpose of God. He explains that Jesus was not sent with the intention that he should die, that his death was not the will of God, and that it was neither required nor desired by God:

In narrative Christus Victor, Jesus’ mission is certainly not about tricking the devil. Neither did the Father send him for the specific purpose of dying, nor was his mission about death. . . . And since Jesus’ mission was to make the reign of God visible, his death was not the will of God as it would be if it is a debt payment owed to God. In narrative Christus Victor, the death of Jesus is clearly the responsibility of the forces of evil, and it is not needed by or aimed at God.⁴²

Yet in terms of the metaphysics of the divine relationship with creation, even this view is unsustainable. So long as God sustains the world in which

³⁹ 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; New York: Pilgrim, 1989) 1–30 (p. 2).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

⁴¹ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 41; cf. p. 117.

⁴² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 132.

the Son suffers, then in a strong sense he wills the suffering of the Son. If he does not stop history as the first blow is about to be struck, then he wills that the Son suffers. There is something that prevents him from intervening to rescue his beloved Son, some purpose he intends to achieve through the suffering, and therefore a strong sense in which even such a diminished god as Weaver's wills the suffering. If someone else had wrested from God his work in sustaining the world, if we lived and moved and had our being elsewhere, then perhaps we could say that God did not will the suffering of the Son. But if purposed redemptive suffering is problematic, then on any view where God maintains some kind of control of his creation, even in a limited fashion at arm's length, the feminist criticism finds its target. And that target is not just penal substitution.

We therefore need to ask about the criticism itself. Is it valid? It is evidently not so with regard to penal substitutionary atonement. According to penal substitution, the cross does not have the character simply of suffering, but of necessary penal suffering for a good end. It is in this sense violent, but not reducible to the single category of violence. The cross was violent, but there was more to it than *merely* an act of violence. We can understand this if we consider scenarios in which a father and his adult son together purpose that the son should suffer. Imagine, for example, the father who directs teams of Médecins Sans Frontières, sending his son into an area where he and the son know that the son may suffer greatly. The father wills to send the son, and the son wills to go. There is no injustice here, because the purpose is good and both parties are willing. The same applies in the case of penal substitution. In fact, the feminist criticism really only applies when we deny penal substitution, because it is then that we are in danger of denying the necessity of the suffering of the Son. According to penal substitution the necessity of punishment arises from God's own nature and his divine government. He is bound only by who he is, by faithfulness to himself.⁴³ On the other hand, if we opt for some kind of voluntarist account wherein the suffering of the Son is not a necessity arising from divine justice, then we are left with a very difficult question, in fact with the feminists' question at its most acute. If God can freely remit sins, we must ask, why did the Father send the Son purposing his death, as Acts 2:23 says? The more deeply we understand the Trinity, the love of the Father for the Son, the more we will ask why a loving Father would lay the burden of suffering on his eternally beloved Son. Penal substitution preserves a necessity, which alone explains why this needed to happen as part of God's saving plan. Remove the necessity, deny penal substitution, and then the suffering of the Son is unjustifiable. The feminists' criticism attains its full force, because the Father wills the suffering of the Son for no necessary reason.

Christus Victor, for example, taken by itself without penal substitution, does not explain why Christ needed to suffer like this. Deny penal substitution

⁴³ *Contra* Green and Baker: "Within a penal substitution model, God's ability to love and relate to humans is circumscribed by something outside of God—that is, an abstract concept of justice instructs God as to how God must behave" (*Recovering* 147).

and Christus Victor is hamstrung. Hence it is that in Col 2:13–15 the victory over the rulers and authorities is accomplished by forensic means, by the cancellation of the legal bond (χειρόγραφον; Col 2:14). Victory is understood by Paul in legal terms. Penal substitution is central because of its explanatory power with regard to the justice of the other models of the atonement. Note that such a claim affirms rather than denies the existence of other models, but it also affirms the centrality of penal substitutionary atonement to them. Without penal substitution, the feminists who reject Christianity are right that the Father has no sufficient reason to inflict suffering on the Son. A cross without penal substitution therefore would indeed mandate the unjustified infliction of suffering on children, because it would have no basis in justice.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is no exaggeration to say that proponents of penal substitution are currently charged with advocating a biblically unfounded, systematically misleading, and pastorally lethal doctrine. If the attack is simply on a caricature of the doctrine, all well and good. Then the way forward is simple: the critics need to say that they do believe in penal substitution itself and just not in warped forms of it. But if the accusation is indeed an accusation against penal substitution itself, as it surely is, then I fear that evangelicals in the UK Alliance and elsewhere cannot simply carry on as they are. I am mindful both of the injunctions of the Lord Jesus Christ to seek peace, and of the ways in which he and his apostles make clear that there are issues over which division is necessary. Does not the present debate over penal substitutionary atonement fall into this category of issues that require separation? I find it impossible to agree with those who maintain that the debate is just an intramural one which can be conducted within the evangelical family. It is hard to maintain this when it has been acknowledged by all parties that we are arguing about who God is, about the creedal doctrine of the Trinity, about the consequences of sin, about how we are saved, and about views which are held to encourage the abuse of women and children. So long as these issues *are* the issues, and I believe that they have been rightly identified, then I cannot see how those who disagree can remain allied together without placing unity above truths which are undeniably central to the Christian faith.