

IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD - The Biblical Pattern of the Atonement - Part twelve - Sunday, October 2nd, 2022

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT - DEALING WITH OBJECTIONS

IPAD TEXT - 1 Corinthians 1:21-24 - “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. [22] For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, [23] but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

In the final two messages in this series I wanted to deal - albeit briefly - with some of the more common objections to the doctrine that Jesus died for my sins on the cross providing both **expiation** for those sins - the removal of the **my guilt** before God - and **propitiation** - the removal of **God’s wrath** from the sinner. The idea that Jesus died the **just** for the **unjust** has a barbaric ring in the ears of many. That God the Father **sending** God the Son to die in our place has been called “**cosmic child-abuse**” from within the ranks of evangelicalism probably shouldn’t shock us as much as it does.

That’s the reason I chose to open with this text. If some people today find this view of the atonement suspect and unsellable to the modern and postmodern mind (and I’ll show you that this is what many objectors think) then it’s important to know that this message of the cross was no more popular or marketable in Paul’s day. It has **always** been so and always **will** be so.

If we didn't actually see the words printed on paper we'd never believe the idea they're pasting in our minds. Paul says God **designed** the means of our redemption to be counter-intuitive to what the wisdom of self-willed religious seekers would ever dream up. Shockingly, Paul says God used all the might of His unlimited wisdom to come up with a plan of redemption precisely so it wouldn't fit in with our own best schemes of social and moral reformation - "**....in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom....**"(21). That's truly an astounding text.

But we still want to **try** to communicate the message of Christ's substitutionary atonement to our generation. And that means, with all the love we can muster, we want to confront the barriers to its reception. The idea here isn't merely one of winning arguments. The passion is to honor Father God's method of glorifying Himself rather than us. We're pleading for the beauty of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf as the sinless Lamb of God, dying in our place.

Before we list some common objections we need to remember we've already dealt with what may be the most common objection of all in our last teaching. The most common objection to penal substitution is that it is not the only model of the atonement found in the Scriptures. Christ died as our **example** (1 Peter 2:21-25), and Christ died as our **victor** over Satan and the powers of darkness (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Without reworking all the points of those past teachings, suffice it to say that while those passages express wonderful truths about the atonement, they aren't **separate** views of Christ's death, but the powerful **results** of Christ dying in our place, bearing our sins and God's just wrath. The power to follow the **example** of Christ in loving our enemies from a **transformed heart** rather than just refraining from striking them is generated by being inwardly "**healed**" (to use Peter's word) by the power of Christ's atoning death.

And the **victory** over Satan is won by Christ freeing us from the bondage of the fear of death that guilt before a just God naturally brings to sinful people. As Christ bears God's wrath for us Satan's power to condemn is defanged. So these wonderful supplementary images of the atonement don't need to be **denied**. They merely need to be set into **context**.

Now we move on to other objections. We'll only consider two today:

- 1) **"PENAL SUBSTITUTION ISN'T A CONCEPT OUR CULTURE EASILY UNDERSTANDS OR WILL EMBRACE. IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT ADDRESSES THE NEEDS PEOPLE ACTUALLY HAVE"**

Let's face it - ***expiation, propitiation, atonement*** - these are not terms people face in daily conversation. We live in a world that isn't even warm to the idea of transgression and punishment. These are old world concepts and terms. They will leave the church out in the cold in terms of relating to a postmodern world.

In their book, ***"Recovering the Scandal," Joel Green and Mark Baker*** say, ***"If, at least to a significant degree, penal substitutionary atonement has been a 'cultural product' of life in the West, is it any surprise that proclamation of the gospel grounded in this theory has tended to fall on deaf ears in other social worlds?"***

And ***Steve Chalke and Alan Mann*** sound the same message in ***"The Lost Message of Jesus,"*** saying, ***"People are desperate for a message that they can buy into, that they can see will make a difference to them and to the world in which they live. The truth is that you can't engender a sense of lostness or need into people simply by pointing out that they are 'sinners'. It just doesn't work."***

As serious a scholar as **Paul Fiddes**, in his book, ***“Past Event and Present Salvation,”*** says, ***“John Calvin assumes that when law.....is broken punishment must always be inflicted. As a matter of fact this no longer seems as self-evident to us today as it did in past ages....Indeed every preacher ought to ask himself whether a theory of penal substitution can even be understood in a society where it is no longer possible to use such words as ‘Christ suffered the death penalty for us’.”***

O.K. More quotes could be piled up, but I think you can get the picture from these three. The idea is this message of Christ dying in our place for our sins, bearing God’s wrath for us, isn’t going to cut it anymore. People can’t get meaning out of this model of the atonement.

How shall we respond? We should begin by admitting the whole concept of punishment for wrongdoing may be getting harder for an increasingly relativistic world to appreciate. Once absolute right and wrong blur and merge into a swamp of personal opinion a God of blazingly pure justice seems out of touch. Fair enough.

And certainly the terms we use are not often heard in common conversation. But we need to be careful here. Because clearly people **can** and **do** learn the meaning of unfamiliar terms all the time. What would the word “**podcast**” have meant to my grandfather? Or “**homophobic?**” And don’t doctors have to learn medical terms and the convoluted names of countless drugs and medicines? And what about chemists? Or lawyers? Or astronauts? Clearly, people aren’t unable to learn what words mean. They simply have to be taught and trained.

Another basic point needs making. Just because someone doesn’t know the meaning or importance of a particular truth **yet** doesn’t mean they don’t **need** to hear it. If the fact that what someone says isn’t yet familiar to others means we can’t communicate it, that would mean no one could **ever** communicate anything **new** to another person. Nor could we educate children. But surely the whole world of education is founded on the principle that it’s precisely the things people **don’t** yet know that need to be taught and communicated.

But there is also a **Biblical** argument to be raised in response to this objection. It is simply an undeniable fact that the New Testament never once links the rejection of the essential gospel with cultural irrelevance. Turn wherever you will and the basic analysis is the same:

IPAD TEXT - Romans 1:16-18 - "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." [18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, *who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*"

IPAD TEXT - Ephesians 4:17-19 - "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. [18] They are *darkened in their understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of *the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.* [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."

IPAD TEXT - John 3:18-20 - "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, *and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.* [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

These are just a few sample references pointing out the obvious Biblical refrain that the gospel - except in those cases where it is never proclaimed at all - isn't rejected due to lack of appreciated relevance. It's rejected precisely because of its recognized demand for repentance and humility by sinners who cherish their sin. To camouflage this willful rejection sinners demand the gospel deal with **other** needs rather than the central one God in His mercy designed it to meet. But that's not a **meaning** problem nor a **relevance** problem. It's a **denial** problem.

2) **“PENAL SUBSTITUTION IS A DENIAL OF JESUS’ MESSAGE OF LOVE, ESPECIALLY TO OUR ENEMIES”**

This view is articulated clearly by **Stuart Murray Williams** when he says, “....**penal substitution is inherently violent and contravenes central aspects of the message of Jesus.**” Underscore that word, “**contravenes.**” The dictionary defines it as “**to oppose, to run counter to, to contradict.**” Penal substitution is **opposed** to central aspects of the message of Jesus, Williams says.

Steve Chalk and Alan Mann leave no room to miss their view in “**The Lost Message of Jesus.**” “**If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.**”

Certainly, we know what's being considered in these objections. Jesus specifically commanded His disciples *not* to return violence for violence - **Matthew 5:38-39** - "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] But I say to you, *Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" - IPAD TEXT

The objection being considered isn't wrong in what it says about Jesus' teaching. It's wrong in what it *assumes* about God. The objection assumes that just because it's wrong for *us* to avenge wrong doing, it's wrong for **God** to do so as well. And that's not true at all.

In fact, we're specifically told we are *not* to do as God does with wrongdoers. You heard me right - **Romans 12:17-19** - "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] 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.'*" - IPAD TEXT

The reason we **mustn't** repay evil for evil is because it displays a total lack of faith in God who promises He **will** judge all evil doers. We are usually ignorant of all facts, biased in our own favor, blind to our own evil hearts. God suffers from none of these defects. He alone can be entrusted with the justice of the universe.

But the solid logic of trusting in the just wrath of God against sin goes much farther. The truth is the exact **opposite** of what **Chalk and Mann** state. Remember their quote? ***“If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.”***

In fact the opposite is true. It is precisely the justice of God revealed against sinners that leaves me free to treat them with love. It is simply amazing that Chalk and Mann can actually **quote** those words from Romans 12 in their objection and not notice the context of them and the point Paul is trying to make!

Let me take the time to put Paul's powerful logic in front of you -

Romans 12:19-21 - "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.' [20] To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." - IPAD TEXT

It is only when people are freed to worship a God who exercises divine, just, certain judgment against sin that those who believe and worship Him are freed to **not** avenge wrongs against them. Once confidence in the just wrath of God to punish sin disappears, I have no other choice than to avenge it **myself. That's** Paul's whole, glorious point. It is the doctrine of penal substitution that creates this wonderful relevance to a walk of love and grace.

I've just been reading a wonderful book called, "***On A Hill Too Far Away - Putting the Cross back into the Center of our Lives,***" by ***John Fischer***. Let me close with his timely words:

“The debate about Christ’s death on the cross and its personal relevance to you or me may go on indefinitely, but the significance of the cross and its purpose in the world is unaltered by what we happen to think about it. Jesus Christ’s death on a cross does not have to be ratified by anyone.....The gospel does not have to move me emotionally before it can save me. The Son of God died on a real wooden cross on a rocky hillside in human history for the sins of the world. You and I were not there to see it or hear it, but God saw it, and therein lies its primary significance.”

“This perspective is sorely missing today in a Christianity that works so hard to make itself acceptable on a personal level. In an attempt to simplify the gospel, to make the gospel make sense to minds that do not want to have to adjust very much to understand it, we have selected those parts of it that are compatible with popular culture. And we assumed we were doing God a big favor by getting this concept down to a level where so many folks can follow along. In an attempt to get people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior, we are altering the picture of Jesus we present, in order to make it more easily acceptable.”

The conclusion of the matter is the power of the cross simply stands on its own two feet. It needs no more defending than a lion needs defending. Just let it loose. Paul reminds all of us that it is the power of God unto salvation. The Lion of Judah doesn't need a manicure.