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Substitution: The Sure Foundation of Atonement

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¹ He was a German count in his twentieth year. He was in the midst of a “grand tour” of the centers of learning and culture in Europe. Lectures and towns of the great cities of Holland failed to impress him. Six months in Paris were little better. Even the lavish Palace of Versailles failed to move him.



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*I maintain that the death of Christ was violent,
vicarious, and victorious.*

Then one day in 1720, while visiting an art museum in Dusseldorf, Germany, he was led to the one experience which would transform him for life. He viewed a famous painting—Domenico Feti’s *Ecce Homo* (Behold the Man)—a poignant, passionate portrait of the thorn-crowned Jesus. Beneath the painting he read the inscription, “This have I done for you; what have you done for me?” At this point Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf responded with a passionate, life-long commitment to give his all to Jesus Christ and serve him for the rest of his life. His life’s motto henceforth became: “I have one passion, and it is him, only him.” Until his death in 1760, Zinzendorf spent thirty-three years leading the Pietist Moravians in what was up until then the greatest mission in the history of Protestantism. In the two decades following the August 13, 1727, outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Moravians living on Zinzendorf’s estate, that church sent out more missionaries than all Protestant groups together had sent out in the previous two centuries.

This was all rooted in and motivated by the suffering Savior on the cross. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14: “For Christ’s love

compels us.” And why does his love compel us? “Because we are convinced that one died for all, therefore all died.” It is passion ignited by the atoning work of Christ and of the experience of reconciliation and Christ’s righteousness made over to us that moves us to say with Paul, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). “All this is from God,” continues Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, “who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The four distinguishing hallmarks of evangelicalism are conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. All four of these hallmarks were present in Zinzendorf and the Pietism of which he was such a central part, as well as in Anabaptism. Cross-centeredness is the foundation without which the activism and biblicism and conversion are shorn of power and meaning. At the heart of our evangelical faith lies the atoning work of Christ. Indeed, the Christian life finds its origin in the cross and is lived in grateful response to it and humble imitation of it.

Clarity of thinking regarding the biblical teaching on the atonement is not merely an academic exercise. It is vital for the integrity of the Christian faith, for the proclamation of the gospel, and for the health of the church. *Substitution is the non-negotiable foundation of the atoning work of Christ*, regardless of what particular model or theory one might espouse, and there are several helpful models. The atonement is a many-faceted, multi-splendored doctrine, to be sure, and can be viewed from many angles. But any angle for a theory which diminishes or denies the vicarious nature of our Lord’s death is to empty the cross of its power (1 Cor. 1:17).

Now we do not believe we are saved by a theological *theory* of the atonement. We are forgiven and reconciled to God by the *fact* of the atonement—the finished work of Christ on the cross. Still, one cannot get away from interpreting the very baseline of the gospel—that which is of *first* importance, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4. So here it is—Christ died for our sins / because

of our sins / to atone for our sins. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24).

In theological circles the various atonement theories have come under considerable analysis. One particular understanding which has received harsh critique is the penal substitutionary view, long held by evangelical Christians, in spite of often having been poorly taught and applied. Penal substitutionary images have been embedded in our hymns and choruses, sermon illustrations, and evangelistic appeals. The message of the cross has been the basis of untold conversions and the transformation of millions of lives, like that of Count Zinzendorf. And of course Scripture is replete with images and descriptions of Christ’s substitutionary death bearing the penalty our sins justly deserved. Jesus is the Lamb of God who bears and takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And our Lord was not unclear regarding his mission. He said: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

One of the reasons some theologians, Mennonites among them, are moving away from this aspect of substitution is that the concept of God punishing his Son is seen as cruel and violent. Violence breeds violence and this is not God’s way. This is inconsistent with our understanding of peace and nonviolence. J. Nelson Kraybill says that the Four Spiritual Laws, the closing prayer of which reflects substitutionary atonement theology, is highly deficient. In the substitutionary view, Kraybill writes, “Jesus took the punishment we deserve. Such an explanation can be *inferred* from the New Testament, and should be included in our theological toolbox, but to use that explanation as the primary way to understand salvation could make God look like an angry deity who ‘evens the score’ with violence.” Kraybill offers what he calls Four Spiritual Truths, with an accompanying prayer, all based on the Christus Victor model of the atonement.²

The thrust of this paper is that various other models illuminate different aspects of the saving work of Christ, including his disarming of the powers (Col. 2:15) and cosmic renewal (Col. 1:20, Rev. 21:1) and much more—but the basis upon which we must build toward gaining an understanding of the totality of Christ’s redemptive work is his sin-of-the-world embracing, penalty-bearing, wrath-accepting manifestation of love, mercy, and grace

for the healing and restoration of lost humanity and for the entire cosmos. In the words of Roger Nicole, “substitution (is) the major linchpin of the doctrine of atonement.”³ In this same volume Kevin Vanhoozer notes: “This is not to reduce atonement to substitution, but to make substitution a necessary condition for understanding the saving significance of Jesus’ death.”⁴

Christ bore the penalty that was due to us. The wrath of a holy God against sin and evil was borne by Jesus, the One (according to Isaiah 53) oppressed and afflicted and crushed down because the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. Thus the soul-wrenching cry of dereliction rang out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

DEFINING THE ATONEMENT

Atonement, i.e., at-one-ment, is what God provided in Christ when on the cross he took our place and bore our sin. Atonement is to make us one with God, to bring about reconciliation between God and humankind. Our Confession of Faith simply says: “God reconciled the world to himself by the atoning blood of Jesus.” Tim Geddert says atonement means simply “becoming reconciled with God.” He adds, “Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection are not the atonement, they are the means of the atonement. Theories about how this all works are also not the atonement, they are simply theories.”⁵ Geddert also affirms: “The Bible presents the atonement through Jesus’ death on the cross as a ‘substitutionary atonement.’ When Jesus died for us, he died to take our place, to do what we could not do, to accomplish what we could not accomplish.”⁶

In *The Glory of the Atonement*, J. I. Packer points out that the English word “atonement” as it is commonly used means amends for wrong-doing and so obscures the “at-one-ment” idea that its etymology suggests as seen in Paul’s use of the word “reconciliation.” This word signifies a status of peace with God that Christ’s death achieved on our behalf (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18–20).⁷

The word “atonement” is rare in the New Testament. Indeed, it is not used at all in many translations. The concept, however, of God providing a once-for-all reconciliation through the shedding of Christ’s blood on our behalf is found throughout the New Testament using a variety of metaphors and figures of speech.

The Old Testament is full of atonement language. Here we

read of a complicated system of sacrifices God provided so that atonement / cleansing / arresting the wrath of God might occur. For example, on the Day of Atonement two goats played crucial roles. The high priest was to “take two male goats for a sin offering” (Lev. 16:5) in order to atone for the people’s sins. One goat was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the altar to make atonement. On the living goat, a fascinating ritual ensued: the high priest laid hands on the goat, confessed the sins of the people, and transferred them onto its head and banished the goat into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20–22).

The sacrificial goat exhibited the *means* of atonement and the banished goat the *results*. I. Howard Marshall observes: “The scapegoat ritual pictured the ‘getting rid of’ sin rather than the sinners. The confession of sin transferred the sin to the goat. When we read of Christ as the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the same kind of thing is happening.”⁸

Hebrews 9 and 10 point to the shed blood of Christ as effecting what animal sacrifices and the scapegoat symbolized, i.e., the cancellation and removal of sin from God’s sight and hence the purification of the sinner. Hebrews 9:22, echoing Leviticus 17:11, states that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. In the Old Testament rituals God was teaching his people the gravity of sin and that their breaking covenant faithfulness not only brought him grief and sorrow but anger and wrath. Then by various aspects of the sacrificial system, an ultimate sacrifice was foreshadowed and foretold, whose death would absorb God’s wrath and take upon himself “the iniquity of us all.”

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, as no other Old Testament passage, undergirds and explicates the substitutionary death of Christ, the Suffering Servant of the Lord. It is from this text that I want to start my first major point: Jesus’ perspective on the atonement. Three other points will follow—the Pauline perspective, the Lion and the Lamb motif of Revelation, and then some closing caveats.

JESUS’ PERSPECTIVE ON THE ATONEMENT

It is clear that by his numerous allusions to the Suffering Servant motif of Isaiah, our Lord saw himself in that soteriological light. He would fulfill the sin-bearing role of Isaiah 53.

The New Testament writers certainly saw in Isaiah 53 the

atoning work of Christ. Indeed, “No other passage from the Old Testament was as important to the (early) Church as Isaiah 53,” writes Joachim Jeremias.⁹

The New Testament writers quote eight specific verses from Isaiah 53 as being fulfilled in Jesus: verse 1, “Who has believed our message” or “what was heard from us” (ESV), is applied to Jesus by John (John 12:38); verse 4, “he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (NRSV), is referenced in Matthew 8:17 as being fulfilled in our Lord’s healing ministry; verses 5–6, “by his wounds we are healed” and “We all like sheep have gone astray,” are picked up in 1 Peter 2:22–25; verse 9, “nor was there any deceit in his mouth” and verse 11, “he will bear their iniquities,” are also referenced in 1 Peter 2:22–25. Thus eight verses out of twelve in Isaiah 53 refer to Jesus.

There are numerous references by Jesus to Isaiah 53. For example, he said he would be “rejected” (Mark 9:12; cf. Isa. 53:3), “taken away” (Mark 2:20; cf. Isa. 53:9), and “numbered with the transgressors” (Luke 22:37; cf. Isa. 53:12).

Isaiah 53:7–8 was a pivotal passage in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was reading about the One who was led like a sheep to the slaughter and being deprived of justice and life, but he did not know of whom these verses were speaking. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

Isaiah 53 is reflected by Jesus in his “ransom sayings” (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28) and his “supper sayings” (Mark 14:24; Matt. 26:28). In his reference to his life being given as a ransom for many, Jesus unites the “Son of Man” and “Servant” passages. A ransom was the price paid to free slaves from bondage.

In the institution of the Lord’s Supper Jesus declared that his blood would be “poured out for many,” certainly echoing Isaiah 53:12—“he poured out his life unto death.” One might add that the “many” for whom our Lord gave his life as a ransom and the “many” for whom he poured out his blood are not as restrictive as they at first appear. The “many” of the ransom saying, echo the fourfold “many” in Isaiah 53:14–15. Indeed, as Stott points out, the expression is not exclusive (“many, but not all”) but, in the Semitic manner of speech, *inclusive* (“the totality consisting of many”).¹⁰

There are those who take exception to the interpretation that

our Lord fulfills the salvatory role of Isaiah 53. In *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver asserts that Jesus' death was never intended by God or chosen by Jesus, for this would have been tantamount to sanctioning violence. "Jesus came not to die but to live, to witness to the reign of God in human history. While he may have known that carrying out that mission would provoke inevitable fatal opposition, his purpose was not to get himself killed."¹¹

Furthermore, Weaver claims that the cross was not a salvific necessity. Jesus' death "accomplishes nothing for the salvation of sinners, nor does it accomplish anything for the divine economy. Since Jesus' mission was not to die but to make visible the reign of God, it is clear that neither God nor the reign of God needs Jesus' death in the way that his death is irreducibly needed in satisfaction atonement."¹² Jesus' death was clearly not the will of God, according to Weaver.

Both of the above assertions fly in the face of the abundant and clear teaching of Scripture. In addition to our exposition of Isaiah 53, we add some sample passages from the Gospels. In Luke 18:31–33 Jesus, for the third time, foretells his death to the disciples: "And taking the twelve, he said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.'"

In John's Gospel, Jesus is described as moving steadily toward the appointed "hour" of his death (2:4; 7:30, 8:20; 12:2,27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1), which is also the hour of his "glory" (12:23, 27–28; 17:1–5). In John 10:11 and 14–18 our Lord says:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheepFor this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received

from my Father.

As to the salvific necessity of our Lord's death, the "ransom sayings," the "supper sayings" of Jesus already referred to, indeed, the entire New Testament, exult in the Lamb "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5). Throughout his epistles Paul exclaims that he wants to proclaim nothing but "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), "For the word of the cross... to us who are being saved is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Was the atonement nonviolent, a view gaining much traction? No atonement theory can possibly avoid the fact that Jesus suffered a cruel and bloody death, crucifixion probably being the cruelest method of execution in the Roman world.

Critics cannot deny the physical violence of crucifixion. What they say is that there was no *divine* violence involved in the death of Christ. "Make no mistake about it," writes Weaver. "Satisfaction *in any form* depends on divinely sanctioned violence that follows from the assumption that doing justice means to punish."¹³ How can a God of all peace not only sanction violence but actually require it to satisfy his own honor or justice?

The atoning death of Christ was violent in its *execution*, but our Lord was nonviolent in his *response*—no striking back and no retaliation. *He endured violence nonviolently*, knowing this was the will of God. He could have called on his Father to send more than twelve legions of angels to deliver him (Matt. 26:53), but he did not. Instead, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23).

I maintain that the death of Christ was *violent, vicarious, and victorious*. Thus we don't have to choose between the "three v view" and the Christus Victor view. In Colossians 2:14–15 we read that the cancelling of our debt on the cross means also triumph over the evil powers oppressing us and our world. God nailed the indictment against us to the cross, and by the death and resurrection of his Son "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him."

THE PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

Paul was the preacher of the cross *par excellence*. To unpack his perspective on the atonement is a large task. We begin by briefly

commenting on what has been called “the most significant atonement passage in the New Testament...a text riddled with theological controversy.”¹⁴ The text is Romans 3:21–26. Much of the discussion centers around the meaning of the Greek word *hilasterion*. Is it to be translated “propitiation” (the turning away of God’s wrath), or “expiation” (the covering or cancellation of sins), or something more generic like “sacrifice of atonement”?

Let me go on record as leaning in to “propitiation” as the more consistent translation of *hilasterion* in this context, with “expiation” not denied, but seen as secondary. The thrust of Romans 1—God’s wrath revealed against all unrighteousness— is carried through in Romans 3, 5, and 8. We are saved by Christ from the wrath of God (5:9) and “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

In his commentary on Romans in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, N.T. Wright states:

Dealing with wrath or punishment is propitiation; with sin, expiation. You can propitiate a person who is angry; you expiate a sin, crime or stain on your character. Vehement rejection of the former idea in many quarters has led some to insist that only “expiation” is in view here. But the fact remains that in 1:18–3:20 Paul has declared that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness and that despite God’s forbearance this will finally be meted out; that in 5:8 and in the whole promise of 8:1–30, those who are Christ’s are rescued from wrath.¹⁵

In the Old Testament, *hilasterion* refers to the “mercy seat” in the temple on which blood was sprinkled and at which place God’s merciful forgiveness was granted on the Day of Atonement. The Hebrew word for atonement means “ransom, substitute, cover, or wipe away” and “whatever the precise nuance of its mechanism... the result of atonement was always to prevent or arrest the wrath of God from flaming out and consuming Israel while he dwelt in their midst.”¹⁶

Citing passages like Numbers 16:46–49, Numbers 25:1–3, Exodus 32:30–33:6, and 2 Samuel 24:1–25, Groves proposes that “atonement” is best understood as made by an act that purifies

something in such a manner that the outbreak of Yahweh's holy wrath is either arrested or prevented."¹⁷

As we have noted, Isaiah 53 is full of atonement language. It concerns that which purifies and shields from God's wrath—the Suffering Servant bore our grief, was smitten by God, wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, oppressed and afflicted, cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for our transgressions, and it was the will of the Lord to crush him and put him to grief.

The cross was *necessary* because humanity was alienated from God by sin and God was alienated from humanity by holy wrath. Thus Romans 3:25–26 explains the need for Christ's propitiating sacrifice of God's holy character.

One of the reasons the concept of propitiation is rejected is, as Weaver and others assert, it portrays a wrathful God—vindictive and vengeful, requiring placating as did pagan deities. However, Scripture does *not* portray God in this manner. He has none of the capriciousness, spitefulness, and loss of control so characteristic of human anger. God's wrath is always predictable because it is provoked by *sin and evil* and by *sin and evil* alone. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wrong (Hab. 1:13). Stott writes: "What is common to the biblical concepts of the holiness and the wrath of God is the truth that they cannot coexist with sin. God's holiness exposes sin; his wrath opposes it. So sin cannot approach God and God cannot tolerate sin."¹⁸ It is precisely because of this dilemma that God put forward and Christ willingly became a propitiary offering. The condemnation our sins deserved (for we are all "by nature children of wrath"—Eph. 2:3) fell on Christ, and now "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

There was no conflict in the triune Godhead regarding the atonement, nor in God's character. The cup of God's wrath was given by the Father and voluntarily taken by the Son on our behalf. "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" said Jesus (John 18:11).

God's love, his holiness, justice, and wrath are all part of his character. Because he is love, God provides an atonement that simultaneously wipes out the sin of those who offend and keeps his own justice intact (Rom. 3:26). In the words of P.T. Forsyth in *The*

Cruciality of the Cross, “The holiness of God...is meaningless without judgment.” The one thing he could not do is nothing. “He must either inflict punishment or assume it. And he chose the latter course, as honoring the law while saving the guilty. He took his own judgment.”¹⁹

This is all of grace and is received by faith. The richness of the Romans 3:21–26 text comes through in a variety of the translations: *New Living Translation*, “We are made right in God’s sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins”; *The Message*, “God sacrificed Jesus on the altar...out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself”; and the expanded translation in *Today’s New International Version*, “This righteousness is given through faith/through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe....God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”

THE LION AND THE LAMB MOTIF OF REVELATION

As we have noted, much current theological thinking seeks to marginalize biblical passages which speak of wrath and punishment as pertaining to God’s actions, in spite of the fact that God’s wrath is mentioned no fewer than thirty times in the New Testament alone. If there is any doubt regarding the wrath and damnation from which the atoning work of Christ came to rescue us, the final book of the Bible graphically shows the horrific fate of those who reject that atoning work.

Warfare, wrath, and judgment are writ large in the Apocalypse. For example, terms seldom used elsewhere in the New Testament appear quite frequently in Revelation, i.e., twice the Lamb makes war—in 2:16 and in 19:11, where the warfare is linked with “judging righteously.” Two words for wrath, *thymes* and *orgē*, are used ten and six times respectively, far more often than elsewhere in the New Testament, except *orgē* in Romans. The verb “avenge” occurs twice (6:10; 19:2) of its six New Testament uses. Numerous words from the *dik*-family are used, stressing the righteousness and justice of God (16:5, 7; 19:2; 22:1; 15:4; 19:8; 19:11).²⁰

Although Revelation is certainly largely symbolic, one must not see symbol as taking away the surety and severity of God’s judgment. From our Lord’s mouth “comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (19:15). Miroslav Volf observes

that the violence of the divine word which comes from our Lord's mouth is no less lethal than the violence of the literal sword, albeit Volf does not argue for a literal sword. But, he writes: "We must either reject the Rider's violence or find ways to make sense of it."²¹ Robert Mounce in his commentary on Revelation states: "Any view of God which eliminates judgment and his hatred of sin... finds no support in the strong and virile realism of the Apocalypse."²² And Volf observes that "a non-indignant God would be an accomplice in injustice, deception and violence."²³

Along with judgment, God is a God of mercy. Psalm 33:5 succinctly summarizes a theme that runs throughout the Bible: "He (God) loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." Everything God does emanates from the core of his being, which is steadfast love. "His judgments are true and just" (Rev. 19:2); the Rider on the white horse "is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war" (19:11). This judgment scene is set as a prelude to a marvelous description of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation 21 and 22 "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). All manner of evil will be abolished from the holy city (Rev. 22:15). Perfect justice will have been served, and peace, so intimately tied together in Scripture with justice, will be perfected in the entire cosmos.

It is a human tendency to give precedence to one of these attributes of God over the other—he is our Peace, the Peacemaker, or he is the one who brings judgment and justice. To over-emphasize the one attribute, i.e., peace/shalom, could lead to an easy universalism; to overstress justice and judgment portrays God almost exclusively as an angry deity. When Hans Boersma, an advocate of penal substitution, separates God's justice and mercy, almost to the point of valorizing the former over the latter, the picture of a "bloodthirsty" God becomes understandable. Likewise, the designation of atonement as "satisfaction," focusing solely on divine wrath, obscures the "all-encompassing love of God."²⁴

We dare not compromise the one attribute or the other. The eschatological justice achieved by the wrath of the Lamb and the end-time shalom which ensues, reflect the truth that God's love and God's wrath are part of an integral whole in the divine nature. "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet," wrote Paul in Romans 16:20. *God will set things right.*

CLOSING CAVEATS

Substitution is the sure foundation of the atoning work of Christ. Here is a secure place where we can stand. Archimedes, third-century BC Greek mathematician and scientist, discovered the laws of the lever and the pulley. With such knowledge he could make machines capable of moving heavy loads. Archimedes said: “Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.”

We have a place to stand—a sure foundation for our confidence that the heaviest load of all human sin and guilt has been lifted by the atoning work of Christ. And his glorious resurrection and ascension assures us that “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

I conclude with five closing caveats:

1. The penal substitution principle is clearly evident throughout Scripture. However, as we have seen, there are numerous ways this principle is expressed. These include the concepts of sacrifice, curse, redemption, ransom, reconciliation, and forgiveness. In all of these understandings of the cross, writes I. Howard Marshall, “the principle of one person bearing the painful consequences of sin is the *modus operandi*...There are different nuances in these expressions of the nature of salvation. But the central action, common to them all, is God doing something in Christ that involves the death of Christ, who bears our sins and the painful consequences of them. Christ’s sacrifice saves us from exclusion from the Kingdom of God. The term ‘penal substitution’ appropriately expresses this process.”²⁵
2. In advocating a penal substitution model, one must qualify this by adding there are *several* penal substitution models of the atonement. To this we must add that the particular penal or satisfaction version one espouses is not the only legitimate interpretation of the cross or that it says everything that needs to be said about the cross. Atonement theology is many-sided and neither the penal, or the moral, or the Christus Victor, or the recapitulation, or any one of the more than a dozen atonement theories being advocated can cover every aspect of the atonement and how it leads to our salvation and spurs us on to discipleship and sacrificial living following the example of Jesus.

3. When making the case for penal substitution one ought not to go as far as to assert, as does Hans Boersma, that “When an individual draws wrong inferences from a penal theory of the atonement, the error lies not with the penal theory but with the person drawing the mistaken conclusion.”²⁵ But what we need to say is that many critics have taken caricatures or at least extreme, crass, and badly exegeted versions of penal substitution as their objects of attack. Bad exegesis and distorted analogies ought not to dictate abandoning the principle of substitution so deeply embedded in Scripture, but call for correctives and more holistic interpretations.
4. The above caveat also applies when answering the criticism that substitution theories are only concerned with the salvation of individual souls and the *hereafter* and not personal and social ethics for *this* life. The wrathful God of penal substitution acts exactly opposite from the teaching and example he left us in Jesus—not retribution but restoration, not retaliation but accepting unjust suffering. Regarding this latter point, holistically exegeted substitution theology always calls believers to follow our Lord’s example of non-retaliation and also to die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Pet. 2:21–24). We love our enemies, do not respond in kind, and pursue peace, leaving God, the righteous judge to avenge wrongdoing (Rom. 1:17–21).

There is mystery surrounding redemptive violence. We are to be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1), but not in the matter of using violence. That is his prerogative and his alone. And he is still the God of all peace who “employs violence for the sake of the ultimate shalom of the Kingdom of GodThe ultimate ‘theology’ of divine violence, therefore, lies in the resurrection as the completion of the Paschal mysteryRedemptive violence, therefore, finds its justification not in a rationally conclusive argument but in a story of salvation that is based on an ontology of love and peace, because the story ends in ‘the kingdom of peace.’”²⁷

5. Judgment and wrath are real. We need to be eternally grateful that God, through Christ, bore the awful punishment we deserved (Rom. 3:23–25; Eph. 2:3–5). Beyond our personal salvation, we rejoice that our Lord’s redemptive, reconciling work will eventuate in cosmic renewal (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20; Rev. 21–22). And as believers motivated and compelled by the

love of Christ, we need to be urgent about *our* ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:17–21). We share good news—Christ is our peace. We “who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13–14).

*To him who sits on the throne and
to the Lamb be blessing and honor
and glory and might forever and ever!”
“Amen!”*

(Rev. 5:13–14)

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the Mennonite Brethren Leaders' Study Conference on the Atonement held November 3, 2010, at the Gracepoint Church in Surrey, B.C.
2. *Canadian Mennonite*, 26 January 2004, 6-7.
3. In Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2004), 445.
4. *Ibid.*, 403n114.
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