

# THE THEOLOGY OF THE ATONEMENT

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'A biblical understanding of atonement is concerned above all with the restoration of mutual, undistorted, unpolluted divine/human relationship, not with the appeasing of a God angered by the misdeeds of his creatures.'<sup>1</sup> This statement by Alan Mann is representative of the view of a number of theologians who reject the concept of penal substitution as the principal means, or even as a subordinate means, of understanding the significance of the death of Christ.

One starting point for this rejection is the objection that such an understanding entails the belief that God could not save sinners until he had first exercised violence on his son, and that the unacceptability of such violence indicates that penal substitution cannot be the right way to understand the significance of the cross.<sup>2</sup> This then leads to attempts to show that the concept is not well-founded in Scripture and even represents a misinterpretation of scriptural teaching.<sup>3</sup> This view is taken by a number of theologians including among conservative evangelicals Joel Green and Mark Baker, Stephen Travis and Stephen Chalke.<sup>4</sup> We are thus conducting a discussion within the family among people who agree that we are saved from our sins solely by grace through faith on the grounds that God sent his Son to die in our place and for our sins and who want to understand more fully what this means and what it does not mean. I shall argue that the doctrine is well-founded in Scripture and that it is defensible against the objections brought against it. And I hope that it may be possible to do so in such a way that, whatever may be the problems with the terminology, all of us may be able to recognise the validity and, indeed, the centrality of what is known by the term 'penal substitution' instead of repudiating the concept. I am not here to win a debate but to try to achieve a consensus on the basis of acceptance of what Scripture teaches.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A. Mann, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society: Engaging with an emerging culture* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 94. It is not clear whether this statement means that a biblical understanding of atonement is not concerned *at all* with the appeasing of God or that it is not concerned *primarily* ('above all') with the appeasing of God.

<sup>2</sup>See the discussion in J. B. Green and M. D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 30-31, 90-92.

<sup>3</sup>In the present company it may not be necessary to deal with the position of those who accept that Scripture teaches penal substitution and then say that we are not bound by the teaching of Scripture.

<sup>4</sup>S. Chalke and A. Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Green and Baker, *Recovering*; J. Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995); C. D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); T. Smail, *Once and for all: A Confession of the Cross* (London: DLT, 1998); S. H. Travis, 'Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul's Thought about the Atonement', in J. B. Green and M. Turner, *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 332-345 (reprinted in Goldingay, *Atonement*, 21-38).

More widely, see I. Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice* (London: DLT, 1995); T. Gorringer, *Cross and Retribution* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988); R. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>In the inaugural F. F. Bruce Lecture, entitled 'Some Thoughts on Penal Substitution' and delivered at the Highland Theological College on 1st October, 2004 (and as yet unpublished), I defended three main points:

1. If the phrase penal substitution is open to misunderstanding, possibly because it conveys different ideas to the world at large from those intended by its proponents, then those of us who believe in the concept should be prepared to hold on to it but use phraseology that is better adapted to communicating it today.

2. We need to think more carefully about the nature of retribution lest a mistaken view about the divine reaction to sin leads us to defend something that we do not need to defend.

3. The contemporary understanding of the Trinity is of decisive significance in helping us to formulate an acceptable understanding of the doctrine.

Inevitably in this paper I shall return to these proposals, but I shall endeavour to develop the case in a fresh way and to bring in some further points that have become clearer to me on reflection over the past few months.

In this paper I am concerned with the biblical and theological foundations that underlie our preaching of the gospel and not with the evangelistic edifice that we erect on these foundations. Therefore, even if we were to conclude that we should not use terms like 'penal suffering' or 'appeasing God' in our preaching, we still need to ask whether there is a place for them and what is meant by them in our technical theology. This restriction in the scope of the present contribution leaves us with the problem of how we communicate biblical theology to unbelievers with a different world-view from ours. Here I warmly appreciate the work done by various evangelical authors in trying to find new ways of expressing the significance of the cross for people today, and I regret that my appreciation may be obscured by the need to concentrate in my limited time on what they have to say about the traditional understanding of the cross and to do so in critical mode.

A doctrine of the work of Christ has to deal with two aspects of the human situation, our situation as sinners in relationship to the God against whom we have sinned and our situation as sinners in relation to the sin that masters us. This paper is required to deal primarily with the former aspect of the situation, and here four views held by evangelicals can be distinguished.

1. One is that the principle of penal substitution does not figure in the New Testament at all.<sup>6</sup>
2. A second is that it is only one of the pictures/metaphors/analogies used in the New Testament to express the significance of the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Some might argue that in this case it is of lesser importance or even dispensable.
3. A third view is it occurs to such an extent that it is not only indispensable but also the most important.<sup>8</sup>
4. A fourth view is that penal substitution is the underlying principle present in all the others and the factor that makes them cohere.<sup>9</sup>

In an attempt to assess the place, if any, of penal substitution in the New Testament, and hence in evangelical theology, we shall begin with a very brief comment on the use of metaphor and then move on to an examination of the place and nature of judgment, wrath and punishment in the New Testament teaching. This will lead into a restatement of the underlying motif of divine holiness and its relationship to the atonement, a survey of the different ways in which the death of Jesus is understood, and some final comments on objections to the doctrine of penal substitution.

#### THE USE OF METAPHOR

First, there is the acknowledged fact that the New Testament uses various forms of metaphorical or analogical language to explain the significance of what Christ did and does for human beings through his incarnation, obedient life, death and resurrection, and heavenly session, and they are to be treated seriously.

Over against the suggestion that penal substitution is simply one metaphor among many and that we can perhaps dispense with it or at least place it on the margin let me cite Trevor Hart's comment that 'the plurality of biblical imagery does not seem to be intended purely or even primarily as a selection box from which we may draw what we will according to our needs and the pre-understanding of our community... the metaphors are not to be understood as exchangeable, as if one might simply be substituted for another without net gain or loss, but complementary, directing us to distinct elements in and consequences of the fullness of God's saving action in Christ and the Spirit.'<sup>10</sup> I reiterate the point made by

<sup>6</sup>V. Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: Epworth, 1945<sup>2</sup>), 197, commented that the New Testament teaching 'comes so near, without actually crossing, the bounds of substitutionary doctrine'.

<sup>7</sup>So Gunton, *Actuality*, but he does not regard it as dispensable.

<sup>8</sup>So J. I. Packer, 'What did the cross achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution', *TynB* 25 (1974), 3-45.

<sup>9</sup>D. Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 65: 'all the benefits of Christ's death depend upon his sin-bearing as the innocent substitute'. Cf. J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 159: 'We strongly reject, therefore, every explanation of the death of Christ which does not have at its centre the principle of "satisfaction through substitution", indeed divine self-satisfaction through divine self-substitution'. Cf. J. I. Packer, 'The Atonement in the Life of the Christian', in C. E. Hill and F. A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 416.

<sup>10</sup>T. Hart, 'Redemption and fall', in C. E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 189-206 (190). Hart himself appears to favour the 'satisfaction' type of understanding and thinks that the development of theories of penal substitution was not free from some misunderstanding of Scripture (201-202).

Henri Blocher that the metaphorical language used in the New Testament does convey truth and is to be taken seriously.<sup>11</sup>

A second point that needs to be made is that the various metaphors used in the New Testament intermingle with one another and cannot be rigorously separated from one another. It follows that any single one of them cannot bear the whole weight of explaining the significance of the work of Christ, and criticisms of the metaphor of penal substitution because it cannot express every aspect of the doctrine are misplaced. We should not ask this explanation of one major aspect of the death of Christ to do things that it was never intended to do.

## THE LANGUAGE OF JUDGMENT, WRATH AND PUNISHMENT

If the cross is concerned 'with the restoration of a mutual, undistorted, unpolluted divine/human relationship, and not with the appeasing of a God angered by the misdeeds of his creatures', why does this divine/human relationship need to be restored if it is not because God is angered by the misdeeds of his creatures? How else are relationships broken? Why was the death of Christ necessary to restore the relationship? I want to clarify the language of anger and appeasement but to do so in a way that will enable us all to say 'well maybe terms like penalty and anger are open to misunderstanding, but properly understood they express the heart of the matter'.<sup>12</sup>

This is true in terms of the sheer volume of evidence pointing in this direction. The reality of final judgment as the active response of God to human sin is an absolutely central part of the predicament from which sinners need to be saved. No amount of emphasis on the present effects of sin and the need for salvation from them can alter the facts that in the last analysis 'the wages of sin is death' and that we need both aspects of the 'double cure', deliverance from the effects of sin as well as from the power of sin. There is a complex network of terminology that conveys this picture of judgment and condemnation.

### *Punishment*

Admittedly those who would downplay the term 'penal' understood in terms of punishment can point to the fact that in the New Testament the concept of punishment does not figure all that prominently.<sup>13</sup> In the parabolic teaching of Jesus wicked servants will be punished when the master returns (Mt 24:43-51; Lk 12:45-48). The noun is applied once to the eternal punishment of the wicked (Mt 25:46). Those who disobey and reject the gospel will pay the penalty of eternal destruction (2 Thes 1:9). A person who rejects the Son of God and the blood of the covenant deserves a greater punishment than somebody who rejected the law of Moses and was put to death (Heb 10:29). The Lord keeps the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment (2 Pet 2:9).<sup>14</sup> That is the sum total of references to divine punishment associated particularly with the day of judgment.<sup>15</sup> One might want to ask whether the comparative rareness of this term should warn us against putting the term 'penal' in a central position in our doctrine. But to do so would be premature.

### *Vengeance*

Second, there is the concept of vengeance, sometimes rendered as 'revenge'. In the Old Testament there is the ghastly story of Adoni-Bezek who is maimed by the Israelites by the amputation of his thumbs and

<sup>11</sup>H. Blocher, 'Biblical metaphors and the doctrine of the atonement', *JETS* 47:4 (Dec. 2004), 629-645. See also (not yet available to me): H. Blocher, 'Agnus Victor. The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment', in J. G. Stackhouse, Jr. (ed.), *What Does It Mean To Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons on Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 87-. Also 'The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ: The Current Theological Situation', *EJT* 8:1 (1999), 23-36.

<sup>12</sup>Probably the term 'appeasement' is too compromised to be usable, since it is very hard to use it of a God who takes the initiative in offering salvation to sinful human beings.

<sup>13</sup>In some English versions sometimes words more expressive of judgment are translated by terms for punishment since the judgment implies condemnation and subsequent sentence.

<sup>14</sup>Or 'while waiting for the day of judgment' (cf. NRSV).

<sup>15</sup>The term is used in some translations for the extended rebuke effected probably by some kind of excommunication of an offender at Corinth which should by now have led to his repentance (2 Cor 2:6). If Peter regards the secular authorities as appointed by God, then they are his agents in carrying out punishment on wrongdoers (1 Pet 2:14). Fear produces punishment (the painful feelings of anticipation of punishment to come; 1 Jn 4:18). Note also Heb 12:5-6 of the painful punishment involved in the training of children.

big toes, and comments: 'Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them' (Jdg 1:7). Indeed, the author of Judges refers to God repaying the wickedness done by Abimelek by letting him be slain by his armour-bearer (Jdg 9:56).

Sometimes people who are suffering injustice simply want to have their rights recognised over against the adversary, by stopping the injustice and effecting some kind of compensation. So the unjust judge in the parable is a picture of those who afflict the chosen people of God, and he will intervene on their side (Lk 18:1-8). Here the emphasis would seem to be on the righting of their wrongs.

But vengeance may also include the common desire to inflict some corresponding pain on the wrongdoer.<sup>16</sup> Persons who want to take vengeance for evils they have suffered are told not to do so as private individuals but to leave it to God who will repay their opponents (Rom 12:19; citing Deut 32:35).<sup>17</sup> They are specifically not to repay evil suffered with evil inflicted. Human vengeance is liable to be sinful and therefore is prohibited, just as very firm limits are also set to the display of human anger.

In 1 Thes 4:6 God will take vengeance on those who wrong their brothers, taking the side of the wronged and acting against the wrong-doer. Sometimes he may do this through human agents.<sup>18</sup> In Lk 21:22 there are days of vengeance on Jerusalem, apparently as punishment for rejection of God. In 2 Thes 1:8 God inflicts vengeance on those who do not know him and disobey the gospel (cf. Rev 19:2).<sup>19</sup>

### Wrath

The impression of sparsity that we gain from looking at punishment and vengeance is dispelled when we take note of the very much more frequent usage of the concepts of wrath and judgment. The noun *orgē* is common.<sup>20</sup> There is a future wrath (Mt 3:7 par Lk 3:7) or day of wrath; Jesus could feel anger at the hardness of the human heart (Mk 3:5; cf. the use of the verb in Mk 1:41 TNIV txt.). God's wrath remains on those who reject the Son (Jn 3:36). There is a lengthy set of references to God's future (but to some extent already revealed and active) wrath in Paul, and it is this from which believers will be saved (Rom 5:9).<sup>21</sup> It is anticipated in the reaction of magistrates (as agents of God) to wrong-doing (Rom 13:4-5). It hangs over evildoers (Eph 2:3; 5:6; Col 3:6), and it comes upon unbelieving Israel that hinders evangelism of Gentiles (1 Thes 2:16).<sup>22</sup> Hebrews 3:11; 4:3 cites Ps 95:11 of God's attitude to disobedient Israel, a peg on which I can hang the reminder that references to God's anger in the Old Testament can be counted in their hundreds. Revelation particularly emphasises the coming expression of the wrath of God and the Lamb (Rev 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). Here the term 'cup' is used metaphorically for suffering and especially for suffering imposed by God (Mk 10:39-39; 14:36).<sup>23</sup> The other term for wrath, *thumos*, is used by Paul for a human passion that is to be avoided (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8), and by Rev. both for the wrath of the devil (Rev 12:12) and for the passion of the harlot (Rev 14:8) and for various expressions of the wrath of God (Rev 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15). Here the reaction of God to the evil of the world is powerfully expressed.

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<sup>16</sup>The principle is clear in Acts 7:24 where an Israelite is being mistreated by an Egyptian, and Moses comes and overcomes the attacker and does vengeance for the victim by striking (fatally) the Egyptian. We see here the element of intervention on behalf of a victim which goes beyond stopping the attack to taking the wrongdoer's life in view of his attempted murder. The principle that whoever sheds a person's blood, his blood shall be shed is here at work.

<sup>17</sup>The same OT background is summoned in Heb 10:30 to warn that God will judge those in his people who reject his Son.

<sup>18</sup>In Rom 13:4 the magistrate is God's agent to carry out vengeance/punishment, translated in the Net Bible as retribution on wrongdoers. Similarly, Paul expresses readiness to 'punish' (lit. avenge) every act of disobedience in the church at Corinth (2 Cor 10:6); this sounds like punishment of the disobedience by one who has authority on behalf of God.

<sup>19</sup>In Rev 6:10 the souls of martyrs ask God to judge and so avenge their blood. Here something is to be done make up for their murder, presumably punishment of the wrong-doers. The prayer is answered according to the expression of praise in Rev 19:2 which describes what God has done.

<sup>20</sup>The verb to be angry (*orgizomai*) is not used directly of God, although it is used of characters representing God in two parables (Mt 18:34; 22:7 par. Lk 14:21). This may be significant in avoiding the danger of thinking of God as exercising angry passions like human beings.

<sup>21</sup>cf. 1 Thes 1:10; 5:9; Rom 2:5, 8; 3:5 [it is just]; 4:15 [effect of God's law; 9:22, seen in action against 'the vessels of wrath'] .

<sup>22</sup>Human anger is more or less totally forbidden (Rom 12:19); action against enemies should be left to God (cf. Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 2:8; Tit 1:7; Jas 1:19-20).

<sup>23</sup>See especially C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977<sup>5</sup>), 337-339, for the view that the cup is associated with God's wrath.



1. The parallel language of judgment involves God, whether the Father or the Son, as the person who brings about this fate of sinners. If God is the agent in judgment, then equally he is the agent of wrath, particularly since it is so frequently referred to as his wrath.

Certainly all would agree that it is not arbitrary, uncontrolled rage. There is a tendency on the part of critics to identify the feeling of wrath with an emotion that may be arbitrary, in that it bursts out for no reasonable cause, uncontrolled, in that it does not know when to stop or is disproportionate to the offence, and intemperate, in that it somehow gives satisfaction to the wrathful person as when I deal with my frustration by shouting at my computer. Whatever we may make of some of the more difficult material in the Old Testament, which is outside my remit as a New Testament contributor to this discussion, the New Testament does not ascribe such arbitrariness and selfish, uncontrolled anger to God. To use such a term as 'fury', although it is found in Scripture, is to run the risk of misunderstanding. When Paul forbids the human activity of taking vengeance and says 'leave it to God', it does not follow that divine vengeance is exercised in the same sorts of ways as sinful, human vengeance.

2. If God feels other emotions, such as tender compassion, it is difficult to see why he should not feel some kind of revulsion against evil. If God can be said to bring his wrath to an end or to turn from it (Exod 32:12; 2 Chron 12:12; Ps 37:8; Hab 3:2), then equally he can begin it (cf. Rom 3:5; 9:22) or refuse to exercise it (1 Thes 5:9). It is something that is under his control.

3. It is sometimes said that wrath is not fundamental to the character of God in the way that love is. It is true that wrath is kindled as a reaction to evildoers, but it is equally the case that mercy is kindled as a reaction to pitiable people. Both qualities or actions are the expression of the fundamental justice and love of God. You can say, if you will, that the wrath is called forth only when evil is present and to that extent is not fundamental, but precisely the same thing could be said about grace and mercy which are necessitated only when his creatures are in need caused by sin.

4. To some extent, but certainly not entirely, the wrathful actions may be the ways in which the results of sinning affect the sinners themselves; they can be said to bring calamity upon themselves, but this is because God has so ordained it or permitted it. But I would deny the conclusion that to speak in this way is to say that the calamity is not brought about by God. So when Stephen Travis describes the nature of the wrath in Romans 1 as 'God's allowing of people to experience the intrinsic consequences of their refusal to live in relationship with him' and contrasts this with 'the retributive inflicting of punishment from outside',<sup>28</sup> this is a false antithesis in that it ignores the precise 'God gave them up' language of Paul. And to deny that God feels some kind of negative feeling about sin seems to be a denial of the personal character of God who reacts to the evil that ruins his creation and destroys his relationship with his creatures. It is to make the judgment something impersonal and mechanistic rather than the personal reaction of the living God. If we allow that God feels pain when he sees his creatures suffer, equally we must allow that he feels disappointment extending to wrath against those who cause the suffering. So when Green and Baker say that human acts of wickedness 'do not arouse the wrath of God but are themselves already the consequences of its active presence',<sup>29</sup> they fail to see that it was precisely the wrath of God that led to these consequences of sin.

Accordingly, the metaphor being used is that of the human response to persons who do things of which we disapprove. It is the attitude of strong disapproval that may be expressed in a withdrawal of affection and an attitude of displeasure that is intended to make the culprit feel uncomfortable and wish that they had not done the wrong action. One must carefully separate off from this complex attitude those elements which are themselves sinful, such as the over-reaction in a fit of temper that gets out of control; the use of words like revenge and even vengeance which often tend to include the re-assertion of one's superiority by a response that exceeds the original offence; the use of superior power to crush the offender. A sinless expression of wrath, free from the elements that disfigure human wrath, is perfectly conceivable and proper.

<sup>28</sup>S. H. Travis, 'Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul's Thought about the Atonement', in J. B. Green and M. Turner, *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 338.

<sup>29</sup>Green and Baker, *Recovering*, 55, make a contrast between God striking out in vengeance against sinners and letting people suffer the consequences which are inherent in their own sins. But this does not take into account passages that speak of God's action subsequent to human sin (2 Thes 1:6-9) or God expressing his wrath (Rom 3:5), or God wishing to show his wrath (Rom 9:22) or God's wrath coming upon disobedience (Eph 5:6; Col 3:6), or the OT language of God swearing in his wrath that is used in Hebrews (Heb 3:11; 4:3) or God carrying out judgment. The term 'vengeance' is not the best one for the holy response of God to sin, but the notion that God does not act in reaction to sin is false.

Hence, to say that 'wrath is not a divine property or essential attribute of God',<sup>30</sup> is to my mind a basic error that leads to a mistaken understanding of the cross. The God of the Bible and the God of the New Testament is fundamentally holy and loving, and both of these attributes are relational; they find expression in love towards his creation and yet also judgment and wrath when that creation is spoilt by sin.

## THE NATURE OF JUDGMENT

How are wrath and judgment expressed against the offender? In the human sphere justice is the upholding of right against evil not simply by asserting the principle but by action against the offender, the latter being termed 'judgment'. The terms 'punishment', 'penalty' and 'sentence' are commonly used to refer to this action or experience. These terms may cover a number of elements, not all of which are necessarily present on each occasion.<sup>31</sup> The establishment of justice includes:

1. *Restraint and deterrence*. These refer to action to prevent similar evil deeds happening, whether by some kind of restriction on the original offender to prevent a repetition of the crime or by warning examples to potential offenders. Detention in prison or some form of restraint may be necessary to stop the offender re-offending. Or there may be some form of penalty imposed upon the offender that will also act as a warning to others who may be tempted to similar crimes. A penalty such as a fine that will involve a cost will induce offenders not to offend in future. Unfortunately a notice that says 'trespassers will be forgiven' will be much less effective.

2. *Reformation*. At a deeper level the penalty imposed may be designed to educate and reform offenders so that, quite apart from fear of the consequences, they will see the wrongness and folly of their actions and resolve to live differently. Ideally, we should like to see wrongdoers *repent* of the wrong they have done and resolve to live lives free of wrongdoing. In practice we have to be realistic and recognise that this happens less frequently, and perhaps the majority of people, including ourselves, keep the laws because we are afraid of being caught and penalised if we do not keep them. Consequently, human systems have to operate on the assumption that they will seldom completely achieve their intended ends.

In both of these ways the aim of having a just society free from crime is being pursued by practical means.

3. *Restitution*. Another vital element is restitution, where this is possible, either by giving back what has been taken, or giving some kind of compensation where this is not possible (like money to a maimed person). Here there is the underlying principle that justice is done to the victim of crime only when something can be done to undo the effects of the crime. There is a principle coming in here that justice requires that the crime be undone and the belief that, if possible, this should be done by the guilty person (although it might also be done by the community).

4. But this raises the further question whether there is more to justice than these three aspects, only the third of which is strictly concerned with *justice* as a principle.

In some societies the *honour* of a person is affected and diminished by a crime, and it is held that the offender should make some kind of satisfaction to restore that honour. Some such idea lies behind the Anselmian type of understanding of the death of Christ. Perhaps it underlies the principle that if a person kills another human being, then by man shall that person's blood be shed. The concept lingers on in the attitude we take to so-called 'contempt of court', but on the whole the weaknesses of this approach are now well appreciated.

More generally it is often thought that if a person causes somebody else to suffer, then they should be made to *suffer proportionately* to cancel out the original evil deed. Till that happens, the guilty person remains guilty. Where the penalty consists in making restitution for the crime to the victim or to society more generally (e.g. by doing community service), there is not a problem. But in many cases, where restitution is not possible (or hasn't been developed), there may simply be the infliction of pain and loss upon the criminal, the payment of an arbitrary fine or the imposition of a prison sentence.

Difficulties arise where this kind of penalty is imposed. It may not do any good to the victim or others affected by the crime. The victim's relatives may cry out for vengeance, but it is hard to see how making the offender suffer actually does any good to the persons who have suffered. Nor is it clear how proportionate suffering by the offender undoes the offence. Although Adoni-Bezek saw a grim correspondence between the evil he had done and the evil done to him, it is quite impossible to believe that God needs to make people suffer in the same way as they have caused others to suffer or to inflict upon them the barbarity that they have inflicted upon others for some kind of self-satisfaction or upholding of an abstract principle of justice. Popular usage, however, often thinks of retribution as the imposition of propor

<sup>30</sup>Green and Baker, *Recovering*, 54.

<sup>31</sup>See the discussion by C. D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, for detail.

tionate suffering on the person who has caused others to suffer or simply broken the law. It is this element that seems dubious.

Certainly the biblical principles are that whatever we sow we shall also reap (Gal 6:7), and that we receive the due 'reward' or 'wage' of our sins (Rom 1:27; 6:23; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15; 2 Pet 2:12-13; Rev 18:6) which is painful and which is brought about ultimately by God.<sup>32</sup> In other words, something happens to sinners as a result of the sins for which they are responsible. But what kind of thing is it?

5. A major reason for the imposition of penalties is so that *society may express its disapproval of and rejection of evil and evildoers*. It upholds justice and law, by asserting the principle that people must not disobey the laws as they please and carrying this principle into effect. We may put lawbreakers in prison for an arbitrary period of time, a sort of temporary exclusion order, whereby we indicate to them and to the whole community that we are upholding justice (as we understand it) and will not tolerate lawbreakers in our society. There is a proper use of the principle of proportionality here.<sup>33</sup>

It goes almost without saying that the penalty is *painful*. It certainly is if it involves physical pain or being deprived of something that you enjoy, such as loss of money or time. However, in some circumstances it might be seen in a different light, as when the offender recognises the enormity of what has been done and is happy to make restitution for the offence, even though it involves personal cost.

I would therefore defend the proposition that in the divine-human context the ultimate element in judgment is *exclusion from the community*, from the Kingdom of God, of those who rebel against God and his requirements.<sup>34</sup> God says, 'Depart from me' ((Mt 7:23; 25:41; Lk 13:27); This combines the two essential elements of upholding righteousness and of exclusion of those who fail to do so.

*But now the question arises whether this is rightly termed 'retribution'*. Retribution refers to the reaction against the specific offender without specifying what is involved in the reaction.<sup>35</sup> Strictly speaking, this term conveys the idea that if somebody commits an offence, then the reaction of the judge<sup>36</sup> is directed against the offender in respect of their offence/attitude; it implies the necessity of proceeding against each offender and of course not against other people not involved in the offence. Retribution should be understood to mean the action taken against an offender in order to uphold justice, to restrain evil-doers, to undo so far as may be possible the effects of the offence, and, where the evil-doer is irremediable, to exclude that person from the community and its benefits.<sup>37</sup> And since the exclusion is exclusion from the blessings of the kingdom of God it follows that this exclusion is experienced as painful by those who undergo it. I do not see how deprivation of eternal life can be understood as anything other than a penalty or punishment upon the impenitent sinner.<sup>38</sup>

#### NON-JUDICIAL IMAGERY

So far I have been looking at the matter against the background of human justice and this helps us to understand how the concept of divine justice that is widespread in the New Testament is to be understood. I am not suggesting that the human language should necessarily shape how we think of God, but simply trying to understand what is normally conveyed by this use of human language. But this is not the only language used in Scripture and we now need to note briefly two other metaphorical ways of expressing the situation.

#### *Reconciliation*

<sup>32</sup>Cf. H. Blocher, 'Sacrifice', 32.

<sup>33</sup>Certainly if we took James 2:10 seriously, we would argue that any person who commits adultery is actually guilty of the much more serious and basic sin of disobedience to the law as divine command and therefore any individual sin is equally culpable, but on the human level we recognise that this is unjust and proportionality is unavoidable.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. G. Williams, 'The Cross and the Punishment of Sin', in D. Peterson, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 90-94. The concept of exclusion has a parallel in the OT concept of exile as exclusion from the promised land of those who have broken the covenant, and some theologians want to understand 'Christ's death on the cross as the divine punishment of exile' (H. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross; Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 19, 174-177.

<sup>35</sup>A dictionary definition (COD) is: 'recompense usually for evil done, vengeance, requital'.

<sup>36</sup>This term is used on occasion for God or Christ a few times and is supplemented by a much larger number of references to God or Christ fulfilling this function.

<sup>37</sup>My impression is that theologians use this term without defining and analysing it to any extent. Packer's article uses it but does not discuss it.

<sup>38</sup>On the impossibility of avoiding 'violence' in this fallen universe, see especially H. Boersma, *Violence*.



The situation presupposed by the use of this language is the enmity shown by the unreconciled. The complication is whether God also treats people as his enemies, and with N. T. Wright and many others I believe that this is what the New Testament implies.<sup>39</sup> The concept of wrath expresses the personal reaction of God to enemies. As we have just seen, the biblical idea of wrath is closely linked to judgment, and it expresses more the reaction of God when justice is not done and the justice and mercy that he wants to see is replaced by injustice and hatred. Nevertheless, wrath is also a concept which is equally at home in this sphere of discourse. And in fact it is hard to separate them rigidly in the Bible. A father was regarded as responsible for the conduct of his family and could be regarded as a judge within that small community (cf. 1 Pet 1:17). It is natural that rebels against God who will not abandon their rebellion should be excluded from the community that they are disrupting. They are excluded from God's favour.

### *Redemption*

In this situation human beings are under the control of the power of sin (and/or the Devil) and the nature of sin is that it kills. Physical death is part of and symbolical of the total death of the sinner. As physical death is exclusion from physical life, so total death is exclusion from spiritual life. Redemption is largely concerned with the deliverance of its victims from sin but part of this process is putting them right with God.

The concept of sin leading to death is quite fundamental in Paul with his discussion of Adam and the pattern of sin-death that we find there. Here, if anywhere, the concept of sin as a self-destructive force affecting the sinner is present. One might want to ask whether this is incompatible with the more active role of the judge in the forensic metaphor. I see no reason to think so. The way in which sin causes its perpetrators to suffer is certainly part of divine judgment upon it.

I conclude that the metaphors belong together and are freely used side by side and to a great extent express a situation in which the same structure can be perceived.

## THE HOLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Why does the New Testament use this kind of language of God? It is because it lies in the character of God that he is holy (or righteous) and loving. Ultimately the holiness and the love are facets of the same character, but, the English language being what it is, it is necessary to use both of these terms in order to bring out the irreducibility of the character of God simply to one or the other. The concept of divine fatherhood in the ancient world inevitably accommodated and required both of these ideas; as we have noted, the father is the upholder of justice within the family (1 Pet 1:17) and simultaneously the compassionate and loving carer for the family. Love wants to see justice done and justice requires that people be loved.

The classical theologian who has done most to present a carefully wrought doctrine of atonement that takes holiness fully into account is P. T. Forsyth. He has been called evangelicalism's greatest modern theologian of the cross,<sup>40</sup> although that title must surely be shared with his fellow Scot, the New Testament scholar, James Denney. Forsyth seems to be overlooked by some of the critics of penal substitution<sup>41</sup> as well as by its defenders,<sup>42</sup> but he is a central player in this discussion.

Forsyth laid what may seem to be extraordinary emphasis on the holiness as well as the love of God, so much so that he wrote frequently of holy love, and left us in no doubt that the holiness of God must figure centrally in any doctrine of the atonement. 'By the atonement, therefore, is meant that action of Christ's death which has a prime regard to God's holiness, has it for its first charge, and finds man's reconciliation impossible except as that holiness is divinely satisfied once for all on the cross. Such an atonement is the key to the incarnation'.<sup>43</sup> It follows that the notion of judgment is inescapable. 'The idea of God's holiness is inseparable from the idea of judgment as the mode by which grace goes into action'.<sup>44</sup> God had to satisfy his own holiness in dealing with the problem of human sin, and he himself did so in the holy obedience and self-offering of his Son through which reconciliation between God and the sinful world is achieved. Alongside judgment Forsyth upheld firmly the concept of the wrath

<sup>39</sup>N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans', in *NIB*, X, 519-20; cf. his defence of a propitiatory understanding of Rom 3:25-26, *ibid*, 470.

<sup>40</sup>David Bebbington, cited by L. McCurdy in his article in T. A. Hart (ed.), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 217-218. See McCurdy's full treatment, *Attributes and Atonement: The Holy Love of God in the Theology of P. T. Forsyth* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999). Forsyth's mature thought is in his *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910; London: reprinted Independent Press, 1938 and subsequently). See also *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Independent Press, 1909; reprinted Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

<sup>41</sup>But not by T. Smail, *Once and for all*, 45, 86-87, 98, 119, 186.

<sup>42</sup>But not by Leon Morris! Surprisingly he is not mentioned by H. Boersma, *Violence*.

<sup>43</sup>*Cruciality*, viii.

<sup>44</sup>*Cruciality*, viii.

of God as the reaction of holy love to sin: 'the reconciliation has no meaning apart from guilt which must stir the anger of a holy God and produce separation from Him'.<sup>45</sup> He insisted that 'we do not only grieve God but we provoke His anger',<sup>46</sup> and he strenuously rejected the idea that the law was 'detached from God, and cut adrift to do its own mechanic work under His indifference'.<sup>47</sup> 'Atonement means the covering of sin by something which God Himself had provided and therefore the covering of sin by God Himself'.<sup>48</sup> What Christ did was 'the perfect obedience of holy love which he offered amidst the conditions of sin, death and judgment'. Christ made the perfect confession to God but it was 'not the sympathetic confession of our sin so much as the practical confession of God's holiness'.<sup>49</sup> There is a penalty and curse for sin; and Christ consented to enter that region... It is impossible for us to say that God was angry with Christ; but still Christ entered the wrath of God... You can therefore say that although Christ was not punished by God, He bore God's penalty upon sin. To say that Christ was punished by God who was always well-pleased with Him is an outrageous thing. Calvin himself repudiates the idea.<sup>50</sup> Christ 'turned the penalty He endured into sacrifice He offered. And the sacrifice He offered was the judgment He accepted'.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately Forsyth sees his restatement of the doctrine as moving from an emphasis upon substitutionary expiation to what he calls 'solidary reparation, consisting of due acknowledgement of God's holiness, and the honouring of that and not of His honour'.<sup>52</sup> He suggests that 'judgment is a much better word than either penalty or punishment', and interestingly he would prefer to speak of representation rather than substitution, judging that 'substitution does not take account of the moral results on the soul'.<sup>53</sup> I take this to mean not that Forsyth rejected what is conveyed by the term substitution but that he thought that representative was the more comprehensive and appropriate term to use, conveying what is meant by substitution and more. If, however, 'representative' means less than 'substitute', then I have no doubt which term should be used.<sup>54</sup>

What more needs to be said? Here we have an exposition of the matter which takes holiness and wrath seriously, and that I find to be much more in tune with the teaching of the New Testament than the position of the anti-penal thinkers. The essential difference is that Forsyth and those like him hold on firmly to the biblical teaching about the holiness and the resulting wrath of God which issue in his active judgment of sinners and then embrace that understanding of the work of Christ which sees it as the active obedience and expression of holiness in which God himself bears the painful consequences of human sin, the judgment of God upon it and so provides the way of reconciliation with God. In other words, to uphold holiness and righteousness, God had to be seen to be both just and the justifier, and this he did by himself bearing the judgment or penalty of sin.

We owe it to L. McCurdy that he has argued convincingly that talk of a conflict between God's love and holiness is unnecessary. He claims that where John Stott sees such a conflict that God has to overcome and criticises Forsyth's view, Forsyth sees what he calls a 'strain'. Where Stott talks of a change in God's nature, Forsyth stated that God's nature did not change.<sup>55</sup>

Forsyth's view may seem more like satisfaction than penal substitution, and it is so categorised by T. H. Hughes in a critical evaluation that is not altogether sympathetic.<sup>56</sup> But since what is satisfied is God's holiness rather than his honour, Forsyth does go in a somewhat different direction from Anselm. My understanding is that Hughes' categorisation of Forsyth has not fully grasped his point, and that Forsyth is in fact a classical statement of the evangelical doctrine, and I would hope that it is a statement that might help us in our present context to arrive at an understanding on which we would all substantially agree. In fact, similar things are said by theologians like Smail and Travis, and I think that it is fair to say that we are close to agreement on a positive statement of the work of Christ, but the crucial difference is that I see this as an exposition of what is meant by penal substitution and appeasement of God rather than as a denial of these two categories of interpretation.

The vital point that needs to be grasped is that it is impossible to separate the personal and the judicial aspects in God as the sovereign ruler. To be a judge is not necessarily to be impersonal! Somehow God has to act in such a way that his justice is upheld (Rom 3), and this is achieved by the death of Christ which enables him to pardon sinners while upholding justice. The judgment on sinners is exclusion from the family of God, God thus dissociating himself from the sinners. There can be no greater loss than that, and it is condign for sinners who

<sup>45</sup> *Work*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> *Work*, 241.

<sup>47</sup> *Work*, 242.

<sup>48</sup> *Work*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> *Work*, 201.

<sup>50</sup> *Work*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> *Work*, 163.

<sup>52</sup> *Work*, 164-65.

<sup>53</sup> *Work*, 182.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. the discussion by J. I. Packer, 'What did the cross achieve?', 22-25.

<sup>55</sup> McCurdy, 204-222. Cf. J. R. W. Stott, *Cross*.

<sup>56</sup> T. H. Hughes, *The Atonement: Modern Theories of the Doctrine* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), 38-46.

have rejected the sovereignty of God, his calling to holiness and love. I cannot see any way of regarding this exclusion of sinners as anything other than the divinely imposed consequence or penalty for sin. When the judgment upon them is set aside, it is done so by God on the basis of his own prevenient grace.

Understood in this way there is simply no basis for the common accusation that God's wrath is arbitrary or vindictive like a human outburst of temper. That is why it is preferable to speak of wrath rather than anger or fury, since it is the latter terms that are most open to misunderstanding, whereas the former tends to be less used and therefore less liable to carry alien baggage. However, we must not go to the opposite extreme and make the wrath impersonal, something that God does not feel, just as he feels the pain of rejection by sinners.

It is inherent in this understanding that the death of Christ is not the event that persuades God, otherwise unwilling, to forgive; it is not the event that makes him willing. (1) Rather, the death is purposed and initiated by God himself; (2) the death is the death of God himself, since the Son is one with the Father, and we are correct to see God dying on the cross, as Charles Wesley clearly taught. The death is God identifying with humanity in its need, and this is important in showing how God in Christ absorbs the suffering inflicted by evil and sinners on humanity (the cruelty of the executioners, the taunts of the bystanders, but also the actual pain of dying that is part of the corruption produced by cosmic evil). Some scholars complain that the idea of 'absorption' is unbiblical;<sup>57</sup> I cannot see that the objection is justified, since we have to use terms that do not occur in the Bible in order to bring out its teaching. The Bible talks clearly enough of God's bearing sin, and that is an adequate basis for this language which means that God takes upon himself our sin and bears its consequences so that we do not have to bear them.

### THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE?

The exposition of Forsyth has demonstrated that the penal substitution principle is clearly present in one way of understanding of the death of Christ. Is it principal and determinative? Let us consider the various metaphors of atonement:

#### 1. *Sacrifice*

A fundamental way of understanding the death of Christ is in terms of sacrifice.<sup>58</sup> Granted that various types of sacrifice were not concerned with the problem caused by sin but were motivated by gratitude and served as means of fellowship with God, there were nevertheless sacrifices which served to undo the effects of sin both as regards the land and the people as a whole, but also the individual sinner. The relevant types of Old Testament procedure were the making of the sin and burnt offerings and the ritual of the day of atonement which included the offering of a goat as a sin offering and the choice of another goat as a scapegoat over which were confessed all the sins of Israel and then the goat was sent away into the wilderness where presumably it died. The scapegoat ritual pictured the getting rid of the sin rather than of the sinners. The confession of the sin led to the transfer of the sin to the goat. When we read of Christ as the Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the same kind of thing is happening.

Not to be overlooked is the point explicitly brought out in Hebrews but implicit elsewhere, that the action involves the offering of the sacrifice to God once the death has taken place. The priest presents the offering to God and on the strength of it claims the cancellation of the list of sins held against the people. The sins are expiated and God is appeased in the one action. Hence the sacrifice has been completed and does not need to be repeated or re-enacted. On that objective basis the gospel can be preached. Christ has died: believe the good news.

Sacrifice is costly and it involves the death of a victim. It is made to God. A sacrifice can be understood in a broad sense as a penalty, although the specific language of penalty does not seem to be associated with it. This may be seen as an indication that the term penal substitution is too narrow to be applied strictly to every type of understanding of the death of Christ. It is better to think of a sacrifice as an offering made to God, but the fact remains that it is costly and involves the death of a victim that would otherwise have been spared.<sup>59</sup> Once again we see God in the Son bearing the consequences of our sin so that we do not have to bear them.

#### 2. *Curse*

<sup>57</sup>H. Blocher, 'Biblical Metaphors', 643.

<sup>58</sup>Despite the arguments to the contrary with respect to Paul of B. H. McLean, *The Cursed Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion Ritual and Pauline Soteriology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). See R. T. Beckwith and M. J. Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995).

<sup>59</sup>Cf. G. J. Wenham, 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice', in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice*, 75-87.

One very specific metaphor is that of Christ bearing the curse of the law for sinners (Gal 3:10-14). Believers are bought back from the curse of the law by Christ dying on the cross as one accursed. The curse of the law is its condemnation of sinners and statement of judgment over them. The curse cannot simply be laid aside. It is carried out on Christ and thereby sinners are delivered from it. Again the one dies for the many, in their place; the principle of one bearing the consequences of sin for the many is present. Here the procedure of the Old Testament criminal law is used to explain the death of Jesus, and the element of penalty is conspicuous.

### 3. *Redemption and ransom*

In redemption a ransom is paid, consisting in the death of Jesus rather than silver or gold. The root conception of ransom is the making of a payment that sets somebody free, a kind of sale that delivers a person from slavery and bondage. The price is a substitute for the person redeemed and in that the price is costly it is we might say painful. Hence the concept of substitution is present and the cost may be regarded as a penalty in the broad sense. This is manifestly the case where the redemption of people is effected by the precious blood of Christ. Consequently the principle of penal substitution can be seen to be effective here. But the rationale is not clearly worked out. It has been said *ad nauseam* that the question of the person to whom the ransom is paid is not raised, and that if it is to anybody it is to God. The point of the metaphor would seem to be that people are in bondage to the power of sin that includes death, and the payment sets them free. There is the clear implication that the price is of infinite worth so that it avails for all people: the principle that the death of this particular One is able to ransom many sinners is manifest.

A special case is the Passover. God passes over the houses where the blood shows that the lamb has been slain (although such elements as the offering of the lamb to God are absent). The first-born does not die. There are other examples where the first-born are ransomed from God's claim upon them. This apotropaic ritual would seem to be redemptive.

### 4. *Reconciliation*

Here the problem is the rebellion of the sinners against God and his consequent exclusion of them from fellowship. Rom 5:9-11 makes it plain that reconciliation takes place by the death of Christ. In 2 Cor 5:18-21 his function is to be made sin on behalf of the sinners, and in this same context there is reference to his death on behalf of all. The rationale is not explained, but it would appear that it is by his death that takes away sin and by the exchange in which the sinners are made righteous in him they are acceptable to God. Again the thought is that the consequences of sin and specifically death are borne by Christ when he is made one with sinners, and in that sense the substitution is penal. Sinners are invited to receive the reconciliation that has been objectively achieved.

### 5. *Forgiveness*

Closely linked with reconciliation is the concept of forgiveness. Here the offended person is prepared to overlook the fault and enter into a positive relationship with the offender. In human personal relationships an expression of contriteness by the offender is often given to the offended person as sufficient ground for forgiveness, and even in a forensic situation the presence or absence of contrition may have some effect upon the judge's act of sentencing. The essence of forgiveness is that the offence is wiped away without the imposition of a penalty or with mitigation of the penalty. But there is a distinction between an offer of forgiveness and the willingness to accept it, and if the reception of forgiveness is not accompanied by contrition and repentance on the part of the offender nothing is achieved.

We might think that in the case of God his offer of forgiveness should then be possible without any demand for retribution or satisfaction. But although such an offer is made, the offender may not be contrite, and the grip of sin is such that sinners are not capable of showing the necessary contrition. OT sacrifices could be understood as expressions of contrition, with the offering of a (valuable) article as expression and proof of the inner feeling, and these were offered in accordance with a divine direction that this way of dealing with sin was prescribed by God and acceptable to him. The sins in question were publicly confessed, the sinner laid hands on the sacrifice to indicate that it was their sacrifice and was in respect of the actual sins confessed. In this way the sacrifice could be said to take away sin.

In the NT, the danger of thinking that an outward act can deal with sin is clearly recognised (Heb 10:4, 11). God, who provided the path of sacrifice in the OT, now intervenes to provide a new offering, himself dying in the person of the Son who has united himself with humanity, to make the offering which will deal with sin. Christ, or his name or his death are integral to the New Testament concept of forgiveness.<sup>60</sup> In Hebrews it is seen as the fruit of sacrifice (Heb 9:22; 10:18). In Eph 1:7 it is linked to the blood of Jesus. In Col 1:14 it is not far distant from

<sup>60</sup>Forgiveness is expressly linked to Christ, his name or his death in Mt 26:28; Ac 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:22; 1 Jn 1:9; 2:12.

a reference to peace being made by the blood of the cross (Col 1:20). Thus God takes the initiative, God himself bears the sin and gives his Son in his sacrificial death as the way or means by which sinners can come to him. The sinner no longer needs to bring an offering to God, for Christ has already made that offering in the heavenly sanctuary. The conferral of forgiveness costs the sinner nothing, but it costs God everything.

Again in the broad sense we may see the consequences of our sin painfully borne by God himself in the Son, a sacrificial death taking place whereby we are saved.

It is very clear to me that essentially the same basic principle is expressed in each of these different understandings of the death of Jesus. The principle of one person bearing the painful consequences of sin is the *modus operandi* of the different understandings of the cross. This is perhaps not surprising when one considers how the New Testament writers can intertwine the different metaphors so readily.

There are thus different nuances in these expressions of the nature of salvation, but the central action can be regarded as God doing something in Christ that involves the death of Christ while bearing our sins and that this is the painful consequence of our sins, and that it saves us from that painful consequence of exclusion from the kingdom of God seems to me to be common to them all, and the term penal substitution can be appropriately used of it, although we might possibly improve our language somewhat.

We thus have an understanding of the death of Christ as the means provided by God which takes away human sin and its penalty as an action with which sinners can identify themselves. The death of Christ is the death of the sinners who accept what he has done on their behalf and instead of them, and yet may be said to identify themselves with it. They can reckon themselves to have died to sin.<sup>61</sup>

## THE OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

Let us finally note the objections brought against the doctrine and whether they are valid.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>I have discussed the way in which the substitution of Christ for the sinner leads to the identification of the believer with him in *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP/Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 223-226. For a fuller and deeper discussion see J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* (ed. R. V. G. Tasker. London: Tyndale Press, 1951; reprinted Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

<sup>62</sup>It may be helpful to gather together here in more detail some comments on Green and Baker, *Recovering*.

1. It ignores or sidesteps the New Testament teaching on wrath and judgment. It ignores the full extent of the evidence in the Synoptic Gospels, specifically the sayings about baptism and the cup, the latter of which is to be understood in terms of the metaphor of drinking the cup of God's wrath. The theology implicit in the baptism statement and the ransom statement is not explored.

It caricatures the understanding of wrath in terms of arbitrary, violent emotion. It claims that wrath is not a divine property or essential attribute. Certainly it is 'the divine response to human unfaithfulness', but it is [merely] 'God's letting us go our own way' (55). Thus the fact of divine wrath is not denied, but it is not something that God feels (like he presumably feels love). Paul is said to lack 'any developed sense of divine retribution' All this is stated rather than defended.

2. The sacrificial language of the NT is largely set aside and its implications ignored. Although the importance of sacrifice and bearing the curse in Paul is recognised, the authors play down the significance of the former by arguing that there were various types of sacrifice and not all were concerned with the removal of sin. But this does not affect the basic point that some of them were concerned with sin, and many required the blood that made atonement. Again, the fact of vicarious substitution is recognised, but it is stated that God does not need to be appeased; rather he acts to bring humanity back to himself (59). Here there is some inconsistency in that the authors allow the teaching in Gal 3 full force: Jesus bears the curse of God on our behalf. If that is not penal substitution I do not know what it is. Again the function of the death of Christ in terms of the mercy seat is acknowledged (63), but little attempt is made to understand it. It would seem that time and again this book recognises the existence of evidence for the position that is being opposed but quite fails to attempt to explain it away; it just ignores it.

Similarly, the possibility of an atonement theology that starts from the Passover as an atoning sacrifice in John is ignored. It is assumed that the *hilasmos* teaching in 1 John can be neutralised by concentrating on the imagery of the scapegoat which banishes the people's sins without a sacrifice or appeasing God. And although the presence of sacrificial teaching in Hebrews is acknowledged and the phrase 'expiatory sacrifice' is used, there is no real discussion of the way in which this evidence is a major obstacle to the proposed thesis.

The one major point that might be raised in favour of the Green and Baker approach is the lack of atonement language in Acts. Salvation is understood as status-reversal, but what makes status-reversal

### 1. *The alleged late origin of the doctrine*

It is sometimes alleged that the doctrine of penal substitution effectively dates from the Reformation and was virtually absent or unformulated earlier. However, a distinction must be made between the existence of the doctrine and its position. The doctrine of penal substitution may not be prominent before the Reformation, but this is quite different from saying that it was unknown. Thus, while Green and Baker can show how great stress is laid on the doctrine of recapitulation in Irenaeus, they also rightly point out that Irenaeus includes statements of propitiation. Irenaeus, like other early Christian theologians is concerned both with the deliverance of sinners from their sin and also with the mending of their relationship with God. Similarly Blocher gathers together patristic and other pre-Reformation statements which show that the doctrine was certainly held but was not central.<sup>63</sup> Further evidence from Origen, Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine is supplied by Boersma.<sup>64</sup> If the doctrine was not central in patristic and mediaeval theology, then that maybe hangs with the general tendency to misunderstand the grace of God that T. F. Torrance rightly detected as occurring from an early stage,<sup>65</sup> and that was not put right until the Reformers brought the church back to the New Testament.

### 2. *A God who needs to be appeased before he can forgive*

It is easy for defenders of penal substitution to present the matter as though it is only because of the cross that God is prepared to abandon his wrath and forgive sinners. Certainly this is a frequent criticism of the doctrine. Yet I am not aware that any responsible defenders of the doctrine take this point of view, and if there were, I would side with their critics.<sup>66</sup>

a. At the cross it is God himself suffering with and on behalf of human beings. We may pick up the deep insight of Isaiah 63:9 which tells us that when Israel was afflicted by its enemies 'in all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them', and yet the very next verse later has to say 'they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them' (Isa 63:10). Here is the paradoxical (to us) recognition of God as Saviour and Judge. It could be argued, as in effect it is, that all God needs to do is to uphold justice, and that he has no duty to sinners beyond that. They have no claims on his mercy. Yet while James tells us that 'judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful' he then adds: 'Mercy triumphs over judgment' (Jas 2:13). That principle must surely be true of God himself, and reminds us that beyond justice lies the mercy of God, which goes beyond justice in the narrow sense to deliver people who have come under judgment. James Torrance used to remind us that God could not give Christians the command to love their enemies if he himself did not do so.

b. The motive for the death of Jesus is stated to be the loving purpose of God, and there is not the faintest hint in the New Testament that Jesus died to persuade God to forgive sinners. On the contrary, his death is part of the way in which God himself acts in his grace and mercy.

The one objection that might be offered here is the way in which Jesus is conceived as the intercessor for sinners, the advocate with the Father (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1). But there is no way in which this picture can be understood in terms of a difference of purpose between Father and Son. The picture of intercession is a condescension to human beings who might think of God as other than the Jesus whom they know as the friend of

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possible is not discussed. Obviously the gospel can be proclaimed without enunciating a theology of atonement, but what we are concerned with here is the theology on which the gospel rests. For example, I suppose that you could preach the Gospel to Gentiles without mentioning the fact that the death of Christ took place according to the Scriptures, although that element would be important in preaching to Jews. The fact that Paul can express a theology of conversion that refers only to the resurrection of Jesus and confession of faith in him as Lord in Romans 10 does not imply that he has forgotten all that he said in the earlier chapters of the letter! The absence of atonement from some evangelistic sermons does not mean that it is a dispensable part of Christian theology. Our concern here is with the theology that must underlie the preaching of the gospel, rather than with the specific forms that this preaching may take with different audiences.

I have to conclude that this book just does not establish the proposition that it puts forward by showing how the texts claimed to support it actually do so and by responding adequately to the texts that offer prima facie evidence against it. The result is that the denial of penal substitution is in danger of being seen as a simple denial of what Scripture says rather than (as the authors would presumably wish) as a convincing re-interpretation of what Scripture does say.

<sup>63</sup>Blocher, 'Biblical Metaphors', 630-631.

<sup>64</sup>Boersma, *Violence*, 158-163.

<sup>65</sup>T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948).

<sup>66</sup>A study of D. L. Edwards and J. Stott, *Essentials: A liberal-evangelical dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 107-168, will make the point absolutely clear.

sinner and assures them that the Father is in agreement with him. The statement about Christ's intercession in Romans 8 comes in the context of the extraordinarily powerful statements of the love of God the Father shown to us in the death of his Son. The recognition that it is God the Son, that is to say quite simply God, who suffers and dies on the cross, settles the question finally. This is God himself bearing the consequences of sin, not the abuse of some cosmic child.

c. The death of Jesus is not a means of appeasing a Father who is unable or unwilling to forgive. It is what God himself does while we are yet sinners as the basis for the gospel, and it is because the reconciliation has already been made that sinners are urged to accept what God has done for them.<sup>67</sup>

It is true that the wrath of God is operative against sinners who have not accepted the gospel, but it is not true that God's wrath has to be appeased before he will be merciful. The mercy lies behind the death of Jesus in which God provides the way for sinners to return to him.

### 3. *Cosmic child abuse*

The charge of cosmic child abuse is totally misplaced. It fails to recognise the points that have just been made which emphasise that it was God who initiated the cross, it was God himself who suffered on the cross and bore the sin of the world. A parent who puts herself into the breach and dies to save her child from a burning house is considered praiseworthy. The God who suffers and dies in the person of Jesus for human sin belongs in the same category. It is true that the concept of God the Son suffering and dying is paradoxical and incomprehensible, and we have to recognise that fact, but that is what Scripture says. It is part of the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Salvation is available to sinful human beings through the death of Christ that involves him in bearing the consequences of sin. These consequences constitute the penalty due to sin, rightly called a penalty because it is

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<sup>67</sup>The case against propitiation and penal substitution is put with care by T. Smail, *Once and For All*, 80-99. The problems that he sees include the oddity of saying that God propitiated himself, the way in which to speak of propitiation so readily suggests the idea that God had to be persuaded to forgive, and the suggestion that Christ was punished instead of sinners. These points raise the question whether the use of this language almost inevitably leads to misunderstanding. Smail wants to say that Christ entered into the just consequences of our sinning, and to see salvation being effected more by his vicarious obedience, as part of which he bears the judgment of our sins. Christ's active obedience is part of his saving work, but recognition of it need not lead to a denial of his bearing of judgment and the making of a sacrifice. And the propitiation or atonement made by God himself is the deepest expression of his love. 'So far from finding any kind of contrast between love and propitiation, the apostle can convey no idea of love to anyone except by pointing to the propitiation—love is what is manifested there; and he can give no account of the propitiation but by saying, "Behold what manner of love"' (J. Denney, *The Death of Christ*, 152). That is the paradox that we dare not explain away.

<sup>68</sup>There is a criticism of a different sort which integrity compels me to mention. Despite such statements in classical documents as that Christ 'made a full perfect and sufficient oblation for the sins of the whole world' and the clear declaration of the New Testament that 'Christ gave himself as a ransom for all people' (1 Tim 2:6), there have been some attempts to tie the doctrine of penal substitution to a doctrine of limited or particular atonement, according to which penal substitution can and must be understood as substitution only for those who are actually saved by the death of Christ rather than being an act of God that enables God to offer salvation to all humankind, whether or not they accept the offer. Here, though we may differ on other points, Joel Green, Stephen Travis and I will unite in declaring that this love, grace and mercy is not extended just to a pre-determined number but is the basis of an offer of salvation to all humankind: 'None need perish, all may live for Christ has died'. Sadly, however, it is not inevitable that all will respond positively when the gospel news is sounding. A doctrine of penal substitution which carries the corollary of particular atonement is unacceptable because it is unbiblical. The postulate of a God who decides to forgive only a limited number of sinners and to exclude the rest from the possibility of forgiveness, in other words double predestination, is just as unacceptable as the false doctrine of a God who demands violence to be exercised on somebody else before he can forgive. The counter-argument that in the case of unbelievers God would be demanding the payment twice, once from Christ who had died for them and once from themselves who had not accepted what he had done for them, is without any force because it assumes a crude mathematical equivalence between the death of Christ and the penalty due to sinners; there is nothing unjust about penalising offenders who refuse to accept the offer of an amnesty. Those of us who were brought up on T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding be Men* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1938<sup>3</sup>), 159, were forewarned against that misapprehension.

painful and deprives the sinner of life with God and all its blessings. In this way the holy and loving God upholds righteousness through judging sinners and saving those who accept what he has done in his Son on their behalf and instead of them. It is not a case of God being angry with Christ but of God himself in Christ taking on himself the sin and its penalty. Indeed, at some point the challenge needs to be issued: where are these evangelicals who say that God was angry with Christ? Name them!<sup>69</sup> Where is the evangelical who will repudiate this statement: 'We do not, however, insinuate that God was ever hostile to him or angry with him', written by John Calvin?<sup>70</sup> You will not find them among serious theologians, although I recognise that popular preachers may err in this respect. And it does seem to be the case that much of the criticism comes from the more radical feminist type of theologian with an agenda that includes repudiation of essential features of biblical theology. Nevertheless, this does not free us of the obligation to ask how we can present this doctrine in ways that do not lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding. As I indicated, I have not entered into this area in what has become already too lengthy a paper. But I believe that I have presented a case that helps to vindicate the traditional evangelical understanding of the atonement as an expression of the central motif in the New Testament, and I hope that it has provided an understanding of it that can command general assent.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>H. E. Guillebaud, *Why the Cross?* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1946<sup>2</sup>), 145, explicitly repudiates the phrase 'God punished Christ'. Similarly, Stott, *Cross*, 150-151. W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1994), 575, can say that 'God... poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.' One can see how such language can be misunderstood.

<sup>70</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2:16:11 (tr. H. Beveridge; London: J. Clarke, 1953), I, 444. A. T. B. McGowan (to whom I am indebted for several helpful comments on this paper) explains that Calvin affirmed that God punished Jesus instead of us but denied that the Father was angry with the Son.

<sup>71</sup>Denney refers to death as the judgment upon sin rather than as the penalty. Interestingly the term 'penal substitution' does not appear to have been used in his writings, although he certainly used the term 'substitution'. J. M. Gordon says (personal communication) that 'he uses the words "penal" and "substitute" but keeps them apart, preferring phrases like "the divine condemnation"'. The point was already noted by J. I. Packer, 'What did the cross achieve', 28, who noted how the substance of the idea was expressed by Denney in other terms. Cf. *The Death of Christ*, 103, for as strong a statement as any. Denney insisted that Christ bore the condemnation due to our sin (e.g. *Studies in Theology* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899], 108). 'The sin is laid by God on the Sinless One; its doom is laid on Him; His death is the execution of the divine sentence upon it' (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907], 220). Packer himself has no problem about using the phrase; see 'What did the cross achieve?'

T. C. Hammond comments: 'The terms which are used in reproach of this doctrine, such as "the penal view", are in themselves too ambiguous to clarify the issues on the subject, and frequently reveal a misunderstanding of what is being suggested by those who believe in propitiation' (*In Understanding*, 149; cf. 159). Nevertheless, he did write of 'Penal Suffering': 'In the sense of His taking upon Himself the results of the infringed "legal liabilities" of those for whom He has rendered satisfaction, they were penal' (*ibid.* 159). H. E. Guillebaud uses the term 'vicarious punishment' but with a caveat against its misuse (*Why the Cross?* 144-145); this formulation goes back at least to J. H. Heidegger, cited in H. Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 468.