

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Significance of Christ's Crosswork: Challenges and Responses to Why Christ Died

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When Steve Chalke and Brian McLaren accused evangelicals who believed in the substitutionary death of Christ of embracing a form of divine child abuse,<sup>1</sup> Christians everywhere reacted. Having sung with passion for years that great line penned by Charles Wesley, “Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me,” Christians could not believe that they were being accused of promoting child abuse by men who claimed to be at least on the fringes of the evangelical community. What McLaren and Chalk did was suddenly cause all to see the long-standing debate by theologians with regard to the meaning of the cross. Almost no one in Christian assemblies doubts the historicity of the crucifixion, but *why Christ died* has long been contested. Of late, due to the rising popularity of everything from the Emergent Church<sup>2</sup> to the Ancient-Future Faith movement<sup>3</sup> to the New Perspective on Paul,<sup>4</sup> the significance of Christ's crosswork (often called the atonement) has been questioned. In particular, what has often been called “penal substitution,” which is that the Son “suffer[ed] instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin,” has

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<sup>1</sup> See Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) 102ff; and, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 182.

<sup>2</sup> The name “emerging church” is in reference to a local congregation that is emerging from the more traditional ecclesiology into a postmodern expression. What it will actually become is still a speculative matter, but its adherents regard it as a postmodern church for a postmodern culture.

<sup>3</sup> The Ancient Future Faith movement believes that the purest expression of Christianity was found in the ancient period of church history (100–600), and it is to this era that Christians must return.

<sup>4</sup> The background for the New Perspective on Paul appears to be various searches for the “historic Jesus” resulting from the influence of Albert Schweitzer in the early twentieth century. Phil Johnson has described advocates of this form of theology as “suggesting that the apostle Paul has been seriously misunderstood, at least since the time of Augustine and the Pelagian controversy, but even more since the time of Luther and the Protestant Reformation. They claim first-century Judaism has also been misinterpreted and misconstrued by New Testament scholars for hundreds and hundreds of years, and therefore the church's understanding of what Paul was teaching in Romans and Galatians has been seriously flawed at least since the time of Augustine” (“A Defense of the Old Perspective on Paul: What Did St. Paul Really Say.” Sermon at the London Reformed Baptist Seminary, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, 10 January 2004).

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come under intense attack.<sup>5</sup> It is the purpose of this article to identify the various views held by Christians with regard to the atonement, analyze briefly the three major theories, and then develop a biblical defense for penal substitution as the central meaning and purpose behind the cross.

## ATONEMENT THEORIES

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There are several major models of the atonement that have been held by assorted Christian groups at various times, and continue to hold influence in some groups today. Early in this article, it is important to mention that while this author does not believe that any of these explain the primary purpose of the cross—a position reserved for penal substitution—some of the views have a measure of biblical support and, when not forced to the place of preeminence, enhance one's understanding of the atonement.

### *The Example (or Moral Influence) Theory*

There is no doubt that this is the most widely affirmed view among traditional liberals and emergents (modern liberals). The idea is that the death of Christ serves as the perfect example of love. Christians, therefore, are to emulate Christ's love. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most recognized popularizers of this theory among liberals in the first half of the twentieth century, famously decried those who taught penal substitution as promoters of a "slaughter house religion."

### *Christus Victor Theory*

*Christus Victor*, or Christ the Victor, "argues that humanity's main problem is that we are trapped and oppressed by spiritual forces beyond our control. Christ's death, then, is seen as a ransom that frees us from captivity. His death and resurrection defeats the evil spiritual forces."<sup>6</sup> The *Christus Victor* view has become very popular among many today, especially those in the Ancient-Future Faith movement, and those who regard the New Perspective on Paul seriously.

### *Ransom Theory*

The Ransom Theory understanding is a subset of *Christus Victor* with the addition that "at the cross, God handed Jesus over to Satan in exchange for the souls of humans held

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions* (Wheaton: Crossway Books: 2007) 21.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Dever, "Nothing But the Blood" [article online] (*Christianity Today*, May 2006, accessed 30 January 2011) available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/may/9.29.html>.

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captive to Satan. Satan believed he could hold Jesus in death, but the resurrection proved him wrong as Jesus triumphed over Satan.”<sup>7</sup>

## *Powerful Weakness Theory*

Well-known emergent leader, Brian McLaren, articulated this interpretation, which corresponds well with his worldview. The lead character in his fictional trilogy

sees Jesus becoming vulnerable on the cross and accepting suffering from everyone, Jew and Roman, and not visiting suffering on everyone in some sort of revenge. It puts on display God’s loving heart which wants forgiveness, not vengeance.... God rejects the violence, dominance, and oppression which have so gripped the world from the time of Cain and Abel until today’s news headlines. The call of the cross is for mankind not to make the Kingdom come about through coercion but “to welcome it through self sacrifice and vulnerability.”<sup>8</sup>

## *Healing Theory*

Popular among certain parts of Pentecostalism and integral to the prosperity gospel (Word of Faith movement) is the idea that not only did Christ’s death provide for salvation from sin but also physical healing is available in the atonement by request in this present life. Ultimately, it is true that because of Christ’s death the redeemed will be given glorified bodies free from all illness and suffering; however, those affirming the Healing Theory insist that such health and wellbeing are obtainable in this present life.

## *Satisfaction Theory*

The satisfaction view is similar to penal substitution except that it understands Christ’s death as a compensation for the honor of a holy God wounded by sin. The Son’s death satisfied that offense to God’s honor. Penal substitution, conversely, sees the problem as God’s law in which “sin is primarily a violation of God’s law, thus Christ’s death pays the penalty for sins that God’s holiness requires.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Vlach, “Penal Substitution in Church History,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 20 (Fall 2009) 201.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor P. Craigen, “Emergent Soteriology: the Dark Side,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 17 (Fall 2006): 185. Also see, McLaren, *The Story*, 105–06.

<sup>9</sup> Vlach, “Penal Substitution,” 203.

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## *Penal Substitution*

Mark Dever explained, “our main problem is God’s righteous wrath against us for our sinfulness, which puts us in danger of eternal punishment.... Christ’s perfect sacrifice for our sins is necessary to satisfy God’s righteousness. Christ’s death bore a divine penalty that we deserved. By taking our penalty upon Himself, God satisfied His own correct and good wrath against us.”<sup>10</sup>

## ANALYSIS OF THE THEORIES

Prior to examining penal substitution in detail, some careful attention needs to be given to two of the theories: Moral Example and *Christus Victor*, which is necessary due to the popularity of these two views and because they have both supplanted penal substitution in some theological areas of influence.

### *Moral Example*

One should gladly admit that Christ’s death serves as the greatest example of self-sacrificing love the world has ever seen. Additionally, the New Testament points to this selfless act and instructs believers to live in like manner (Phil 2:5–8). However, the question needs to be asked in what sense Christ’s death was a demonstration of love? If Christ died randomly, without purpose, the cross is not an example of love whatsoever. If this author were to step in front of a car for no reason he would not have displayed love but foolishness. By contrast, if he were to step in front of a car to save a person’s life, his death would be an example of self-sacrificing love. Likewise, for Christ’s death to be an exhibition of love it would necessitate that He die accomplishing something of great value for others. The something, Scripture reveals, is paying the penalty for sin as told in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” No one denies that Jesus’ crucifixion was a marvelous example of love, but it is so because Christ’s death had as its object and purpose the securing of salvation. The crucifixion was motivated by love but it was far more than a mere demonstration of how one is to love another.

Ignoring this simple reasoning, and scriptural teaching, a large segment of Christendom has limited the crosswork by asserting that Christ merely set an example of love for others to follow. Peter Abelard, who lived from 1079 to 1142 and was among the first to clearly articulate this view, taught that

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<sup>10</sup> Dever, “Nothing But the Blood” [online].

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The work of Christ chiefly consists of demonstrating to the world the amazing depth of God's love for sinful humanity. The atonement was directed primarily at humanity, not God. There is nothing inherent in God that must be appeased before he is willing to forgive sinful humanity.... Through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the love of God shines like a beacon, beckoning humanity to come and fellowship.<sup>11</sup>

The church later condemned Abelard's view and he was excommunicated, but his theory, in one form or another, has continued. Most prominently, this interpretation was revived and updated in the modern liberal movement originating in the eighteenth century. The recognized fathers of so-called modernism were Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89). These men, and their followers, sought to accommodate the teachings of Christianity to the worldview of those living in the time of the Enlightenment. The idea of a sacrifice for sin seemed barbaric and unsophisticated to the civilized mind, but that Jesus would offer the perfect example of love for others to emulate was acceptable with many.

It does not appear that Schleiermacher and Ritschl actually intended at first to circumvent the more conservative understandings of the Bible; they sought to update doctrine to make it more palatable to modern thinkers. However, once the foundations of biblical truth were undermined other doctrines began to replace this neglect until not much was left of the Christian faith. One of the fundamental doctrines to suffer was that of the cross. Liberals could not easily deny that Jesus historically died on the cross (although some have done so today) but they could reframe the purpose of the cross. Man's great need was not redemption, not salvation from sin, not rescue from the wrath of God, but love. Humanity needs to love one another or else we will destroy the world and everything in it. But what does love look like? Christ came to show mankind. While the biblically informed Christian would regard this theory as incomplete, a Hindu such as Mahatma Gandhi would have no problem with this kind of sacrifice. He said, "His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept."<sup>12</sup>

One of the real problems with the Moral Example theory is that it does not regard sin seriously and therefore sees no remedy, nor need for one, for guilt and judgment. Historian Tony Lane wrote concerning a main proponent of this interpretation.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul R. Eddy and James Beilby, "The Atonement: An Introduction," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. idem (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 19.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Death by Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) 20.

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Schleiermacher's concept of the work of Jesus Christ is too low, because of his inadequate view of human sinfulness—he has very little to say about guilt before God, for instance. Jesus Christ came not to atone for sin but to be our teacher, to set us an example. His work is essentially to arouse in us the consciousness of God ... the work of Jesus Christ as perceived by Schleiermacher, makes his resurrection, ascension into heaven and second coming superfluous.<sup>13</sup>

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It is no wonder that H. Richard Niebuhr famously described liberal theology as “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>14</sup> Liberalism eventually permeated all the major denominations and ultimately defined most of them. As a result, liberal denominations today are on the decline as people have increasingly recognized that they have nothing more to offer than other benevolent organizations and social agencies.

However, in the twenty-first century a new form of liberalism has arisen that has received the interest of many. The new form is often called the Emergent movement (with leaders such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt). Essentially the Emergent movement affirms the same doctrines that old (traditional) liberalism did, except that they are restating their message for a postmodern generation rather than a philosophical modern one. For example, where the Enlightenment proclaimed that truth could be found not in revelation but in the self—in reason and in the scientific method—postmodernity can offer little more than uncertainty. Absolute, universal truth, the postmodern claims, is a myth. Those within Christendom who have imbibed postmodern thinking might not totally dismiss the concept of truth but they have embraced uncertainty. Truth may exist but there is no way that one can be certain what it is. Furthermore, if one did there would be no means of communicating it to others. When this mindset is transferred to the atonement, one is delivered a diluted and contradictory message. The great accomplishments of the atonement (as found in Scripture) are banished, for they offend the sensibilities of twenty-first century people. Nevertheless, while believers can be certain that Christ did not die to satisfy the wrath of God or to defeat evil forces (so one is told), we can be certain that the cross gives believers a powerful example of love. How the emergents, who deny certainty, can be so certain of this is not clear.

There is enough truth in what the liberals and emergents were/are saying to be confusing to some. Love is certainly the chief of the virtues; it is an attribute of God, and it was a motivation behind the incarnation and the cross (John 3:16). However, while Christ came motivated by His great love, He came to provide more than an example of love. The real

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 240.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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problem facing the human race is alienation from a holy God who is righteously wrathful toward sinners. There was no remedy to this condition found within man or the world around him. The only solution rested in God, but God could not simply love man to Himself and ignore his sins. God had to provide a means of deliverance that was consistent with His own holy nature and which satisfied His wrath toward sin and sinners; this necessitated the sacrificial death of Christ, which will be addressed momentarily.

## *Christus Victor*

Considering the *Christus Victor* model, one finds that it has become very popular today in some theological realms. Robert Webber, father of the Ancient-Future Faith movement, attempted to establish that this was the primary interpretation of the atonement for the first millennium of church history<sup>15</sup> (this assertion will be refuted in the section affirming penal substitution). The *Christus Victor* view, in its present form, results from a book by that name written by Gustaf Aulen in 1930. Aulen sought to offer an opposing view to the traditional understanding that Christ died to satisfy God's justice and to make humanity acceptable to Him. However, he wanted to move beyond the theory that Christ died to change one's attitude toward God and provide one with an example of pure love. Aulen regarded Christ's death as a means by which the Lord battled with and conquered the evil forces of this world, principally Satan and his demons.<sup>16</sup>

*Christus Victor* has much to commend it, most important of which is that it has biblical support. One of the most consistent teachings in the Scriptures is that the Lamb of God came to set humanity free from all the corrupting, polluting, destructive, and enslaving powers that reign over mankind (Col 1:13–14) (which includes sin, death and Satan). Only the power of Christ through the cross can liberate one from such enemies, and the Scriptures provide ample evidence that this is one of the reasons Christ died.

Biblical support for *Christus Victor* includes Colossians 2:15, "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities; He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him." However, the means by which Christ triumphed over these spiritual powers was by dying in the sinner's place and taking the sinner's penalty upon Himself. Verse 14 reads, "Having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." Therefore, without denying Christ's victory over satanic forces at the cross, penal substitution remains central. Were it not for Jesus taking humanity's sins upon Himself and paying the sinner's penalty, no victory would have been realized. Hebrews 2:14–15

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Lane, *Concise History*, 279–81.

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is also an important biblical support for this theory, “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.” First John 3:8 is also helpful, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.” Without question, in the atonement, Christ won a great victory over the forces of evil.

Unfortunately, some take this interpretation too far. Robert Webber is one of those. His explanation of *Christus Victor* is as follows:

- At the cross the power of Satan was dethroned. Christ’s death exposed Satan’s lies so that people can be set free from his illusions.
- At the consummation, Satan’s influence over the powers will be destroyed.
- Between the resurrection and the consummation, Satan’s powers have been limited.
- Creation ultimately will be reconciled to God.
- As for now, the kingdom of God, God’s rule over all things, is manifested.<sup>17</sup>

As presently understood by men such as Webber, Satan still has power over this world but it is greatly limited. Therefore, according to this theory, the kingdom of God is here now which leads to some very practical applications. Webber wrote,

Faith in Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate ruler over all of life, can break the twisting of political, economic, social, and moral structures into **secular salvation**. Because those structures that promise secular salvation are disarmed, they can no longer exercise ultimate power in our lives. The powers have been dethroned by the power of the cross [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup>

Why *Christus Victor* has gained popularity among emerging adherents and others who see the gospel as including a social element is obvious. If the cross is designed to presently correct social, political, and economic structures then the mission of the church is to right the injustices in the world. One need not wait for the King to come to establish His kingdom because it is here. The believer’s job is to administer His kingdom now in preparation for the final stage of the kingdom coming to earth (such an understanding of

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<sup>17</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future*, 50–55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 51.



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the atonement radically transforms the overall purpose of God's people from that of the Great Commission to the Cultural Mandate of "fixing" the planet). As Brian McLaren stated,

Jesus came to launch an insurgency to overthrow that occupying regime [a reference to aggression and injustice throughout the planet]. Its goal is to resist the occupation, liberate the planet, and retain and restore humanity to its original vocation and potential. This renewed humanity can return to its role as caretakers of creation and one another so the planet and all it contains can be restored to the healthy and fruitful harmony that God desires.<sup>19</sup>

Before an examination of penal substitution is given, this author believes it is in order to state that he believes a mistake is often made when theologians attempt to force one to choose between the three main interpretations of the atonement. The truth is all three have biblical support and help explain the multifaceted beauty of Christ's great crosswork. John R. W. Stott expressed this truth well when he wrote,

In fact all three of the major explanations of the death of Christ contain biblical truth and can to some extent be harmonized, especially if we observe that the chief difference between them is that in each God's work in Christ is directed toward a different person. In the "objective" view God satisfies himself, in the "subjective" he inspires us, and in the "classic" he overcomes the devil. Thus Jesus Christ is successively the Savior, the Teacher and the Victor, because we ourselves are guilty, apathetic and in bondage.<sup>20</sup>

While Stott is correct, nevertheless, the penal substitution of Christ is central, both in Scripture and in relationship to the believer's salvation. In the remainder of this article, the attempt will be made to support this statement and give a thorough explanation of penal substitution as found in Scripture.

## ***Penal Substitution***

As previously stated, this author believes the central teaching of Scripture in regard to Christ's crosswork is best defined as the Penal Substitutionary Atonement. It is this view of the atonement that is facing resistance from many who would be happy to embrace the cross as a moral example of love or a victory over the forces of evil. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that while Christ's death was a great example and resulted in the defeat of

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<sup>19</sup> Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) 129.

<sup>20</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 226.

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evil forces, more importantly His death was necessary in order that one's sins might be forgiven and for the believer to be reconciled to God.

## DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES

Wayne Grudem provided this helpful definition: "Christ's death was 'penal' in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a 'substitution' in that he was a substitute for us when he died. This has been the orthodox understanding of the atonement held by evangelical theologians, in contrast to other views that attempt to explain the atonement apart from the idea of the wrath of God or payment for the penalty for sin."<sup>21</sup> Millard Erickson wrote plainly, "The idea that Christ's death is a sacrifice offered in payment of the penalty for our sins [*sic*]. It is accepted by the Father as satisfaction in place of the penalty due to us."<sup>22</sup> Erickson further refined the doctrine, "By offering himself as a sacrifice, by substituting himself for us, actually bearing the punishment that should have been ours, Jesus appeased the Father and effected a reconciliation between God and Man."<sup>23</sup>

A helpful article written by Mark Dever explains that Penal Substitutionary Atonement has come under attack in modern times for a number of supposed reasons such as: (1) it is a medieval doctrine not found in Scripture; (2) it is irrelevant and does not make sense to modern cultures because it glorifies abusive behavior; (3) it is too individualistic, focusing on individual guilt and forgiveness while ignoring the bigger issues of social justice; and, (4) it is too violent, requiring of God a violence for redemption that He would condemn in humans.<sup>24</sup> The final criticism of Penal Substitutionary Atonement has received much attention of late because of some blunt and shocking statements from a few claiming credentials in evangelicalism. For example, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Barker recently wrote *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* in which they rejected any notion of divine wrath besides that of allowing people to go their own way. "The Scriptures as a whole provide no ground for a portrait of an angry God needing to be appeased in atoning sacrifice," they said. Penal Substitutionary Atonement, therefore, is rejected as ridiculous, and as apparent proof Green and Barker cited a boy in Sunday school who said, "Jesus I like, but the Father seems pretty mean.... Why is God so angry?"<sup>25</sup> In a similar manner, Brian McLaren placed the following words in the mouth of the main

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<sup>21</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 579.

<sup>22</sup> As cited by Richard Mayhue, "The Scriptural Necessity of Christ's Penal Substitution," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20 (Fall 2009): 140.

<sup>23</sup> As cited by Vlach, "Penal Substitution," 200–01.

<sup>24</sup> Dever, "Nothing But the Blood" [online].

<sup>25</sup> As cited by David Wells, *Above all Earthly Powers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 219.

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character in his fictional works, “If God wants to forgive us, why doesn’t he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?”<sup>26</sup>

## OLD TESTAMENT SUPPORT FOR PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

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While Penal Substitutionary Atonement of Christ comes into focus in the New Testament Scriptures, the Old Testament clearly points to this truth through at least four means.

- The Passover at the time of the Exodus provided a glorious picture of what would ultimately be fulfilled in Christ (Exod 12:3–13). Just as a lamb would be killed and its blood applied to the entry way of Jewish homes in order that the inhabitants of those homes would be spared physically, so the Lamb of God would shed His blood so that we would be spared spiritually and given eternal life.
- On the Jewish Day of Atonement, the lives of two goats would be substituted for the sins of the people. One goat was sacrificed and slain on the altar; the other, the scapegoat, would symbolically remove the sins of the people as it was released into the wilderness (Lev 16). Christ, therefore, would not only die for one’s sins but also remove those sins.
- The direct prophecy of Isaiah foretold the fact of Christ dying for sinners—in the sinner’s place—and is stated nine times (Isa 53:4–6, 8, 11–12).
- Finally, Penal Substitutionary Atonement is clearly depicted in the whole sacrificial system in which animals were sacrificed as substitutes for men and women who deserved death because of sin.

## NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT FOR PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

While the Old Testament sacrificial system provided marvelous shadows and symbols of the work of Christ, they were incapable of covering man’s sin, for it was “impossible for the blood of bull and goats to take away sin” (Heb 10:1–4). True atonement would necessitate a greater sacrifice, a more acceptable substitute than anything known

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<sup>26</sup> McLaren, *The Story*, 102.

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previously. It would take the substitutionary death of the Son of God to fully expiate sin. While the sins of Old Testament saints were truly removed and forgiven prior to the Cross, such was made possible only on the basis of what would ultimately occur at the Cross. All the Old Testament ceremonies pointed to the One who could provide salvation by meeting the righteous demands of a holy God. Animals could not meet those demands, nor could man do anything to satisfy God's justice—only the Son could do so. At this point, the reader should now consider what the New Testament actually teaches.

## *As Substitute*

Consideration of the New Testament teaching will begin by surveying some references that speak with regard to Christ dying as the sinner's substitute. Second Corinthians 5:21 is a primary text: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Some have termed this "The Great Exchange" as the Sinless One took sin upon Himself and gave believers the righteousness of God. The implication is that this spiritual transaction is made possible only through the sacrifice of Christ. First Peter 2:24 adds detail, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed." Christ then became sin on behalf of the sinner (i.e. in the sinner's place) at the Cross, for it is there that He bore sin in His body. He did so to free humanity from sin and to bring righteousness, but the believer's healing was made possible only because of His wounds.

First Peter 3:18 reiterates the same thought by proclaiming, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God..." In Roman 5:8, Paul wrote, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Christ death was "for us." His death accomplished what nothing else could. Jesus Himself spoke of penal substitution when He stated that He came "to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). John the Baptist declared Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). One of the best hymn writers, Horatius Bonar (1808–89) expressed it well.

'Twas I that shed the sacred blood;  
I nailed him to the tree;  
I crucified the Christ of God;  
I joined the mockery.

Of all that shouting multitude  
I feel that I am one;  
And in that din of voices rude  
I recognize my own.

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Around the cross the throng I see,  
Mocking the Sufferer's groan;  
Yet still my voice it seems to be,  
As if I mocked alone.<sup>27</sup>

## Propitiation

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While the *Christus Victor* and moral influence views of the atonement have biblical validity, neither adequately explains the Godward side of the atonement issues. Christ's death to set believers free from the bondage of sin, death, and Satan, and His death to provide for believers an example of perfect love, explains important facets of Christ's death. However, neither of these views, or any others except Penal Substitutionary Atonement, address why the death of Christ was necessary from the perspective of God Himself. Scripture, nevertheless, teaches that God is righteously angry at sin and therefore His wrath and judgment is being, and will eternally be, outpoured on sinners who have not had their sins cleansed and forgiven. At issue is the fact that God is just in His judgment of sinners and, being holy, God cannot ignore sin and accept sinners as they are. Something must occur that satisfies the righteous anger of God, and that something is termed propitiation in the Scriptures. At the Cross, Christ took upon Himself the righteous wrath of God that sinners deserve in order that He might appease the anger of God against sin and sinners.

Propitiation is foreign to the minds of modern people and often confused with pagan concepts. Pagans—both of biblical times and today—regard propitiation as an act of man to keep vengeful and mean spirited deities from bothering them. The pagan deities are often regarded as anything but holy. As a matter of fact, they are viewed as super sinners who care only for themselves. To keep them happy, or to secure their favor, pagans will sacrifice something of great value to them personally. The Hollywood picture of tossing a virgin into a volcano to please the gods, and thus obtain victory in battle, or to produce rain is one that comes readily to the mind of many.

To speak of the true God as needing this pagan kind of sacrifice is offensive to God and perplexing. Therefore, it is important to understand that biblical propitiation differs in at least two ways. In pagan sacrifice man is doing something to please the gods; in Christ's sacrifice, God has done something to satisfy His own righteousness. In pagan propitiation, an evil and spiteful deity demands that his unholy appetites be met, while in Christ's death the holiness of God is at stake. At issue with God is how can He, who is infinitely holy, accept people who are deeply corrupt and sinful? Something must occur to enable God to be Holy, and at the same time be accepting of sinners. At Christ's death,

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<sup>27</sup> "Twas I That Shed the Sacred Blood," as cited in Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 63.

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the holy nature of God was satisfied in order that He could receive sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ.

Still propitiation is difficult to accept for many, which might explain why many modern English translations have replaced “propitiation” with such terms as “expiation” or “atoning sacrifice,” even though the proper translation for the Greek word *hilasmos* is unquestionably “propitiation.” Rightly understood, however, the concept of propitiation gives the salvation process the fullness it deserves. Considering a few terms will be helpful.

## Expiation

Expiation is an ornate term that means that God has removed sin; they have been removed from the believer. Such removal of sin was made possible only through the substitutionary death of Christ. Isaiah 53:12 prophesied that the Messiah would bear the sins of many. Christ “put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself ... having been offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:26, 28), and He has “released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev 1:5b). Expiation is directed at sin, propitiation is directed at God’s holiness. Expiation purges from sin; propitiation satisfies God’s just anger toward the sinner.

## Propitiation

J. I. Packer wrote, “It is a sacrifice that averts wrath through expiating sin, and canceling guilt.”<sup>28</sup> Through propitiation, the divine wrath is averted from the sinner and placed on Christ. Thomas Schreiner stated the issue well: “Modern people tend to ask, ‘How can God send anyone to hell?’ Paul asks a completely different question because he thinks theocentrically and not anthropocentrically. He asks how can God refrain from punishing people immediately and fully.”<sup>29</sup>

## Reconciliation

David Clotfelter provided a very useful distinction. “If expiation is the removal of our guilt, and propitiation the removal of God’s wrath, reconciliation is the consequent renewal of relationship between God and us. Because we are no longer regarded as guilty and are no longer objects of wrath, there is now no barrier to hinder us from coming to

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<sup>28</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973) 141.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *Nature of the Atonement*, 88.

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God and experiencing peace with him.... The death of Jesus has opened the way for God to embrace those from whom He was previously estranged by their sin."<sup>30</sup>

## Redemption

"Propitiation focuses on the wrath of God which was placated by the cross; redemption on the plight of sinners from which they were ransomed by the cross."<sup>31</sup> James White made this distinction: "Redemption contemplates our bondage and is the provision of grace to release us from that bondage. Propitiation contemplates our liability to the wrath of God and is the provision of grace whereby we may be freed from that wrath."<sup>32</sup>

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## Justification

John R. W. Stott correctly explained, "Justification will take us into the court of law. For justification is the opposite of condemnation (e.g. Rom 5:18; 8:34) and both are verdicts of a judge who pronounces the accused either guilty or not guilty.... Forgiveness remits our debts and cancels our liability to punishment; justification bestows on us a righteous standing before God."<sup>33</sup>

## Other New Testament Scriptures Examined

Romans 3:21–26 is one of the key passages addressing the atonement issues. In the excellent book *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, the authors offered an interpretation which is faithful to the context and thought process that Paul intended for his readers.

All people are sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, but all may be justified through faith in Jesus. For God, who in the past had left his people's sin unpunished, has now demonstrated his justice by punishing their sin in Christ. He was set forth as ... a propitiation, (v. 25) turning aside God's wrath by suffering it himself in the place of his people.<sup>34</sup>

In the flow of Paul's argument in Romans, he used most of the first three chapters to demonstrate the condemnation that mankind is under because of sin. Perhaps the key verse has been 1:18 wherein one finds that God's wrath is outpoured against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. As Paul brought the first section of his great epistle to

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<sup>30</sup> Dave Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God, Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004) 196.

<sup>31</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> James White, *The God Who Justifies*, (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2001) 195.

<sup>33</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 179–80.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgression*, 80.

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a conclusion, he demonstrated the hopeless condition of sinful humanity by communicating that even the Law of God was unable to purify from sin, for the Law was only able to reveal sin and thereby condemn and hold mankind accountable before a holy God (3:19–20). It would take something even greater than the Law to satisfy the wrath of God against sin and redeem sinners from its power. It would take something that could allow God to both justify unworthy sinners and at the same time maintain the justice and holiness of God (v. 26). Only the sacrifice of the Son of God could do both. Christ died in the sinner's stead, taking upon Himself the full wrath of God that sinners deserved. God's sentence against sin was fully completed on Christ so that sinners might be redeemed. Proclaiming the doctrine of penal substitution, verses 24–25b read, "Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith..."

Thomas Schreiner argued that Galatians 3:10–14 is remarkably similar to the teaching in Romans. In verse ten, Paul wrote, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse." "How can such a curse be removed?" Schreiner asked? "Not by Christ's good example. Not merely by Christ defeating demonic powers. Not merely by God healing our damaged souls. Galatians 3:13 answers the question posed: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.' The curse we deserved was borne by Christ.'" <sup>35</sup>Galatians 1:4 reads, "Who [speaking of Christ] gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age..." Christ voluntarily died for the sins of humanity in order to rescue sinners. Nothing but the great sacrifice could set sinners free.

In Hebrews 2:17, one find this affirmations of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Christ's high priestly ministry directly targets the need for sins to be propitiated. Under the Old Testament system, the Jewish high priest would sacrifice animals to atone for the sins of people and temporarily appease the wrath of God against those sins. However, final removal of those sins, in addition to those of the New Testament believer, would await the perfect sacrifice at the cross. The difference was not so much in the methodology used as it was in the sacrifice itself. The weakness in the Mosaic system was that the animals sacrificed were not capable of removing sin (Heb 10:1–4). A final, once-for-all, holy sacrifice was needed to pay for sins.

The apostle John, while not dealing as intently or directly with the doctrine of substitution, was not hesitant to speak regarding propitiation. In 1 John 2:2, he wrote,

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<sup>35</sup> Schreiner, "Penal Substitution," 89.



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“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but for those of the whole world.” Again, in 4:10 we read, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

There are three more passages worthy of note. Titus 2:14 reads, “Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, jealous for good deeds.” Ephesians 2:13 teaches, “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” There are few texts as clear on the subject than Isaiah 53:4–6, “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried.... But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

## CONCLUSION

While there is helpful truth to be found in some of the other atonement theories, especially *Christus Victor* and Moral Example, the central theme of redemptive theology as found in Scripture is that salvation could be made possible only through a perfect sacrifice that could not only redeem sinners from sin and declare them justified (righteous) but could also satisfy God’s holy wrath against sin. While many substitutes have been suggested, such as one’s own merit by keeping the Law or through the death of animals under the prescribed Old Testament sacrificial system, none of these would suffice. Paul, who confessed to trying these other means, gloried in the fact that because of Christ his righteousness was not “of my own, derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil 3:9).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gilley, G. E. (2011). “The Significance of Christ’s Crosswork: Challenges and Responses to Why Christ Died.” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* Volume 15, 15(45), 7–24.