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RECOVERING
THE SCANDAL
OF THE CROSS

ATONEMENT IN NEW TESTAMENT
AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

SECOND EDITION

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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MODELS OF THE ATONEMENT

A HISTORY AND ASSESSMENT (PART TWO)



HAVING PRESENTED AND ASSESSED three well-known models from the church's theological tradition (*Christus Victor*, satisfaction and moral influence), we now turn to what has more recently become the most pervasive atonement theory: the penal substitution model.

Recent discussion of this model, especially over the last decade, provides the impetus for beginning our summary and assessment with some clarity on terminology. This is because substitutionary atonement is a broad category. Many models of the atonement are "substitutionary" in the sense that they portray Jesus as having taken our place or having done something for us that we are unable to do for ourselves. However, some people mistakenly use the broader term "substitutionary atonement" as though it were synonymous with "penal substitution." J. I. Packer has helpfully observed that *penal* substitution is just one type of substitution.¹ Here, then, we are focused on the particular model of *penal* substitutionary atonement and not on the broader category of "substitution."

The word "model" to describe "penal substitution" is also important. The question is not whether there is substitutionary and penal language in the Bible. After all, the Bible uses the legal language of judgment and legal metaphors. Recognition of legal metaphors in Scripture, however, leaves open the question of which legal and judicial system we should

¹J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," in *The J. I. Packer Collection* (ed. Alistair McGrath; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 109-11.

utilize to shape our understanding of the penal nature of the cross. The penal substitutionary *model* of the atonement offers an explanation of how the death of Jesus functioned as a penal substitute as a means of salvation. But one could affirm that the cross has both a substitutionary and penal character yet disagree with the mechanics of how a penal substitution model of atonement attempts to explain the character of the cross. This chapter focuses on the *model* rather than on the terms themselves.

One does not need to go to a theological library to encounter the penal substitution model of the atonement. Most Christians in the West have encountered it in Sunday school classes, heard it proclaimed by pastors and evangelists, sung it in hymns, or read it in tracts or books of basic doctrines. We can also go to faraway lands where Western missionaries have preached and encounter the penal substitution model in places where its legal language and concept of justice are quite foreign—in Japan for instance or in the jungles of Panama.

In fact, one of us was giving a class to a group of indigenous pastors in Panama. In response to the question of why Jesus died on the cross, these pastors responded in a way that communicates the heart of the penal substitution model of the atonement. They explained that God would like to be in relationship with humans and dwell together with us forever in heaven, but human sin does not allow for this since God is holy and cannot associate with anyone corrupted by sin. It is impossible for humans to achieve the sinless perfection necessary, and because God is just, he must punish us for our sins. God, however, provides a solution. God the Father sends his Son to earth to suffer the punishment we deserve by dying on the cross. Since Jesus has paid the penalty for us, God can regard us as not guilty. If we believe that we are sinners deserving of hell, but that Jesus died in our place, then we can be in relationship with God and go to heaven.

Although the exact legal mechanics of how one person could pay the penalty for everyone's crimes may be a little mind-boggling, the basic ideas of this model can be communicated even to children. Many of us may remember sitting in a class as a child or youth and hearing an example similar to this one: It is as if God is a judge sitting in court looking at a big book that lists all our sins, and God says, I must punish you

for all these sins. If, however, a person accepts Jesus as Savior then Jesus will say, "No, I died on the cross to pay the penalty of those sins"; then when God looks at the book again the list of sins is gone, and the page with your name on it is totally blank.

Similarly, some of us may remember hearing the more gruesome story that compares God to a railroad switchman who sees that his son has wandered onto the main track just as a passenger train is hurtling toward him. If the man throws the switch, his son will live, but the train will crash into freight cars parked on the siding, and many people will die. The father opts to leave the switch open and kill his son instead of killing the people on the train.

The railroad story succeeds in disturbing young listeners but theologically does not communicate much more than that God the Father was willing to kill his Son to save others. Adding more theological details to parables of penal substitution does not, however, lessen the distress in the minds of listeners. It simply adds further troubling images. For instance, Shirley Guthrie recounts how the following example left a young listener filled with questions and fear.

The preacher held up a dirty glass. "See this glass? That's you. Filthy, stained with sin, inside and outside."

He picked up a hammer. "This hammer is the righteousness of God. It is the instrument of God's wrath against sinners. God's justice can be satisfied only by punishing and destroying people whose lives are filled with vileness and corruption."

The preacher put the glass on the pulpit and slowly, deliberately drew back the hammer, took deadly aim, and with all his might let the blow fall.

But a miracle happened! At the last moment he covered the glass with a pan. The hammer struck with a crash that echoed through the hushed church. He held up the untouched glass with one hand and the mangled pan with the other.

"Jesus Christ died for your sins. He took the punishment that ought to have fallen on you. He satisfied the righteousness of God so that you might go free if you believe in him."²

²Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 250.

Anselm would not have approved of either the railroad or pan story, yet these images grow out of the atonement thought of people who have taken his basic idea of satisfaction and adapted it to fit the legal systems of an era far removed from his. The shift away from feudal obligations to criminal law altered markedly the character of the satisfaction Christ provided. As we noted, Anselm does not present a wrathful God punishing Christ in our place; rather, Christ satisfies, or pays a debt we owe. In a criminal-justice system such as ours, however, "satisfaction" has to do with the apprehension and punishment of the guilty. Therefore, in this context, Christ does not pay a debt humans owe to God but rather bears the punishment of God against human sin. This shift in legal framework signals the main differences between Anselm's satisfaction model and the penal substitution model.

This shift is evident already in Luther and Calvin. For instance, Calvin writes, "God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us. Hence, an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God's favor for us and appease his wrath."³ Calvin and Luther, however, do not work out a detailed, all-encompassing penal theory. They also use other images of atonement. For instance, Gustaf Aulén claims that Luther placed more emphasis on a *Christus Victor* model than on a penal model. Penal substitutionary thinking became more and more dominant, however. Many theologians developed models of the atonement in which some version of penal substitution was presented as the singular explanation of the saving significance of the cross.⁴ As we have done with other models in the previous chapter, we will take a more in-depth look at penal substitution by summarizing a classical description of the position. We have chosen Charles Hodge because he wrote in great depth on the topic, because his articulation of the model has been so influential and because it closely represents the understanding of penal substitution held by many at the popular level. Since Hodge's day, though, others have developed the penal substitutionary model

³John Calvin *Institutes* 2.15.6 (*Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* [ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 1:501).

⁴The dominance of penal substitution continues today among evangelical theologians. Beginning with Schleiermacher, however, there was a renewed interest in an Abelardian-type approach that has continued to the present among many other theologians.

along different lines; to some of these developments we will turn later in the chapter.

CHARLES HODGE: PENAL SUBSTITUTION MODEL

Charles Hodge (1797–1878) was perhaps the leading theologian in the United States during the nineteenth century. He taught at Princeton Seminary for fifty years. His three-volume systematic theology, first published in 1872–1873, had great influence and was republished as recently as 1981. Chapter seven of the second volume dedicates over sixty pages to the theme “satisfaction of Christ.”

Hodge states that God cannot simply pardon sin “without a satisfaction to justice, and He cannot have fellowship with the unholy” (492).⁵ Hodge acknowledges that some might say that God can do anything God wants to do, but he argues that God cannot stop being just. God’s justice, his moral excellence, “demands the punishment of sin. If sin be pardoned it can be pardoned in consistency with divine justice only on the ground of a forensic penal satisfaction” (488). God’s justice “renders it necessary that the righteous be rewarded and the wicked punished” (490).

The wages of sin is death, and therefore Hodge explains that “every sin of necessity subjects the sinner to the wrath and curse of God” (516). But through the cross, God acts to save sinners from this situation and from our alienation from God. Hodge allows that the sufferings of Christ may “illustrate and enforce truth, and exert a moral influence on others; [but] these are all subordinate and collateral ends” (516). He also states that Jesus’ death on the cross was not a natural consequence of “subjecting himself to the common lot of humanity.” Rather, Hodge believes God orchestrated Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. In commenting on Galatians 3:13 he writes:

They were divine inflictions. It pleased the Lord to bruise him. He was smitten of God and afflicted. These sufferings were declared to be on account of sin, not his own, but ours. He bore our sins. The chastise-

⁵All citations in this section are from Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

ment of our peace was on him. And they were designed as an expiation, or for the satisfaction of justice. They had, therefore, all the elements of punishment, and consequently it was in a strict and proper sense that he was made a curse for us. (517)

In these few paragraphs we have communicated the core of Hodge’s position. He writes much more, however. He responds to possible objections and has lengthy sections that list various passages of Scripture, especially those dealing with the cross in terms of sacrifice, to show how they support his position. He also explains certain aspects of the model in greater detail. For instance, he distinguishes between meeting the demands of justice and meeting the demands of the law and explains how Jesus does both. “To satisfy justice is to satisfy the demand which justice makes for the punishment of sin. But the law demands far more than that punishment of sin.” The law also requires the fulfillment of all righteousness. Therefore, Christ, “by his obedience and sufferings, by his whole righteousness, active and passive, he, as our representative and substitute, did and endured all that the law demands” (493–94).

In addition Hodge explains how penal substitution provides deliverance from the power of sin and Satan, something more directly associated with a *Christus Victor* model of the atonement. In relation to liberation from the power of sin, he explains that “deliverance from sin is a true redemption. A deliverance effected by a ransom, or a satisfaction to justice, was the necessary condition of restoration to the favour of God; and restoration to his favour was the necessary condition of holiness” (518). Hodge states emphatically that the cross delivers us from the power of Satan, but he refuses to describe it as a direct confrontation and specifically rejects a *Christus Victor* type of explanation. Instead, he attempts to show how Christ’s penal satisfaction of justice and the law also frees us from Satan. He makes three points. First, humans “are in a state of bondage through fear of the wrath of God on account of sin.” Second, “in this state they are in subjection to Satan who has . . . the ability and opportunity of inflicting on them the sufferings due to them as sinners.” Third, the death of Christ delivers humans from “the state of bondage and subjection to the power of Satan . . . by satisfying

the justice of God, [freeing] them from the penalty of the law; and freedom from the curse of the law involves freedom from the power of Satan to inflict its penalty" (519).

Hodge also explains what an individual needs to do to appropriate Christ's work for his or her life. Again attacking the moral influence approach, he writes, "It is not enough that we should open our hearts to all the influences for good which flow from his person and work." We must give up the idea "that we can satisfy the demands of God's justice and law, by anything we can do, suffer, or experience." Instead, Hodge states that we must trust in Christ, "renounce our righteousness and confide in his for our acceptance with God." Hodge then explains that our justification is not a subjective work. "It is not wrought in us either naturally or supernaturally. . . . But if God, in justifying sinners, declares that with regard to them the claims of justice are satisfied, it confessedly is not on the ground that the sinner himself has made that satisfaction, but that Christ has made it in his behalf" (522).

HODGE'S PENAL SUBSTITUTION MODEL: AN ASSESSMENT

At the heart of Hodge's explanation of the atonement is a legal metaphor that would have been readily understood by people of his day. That may be less true today with the dissolution of an accepted framework of universal moral law. Hodge also, however, leans heavily on the biblical image of blood sacrifice, something very distant from his students in nineteenth-century New Jersey. His concern does not appear to be to develop a presentation that will connect with people's reality but to articulate a logical, intellectually sound and biblically correct theory of the atonement. He cites many scriptural passages to support his explanations, thus at least giving his position the appearance of being biblical. Upon closer examination, however, we find that Hodge's model actually falls short in this regard. Because Hodge read the Bible through the lens of the criminal-justice system of his era, the Bible appeared to support his explanation. In other words, if readers come to the biblical text with the presuppositions Hodge has about justice, God's wrath and judgment, and the mechanics of biblical sacrifice, they would be inclined toward viewing his model as biblical.

For instance, if one were first to assume that, in the biblical materials, sacrifice was given as a payment to appease God, then one might quite naturally conclude that the penal substitution model is found throughout the Bible. But what of readers who live in a context in which sacrifices are a means of breaking an evil curse, of renewing a covenant or of purifying a sinner? For those readers, using the word "sacrifice" would communicate something quite different. Of course the fact that some cultures' understanding of sacrifice will naturally lead them to read biblical texts differently than Hodge does not by itself prove that Hodge is wrong. It does, however, highlight the reality that other possible understandings exist. Of course, this example is not innocent, since, as we have already demonstrated in chapters two and four, biblical notions of sacrifice are not easily correlated with the penal substitutionary theory of atonement. That is, as we have seen, the sacrificial system did not have for Israel the purpose of appeasing God. At this point, then, Hodge's model appears fundamentally flawed because it imports into the Bible a foreign understanding of sacrifice.

Although Hodge rejects the penitential system and does not participate in a feudal society, the substructure of his model is borrowed from Anselm, who, as we have seen, based his concept of satisfaction not on New Testament teaching but on feudalism and penance. Using this extrabiblical foundation shapes the character of the whole of Hodge's superstructure in essential ways. Thus, it distorts biblical words and phrases to the point that they are no longer recognizable in their biblical contexts. For instance, Hodge ends up with a God who can only operate within certain legal confines as determined by a particular concept of justice—in contrast to a biblical understanding of justice that is covenantal and relational and almost synonymous with faithfulness.⁶ Hodge explains the penal substitutionary model in a way that makes it appear self-evident that God must behave according to late-nineteenth-century American notions of justice. This, however, leads him to depict God as having no option but to act in ways that do not match up with the God actually revealed to us in Scripture and ultimately in Christ.

⁶Cf. Richard B. Hays, "Justification," *ABD* 3:1129-33.

Within his penal substitution model, God's ability to love and relate to humans is circumscribed by something outside of God—that is, an abstract concept of justice instructs God as to how God must behave. It could be said that Hodge presents a God who wants to be in relationship with us but is forced to deal with a problem of legal bookkeeping that blocks that relationship. The solution is having God the Father punish God the Son. Rather than presenting a Father and Son who are one, Hodge has one member of the Trinity punishing another member of the Trinity.

His presentation is more likely to lead his readers to picture a God who has a vindictive character, who finds it much easier to punish than to forgive. Earlier we demonstrated that a mistaken concept of God's wrath as vengeful retribution lies behind this picture of God (see chapter two). In a playful but also jarring way Robin Collins has made the same point by inserting the Father described by Hodge's penal substitution theory into the parable of the prodigal son. When the son returns and recognizes the error of his ways, Collins has the Father respond, "I cannot simply forgive you . . . it would be against the moral order of the entire universe. . . . Such is the severity of my justice that reconciliation will not be made unless the penalty is utterly paid. My wrath—my avenging justice—must be placated." Collins also provides a different ending to the parable. The older son offers to do extra work in the fields in order to pay his brother's penalty. "And finally, when the elder brother died of exhaustion, the father's wrath was placated against his younger son and they lived happily for the remainder of their days."⁷

In addition, because of Hodge's singular focus on penal satisfaction, Jesus' resurrection is not really necessary according to this model. Hodge's presentation of penal substitution falls short not just because it distorts or leaves out biblical concepts. It is also problematic because of its attempt to have one image or model serve as an all-encompassing theory, the only correct and needed explanation of the atonement. As

⁷Robin Collins, "Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory," <<http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Philosophical%20Theology/Atonement/AT7.htm>> (accessed December 24, 2010).

we have seen, the New Testament provides a number of images that in different contexts of the Christian mission were used to proclaim the saving significance of the cross. Hodge, however, presents one model as though it were *the* explanation of the atonement for all times and places. This approach is reductionistic with respect both to Scripture and our theological tradition, and it also creates significant missiological problems. It implies both that we have no need to develop a different model and, indeed, that we would be wrong to try. Yet the reality is that in many societies—both when Hodge lived and today—different peoples have different concepts of justice, so that for them penal substitution is simply unintelligible. The weakness of forcing all atonement thinking into the mold of one image becomes especially apparent when Hodge attempted to explain victory over Satan and the power of sin in terms of penal substitution. In contrast with the tight logical arguments of the other sections, in these it appeared he was trying to force a square peg into a round hole.

Hodge's penal substitution model takes sin seriously in that it presents sin as an apparently insurmountable barrier between God and humans. Yet it is a limited concept of sin that portrays it only in terms of moral failure or transgression of a law. Even within that concept of sin, however, the model does not intersect with day-to-day reality. Describing the atonement as a legal transaction within the Godhead removes it from the historical world in which we live and leaves it unconnected to personal or social reconciliation. And in actuality it only addresses our reconciliation with God at an abstract level. That is, it is so objective, so outside of us (and in a sense outside of God) that what changes through the cross is a legal ruling. According to the logic of the model, an individual could be saved through penal substitution without experiencing a fundamental reorientation of his or her life.

Ethically this model has little to offer; it can do little more than serve as an example to point to when calling individuals to imitate Christ. Yet the life of Jesus that this model presents is as disengaged from his historical reality as the atonement it provides is from our day-to-day reality. The model needs Jesus to have lived a perfect life in order to have met the standard of justice and the law. Jesus' conflict

with the powers of his day and their putting him to death is of no significance. There is no sense that Jesus' life led to and even culminated in his death. Instead, Hodge portrays God as having to orchestrate Jesus' death. What is significant about Jesus' life is that he did not sin. In this model the only aspect of Jesus' life that is presented concretely is his physical suffering, which helps to validate the penalty's sufficiency. Unfortunately, then, in calling people to imitate Christ the model too easily has been misused to glorify suffering and encourage passive tolerance of abuse.

In conclusion, we might say that Hodge's approach has repeatedly led him to theological innovations at odds with those suggested in our biblical study. He has turned to the world around him at those points where he should have engaged more fully with Scripture and has gone to the Bible when he would have done better to engage his own cultural context. He roots his model in an individualistic, legal framework borrowed from the world of his day rather than from the Bible. His portrait of God is therefore governed more by concepts of justice among his contemporaries and not by God's revelation of himself in Christ. It is not surprising, then, that Scripture does not shape his fundamental conception of the saving work of the cross. Then he borrows metaphors—like sacrifice, ransom and redemption—from the Bible without taking into account that these images were foreign and largely unintelligible to people of his age. The problem, however, is not just one of communication. In the context of his work these metaphors do not function as they do in the Bible; indeed, they are set within a framework that is alien to the world of Scripture, and within that framework they operate with meanings foreign to Scripture.

As we have seen, this sort of penal substitution model too easily leads to a situation in which we might conclude that Jesus came to save us from God. Of course, Hodge and current proponents of the penal substitution model would protest they explicitly state that because God loved us, he sent his son to die for us. They affirm that God is a God of love. Yet in the context of Hodge's model this seems a little like having the owner of a dog who is barking, growling and straining at its leash say, "Don't worry, he doesn't bite." Maybe it is true, but the combina-

tion of messages we receive leads us to keep a safe distance from the dog. In the same way, Hodge's presentation makes it much easier for us to conceive of a God who punishes with vindictive retribution—a God from whom we need to be saved.

HODGE: REPRESENTATIVE OR CARICATURE?

Thus far in this chapter and the last, we have focused on historical, classical expressions of different atonement models. Just as over time theologians have developed different versions of the *Christus Victor* and moral influence models of the atonement, so too others have developed different views of the penal substitution approach. Many have in fact sought to explain this model in ways that avoid some of the very weaknesses we have pointed out in Hodge. Therefore, someone might protest that, rather than choosing the best example of penal substitution, we have chosen a caricature easy to critique. To such protests we reply, first, by recalling that our concern is not focused solely, or even primarily, on scholarly articulations of the atonement—that is, on the sorts of nuances that one finds in scholarly discussions of penal substitutionary atonement. Rather, our concern lies with popular understandings and articulations of the atonement. Hodge, in addition to being a classical expression of penal substitution, has sketched an atonement theory that continues to be reflected in popular expressions of penal substitution that we and many others find as problematic.

In his defense of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, I. Howard Marshall voices his concern with those who criticize only caricatures of the view:

It is easy for opponents 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 would take this point of view, and if there were, I would side with their critics.⁸

⁸I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (Thinking Faith; Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), p. 54.

Marshall implies that it is inappropriate to dismiss all versions of penal substitution because of problems found in some of its articulations. We agree. Marshall also implies that it is a caricature of the penal substitution model to say that it communicates that God must punish Jesus on the cross in order to forgive. On this point we do not agree. Unfortunately, we regularly hear people state that Jesus died on the cross *so that* God could forgive our sins. It may be that many carefully nuanced versions of penal substitution avoid this error, but it concerns us greatly that it is found repeatedly in tracts, sermons, blogs and Bible studies.⁹

And what Marshall dismisses as irresponsible and a caricature is not limited to the lay or popular level. We mention here only four examples of the many that could be listed. No less an influential Christian leader than John F. MacArthur Jr., popular pastor and author of many books, writes: "Here's what was happening on the cross: God was punishing His own Son as if He had committed every wicked deed done by every sinner who would ever believe. And He did it so that He could forgive and treat those redeemed ones as if they had lived Christ's perfect life of righteousness."¹⁰ Another renowned pastor and author of numerous books, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, wrote, "If Christ had not died on the cross in that way, God could not forgive sin."¹¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, a New Testament scholar selected to present the penal substitution model in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, writes: "And yet because of God's great love, he sent Christ to bear the punishment of our sins. Christ died in our place, took to himself our sin (2 Cor 5:21) and guilt (Gal 3:10) and bore our penalty so that we might receive forgiveness of sins."¹² Watchman Nee, another influential Christian leader, especially at the popular level, observed, "Without the blood [Jesus shed] God could not forgive even if He wanted to forgive."¹³ Would Marshall label

⁹For a sampling of these examples, we invite our readers to conduct an Internet search for the words "so that God could forgive" or "God could not forgive."

¹⁰John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Murder of Jesus* (Nashville: Word, 2000), p. 219.

¹¹Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), p. 437.

¹²Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 67-98 (73).

¹³Watchman Nee, *Questions on the Gospel* (Anaheim, Calif.: Living Stream Ministry, 2002), pp. 26, 27.

these as irresponsible versions of penal substitution? We wish Hodge's position were a caricature, but his understanding is actually representative of many expressions of penal substitution today.

Some brief comments on a more nuanced version of the penal substitution model may help to clarify our approach. A number of people have recommended J. I. Packer's articulation of penal substitution, and appropriately so.¹⁴ It differs from Hodge in a number of ways. Packer acknowledges that theologians advocating penal substitution have often explained it poorly, and that at the popular level many descriptions of penal substitution merit the adjective "crude" (98, 115). He further asserts that many advocates of the penal substitution model were overly rationalistic. They got too caught up in trying to explain the mechanics of the atonement, the "how," and borrowed too heavily from the world of contemporary legal and political thought (110, 115). Packer also points to the error of turning one vital truth about the cross, penal substitution, into the only truth. In contrast he argues that the *Christus Victor* motif, the moral influence model and the penal substitution model are not mutually exclusive and that all contain truths (112, 115). As one would expect from an advocate of the penal substitution model, Packer strongly and clearly affirms that justice demands a penalty for human sin, as well as the necessity of God's carrying out this retributive justice. Yet he carefully nuances his discussion and avoids creating the sense of a vindictive God who must be placated.

We affirm Packer's insightful critique of other articulations of the penal substitution model and how he has sought to avoid those mistakes, but it is unclear whether his carefully qualified version of the model has sufficiently addressed the very concerns he raises. It appears to us that some of the fundamental elements of the penal substitution model continue to exert their negative influence even though Packer acknowledges the problems and seeks to correct them. For instance, Packer explicitly names the problem that, in typical expressions of the penal substitution mode, the resurrection is not central, or even necessary. Accordingly he argues that the resurrection is essential and an or-

¹⁴Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" All page numbers in this section refer to this essay.

ganic element, and offers a brief explanation to support that point (112). It is telling, however, that when he turns to describe penal substitution he does not include the role of the resurrection, nor does he mention it as one of the main ingredients of the penal substitution model (127). Although Packer correctly affirms the centrality of the resurrection for our salvation, in the end it appears that the fundamental logic of penal substitution wins out and the resurrection is not included.

Although Packer resists so fully utilizing the legal models of the day, at a fundamental level his articulation of the atonement is nonetheless built on concepts of moral law, guilt and retributive justice that are more at home in his time and place than in the biblical materials (114). Rather than bringing a framework of morality and justice to the Bible and interpreting it through that framework, we have argued for seeking to let the biblical narrative shape the framework on which we build our atonement thinking. One aspect of that is a covenantal and relational concept of justice. In the legal system of Packer's world the fundamental role of the judge is to use an impersonal code of law to evaluate guilt or innocence and punish accordingly; in the Old Testament, judges also evaluated guilt or innocence and meted out punishment, but within a covenantal context. Judges evaluated whether people were faithful to their covenant commitments. The judge's essential role was to restore relationships and rectify situations. As we saw in chapter four, these two legal frameworks lead to different understandings of how God's justice is revealed at the cross and what it means for a sinner to be justified through the cross. In the world portrayed by Israel's Scriptures, God's justice is nothing other than his covenant faithfulness. It is not his adherence to an impersonal code of law that demands he punish those who break that law. God works through the cross to save and set aright the world of injustice. "Justification" would not just refer to being declared "not guilty" but to God's embracing believers, Jew and Gentile, as members of God's own people, full participants in God's community. For those who believe, God does this because their sins have been wiped clean through the sacrificial death of Jesus. If Packer more fully embraced this alternative concept of justice, it would change aspects of his atonement theology.

As we have already seen, the legal framework of penal substitution raises missiological concerns. For instance, Packer states that our conscience affirms the appropriateness of God's demands and God's law of retribution, and "our conscience is pacified by the knowledge that our sins have already been judged and punished" (119). We do not challenge the reality that all have sinned, but we doubt that obtaining a peaceful conscience through punishment is a universal experience. Packer's statement is rooted in a particular cultural context in which guilt and punishment are common means of influencing behavior. As we will see in the next chapter, in cultures where shame, exclusion and separation are more common, a guilt-based explanation of the cross can be difficult to grasp and experience as good news. This is not to say that an image of atonement that relies on guilt and punishment is necessarily wrong; it speaks clearly to some people in some contexts. The problem comes when a model like penal substitution, built on a particular cultural understanding, is presented as *the* universal explanation of the saving significance of the cross. Although Packer does not represent the penal substitution model as the one exclusive theory of atonement, he does call it comprehensive (112); indeed, he places so much emphasis on its centrality that it is unclear whether he has allowed room either for the range of atonement images found already in Scripture or for the ongoing work of theological reflection on the significance of the cross in missional contexts.¹⁵

Sensitive to the criticism that the logic of penal substitution splits apart the Trinity, Packer strongly affirms the loving motivational unity of Father and Son. Yet as part of his description of the great extent of God's love for humanity, Packer describes the depth of the Son's suffering that he was willing to go through for us. And what "made all the sufferings of Christ the more terrible to him, [was that] they were from the hand of this Father" (126). Irrespective of Packer's intentions, we wonder whether this portrait of the Godhead is not open to the very

¹⁵In a more recent writing, Packer again affirms that we "must not define atonement in single-category terms." Yet even more strongly than in his earlier essay he argues that penal substitution is *the* foundational category: "It is evident that this category explains all the others" ("The Atonement and the Christian Life," in *The Glory of the Atonement* [ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004], pp. 409-25 [416]).

interpretation Packer wants to avoid. Does it not allow a picture of the Father and Son at odds? Even when able theologians like Packer explain penal substitution in a way that affirms the unity of the Trinity, the essential logic of the penal substitution model can still come through in ways that give the appearance of polarization within the Trinity, with one member placating another. Unfortunately, this understanding is often expressed with no nuance at all at the popular level. One of our students recently reported to us that a Bible study speaker asked an audience: "What did Jesus save us from?" People offered various answers including "sin" and "hell," but the speaker replied, with all apparent sincerity, "Those are all true, but when you think about it, Jesus really saved us from God." The speaker then went on to outline a version of the penal substitution model of the atonement, stating that because of our sin God would have to destroy us, but Jesus took our place on the cross so that God could forgive us instead.

This brings us back to the questions with which we began this section. Have nuanced versions of penal substitution like Packer's made our critique of Hodge irrelevant? Unfortunately the answer is no. In spite of commendable efforts like Packer's, the problems we pointed to in Hodge's presentation continue both at the popular and formal levels. For instance, in an essay titled "Why Did Christ Have to Die?" David Clark spends almost a third of his article describing Jesus' physical suffering on the cross.¹⁶ Clark apparently highlights Jesus' suffering in order to demonstrate that his suffering was equal to the punishment demanded. Yet Clark acknowledges that others have suffered similar physical torment, and some, like Jesus, have suffered it unjustly. He asks whether this physical suffering would be enough to save us. No, he concludes, and then argues that Jesus' spiritual suffering and his experience of God's wrath were even greater than the physical agony, and these were sufficient.

But when the Lord suffered, the wrath of God was poured out in such measure upon him, that the Father was satisfied. His sufferings were

¹⁶David Clark, "Why Did Christ Have to Die?" *New England Reformed Journal* 1 (1996): 35-36.

sufficient for all the sins that his elect would ever commit! Who can even begin to grasp the "width and length and depth and height" of the true spiritual suffering of our Lord and our God as his Father turned his back upon him. Who can begin to comprehend the love that drove a Father to pour out his unmitigated wrath upon his dearly beloved Son for such rebellious worms and wretches as us? . . . Perhaps now we can begin to understand why God had to die for man. Surely only God the Son could bear the unmitigated wrath of God the Father.¹⁷

We acknowledge that Hodge is not representative of some of the best, and finely nuanced, work being done on penal substitution by contemporary theologians. Yet Hodge continues to be representative of much that is written and said about penal substitution.

In order to see changes happen in atonement thinking at the popular level, theologians who teach and write must go beyond nuancing the model of penal substitutionary atonement and examine critically the essential logic of the model. We see encouraging signs of this happening. For instance, Hans Boersma acknowledges, "It is true that particularly in the Reformed tradition the 'penal voices' of the choir have tended to exclude others. . . . It seems to me that without allowing it to dominate, we should let penal substitution have a voice in the choir."¹⁸ To view penal substitution as one voice among others in a choir of atonement models and images is an important step. Boersma, however, does more than that. In his recent book he takes seriously concerns like those we have voiced and presents a version of penal substitution that at key points builds on a fundamentally different logic.¹⁹ Similarly Stephen Holmes is a strong advocate for the penal substitution metaphor but is just as strongly an advocate for using many metaphors to talk about the cross. Rather than seeing penal substitution theory as the one right way of talking about the cross and reading the Bible through that lens, he reads the Bible while asking how it informs and shapes the way we understand penal substitution. Seeing it as one among many meta-

¹⁷Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁸Hans Boersma, "The Disappearance of Punishment: Metaphors, Models and the Meaning of the Atonement," *Books and Culture* (March/April 2003): 34.

¹⁹Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

phors frees him from the pressure of attempting to explain the cross fully in terms of penal substitution.²⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer provides another example of this type of work, and we will look at his work in more detail.

KEVIN VANHOOZER: PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN POSTMODERNITY

In 2004, Kevin Vanhoozer, now Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, published a lengthy essay on the atonement in postmodernity.²¹ For three-quarters of the essay he summarizes and analyzes criticisms of the penal substitution model and alternative articulations put forward by postmodern theologians. He highlights three significant concerns.

First, he observes, postmoderns protest that advocates of penal substitution have reduced the articulation of the atonement "from many metaphors to one, and from the one metaphor to a single concept" (371). They decry the tendency of modern theologians to reconcile oppositions and differences and strive for a single, comprehensive vision (368). Vanhoozer admits, "A doctrine of the atonement that pretends to explain fully the saving significance of Jesus' death is probably guilty of preferring the clarity of unifying concepts to the messiness of multiple metaphors" (401).

Second, Vanhoozer recognizes the problem of violence as a fundamental concern of postmodern thinkers, who have expressed concerns that the doctrine of penal substitution might legitimate a violent cycle of retribution and retaliation. They protest against the character of retaliation and the economy of exchange that lie at the heart of penal substitution. "Does God need to be placated before he can love and

²⁰Stephen R. Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross: Atonement and Penal Substitution in the Bible and History* (London: Paternoster, 2007).

²¹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 367-404. Unless otherwise noted all citations in this section are from this essay. Vanhoozer used the atonement as an exemplar case study in his *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pp. 380-97, 426-44. We will also refer to it in this summary.

forgive? Is God party to an economy of retaliatory exchange?" (372).

Third, according to Vanhoozer, postmodern theologians are as concerned with church practices as they are with church doctrines, and the penal substitution theory may foster practices that perpetuate suffering and abuse. Vanhoozer concludes that "those who wish to commend the doctrine of the atonement to postmoderns must henceforth demonstrate how it leads to healthy rather than abusive practices" (373).

Although Vanhoozer challenges postmodern theologians at a number of points, he also recognizes that "theologians need to think hard about the merits of the postmodern protest" (371). Indeed, in his own constructive proposal, he demonstrates how seriously he has taken their protest. "The postmodern challenge requires us to develop a nonreductive doctrine of atonement that perceives the saving significance of Jesus' death in terms other than this-worldly economies of exchange" (401). Vanhoozer's depth of commitment to do just that is displayed by his repeated use of the concept of "excess." For example:

The operative concept in postmodern theological understandings of the atonement is *excess*, not exchange. The death of Jesus *exceeds* our attempts to explain it. (396) . . . Jesus was a master of *excessive* metaphors long before postmodernity. (397) . . . Jesus' death thus *exceeds* the levitical provisions for atonement. (398) . . . The triune God is *excessive*, so much so that God shares his *overflowing* love with creatures who are not God. (400) . . . The gift of Jesus' death . . . is itself *excessive*. *No economic or external constraint* coerced God to give himself for us. *No economy mandates* that God return our evil with a greater good. (401) . . . In the final analysis, what *exceeds* the confines of theory is nothing less than the searing white heat of God's holy love. . . . God pours himself out for us, not in an economic exchange, but in an *excess* of justice and love. (403) . . . God did *not merely compensate* for human sin; he did *more*. He did *not simply make up sin's deficit*; he destroyed it. The New Testament, of course, knows this "*excess*" by its proper covenantal name: *grace*. (403-4, emphasis added)

Another key word in Vanhoozer's constructive proposal comes not from postmodern thinkers but from the biblical text. "The one NT word used more than any other to express the significance of Christ's

death is *hyper*, the Greek word for 'on behalf of,' or simply 'for'" (397). Jesus used the setting of the Jewish Passover feast to tell his disciples, "This is my body given for (*hyper*) you" (Lk 22:19). Vanhoozer reaches back to Irenaeus and borrows the idea of recapitulation, but like Jesus he intentionally develops it by using Jewish history and traditions to seek to understand the meaning of Christ's dying for us. He writes, "Jesus recapitulates—repeats differently—the history of Adam and the history of Israel. It is this recapitulation of central events in the drama of redemption—exodus, exile, entry to the promised land—that ultimately provides a framework for understanding the saving significance of Jesus' death."²² "The exile, of course, was Israel's punishment for covenant disobedience. As such it had both penal and interpersonal implications: Israel's exile was a humiliating obstacle to the fulfillment of the covenant promise of life in God's presence." In the context of first-century Palestine it is likely that Jesus' message of forgiveness "carried the connotation [of] 'return from exile'" and included the hope of covenant renewal (397). "God reconciles the world to himself by providing his own Son as a substitute for the exile that should have been ours" (399). Vanhoozer thus uses covenantal language to include and qualify both the legal and relational aspect of the atonement. He writes: "Jesus' death saves because it achieves *covenantal* (not mere legal) *rightness* and *covenantal* (not mere interpersonal) *relationship*."²³

Vanhoozer turns next to explore the theme of the temple and how that relates to Jesus' body having been broken "for us."

Jesus' words during the Last Supper suggest that he substituted his own person and work for the temple and its sacrificial system: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mk 14:24). . . . What Jesus is claiming in the Last Supper is that his broken body and shed blood are the place where sin is dealt with (as it was in the temple on the Day of Atonement), making possible life in the presence of God. . . .

The shed blood is a sign that God has proved this covenant faithfulness

²²Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, p. 388.

²³Ibid., p. 391. Vanhoozer acknowledges the influence of N. T. Wright in what he describes in this section (see Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], pp. 243, 268-70, 416-17, 577).

precisely by undergoing the sanctions, legal and relational for covenant disobedience. . . . Not only does Jesus' death make possible a return from exile (the forgiveness of sins), but the cross of Christ somehow becomes the cornerstone for a new, living temple in which the Spirit of God dwells "bodily" (in the church as the body of Christ). (398, emphasis original)

God worked through the exodus to deliver Israel and lead them to the Promised Land. God worked through Jesus' death or "departure" (*exodos*, Lk 9:31) to give the Holy Spirit.

The "wonderful exchange" is thus not economic but thoroughly eschatological: *Jesus gives his body and blood for us, and in return we receive the Holy Spirit, the operative principle of the new covenant and of the new age. . . .*

Jesus' death on the cross is at once an exodus and an exile, the condition of the possibility of our entry to the promised land of the Holy Spirit. (399, emphasis original)

Vanhoozer observes that the gift of the promised Spirit "made possible by Jesus' horrific exodus" both inaugurates and enables the practices of forgiving and peacekeeping that are to be distinctive of the church. It is the end of exile and the construction of "a new kind of temple, indwelt by God's own Spirit" (400). In this emphasis on practices flowing from the atonement he makes clear that the cross is much more than an example; it enables a new objective situation through the giving of the Spirit.

Vanhoozer explicitly states that "the logic of penal substitution . . . has a legitimate place" (404), yet he also explicitly states the cross does much more than compensate for human sin. "[God] did not simply make up sin's deficit; he destroyed it. . . . The economy of covenantal grace is not exhausted by the logic of penal substitution" (404).

In his elegant final paragraph, Vanhoozer weaves together postmodern themes with New Testament imagery rooted in the Jewish covenantal context he has utilized in this constructive proposal:

We struggle to understand adequately, yet we are fed the answer every Lord's Day when we take Communion. Postmoderns or not, we gather around the Lord's Table as we have been instructed ("Do this in remembrance of me"), awaiting the elements that signify more than our starv-

ing theories. Then, like the five thousand, we discover that after our centuries-long banquet of atonement theology, there are still more fragments of the cross left over. As we seek to understand the atonement in postmodernity or at any other time, let us fill our baskets and keep the feast. (404)

KEVIN VANHOOZER: PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN POSTMODERNITY: AN ASSESSMENT

In a number of ways, Vanhoozer avoids many of the problems we see in Hodge's work as well as in popular expressions of the penal substitution model. For instance, rather than making a legal transaction, or in his words "an economic exchange," both the foundation and the frame of his explanation of the atonement, he purposefully makes the excess of God's love and grace the foundation and frame. He does not simply describe penal substitution and label it as motivated by love; rather, he places penal substitution within a description of God's excessive love. This gives his presentation a radically different character.

Also, rather than following the modern drive to explain comprehensively in a way that ties up all the loose ends and produces a list of clear propositions, Vanhoozer accepts the postmodern invitation to embrace complexity, use metaphors and acknowledge that the cross exceeds our understanding. This move helps him avoid the error of communicating that penal substitution is the one and complete explanation of the atonement. It also brings him in line with the way Scripture uses a variety of metaphors to proclaim the broad and profound significance of the cross: "We discover that after our centuries-long banquet of atonement theology, there are still more fragments of the cross left over" (404).

One might be tempted to say that learning from postmodern thinkers and taking their concerns seriously led Vanhoozer to an articulation of the atonement that avoids the mistakes we have observed in others and that follows the guidelines listed at the end of chapter four that we garnered from the New Testament writers. However, this is not simply a postmodern move but rather an attempt to root atonement theology in Israel's story rather than in medieval society or a Western court-

room. Israel's story, and Jesus' story within that story, leads Vanhoozer to multiple metaphors and multiple layers of meaning.²⁴ Placing penal substitution in this context also gives it a corporate character not usually found in this model. Also, by explaining penal substitution as part of a living history, past, present and future, the element of practices fits integrally into the model.²⁵

Because penal substitution is a legal image, the most significant thing about Vanhoozer's use of Israel's story as an explanatory context is how it transports our thinking to another culture, another time and place. Images of the Western courtroom might lead to thoughts about how justice is satisfied through the paying of a penalty—thoughts that easily translate into an understanding of a just God's demand for satisfaction through punishment. But in the context assumed by Vanhoozer, justice is defined by faithfulness to commitments and covenants, and the role of the judge is to rectify and reconcile. If this judge demands payment or punishment, the purpose is restorative. This translates into an image of the God who works through the cross not so that he might be appeased but so as to set things right by remaining faithful to his covenant promises to save and bless.

We affirm Vanhoozer's placing his explanation of the atonement in a covenantal context and stating that covenantal rightness is more than just legal rightness. We wish, however, he would have more explicitly stated that, when the term *legal* is used in relation to the covenant, it has an essentially different character than the word *legal* as used in relation to our judicial system today. It is not just an issue of avoiding reduction but also of redefining the concept in relation to its covenantal context.

Whether proponents of penal substitutionary atonement will find in Vanhoozer's proposal a way to reenvision this atonement model remains to be seen. Throughout the remainder of the book, though, we will continue to refer to penal satisfaction and penal substitution as a model of the atonement with characteristics similar to those seen in Hodge

²⁴Vanhoozer draws on additional metaphors from the Old Testament, including mercy seat and scapegoat.

²⁵It is noteworthy that in *The Drama of Doctrine* Vanhoozer includes a whole section on performing, or living out, the doctrine of the atonement (pp. 426–44).

and Packer, while hoping that others will join Vanhoozer in the worthwhile task of critically engaging and revising the basic logic of the traditional model of penal satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The language of "substitution" and "penal" is hardly alien to the Bible, yet we have observed how easily articulations of the "penal substitutionary model" can deviate from the message of Scripture. Two basic errors lie behind many of the criticisms we directed at Hodge's work, for example. The first is that Hodge and his heirs present the penal substitution model as either the one-and-only explanation of the atonement, or as the basis for all other models. The second is to interpret what we might call the "legal" language of Scripture as though it derived from Western judicial systems. This second error often leads to two further distortions of biblical atonement teaching. The first communicates that God needed to be appeased in order to forgive—that is, that God had to punish Jesus in order for God to be able to forgive and be in relationship with God's people. The second relates to the character of God's punishment. It is true that God is angered by sin and injustice and that God judges and punishes. It is a distortion, however, to portray God punishing as recompense or revenge.

True, not all articulations of the penal substitution model of the atonement are the same. We have seen the above errors and distortions clearly at the popular level and in some scholarly presentations. We have also seen that, in other articulations of the penal substitution model (represented by J. I. Packer, for example), these distortions can be present to a lesser degree or even explicitly acknowledged as problematic. Although this is an improvement over the model as articulated by Hodge and others, the penal substitution model requires more than nuancing if there is hope of correcting now-pervasive popular distortions. Vanhoozer's work models what is needed. To return to the choir metaphor, Vanhoozer goes beyond stating that we need a choir, not just a penal substitution soloist; he actually lets the other voices in the choir sing. Moreover, rather than simply doing some remodeling to lessen some of the problematic features of the penal substitution building,

Vanhoozer reconstructs the penal substitution edifice using an altogether different architectural framework. It is a framework grounded in the biblical story of Israel rather than in modern Western concepts of law and justice.

N. T. Wright makes a similar point about frameworks. He argues that, in order to have a biblical understanding of the concepts "substitution" and "penal," we must root ourselves not in an arbitrary law court, but within the biblical world, the Old Testament world, the story of Israel.²⁶ Certainly articulations of the penal substitution model, like we observed in Hodge, use many biblical passages, but Wright argues that by putting them in the wrong framework they become systematically misleading. Rather than a building, he uses a drawing metaphor. When doing a connect-the-dots puzzle, if one does not draw the lines according to the sequence of the numbers, one may still end up with a picture, and one may even have used the dots to make the picture, but it will not be the picture envisioned by the puzzle designer. Similarly one might use many biblical verses to construct a penal substitution picture, but this would not make it biblical. Wright argues that the penal substitution picture will be biblical not only when we allow the Bible to provide the dots but also when we allow the biblical story to guide our sequencing of the dots. We think Kevin Vanhoozer has done that.

In the chapters that follow we turn to look at some contemporary examples of presentations of the atonement that were developed by people who, like the New Testament writers, have wrestled with how to present the message of the cross within the context of mission to differing audiences. They have attempted to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of the work of others and sought to present models of the atonement that both communicate to and challenge the society around them.

²⁶N. T. Wright, "The Cross and the Caricatures: A Response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John, and a New Volume Entitled *Pierced for Our Transgression*," *Eastertide*, 2007, <www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=205> (accessed July 20, 2009), pp. 7, 11.