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PENAL SUBSTITUTION IN PERSPECTIVE:  
RE-EVALUATING THE ARTICULATION AND APPLICATION OF THE  
DOCTRINE

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1. *Introduction*

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood—  
Sealed my pardon with his blood: Hallelujah, what a Savior!  
– Philip P. Bliss

It is no secret that, in recent times, the doctrine of penal substitution has fallen into disrepute. It is accused of being outdated and irrelevant to contemporary culture, degradingly anthropomorphic in its view of God, and morally reprehensible in its social implications. While there is a degree of truth to these charges, they fundamentally misunderstand and misrepresent the penal substitution view. What they attack is a crude caricature, not the genuine doctrine as articulated by its best proponents.

In contrast, penal substitution is a legitimate and relevant representation of the biblical doctrine of atonement. The problem with this metaphor is not primarily its *formulation* (although certain qualifications need to be made), but its *application*. In particular, problems arise when the penal substitution metaphor is viewed in isolation from other atonement metaphors, when it becomes a dominant or controlling metanarrative, or when it is converted mechanistically into a methodology for evangelism. Essentially, each of these errors leads to gospel reductionism. In order to develop the above points, the paper first examines the doctrine of penal substitution as it is articulated by one of its best advocates, Charles Hodge (though it also interacts with other

important voices);<sup>1</sup> second, it discusses and evaluates some of the objections that are commonly raised against it; and third, it offers a critique of the applications of the doctrine that are erroneous and reductionistic. As part of this critique, the paper will consider several insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## 2. *The Doctrine as Articulated by Charles Hodge*

According to Charles Hodge, the justice of God is the foundation for the plan of salvation that is revealed in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> By this, Hodge means, first, that God is supremely holy and cannot maintain fellowship with unholy, sinful creatures.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when human beings fell into sinful disobedience and corruption, they became alienated from their Creator. They descended from a state of moral perfection and holiness to a condition of total depravity. Second, God cannot simply pardon sin without a satisfaction of justice. It is God's nature to reward godly service and obedience, and to punish sin and disobedience.<sup>4</sup> Third, "man cannot satisfy the justice of God for himself, nor any creature for him . . ." <sup>5</sup> By their own efforts, people are totally impotent to satisfy God's just demands and thus achieve reconciliation and restoration to humanity's former glory and standing before God. As a result, humanity finds itself in the

1. Green and Baker also appeal to Hodge as an exemplary representative of the penal substitution view. See their *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 142–50.

2. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 492.

3. Erickson explicitly states that his understanding of the atonement is based upon the assumption that the nature of God is perfect and complete holiness (*Christian Theology*, 802). Employing stronger language, Grudem argues that Christ's suffering on the cross was intensified due to the repugnance to his supreme holiness of the sin laid upon him: "Now Jesus was perfectly holy. He hated sin with his entire being . . . Taking on himself all the evil against which his soul rebelled created deep revulsion in the center of his being. All that he hated most deeply was poured out fully upon him" (*Systematic Theology*, 573).

4. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 489. Grudem says that "there is an eternal, unchangeable requirement in the holiness and justice of God that sin be paid for" (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 575).

5. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 481.

hopeless predicament of being rejected by and alienated from God. Its only hope for salvation lies in Jesus Christ, who alone can satisfy the just demands of God on humanity's behalf as its representative and substitute. Therefore, for Hodge, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation precisely because Christ's work *satisfies* the demands of God's justice.

#### *The Nature of Christ's Satisfaction*

Hodge presents three clarifying points to elucidate the nature of the atonement as a satisfaction. These are based on three key terms in his thesis: Christ's atoning work was a satisfaction in that it answered all of the demands of God's justice and God's law against the sinner. First, Christ's saving work was offered to satisfy God.<sup>6</sup> It was not offered primarily to affect a change in human beings, but to satisfy something intrinsic to the divine nature within God. This sacrifice was a perfect satisfaction, both in its efficacy and its applicability. It was efficacious because it completely satisfied God's just demands; it was applicable because Christ was a true representative of humanity. Therefore, there is no longer any basis for condemnation of sinners, for the demands of justice have been totally exhausted in Christ.<sup>7</sup> This is due not to the form and extent of his suffering, as if he suffered in kind and measure what sinners would have been required to suffer, but rather to the infinite dignity of his person, which gives his suffering an intrinsic worth. No mere creature, no abstract or distant deity, could accomplish this. For satisfaction to be applicable, it must be offered by a genuine human being; for it to be efficacious, it must be offered by a being of infinite merit and dignity (i.e., a divine being).<sup>8</sup> Only Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully human, could offer such a satisfaction. Furthermore, the effects of Christ's satisfaction were both negative and positive, both passive and active. They were negative and passive in the sense that Christ suffered the

6. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 482.

7. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

8. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 486.

punishment that belonged to sinners and paid their debt. They were positive and active in the sense that Christ accomplished for sinners what they could not accomplish for themselves, namely perfect righteousness and obedience to God. He both suffered in their place and offered his own righteousness to God on their behalf.<sup>9</sup> Hodge says, “It follows from this that the satisfaction of Christ has all the value which belongs to the obedience and sufferings of the eternal Son of God, and his righteousness, as well active as passive, is infinitely meritorious.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, Christ’s atoning work was offered to satisfy the demands of *God’s justice*.<sup>11</sup> For Hodge, justice is not some abstract Platonic category to which God is subordinated. Rather, justice is intrinsic to God’s nature and character, just as love is.<sup>12</sup> On this, all of the classical atonement theologies are agreed: God is just in defeating evil and Satan (*Christus victor*), in demonstrating to us the meaning of true justice, righteousness, and love (moral/exemplar), in securing a just pardon for sinners (forensic), or in punishing sin (penal substitution). What is distinctive about the penal substitution view is that God’s justice is conceived not only as restorative (reforming sinners) or demonstrative (as a deterrent to sin), but also (often primarily) as retributive, distributive, and vindicatory.<sup>13</sup> Hodge explains:

9. See also Grudem’s discussion of Christ’s “active” and “passive” obedience; by the former Christ obeyed the regulations of the law for us and thus became our righteousness, while by the latter he suffered our penalty in our place (*Systematic Theology*, 570).

10. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

11. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 489.

12. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 488–90. For Hodge, the key question is whether there is in God the attribute of retributive/distributive/vindicatory justice.

13. It is retributive in that God must punish sin simply because it is sin, regardless of whether or not such punishment will lead to reform or deterrence. It is distributive in that God responds to human actions with fairness and justice, impartially rewarding obedience and righteousness and punishing disobedience and unrighteousness. It is vindicatory in that God vindicates the righteous and opposes, frustrates, and even destroys the unrighteous.

[God] is determined by his moral excellence to punish all sin, and therefore the satisfaction of Christ which secures the pardon of sinners is rendered to the justice of God. Its primary and principal design is neither to make a moral impression upon the offenders themselves, nor to operate didactically on other intelligent creatures, but to satisfy the demands of justice; so that God can be just in justifying the ungodly.<sup>14</sup>

However, Hodge also cautions his reader against mistaking God's vindicatory justice for vindictiveness or thirst for revenge.<sup>15</sup> The latter implies an irrational emotional response (as if God was personally demeaned or offended) while vindicatory justice implies simply those actions required by a just God.

Third, Christ's atoning work was offered to satisfy the demands of *God's law*.<sup>16</sup> Since this divine law is established by the nature and character of God, it is immutable and cannot simply be ignored or set aside.<sup>17</sup> According to Hodge, our relation to the law is both federal and moral. By "federal", Hodge means the soteriological function of the law to secure salvation under the covenant.<sup>18</sup> This "federal" law must be obeyed in its entirety, including both its prescriptions and its prohibitions. Transgression of the law in even the smallest detail amounts to absolute guilt, which results in condemnation and death. To effect salvation in human beings, Christ satisfies the law of God, not by abolishing it or even by lowering its demands, but by fulfilling it completely on their behalf (as their representative) and in their

14. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 493.

15. However, Grudem comes very close to this (if not endorsing it) when he says, "Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world" (*Systematic Theology*, 575).

16. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 493.

17. One might well ask of Hodge whether retributive action is the only way to "satisfy" God's law.

18. Paul Wells ("Free Lunch," 48), following F. Turretin, explains that in Reformed covenantal theology the law has three applications, including moral (universal, natural law), federal (covenantal, binding humanity to God), and penal (exact punishment on sinners).

place (as their substitute). This fulfillment of the law on behalf of sinners does not lead to antinomianism, as if there is no longer any place for the law in the lives of believers. For, while Christ delivers people from the law's federal requirements, he does not thereby remove or destroy its moral significance.<sup>19</sup> In other words, obeying the law still has moral and practical value, but such obedience is no longer required for salvation. Believers access the saving benefits achieved by Christ through faith, while those who reject Christ are still under the federal requirements of the law.

*How Does Christ Achieve Satisfaction?*

So far, we have examined Hodge's explanation of what Christ does to secure our salvation. Next, we explore Hodge's account of how Christ does it. First, Christ saves us as our priest.<sup>20</sup> A priest is someone who goes before God on behalf of the people as a representative. As such, the priest intercedes for the people, acting on their behalf in the presence of God. The priest also acts on behalf of God in the presence of the people, mediating God's presence and actions toward them. According to Hodge, Christ's priesthood must be understood in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system, in which the forgiveness of sins could only be effected by means of expiation through the shedding of blood. Such expiation, according to Hodge, was accomplished by substituting a victim in place of the sinner. Since the removal of guilt required punishment, the guilt of the sinner was transferred to a victim that was sacrificed in the sinner's place.<sup>21</sup> This expiation covered the guilt of the sinner, hiding it from the sight of God. Expiation should not be confused with reconciliation, rather the latter should be regarded as an effect of the former.<sup>22</sup>

19. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 493.

20. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 496.

21. See also Erickson, who argues that Old Testament sacrifices atoned for sins by means of vicarious punishment, not by reforming the sinner or by social deterrence (*Christian Theology*, 804). However, Peter Schmiechen denies that sacrifices function in a vicarious or substitutionary way (*Saving Power*, 111).

22. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 497.

Second, Christ saves us not only as our priest but also as our sacrifice. He becomes simultaneously the one who offers and the offering itself. Furthermore, since his sacrifice must fulfill the requirements of God's retributive justice, it must be offered as a propitiation to satisfy God's wrath.<sup>23</sup> Hodge argues that this propitiation *is secured by the expiation (removal) of guilt*, so that sin no longer appears before God as demanding punishment. The effect of this sin offering, therefore, is that sinners are pardoned and restored to God's favor. It is almost as though God's wrath, being stirred by and tied to the presence of sin, is turned away by expiation, which removes sin from God's sight. Thus, at first glance, it seems that, for Hodge, expiation (as the removal of sin) is more dominant than the theme of punishment. However, Hodge goes on to say that expiation *is effected by vicarious punishment*. Thus, while propitiation is secured by expiation, expiation is in turn accomplished by the vicarious punishment of a victim in place of an offender. That this latter theme of vicarious punishment predominates Hodge's view becomes obvious as his discussion unfolds. He makes it clear that sin offerings for the expiation of sin were "not designed proximately for the reformation of the offender, but to secure the remission of the *penalty* due to his transgressions" (emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> For Hodge, Christ satisfies God by offering himself as a propitiation

23. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 499.

24. To support his point, Hodge appeals to ceremonies in the Old Testament sacrificial cult. First, victims were selected from the clean class of animals and were free from blemish. Second, the offender was required to bring the victim to the altar. Third, the hands of the offender were laid on the head of the victim, symbolizing the transfer of guilt from the former to the latter. Fourth, the victim's blood was sprinkled on the altar or, on the Day of Atonement, carried into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled on the ark of the covenant, symbolizing that the offering was meant to propitiate God. See also Erickson, who argues that atoning sacrifices were intended to appease God's justice by offering a victim to bear guilt and suffer punishment in place of the sinner (*Christian Theology*, 805).

for sinners, a sacrifice which expiates sin by vicariously bearing its punishment.<sup>25</sup>

Third, Christ saves us as our redeemer. Redemption, for Hodge, means “deliverance from evil by the payment of a ransom.”<sup>26</sup> The main point of the ransom metaphor is that sinners are in bondage and in need of deliverance. Clearly, the payment rendered to redeem sinners was Christ himself, in particular his death on the cross. However, Hodge believes that speculation about to whom the ransom was paid pushes the metaphor too far. For example, he rejects the view, held by some of the early Fathers, that God pays a ransom to Satan.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the focus of the metaphor is not on the creditor, but on the debtors and the payment offered for their redemption. Furthermore, the ransom or redemption metaphor does not operate in isolation, but in interdependence with the penal substitution theory. Redemption is effected by Christ’s atoning work in bearing our punishment. Hodge elucidates this relationship in his discussion of the ways in which redemption brings freedom to those formerly in bondage. First, it frees them from the penalty of the law, which is the wrath and curse of God directed against transgressors.<sup>28</sup> Christ frees transgressors from this penalty by suffering punishment in their place. Second, it frees them from their obligation to satisfy perfectly the demands of the law.<sup>29</sup> In particular, they are freed from its federal demands. While the law still plays a moral function in the lives of believers (i.e., for the enrichment of life), it no longer determines their eternal destiny. Third, Christ’s redemption frees people from the power of sin. Hodge affirms that “He gave Himself that He might purify unto Himself a peculiar people zealous of good works.”<sup>30</sup> Having been restored to the favor of God, the believer’s soul is now

25. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 506–10. Hodge points to several passages for support of his view, including Isaiah 53, Rom 3:25; 8:3; Gal 1:4; Heb 9:14; and 2 Cor 5:21.

26. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 516.

27. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 565.

28. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 516.

29. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 517.

30. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 518.

vivified by the love of God and is restored in the image of God. Thus, the power of sin over the believer is defeated (though this happens gradually through sanctification). Fourth, redemption frees people from the power of Satan.<sup>31</sup> According to Hodge, Satan, as the accuser, has the office of inflicting the penalty of the law, to which all people (as sinners) are subject. When Christ satisfied the penalty of the law by his sacrificial death, he thus stripped Satan of his power over believers.<sup>32</sup> Christ did not annihilate the devil by dying on the cross, but he did disarm him by disabling the primary weapons of his arsenal (i.e., accusation, condemnation, despair, and punishment based on the demands of the law). Finally, Christ's redemptive work ultimately frees people from all evil. While evil is a consequence of the fall, of the curse resulting from violation of the law, redemption overturns the curse and thus implies being delivered from all evil.

#### *Summary of Principles*

Before we move to the next point, a summary of Hodge's penal substitution theory is in order. First, justice is the starting point.<sup>33</sup> God is absolutely holy and cannot abide the presence of sin. Second, humanity is in a state of total depravity, which means not that humans are as bad as they possibly could be, but that humans are infected with sin to the depths of their being and are totally unable to satisfy God's just demands and thus effect their own salvation. Third, fallenness is regarded primarily as a state of guilt, which leads to condemnation and alienation, while salvation is regarded primarily as satisfying justice, which leads to a restoration of favor and relationship. Fourth, since people cannot achieve their own salvation, they are in need of a representative and substitute to achieve it on their behalf and in their place. To be genuine, a representative must be fully human; to be

31. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 518–19.

32. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 565.

33. Green and Baker concur that at the heart of Hodge's explanation of the atonement is a legal metaphor that is indebted to his understanding of the criminal justice system of his time (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 146).

efficacious, a substitute must be fully God. Thus, fifth, the Incarnation is conceived of as a necessary step in God's solution for dealing with human sin. Christ, as fully God and fully man, is both a genuine representative and an efficacious substitute for humanity. Sixth, Christ satisfies God's justice and God's law for sinners, on their behalf and in their place, as their priest, sacrifice, and redeemer. Finally, Hodge believes that the penal substitution view accommodates the themes addressed by the other major atonement metaphors.

### *3. Objections and Responses to Critics*

Objections raised against the penal substitution view typically fall into one of two categories, namely ethical objections and theological objections. In this section, I briefly explore these objections along with the responses given by proponents of penal substitution.

#### *Ethical Objections*

One ethical objection commonly raised is that sin and guilt are personal and non-transferable.<sup>34</sup> It is both inappropriate and unfair for God to satisfy justice by punishing an innocent person (Christ) in place of guilty offenders. Erickson and Grudem respond by emphasizing the fact that Christ's suffering was voluntarily, that Christ willingly offered his life on behalf of sinners.<sup>35</sup> This response is partially helpful in that it presents Christ as a willing participant, but it does not show how punishing an innocent person serves the cause of justice itself. How is it just to add evil to evil? Does not the death of Christ create a further injustice? Grudem is not very helpful when he responds:

God himself (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is the ultimate standard of what is just and fair in the universe, and he decreed that the

34. Wells, "Free Lunch," 43.

35. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 574; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 817.

atonement would take place in this way, and that it did in fact satisfy the demands of his own righteousness and justice.<sup>36</sup>

Apparently for Grudem, justice is served because God says so (apparently in good nominalist fashion). God determines what is just and may therefore turn evil into good simply by declaring it to be so. But if this is the case, why cannot God simply declare all sin to be forgiven? Perhaps a better response to this charge is that justice is served because Christ is, in some sense, *actually guilty*. Not that Christ ever *committed* sin, but in the Incarnation and atonement he united himself to sinful human beings and thus, in a mysterious yet real way, he became “guilty” for us in order to make us righteous. He identified with us, in order to incorporate us into union with himself and thus into deep fellowship with the triune God.<sup>37</sup> As Paul writes, “God made him who had no sin *to be sin for us*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21; emphasis added). Hans Boersma articulates this view clearly:

Since God assumes the penalty rather than punishing a third party, God can no longer be construed as a “bloodthirsty” God who punishes the innocent. Rather, by absorbing the punishment and thus enabling humankind to obtain forgiveness, God offers hope for the attainment of ultimate justice.<sup>38</sup>

A related objection to the penal substitution view is that Christ cannot fulfill the law or the righteous demands of God for us. It is not possible for one person to “be good” in place of someone else. Erickson responds that the atonement is not an “arms-length transaction,” but that we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection.<sup>39</sup> Hans Boersma, who defends the penal

36. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 574.

37. The language of “identification for incorporation” comes from McKnight (*Community Called Atonement*, 107–14).

38. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 198.

39. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 818. However, his qualification that our union with Christ is “in the sight of God” weakens his position. While he wants to get beyond a mere transaction to a deeper union, this qualifying phrase

substitution view, admits that it is often portrayed (especially in more popular evangelical theology) as “a strict economy of exchange: the covenantal relationship between God and human beings takes on strongly contractual connotations.”<sup>40</sup> This tends to happen especially when the penal view is articulated in isolation from the other atonement metaphors. Boersma suggests that the solution is a blend of the penal view with the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus.<sup>41</sup> He argues that Irenaeus connects the Incarnation with eschatological justice by viewing the atoning work of Christ as a recapitulation of Adam’s creation, life, and death. In the Incarnation, Christ enters into a mystical union with humanity, in order to destroy human sin in his own flesh by his death on the cross. In the same way, Christ’s union with humanity means that his resurrection from the dead creates the possibility for new life for human beings. By means of his union with humanity, Christ bears our punishment and fulfills the demands of righteousness for us. Those who are *in Christ* have died with him and are raised to new life through faith in him. What happened to Christ happens also to them.

A third ethical objection is that the penal substitution view celebrates and justifies redemptive violence as a solution to human problems. God the Father satisfies the demands of justice by inflicting upon the Son unthinkable, torturous violence—in fact, “the most horrible and contemptuous form of execution known to the ancient world.”<sup>42</sup> Critics have referred to penal

seems to be a regression back to the former. Is the believer *actually* united with Christ or not? Erickson does not clarify this point.

40. Boersma, “Penal Substitution,” 92.

41. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 194–95. See as well McKnight, who also appeals to themes of recapitulation and union with Christ. His overriding proposal is the atonement as “identification for incorporation,” in which Jesus as the incarnate Son of God identifies fully with human beings in order to incorporate them into union with himself, and thus union (via reconciliation) with God and each other (*Community Called Atonement*, 54–69, 100–106, 107–14). McKnight argues that understanding the atonement as “identification for incorporation” allows us to incorporate several atonement metaphors, including recapitulation, ransom, Christus victor, Satisfaction, substitution, representation, penal substitution, and moral exemplar. I am inclined to agree with him.

42. Marshall, “The Death of Jesus,” 13.

substitution as a theory of “cosmic child abuse” committed by a “sadistic and bloodthirsty” God.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, critics have charged that such a view of the atonement has disastrous social implications:

The images are particularly harmful for people who live in oppressive situations—a woman who is abused by her husband, or a people living under military occupation and whose land is being stolen daily by the occupiers. If these people are told to “be like Jesus,” it is an invitation for them to follow Jesus’ example of submitting passively to unmerited suffering because the ruler wants it.<sup>44</sup>

Hans Boersma has written a convincing response to such criticisms.<sup>45</sup> First, punishment and crime are fundamentally different categories; one cannot employ the former to justify the latter.<sup>46</sup> Punishment may only be enforced by legitimate authorities. In the penal substitution view, God (and only God) is in a position of such authority, hence God’s punishment is just.

43. Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 56; Crysedale, *Embracing Travail*, 115. McKnight rejects such criticisms as being too simplistic, and because they lift writers and their thoughts out of context. Nevertheless, he goes on to urge defenders of penal substitution to exercise greater care in articulating what they mean, in part by distancing themselves from crassly caricatured misunderstandings (i.e., those depicting an angry God venting his rage on his son). See *Community Called Atonement*, 41–42.

44. Weaver, “The Violence of Satisfaction.”

45. Elsewhere, Boersma makes the point that critics who reject the penal satisfaction view because of its violence, in favor of other atonement metaphors, fail to see that *every view of the atonement* somehow associates God with violence. In the Christus victor model, God either deceived the devil (does violence to truth) or conquers him by outright military conquest (Boersma notes that Constantine drew on the Christus victor tradition to support his imperial power). The Abelardian moral influence theory also involves violence, because God enacts or allows the sacrifice of his Son in order to demonstrate his love to the world (Boersma, “Penal Substitution,” 89–91). For Boersma, the use of violence in and of itself is not the primary issue (violence cannot be avoided unless God has nothing whatsoever to do with the cross); the fundamental question is whether a particular instance of violence is justified and appropriate.

46. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 188–89.

Therefore, one cannot justify violent crimes by appealing to divine penal justice. That would amount to a serious category error: “Penal substitution . . . takes us into the realm of punishment, not into the realm of crime.”<sup>47</sup> Second, the rejection of all penal aspects of justice would actually lead to an increase, not a decrease, in violence.<sup>48</sup> Without recourse to punishment, a society would degenerate into anarchy. Punishment can be useful as a deterrent to prevent violence from occurring in greater degree and frequency. In addition, without recourse to penal justice, the victims of crime would be left in a state of frustration and powerlessness. They might even decide to take vengeance into their own hands, or else others might take up a vigilante cause on their behalf. Conversely, Christians are exhorted to relinquish revenge and retribution, not because such retribution is inherently unjust, but because vengeance belongs to God who alone can be trusted to vindicate the righteous and punish the oppressor properly. Third, those who attack the penal substitution view as glorifying violence fail to see that punishment is God’s last option and is usually only enforced after continued warning or even pleading for people to repent. In light of this insight, Boersma likens the penal dimension of the cross to God’s use of exile to punish Israel: “It is certainly true that God would rather forgive than punish, often does forgive rather than punish . . . But the biblical narrative highlights Israel’s consistent rejection of God’s plans for justice. Exile seeks to subvert this constant pattern.”<sup>49</sup> Fourth, viewing penal substitution in light of the Incarnation shows that God has taken judgment upon himself.<sup>50</sup> Or, as Erickson puts it, “Christ was sent by the *Father’s* love. So it is not the case that the propitiation changed a wrathful God into a loving God.”<sup>51</sup> Rather, the wrathful God *is* loving.

47. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 188.

48. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 190–92.

49. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 193–94.

50. Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 198.

51. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 817.

Or, as Luther argued, God's wrath is an instrument of God's love:<sup>52</sup>

"For love's anger (wrath) seeks and wills to sunder the evil that it hates from the good that it loves, in order that the good and its love may be preserved."

"Wrath is truly God's alien work, which He employs contrary to His nature because He is forced into it by the wickedness of man."<sup>53</sup>

### *Theological Objections*

While several theological objections could be raised, I will focus on three of the more prominent ones. The first two are less convincing, while the third is more serious. First, some critics argue that the penal substitution view is anti-Trinitarian.<sup>54</sup> The idea that God the Father punishes the Son for human sin amounts to a tri-theistic division of the Trinity and introduces contradictory or schizophrenic motivations into the godhead (i.e., the Son is loving and self-sacrificing, while the Father is vindictive and requires placation). However, while popular portrayals sometimes lean toward this depiction, they represent a fundamental misunderstanding of penal substitution.<sup>55</sup> The view in question does not pit the Son against the Father or the Father against the Son. Rather, both Father and Son are motivated by their love for human beings and both Father and Son want to eradicate sin and

52. Green and Baker argue that God's grace outlasts God's wrath, because grace is foundational to God's character while wrath is temporary and contextual (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 51–53).

53. Quoted from Ngien, *The Suffering of God*, 107. Ngien comments, "The 'wrathful' opposition against 'sin' is not generated by some abstractly conceived justice of God, which demands retribution for the broken law; rather it is generated by God's 'pure love' which demands a pure, simple and undefiled relationship."

54. Wells, "Free Lunch," 43. See also Schmiecchen, *Saving Power*, 112–13.

55. For example, Leon Morris, a proponent of the penal satisfaction view, states explicitly: "Salvation is not something wrung from an unwilling God by the desperate intervention of a compassionate Son who took pity on those subject to the Father's destroying wrath. Salvation proceeds rather from the loving heart of God the Father Himself. It is an expression at once of His love and of His righteousness" (Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, 154).

evil in the world. Both want to ensure forgiveness and restoration while simultaneously upholding justice. They simply play different roles in the outworking of salvation. In support of this delicate tension, an oft-quoted verse is 2 Cor 5:19: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.” How? Verse 21 continues, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

A second theological objection concerns the nature and function of sacrifice. The penal substitution view claims support from the Old Testament sacrificial system, seeing it as a key to interpreting the sacrifice of Christ. In particular, the view relies on the interpretation of the sacrifices as propitiatory offerings, intended to satisfy God’s wrath against sin. Sacrifices, in this view, were offered on behalf of sinners and in their place (they were representative and substitutive). Hodge claims that Old Testament sin offerings were for the expiation of sin, which secured propitiation by the remission of the penalty or punishment due to transgression of the law.<sup>56</sup> On the basis of his understanding of words like “propitiation” and “sacrifice” in Scripture, Leon Morris argues that the entire New Testament makes sense only “on the basis that God sent His Son to die on the cross and so made a way of forgiveness for sinners.”<sup>57</sup> For Morris, when the New Testament speaks of Christ’s death as propitiation, it unmistakably means that “Christ’s death is the way in which God’s wrath is averted from man” and without it “there is nothing to show how the wrath is turned away.”<sup>58</sup>

However, Peter Schmiechen maintains that “the idea of satisfaction or appeasement of God is simply not biblical.”<sup>59</sup> He argues that “(1) the entire system of sin offerings was instituted by God for the remission of sin; (2) that the offering was to cover or remove sin; (3) that it was not directed toward God as a

56. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 503.

57. Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, 5.

58. Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, 226. For a detailed account of the meaning of propitiation, see Morris’s, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (esp. chaps. 4–5).

59. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 111.

form of appeasement.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the smearing of animal blood on the sacrificial altar was effective because the life-bearing blood of the animal, not its death, resulted in a change. It symbolized the covering of sin, such that sin was removed from God’s sight. Sacrifice was directed toward sin to effect purification, not toward God to effect appeasement.<sup>61</sup> Hence, the primary idea behind sacrifice is “expiation” (removal of sin), not propitiation (substitution to appease God’s wrath).<sup>62</sup> Schmiechen raises a good point, which should challenge defenders of penal substitution and divine retributive justice (at the very least) to nuance their position more carefully. The writer of the book of Hebrews seems to confirm Schmiechen’s emphasis on atonement as purification and removal of sin through Christ’s righteousness, rather than as the appeasement of wrath through punishment. It is Christ’s righteousness and obedience that “appeases” God, not his torturous suffering. Consider, for example, the following passages:

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

[Christ] has become a priest . . . through the power of an indestructible life.<sup>63</sup>

60. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 111. See also 20–55.

61. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 22. Similarly, Schmiechen argues that the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement symbolized purification or removal of sin. While sins are transferred to the scapegoat, the victim does not die vicariously for sinners as a substitute for their death penalty.

62. Conversely, Wells (citing Morris): argues that “when Scripture uses the word ‘blood,’ in almost all cases it indicates not the life of the animal, but its death” (“Free Lunch,” 49).

63. Heb 5:1, 7–9; 7:16.

On the other hand, Schmiechen does not, to my satisfaction, address texts that mention God's wrath against sin explicitly and how Christ's atoning work attends to it (e.g., Rom 5:9–10; 8:3–4; Col 3:6).<sup>64</sup> His position would be strengthened if he clarified and specified the nature, purpose, object, and resolution of this "wrath". In any case, it is unlikely that this debate will be resolved soon. Until it is, I am persuaded of the correctness of Hodge's view, which integrates both expiation and propitiation as key elements of atoning sacrifice. I. Howard Marshall supports this position:

If the sacrifice is regarded as expiatory in the sense that it cancels out the effect of sin, it does so in that it propitiates God against whom the sin was committed; and equally, if it is regarded as propitiating God, it does so by covering the sin which aroused his judgment. Expiation and propitiation are two sides of the same coin.<sup>65</sup>

A third theological objection is that penal substitution prioritizes justice over all other divine attributes. As Schmiechen comments regarding Hodge's system, "it is the demand of legal justice that drives the entire theory."<sup>66</sup> Again, "The Law of distributive justice is immutable."<sup>67</sup> Hans Boersma also notices the tendency in popular portrayals of penal substitution to separate God's justice and mercy, or even to valorize the former over the latter. The God depicted by such portrayals is understandably perceived as being "bloodthirsty". Likewise, the designation of the atonement as a "satisfaction," if it is not carefully nuanced and enriched by other metaphors, often becomes fixated upon divine wrath and "obscures the all-encompassing love of God."<sup>68</sup> However, skilful proponents of the penal substitution view, such as Hodge and Boersma, are careful to avoid such implications.

64. McKnight affirms that the notion of penal substitution is present in the New Testament, though it should not be over-emphasized or made primary over other scriptural concepts and images concerning sin and atonement (*Community Called Atonement*, 107–14).

65. Marshall, "The Death of Jesus," 16.

66. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 103.

67. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 110.

68. Boersma, "Eschatological Justice," 187.

For example, Hodge clarifies that justice is not a law that transcends God, one to which God is somehow subordinate. Nor does the idea of divine justice imply necessity or determinism in God, as if God must act according to an impersonal mechanism. Rather, retributive justice is inherent to God's character; it is a natural expression of the nature and being of God to act justly.<sup>69</sup> In other words, justice is not God, but *God is just*. The same argument applies to God's love. Some critics dismiss outright the notion of divine retribution as inherently demeaning to God and argue instead (or at least imply) that love determines God's essence. In other words, they introduce a necessity to love by assuming that God *must always* act lovingly. Is not this assertion equally open to the charge of necessity or determinism? Of course, the proper response is that love, like justice, is inherent to God's character. Love is not God, but *God is loving*. In both cases, it is the character of God that defines for us the genuine meaning of genuine justice and love. Having acknowledged this, we are left with this question: Why does Hodge prioritize justice over love, making it the foundation for his system? (One might further ask whether Hodge actually prioritizes *his own pre-suppositions about what constitutes justice* over God's love.)<sup>70</sup> I propose that this a legitimate weakness of the penal substitution view. As Schmiechen has suggested, the penal substitution view tends to resolve the tension between justice and love by prioritizing the former over the latter and making it the determinative principle of the atonement.<sup>71</sup> This is highly problematic, biblically, theologically, ethically, and missionally.<sup>72</sup>

69. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 489. Green and Baker seem to misread Hodge on this point (see *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 147).

70. See Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 146. They contrast Hodge's view of justice, which borrows from both Anselm and late nineteenth-century American notions of justice, with a "biblical understanding of justice that is covenantal and relational and almost synonymous with faithfulness" (p. 147).

71. Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 110.

72. Where one begins is, of course, crucially important. As McKnight puts it, "*where we begin shapes where we end up*. If you begin with wrath, you get

#### 4. *The Real Problem: Reductionism*

In my view, the best approach to the atonement is to recognize the validity and significance of all of the biblical atonement metaphors.<sup>73</sup> The saving work of Christ affects people to the very depths of their being and personhood. It impacts them spiritually, relationally, psychologically, epistemologically, ethically, and even physically.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it affects not just individuals, but also families, communities, societies, power structures, the environment, and even cosmic forces (Gen 12:3; Matt 5–7; Acts 1:6–8; 10:34–35, 44–48; Col 1:15–20; etc.).<sup>75</sup> Each of the atonement metaphors highlights different aspects of Christ’s saving work, and none comprehensively addresses them all. Each metaphor is important because the eternal truth of Christ’s death has particular relevance to people in particular circumstances. As Leon Morris has argued, “we experience needs of our own for which the cross gives an answer.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, what is needed is an approach that allows the various atonement metaphors to coexist in a kind of perichoretic union—one in which the distinctiveness of each view is maintained even while it contributes to a unified (but not uniform) understanding of salvation.<sup>77</sup>

an atonement that tells the story of wrath being pacified” (*Community Called Atonement*, 15, emphasis his)

73. Green and Baker (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 23) identify five primary constellations of atonement images in the New Testament, all borrowed from the ancient Mediterranean world. These include: (i) the court of law (e.g., justification); (ii) the world of commerce (e.g., redemption); (iii) personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation); (iv) worship (e.g., sacrifice); and (v) the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil).

74. Granted, the experience of complete salvation is an already-not-yet eschatological process, in which some aspects are experienced in the present, others in the near future, and perhaps still others in the eschaton.

75. For some creative insights regarding the significance of the atonement for a wide range of issues affecting the human condition, see Morris, *The Cross of Jesus* (esp. chaps. 3–7).

76. Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, viii.

77. Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, recommends a “multi-faceted” approach; Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” argues for a “kaleidoscope” approach; van Asselt (“Christ’s Atonement”) envisions a “multi-dimensional” approach; and

The penal substitution view, as articulated by Hodge, is a helpful solution to the problems of human disobedience, culpability in sin, or participation in radical and inexplicable evil. It is therefore an apt and poignant expression of the gospel to people who are burdened with feelings of guilt (or, conversely, those who are puffed up with pride).<sup>78</sup> It is, perhaps, not as helpful for those whose predominant experience of their fallen human condition comes in the form of loneliness, aimlessness, or despair at the injustices they observe in the world. The penal substitution view does communicate important truths about God and the human condition, but it must be applied properly with due consideration given to context or audience. Unfortunately, it is often the case that when the penal substitution theory is articulated and applied, two errors are commonly made (especially in popular portrayals). Both errors fall under the category of reductionism; hence, both compromise the richness of a multi-dimensional approach to the atonement and threaten to undermine and dismantle its delicate unity-in-diversity.

#### *Penal Substitution as a Metanarrative*

The first error commonly made is to grant the penal substitution metaphor the status of a metanarrative. A metanarrative is a grand story, which claims to account for all of the facts by subsuming them into and arranging them under one dominant theme, idea, principle, or system. In recent times, metanarratives have become suspect. In particular, postmodern theorists have pointed out their tendency to suppress otherness, difference, and complexity. Metanarratives tell a dominant story, or support a

McKnight (*Community Called Atonement*) suggests “identification for incorporation” as a framework in which all of the atonement metaphors find an appropriate place. Boersma’s position is that the penal satisfaction view needs to be grounded in such a way that it does not favor God’s justice over his love, and perhaps is included within a larger framework of union with Christ with reference to the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus (See Boersma, “Eschatological Justice,” 194–97).

78. In fact, the penal substitution view is the only atonement metaphor that specifically addresses the problem of human guilt.

dominant ideology, philosophy, or theology, by silencing or downplaying other views. They achieve unity and clarity by erasing distinctiveness and counterclaims. For example, one metanarrative that has harmed modern Christian faith is scientism or natural reductionism. In this grand story of modern science, something can only be considered true if it can be proved scientifically by empirical evidence. This view is reductionistic because scientific inquiry cannot account for the complexity of reality. It cannot explain things like art, music, love, justice, faith, and hope, in a way that is fully meaningful for people.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, penal substitution takes on the character of a metanarrative when it is portrayed as the whole Christian story (or at least the part that really matters) and is virtually equated with “the gospel.” When this happens, other important truths about the gospel (arguably more central ones) are ignored, including such things as costly discipleship, the kingdom of God (which Jesus always linked with “the gospel”), and the overcoming of evil and suffering in the world. In North America, the use of penal substitution as a metanarrative has tended to reinforce a bland Christianity, which is theologically shallow, individualistic, self-centered, and ethically ambiguous (a strange blend of legalism regarding personal piety or holiness and antinomianism or carelessness regarding issues of structural evil and social justice).<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it has tended to address only one aspect of the experience of the fallen human condition, namely guilt. Consequently, it has preached an increasingly irrelevant message, which has had the effect of turning the good news into old news.<sup>81</sup> In addition, a fixation on penal substitution has alienated people whose deep needs are more aptly addressed by other aspects of the atonement. Christ’s atoning work is bountifully

79. For a further critique of natural reductionism in science, see Peterson, *Genetic Turning Points*, 32.

80. Regarding the individualism and self-centeredness of North American culture, see also Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 24–25, 150, 201, 213–14.

81. See also Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 29–30.

rich, exceedingly comprehensive, and powerfully efficacious. Why limit it to a narrow and individualistic invitation to receive the forgiveness of sins in order to secure one's personal salvation? (Again, I want to stress that these concerns are important, but they are far from being the whole story, or even the primary plot). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once reflected,

Hasn't the individualistic question about personal salvation almost completely left us all? Aren't we really under the impression that there are more important things than that question (perhaps not more important than the *matter* itself, but more important than the *question*!)? . . . Does the question about saving one's soul appear in the Old Testament at all? Aren't righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything, and isn't it true that Rom. 3.24ff. is not an individualistic doctrine of salvation, but the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous? It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist *for* this world; I mean that, not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup>

One way to avoid making the penal substitution view into a metanarrative is to resist the tendency to interpret it too literally. When I say this, I am not suggesting that we become suspicious of its truthfulness, or take it less seriously. I am simply suggesting that we accept it for what it is—a metaphor (even if a divinely inspired one). Like any metaphor, it bears both continuity and discontinuity with what it seeks to represent, and one must be careful not to push its limits too far. All metaphors break down if pushed too far; worse, they actually become *literal* and lose their creative metaphorical power. As Colin Gunton reminds us, “the truth of a claim about the world does not depend on whether it is expressed in literal or metaphorical terms, but upon whether language of whatever kind expresses

82. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 285–86.

human interaction with reality successfully (truthfully) or not.”<sup>83</sup> Literalizing a metaphor emasculates the truth it was meant to communicate.

Discerning the limits of the penal substitution view will require a good deal of reflection as well as sensitivity to cultural context and the needs of people. Such reflection is not easy, but it is necessary.<sup>84</sup> Actually, we commonly do the same thing when we explain the ransom theory. When the following question is asked of the ransom theory, “To whom is the ransom paid?”, the common response is that such a question pushes the ransom metaphor too far. All that can be said is that the atonement is a ransom in the sense that Christ’s sacrifice redeems us “in some way” from debt to sin and bondage to evil. Perhaps it is possible to speak of the penal substitution view in like manner. Perhaps all that we can and should say is that Christ’s atoning work saves us by satisfying the justice of God “in some way.”<sup>85</sup>

#### *Penal Substitution as a Methodology*

The second error often made in the application of the penal substitution metaphor is when it is turned into a methodology for

83. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 35.

84. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 20–21, insightfully write, “As is often the case in our use of the New Testament, our use of tradition often falters because we learn less *how* the theological task has been undertaken and exemplified, and attempt instead to carry over into our own lives and pronouncements models and metaphors that belong to another age and that are dead to us. Metaphors work within cultures where a shared encyclopedia can be assumed. Crossing cultures requires the creation of new metaphors, new ways of conceptualizing and communicating. Often to the detriment of fidelity in understanding do we borrow metaphors from other cultures and use them as if they were our own.”

85. Gunton writes, “excessive preoccupation with the juridical aspects of the doctrine of justification has led to versions of penal substitution which do appear to attribute to God an excessively punitive character. So much hangs on a sensitive appreciation of what are the possibilities and limits of the legal metaphor” (*Actuality of Atonement*, 101).

evangelism.<sup>86</sup> This practice is commonplace in North America, hence two examples will suffice. One example is the way in which many people define a “gospel sermon” or a “gospel message.” Typically, the expectation is that a gospel message will provide a step-by-step account of the penal substitution view of the atonement (which is virtually equated with the gospel), followed by an opportunity to “accept Christ.” Usually, such messages are preached without any reference to the other atonement metaphors. A second example is the wide-spread use of the so-called “Four Spiritual Laws” in evangelism, which are explicitly derived from the penal view. In such evangelistic encounters, people are led through a series of propositions that tell them that God, while loving, is absolutely holy and righteous, that all people are sinners, that the consequence of sin is death, but that Christ offers forgiveness freely to those who “accept” him in faith as their Savior.<sup>87</sup> Again, rarely is any mention made of the other atonement views. Furthermore, when combined with the North American context of individualism and consumerism, such “invitations” rarely make costly demands on potential converts.

There are at least two problems with this kind of methodological reductionism. First, it promotes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”<sup>88</sup> It tends to present salvation as a mechanistic transaction between God and sinner, one in

86. For a related discussion, see Green and Baker’s insightful distinction between “technique” and “craft,” which they borrow from Alasdair MacIntyre (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 214–17).

87. There are many Internet sites that explain the Four Spiritual Laws. See, for example: <http://powertochange.com/landing/four-laws/>. The Four Spiritual Laws are: “1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life; 2. All of us are sinful and separated from God. Therefore, we cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for our life; 3. Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for our sin. Through him, we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our life; 4. We must individually accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then, we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our life.” (Accessed April 4, 2009). It is instructive to compare these Four Laws with my summary of Hodge’s position on pp. 30–31.

88. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43–56.

which God makes no demands and yet pays for all the benefits. Bonhoeffer defines cheap grace as follows:

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs.

Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God.

Cheap grace means justification of sin but not the sinner.

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.<sup>89</sup>

One of the key notions about cheap grace is that it is always offered as a presupposition rather than as a conclusion. In other words, it is predictable, mechanistic, and always available and at the disposal of the sinner. It is like a blank check or a bottomless bank account to which one has unlimited access to inexhaustible resources. Costly grace, by contrast, is never a presupposition—if it were, it would cease to be grace and would become necessary or even deserved—it can only be a conclusion. In other words, grace is always surprising, always transformative, always beyond what we can calculate or even imagine.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, an invitation to costly grace is an invitation to join the kingdom of God, an invitation to become a disciple of the crucified, an invitation to live out the Sermon on the Mount; in short, it is an invitation to bear the cross daily. As Bonhoeffer poignantly puts it: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>91</sup>

89. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43–44.

90. Green and Baker worry that popular evangelical depictions of the cross have removed its scandal and enigma, and have turned it into a slogan (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 12).

91. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 89.

A second problem with turning penal substitution into a methodology for evangelism is that it relies heavily on one particular type of experience, namely a deep sense of guilt and fear of divine punishment. One concern that Bonhoeffer raised about such an (over-)emphasis is that it quickly leads to manipulation. People are easily pushed into a “decision” for conversion when they are feeling feeble, destitute, and guilty. Bonhoeffer asks, “Are we to fall upon a few unfortunate people in their hour of need and exercise a sort of religious compulsion on them?”<sup>92</sup> It would not be difficult to show that our contemporary post-modern culture is highly skeptical of such ploys.

Another concern arises: What if people lack this sense of guilt and condemnation (which seems to be the case in contemporary Canada)? What if this particular experience of guilt is more prevalent in certain times, places, or cultures? Bonhoeffer recognized this problem and argued that the gospel must be contextualized and proclaimed to “good” and “happy” people, just as it is to “evil” and “despairing” people. He attacked the Lutheranism of his day because, in its fixation upon guilt, human weakness and misery, it simply did not address “good” people.<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer laments, “But if [the ‘good’ person] cannot be brought to see and admit that his happiness is really an evil, his health sickness, and his vigour despair, the theologian is at his wit’s end.”<sup>94</sup> Bonhoeffer faults Lutheranism for narrowly directing the message of the gospel toward the “evil man” without considering how the “good man” might find Christ.<sup>95</sup> In Bonhoeffer’s thinking, focusing on the former without the latter results in gospel reductionism, as the gospel becomes “merely the call to conversion and the consolation in sin of drunkards, adulterers and vicious men of every kind, and the gospel [loses]

92. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 280.

93. Bonhoeffer directs his criticism not at Luther *per se*, but at the Lutheran tradition that followed him, particularly in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms.

94. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 341.

95. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

its power over good people.”<sup>96</sup> In addition, by attending (almost exclusively) to human weakness and by downplaying human goodness, Bonhoeffer felt that Lutheranism unintentionally justified the lifestyles of those who lived self-indulgently and indifferently to the needs of others.

It is worth asking whether these same criticisms apply to our present-day North American evangelical churches, especially with reference to our evangelistic and church growth strategies.<sup>97</sup> Do we turn penal substitution into a methodology? Do we favor one type of conversion experience over others? Do we ignore key aspect of the good news of the kingdom in our “gospel messages” in order to win converts?

### 5. *Conclusion*

The penal substitution view, when articulated by its best proponents, is a faithful interpretation of the atonement and continues to have significance for contemporary people. However, an appropriate contextualization of penal substitution in contemporary culture requires great care and discernment. In particular, it is crucial that we avoid the common errors of turning the metaphor into a metanarrative or a methodology. To avoid these pitfalls, it is best to adopt a multi-dimensional view of the atonement, which recognizes the significance of all of the atonement metaphors and attempts to speak into the complexity of the human condition.

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