

I. Major Theories of the Atonement

Figure 6.1: Who is the Target of the Cross?

God

Penal Substitution: Jesus satisfies God's wrath.

Romans 3:25-26; Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21,
1 John 2:2, 4:10.

Promoted by (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*) John Calvin,
Charles Hodge, Martin Luther and nearly all
evangelical Christians.

Us

Moral Influence: Jesus
shows God's love to us.

1 John 3:16, 4:7-12;
Romans 5:8.

Promoted by Abelard.

Us

Moral Example: Jesus
shows us how to love and
trust God.

1 Peter 2:21.

Promoted by the Socinians
and liberal theologians.

Satan

Christus Victor: Jesus defeats the Devil.

Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8.

Promoted by the majority of the early church,
Martin Luther (again), and C.S. Lewis.

II. Problems with Penal Substitution

A. Too individualistic (need *Christus victor*)

B. Too soft on sin (need *Christus victor*)

C. Too modern? (but see Rom. 3:25-26; Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Jn. 2:2, 4:10).

D. Too western? Its focus on guilt does not communicate to Easterners who understand shame but not guilt.

E. Too impersonal? It assumes that God cannot forgive without obliging some higher, abstract standard of justice.

F. Divine child abuse?!

1. Why does a loving God demand a sacrifice in order to forgive? Why does he demand “a kill” to satisfy his wrath? He commands us to forgive without strings attached, so why doesn’t he? Are we more magnanimous than God?

2. What kind of Father violates his innocent Son for the sake of others?

III. Response to the Accusation of Divine Child Abuse

A. God sacrifices himself rather than someone else (the Trinity is one)

B. God’s loving and righteous nature demands payment for sin

1. God’s nature: self-giving love → righteousness → life

2. The opposite: selfishness → sin → death

IV. Problems with Critics Who Reject Penal Substitution

A. Some reject original sin

1. Spencer Burke, *A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 64: “the link between grace and sin...just doesn’t resonate in our culture anymore....People are becoming much less inclined to acknowledge themselves as ‘sinners in need of a Savior.’...‘Broken,’ ‘fragmented,’ and ‘lacking wholeness’—these are some of the new ways people describe their spiritual need.”

2. Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), 120-70.

B. All reject the wrath of God

John Goldingay challenges the traditional view that Old Testament sacrifices vicariously bore the punishment in place of the worshippers who offered them. He writes: “Sacrifice does not involve penal substitution in the sense that one entity bears another’s punishment. By laying hands on the offering, the offerers identify with it and pass on to it not their guilt but their stain. The offering is then not vicariously punished but vicariously cleansed (John Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” in *Atonement Today*, ed. John Goldingay [London: SPCK, 1995], 10).

C. None can explain what happened on the cross

1. William E. Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” in *The Works of William E. Channing* (1882; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), 378: “We have no desire to conceal the fact that a difference of opinion exists among us in regard to an interesting part of Christ’s mediation,—I mean, in regard to the precise influence of his death on our forgiveness. ...Many of us...think that the Scriptures ascribe the remission of sins to Christ’s death with an emphasis so peculiar that we ought to consider this event as having a special influence in removing punishment, though the Scriptures may not reveal the way in which it contributes to this end.”

2. Greg Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (InterVarsity, 2006), 37: “Obviously, this account leaves unanswered a number of questions we might like answered. E.g., precisely how did Calvary and the resurrection defeat the powers? In my estimation, the ancient Christus Victor models of the atonement...became incredulous precisely because they too vigorously pressed for details. ...But at the end of the day we must humbly acknowledge that our understanding is severely limited.”

3. Tony Jones, “Why Jesus Died,” at <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/04/why-jesus-died.html>: “Some people today may find it compelling that some Great Cosmic Transaction took place on that day 1,980 years ago, that God’s wrath burned against his son instead of against me. I find that version of atonement theory neither intellectually compelling, spiritually compelling, nor in keeping with the biblical narrative. Instead, Jesus [sic] death offers life because in Christianity, and in Christianity alone, the God and Creator of the universe deigned to become human, to be tempted, to reach out to those who had been de-humanized and restore their humanity, and ultimately to die in solidarity with every one of us. Yes, he was a sacrifice. Yes, he was ‘sinless.’ But thank God, Jesus was also human.

The hope he offers is that, by dying on that cross, the eternal Trinity became forever bound to my humanity. The God of the universe identified with me, and I have the opportunity to identify with him. Today, and every day, I hang with him on that cross.”

V. Resolution—Big Picture: *Christus Victor*; Heart: *Penal Substitution*; Application: *Moral Example*