

140 Penal substitution: true or false?

“So, Paul, in your fourth year of giving us the benefit of your theological thinking, please tell us: Is the idea of penal substitution true or false?”

OK, I admit it: in earlier articles, I said that penal substitution (PS) was false – a heresy that grew to prominence in the mid second millennium. However, having wrestled with PS and with the Scriptures related to it and with theologically trained folk, I no longer say that it’s false.

But I was asking the wrong question. PS is not a concept that can be “right” or “wrong”. It’s a metaphor, a picture, an image to help us understand and to appreciate, in some small way, the enormity of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Pictures, illustrations, images, metaphors, parables are all given to us by God to help us grasp the ungraspable. And we have good precedent: Jesus and Paul, to name but two.

But one person will find one illustration helpful and another not so helpful – that’s fine, we’re all different. What’s more, if you put some of the biblical metaphors/images side by side – indeed, some of Jesus’ own words – they do appear to be contradictory. No analogy is perfect, and we certainly shouldn’t stretch them too far – or they can snap and flick us in the eye!

So I accept that PS is indeed based on the teachings of the New Testament but, to be clear, it was only first articulated around the time of the Reformation, in the 16th century, although it had its origins in Anselm’s 11th century ideas of “substitution” in a more general sense.

Despite the fact that the gospel spread around the world for over 1500 years without it, PS has become the most-used illustration of the gospel: find me one gospel tract that does **not** use PS!

So one single image of God’s love in Jesus has become the be-all and end-all, and anyone who, like me, says that it’s often not a very helpful illustration is considered unsound.

And the effect of putting PS centre stage? How long have you got?! I believe that it warps our view of God and it warps our view of ourselves, and this has a huge effect on... well, on everything: how we view ourselves, how we come across to other people, the focus of our thinking, feeling, being, witnessing, serving. Let me illustrate.

Even a theologically trained friend admits that, for some people, PS is “pastorally inappropriate, to say the least”. This comment came as we thought about a person, say, who had been abused over the years and thus had a very low self image. As “the gospel” is preached, they hear “You are a terrible sinner and deserve to be judged by God and to die; but don’t despair because God loves you and has allowed Jesus to be crucified instead of you; he suffered the punishment that **you** deserve for all the evil things **you** have done. Hallelujah! What good news!”

An exaggeration? OK, well how would **you** “explain the gospel” to them?

I've found help from "Healing the Gospel" by Derek Flood: the fundamental distinction he draws, as I've tried to explain in my articles,¹ is between **retributive justice**, which is the core of "the (PS) gospel", and **restorative justice**, which I now believe is the beating heart of the early church's "good news". (It was the Pharisees who were into retributive justice!)

I gave an illustration last time [139] of the influence of retributive justice when I mentioned Col 3:6 and quoted a note from my NIV Study Bible: "*God is unalterably opposed to sin and will invariably make sure that it is justly punished.*" Whose mouth would you expect to hear that from? Jesus or the Pharisees?!

This article started as a response to a discussion of PS's complementary concept, "original sin". Are we by nature evil? How we view ourselves is fundamental to how we relate – or not! – to God and to other people. One person felt that "[because] we continually ask for forgiveness, especially together in church services, I feel it must be in our nature to sin." So, PS has pushed us into seeing ourselves as fundamentally evil – saved by grace, yes, but evil through and through!

We need to be realistic about ourselves, yes, but it's so destructive if we are constantly concentrating on "the evil that lies within". We were created in the image of God, we were created good and beautiful and wonderful – mixed up and messed up, true, but fundamentally good. Without that optimism, developing good relationships is going to be very difficult.

One final, sad reason that PS has appealed to us: since the Enlightenment (16/17th centuries), we've been trained to look at everything and ask if it's "true" or not, and the modern mind is strongly trained to analyse things and work out the "mechanism", and for salvation, that's PS.

This simple mechanism also appeals because we like (another of our many sins?!) to categorise people: "Has she prayed the sinner's prayer? OK, good, so she's a Christian." Sorry, but life and people are more complex; we're not fundamentally mechanisms, we're people who relate (or don't relate) to other people and to God.

We **say** that knowing God is a relationship, so let's stop offering everyone with the same one-size-fits-all mechanism of PS and concentrate on drawing everyone (whether an acknowledged believer or not) closer and closer to Jesus (modelling and) understanding more about loving relationships (vertical and horizontal) – that's what set the world alight in the first century!

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¹ I hadn't realised Flood's influence on me until I checked the P000 file (the text of all my articles). I reference Flood's ideas in articles 51–54, 57, 61, 65, 76 and 110–112! He has certainly "healed the gospel" for me. Thanks, Derek!