

# **PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS, THE CREEDS, AND TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY**

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In July 2005 London School of Theology jointly hosted with the Evangelical Alliance (EA) a symposium on the Theology of the Atonement. The EA had hosted a discussion on the same topic in October 2004, and the 2005 event was organised to allow for differences of opinion within the EA on this topic to be more fully canvassed. For Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, who perhaps inadvertently sparked the EA 2004 meeting, a significant motivation for their challenge to the dominant penal substitution interpretation of the atonement (PSA) was how to communicate the message of the cross in a cultural context in which it is questioned whether it is possible to reconcile a God of love and justice with a God of violence and anger, as they claim God is popularly depicted in evangelical preaching of penal substitutionary.<sup>2</sup> Responses to Chalke and Mann ranged from the more irenic response of I. Howard Marshall who prayed for “an understanding of it [PSA] that can command general assent and form the basis for our evangelism,”<sup>3</sup> to that of Joel Green’s plea that interpretations of penal substitution are not used to “distinguish Christian believer from non-believer or even evangelical from non-evangelical,”<sup>4</sup> to Garry Williams who concludes, “I cannot see how those who disagree [with PSA as he defines it] can remain allied [to the EA] without placing unity above truths which are undeniably central to the Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2012 Darrin Belousek published his contribution to the atonement debate. His motivation was to provide a theological bridge between the mission of the church to proclaim salvation through the cross of Christ and Christian action for justice and peace.<sup>6</sup> In his view, the present teaching of PSA does not

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<sup>2</sup> S. Chalke, “The Redemption of the Cross,” in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 35.

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “The Theology of Atonement,” in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Joel B. Green, “Must we imagine the atonement in penal substitutionary terms? Questions, caveats and a plea,” in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 167.

<sup>5</sup> G. Williams, “Penal Substitution: a response to recent criticism,” in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 188.

<sup>6</sup> D. W. S. Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 5.

provide such a bridge. He takes issue with the claims of PSA proponents such as Mark Dever<sup>7</sup> who states, “At stake is nothing less than the essence of Christianity”; while Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey and Andrew Sach assert “differences over penal substitution ultimately lead us to worship a different God and to believe a different gospel.”<sup>8</sup> In his book on atonement Belousek the philosopher tests these claims.

In May 2014 the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) invited Belousek to Australia and New Zealand for a series of fora to discuss his work on the atonement, justice and peace. As a Church Historian with a research interest in 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptism I was invited to respond to Belousek’s presentation of two sections of his work: chapter 6 “The Apostolic Faith Taught by the Early Church,” and chapter 16 “‘God was in Christ’: Propitiation, Reconciliation, and Trinitarian Theology.”

At the May 2014 conversation Belousek explored the claims of Dever, and Jeffery, Ovey and Sach by exploring two questions: “Is penal substitution the faith of the Apostles and bishops of the early church, taught in the ancient creeds of the church catholic?” and “Is penal substitution compatible with the orthodox doctrine of Trinitarian theology?” He refined this second question by exploring two additional questions: “Does PSA represent God divided against Himself, and God alienated from Himself?” He rejected Dever’s claim that PSA was the faith of the Apostles. While he initially conceded that that PSA may be compatible with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the creeds of the church, he later concluded that PSA does in fact represent “a Trinity comprising not only distinct but separable, even conflicting, persons—quite contrary to the ecumenical creedal affirmations of Nicaea and Constantinople.”<sup>9</sup>

#### ATONEMENT IN THE FAITH OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS AND CREEDS

I agree with Belousek that PSA was not the faith of the Apostles and early church fathers and taught in the ancient creeds of the church catholic. While Jeffery, Ovey and Sach claim PSA has been affirmed from the earliest days of the Christian church, and that it was “central to the Christian faith and a foundational element of God’s plan for the world”<sup>10</sup> in Athanasius theology, a person represented as the defender of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church, they also recognize that PSA was not the only understanding of the atonement held by the early church fathers. More tellingly, Belousek rightly challenges Jeffery, Ovey and Sach about reading back into Athanasius’ theology of the atonement an Augustinian view of sin, death and punishment.<sup>11</sup>

I am persuaded by the arguments of Frances Young that PSA is only anticipated in the work of the patristic theologians. She writes: “scholars telling the history of the doctrine of the atonement have always been able to find anticipations of later doctrines in the patristic material. The classic histories were written

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, fn. 14, 100.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>10</sup> S. Jeffery, M. Ovey and A. Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the glory of penal substitution* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 203.

<sup>11</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, fn. 10, 365.

at the beginning of this century, and they were shaped by the current conflict between so-called liberals and conservatives both catholic and evangelical. The latter asserted that the traditional doctrine of the atonement, as enunciated by Anselm in the Middle Ages and anticipated in the early material, was in terms of “penal substitution.”<sup>12</sup>

Young and Belousek alert us to a key problem when interpreting historical data; identifying the same word in documents from different periods and investing the older word with the meaning from the more recent context. Historical explorations of atonement often fall into this trap. Interpretations of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* illustrate this problem. Key to the debate is the term “satisfaction.” Belousek objects to proponents of PSA “conflating” Anselm’s idea of “satisfaction” with Calvin’s “penal substitution,” and favourably cites Paul Fiddes in support of his view.<sup>13</sup> However, Fiddes continues to locate Anselm in a feudal setting, contrasting the feudal setting with the revival of Roman Law during the period of the Reformation. Fiddes summarizes Anselm’s argument: “Christ is not punished in our place, but releases us *from* punishment *through* satisfaction,” whereas Calvin from his context builds on Anselm’s premise that where honour is offended, satisfaction needs to be made, but understands the honour of God to be linked to the divine law to which only punishment can provide satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> While I agree with Fiddes’ premise that historical context greatly influences theological development, more recent study on the nature of feudalism, and the probable historical context in which Anselm lived and worked, would question whether it is legitimate to understand Anselm’s understanding of “satisfaction” in terms of a feudal worldview.<sup>15</sup>

There have been a series of key words used by theologians when writing about the atonement such as, but not limited to, salvation, satisfaction, sacrifice, sin, justice, wrath, expiation, propitiation, forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, obedience, honour, order. Across the centuries, these words have been invested with meaning drawn from their specific context. Subsequent theologians have used the same words, demonstrating a kind of continuity with those who have preceded them, but amended the previous meaning by drawing on the worldview of their own context. For example, Cyprian’s writings (c. 249-258) use many of the terms and phrases found in the writings of proponents of PSA. Cyprian, in his controversy about re-admission of the lapsed, attributes the persecution engulfing the church at that time to be the result of empowering Satan with authority to punish believers because they do not obey “the

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<sup>12</sup> F. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 89.

<sup>13</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Tood, 1989), 97-98.

<sup>15</sup> For a convincing case for a non-feudal setting for Anselm see David L. Whidden III, “The Alleged Feudalism of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* and the Benedictine Concepts of Obedience, Honor, and Order,” *Nova et Vetera* English Edition, Vol. 9, No. 4, (2011): 1060-1068. However the argument that the Rule of St Benedict provides the interpretive framework for *Cur Deus Homo* does not convince me entirely. While Anselm as an Abbot lived with the Rule as a daily framework, he also lived in a world that saw order beyond the walls of the monastery, a world where Popes, Emperors, Kings, Princes, Lords, and Knights vied to assert their authority over people within their territories on the basis of God’s revealed order for the world, a revelation open to varied interpretations.

commandments of the Lord, while we do not keep the salutary ordinances of the law that He has given.”<sup>16</sup> He challenges his fellow priests to follow the example of Christ to pray so that satisfaction can be made to the Father: “But if for us and for our sins He both laboured and watched and prayed, how much more ought we to be instant in prayers; and, first of all, to pray and to entreat the Lord Himself, and then through Him, to make satisfaction to God the Father!”<sup>17</sup> To the lapsed who seek the peace of the church he notes that it is by “divine law” that only bishops hold the power to forgive sins, and the lapsed should be “submissive and quiet and modest, as those who ought to appease God, in remembrance of their sins.”<sup>18</sup> In a telling outburst he contrasts the schismatics with the lapsed. “This is a worse crime than that which the lapsed seem to have fallen into, who nevertheless, standing as penitents for their crime, beseech God with full satisfactions. In this case, the Church is sought after and entreated; in that case, the Church is resisted.”<sup>19</sup>

However, when Cyprian explains how Christ is able to restore the relationship of people with God, he echoes Irenaeus’ focus on the incarnation rather than the cross:

Therefore of this mercy and grace the Word and Son of God is sent as the dispenser and master, who by all the prophets of old was announced as the enlightener and teacher of the human race. He is the power of God, He is the reason, He is His wisdom and glory; He enters into a virgin; being the holy Spirit, He is endued with flesh; God is mingled with man. This is our God, this is Christ, who, as the mediator of the two, puts on man that He may lead them to the Father. What man is, Christ was willing to be, that man also may be what Christ is.<sup>20</sup>

This concept of Christ becoming man so that man may be what Christ is does not appear as a dominant theme in proponents of PSA. Similarly, Cyprian’s idea of salvation being initiated in baptism, and guaranteed only when the baptized remain in obedient relationship to the bishops who represent the Church catholic,<sup>21</sup> would not resonate with proponents of PSA who identify continuity not through a line of bishops but through the gospel as revealed in Christ in the Scriptures. Cyprian puts in place the ideas that will develop into the medieval penitential system, of an order within society where clergy and laity were divided, and salvation for the laity depended upon them staying in right relationship with the clergy through obedience to complete the penance required of them by the Church representatives, the clergy. However, the understanding of salvation and atonement enunciated by Cyprian was based on a pre-

<sup>16</sup> “Epistle VII. To the Clergy, Concerning Prayer to God,” in *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix* (vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; revised Cleveland Coxe; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 286.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “Epistle XXVI: Cyprian to the Lapsed,” vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 305.

<sup>19</sup> “On the Unity of the Catholic Church,” vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 427.

<sup>20</sup> “Treaties VI: On the Vanity of Idols,” vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 468.

<sup>21</sup> From baptism “springs the whole origin of faith and the saving access to the hope of life eternal, and the divine condescension for purifying and quickening the servant of God.” “Epistle LXXII. To Jubaianus, Concerning the Baptism of Heretics,” vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 382; “Thence, through the changes of time and successions, the ordering of bishops and the plan of the Church flows onwards; so that the Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers.” “Epistle XXVI. Cyprian to the Lapsed,” vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 305.

Christendom worldview. Monks had not yet become a major sub-set of the clergy, who by the time of Anselm vied with the priests in the minds of the laity as to which group could do for them what they could not do. While the sacraments of the church were necessary, the intercessory prayers of monks and nuns were also appreciated as effecting forgiveness for post-baptismal sins. By the time of Anselm the Western Church had an adequate explanation for how the work of Christ achieved atonement for sinners; the Church catholic as the representative of Christ through its priests mediated the prevenient grace of God through the sacrament of baptism, and the medicine of grace through the sacrifice of Eucharist, providing for the removal of punishment through penance, including the intercessory prayer of monks and nuns. This was received by faith as the truth revealed by God through the church.

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* does not challenge this understanding of the atonement.<sup>22</sup> We might ask the question "Why address the question of the incarnation and atonement in 1090 when no theologian had addressed the topic for centuries?" Rather than posit a change in worldview based on the development of feudalism, there is a more pressing issue that changed Anselm's world, Islam. Not the mere existence of that faith, but the increasing interaction of Christians on pilgrimage to the Holy Land where pilgrims encountered people who argued that the Christian claim that God became man was contrary to reason.<sup>23</sup> *Cur Deus Homo* might then be seen as an early instalment of the underlying struggle between revived Aristotelianism and Platonism that played out in parallel with the rise of universities that began to rival the authority of the church as the locus of "truth," a struggle that continued to inform the context of Protestant Reformers when they located "truth" in the revelation of Christ in Scripture, focused on the cross.

I would suggest that PSA is anticipated in the writings of the early church fathers and the creeds in the sense that the language used to support PSA existed at that time and is not incompatible with the later fully developed meanings attributed to it by those who support PSA. This means that other theories of the atonement can also be anticipated in the writings of the early church and creeds. Each needed to wait till a worldview existed that would nourish its ideas and assist it to dominate the landscape. The other theories remained, remnants in isolated locations, until the cultural climate and context changed to allow them to dominate. Such is the situation today, when the Western Church's cultural context sees alternative views to PSA begin to flourish as they are better able to engage with issues raised in the present cultural context.

Fiddes helpfully notes that while history can only provide "probability" that an event did take place, there is no need to retreat from locating Jesus in history and making faith only existential encounter. Rather he would place "historical fact (that is probability) *alongside* the insights of faith," not that historical

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<sup>22</sup> "Boso. Therefore, since I thus consider myself to hold the faith of our redemption, by the prevenient grace of God, so that, even were I unable in any way to understand what I believe, still nothing could shake my constancy." *Cur Deus Homo*, ch 2, CLLL, 186.

<sup>23</sup> "infidels are accustomed to bring up against us, ridiculing Christian simplicity as absurd ... for what necessity, in sooth, God became man, and by his own death, as we believe and affirm, restored life to the world; when he might have done this, by means of some other being, angelic or human, or merely by his will." *Cur Deus Homo*, ch. 1, 185.

fact can “prove faith; rather, belief that certain events have happened will shape and educate a faith that comes from encounter with Christ today.”<sup>24</sup>

The trajectory of this line of thought leads us to ask: Are all views of the atonement equally legitimate? Who decides which are or are not legitimate? Representatives of the Western Church prior to the Reformation identified the Church as the locus of authority: for the Conciliarist of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Church was identified as the Council of Bishops gathered together; the supporters of Papal Primacy identified the Church with the bishop of Rome. The Reformers rejected the idea that the Church was the locus of authority to validate doctrine, replacing the Church with Scripture. The Reformers argued Councils and Popes were fallible; Scripture as the revelation of God was not. Further, they rejected the notion that the Church established Scripture, insisting that it was Scripture that established the Church. To counter the accusation that this position would lead to unbridled individualism, the Reformers continued with the hierarchical model they inherited from their Roman Catholic heritage, the differentiation of clergy and laity, and investing their creeds established by their learned clergy with authority to determine which positions were valid and which were not.

There was a third view during the early Reformation which was rejected by both Roman Catholics and Magisterial Reformers, that the church as the body of Christ, that is believers (having no division between clergy and laity) when gathered together, considered the Scriptures under the leading of the Holy Spirit, taking into account the contribution of the scholars learned in the ancient languages and history of the church, determined the validity of doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Fiddes hints at the role the community of believers played in understanding the cross and the resurrection, a role the present followers of Jesus need to also undertake when understanding our present day encounters in faith with Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps today’s Western cultural context with its antipathy towards institutional authority will provide fertile soil in which congregational hermeneutics can flourish.

## GOD DIVIDED AND ALIENATED FROM HIMSELF

Belousek’s conclusion that PSA divides God and alienates God the Father from God the Son is in part based on his assessment of Christ’s cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>27</sup> He argues that if as John Stott, a preeminent proponent of PSA claims, this is an “actual and dreadful separation,” then it cannot be avoided that God is divided and alienated at the moment of this cry of dereliction. Where Stott sees the reality of an “actual and dreadful separation” is “balanced” by the faith statement that there can be “no separation” in God, Belousek sees “incoherence.”<sup>28</sup> Once again Belousek

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<sup>24</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> This is a summary of Balthasar Hubmaier’s congregational hermeneutic that he initiated in Waldshut and Nicosburg 1525-1527 but moved away. G. Chatfield, *Balthasar Hubmaier and the Clarity of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 365.

<sup>26</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 301.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 302.

the philosopher demands logical clarity. He summarizes the PSA interpretation of Jesus' cry of dereliction as follows:

This separation between the Father and the Son happens ... because at the cross Jesus both bears the sins of all humanity and suffers the penalty for those sins in place of humanity, both of which are necessary in order for Jesus to satisfy divine retribution as the universal penal substitute. The Father, whose justice requires this punishment for sin but whose holiness can have nothing to do with sin, must separate himself from the sin the son bears and so must separate himself from—and, hence, “turn his back” on or “hide his face” from—the sin-bearing Son.<sup>29</sup>

Defenders of PSA have recognized the problem of alienation of Father and Son inherent in PSA, and have offered solutions other than that of Stott cited above. Jeffery, Ovey and Sach suggest the cry of dereliction is only metaphoric, but this does not support the reality of the separation between Father and Son PSA teaches. I. Howard Marshall focuses on the relational nature of sin, and the infliction of proportionate suffering by God on the sinner, being exclusion from the presence of God. Christ as our substitute on the cross not only experiences the wrath of God for our sin but also bears in himself the consequences of our sin, “eternal exclusion” from God's presence.<sup>30</sup> Belousek claims the logical conclusion of Marshall's approach is an eternal separation in the Godhead. However, as Tony Campolo put it, “It's Friday, but Sunday's coming,” the resurrection challenges the idea of eternal separation. I find the insight of Paul Fiddes helpful at this point.

If we understand the “wrath” of God to be his confirming of the natural consequences of human estrangement ... and if we see Christ as participating in the deepest human predicament, then we can speak (with Karl Barth) of God's suffering his own contradiction of sinful humanity; we need not speak of God's contradicting *himself*. ... The shock of the silence at the cross is God's exposure of his very being to non-being, as the Son is identified with those for whom the Father must, with infinite grief, confirm death as the goal of their own direction of life. This breach in God cannot be diminished, even by saying with Boff that Jesus turns his deepest despair into “trust in the Mystery.” The cry of forsakenness cannot be abridged like this; it is not resolved, at the cross, into a word of trust, but rings out in all its starkness. But it is not the last word; the resurrection tells that as God takes death into himself, he is not overcome by it. All hangs in the balance as the being of God and death strike against each other; yet God sustains his being in the face of death, and makes it serve him.<sup>31</sup>

As “God was in Christ” on the cross reconciling the world to himself, God the Father experiences relationally in himself the reality of the consequences of sin as experience by God the Son. One of those consequences is separation, a separation based on mutual consent. However, Belousek rejects the idea that

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 301.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 194.

mutual consent allows for abandonment. “How, though, can one *consent* to be abandoned or forsaken by another? If I consent to your taking leave of me, then I have not been forsaken by you and you have not abandoned me—we have merely parted; I am left alone, but not derelict.”<sup>32</sup> If it could be shown that a case could be imagined where two people could by mutual consent separate so that one was left abandoned, totally forsaken to face death alone, then Belousek’s objection to the real abandonment of the Son by the Father would be brought into question. Imagine a couple, married for many years and deeply in love, driving in their car which crashes through a barrier into a lake. As the car is sinking, one is trapped, the other can escape from the car. They both face death, but by mutual consent because of their love for one another, they separate; the trapped one to die alone and abandoned, the other to experience in the separation their own suffering from abandonment. Yet, mutual love which motivated the consent, gives meaning to the act, while still not cancelling out the reality of the separation, suffering and death. If such a scenario is possible for human beings, surely it is possible for God.

While it is helpful for the philosophers to challenge the thinking of theologians, there are some areas of our faith where the limitations of human logic become evident. The creeds provided boundaries around the mystery that is the Trinity, but the Trinity remains a mystery to be accepted by faith. If this were not the case, then human reason would be sufficient to encompass God. In my view reason may support faith, but the biblical revelation allows for mystery and paradox within faith. The atonement, be it PSA interpretation or any of the other approaches must all, in the end, confront the finitude of our human reason in the face of the mystery that God should willingly choose to become human to effect the restoration of relationship with Him.

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<sup>32</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 306.