

Penal Substitution

A few weeks ago Steve Chalke, a well known Baptist minister and leading evangelical, published a book entitled *The Lost Message of Jesus* in which he rejected the doctrine of Penal Substitution. His argument occupied only two pages but the Evangelical Alliance believed it was necessary for them to make a public declaration that this doctrine was a traditional understanding of evangelicals down the years and was held by the great majority of them today. The doctrine of Penal Substitution claims that on the cross Jesus, who was himself sinless, suffered the punishment for *our* sins.

I was taught that and I have myself taught it to others. The illustration of it that I used most frequently came from the law courts of ancient times. A judge, an honourable man, found that his own son appeared before him on a charge of fraud. Of course, today their relationship would prevent such a thing happening but not in those days. There was no doubt his son was guilty and the judge found him so but then it came to the sentence; everyone waited to see what it would be. When he announced it there was a gasp from the assembled company; it was the largest fine permitted. But then, having passed sentence, the judge stepped down from the bench and paid the fine himself. That is Penal Substitution; bearing the punishment due to another. I could live with that; it was a noble gesture and it related to money. There is another illustration I heard when I first became a Christian which I found far more difficult. It happened at a summer camp for scouts. One of the lads had committed a very serious offence and had to be punished. The problem was that he was full of bravado and the leaders were concerned that he should understand the seriousness of what he had done and were undecided about just how to get through to him. In the end, the scoutmaster called the whole troop together and explained what had happened, saying that the offence had to be punished and the

sentence was twelve strokes of the birch. He then handed the birch to the assistant scoutmaster and said he would bear the punishment himself. Everyone else watched including the scout who had committed the offence. Apparently it had the desired effect because after the first few strokes the lad broke down begging them to stop.

Now that is a very graphic illustration of what may seem a dry doctrine of Penal Substitution, but I found it deeply offensive. I was told that my revulsion was ‘the offence of the cross’; and that the cross *is* offensive and is supposed to be – it was a vivid picture of what it cost Christ to save us. I know that and I accept it; but I still found that particular illustration deeply offensive and I have never used it myself. I couldn’t put my finger on it but I sensed deep within my spirit that somewhere it was flawed. It gave a wrong picture of God. Over recent years I have become more and more concerned by this doctrine of Penal Substitution and, like Steve Chalke, I no longer believe it; although I would not wish to imply that my reasons for doing so are the same as his, I just don’t know and cannot speak for him.

So let me share my own thoughts and leave you to take them on board or reject them after consideration, but with the warning that I am in the minority and most evangelicals would disagree with me.

First let me set out the definition of the word ‘Penal’.

PENAL adj 1. of punishment: relating to, forming, or prescribing punishment, especially by law;

the penal system

2. punishable by law: subject to punishment under the law

3. used as place of punishment: used as a place of imprisonment and punishment;

a penal institution

4. payable as penalty: required to be paid as a penalty

[15th century. Via French pénal from, ultimately, Latin poenalis , from poena **'penalty'**.]

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Notice that the total emphasis in that definition is to do with law and punishment. It is 'penal', to pay the penalty (the penalty) for breaking the law.

Secondly, we need to understand that we use the word 'law' in two distinct meanings. There is the legal law which seeks to control human behaviour – you must do this and you must not do that; and if we break that law there is a punishment. But there is also the natural law such as the law of gravity. I may say to you, "Do not step over the cliff because if you do you will fall and be killed." The fact that you would be killed is not a *punishment* for breaking a natural law, it is a *consequence*. So to break a legal law involves a punishment; to break a natural law involves a consequence. Now it is true that we Christians hold that natural laws were designed by our God who created everything. They are good and useful; the law of gravity keeps us attached to this earth and prevents us all being flung out into space but that brings the consequence that if we fall off a cliff we will drop down and hurt ourselves. However, it is indeed a *consequence*. In setting up that law God was not planning to *punish* us for breaking it; that is an inevitable consequence. There are also spiritual laws which are akin to natural laws in that if they are broken they have consequences.

This is such an important point that I want to develop it. Imagine a father and child walking along a pavement beside a busy road. He tells his child that he must not step into the road because he might get hurt or even killed. That would not be a punishment for stepping into the road it would be a consequence. Now suppose that in fact the child disobeys, lets go of his father's hand and runs into the road. The father sees a lorry bearing down on

the child and he rushes into the road and just manages to push the child to safety before the lorry hits *him* and injures him severely. Now that is not a punishment. The lorry driver did not say to himself, “That father should not be in the road so I will punish him for doing so and cause as much injury as I can”. No one wanted to punish either father or child. Nevertheless the father took the consequence of the child’s disobedience; he took the place of the child and bore the *consequence* of his action.

Those of you who are sitting there worried that I am preaching heresy can begin to relax because I am sure you see where I am going. I do not reject the truth that Jesus did die in our place, that it was indeed a substitutionary death. It is the word ‘penal’ I object to; it wasn’t God’s *punishment* for our sin he was bearing; it was our sin itself and its consequence.

Let me return to that illustration of the father and his child. Because it is so important that the child does not step out into the road his parents will introduce a legal law to prevent the child falling foul of the natural law. They will say, “If you do what mummy and daddy have told you not to do then you will be punished.” Presumably these days they will not smack the child but they will withhold a treat or send him to his room until he is sorry and promises not to do it again. It is important to understand that the punishment is a discipline for the child’s good so that he will learn under a legal law, not to break the natural law that if you are hit by a heavy moving object you get injured. Once the child is an adult there is no need for the imposed legal law; he will know the danger for himself. In fact the legal law is nowhere near as satisfactory as the child understanding for himself how to live. The legal law was only there to lead him to the truth.

I believe that that is a very good illustration of what God has done with humankind. Originally there was no need for law (law

in the legal sense). It was to be a matter of relationship. God appointed humankind as stewards to care for his creation. There was only one fundamental spiritual law, “Do not disobey me; if you do, you will die.” Death would not be a punishment; it would be a consequence. Scripture says that God is too pure and holy even to look at sin. For sin to be near God is like putting a snowman next to a fire to keep warm – it is destroyed, and that is not a punishment; it is a consequence of a natural law. Similarly for humankind to sin by disobeying God would result in death; not as a punishment but as a consequence of a spiritual law.

Without that close relationship with God, humankind were like sheep without a shepherd and so God first selected a people to be his own and then, when he had formed them into a people, he gave them the law at the time of Moses – just as the parents in my illustration gave their child a law to stop him stepping into the road. That law was a discipline and God punished his people for breaking that law, just as the parents would punish their child for disobeying them; but the law was for the people’s good not to provide God with an opportunity to vent his anger. I said that the parents in my illustration only introduced a law until the child was old enough to recognise the danger of the natural law for himself. The law was there to lead him to the truth. Paul says the same of the law of God. He says it was our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. [Gal. 3:24] That is the old King James version: the *Message* translation has, The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for.

But Paul’s great teaching is that we who trust in Christ are redeemed and are no longer under law but under grace. The law is second best – it isn’t even that, nor third or fourth best; it

comes a long way down the line compared with the freedom of living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I recognise that Scripture speaks of God's wrath, it has that terrible phrase, "The wrath of the Lamb", but that is wrath against the whole principle of sin. God cannot permit sin. As I have said so often, we have made enough mess of this world; God cannot risk us doing the same in eternity. He *has* to forbid sinners from entering the eternal kingdom. If you own a dog which you love dearly, if it rolls itself in some evil smelling and filthy bog, you cannot allow it into your home unless it has been cleaned up, however much you love it. But that is not a punishment; you are not rejoicing in causing it the pain of being shut out.

The Evangelical Alliance, in seeking to promote the doctrine of Penal Substitution, refers to texts which, certainly at first sight, do seem to support it. The one they major on is in Romans Chapter 12 and verse 19,

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Yes, but that is a quotation taken from the Old Testament when the law was in operation and I have already said that the wrath of God against sin is a frightening reality. Sinners who do not repent will indeed perish, but I still hold that that is a consequence of their sin rather than to satisfy some desire on God's part for punishment. In its context Paul has just said "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." Is it likely that God will himself act less lovingly than he demands of us? The *Message* translation, which admittedly is more concerned with making Scripture clear and understood rather than strict accuracy, says, "Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

And I suggest that his way of doing that is to allow the consequence of his spiritual law to run to its conclusion - “The Wages of sin is death”. Those who act wrongly and unjustly, unless they repent, will perish; isn’t that God taking care of the situation?

I am now going to make a statement which is dangerous because it can be misunderstood. I deeply value the Bible and I believe it is reliable but I do not follow a book; I follow the living Lord whom I discover in that book. I will not put the Bible above my relationship with Jesus, and through him with God the Father. I have so much more to learn about God in all his fullness, but I do know what I know. I believe that God is not interested in revenge; that is a human trait and part of *our* fallen nature. We have that truth even in the Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel says,

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?[Ezek 33:11]

The God I have come to know does not want to condemn but to save. Yes, it is a spiritual law that all who do not repent and turn to him will perish – have no doubt about that; I am not preaching that God is too loving to allow anyone to perish. Not at all, but he has done everything he can to save us from perishing; he runs after us begging us, “Don’t go that way; if you go that way you will be shut out of eternity and will be lost for ever.” He yearns after us with an everlasting love. I just cannot believe that he then adds, “but if you do not listen to me, then I am going to punish you so that you will realise you cannot mess with me”. That just does not fit with the God I know. If Scripture seems to say otherwise, then I would say, go back to Scripture, look at the words and the context more closely, because I do not believe that is what it is teaching because it is inconsistent with the character

of God. You are reading into it the desires and passions of the fallen nature of humankind not the character of God.

Scripture says that Jesus was made *sin* for us and that God laid on him the iniquity (the *sin*) of us all. He laid our sin on him, not our punishment. Jesus absorbed the sin of humankind, not its punishment, because God is not finally interested in punishing us but saving us. Punishment is related to the law and the law was not given until after man had sinned; and, following the birth, death and resurrection of Christ together with the giving of the Holy Spirit, if we have committed our lives to Jesus we are no longer under law.

So let me ensure that you understand. I do not question that Jesus died in my place; he suffered the consequence (but not the punishment) of my sin. He died for me and without him I have no hope of eternal life. All I am rejecting is the doctrine of *Penal* substitution; that when Jesus was on the cross it was because the Father was *punishing* him. I do not believe that; he was *saving* me.

So is it so very important after all? Why have I made so much of it and gone into such detail this morning? For two reasons: First because I want to make certain you have no distorted view of God as an angry policeman waiting for you to make a mistake so that he can punish you. He is a loving heavenly Father who is desperately concerned lest you should run off on your own and miss all he longs for you to enjoy with him in eternity - just as the child in my illustration ran out into the road and risked injury and death as a consequence of *his* stupid and ignorant action.

Secondly, so that at the beginning of a New Year we might all be reminded of what it cost Jesus to save us from the consequence of our going our own way and not God's; so that we may be

encouraged once again to commit ourselves to him who loved us and gave himself for us.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. [John 3:16]

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A further observation not included in the sermon as preached.

Proponents of the doctrine of Penal Substitution sometimes advance the argument that justice requires that there must be some recompense to counteract injustice; that is to say there is a 'principle' of justice which exists in its own right and so God, if he is just, has to abide by that principle.

However, I believe that that argument is heretical. There is, ultimately, no 'principle' of justice. In fact there are no principles at all which exist in their own right: no principles of love, righteousness nor even of truth. In the conduct of everyday life it is helpful (and perhaps even essential) that humankind recognises and adopts such principles, but *ultimately* (before creation was brought into being) there were no principles because there was no 'anything' apart from God. And finally there will be no such principles. In my understanding this is what Paul is trying to explain when he writes:

"God has put all things in subjection under his (*Christ's*) feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. [1 Cor 15:27/8]

Initially God was all in all in the sense that he was all that there was and in the final consummation of all things that is what he will be again. The great difference between the two states is that

between the two he has created us human beings and called us to himself so that we in whom he dwells also dwell in him and so we are part of that eternal existence. Anyone who does not respond to his invitation to become part of him will perish.

So there are no principles by which God must abide; the principles which *we* recognise are based on and spring from the person of God. This is why Scripture is careful not to say that God *has* love (as though there is some principle of love which exists apart from him) but that he *is* love. Similarly, Jesus does not abide by some independent standard of truth; he claims that he *is* truth.

All those standards which we regard as absolute principles are, in fact, expressions of an active God; they take their meaning from him – not the other way round. I believe this is what Paul is arguing with regard to the principle of ‘fatherhood’ when he writes:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. [Eph 3:14/15]

(Admittedly, there is real difficulty in translating this verse and in understanding just what it means. There is a close link between the word *pater* (father) and *patria* (family) which is obvious in the original but is lost in English. It seems that the point is that a family is only a family because it has a common link. That link is that each individual has the same father. A consequence of this understanding is that the picture we adopt of God as Father is based on our own experience of human fatherhood, which may be good or bad. This verse stands that reasoning on its head. All true fatherhood should reflect the perfect fatherhood of God.)

We need to apply this reasoning to our understanding of ‘justice’. It is not a principle to which God conforms; rather we are to base our appreciation of what justice is on the way God acts. He is

thus free *not* to impose punishment if he so determines, yet remain just. If he allows the consequence of sin to run its course and lead to death and the exclusion of a sinner from eternity then that is a 'just' decision because it is God's decision and he is 'just' - in the same way that he is 'love', 'truth' and any other concept which we may choose to call a principle.

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