

The Atoning Death of Christ on the Cross
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The Pauline Gospel

For Paul, as for the other New Testament (NT) writers, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the saving event. Therefore, Paul preaches the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection, affirming that it is the common gospel of all the apostles (1 Cor 15:3–5, 11). However he often summarizes the gospel in terms of the “death-formula” (“Christ died for our sins/us”), thus sharply focusing on Christ’s death as the saving event. So it is no surprise when he says that during his mission in Corinth he decided to know “nothing but Christ crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

The Reformation started with the rediscovery of the essentially Pauline gospel of justification, and this Pauline form of preaching the gospel is especially based on an understanding of Christ's atoning death in terms of penal substitution. Hence, purporting to be faithful heirs to the great Reformation heritage, evangelicals have cherished the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement and the doctrine of justification in their gospel proclamation.

Among the NT writers, Paul explains the atonement the most clearly. Even so, he does it in a few compact formulae (Rom 3:24–26; 4:25; 8:3–4; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; and the numerous uses of the “death-formula”). Among them, Romans 3:24–26 represents the fullest explanation. There are basically two types of interpretation of this hotly disputed passage, which is, in the main, regarded by many scholars as Paul's citation of a pre-Pauline form of gospel preaching.

Taking God's “righteousness” in the juridical sense, the traditional interpretation sees Paul explaining Christ's death as the meeting of God's mercy and justice. Being truly merciful, God willed to forgive sinners and restore them to himself. Being truly righteous, however, he could only do that without compromising his righteousness. Therefore he offered Christ as a “propitiatory sacrifice” (_____), so that by vicariously bearing the full weight of God's wrath which sinners deserved, Christ might avert God's wrath from them. This “redemptive act” of God had the purpose of “proving” (endeixis) his righteousness as it could be called into question because of his “passing over” (paresis) sins committed until then. Furthermore, it had the purpose of “proving” (endeixis) God's righteousness in this new aeon of salvation, so that God might be righteous even in justifying sinners who have faith in Jesus.¹

A more recent interpretation understands God's “righteousness” here as his covenant faithfulness—and therefore as a concept of salvation rather than judgment. It interprets the crucial term _____ as “expiatory sacrifice” (especially that of the

Day of Atonement) that covers or washes away the sins of God's people, as well as taking the terms *paresis* and *endeixis* in the sense of "pardoning" and "showing," respectively. In this view, Paul is saying that God has set forth Christ as an "expiatory sacrifice" to "show" his "righteousness" (covenant faithfulness) for his people that "pardons" their past sins and "justifies" anyone who believes in Jesus.²

It is now widely accepted that following the Old Testament (OT) usage, Paul understands "righteousness" fundamentally as a relational concept and "God's righteousness" as his covenant faithfulness, rather than regarding them as basically forensic concepts according to the Greco-Roman usage. However, even in the OT, God's righteousness seems to include in itself a forensic dimension of unleashing judgment upon sinners, albeit in order to restore the right order (cf. Isa 1:27–28; 5:16; 10:22).³ Even if, despite Romans 3:5–8, God's righteousness in Romans 3:24–26 is to be seen exclusively as a concept of salvation in contrast to God's wrath, the _____ here cannot be read independently of the concept of God's wrath, which is the dominant background of the context (Rom 1:18; 2:5–6; 3:5) and God's saving act ("redemption," v. 24) that is proclaimed here cannot be seen independently of Paul's overwhelming sense of God's last judgment, the redemption which Paul perceives as the ultimate salvation (Rom 2:1–16; 8:33–39; and some twenty more references in Paul's letters).

Thus, while it is to be affirmed that out of his righteousness God set forth Christ as the eschatological _____ to bring about forgiveness and restoration of sinners, Christ's death as the _____ had the function not just of washing away their sins but also of dealing with God's wrath, i.e., averting it, and so "redeeming" them from God's last judgment. Then, the dimension of propitiation in the _____ cannot be ignored, and the penal category of understanding the atonement as set forth in our passage cannot be avoided.

This is explicitly recognized by N. T. Wright, in spite of his fundamental understanding of God's righteousness as God's covenant faithfulness.⁴ However, there are many scholars for whom this understanding of God's righteousness leads to rejection of the propitiatory understanding of Christ's sacrifice and the whole penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. O. Hofius is a good example.⁵ He still speaks of Christ's atonement in terms of Christ's "inclusive substitution" in or through which sinners "com[e] to God by passing through the judgment of death."⁶ Following the studies of H. Gese and B. Janowski on atoning sacrifices in the OT,⁷ Hofius insists that Christ's atonement is not to be understood in terms of washing away of sins, but rather in terms of sinners' inclusion in or identification with Christ, "the inclusive substitute," in his dying, so that "through such offering of life to God" sinners "are snatched away from the deserved death" and dedicated to God.⁸ If so, in his atoning death as the "inclusive substitute" for all sinners, Christ received "the judgment of death," and by this act of Christ sinners are saved from "the deserved death." But, then, what real difference is

there between this theory and the traditional theory of penal substitutionary atonement? The theory of Gese and Hofius does not contradict the latter but rather strengthens it by clarifying the nature of Christ's substitution as an "inclusive" one, as one that includes all the sinners in himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:14; Rom 6), as well as by stressing the positive result of the atonement, namely, dedication to God.

P. Stuhlmacher also stresses that God's righteousness is a concept of salvation rather than judgment⁹ and that the _____ must be interpreted in terms of the expiatory sacrifice of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).¹⁰ But he also adopts Gese's interpretation of atonement in terms of inclusive substitution, and endorses Gese's view that atonement (kipper) involves not simply washing away sins but offering a ransom (kopher) for forfeited life.¹¹ Note how Gese defines kopher as "that which pays the price of a life, which can substitute for my life," and insists that "kipper means to find such a kopher, to pay the penalty of death," and therefore "atonement does not mean forgiveness of sins," but "it means to snatch one way from a death that is deserved."¹² Furthermore, Stuhlmacher insists that the Pauline (or pre-Pauline) statements about Christ's atoning death in Romans 4:25; 8:32; 1 Corinthians 15:3–5; and 2 Corinthians 5:21 reflect an understanding of Christ in terms of the servant of Isaiah 53, who bears the sins of "many" and suffers a vicarious death for them, thus offering himself as a ransom as well as a guilt-offering.¹³ With this view, Stuhlmacher interprets 2 Corinthians 5:21 thus: "The sinless Son of God vicariously bears the sins of sinners and dies in their place the death that they have earned; the sinners are spared in this way from the judgment of annihilation and obtain a new life before God through participation in the righteousness that has been wrought through Christ."¹⁴ Anybody who has such an understanding of the nature of atoning sacrifice and such an appreciation of the role of Isaiah 53 for the Pauline (and pre-Pauline) interpretation of Christ's death hardly contradicts the penal substitutionary understanding of Christ's atonement.

Indeed, despite many ingenious efforts to prove otherwise, the penal and substitutionary overtones can scarcely be denied in Paul's striking declarations that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Gal 3:13) and that "having sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as sin-offering, God condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3-4), so that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1; cf. also 8:33).¹⁵

Distortion and Objection

The spirit of the Enlightenment has led many liberal theologians to reject the penal substitutionary understanding of Christ's atonement. Recently some feminists and "postcolonial" writers have heightened their criticism of it, and some fainthearted evangelicals have joined them. These objectors argue that the conceptions of God's wrath and its propitiation are unworthy of our biblical God and even immoral.

To make this point, many critics often exploit a primitive distortion of the penal substitutionary theory that prevails among some theologically unsophisticated Christians. They caricature “God’s wrath” and “propitiation” by extending those metaphors literally to a horrible extent beyond the proper bounds set by the nature of a metaphor employed in God-talk. Thus they criticize the upholders of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement as if they conceived of God’s wrath as his emotionally charged anger—when in reality, with the metaphor, they seek to affirm only the holy and righteous God’s inevitable judgment of sinners. Then the critics argue that God’s wrath should be understood only in terms of an impersonal process of retribution (sin reaping its own fruit). But unless one is a Deist, one cannot help but attribute even such a seemingly impersonal process to the institution and governance of a personal God, and so an element of God’s personal engagement in the judgment of sinners cannot be completely removed (cf. Rom 1:18-32).

The objectors also caricature “propitiation” as appeasement of an angry and capricious God, when in reality the advocates of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement seek to affirm with the metaphor only Christ’s bearing vicariously the penalty for our sins and thereby averting God’s wrath (judgment) upon our sins. The critics regularly point out that since in Romans 3:24-26 it is God who is said to have provided Christ as the _____, and since it is senseless to speak of God as propitiating himself, Christ’s death as the _____ cannot be understood as propitiation. But this argument is again based on a literalistic extension of the metaphor of propitiation into an unintended direction. Just as the metaphor of “ransom/redemption” is used only for the idea of liberation of sinners and the heavy price involved in it, namely, Christ’s vicarious suffering (“You were bought with a price,” 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23, etc.), without any literal thought of God paying ransom to anybody for that liberation, so with “propitiation,” Paul expresses only that Christ’s substitutionary death has borne God’s wrath away and so averted it from us, without reflecting on the question how God can be said to appease himself.

It is a grave distortion of penal substitutionary atonement when it is presented in such a way as to pit Christ against God as if through his substitutionary suffering the merciful Christ had appeased or satisfied the angry and reluctant God to forgive sinners of their sins. Such a distortion is disallowed by Paul’s strong emphasis on God’s initiative in the atonement. It was God who out of his righteousness (covenant faithfulness; grace) “set forth Christ as the atoning sacrifice” (Rom 3:25), “delivered Christ up for our transgressions and raised him up for our justification” (Rom 4:25, formulated in the divine passive), “delivered his Son up for us all” (Rom 8:32), “sent his own Son . . . as sin-offering and condemned sin in [his] flesh” (Rom 8:3), “made him sin(-offering) for us” (2 Cor 5:21), etc. It was “God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” by offering Christ as the atoning sacrifice (2 Cor 5:19-21; Rom 5:10). Yet this emphasis on God’s initiative does not prevent Paul from looking at the atonement also from the perspective of Christ: “Christ died for us/our sins” (Rom 5:6-10; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 5:9-10;

etc.), “Christ/the Son of God . . . gave himself up for our sins/me” (Gal 1:3-4; 2:20), “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal 3:13), etc. Therefore, it seems appropriate to speak of Christ as having borne our sins and the punishment of God in our stead and for our sake, so long as we do not lose sight of the unity of God the Father and Christ the Son in the work of the atonement as well as the priority of God’s grace.

Is This Doctrine Also in the Other New Testament Books?

This understanding of Christ’s atoning death is also represented in 1 Peter (1:18-19; 2:22-25; 3:18). The Gospel of John focuses on the death of Jesus as the lifting-up of the Son of Man or the glorification of the Son of God, interpreting it in terms of vicarious atonement for sins (1:29; 3:16-17; 6:53–56; 8:24; 10:11, 15; 11:45-52; 13:1–11; 18:14; 19:34; 20:23), as well as the supreme revelation of God and his victory over Satan (16:33). The understanding of Christ’s death as a vicarious atonement is also reflected in 1 John (1:7; 2:2; 4:9-10) and Revelation (1:5-6; 5:6-12; 7:14; 12:10-11). Especially significant are the three powerful images of Jesus in the Johannine literature: “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), who as the paschal lamb and the servant of Yahweh (Isa 53:7, 11) is duly offered as a sacrifice by the High Priest (John 11:45-52; 18:14) on the Passover eve with blood pouring out from his side (John 19:34) for the eschatological atonement and redemption; “the lamb who was slain” sitting on God’s throne, having “ransomed [a people] for God by [his] blood” and so “freed us from our sins” (Rev 5:6-12; 1:5b); and the Son of God sent by God to be “the expiation/propitiation [hilasmos] for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:9-10). Hebrews focuses on Christ’s death as the covenant-establishing and atoning sacrifice as well as on his exaltation as the heavenly High Priest, with perhaps some faint echoes of penal substitution (cf. 2:9, 17; 9:15, 28).

Through his two-volume work (Luke and Acts) Luke concentrates on presenting both the earthly and the exalted Jesus Christ as the bearer of God’s redeeming kingship. So, while insisting that Jesus the Messiah was destined to suffer, Luke does not make efforts to explain his suffering in terms of an atoning sacrifice. Yet, with his retention of the Last Supper (Luke 22:19-20, the longer text) and his echoes of Paul’s atonement theology (Acts 13:31-42; 20:28) as well as his summary of the apostolic gospel in terms of the Messiah’s death and resurrection and “forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 10:36-43; cf. 26:18), Luke shows that he presupposes an understanding of Christ’s death as the eschatological atonement for sins, rather than rejecting it.

Is There Any Basis in the Historical Jesus?

A typical thrust of critical scholarship is to turn Jesus against Paul. In this case, there is an appeal to the Lucan material (esp. “Q”—material common to Matthew and Luke that is not from Mark—and the apostolic sermons presented in the first half of Acts). It is argued that the earliest disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem presented Jesus only in terms of

the eschatological prophet or righteous wisdom teacher who was rejected by the perverse generation but was vindicated by God, and then it is maintained that the historical Jesus himself had a self-understanding that was no more than that. Critics argue that the interpretation of Christ's death in terms of a vicarious atonement arose later with the Hellenistic (Jewish) Christians. But as M. Hengel has shown, both 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 which Paul claims to be the common gospel of all the apostles (1 Cor 15:3a, 11; cf. Gal 2:1–10), and such pre-Pauline kerygmatic formula as Romans 4:25 clearly demonstrate that the earliest Jewish Christians including Peter and James proclaimed Christ's death as the eschatological sacrifice of atonement.¹⁶ With its typical Semitic construction of having been "delivered up—raised up," Romans 4:25 appears to have been not only the original form of the Grecized "death" formula of 1 Corinthians 15:3b but also the post-Easter kerygmatic response to Jesus' own passion announcements, "The Son of Man will be delivered up . . ." (Mark 9:31pars; 14:21bpars; etc.). Pointing to such evidence as well as to the Last Supper, Hengel traces the interpretation of Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice ultimately back to Jesus himself.¹⁷ Then, we have no reason to put greater trust in the hypothetical document "Q," whose extent cannot be known, than in the clear evidence that Paul provides of the earliest church's kerygma.

It is often argued that since Jesus offered salvation through God's kingdom (God's gracious kingship or fatherhood) he could not possibly have seen his own death as a saving event. However, H. Schürmann has sought to demonstrate through the most rigorous method of "implicit soteriology" the essential authenticity of the Last Supper tradition (Mark 14:17–25pars) and Jesus' view of his own death as "the cause and ground" of the salvation of the coming kingdom of God.¹⁸ Through a careful observation of Jesus' striking attitude to the temple, Schürmann's theses can be strengthened. The Eucharistic sayings explain Jesus' death as a sacrifice both of a new covenant that was to renew Israel or create a new people of God (Ex 24:8; Jer 31:31–34; Isa 42:6; 49:8), and of an atonement that was to cover their sins and make them righteous in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:10–12. Thus, his death was a sacrifice that was to create a new righteous people of God. Through his kingdom preaching Jesus intended to gather and create a new righteous people of God, so we can see that he saw his death as the fulfillment of what he had promised and aimed at through his kingdom preaching.

For such an understanding of his Messianic mission, Jesus drew inspiration chiefly from Daniel 7 and Isaiah 40–66. So he made his passion announcements regularly in terms of "the Son of Man" being "delivered up," thus combining allusions to Dan 7 (:13) and Isa 53 (:12) (cf. Mark 9:31pars; 10:45par; 14:17–25pars; etc.). At the Last Supper, having announced his impending death in his typical riddle (mashal) form in terms of "the Son of Man" "going" or being "delivered up" (Mark 14:21pars), Jesus went on to expound its meaning by means of a drama with explanatory words (Mark 14:22–25pars). As we have seen, with the cup-saying Jesus interprets his impending death as a covenant-establishing and atoning sacrifice. The atonement motif in it is expressed with the

language drawn from Isaiah 53:12. All this helps us take the “ransom” saying of Mark 10:45/Matthew 20:28 as authentic, as it is closely related to the Eucharistic sayings. In the “ransom” saying, Jesus interprets his death as “ransom” (lytron/kopher) paid “for [anti] many,” i.e., as a death that is a substitution for all people, alluding to Isaiah 43:3-5 and 53:10-12. If we look at the “ransom” saying and the Eucharistic sayings against the backdrop of Jesus’ strong belief in God’s eschatological judgment, we can appreciate in them his vital concern for atonement, indeed penal substitutionary atonement, for sins!

The Reasons for the Penal Category

It was only natural that Jesus’ disciples recognized his death as the eschatological sacrifice of vicarious atonement when they witnessed his crucifixion and God’s resurrection of him, as the resurrection could only be seen as God’s confirmation and vindication of Jesus. In addition to Jesus’ own teaching, such as the “ransom” saying and the Eucharistic sayings, seen against the background of the institution of atonement in the OT, his actual death by crucifixion after trial and condemnation naturally led his disciples to understand his death in the category of penal substitution. Hence they came to formulate such kerygmatic formulae as Romans 3:24-25; 4:25; 8:3-4; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; and so on.

The Misused Appeal to the “Multiple” Theories of the Atonement

Those who dislike the penal substitutionary atonement theory typically point to the multiple atonement theories in the NT. But unlike the word “Sühne,” as German writers use, some Anglophone writers use the concept of “atonement” loosely so as to include justification, reconciliation, redemption, etc. as well as expiation/propitiation, and claim these as representing the multiple theories. Defined narrowly in connection with human transgression of God’s rule, which is the chief category of interpreting the human predicament in the Bible, “the atonement” refers to Christ’s resolution through his death of the problems of sin and its consequence, God’s wrath. However, if it is defined broadly, with the view of human predicament in terms of ignorance of God and enslavement to the evil forces as well as in terms of sin, “the atonement” will need to include interpretations of Christ’s work in terms of resolution of these problems as well. However, justification, reconciliation, and redemption represent not separate atonement theories, but the fruits of the atonement: on the basis of Christ’s expiatory/propitiatory sacrifice sinners are justified (acquitted of sins and restored to the right relationship to God), reconciled to God, and redeemed from the evil forces (sin, the flesh, the devil, and death), when they appropriate atonement by faith.¹⁹ Therefore these divine actions are not unrelated to the atonement understood in terms of penal substitution.

It is true that in the NT there are views represented that Christ has wrought salvation by bringing the “revelation” of God or by overcoming the evil forces through his death

and resurrection. The presence of these interpretations of the atonement in the NT certainly means that we cannot insist on the penal substitutionary theory as the sole legitimate biblical mode of interpreting the Christ-event. We may employ these other modes as well to suit our particular audience or purpose, just as, e.g., the Gospel of John effectively employs the category of divine "revelation/knowledge" for his Hellenistic audience. At times it may be necessary to stress Christ's salvation through overcoming the evil forces. But the NT allows us to play off neither the "Christus victor" theory nor the "revelation" theory of the atonement against the penal substitutionary theory. For these three theories not only coexist but are often coordinated with one another. Take Colossians 1:13-20, for example; there Paul celebrates the result of Christ's atoning sacrifice ("the blood of his cross," v. 20) not only in terms of "reconciliation" to God but also in terms of "deliverance from the dominion of darkness and transference into the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son," the preeminent head of all things, including "thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities," as well as of the church. Then he identifies this "deliverance" or "redemption" from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's Son explicitly with "the forgiveness of sins" (v. 14). Likewise in Colossians 2:13-15 he identifies Christ's atonement for our "transgressions" on the cross with his "disarming" of "principalities and powers." If sin is transgression of God's rule, it is submission to the devil's rule. Therefore, Christ's atonement for sin through which we are restored to the rightful reign of God is an event of his overcoming Satan and rescuing us from Satan's grip. That is why at the climax of his argument for justification of the ungodly on the basis of Christ's (penal substitutionary) atonement (Rom 8:31-39), Paul declares his confidence in the final triumph of believers over all the Satanic forces at the last judgment through the atonement and intercession of Christ (esp. vv. 32-34; cf. Isa 53:10-12), who died and was resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God as God's viceroy, overcoming all evil forces. See how in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 also Paul speaks of "the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" in terms of victory over sin, the law, and death. This correlation of Christ's atonement for sin and his victory over the devil (and his forces) is also made in the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John (cf. also Acts 10:38, 43; 26:18), and it corresponds to Jesus' own teaching about his gathering of sinners into the kingdom of God as his victory over Satan, as his redemption of them from the kingdom of Satan. Those who ignore this NT teaching and try to uphold the Christus victor theory of the atonement at the exclusion of the penal substitutionary theory run the risk of falling into a mere shamanistic soteriology ("spiritual warfare") or a mere political soteriology (liberation from an imperial and despotic Caesar).

God's Grace that Transcends Human Moralism

The penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement is often impugned on the ground that it is immoral and makes God immoral, with the imagery of God punishing an innocent man for the sins of evildoers. This age-old objection has recently been "modernized" in the form of "cosmic child abuse": God the Father "abused" his Son for the sake of worthless sinners! But, if the concept of "abuse" is not stretched beyond the

intent of the metaphor of the “delivering-up” formula, that is precisely what the kerygma in Romans 3:25; 4:25; 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13 etc. says! God made his sinless Son bear the sins of sinners and the condemnation for them, and “delivered him up” to death in their place. Ultimately then we have to choose between this biblical doctrine and the moral sensitivity of “enlightened” humanity. Many critics may reject penal substitutionary atonement as it is offensive to their moral sensitivity. “The word of the cross” is indeed a “stumbling block” to many (1 Cor 1:18-25). But many believers have found with Paul that precisely because it transcends the law or human moralism God’s “delivering his Son up” to a substitutionary death for their sins demonstrated his grace that wrought what the law or human moralism could not, namely dealing with sin and the flesh, so that sinners may be justified (Rom 8:3-4, 31-32)!

Precisely because the penal substitutionary theory is the best tool to bring out the grace character of Christ’s atonement, it has been cherished by the Reformers and the Evangelicals against the Catholics and the liberals. It is also the reason why so many simple Christians (not only of the West, many contrary claims notwithstanding) immediately understand it or instinctively identify themselves with it (as in the many favorite hymns that sing of it!). Just as rationalists cannot accept the incarnation of the transcendent Logos as it defies human reason, moralists cannot accept God’s giving his sinless Son to a substitutionary death for sinners as it defies human moralism. But there has always been a host of believers who could deeply appreciate what John says about the saving work of the transcendent God in spite of its defiance of human reason and moralism: “And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father”; “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son [to be the sacrificial lamb that takes away the sin of the world, or to be the hilasmos for our sins], that whoever believes in him should not perish [through God’s condemnation] but have eternal life” (John 1:14, 29; 3:16-17; 1 John 4:9).

Need to Present Penal Substitutionary Atonement in the Proper Way

It is true that penal substitutionary atonement has often been distorted to become the basis for “cheap grace,” the supposition that since by his grace Christ has already paid the penalty for our sins and we have thereby been justified we need not be bothered with the serious business of sanctification. Penal substitutionary atonement must be understood in its full sense. We can do so, first, by expounding properly the inclusive substitutionary nature of Christ’s atonement and by explaining how our faith in Christ (i.e., faith that “Christ died for us and was raised”), which is dramatized in baptism, actualizes that inclusive substitution so that we have died in/with Christ to sin and been proleptically made to participate in the new life of his resurrection (Rom 6:1-11; Col 2:12-15). Then, we need to explain properly the proleptic structure of justification that issues from Christ’s atonement. As by faith in Christ we appropriate his atonement, we are made righteous, i.e., we are acquitted of sins and restored to the right relationship to God. But this “justification” is only a prolepsis of the ultimate “justification” at the last

judgment. So, in the idioms of the New Perspectivists, the believers have already “entered” into the right relationship with God, but they need to “stay in” that relationship until the last judgment. This “entry” into the right relationship with God is really a transference from the sphere of Satan’s lordship to that of God’s or his Son’s Lordship (Col 3:13). Therefore, “staying in” the right relationship with God requires obedience to the Lordship of God/his Son, Jesus Christ (Rom 6:5-14) and thereby bearing the fruits of righteousness, instead of obeying Satan and committing sins. This obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ they can do because they have been liberated from slavery to Satan and his forces of sin, the flesh, and the law, and because they have been provided with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, on the basis of this indicative of justification, Paul issues the imperative for the believers not to “walk/live by the flesh” and bear “the fruits of the flesh” but to “walk/live by the Spirit” and bear “the fruits of the Spirit” (Rom 8:1-17; Gal 5:13-26).

This “staying in” the right relationship with God by “living/walking by the Spirit” has traditionally been called “sanctification.” But note that Paul also refers to it as the process of putting off the image of the first Adam and “being conformed” to or “transformed” into the image of Christ, the last Adam, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; cf. Phil 2:6), in order to obtain the glorious image of God/Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:20-21; Col 3:9-10; cf. Eph 4:22-24). During this process, it is vital for Paul that believers seek to imitate the example of Christ (Rom 15:1-3, 7-9; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:6-11; cf. also 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Cor 4:16-17; Phil 3:4-17). In the imitatio Christi call, Paul has in mind following Jesus’ teachings (esp. the double command of love—of God and of neighbor) and emulating Jesus’ whole life of self-giving service. Thus Paul has in mind what the Evangelists call “following” Jesus (i.e., discipleship). But Paul especially focuses on Christ’s self-giving on the cross and in the incarnation as the supreme example for our imitation.²⁰ Thus imitatio Christi is a vital part of the process of our being saved in the present on the way to the final glorification at the eschaton, and imitating his self-giving on the cross or “being conformed to his death” (Phil 3:10; cf. 2 Cor 4:10) is central to the whole imitatio Christi.

Nevertheless, it will be wrong to suggest that Paul (or any other NT writer) teaches that Christ died in order to leave us an example to imitate rather than to atone for our sins, or that Christ meant imitating his self-giving as a (separate) way of salvation instead (or alongside) of availing ourselves of his atoning sacrifice by faith. For this reason, it is difficult to recognize the imitatio Christi motif as a theory of the atonement. It is only a way, a vital way, of explaining the actualization of Christ’s inclusive substitution that believers should make in their daily walk by the Spirit of Christ Jesus. Note well how in Philippians 3 Paul makes the motifs of imitatio Christi (3:4-17) and transformation (3:20-21) integral parts of his argument for the doctrine of justification (cf. also the integration of atonement and imitatio in the dramatic interpretation of Christ’s death in John 13).

Conclusion

Thus, when the doctrine of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement on the cross—and the doctrine of justification that issues from it—is properly expounded, it can integrate the Christus victor motif in itself and provide the adequate basis for sanctification or imitatio Christi. Hence Paul uses penal substitutionary atonement for his moral exhortation not to sin against brethren, especially the “weak” ones (“the brother for whom Christ died,” Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11), and not to sell one's body into slavery either of sexual lust or of a human master (“You were bought with a price,” 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Above all, in expounding the missionary and social implications of the doctrine of justification, Paul makes the most revolutionary declaration: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; cf. also Rom 3:30; Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:11). Since justification does not depend on any innate quality or merit of human beings, but it is only by God's grace manifested in Christ's substitutionary atonement, and solely through our faith-appropriation of it, racial, gender, or social differences do not count any more.²¹ There is no doubt that this gospel has exerted its liberating force over against the still mightily raging diabolic force of discrimination and oppression in the dialectical history of the Christian world. What an irony it is then that the basis of such a liberating doctrine is now made the target of abuses by some “postcolonial” and “feminist” theologians! Evangelicals, if they are to be true to their historic identity, should not succumb to any polemics based on distorted versions of the Biblical doctrine of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement, nor yield to the attempts to marginalize it for the sake of the (independent) Christus victor theory or the (biblically questionable) moral influence/example theory. Rather, they must uphold the doctrine, expounding it fully and celebrating the grace of God that it highlights.

ENDNOTES

1. E.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 201–18.
2. E.g., E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 91–101.
3. Cf. P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 327–28.
4. N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 473, 476.
5. O. Hofius, “Sühne und Versöhnung: Zum paulinischen Verständnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu,” in *Paulinische Studien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 34–39.
6. *Ibid.*, 41–48, *passim* (my italics).

7. H. Gese, "The Atonement," in *Essays on Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 93–116; B. Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982).
8. Hofius, "Sühne," 42 (my italics), quoting from Gese, "Atonement," 99.
9. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, 1:327–29.
10. *Ibid.*, 1:192–94.
11. *Ibid.*, 1:138, 193, 198.
12. Gese, "Atonement," 99.
13. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, 1:138, 143, 195–96, 294–96, 334–35; so also Wright, "Romans," 475–76.
14. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, 1:296.
15. Many English-speaking scholars strictly distinguish the two concepts "representation" and "substitution" and insist on applying only the former to Christ's atoning death: Christ died for sinners as their representative but not their substitute. But it does greater justice to Biblical data to understand Jesus' atoning death in terms of "inclusive substitution," integrating both concepts. Besides Gese, Hofius, and Stuhlmacher cited above, cf. also W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (London: SCM, 1968), 264ff., against the modern ethical individualism that rejects the idea of substitution. NB: Stuhlmacher's stress on Christ's "Existenzstellvertretung" and "Ersatzleistung" (*Biblische Theologie*, 1:296, 298–99, 334).
16. M. Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origin of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1981), 34–55.
17. *Ibid.*, 65–75.
18. H. Schürmann, "Jesu ureigenes Todesverständnis," in *Gottes Reich—Jesu Geschick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983), 198–223 (quotation on 218)
19. Sometimes the imagery of paying "ransom" is also considered as a separate theory of the atonement. But as seen above, it is an integral part of vicarious atonement itself.
20. For all this, see my "Imitatio Christi (1 Corinthians 11:1)," in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13 (2003), 193–226.

21. Cf. N. A. Dahl, "The Doctrine of Justification: Its Social Function and Implications," in *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 108–13, 118–20.

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