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The Atonement — Understanding the Meaning of the Cross

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Last week, with the cross and resurrection of Christ prominent in many public conversations, several figures launched direct attacks upon the idea of penal substitution. Most notably, The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey John of the Church of England rejected the doctrine as “repulsive” and “insane” [see here]. Following in this line, Dr. Giles Fraser, Vicar of Putney, affirmed John’s argument [see here].

Now, with the press having moved on to other pursuits and interests, we should return to the question and remind ourselves of why penal substitution is so important and essential to New Testament Christianity.

To that end, I commend an excellent article written almost a year ago by Dr. Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. In “[Nothing But the Blood](#),” published in the May 1, 2006 edition of *Christianity Today*, Dr. Dever presents one of the best and most succinct summaries of the doctrine and its importance.

As Dr. Dever observes, “Few other doctrines go to the heart of the Christian faith like the Atonement. Congregations sing at the top of their lungs: “My sin, not in part but the whole, has been nailed to the cross, so I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord,

O my soul!” (“It Is Well with My Soul”). The priestly work of Christ separates Christianity from Judaism and Islam. Not surprisingly, the Cross has become the symbol for our faith.”

Our prayers and hymns betray the fact that the idea of penal substitution is central to the faith. (Actually our prayers and hymns are often more orthodox and biblical than our theological talk.)

Further:

Still, God’s work on the Cross leaves us with plenty of questions. In fact, there have always been a few Christians who question whether we need the Atonement, including, in recent years, some evangelicals who have challenged the dominant understanding of Christ’s death on the Cross as the substitute for our sins.

At stake is nothing less than the essence of Christianity. Historically understood, Christ’s Atonement gives hope to Christians in their sin and in their suffering. If we have any assurance of salvation, it is because of Christ’s Atonement; if any joy, it flows from Christ’s work on the Cross. The Atonement protects us from our native tendency to replace religion with morality and God’s grace with legalism. Apart from Christ’s atoning work, we would be forever guilty, ashamed, and condemned before God. But not everyone these days sees it that way.

Dr. Dever’s article is kind but clear, generous but also emphatic. He acknowledges the significance of several theories of the atonement, and affirms that the penal substitutionary model does not exhaust the New Testament witness.

Still, he insists that the idea of penal substitution is central and essential to understanding the Gospel. Beyond this, he argues that the concept of penal substitution serves as a control on our theological formulations of the cross.

In his words:

Still, when we give attention and authority to all parts of the New Testament canon, substitution becomes the center

and focus of the Bible's witness to the meaning of Christ's death, and the measure of God's redeeming love. As New Testament theologian George Eldon Ladd said, "The objective and substitutionary character of the death of Christ as the supreme demonstration of God's love should result in a transformation of conduct that is effected by the constraining power of that love." Theologian Donald Bloesch is in line with this when he insists: "Evangelical theology affirms the vicarious, substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ. It does not claim that this theory does justice to all aspects of Christ's atoning work, but it does see substitution as the heart of the Atonement."

The heart of atonement. Yes, and a precious and life-transforming perspective into the heart of God the Father, who is shown in the cross of the Son to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus [[Romans 3:26](#)].

This is an unavoidable dividing line in Christian theology — and increasingly in what is called evangelical Christianity.

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