

Setting the Record Straight

By Santiago Lange

The Protestant Reformation popularized “The Penal Substitution theory”. While the idea of a “vicarious atonement” is certainly a legitimate biblical concept where a parallel is drawn from the temple sacrifices to Christ's death for us on the cross, “Penal Substitution” harbors dangerous distortions we must recognize and reject.



A wrongly understood “Penal Substitution model” or “Satisfaction Doctrine”, basically contends that we are all guilty of breaking a law that we are not able to keep anyway. We are therefore, these models go on to say, charged with the death penalty, because the “penalty of sin is death”. Those are the rules and the rules must be kept. God requires blood because the law requires blood. A penalty must be paid and the only appropriate payment that would have been enough is sacrificing someone who was the “perfect law-keeper”, someone who could live a perfect life without sin. So, and here comes the creeping and most repugnant distortion, God in His anger decided to kill His own Son on the cross to appease His holy wrath and his legal need for blood. And now that Jesus has been sacrificed God is no longer mad at us for doing what we could not have done anyway, so we now can come and live with Him forever, as long, of course, as we are grateful to Him for His mercy to us.

„Penal Substitution“ is a systematic theory of the cross based in legal framework and centering in the idea that God must be appeased or satisfied before he can forgive, pretty much like the pagan gods. Satisfaction doctrine focuses on legal terms like God's law, punishment, justice, payment, and debt. Back in the Middle Ages rationalistic theories and judicial systems were considered the highest way of thinking.

One of the most serious distortions going around in the evangelical community nowadays is a wrong understanding of “God’s wrath”. We have come to build God in our own image and so we are all too often tempted to think that God’s wrath must in some way be similar to our own “human wrath”. Let’s understand, the “wrath of God” does not aim at the child or children whom He loves, but at sin that keeps humanity from experiencing the type of loving relationship the Godhead is eager to have with all of humanity. The “wrath of God” is the “fiery passion” the Father has for each and every one us. God is for us, not against us. God is seeking to destroy every barrier that keeps us from being fully reconciled. The Father will not relent in this mission. God is not “into” retributive justice, but “into” restorative justice. Sin, no doubt is a serious and deadly disease, but Jesus, who IS grace, is the cure. The works of atonement cannot be separated from the Person of Christ. In a very real sense atonement started before the foundation of the world and was actualized in the Incarnation, beginning in Mary’s womb. In Jesus, and our union in him, every stage of human life was redeemed in the complete saving work of redemption including our Lord’s birth, death, resurrection and ascension. □