COMMENTS ON JOHN CALVIN'S PENAL SUBSTITUTION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

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Since the Reformation, a common understanding of Christ's atonement work considers his righteousness as a substitute for ours and his death as a substitute for our death as punishment for our sin. The comments below shoulder a negative burden of proof to show that John Calvin's penal substitution understanding is foreign to atonement theory unless we adopt the rest of his legal theological method, where penal substitution would make sense. The thesis here is that substitutionary atonement theory does not belong in non-Calvinistic theology.

1. The act-guilt-penalty correlation. Alienation/penalty comes from guilt, which comes from action. By the nature of the case, an action cannot be transferred from one person to another; so the guilt it produces cannot be transferred, and the penalty for the guilt cannot be transferred either. It does not matter whether some second person is willing to take the penalty, whether he is sinless or not; whether he is human, divine, or angelic; or whether he or a third party prescribed the penalty. The simple fact that he is not the one who did the act means that he cannot be held guilty of it or penalized for it.

What holds true negatively holds true positively. Relationship/blessing corresponds to righteousness, which arises from action. The nature of the case cannot include transferring righteousness from one person to another because righteousness arises from acts as surely as guiltiness does. They are both moral realities.

Neither from the negative or positive sides does substitution explain Christ's role in our salvation. Guilt cannot be transferred to Christ to have him take the penalty for us, nor can his righteousness be transferred from him to us so we experience relationship to God.

2. The testimony of scripture. More importantly, what derives from the nature of the case is clearer from the teaching of scripture. The Old Testament Law itself specifically forbade punishing one person for another person's crime: *"Everyone will be put to death for his own sin"* (Deuteronomy **24**:16). The soul that sins is the one that dies, not someone else (Ezekiel **18**:20). We cannot give *"the fruit of our body for the sin of our soul"* (Micah **6**:7) any more than the blood of bulls and goats can take away sin (Hebrews **10**:4). Even in legal theory, divine jurisprudence forbade substitution.

In New Testament teaching, Paul declares in Romans **3**:21 that salvation is apart from law (χωρὶς νόμου), which amounts to saying that it is not by legal means. In Galatians **3**:21 he says so directly, *"If a law had been given that could give life, truly righteousness would have been by [the] Law"* (εἰ γὰρ ἐδόθη νόμος ὁ δυνάμενος ζῳοποιῆσαι, ὄντως ἐκ νόμου ἂν ἦν ἡ δικαιοσύνη).

3. The test of consistency. Christians often reject the doctrine that Adam's descendants are counted guilty to hell for Adam's sin; "guilt is personal," they say. Yet many of them suppose that the mechanism they deny leads to lostness is the one that leads to salvation. If guilt can transfer from us to Christ, it can transfer from Adam to us. We cannot deny original guilt-to-lostness for a reason we use to gain righteousness-to-salvation.

4. The righteous-unrighteous-Christ paradox. If real substitution were the case, Christ as substitute would be sinful, but as to himself would be righteous for obedience even to death on a

cross. As to himself he would please the Father, but as substitute he would utterly displease the Father. As to himself he would be God's friend, but as substitute he would be alienated from him. The same person would be righteous and unrighteous, pleasing and displeasing, related and alienated at the same time in the same sense. One person cannot view another favorably and unfavorably at the same time in the same sense. A personal relationship cannot be and not be at the same time in the same sense. Such things are not possible theoretically, much less psychologically.

5. Christ did not receive our penalty. Jesus Christ did not experience the penalty God established for sin: *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans **6**:23). If the penalty is physical death, Jesus did not die in our place because Christians still die. If the penalty is spiritual death, he did not die in our place. As the penalty for sin, spiritual death would mean permanent objective separation from God, but Jesus did not experience permanent objective separation from the Father. At most he experienced a temporary subjective sense of separation from him—as the Cry of Dereliction may imply (Matthew **27**:46 = Mark **15**:34 > Psalm **22**:1).

6. The continuity of kind between cause and effect. You must deal with the problem in the realm of the problem. You cannot solve a legal problem in other than a legal way; you cannot solve a nature problem by other than natural cause; you cannot solve a logical problem other than metaphysically; and you cannot solve an interpersonal problem by other than interpersonal means. The kind of cause must correspond with the kind of result as *"the law of the harvest"* states. It is the ancient principle of *"after their kind"* (Genesis 1:20-21, 24-25.). You cannot gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles (Matthew **7**:16; Luke **6**:44); you reap what you sow (Galatians **6**:7-9); what is of flesh is flesh (John **3**:6). The result is salvation, which is reconciliation, an interpersonal matter. Legal and interpersonal are different, parallel categories; they are different kinds of things. Since substitution is a legal concept, interpersonal reconciliation does not come about by the substitution principle.

Evangelicals rightly speak of a saved people as having a "personal relationship with God" through Christ. An interpersonal relationship cannot come by legal means; an interpersonal result must come by interpersonal means. Only legal results can come by legal means. Since the result is not legal, the cause is not legal. Substitutionary atonement is a legal concept; so it does not represent the way Christ saves us. Christ is an interpersonal basis for reconciliation with God, or he is no basis at all.

7. Law as a secondary principle in salvation history. Law was a temporary add-on to interpersonal process. Grace-faith-promise is not a secondary category inside of law-works-merit. It is the other way around: God added law to promise for practical purposes until the realities through Christ would come. In Galatians **3**:15-29 Paul is quite definite about this way of relating "law" *vs*. "grace," "works" *vs*. "faith." His two terms *grace* and *faith* (*vs*. *law* and *works*) are code words for actions on the two sides of personal relationship during reconciliation and fellowship; that alternative to law we are calling "interpersonalism." If law is a secondary principle in salvation, then a legal principle like substitution cannot bring about reconciliation.

At this point, we could add the observations in "Bases for Interpersonalism" to show that interpersonalism is the ultimate reality and all others are secondary: what scripture considers most original, most central, most enduring, most ultimate; the way Christianity is defended, its central vocabulary.

One question about the denial of substitution theory is this: why does the Bible speak of salvation in substitutionary terms if no substituting takes place? Scripture does speak of Christ's

work in substitutionary language. The issue is whether such language is reality or imagery. Non-substitutionary theory understands it as imagery, but doing so does not deny the teaching of scripture; it denies that the teaching of scripture means what John Calvin made of it.

Taking substitution language as imagery, or analogy, is natural for the following reasons. **(a)** The discontinuous descriptions of Christ's atonement work require that these descriptions represent analogy: ransom (Matthew **20**:28; Mark **10**:45; 1 Timothy **2**:6), conqueror (Hebrews **2**:14-15), the brazen serpent (John **3**:14-15; *etc*.), animal sacrifice (Hebrews **10**:1-12; *etc*.), purifier (Hebrews **1**:3), founder (Hebrews **2**:10; *etc*.), example (1 Peter **2**:21-23), representative (Hebrews **2**:5-18), priest (Hebrews **5-10**), primogenitor (Colossians **1**:13-24), begetter (1 Peter **1**:23), purchaser (1 Corinthians **6**:20; **7**:23; Acts **20**:28; 1 Peter **1**:18-19; 2 Peter **2**:1; Revelation **5**:9), being his disciples (Matthew **16**:24-26, *etc*.). These descriptors do not form aspects of the same whole, the same picture; at best, one could be real and the others analogous.

(b) Some imageries must be imageries because they contain elements that are foreign to what they represent. Notably the ransom-redemption-purchase analogy implies someone to pay the ransom to, but there is no such someone. Likewise, substitution involves antinomies like those noted above in #4. Whenever a viewpoint creates a paradox or whenever a view requires appealing to paradox to maintain the image, we are dealing with an image, not a reality.

(c) Christ came to save people that were legally lost. He was born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem people under the Law (Galatians **4**:5). There is no denial that penal substitution can be involved in atonement; the denial is that penal substitution is the ultimate reality in atonement. Those legally lost Christ can be legally save by penal substitution. But that legal frame of reference is secondary. Law—hence, legal mechanisms—cannot real-ly solve the problem because it is real-ly an interpersonal problem: we cannot be justified by law (cp. Hebrews **7**:19; Galatians **2**:16). Substitution imagery can appear because it can apply in the lesser plane of legal lostness, the circumstance of a large percentage in the original Christian community (Jews). In fact, God put the whole Mosaic sacrificial system in place as a foreshadow of the future reality in the Messiah (Colossians **2**:17; Hebrews **8**:5; **10**:1).

As with all analogies, **(d)** the analogy and the reality share crucial elements; that is the reason for the imagery. On the negative side, both substitution and "identification" (the alternative to substitution) involve another person that endures a painful experience because of something we did. Jesus would not have needed to endure the painful human predicament had we not sinned.

On the positive side, in both substitution and "identification," there is a connection between our righteousness and his. By entering the extremes of the human condition and living here without sin, he qualified himself as the appropriate object of identification. He became righteous by carrying out the Father's will for him to the final degree, making himself a most appropriate and only one for us to identify with unto righteousness, the only one to commit to for God to considered us like him. In both substitution and identification, there is a connection between our sin and his suffering and between his being righteous and our being considered righteous. Because of these common elements, substitution can serve as imagery for identification even though the manner of connection between these elements differs.

We use analogies for affective advantage. In this case, substitution language from the negative side causes us to feel, *"If I had not sinned, he would not have had to go through all that!"* From the positive side, substitution language keeps us from feeling proud that the Father considers us righteous (Romans **3**:27; **4**:12; Ephesians **2**:9).

The three main images the New Testament uses in atonement presentations (ransom, substitution, conquest) have an important common element that makes them appropriate images for the salvation reality: <u>something comes to the person in need that he did not contribute to causing in whole or in part</u>. The decisive act of any reconciliation is done by the offended party. That is true in substitution, it is true of conquest (Christus Victor), and it is true of ransom/purchase/buying/ redemption. In all three images, the result comes to the one in need by an act the other does in grace, <u>and</u> the one in need "identifies" with the benefactor. The one in need accepts the benefactor's act (faith/trust in the gracious One).

A comment about symbolism is whether Christ's work is merely symbolic. No. It is real. <u>Substitution</u> could be called "symbolic" (although we prefer "substitution <u>imagery</u>," "substitution <u>language</u>," or "the substitution <u>analogy</u>"). **But**, it is <u>substitution</u> that is symbolic, not Christ's work itself. What he did was real, and he did it for real reasons. He lived in real history subject to the human condition, subject to real death, violent death of a most horrible sort (Philippians **2**:7-8). He thereby established his real righteousness as a man in the real human realm; in doing that, he "qualified himself" as an appropriate object that is really righteous that we can really identify with. We identify with him unto our being viewed as righteous by the Father. Identification means that we explicitly commit to <u>him</u>, choosing his lordship, values, and purposes. Our commitment to the Righteous Object of identification is God's "condition" for viewing us as righteous like him, righteous as his natural condition for fellowship with himself who is righteous.

These points characterize all personal relationships; they are natural to personal relations *per se*. Fellowship is always based on being <u>viewed</u> as righteous, which in theory could be because we <u>are</u> righteous. But since "nobody's perfect," that possibility does not exist between us and God or between us and other people, either in reconciliation (initial justification) or in continued fellowship. In all social relations, it is not specifically what we really <u>are</u> or <u>do</u> but how we are <u>viewed</u> by the other. Social relations are a practical issue. As with most "systems," friendships can survive a certain amount of contrary elements. As long as the "heart," attitude, motive override actual behaviors (context), the friendship continues. *"Love covers a multitude of sins"* (James **5**:20; 1 Peter **4**:8). Repentance-forgiveness can remove these exceptions as a barrier to association; the other person can <u>view</u> the first as good even if not perfectly so. The offended party always establishes appropriate "conditions" for viewing the offender as good (relative to shared values and purposes). Those conditions amount to identification with the offended party and commitment to him. If the second party (offended) understands that the first one (offender) really does care about him and is committed to him, the second party can overlook individual failures when repentance is present. The offender may show repentance by apology, demeanor (tears?), some effort to rectify or offer restitution where possible, by not repeating the offending behavior.

In reconciliation, Christ incarnate is an extension of the other side of that relationship (the Father). In identifying with the Son crucified, we identify with the Father; and identifying with the Son is the Father's condition for identification with himself for reconciliation, fellowship, sonship, friendship, blessing, *etc*. In keeping with the nature of friendship, God considers us righteous, not because we are, but because we commit to one who is—and everything that implies—like trying to live up to expectations; and that is what God asks of us, even to taking our cross and following Jesus (Matthew 10:38; **16**:24; Mark **8**:34; **10**:21; Luke **9**:23; **14**:27).

As a final note, our interest in clarifying how Christ's atonement works is for helping unbelievers make sense of salvation. We suspect that *"Christ died for our sins"* does not explain much to outsides—as people have admitted to me personally. Tshe claim makes little sense as Paul says in something of a different connection, *"The message about the cross is foolish to the ones that are perishing"* (1 Corinthians **1**:18; cp. **1**:21, 23, 25; **2**:14). *"He shed his blood for our sins"* does not explain how shedding his blood has anything to do with saving us from our sin. That and similar statements in scripture are shorthand for a set of factors that connect the antecedent and consequence. That connection should undergird thoughtful conviction. We do not let one person go to prison for another; we do not let one person go to the gallows for another. We need to clear up the mystery if we can.

Having said all the above, we hasten to make clear also that these efforts do not make "theories of the atonement" a matter of orthodoxy. If scripture feels free to use what we have called imageries of the atonement (substitution, ransom, conquest), then certainly the readers of scripture can regard them as practical ways of picturing what Christ alone has done for us. We do hold back approval of a fourth idea called the "moral influence theory," where Jesus "saves" us by being the lone example of human holiness and unique motivator for us to live holy lives. The goal of such living is right and good, but we will not achieve the perfect righteous that relationship to a holy God entails so he "owes" it to us to view us as righteous because we are (Romans **4**:3-6). We will no more succeed at personal perfection in the future than we have in the past.

See also "Christ's Blood Shed for Our Sins" and other essays under "Atonement" on this website.

ADDENDUM

Jack Cottrell has claimed that the view of atonement described in *What the Bible Says About Salvation* is a form of the moral influence theory. What has caused this misreading is hard to say. Beyond simply denying the accuracy of that reading, some clarification may help others from misreading "Benefits of the Atonement" as presented in that book. The book highlights three benefits of the atonement: repentance, righteousness, and resurrection. That list represents a chronological sequence, not a logical series. Repentance occurs before righteousness is reckoned to us in God's mind, a reckoning that takes place before the resurrection at the last trump. Motivation to repent is not meant as the defining category (as in John's baptism of repentance) in which righteousness and resurrection then take place. Were that so, it might be more conceivable to call the approach moral influence; Christ's role would be as motivator to such repentance. He would then forgive only because of repentance and later grant resurrection to the penitent righteous. Forgiveness would be because of repentance rather than because of the character of the Righteous One that identification unto righteous leads to—the next step. Our understanding, however, places Christ's decisive role as savior in the second step, not the first (our act). So the first response is that **(1) moral influence is not so much false as insufficient, subsequent, secondary, and aside from atonement itself.**

Cottrell's book (*God the Redeemer*, pp. 424-29) labels the view "The Interpersonal Theory." While the label describes it, it does not define it, because **(1)** the terminology does not specify the kind of interpersonal connection between Christ's righteousness and our forgiveness; it does not indicate the "mechanism" in the atonement. The specific mechanism is

identification/commitment-plus-reckoning. Identification-commitment to Christ is our interpersonal commitment, and reckoning is God's interpersonal reckoning us righteous because of our identity with the Righteous One. If we were to label the atonement theory as we understand it, we would prefer "Identification Theory." Cottrell's statement on page 426, *"Repentance and confession cleanse away all past obstacles to the forgiveness of sins,"* is simply not what is meant; it leaves out the very thing Christ's atonement is beyond the basic repentance-forgiveness format for reconciliation. The Cottrell statement sounds like a way to describe the typical process of reconciliation that takes place between people. Perhaps God could have left the process that way for reconciliation between us and him. But, that is not what he did.

Repentance has been defined as sorrow for sin that leads to a reformation of life. So, on the repentance side of reconciliation, the Father has called for the penitent to identify with the Incarnate Righteous One as the specific form of expressing repentance. Now the condition for forgiveness-unto-reconciliation is not simply repentance (as from past sin) but repentance in pledge to reformation of life evidenced by commitment to the Incarnate Righteous One—and all that implies about his lordship, values, and purposes. That represents not so much an addition to the reconciliation process, but an elaboration of repentance (by commitment to righteousness) and forgiveness (as considering the penitent righteous). Christ's incarnate righteousness qualifies him as the appropriate object of identification by the penitent and the One the Father considers him as being like (righteous).

Identifying-committing with-to the Righteous One is the Father's condition for reckoning us as righteous unto reconciliation; that is broader than just repentance, and the added placement of Christ in the process is the atonement factor.

The Cottrell criticism may stem from **(2)** picking the wrong interpersonal mechanism—influence—instead of identification, which is the heart of atonement through Christ. Influence is not the only interpersonal element, so influence should not be equated with interpersonal. And, to emphasize the depth of the identification envisioned here, we hasten to repeat that it is more than a sense of nearness to him. Because of who Christ is, identification in this case brings in allegiance, commitment, obedience, and all the other factors that belong to our relationship to God through him.

The criticism treated in the preceding paragraphs may also stem from **(3)** confusing theory with fact. What might have been possible to do in theory is not the same thing as what the Father did. What happens between people (between equals) differs from what happens with our Lord. For the sake of thought, we might agree that repentance-forgiveness could theoretically be what God could call for in reconciliation and still be a just Justifier. But what we might suppose is possible to do in theory and what God decided to do in fact are two different things. Scripture does not lead us to believe that what God did was inherently necessary. If that were so, we wonder whether he would be sovereign; he would be subservient to more than righteous self-consistency. Satan would have put him over a barrel; the sovereign righteous God would be subject to something like the Fates in pagan thought. Satan would have taken over the situation by setting up a circumstance of our lostness by successful temptation. The New Testament indicates that within the repentance-forgiveness format, God specified an appropriate condition for the penitent to fulfill in expressing that repentance and trust: identify with the Righteous One. Even if God would not theoretically have had to establish that as an added aspect of the repentance condition, he did so and most appropriately did so. What he did establish as the condition for forgiving the penitent's sin is what we proclaim. Inasmuch as commitment to Christ constitutes that elaborated condition, we preach that Christ saves us by being the object of

commitment unto our imputed righteousness. We prioritize his role in the reconciliation process, which includes understanding how that role is involved—atonement theory.

We perceive appropriateness at work here more than inherent necessity. God established an appropriate condition, which included sending his Son to become that object of identification in the realm of physical human existence. What God did we need not interpret as something he had to do or had to do that way. We say that what he did was especially appropriate in resolving an interpersonal problem between humankind and God; it did so because of the love of God the Father and the love of the Son in leaving the realms of glory to live in our limiting and painful-death condition susceptible to temptation. The issue is not just what might make sense (like inherent necessity), but what makes interpersonal "sense," what shows how much he cares about us (appropriateness). The incarnation unto violent death on a cross by others adds drawing power to sheer appropriateness. If God calls us to be faithful to the point of temptation and violent death by others, it is appropriate that our Savior be no less in his faithfulness. That way his disciple is not above his teacher, his servant above his master (Matthew **10**:24-25; Luke **6:**40; John **13**:16; **15**:20). Leaders do not ask followers to do more than they are willing to do. We take up our cross and follow him up Calvary's hill.

Furthermore, appropriateness rather than inherent necessity may relate to how the Son could ask the Father to send twelve legions of angels to protect him even after the Father had denied three times his request *"with audible crying and tears"* to remove the *"cup"* from him (Matthew **26**:53). Jesus did not call the legion of angels; if he had, the scripture would not then be fulfilled (**26**:54). The plan had been put in place centuries before (even before the foundation of the world) and been prophesied as such; so carry-though had to happen for consistency's sake rather than for originating inherent necessity's sake. Inherent necessity characterizes legal process, logical process, and natural process because those processes are deterministic; but we are dealing with a problem in the interpersonal realm (friendship with God), so the characteristics of the solution—summed up especially in love context—are natural to that interpersonal process (which is not itself deterministic).

Admittedly, these last two paragraphs have taken us into unrevealed theory, but we deem it as appropriate to speculate in favor of appropriateness as it is to do so in favor of inherent necessity. Inherent necessity is an unrevealed inference whose incorrectness, we believe, shows up in its doubtful implications and in the tensions it creates in other matters that are revealed.

There is a second major problem with the moral influence theory—depending on how it is formulated: (2) **moral influence does not avoid works** because it does not necessarily include God's reckoning righteousness, nor does it necessarily include commitment to the Righteous One as the condition for reckoning us as righteous.

First, moral influence might simply mean that Christ's love influences us toward holy living so we can have fellowship with a holy God. That would omit reckoning us righteous in contrast to our being righteous. Our righteousness in God's eyes would rest on our own deeds; hence, it would be a person's own righteousness (Leviticus **18**:5). It would mean actually continuing to do all—a perfect righteousness (Deuteronomy **27**:26). Short of theoretical perfection, it might feel satisfied with basic goodness. In combination, these facts could put us back in a legal works situation because legal works is the principle of personal perfection (Galatians **3**:10-12). Or, it could scale back the level of aspiration for continued spiritual growth. Since holy, righteous, and just mean perfectly holy, righteous, and just, we could end up in at best in Galatianism: we would begin by grace (of forgiveness) and try to continue in works (of achievement).

Second, moral influence does not avoid works because it does not include commitment to the Righteous Other on the other side of the relationship—or more specifically in Christianity—to the Righteous Son who serves as an incarnate extension of the Righteous Father. Our righteousness would be personal righteousness in response to Christ's moral influence rather than righteousness viewed upon us imperfect people by the offended Other. The most crucial part the atonement is this point two in "Benefits of the Atonement": a reckoned righteousness based on identity with the Righteous One.

Earlier on page 425 Cottrell notes that the proposed "theory" denies imputation, which again is true in a sense; but it is imputation in the Calvinistic sense that we deny—imputation as legally transferring righteousness from Christ to us, objectively putting his righteousness in place of ours. Transferring righteousness to us is the reverse side of transferring our guilt to him. Such a process is aside from the sinner himself; it takes place besides him, not in his heart but in the impersonal process, "on paper," in the law that authorizes it. If transfer were not the mechanism in Calvin's penal substitution and legal imputation, there would be no punishing Another for my guilt. Transferring act-guilt-punishment is inherently impossible; hence, it is made to make sense only in a legal sense, only by putting it in a legal process, which is artificial hence impersonal instead of interpersonal. Law does not have to conform to reality to achieve its results because the results come from authority, not reality.

Instead of legal imputation, we stress interpersonal imputation in the Father's regarding, reckoning, imputing righteousness to us as considering us righteous like Christ *vs.* transferring his righteousness to us and our guilt to him. The Father views, reckons, regards us as being like the One we commit ourselves to. Righteousness is imputed, not from Christ to us ("outside God's mind" via legal process) but as regarding us like Christ in God's mind (by interpersonal choice). Righteousness is imputed to us in God's mind, not transferred from Christ to us by authority. It is an interpersonal viewing not an objective transfer. So to speak, again, salvation is not something that takes place "on paper" but between persons—God and us, not on stone but in hearts, not by legal authority but by personal choice because of love. The point is how God views us and why he views us that way. The "why" is not that we really are righteous, nor that someone else's righteousness has been moved over onto us somehow—legally or otherwise, but that we accept identity with the One who is righteous; we are viewed as "like" that righteous One we identify with and commit to, the One we pledge to follow to death if need be. In doing so, God's attitude toward us is not based decisively even on our repentant actions, but on the righteousness of the Object of our identification. Inside the atonement framework, aspiration is the condition for righteousness (note the flow of thought in Romans **7-8**).

Comments in this Addendum illustrate how misunderstanding can come from (1) a reader unconsciously mixing in his own presuppositions with what he is reading to form artificial interpretation. It is an example of not hearing another view on its own terms. The issue points out another difficulty: (2) the hard thing is not understanding something but keeping it distinct from alternatives. Equivocations and cross-connections muddle the understanding. (3) It is an example as well of trying to unpack a whole system of thought out of a shorthand label for it.