

SIX NOTATIONS ON IDENTIFICATION ATONEMENT THEORY

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I. Identification as the Whole Basis

In identification atonement theory, “identification” means more than identifying with Christ from our own side so God will count Christ’s atoning death as a substitute for our own death. That leaves substitution—or whatever—as the operative mechanism. Identification likewise is not just God’s viewing us from his side as connected with Christ. Identification in these senses fits with any theory of the atonement. Identification would merely connect the sinner with Christ—in the sinner’s mind and God’s mind—in anticipation of whatever mechanism then removed the penalty: ransom, substitute, or conquest. Identification would not replace or obviate some additional operation after the subjective and objective connection.

Map of Identification Atonement Theory

Christ’s INCARNATE RIGHTEOUS- NESS to the point of violent death by crucifix- ion in obedi- ence to the Father’s will; Christ’s IDENTIFI- CATION with us	God’s FREE PROMISE to forgive, <i>etc.</i>	Our IDENTIFI- CATION with Christ; sense of personal oneness with him (<u>exclu- sive</u>); commitment to him as a person; commitment to his lordship, hence, his values and purposes; commitment to the degree (<u>total</u>) and length (<u>per- manent</u>) of his obedience (to death)	God’s ACCEPTING OUR IDENTITY with Christ	God’s FORGIVING OUR SIN (= counting us us righteous on the basis of our will- ingness to identify with Christ	PENALTY (= alienation/ separation) AUTOMAT- ICALLY REMOVED (= gift of the Spirit/ vertical reconciliation + membership in the body of Christ/horizontal reconciliation) RENEWED BLESSINGS: providential direction, objective meaning, divine love, security
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The crucial point in atonement theory is what happens besides our identifying with Christ and God’s accepting that identity as a basis for his forgiving sins. As we have attempted to show in the above map read left to right, in identification theory, subjective and objective identity with Christ is the only thing that happens besides God’s forgiving us itself. There is no substitutionary penalty taking and no conquering hostile powers. There is no replacing our death with his death on the negative side, any more than there is substituting his righteousness for our lack of it, on the positive side. There is forgiving sin and coming to view us as righteous, which are respectively the negative and positive of the same thing. Forgiveness—not penalty borne before forgiveness or opposition conquered before forgiveness—is the specific act that “takes care of the sin.”¹ Prior to all of this is Christ’s qualifying himself as righteous in the human

circumstance to the point of violent, painful death. That degree of righteousness is appropriate because God calls us, though not righteous like Christ, to carry our obedience to the Father to that same degree. God does not call on us to carry our righteousness any farther than he himself is willing to carry his in the person of his Son. The incarnation made that appropriateness possible and establishes the rationale for the incarnation.

II. The Fate of Threatened Penalty

The question remains as to what “takes care of the penalty.” John Calvin’s penal substitution is often concerned about carrying out the penalty in order to preserve divine honor and justice. But that is not what the issue calls for. Justness, or holiness, is God’s self-consistency in acting according to his own nature and responsibility, the nature of his creation, and his previous choices and revelation. Honor is respect for him because of who he is, what he is, and what he has done. In theory, a threatened penalty like death for sin can be dropped for appropriate reasons without compromising God’s honor and justice. For one thing, **(1)** the threatened penalty could be regarded as having an implied condition like impenitence. Death comes in consequence of sin on the condition that the sinner does not repent. Not giving death to repentant people would be like not destroying Nineveh after God said he would destroy it in forty days. He had previously made that threat on the implied condition of their impenitence, a tacit assumption he did not verbalize even to the messenger who warned them. When they did repent, God relented (Jonah 3:9-10; cp. Jeremiah 18:7-8).² He simply dropped the threatened penalty. He did not need some substitutionary destruction, say, to preserve his divine honor and justness. That is partly what made Jonah so mad; it made him feel like a fool and look like a false prophet.

In the Nineveh episode, God did not change his mind in the sense of capriciously switching to different principles. He changed his mind about destroying the Ninevites in light of his broader principles. He relented because of an appropriate principle he eternally operates by: he can drop a penalty for sin if the sinner repents. In the case of Nineveh, that repentance came into the picture as a new factor, which led to God’s new decision on the destiny of the city. In the case of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ, the condition—repentance—takes the added form of identification with the Righteous One and commitment to his lordship, values, and purposes. Even this condition is not essentially a new one, because Christ as an “extension” of the Father is a manifestation of the divine side of the divine-human relationship. In any personal relationship, reconciliation is conditioned on re-identifying with and committing to the other person. So identifying with Christ is really the age-old principle of identifying with God unto salvation from any threatened penalty for sin.

For another thing, atonement theory need not have a separate provision that takes care of the penalty, because **(2)** the penalty automatically disappears with the forgiveness. That is so because of the kind of penalty it is—an interpersonal one, alienation. The penalty is one natural to interpersonalism rather than a separate, foreign one. God did not just decide to do something to sinners because we sinned. Sin naturally separates the sinner from the one sinned against. “Death” in the salvation context is spiritual death since all Christians physically die like everyone else. Spiritual death is separation from God—alienation. Physical death pictures spiritual death. Separation from the one sinned against naturally results from unrepented-of sin in any personal relationship. Quite “naturally,” then, if the sin that separates is forgiven, the

separation ceases perforce. The forgiving and the reconciling form a set and happen simultaneously on the same condition. God's forgiveness automatically gets rid of the "death penalty" by getting rid of the guilt that leads to it. Identifying with Christ meets the Father's condition for counting us righteous (= forgiving our sin); so, identifying with Christ meets the Father's condition for giving us his Spirit (removing vertical alienation) as well as counting us in his one body (removing horizontal alienation). There is no additional substituting or conquering. The essential, operative act is sheer forgiveness—based freely on an appropriate condition, but sheer forgiveness nevertheless.

III. Objections to Divine Necessity

Related to atonement theory is the supposed concept of divine necessity. The presentation above takes exception to the belief that God has to punish sin regardless of any considerations whatever. He does not have to establish a necessary penalty for sin because his holiness requires a penalty for all unholiness. In that arrangement, holiness that exacts justice overrides love that relents.

God does deal with all sin, but his dealing with all sin need not involve punishment or penalty; he may freely decide to forgive. God's holiness does require self-consistency, and his self-consistency requires doing something about sin if there is no exonerating circumstance or no repentance. That is so because creatures' sins challenge God's rightful headship of reality due to who is, what he is, and what he has done as creator. Creatures' sins also work against his will expressed in human nature, personal relationship, and eternal purpose. It is not right or honorable that he allow what is not God to act as if it were; that would compromise "justness." Inasmuch as such behavior is also a "slap in God's face," his doing nothing about it would compromise his "honor." And he does do something about it; that is the function of temporal separation from him (lostness/alienation) because of sin and eternal separation from him as hell. But there is no evident reason for saying that God has to establish a distinct penalty for repented-of sin or sins of honest ignorance.

We espouse our counter-position, not because God is sovereign (and so can do what he wants) or capricious (and does do what he wants), but because he is personal and sin is interpersonal behavior. If sin against God is an action, it is not like something that mars his honor the way a rock dents a car. Sin is not something that causes a quantitative loss that has to be regained; it is not a bad substance that has to be annihilated, or a negative that has to be offset by a positive. All these alternative images and others like them come from deterministic categories—substantive nature, legal process, or metaphysical form—rather than from personal relationship, wherein lies freedom within a framework. So, the other alternatives are irrelevant for establishing principles for non-deterministic realities like reconciling persons into loving and purposeful relationship.

Instead of trying to disprove that God has to punish sin regardless, we ask why that would be so, thereby putting the burden of proof appropriately on the affirmative, that is, on the claim that God has to do that. We have heard no adequate reason for the concept as based in the nature of the case. Scripture does not affirm the principle of divine necessity, and there is apparently no way to infer it from what scripture does affirm. The lack of adequate basis leaves the concept without authority, without authority in atonement theory, and without any need to refute it. God did not need to exact a distinct penalty for all sin regardless; so Christ did not have

to substitute for us in taking that distinct penalty, which was such that we could not take it ourselves. Besides, it would have been artificial to the case for him to take the penalty because the penalty was pronounced on us. Penalty answers to guilt, and guilt is personal.

A related approach to divine necessity agrees that we cannot show that God had to establish a necessary penalty for sin regardless, but since he did establish a penalty, now he has to exact it. Holiness that carries through overrides love that relents. The answer relates to our response to the previous construct. The problem this time is that statements about penalty need not have unconditional intent. Statements mean what the speaker intends. When God makes promises or threats, he can have implicit assumptions in mind. That is the value of Jeremiah 18:7-8 as a general principle applicable to a specific threat to destroy Nineveh. God did not become inconsistent by not carrying out the threat; he invoked another, unstated, higher principle of relenting threats on appropriate conditions—like previous ignorance or repentance. “*In the day that you eat of it you will surely die*” (Genesis 3:3, 5; cp. Hebrews 9:27) did not make God inconsistent when he translated Enoch and Elijah so that they did not die.

The same principle applies on the positive side with gifts and promises. In the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), the master mercifully forgave the first servant his enormous debt. But when that servant did not treat his fellow servant mercifully, the forgiven debt was “dis-forgiven”: “*His lord . . . delivered him to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due*” (18:34). The master forgave the debt on an implicit condition—that the forgiven servant would appreciate it and treat other people mercifully because he had received mercy. When he did not do that, his debt “came back” on him. The master did not go back on his word when he “re-activated” the debt. Intent of statement derives from the nature of the case, by examples like the ones cited here, or by observing contextually that a promise or threat falls within an implied limitation rather than given as an unqualified principle.

So the appropriate question is why we would think that in his statements about penalty for sin God meant to establish penalty for sin regardless, since we know that he has always adopted the possibility of forgiving sins-plus-their penalties on conditions like honest ignorance and sincere repentance. If his statements were not meant to establish penalty for sin regardless, then repentant sinners do not have any penalty left over after forgiveness that a substitute shoulders responsibility for. That is especially so because guilt and penalty are already declared elsewhere to be personal and since the kind of penalty involved cannot by its nature be transferred. If sinners repent, God can relent; a proxy cannot be alienated in place of someone else. All these statements about human repentance plus divine forgiveness have to do with the precondition of identifying with, and committing to, the Righteous One. The Father has established that precondition for all those who have come to know about the incarnation, its aspects, and meaning. He established that precondition as appropriate to forgiveness and reconciliation.

IV. The Sequence of Forgiveness and Penalty

Penalty and forgiveness appear in different sequences under identification theory and John Calvin’s penal substitution theory. In penal substitution, the substitution in taking the penalty to remove the penalty occurs before the forgiveness, or justification. In identification, the penalty is removed logically after the forgiveness, because the penalty is a natural one—interpersonal alienation—rather than a distinct, specially assigned consequence that comes in

only because God assigned it. After the forgiveness there is “nothing” any longer holding the persons apart.

V. The Location of the Salvation Act

The saving process goes on in God’s mind, and it goes on there not because he somehow substitutes Christ’s death for ours. Obeying God as Christ did is the kind of thing we are willing to commit ourselves to do. As to degree, obeying God to the point of dying as Christ died is something we are willing to commit ourselves to do if need be. The death and righteousness of Jesus Christ do not substitute for our death and lack of righteousness; his life-death fully embodied the will of the Person we “offended” by our sin. Our willingness to identify with that full embodiment of the divine will serves as the condition for God’s beginning to consider us sons in his own mind. That has always been the essential condition for divine sonship. Not punishing someone else or conquering opponents or balancing books, but forgiving us is the specific act in God’s mind that gets rid of the guilt and its penalty that would otherwise be attached to us “when he looks at us.” Forgiving us and beginning to view us as sons (dropping the penalty, separation) in his mind contrasts with those activities occurring outside his mind in some legal, natural, or metaphysical process.³

VI. Reasons for Concern

The comments above have been made from an exegetical and theoretical standpoint. From a practical standpoint each person must decide whether in ministry it is worth distinguishing between identification and substitution since John’s Calvin’s penal substitution theory is a common understanding. Identification may be unsettling to some saved people because they may not readily see how certain statements in scripture can allow for anything but substitution. Trying to “correct” that understanding may do more harm than good. The reason for making a point of it, however, is that some unsaved people reject Christianity because this central doctrine does not make sense to them. If substitution is an approximate image rather than the sober reality, proclaiming salvation through Christ under that figure will be less effective.

¹Paul, the writer of Hebrews, and others did not use substitution to state the reality itself but to picture a way of looking at it. For their audience, it was especially engaging because a high percentage of their readers had lived under the Old Testament sacrificial system. So they could look at Christ’s death for salvation on the analogy of the death of the animals they had been offering for their sins before. That is the reason, we take it, that God setup the sacrificial system in the first place. Additionally, these people had previously lived under a legal system. They could be thought of as lost in a legal sense; so they could be “saved” in a legal sense as well. But their real lostness consisted of more than the secondary legal lostness they had under Mosaism; they were also lost in the real, interpersonal sense. Christ’s death could cover both because he did die in the interest of removing sin. They could regard his death as having a double meaning.

God counts us Gentiles righteous, however, simply on the basis of our willingness to identify with Christ who throughout his whole life was righteous. Christ's crucifixion was his most extreme expression of obedience to the Father rather than the separate, specific act that provided the basis for our salvation. His whole righteous life as a work-up to the most extreme expression of righteousness, served as the basis for appointing him as the one we commit to for being viewed as like him. In scripture his death is singled out because it is the epitome of his devotion to God while living as a man in our setting, not because it is the only thing that serves as the basis for our righteousness and reconciliation. Furthermore, his death was not a substitute for our death-as-punishment; it was the highest expression of his righteousness. When we identify with him and his physical death and resurrection, we do not do so because his death replaces ours; we still die.

²Jeremiah **18:7-8** says, *"When I say I'll pluck up a nation, break it down, and destroy it, if that nation turns from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to them."*

³The comments here do not discount restitution when it is possible. In many cases restitution is not possible. We can consider the recommitment to God in Christ as the restitution; we can consider transforming our behavior as the equivalent of restitution.