

SACRIFICE OR PENALTY?

Why it matters what
we believe about
Christ's death

KEITH CRIDER

Christian Light Publications

Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Contents

Introduction	v
1 The Crux of the Matter	1
2 Varieties of Penal Theories	13
3 The Penal Theory Conflicts With God’s Revelation in the Old Testament	19
4 The Penal Theory Denies the Holiness and Unity of God	39
5 The Penal Theory Leads to False Understandings of Salvation, Forgiveness, and Life in Christ	49
6 The Penal Theory Denies the Efficacy of the Blood and Jesus’ Work in the Body	65
7 The Penal Theory Assumes Something the Bible Does Not Teach	73
8 What Is the “Price” of Our Salvation?	77
9 Scriptures and Arguments Used to Support the Penal Theory	85
10 It’s Not Just About Words	99
Epilogue: Is Jesus’ Sacrifice Enough?	105

Introduction

"Ideas have consequences."

A number of years ago, I picked up a children's book entitled *The Whipping Boy*. After reading it, I felt the need to know "whether these things were so." Had there ever been such a thing as a whipping boy or was the whole concept fictional? A little research showed that the story, though fictional, was based loosely on historical facts.

What is a whipping boy? The dictionary explains that in former ages, a whipping boy was one educated with a prince who was punished in his stead. In other words, the young prince, because he was royalty, was too important and noble to be spanked; so when he misbehaved, the royal tutor spanked the prince's whipping boy instead.

To us, that seems like a sure recipe for a prince to grow up being a royal problem. Besides, there is something inherently *unfair* about it that grates on our sense of right and wrong.

Yet that concept is very close to the modern evangelical understanding of Jesus' death. "I sinned, so God punished Jesus." Understanding Jesus' death this way almost invariably leads to a casual attitude toward sin. "Jesus took my punishment . . . so I can do as I please."



The church has always faced wrong ideas about Jesus' death, as well as the results of those wrong ideas. New Testament writers addressed two basic errors: Judaizing Christians denied the efficacy of Jesus' blood by teaching that believers must observe part or all of the Law. And antinomian ("anti-law") Christians taught that Jesus' sacrifice freed them from all law, allowing them to do as they pleased.

Both Judaizers and antinomians overemphasized some aspects of truth while ignoring others. Both errors are with us today. Some Christians overemphasize rule-keeping; some even insist on keeping parts of the Law. Others tend toward antinomianism, claiming that Christ frees us from obeying laws or rules, and denying the need for holiness and obedience. Both deny the truth of the Gospel.

This book deals with what is, at first glance, a fairly narrow aspect of doctrine: the exact nature of Christ's work on the cross. However, since forgiveness comes through Jesus' death, this is not a minor detail. Our view of *how* His death brings salvation determines what we believe salvation is.

Antinomianism today grows out of the teaching that God *punished* Jesus for our sins; that is, that Jesus suffered our *penalty*. Anabaptists historically rejected this theory as unscriptural.

This study exposes, by examining the Scriptures, some of the false ideas about salvation permeating modern evangelicalism today. It calls us back to a simple New Testament understanding of Jesus' death.

This study also reminds us that the terminology we use is important. Words are important, for on them we base our decisions and actions. Some modern Anabaptists have begun to accept Protestant understandings of salvation, in part because

they adopted Protestant terminology without examining it in light of Scripture.

This book attempts to avoid presenting Jesus' work in technical theological terms. It aims to be *Biblical*. It emphasizes what the *Bible* says. It includes many Scripture passages, for a number of reasons:

- ◆ This is a Biblical study.
- ◆ The best way to recognize the false is to know the true thoroughly.
- ◆ You, the reader, will be more likely to read passages printed here than you would if you had to look them up for yourself.
- ◆ To be honest with the Scripture, I often included every passage I could find relating to a given subject. I wanted it clear I am not cherry-picking, finding passages to support my view while ignoring others.
- ◆ I want you to see what the Scriptures say, not what *I say* they say.
- ◆ Using all the passages freed me from deciding which to use and which not to.

However, you still need to be like the Bereans, who “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). So do not read only these Scripture passages, but also open your Bible and read them in their larger contexts.



The Crux of the Matter

crux (from the Latin, *crus* or *crux*; cross, torture): the essential point requiring resolution

Sacrifice or Punishment?

Consider these two statements:

Sacrifice: Jesus offered Himself as the sacrifice for man's sins. The one true and holy God declares that spiritual, physical, and eternal death are the wages of sin. But this holy God is also very merciful. Because He loves His created people, He provided a way to save fallen man. In His plan, Jesus Christ, the sinless and holy Son of God and God in the flesh, freely offered Himself as a sinless sacrifice so that any human could have his sins forgiven. Jesus rose again so that those thus forgiven could be children of God and live in victory over sin, bringing glory to His Father.

Punishment: God punished Jesus for man's sins. Because God is holy and just, He must punish sin. The penalty for sin is spiritual, physical, and eternal death. However, God loves the people He created and does not want them to perish, so He worked out a way He could satisfy His justice by punishing sin, and yet save some of mankind. He did this by punishing His Son Jesus Christ, who was totally innocent of sin. The

person who accepts Jesus' death by faith receives the free gift of eternal salvation in glory.

To many modern Christians, both of those statements would sound acceptable. But they are fundamentally different, and one of them is largely unscriptural.

Consider the "punishment" statements below. These kinds of statements are common in mainstream Christian books and in the notes of most study Bibles. Each statement is false, or at least is based upon false teachings.

"God punished Christ for man's sins."

"Christ paid the penalty for our sins."

"Christ died as the recipient of our punishment."

"Jesus took our punishment upon Himself."

"Jesus suffered the torments of Hell for us."

"Jesus experienced spiritual death in our behalf."

"Jesus took our sins upon Himself, became sinful, and experienced the wrath of God."

"Jesus' death appeased God's wrath upon sinners."

Because this view of reconciliation emphasizes *punishment* for sins, it is often called the *penal* theory of atonement. Those who hold this view emphasize that God's justice needed to be satisfied, or even that His wrath toward man needs to be appeased. Because of this emphasis on satisfying God's wrath and justice, the penal theory is also sometimes referred to as the satisfaction theory of the atonement.

The Penal Theory

According to the penal theory, Jesus "paid the penalty" or was "punished" for our sin. Foundational to this theory is the

idea that for God's wrath or justice to be appeased, He must punish sin in some way.

The Strongest Version of the Penal Theory. According to the most objectionable form of the penal theory, our salvation is secured by Jesus taking our sins upon Himself and suffering the punishment of them by experiencing the wrath of God in the fires of Hell for a time after His death on the cross.

Here is an example of the teaching of the penal theory from the writings of John Calvin:

Nothing had been done if Christ had only endured corporeal death. In order to interpose between us and God's anger, and satisfy His righteous judgment, it was necessary that He should feel the weight of divine vengeance. Whence also it was necessary that He should engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of Hell and the horrors of eternal death.

Not only was the body of Christ given up as the price of redemption, but that there was a greater and more excellent price—that He bore in His soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man.

Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book II, Chapter 16

Many other examples, some of them much more horrible-sounding than this one in their description of Jesus' supposed torment in Hell, could be quoted from past and present writers. A few more such quotations are included later in this book.

Milder Penal Theories. A number of less objectionable forms of the penal theory exist today, some of them showing up even in Anabaptist circles. This is largely due to the prevalence

of “satisfaction” theories that have been accepted by much of the church since the 1100s, when Anselm of Canterbury first systematically outlined this idea. These almost always begin with the supposition that because God is just He must punish sin, and include the idea that in some way the suffering of Jesus Christ satisfies God’s wrath or justice.

Another aspect of the theory, even in its less objectionable forms, is the teaching that, since God is holy and cannot look on sin, the Father had to turn away or withdraw from the Son during His suffering because the Son had become sinful by taking on man’s sins.

A Look at Some Words

Consider the meanings of the words *penalty*, *punish*, and *punishment*, along with the ways the words are used in the Bible.

penalty – the act of punishing; the painful consequences imposed by an authority by law or judicial decision upon a rule- or law-breaker; the **punishment** due for wrongdoing

punish – to impose a penalty on for an offense, violation of law, or a fault

The word *penalty* is not used in the Bible. The words *punish*, *punished*, and *punishment* appear in the Bible, but are never used of what happened to Jesus Christ. *Chastisement*, a word that in some cases may have nearly the same meaning as *punishment*, is used once in an Old Testament prophecy of what Jesus would experience.

Isaiah 53:5 – But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

But of the four types of suffering mentioned in this verse, each of the other three refer to physical suffering—things men did to Jesus. The passage gives no indication that the chastisement here was spiritual suffering in Hell—or even a punishment imposed by God. This passage is built on the imagery of sacrifice, and the Old Testament sacrifices are never pictured as being penalties, but as merciful provisions of God for dealing with sin.

Jesus died “for sin”: for our sins, for the sins of the world. He became the atoning sacrifice and took His own blood into the tabernacle “not made with hands” (Hebrews 9:11, 24). “Through the eternal Spirit [He] offered himself without spot to God” (Hebrews 9:14), thus securing a special people for Himself (1 Peter 2:9), “the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). But the sinless Son of God *did not* become sinful in the process, nor did God need to “punish” Him.

The Old Testament sacrifices did indeed satisfy God’s merciful requirements, but they were in every sense “all of mercy.” They were God’s gifts to His people to deal with their sins. They provided the Israelites with opportunity to make costly confession and obedience—which always accompany true repentance. Those sacrifices, in themselves, did not fulfill “justice” in any human sense. God accepted them because they fulfilled His requirement for His people at that time.

A Look at Some History

Ask a Christian today what the way of salvation is, and he will likely explain it by means of the “Roman Road to Salvation” or some similar plan. The basic outline is something like this:

1. Man is a sinner and cannot save himself.
2. God is holy and just and must punish sin, but He loves us and wants to save us.
3. Jesus, the perfect God-Man, came to take our penalty for sin, making it possible for God’s justice to be appeased so He could save us.
4. God offers this salvation to us as a free gift. All we have to do is believe.

This outline is a variation of the satisfaction theory of Christ’s death. It describes the way the Gospel is understood and presented in much of the world today.

However, Jesus and His apostles never presented it this way; nor did the early Anabaptists; nor did other Biblical Christians during the first 1100 years of the church’s history.

The earliest Christians understood and spoke of Christ’s death in Biblical terms; they understood Jesus’ death as the divinely provided sacrifice for sins and His shed blood as the divinely appointed cleansing agent. The motivation for the provision was love and mercy, not justice. For the first 450 years of Christian history, the church proclaimed reconciliation through Jesus’ death, but formulated no position on the theory behind it or the mechanics of it.

Later, as Christian thinkers became more technical in their thinking, they began trying to explain the “mechanics” of salvation—how it actually worked. From the 400s through the 1100s, Christians tended to emphasize Christ

as Victor, the One who won the victory over sin, death, and evil.

It was, as far as we know, Anselm of Canterbury, a theologian of the latter 1000s, who first posited the satisfaction theory of salvation that underlies most salvation theories today. It is based on the idea of Jesus' death "satisfying God's justice" and explains salvation largely in legal or judicial terms. In this understanding, at the root of God's provision is His need to satisfy justice—or as Anselm would have understood it, to satisfy God's "honor."

Anselm's system was firmly grounded in feudal understandings of his day. God was like a feudal overlord; men were his serfs or vassals; and by sinning, they had offended their divine overlord's honor. They could do nothing to amend the infraction, but in feudalistic societies, "satisfaction" could be rendered by providing restitution. In man's case, the divine overlord Himself provided the satisfaction. The death of His innocent Son was sufficient to repair the divine honor.

Today's penal and satisfaction theories derive from this system of thought. Today, however, instead of medieval ideas of offended honor, they are based on more modern ideas of "justice." The modern idea of justice and the Biblical idea of justice, however, are not the same. In modern law, *justice* refers to punishment doled out to transgressors—giving them "what they deserve." The Biblical term *justice* refers to righteous living and fair treatment of others. The modern judicial understanding of justice leads naturally to the concept of penalty or punishment rather than righteousness and kindness. Here are four New Testament verses describing a "just man"; these give us a good idea of the Biblical idea of justice:

Matthew 1:19 – Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

Matthew 27:19 – When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.

Mark 6:20 – For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

Acts 10:22 – And they said, Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that feareth God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by an holy angel to send for thee into his house, and to hear words of thee.

Today's penal and satisfaction theories, in turn, do much to promote the idea that salvation is merely a one-time judicial or legal transaction. Christians who understand salvation that way tend to quickly forsake obedience and discipleship. For if my salvation is indeed "a done deal" (that is, God by a judicial act has declared me righteous), then my lifestyle doesn't really matter.

The Anabaptists did not understand salvation to be merely a one-time, legal transaction.¹ They knew it to be a spiritual conversion that transformed a person from a sinner into a saint. It not only brought forgiveness of his sins, it transferred

¹ There is an element of the "legal" in Paul's writing about salvation. See pages 54, 55 where that is discussed more fully.

him into God's kingdom, redeemed him from the power of sin, enabled him to live a holy life that glorified God here and now, and provided for him to enter glory at death.

They emphasized the effects of salvation in a person's life and did not spend a lot of time on the "mechanics" of salvation. But in the late 1800s and early decades of the 1900s, the heirs of the Anabaptists began to rub shoulders with Protestant fundamentalists, who eventually became the evangelicals of the latter 1900s. During the 1900s many American Mennonites began adopting the terminology of evangelical satisfaction theories of salvation.

They did not swallow fundamentalist salvation doctrine whole. Instead, they tried to combine fundamentalist understandings of salvation with their own emphases on transformation and holiness of life. In other words, they began to focus more on the "mechanics" of getting saved while continuing to insist that holiness of life must result from that initial getting saved and be a part of the total salvation package.

With the passing of time and the permeating influence of the penal and satisfaction theories, many of the heirs of Anabaptism have lost or are in the process of losing their emphasis that salvation is a whole-life package.

In the next number of chapters, we will look at various ways the penal theory violates Scripture and leads away from the way of truth and holiness.

But first, let me tell you about my experience with the penal theory as it is taught in evangelicalism today.

My Experience

I do not think I heard the penal theory as such taught in my younger years. But as a new Christian, I read modern evangelical books, assuming what I read there was correct.

I remember the niggling questions I had when Christians described Jesus' death as a penalty or a satisfaction of God's justice. How could one man's *physical death* fully pay the penalty of *spiritual death* (eternity in Hell) for millions of people? The stock answer, which is, "But this Man was the Son of God," didn't really seem to answer my questions about the "justice" involved.

I eventually concluded that, in light of my own certainty that God had saved me and that I was His child as long as I lived in obedient faith, I would just accept this explanation by faith and wait for further light.

A few years after coming to know the Lord, I, along with several others, participated in a personal evangelism effort that involved memorizing a Gospel presentation. Its description of Jesus' work followed the usual Protestant penal theory line. It first described the "predicament" that God's "opposing" virtues of justice and mercy placed Him in because of man's sin: "God loves man, but He must punish sin." Then it went on to describe how Jesus was the answer to that predicament: "Jesus Christ was the perfect God-Man, who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so that we could go to Heaven."

However, we were uncomfortable with that terminology, so we changed it to something like this: "Jesus Christ was the perfect God-Man, who died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins so that we could go to Heaven." We felt much better with that terminology.

Over the years, I have continued to be troubled by the whole approach of presenting the Gospel in that way. I haven't always known why, but I knew it wasn't the way the apostles presented the Good News. Nor could I find that the early Anabaptists preached the Gospel that way.

That is not to say that God cannot use that method or even penal terminology to bring people to salvation. But as someone has so aptly pointed out, “What you win them *with* is what you win them *to*.” We want people to come to faith in the living Lord Jesus who will live in them and in whom they will live—not to some technical explanation of how salvation works, especially when *salvation* is primarily understood to mean “getting to Heaven.”

So, while I suggest no set “Gospel outline” by which to present the Gospel, I know it must point people to Jesus Christ as the only sacrifice for man’s sin, the only way for any person to be saved, the only way for anyone to become righteous, please God, live by God’s power, have victory over sin, and obtain eternal glory in the presence of God.