

Substitutionary atonement and the Church Fathers: A reply to the authors of *Pierced for Our Transgressions* Derek Flood

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Introduction

One of the most significant claims of the recent book *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach,¹ is that the doctrine of penal substitution did not originate with Calvin, but was taught by the church fathers. As the authors state, 'It has been claimed that penal substitution is a relative newcomer to the theological scene and in particular it was not taught by the early church. These claims have no historical foundation whatsoever and we hope to lay them to rest.'² This claim is quite significant because it would contradict a significant amount of patristic scholarship. To back up their assertion, they cite a number of passages from patristic authors such as Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine.

This paper will examine these quotations cited in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* in the context of each patristic author's larger soteriology. From this it is concluded that the statements of the church fathers cited have been taken out of their contextual framework, and placed in one foreign to their thought. It will be concluded that while the church fathers do clearly teach substitutionary atonement, they do not teach penal substitution as understood by Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach. Rather, the dominant pattern found in these patristic writers is substitutionary atonement understood within the conceptual framework of restorative justice.

Definitions and methodological considerations

Before examining the writings of the patristic authors cited in *Pierced for Our*

1 Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

2 Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 32.

Transgressions, it would be important first to define what precisely is meant by 'penal substitution'. An initial distinction that must be made is between the general idea of 'substitutionary atonement' and the more specific notion of 'penal substitution'. Substitutionary atonement broadly speaks of Christ's death being vicarious: Christ bearing our sin, suffering, sickness, injustice, and brokenness. Penal substitution is a subset of substitutionary atonement which focuses specifically on the *penal* aspects of that vicarious suffering, understood in the context of fulfilling the demands of judicial retributive punishment, and thus appeasing God's righteous anger. A classic example of the distinction between these two terms can be seen in the Catholic understanding of substitutionary atonement based on Anselm's idea of satisfaction of God's wounded honour. This is not the same as the Reformed understanding of penal substitution used in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, as our authors explicitly state,

Anselm did not teach penal substitution. Yes, he brought to prominence the vocabulary of 'satisfaction', which became important in later formulations. But in Anselm's feudal thought-world, it was God's honour that needed to be satisfied by substitutionary obedience, not his justice by substitutionary penalty. Thus his omission from our list of those who have endorsed penal substitution was not accidental.³

What specifically identifies the Reformed notion of penal substitution, as these authors say, is the idea of *satisfaction of God's justice by substitutionary penalty*. Only when the purpose of substitution is *the satisfaction of God's retributive justice via penalty* can an author be said to endorse penal substitution as it is understood in Reformed theology. This definition of penal substitution, used throughout *Pierced for our Transgressions*, is not however the same criterion they use to determine whether a patristic author endorses penal substitution. The patristic study in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is based almost exclusively on a doctoral thesis by Garry Williams.⁴ In this dissertation Williams defines his criteria for inclusion of a patristic author: 'An author can be held to teach the Penal doctrine if he plainly states that the punishment deserved by sin from God was borne by Jesus Christ in his death on the Cross.'⁵ So while the definition of penal substitution used by Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach is quite narrow, the criterion they adopt from Williams for classifying a patristic author as teaching penal substitution is quite broad. This broad definition raises the question as to the working mechanism of the atonement. That is, why exactly would God incarnate suf-

3 Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, 'N. T. Wright on Pierced for our Transgressions' <http://piercedforourtransgressions.com/content/view/107/51/>.

4 Garry J. Williams, *A Critical Exposition of Hugo Grotius's Doctrine of the Atonement in De Satisfactione Christi*, (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1999). Cited in *Pierced*, 32. Hereafter cited as *Doctoral Thesis*.

5 Williams, *Doctoral Thesis*, 68. Quoted in Robert C. Doyle 'Penal Atonement: the Orthodox Teaching of the Fathers and Three Conversations with John Calvin', *Reformed Theological Review*, 65:1, (Apr 2006), 39. While Williams' dissertation remains unavailable in the United States, Doyle's article provides a good overview.

fering punishment in our place effect our salvation? The answer which penal substitution typically gives is that God's justice, which demands punishment, is satisfied by Christ being punished instead of us. This is quite significant because it draws out the distinction between penal substitution, and the more general concept of substitutionary or vicarious atonement. Without question, both the New Testament and the church fathers teach *substitutionary atonement*—the idea that Christ took on our suffering and sin and bore it 'for us'. We equally can find penal elements in their understanding of sin, so that one can say that Christ, in bearing our sin, is also bearing punishment in a certain sense. The question is: how do these themes fit into the church fathers' larger understanding of how salvation and the atonement function?

It is not enough to simply identify *substitutionary* or even *penal* themes in the writings of the church fathers, and assume that this is an endorsement of the Reformed understanding of penal substitution. Instead, one must look at how a patristic author is using these concepts within their own understanding of the atonement and ask: what salvic purpose does Christ bearing our suffering, sin, and death have for this author? Rather than simply 'proof-texting' we need to seek to understand how these statements fit into the larger thought-world of an author. In short, it is a matter of context. The main task of this essay therefore is to explore the context in which the church fathers understood substitutionary atonement.

A note on the sources used: Because the authors of *Pierced for Our Transgressions* cite primarily from the classic *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* collection, I will likewise utilize this translation when addressing the same texts for ease of comparison. When citing additional patristic works, I have utilized more recent translations where available. The use of these different translations however is not intended as a critique of the author's use of the NPNF. Because the arguments here are based on reading these patristic works in their larger context, they could just as easily be made using the classic translation, as they could a modern one.

Justin Martyr

The study of the church fathers in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* begins with Justin Martyr. The authors cite a passage from Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* where Justin says that, 'The Father of all wished his Christ for the whole human family to take upon him the curses of all, knowing that, after he had been crucified and was dead, he would raise him up.'⁶

From this single quote they pronounce that Justin's statement 'amounts to a clear statement of penal substitution', and proceed to move onto the next church father.⁷ However, what we in fact have in Justin is a rather ambiguous statement

6 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 95, in Alexander Roberts (ed.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 1 (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1892). As quoted in *Pierced*, 165.

7 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 166.

of substitutionary atonement. Christ took ‘upon him the curses of all’, Justin writes, but he does not tell us to what end he took it. Was it to fulfil the demands of retributive punishment as Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach immediately assume, or for some other reason? Justin does not tell us here. What he does say repeatedly in his *Dialogue with Trypho* is that ‘Christ was not cursed by the law’.⁸ This if anything would seem to indicate that Justin is not thinking of Christ bearing our curse in the legal categories of penal substitution. Where Justin does address the purpose of Christ’s substitutionary death elsewhere, he does so in terms of our *healing* rather than of God’s appeasement: ‘He became a man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, he might also bring us healing.’⁹

So while we do find elements of substitutionary atonement in Justin, the conclusion made by our authors that we have in him a ‘clear statement of penal substitution’ seems rather premature. What we do have is a statement of substitutionary atonement. However the context in which this is understood by Justin is unclear. Any hints we do find seem to lead us away from a judicial understanding of ‘curse’ and towards one of vicarious suffering understood in the context of our ‘healing’.

Eusebius of Caesarea

Pierced for Our Transgressions’ patristic survey next jumps forward to the fourth century, to Constantine’s biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea. Again, only a single passage is quoted from this author. This in itself is not problematic, provided the passage was representational of the author’s thought-world. However, because of the broad criteria of inclusion used by Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, they in fact end up taking statements by these patristic authors out of their larger soteriological context. Take for example their quote from Eusebius that Christ, ‘received death for us and transferred to himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down upon himself the appointed curse, being made a curse for us.’¹⁰

As before our authors immediately declare this to be an ‘unequivocal statement of penal substitution’.¹¹ However, simply by reading the preceding sentence in Eusebius, we can already see problems with their conclusion. Eusebius asks, ‘How can he make our sins his own, and be said to bear our iniquities?... He takes into himself the labours of the suffering members, and *makes our sicknesses his, and suffers all our woes and labours* by the laws of love.’¹²

The context in which Eusebius says that Christ bore our curse was the same

8 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 111 (ANF 1).

9 Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 13, in Leslie William Barnard (tr.), *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 84.

10 Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, 10.1, in W. J. Ferrar (tr.), *Proof of the Gospel*, vol 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1920). As quoted in *Pierced*, 167.

11 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 167.

12 Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, 10.1. Emphasis added.

in which he bore our *sickness, sorrow, and burdens* as well. The paradigm here is not one solely of bearing a legal penalty, but of one bearing another's burdens in love – both our hurtfulness, and the hurt we encounter in a fallen world: sickness, woes, labours Eusebius then proceeds over the next several chapters to attribute the sufferings of Christ, not to the Father and divine retributive justice, but to evil powers who 'inspired the plot that was carried through by men'¹³ who 'did evil to him instead of good, and gave him hate in return for his love'.¹⁴ After developing this theme of the *injustice* of Christ's passion, (as opposed to seeing it as a fulfilment of the demands of justice), Eusebius addresses *why* God would subject his Son to such evil,

He was crucified, suffering what we who were sinful should have suffered, as our sacrifice and ransom, it is to impel us to ask why the Father forsook him, that he says, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' The answer is, to ransom the whole human race, buying them with his precious Blood from their former slavery to their invisible tyrants, the unclean daemons, and the rulers and spirits of evil.¹⁵

Christ was made a curse for us, Eusebius says, out of love in order to ransom us from the slavery of 'invisible tyrants, demons, and evil spirits'. Simply by reading Eusebius in context, we find that what he is actually describing is substitutionary atonement understood in the context of a Christus Victor model of the atonement. According to Eusebius, the *reason* Christ suffered what we 'who are sinful should have' was to ransom humanity from Satan's tyranny. Thus in Justin and Eusebius we can see the two key themes in which the church fathers understood the purpose of substitution: in Justin it is to *heal* sinful humanity, and for Eusebius it is to *annul* death's dominion (the opposite of penal substitution's appeasement of divine retribution).

Christ's atonement understood in the dual context of our *healing* and death's *destruction* are prevalent themes throughout the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. They can be found in Ignatius, Polycarp, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *the Epistle to Diognetus*, and *The Epistle of Barnabas*. Repeatedly, our pattern emerges: substitutionary atonement framed within the context of the *healing* of sin, and the *annulment* of death and curse. As the *Epistle of Barnabas* states, 'It was for this reason that the Lord endured the deliverance of his flesh to corruption, that *we might be cleansed* by the forgiveness of sins... and in order that *he might destroy death* and demonstrate the reality of the resurrection of the dead.'¹⁶

This pattern comes together in the late 2nd century church father Irenaeus, whom our writers do not include in their survey. The bishop of Lyons writes that

13 Ibid, ch 2.

14 Ibid, ch 3.

15 Ibid, ch 8.

16 The Epistle of Barnabas, 5:1,5-6, in Michael Holmes (tr.), *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 283-285. Emphasis added.

‘the word of God was made flesh in order that he might destroy death and bring us to life.’¹⁷ Irenaeus is widely recognized as playing a significant role in the early development of atonement theology, and his perspective would have a profound effect on Athanasius, whom we turn to next.¹⁸

Athanasius

While we do find every indication that the early church father’s understanding of Christ’s substitutionary death was understood within the context of the dual themes of humanity’s *healing*, and the *overturning* of the dominion of death, these remain for the most part as isolated statements, mere hints with little explanation. It is not until the fourth century in the works of Athanasius that we encounter a sustained treatise specifically on the atonement which explores the implications of these concepts in depth.

The quotations from Athanasius in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* are all taken from his *On the Incarnation of the Word*.¹⁹ Before we look at this however, it will be good to first take a moment to acquaint ourselves with the thought-world of Athanasius, and his understanding of sin and salvation. Typical of the Greek Fathers, Athanasius defines sin as corruption leading to death. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach frame this in terms of a legal sentence, a ‘penalty for sin’²⁰ as they put it. This is however not the way that Athanasius conceives of ‘corruption’. Instead of externally inflicted judicial punishment, the model Athanasius has is one of natural consequence. In breaking our communion with God, Athanasius says that we have cut ourselves off from the very source of Life. As a result we return to the state we were created out of: nothing, ‘returning, through corruption, to non-existence again’ (ch 4). Being separated from the source of Life, we die. This ‘corruption’ and resulting ‘death’ is not understood by Athanasius in terms of a punishment externally inflicted, but as the *inevitable* consequence of sin, ‘Inevitably, therefore when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it’ (ch 4). Consequently, because Athanasius does not see sin as simply a transgression of the law, but involving a sickness of the soul, he says that repentance was not enough, ‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough’ (ch 7). Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach in fact quote this very passage, but apparently miss that it refutes their

17 Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching (Epideixis)* 37. Quoted in H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1952), 52. Full English text in John Behr (tr.), *On the apostolic preaching: St. Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: St Vladimir’s, 1997). See also *Against Heresies*, 3.19.6.

18 On the role of Irenaeus in the development of patristic atonement doctrine, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 141-154.

19 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol 4. As quoted in *Pierced*, 169-173.

20 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 171.

claim that Athanasius espouses to penal substitution and its legal framework.²¹ What Athanasius is saying here is that the problem of sin goes deeper than mere legal transgression, and therefore *cannot* be addressed simply through interpersonal legal measures, because neither repentance nor punishment can heal the corruption in us. What we need, Athanasius tells us, is a renewal of our image, the *healing* of the corruption of sin. Not merely a subjective change of our view of God, or even of God's view of us, but an objective ontological *change* in us wrought by God. In a word: regeneration.

Athanasius' concept here of *sin as sickness*, as opposed to the more familiar Western judicial idea of *sin as transgression*, deserves some unpacking. This understanding of sin, typical of the Greek Fathers (note that we have already encountered this in the patristic writers above language of 'healing'), is primarily a *medical*, rather than a legal understanding. While Athanasius uses legal vocabulary at times, his guiding framework for understanding sin and salvation is not of sin as transgression, and salvation as an escape from punishment, but a medical paradigm of sin as corruption, and salvation as an escape from death. From this perspective, the problem of the atonement is not an angry God, but a sick and dying humanity.

Having established the depth of our sin problem and its resulting bondage to corruption and death, Athanasius next moves to its remedy in the Incarnation: Since through sin we are subject to corruption leading to death, the way we get out of this state, Athanasius tells us, is by being *recreated* in Christ. 'What else could he possibly do, being God, but renew his Image in mankind' (ch 13). Athanasius' idea here of humanity being 'recreated' in Christ is a form of atonement theory known as 'recapitulation' classically credited to Irenaeus of Lyons. In the formula of Irenaeus, Christ became what we are, so we could become what he is.²² Recapitulation means that through Christ becoming human, living as us, we are 'recreated' in his image. As Paul puts it, 'If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him' (Rom. 6:5,8). In other words, God entered into our humanity, in all of its wretchedness, and because of Christ's participation in our death, we can take part in his Resurrection life. As Athanasius concludes, 'only the Image of the Father could re-create the likeness of the Image in men' (ch 20). Next, Athanasius ties together the idea of our *healing* with the *overcoming* of death's dominion,

In order to effect this re-creation however, he had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore he assumed a human body, in order that in it *death might once for all be destroyed*, and that men might be renewed according to the Image. (ch 13)

As the above quote indicates, the key focus of Christ's substitutionary atonement here is in *conquering death* in order to bring us *new life*. Quoting from He-

21 Ibid.

22 Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5, Preface.

brews 2:14 Athanasius says that very reason the Word became incarnate was so he, 'suffering for the sake of all through his union with it, "might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver them who all their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death" (ch 20). But how exactly does the Word's dying free us from the grip of sin's tyranny? Athanasius explains that because Jesus was human he could die, but because he was also God ('the indwelling of the Word') the Life of God in him overpowered Death, setting us free. 'Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act *utterly abolished*' (ch 4).

Many commentators have focused on the Platonic notion of Christ transforming human nature through the incarnation, which we can see reflected somewhat in Athanasius' focus on recapitulating humanity.²³ Today it is easy for readers to get hung up on this unfamiliar idea. Harnack for example disparagingly referred to this as a 'physico-pharmacological' process, and pronounced it as incomprehensible.²⁴ It is therefore important to look deeper, past the particular language of a patristic writer's worldview, and into the actual meaning that lies behind this language. The question we need to ask is: what is the reality that is being addressed here? What we ultimately have in Athanasius is an understanding of salvation that involves a real and profound change in who we are, and one that addresses evil, suffering, and injustice on an ultimate level. It is an understanding of salvation which involves our *healing* by way of Christ 'abolishing' the very system of death through his death and resurrection. In other words, substitutionary atonement understood within the conceptual framework of what we might term *restorative justice*. It is restorative in the sense that salvation is focused on our healing and re-birth (restoring us), and restorative in that it seeks to overturn the system of death (restoring God's reign). This represents a paradigm of justice not based on a punitive model, but one focused on setting us right by transforming us, and setting the world right by overthrowing 'the law of sin and death' (Ro 8:2). In this later sense it reflects a model of justice that is in fact the *opposite* of retributive justice, because it seeks ultimately to abolish retribution, not to appease it.

In contrast to this the exposition of Athanasius in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* mentions nothing of Christ's death defeating the death, nor of it healing our corruption. Instead, Athanasius' view of the atonement is presented purely in legal categories as an appeasement of God's anger. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's

23 See E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). The most vocal proponent of this perspective is R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). Against this see William C. Weinrich, 'God did not Create Death: Athanasius on the Atonement', *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol 72, num 4 (Oct, 2008), 291-304.

24 Adolf von Harnack (Edwin K. Mitchell, tr.), *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1893), 238.

summary of Athanasius is that, 'God became man in order to save humanity from God's punishment for sin, and Christ accomplished this by enduring and exhausting this curse in our place, as our substitute.'²⁵

This idea of Christ 'enduring and exhausting' God's punishment is to be found nowhere in Athanasius.²⁶ Furthermore, our authors say nothing of how death was 'utterly abolished' as Athanasius insists. On the contrary their point seems to be that death is upheld and fulfilled through Christ's punishment, not abolished and destroyed as Athanasius maintains. Because their legal presentation of Athanasius leaves out his central concept of the devil's defeat, humanity's re-creation does not come through our liberation from death, but presumably because God's anger being spent on Christ somehow automatically leads to our renewal. How exactly God 'exhausting his punishment' would lead to humanity's healing they do not explain. What is clear is that this punitive view in no way reflects Athanasius' understanding of sin and salvation. What we instead find in Athanasius is a nuanced understanding of salvation as healing, brought about by the abolishment of death and curse through Christ's vicarious death and resurrection.

Gregory of Nazianzus

Pierced for Our Transgressions turns next to Gregory of Nazianzus, quoting the Cappadocian Father as saying, 'For my sake he was called a curse, who destroyed my curse; and sin, who taketh away the sin of the world... He makes my disobedience his own as head of the whole body'.²⁷ In fact, we can find even stronger substitutionary language in Gregory of Nazianzus than this. Just a few sentences later he writes that Christ 'makes his own our folly and our transgressions'. Gregory of Nazianzus even goes so far as to coin two new words in Greek in order to express the depth of Christ's substitution: Christ became 'sin-itself and curse-itself' (αὐτομαρτία καὶ αὐτοκατάρα).²⁸ Yet for all the force with which Gregory of Nazianzus emphasizes Christ bearing our sin and curse, he stresses with equal weight the *destruction* of that same curse. Already in the very citation which our authors quote, we can see our formula: 'he was called a curse, who destroyed my curse'. In other words, the goal of the atonement expressed as the destruction of the curse, rather than its fulfilment. Elsewhere he writes that Christ 'destroyed

25 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 173.

26 Their vocabulary here is presumably taken from J. I. Packer's definition of penal substitution, that Christ 'endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined'. J. I. Packer, 'What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution', *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974), 25.

27 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fourth Theological Oration*, Oration 30, (NPNF² 7). As quoted in *Pierced*, 174.

28 I am indebted to Jean Rivière for this insight. Jean Rivière (Tr. Luigi Cappadelta), *The Doctrine of the Atonement: A Historical Essay*, vol 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1909), 207. The citation is from Gregory's Oration 37, 1.

the whole condemnation of your sins' (ὅλον τὸ κατὰκριμα λύσας τῆς ἀμαρτίας).²⁹ The implications here are staggering: *condemnation* itself is wholly destroyed, dissolved, undone.³⁰ This effectively takes us out of the bounds of any theory of the *satisfaction* of legal retribution. It is the overturning of the economy of wrath with the superior economy of grace. Christ became condemnation-itself in order to abolish condemnation-itself.

This language of death and curse being 'abolished' and 'annulled' present in both Gregory and Athanasius is quite significant. It begins with the assumption of validity of retributive justice: We are not only victims of Satan's bondage, we are also sinners and the just consequence of that is death. But in the Christ event (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection) this way of retributive justice has been *superseded, replaced and 'destroyed'* by the superior way of restorative justice. The law of sin and death is replaced with the economy of grace which works to set free and restore life. Seen through the lens of the father's image of *salvation as healing*, we can think here of a doctor who, while recognizing that certain behaviours can lead as a consequence to injury and sickness, nonetheless seeks to heal the patient.

This view of salvation as healing, sanctification, and re-creation is also found in Gregory. His well known formulation is 'What is not assumed is not healed, but what is united to God is saved'.³¹ Here the purpose of Christ's taking on human wretchedness, suffering, and sin, is for the sake of our healing. In other words, substitutionary atonement understood in the context of healing and giving new-life. Salvation for Gregory is about God's creative action in the Christ event which re-forms us. It is about being transformed through an intimate union with God.³²

So how does Gregory's understanding of salvation as healing connect with his parallel understanding of Christ's substitutionary death abolishing condemnation? Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, coming from their Calvinist perspective, insist that the ransom payment is made to God. 'It is to God we are under obligation, to him the ransom must be paid' they write.³³ Gregory of Nazianzus disagrees,

To whom was that blood offered that was shed for us, and why was It shed?... if to the Father, I ask first, why? For it was not by him that we were being oppressed. Next, on what principle did the blood of his only begot-

29 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 40*, 45 (*NPNF² 7*). Greek text in Claudio Moreschini (ed.), *Grégoire de Nazianze Discours 38-41*, Sources Chrétiennes no. 358 (Paris: Cerf, 1990) at 424B, 25.

30 The Greek word translated as 'destroyed' here is *λύσας* from the lexical form *λύω* which the BDAG defines variously as: *untie, set free, destroy, and abolish*.

31 Gregory of Nazianzus, *To Cledonius Against Apollinaris (Epistle 101.7)*. For the full English text see Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 215-224.

32 For a study of these themes in Gregory's writings see Verna Harrison, 'Some Aspects of Gregory the Theologian's Soteriology' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol 34 no 1 (1989) 11-18.

33 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 144.

ten son delight the Father, who would not receive even Isaac, when he was being offered by his Father, but changed the sacrifice, putting a ram in the place of the human victim? Is it not evident that the Father accepts him, but neither asked for him nor demanded him?³⁴

God did not *ask* for Christ's substitutionary death, nor did God *require* it, Gregory writes. In the next sentence Gregory continues to explain why the sacrifice was acceptable to God. The reason, he says, is 'because humanity must be sanctified by the humanity of God, that he might deliver us himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to himself by the mediation of his Son'.³⁵ The sacrifice was not for the appeasement of God's wrath or punishment. It was for our sanctification and liberation, and because of this it was undertaken and accepted by God. Its purpose was to tear down anything that would separate us from God and life – be it death, sin, or *condemnation itself*. In Gregory's words: Christ became the 'curse-itself' in order to 'destroy the whole condemnation'. Once again, we find substitutionary atonement understood in the context of a restorative, rather than a retributive model of justice.

Ambrose and the Latin fathers

The only exception to this pattern in our long parade of church fathers listed in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* thus far is found in the Latin church father Ambrose of Milan. We do still find in Ambrose the familiar patristic theme of the destruction of the curse, 'Jesus took flesh that he might destroy the curse of sinful flesh, and he became for us a curse that a blessing might overwhelm a curse... and life might overwhelm death.'³⁶ Jesus came, he tells us, to 'destroy' and 'overwhelm' curse and death with life. Yet side by side this, we also find Christ's death described as a satisfaction of justice. Ambrose continues, 'He also took up death that the sentence might be fulfilled and satisfaction might be given for the judgement, the curse placed on sinful flesh even to death. Therefore nothing was done contrary to God's sentence when the terms of that sentence were fulfilled, for the curse was unto death but grace is after death.'³⁷

Although the satisfaction view of the atonement first emerges as a fully developed theory in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, the seeds of that thought can be found quite early in Latin church fathers such as Ambrose.³⁸ What is questionable, is whether this trend in the Latin Fathers can be understood as teaching a Calvinist understanding of penal substitution. In a certain sense, Jeffery, Ovey, and

34 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45,22 (NPNF² 7). In contrast to Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus likewise denies that the ransom was paid to the devil.

35 Ibid.

36 Ambrose of Milan, *Flight from the World*, 7.44 in M. P. McHugh (tr.), *The Fathers of the Church*, vol 65; *St Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 314-315. As quoted in *Pierced*, 175.

37 Ibid.

38 See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol 1, 147ff.

Sach are correct in claiming that Ambrose teaches penal substitution in that we find the idea of Christ bearing punishment as a satisfaction of retributive justice. Such language is common among the Latin Fathers. At the same time, we need to ask in what context this idea is understood. What we find is that the Latin church Fathers' concept of Christ's sacrifice as an act of *penance* distinguishes their understanding of the atonement from a Calvinist perspective which rejects the very notion of penance.³⁹

While it is difficult to derive the context in which Ambrose understood Christ's punitive death on the basis of a single sentence,⁴⁰ the two later medieval writers who systematically developed the Latin understanding of satisfaction – Anselm and Aquinas – both explicitly deny the central premise of the Reformed understanding of penal substitution espoused by Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach. Anselm writes in *Cur Deus Homo*,

What man would not be judged deserving of condemnation if he condemned the innocent to free the guilty?... It is surely to be wondered at if God so derives delight from, or has need of, the blood of the innocent that he neither wishes nor is able to spare the guilty without the death of the innocent.⁴¹

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas (whom our authors want to claim as a proponent of penal substitution)⁴² writes in the *Summa Theologica*,

If we speak of that satisfactory punishment, which one takes upon oneself voluntarily, one may bear another's punishment... If, however, we speak of punishment inflicted on account of sin, inasmuch as it is penal, then each one is punished for his own sin only, because the sinful act is something personal.⁴³

So while we do find the idea of satisfaction in the Latin fathers, we cannot simply assume that this is automatically an endorsement of a Calvinist understanding of penal substitution. As before, it is crucial to read an author in context

39 Calvin in his *Institutes* for example disparagingly calls penance a 'pestilent' doctrine (3.4.27), and a 'feigned sacrament' (4.19.17). John T. McNeil (ed.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Library of Christian Classics*, vols 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 653 & 1465. See also note 43 below.

40 While Ambrose uses the term 'satisfaction' frequently in relation to penance, he only uses it this one time referring to the atonement. See H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1952), 106; Jean Rivière, *Doctrine of the Atonement*, 273.

41 Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, I.8 & 10 in Joseph M. Colleran (tr.), *Why God Became Man, and the Virgin Conception and the Original Sin* (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969), 75, 83. Anselm's response is that God plainly did not require the death of Jesus at all. What God required is for Jesus to be obedient in love.

42 Jeffery et al., *Pierced*, 184-185.

43 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, FS Q87 A8 (Benziger Bros. Edition, 1947). Emphasis added. Thomas further defines 'satisfactory punishment' as penance done for another (TP, Q49 A3).

in order to discern the flow of their thought, and to be cautious not to simply find familiar terms in a passage and immediately associate those terms and phrases with our own doctrinal understandings.

In sum, while we continue to find in the Latin fathers the dual themes of healing and liberation, an additional theme of satisfaction begins to emerge as well. This theme of satisfaction came into full fruition in the writings of Anselm and Aquinas in the middle ages, and continues to shape the Catholic understanding of the atonement. Traditionally the satisfaction model has been understood to be rooted in retributive justice since it, like the Calvinist notion of penal substitution, is focused on effecting a change in God, rather than in the transformation of humanity. Some have however challenged this interpretation, claiming that the satisfaction model is also rooted in a model of restorative justice.⁴⁴

Augustine

Augustine has had a phenomenal influence on both the Catholic and Protestant churches, and so among the church fathers his understanding of the atonement carries significant weight. The passage cited as proof of the Bishop of Hippo's alleged belief in penal substitution in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* comes from *Contra Faustus*. In it, Augustine is addressing how Christ can be said to be made a 'curse' while still being without sin: 'Christ... submitted as man, and for man, to bear the curse which accompanies death. And as he died in the flesh which he took in bearing our punishment... He was cursed for our offences, in the death which he suffered in bearing our punishment.'⁴⁵

As with all the church fathers before him, our authors immediately conclude that the above quote from Augustine is 'a straightforward statement of penal substitution'.⁴⁶ Yet as always we need to ask: How does Augustine understand Christ bearing the punishment of death? Just a few paragraphs earlier Augustine discusses the function of Christ's vicarious death, 'He bore for our sakes sin in the sense of death as brought on human nature by sin', and as a result, he continues, 'Thus was death condemned that its reign might cease, and cursed that it might be destroyed. By Christ's taking our sin in this sense, its condemnation is our deliverance.'⁴⁷ The reason Christ bore our death, he tells us here, is 'that its reign might cease', and 'that it might be destroyed'. We see here that for Augustine the purpose of Christ bearing the punishment of death was not in order to fulfil a legal demand for punishment, but to overcome death. This is not the satisfaction of punishment, it is the overthrowing of the system of punishment and death that held humanity captive. Christ 'took our punishment', Augustine writes, 'that

44 Arguing this for Anselm see Katherine Sonderegger, 'Anselm, Defensor Fidei' *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol 9, Num 3 (July 2007), 342-359. For Aquinas see Eleanor Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 427-454.

45 Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 14.6 (NPNF² 4). As quoted in *Pierced*, 179.

46 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 179.

47 Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 14.3.

he might cancel our guilt, and *do away with our punishment*.⁴⁸ Death, sin, and the devil are 'condemned', 'cursed', and 'destroyed' by Christ's death.

How exactly is this accomplished in Augustine's understanding of the atonement? How does Christ's substitutionary death result in 'death's condemnation and our deliverance'? Similar to Gregory of Nyssa's 'fishhook' analogy,⁴⁹ Augustine employs the image of the 'devil's mousetrap':

The devil jumped for joy when Christ died; and by the very death of Christ the devil was overcome: he took, as it were, the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced at the death, thinking himself death's commander. But that which caused his joy dangled the bait before him. The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord.⁵⁰

Yet here too we might ask how is it that this 'mousetrap' works? How does the death of Christ 'trap' the devil? Augustine's answer is that because the devil acted unjustly in putting Christ to death, he lost his rights to humanity as well. Augustine writes that Christ 'set the mousetrap of his cross', and because the devil 'shed the blood of one who was not his debtor, he was ordered to release those who were his debtors'.⁵¹ There are three points here in Augustine's thought that are worth noting:

First, Augustine emphasizes that this was not a case of God deceiving the devil. Instead he frames the exchange in terms of God acting in justice: 'Death found nothing in him to punish, so the devil might be overcome and conquered not by power and violence but by truth and justice.'⁵² The devil's downfall was due to his own malice and injustice. In killing Christ who was without sin, Augustine reasons, the devil lost all rights to hold humanity captive. At the same time, Augustine describes the crucifixion, not in terms of the fulfilment of justice, but as an act of the devil who 'had most unjustly put Christ to death'.⁵³ Elsewhere Augustine describes our redemption as coming through Christ's 'just blood *unjustly shed*'.⁵⁴ So we have a complex picture of God acting justly, but the crucifixion seen as an unjust act.

Second, the ransom or redemption price, which Augustine understands as being paid to the devil, should not be understood in the sense of a tyrant op-

48 Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 14.4. Emphasis added.

49 Gregory of Nyssa, *Greater Catechism*, 24.

50 Augustine, *Sermon 263, On the Ascension* in Henry Bettenson (tr.), *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection From the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 222. This sermon can be found in its entirety in John E. Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of St Augustine – A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol 3/7 (New York: New City Press, 1993), 219-221. Note that it is correctly listed here as Sermon 263, not 261 as Bettenson has it.

51 Augustine, *Sermon 130.2* (com. on John 6:5-14), *Works of Augustine*, vol 3/4 (1992), 311.

52 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 49, *Works of Augustine*, vol 1/8 (2005), 303.

53 Ibid.

54 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 4.3.17, *Works of Augustine*, vol 1/5 (1991), 165. Emphasis added.

pressing God, because it ultimately leads to the devil's downfall. As Augustine writes, 'In this act of redemption the blood of Christ was given for us as a kind of price, and when the devil took it he was not enriched by it but caught and bound.'⁵⁵ This picture of the devil being 'not enriched, but bound' evokes the idea that condemnation and retribution are not satisfied or 'exhausted' as they are in penal substitution's retributive model, rather they are *bound, abolished, destroyed*.

Finally, Augustine directly addresses the notion that God's anger was appeased through the cross. Augustine asks, if we are reconciled to the Father through Christ's death, 'Does this mean then that the Son was already so reconciled to us that he was even prepared to die for us, while the Father was still so angry with us that unless the Son died for us he would not be reconciled to us?'⁵⁶ The later half of this sentence is in fact exactly what advocates of penal substitution often claim. *The Father was so angry that he could not be otherwise appeased than by the death of his Son*. As John Piper writes in the foreword to *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 'For if God did not punish his Son in my place, I am not saved from my greatest peril, the wrath of God'.⁵⁷ In response to this, Augustine turns to Scripture, laying out the case that God the Father 'loved us not merely before the Son died for us, but before he founded the world'.⁵⁸ He concludes that Christ's sacrifice was a free act of the Triune God out of love for humanity which acted to overcome Satan and free us from his hold over us which had resulted because of our sin. Our problem then is not God's willingness to love and forgive us, but the objective reality of our brokenness being in need of a real cure.

To be fair, at least since John Stott's book *The Cross of Christ*,⁵⁹ most advocates of the Reformed notion of penal substitution have not framed the atonement as a dichotomy between a loving Son and angry Father, but as God's own sacrifice for us. This is certainly the case with *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, and it would be unfair to imply otherwise. However the central function of the atonement in penal substitution, (despite its seeming contradiction with this above statement), remains the appeasement of God's anger through punishment. While contemporary proponents of penal substitution would formulate this in Trinitarian terms of 'God appeasing Godself', they would nevertheless see the central function of the atonement as appeasing God's anger through retributive punishment as a *precondition* for God's forgiveness, and our resulting healing and sanctification.⁶⁰

With Augustine this is reversed. It is not the appeasement of God's wrath that

55 Augustine, *Trinity*, 13.5.19, *Works of Augustine*, 359.

56 Augustine, *Trinity*, 13.4.15, *Works of Augustine*, 354-355.

57 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 14.

58 Augustine, *Trinity*, 13.4.15, *Works of Augustine*, 355.

59 John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1986).

60 See for example J. I. Packer, *Logic of Penal Substitution* who bases his understanding of penal substitution on God's 'sanction' of the 'retributive principle', 30, and speaks of God 'propitiating himself' as the precondition of all other effects of the atonement, including 'God's seeking and saving love', 20.

allows God to forgive, it is the healing of our sin that removes the cause of God's righteous anger. In *On Nature and Grace*, Augustine writes, 'God himself spiritually heals the sick and restores the dead to life, that is, justifies the sinner, through the mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus Christ... God then heals us not only to destroy the sins we have committed, but also to provide us with the means of not sinning.'⁶¹

Note here that Augustine makes the idea of God 'healing' and 'restoring to life' synonymous with justification. As with his imagery of sin as bondage in need of a Liberator, because Augustine's view of human sin was so grave, he does not conceptualize of it merely as a crime to be remitted, but as a grave wound to be healed. 'Relieve a deep wound after Your great healing. Deep is what I have, but in the Almighty I take refuge. Of my own so deadly wound I should despair, unless I could find so great a Physician!'⁶²

Augustine does adopt the biblical language of *sacrifice, justification, and reconciliation*. Yet while he goes into great detail in explaining how the ransom paid to the devil liberates humanity from the bondage of sin – a theme directly related to his increasing notion of humanity's inability apart from grace to come to God – Augustine does not ever work out how Christ's sacrifice as a propitiation of God functions. As Joanne McWilliam Dewart puts it, 'the vocabulary was there, but little or no exposition of its meaning.'⁶³ In fact, as we have seen, he invariably re-frames these terms, understanding them in the context of his two central motifs: healing and liberation. We have enmity with God because of our sin, and that for Augustine entails bondage, 'God does not have free men as his enemies; they must be slaves and they will remain slaves unless they are set free.'⁶⁴ Therefore Augustine can write elsewhere that we are 'saved from God's wrath' by God incarnate loosing us from the 'devil's power'.⁶⁵

As in the church fathers before him, we do indeed find substitutionary atonement in Augustine, but again understood within the context of a restorative model of salvation expressed in terms of God healing the wound of sin, and liberating us from its bondage. Christ is 'both victor and victim, and victor because victim... turning us from slaves into thy sons, by being thy Son and becoming a slave. Rightly is my hope strong in him for you will heal all my infirmities... for many and great are my infirmities, many and great, but thy medicine is of more power.'⁶⁶

61 Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 26.29, in *Works of Augustine*, vol 1/23 (1990), 231.

62 Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms*, 51.6 (NPNF¹ 8). For a study of Augustine's use of the patristic theme of salvation as healing see Rudolph Arbesmann, 'The Concept of "Christus Medicus" in St. Augustine', *Traditio*, vol 10 (1954) 1-28.

63 Joanne McWilliam Dewart, 'Augustine's Developing Use of the Cross: 387-400', *Augustinian Studies*, vol 15 (1984), 22.

64 Augustine, *Homily on the Gospel of John 41.5.2* in John Retting (tr.), *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol 88. *St Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1993), 140.

65 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 13.16.21 in *Works of Augustine*, vol 1/5 (1991), 360.

66 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.43.69 in F. J. Sheed (tr.), *Augustine: Confessions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 228.

Conclusion

Space constraints prohibit covering in detail all of the patristic authors mentioned in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*. The most representational patristic authors have been selected here to exhibit the general patterns outlined in this essay. The omitted authors are no exception to this.⁶⁷ To sum up, while there are many models and nuances involved in how the fathers understood the atonement, the core pattern behind these diverse theories is substitutionary atonement understood within the context and framework of restorative rather than retributive justice.

From the patristic survey presented in this paper we can arrive at several insights: First, it is a mistake to simply assume that any instance of substitutionary atonement found in a patristic author should automatically be read in penal substitution's terms of appeasing retributive justice. To do so is to project an understanding of the atonement onto the church fathers which they did not hold. The majority of the church fathers – if not all of them – do indeed embrace some form of substitutionary atonement. They do not however teach penal substitution. Substitutionary atonement is not the sole domain of advocates of penal substitution. The two terms are not synonymous.

This leads us to a second conclusion: Substitutionary atonement is the common denominator in the church father's various understandings of the atonement. It is the functional mechanism through which the atonement works, the 'lynch-pin' of God's saving action in Christ. However, as we have seen, the majority of the church fathers understood this within the conceptual narrative framework of restorative justice on an individual (restoring us to new life), and systemic level (restoring God's kingdom order). While each patristic writer has their own particular emphasis, and it would be an exaggeration to speak of one single patristic atonement theory, what we do find as a common denominator *behind each theory* is their starting point of a restorative conception of salvation and justice, rather than a retributive one.

This narrative of restorative justice on both an individual and systemic level gives us a context in which to understand Christ's substitutionary death which is quite different from one based on retributive justice. They represent two very different models, one of retributive justice, the other of restorative justice, and substitution takes on different meanings within each. Both represent objective rather than subjective understandings of the atonement. Both see substitution as central. But in a restorative model it is through God's action to transform and heal our sin that our relationship with God is set right, rather than through retribution. A real change in us, effected by God, effects a real change in our relationship with God.

67 These are Hilary of Poitiers, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Gelasius of Cyzicus, and Gregory the Great.