

Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Justin Martyr

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Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians regularly falling back upon familiar biblical and liturgical terms like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation to describe it, but always with a deep sense of awe before the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the blood of Christ. They used these terms, however...to refer, to not any external transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God.*’²

‘Atonement thus occurs for the Fathers through the dynamic of the incarnation itself, not by way of some extrinsic theory, i.e., satisfaction, penal substitution, and so on. Why, one wonders, did theology subsequently fail to reflect this? I am not sure. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in how the incarnation came to be largely understood. With focus on the miracle of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus, the saving significance of the rest of Jesus’ life was overshadowed. With focus returned, so to speak, on the Cross, the climactic end of Jesus’ life, the impression de facto was that the real meaning of God’s identification lay at the beginning and at the end, not in the entire range of Jesus’ life.’³

Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, the authors of the recent book *Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, claim that penal substitutionary theory stretches back to the earliest fathers of the church.⁴ Of these early theologians, they impressively cite Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165), Eusebius of Caesarea (275 – 339), Hilary of Poitiers (c.300 – 368), Athanasius (c.297 – 373), Gregory ‘the Theologian’ of Nazianzus (c.330 – 390), Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397), John Chrysostom (c.350 – 407), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444), Gelasius of Cyzicus (fifth century), Gregory the Great (c.540 – 604). They then proceed to quote Thomas Aquinas (c.1225 – 1274), John Calvin (1509 – 64), and then others from the Reformed tradition. My focus here involves correcting their misunderstanding about the early theologians. They express some nervousness about whether penal substitution is historically attested in early church history, and their reason for hoping it can be vindicated:

‘The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible. On the other hand, it would be immensely reassuring to find that our understanding of the Bible has indeed been the consensus of Christian orthodoxy for almost two millennia.’⁵

But scholarly opinion weighs against these authors. Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over

¹ This paper was originally, and still is, part of my lengthier paper exploring patristic atonement teaching, *Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison*. That paper can be found online on the website of The Anástasis Center for Christian Education and Ministry, on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic>.

² T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168. I am indebted to this work, especially p.161 – 168, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), for the citations in this section.

³ Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm; Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

⁴ Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162

human sinfulness, death, and the devil.⁶ Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. I am calling this view ‘ontological substitution,’ or ‘medical substitution,’ although Eastern Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman prefers ‘therapeutic substitution,’ and Reformed theologian T.F. Torrance calls it ‘total substitution.’ It was only Anselm of Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

In this essay, I will shed light on why I believe these three authors misunderstand the theological thought of the earliest Christian theologians, especially those at the Council of Nicaea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘medical substitution,’ which is an aspect – and in my opinion, the *foundation* – of the *christus victor* understanding. This position is the view that Jesus had to physically assume fallen human nature, unite it to his divine nature, overcome temptation throughout his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and defeat the corruption within his human nature at his death, in order to raise his human nature new, cleansed, and healed, so he could ascend to the Father as humanity’s representative and share the Spirit of his new humanity with all who believe. That rather long-winded sentence can be boiled down to the saying that was popular with Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ God must assume to Himself what He intends to heal. Hence if God intends to heal the entire human being, He must assume the entire human being in Christ. My comparison of the two theological doctrines and their significance can be found in separate essays. This particular essay focuses on the atonement theology of the early church fathers.

Justin Martyr of Rome (c.100 – 165 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

Looking at Ignatius, Irenaeus, and the *Odes of Solomon* is helpful because these writings show how other Christians were using some terms that Justin Martyr uses. Justin (c.100 – 165) is the first writer that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach study. Trained as a Greek philosopher, Justin came to believe in Christ around 130 AD. Obviously, for Justin to have lived and written so early, within a generation or two of the apostles, makes him an important figure historically. Justin became a teacher in a Christian school in Rome during the reign of Antonius Pius (138 – 161 AD). Tatian the Assyrian and Irenaeus were among his students. Irenaeus quotes from him twice in *Against Heresies*⁷ and multiple times in the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*,⁸ and attests to other works of Justin no longer extant, so we should reasonably expect a great deal of similarity between Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. Justin eventually angered the Cynic philosopher Crescens, who denounced him to the Roman authorities. He was tried along with six companions by Junius Rusticus, prefect of Rome from 163 – 167 AD, and was executed for his faith, probably in 165 AD.

Justin recorded a conversation he had with a Jew named Trypho that took place sometime after Justin’s conversion. This work, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, follows after his *First Apology* and *Second Apology* where Justin is mainly concerned to set the record straight on what Christian practices are. Jeffery, et.al believe that Justin Martyr upholds penal substitution based on the *Dialogue*. They cite the following passage from Justin, in chapter 89, and center their understanding of Justin on the language of the ‘curse’:

Then Trypho remarked, ‘Be assured that all our nation waits for Christ; and we admit that all the Scriptures which you have quoted refer to Him. Moreover, I do also admit that the name of Jesus, by which the son of

⁶ Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.6.2 and 5.26.2

⁸ J. Armitage Robinson, *St Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1920), p.10 – 44

Nave (Nun) was called, has inclined me very strongly to adopt this view. But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about. For whosoever is crucified is said in the law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point. It is quite clear, indeed, that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer; but we wish to learn if you can prove it to us whether it was by the suffering cursed in the law.⁹

Against Trypho's objection, Justin says that Christ was not cursed for his own sins, but for others. Justin then says that all human beings – Jews and Gentiles – are cursed, in chapter 95:

'For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.' [Dt.27:26] And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes?'¹⁰

In this same passage comes the passage that the three authors pin their interpretation of Justin and his supposed support of penal substitution:

'If, then, 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, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves?'¹¹

Without any interpretation, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach move straight on to say:

'In summary, Jesus took upon himself the curse of God that had rested upon 'the whole human family.' This explains why he was crucified even though he himself had committed no sin. It also amounts to a clear statement of penal substitution: although Christ was innocent, he bore the curse due to sinful humanity, enduring in his death the punishment due to us. Justin is a very early example of a writer who explained the doctrine on the basis of the 'curse' vocabulary of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23. As we shall see, Eusebius of Caesarea and Hilary of Poitiers are among a number of later theologians who also took this approach.'¹²

The problems I see here are numerous. First, penal substitution supposes that there is some punishment that flows from the 'wrath of God' absorbed by Christ and *not* poured out on others. But this is not what Justin Martyr was saying at all. He was saying that the Jews and the Gentiles were *already under the curse and participating in it*. They were suffering the results of their own disobedience and separation from God: for Gentiles, it was idol-worship, seduction of youth, and other crimes; for Israel, it was ongoing exile, knowledge that they broke the very law of Moses that they wanted to uphold, etc. Hence Justin, right before he says that 'the whole human race will be found to be under a curse,' says in chapter 94 how the curse on Israel is best understood:

'For tell me, was it not God who commanded by Moses that no image or likeness of anything which was in heaven above or which was on the earth should be made, and yet who caused the brazen serpent to be made by Moses in the wilderness, and set it up for a sign by which those bitten by serpents were saved? Yet is He free from unrighteousness. For by this, as I previously remarked, He proclaimed the mystery, by which He declared that He would break the power of the serpent which occasioned the transgression of Adam, and [would bring] to them that believe on Him [who was foreshadowed] by this sign, i.e., Him who was to be crucified, salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts. Unless the matter be so understood, give me a reason why Moses set up the brazen serpent for a sign, and bade those that were bitten gaze at it, and the wounded were healed; and this, too, when he had himself

⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 89

¹⁰ *Ibid*, chapter 95

¹¹ *Ibid*, chapter 95

¹² Jeffery, et.al, p.166

commanded that no likeness of anything whatsoever should be made.’¹³

Justin makes a parallel between the incident of Israel in the wilderness being bitten by venomous snakes, and the Adam and Eve in the garden being bitten by ‘fangs of the serpent.’ Justin’s reason for making that parallel is that he sees that human beings committing ‘wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts’ *is itself the curse*. The curse is not a legal-penal consequence that comes from God in response to these things. The curse is itself the spiritual alienation from God and the moral failure that results.

Hence, as Justin understood it, Jesus did not deflect the curse from Israel or the world. Instead, he *participated* in it with us even though he was innocent. Jesus forged a way through the curse on our behalf through his death and resurrection, so we could follow him through it. He therefore associated himself and identified himself with guilty human beings on the tree of the wooden cross. But Justin does not suggest that Jesus took some unique punishment from God. So the basic logic of penal substitution is undercut here at the start, which our three authors simply ignore or misunderstand in their haste to find support for penal substitution.

Second, and very related, they also misconstrue how Justin Martyr uses the curse vocabulary. In the very next chapter, chapter 96, Justin says this:

‘For the statement in the law, ‘Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree,’ [Dt.21:23] confirms our hope which depends on the crucified Christ, not because He who has been crucified is cursed by God, but because God foretold that which would be done by you all, and by those like to you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ. And you clearly see that this has come to pass. For *you curse* in your synagogues all those who are called from Him Christians; and *other nations effectively carry out the curse*, putting to death those who simply confess themselves to be Christians; to all of whom we say, ‘You are our brethren; rather recognise the truth of God.’ And while neither they nor you are persuaded by us, but strive earnestly to cause us to deny the name of Christ, we choose rather and submit to death, in the full assurance that all the good which God has promised through Christ He will reward us with.’¹⁴

In other words, Justin understands the curse language as, more or less, being separated from God, especially God in Christ, which results in moral failings. Justin says that the Jews curse Jesus and his followers in their synagogues, and that Gentiles ‘effectively carry out the curse’ by ‘putting to death’ the Christians. This demonstrates how Justin understands the Jews and Gentiles to be participating in the curse already. He says in chapter 93:

‘For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness; and every race knows that adultery, and fornication, and homicide, and such like, are sinful; and though they all commit such practices, yet they do not escape from the knowledge that they act unrighteously whenever they so do, with the exception of those who are possessed with an unclean spirit, and who have been debased by education, by wicked customs, and by sinful institutions, and who have lost, or rather quenched and put under, their natural ideas. For we may see that such persons are unwilling to submit to the same things which they inflict upon others, and reproach each other with hostile consciences for the acts which they perpetrate.’¹⁵

And from there, in chapter 94, he refers to the episode of Israel in the wilderness bitten by venomous snakes, as I discussed above. By saying here that the Jews are under the curse, Justin is not saying that there is some additional external punishment that comes upon unbelieving Jews because of their unbelief. Instead, Justin says to Trypho, their unbelief is itself a curse, even though there is no readily apparent way in which the Jewish community was hanging on any tree. Nevertheless for Justin, living under the curse, or bearing the curse, is resisting God, and especially resisting Jesus. Jesus hung on a tree to reveal what was already cursed: human nature because of the corruption of sin within it. This understanding of Justin corroborates my earlier point and Justin’s earlier sayings. If the Jews and Gentiles are already under a curse, then Jesus does not uniquely take a curse on himself. The curse is already happening, and a state which Jesus shared with us.

¹³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 94

¹⁴ *Ibid*, chapter 96

¹⁵ *Ibid*, chapter 93

Third, our three authors do not discuss this important statement from Justin:

‘He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her: wherefore also the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, ‘Be it unto me according to thy word.’ And by her has He been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.’¹⁶

Justin sees a basic symmetry between the fall of human nature through Adam and Eve and in the redemption of human nature through Jesus. The disobedience which proceeded from the serpent, according to Justin, is not simply that of Eve and Adam, but of all humanity. ‘The word of the serpent’ was conceived and brought forth in Eve, meaning it took physical manifestation in human nature. All humanity subsequently became tainted by ‘disobedience and death.’ By contrast, the word of God conceived and brought forth in the Virgin Mary also took physical manifestation in human nature. And this word of God is none other than ‘the Son of God’ in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and he brings about ‘deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.’ To Justin, since the curse is the moral effect of Satan’s influence upon and within humanity, the salvation achieved by Christ had to correct that defect in our humanity. Thus, Jesus had to resolve that problem *physically*. Earlier, Justin refers to Jesus being born a man, ‘of like passions with us, having a body’:

I have certainly proved that this man is the Christ of God, whoever He be, even if I do not prove that He pre-existed, and submitted to be *born a man of like passions with us, having a body*, according to the Father’s will; in this last matter alone is it just to say that I have erred, and not to deny that He is the Christ, though it should appear that He was born man of men, and [nothing more] is proved [than this], that He has become Christ by election.¹⁷

And Trypho said: ‘...you may now proceed to explain to us how this God who appeared to Abraham, and is minister to God the Maker of all things, being born of the Virgin, *became man, of like passions with all*, as you said previously.’¹⁸

‘Passions’ for Justin is primarily about negative desires. Justin, as Irenaeus does, understands Jesus as struggling to realign human nature and its passions with God. Hence, Justin comes closest here to stating the medical substitution theory of the atonement. He does not say it as eloquently or as fully as Irenaeus would a few years later. But the basic insight is there. Since Irenaeus quoted twice from Justin Martyr in *Against Heresies*, it is reasonable to think that Irenaeus endorsed Justin’s basic argument and that the two thinkers were identical on this point.

Fourth, our three authors do not integrate other themes in Justin’s *Dialogue*. For example, Justin repeatedly calls for Trypho to be truly circumcised with a spiritual circumcision in Christ, as with the *Odes of Solomon*, above. Here is how Justin uses this Pauline theme:

‘Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, as the words of God in all these passages demand.’¹⁹

‘You have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh.’²⁰

‘And God himself proclaimed by Moses, speaking thus: ‘And circumcise the hardness of your hearts, and no longer stiffen the neck. For the Lord your God is both Lord of lords, and a great, mighty, and terrible God, who regardeth not persons, and taketh not rewards.’ And in Leviticus: ‘Because they have

¹⁶ Ibid, chapter 100

¹⁷ Ibid, chapter 48

¹⁸ Ibid, chapter 57

¹⁹ Ibid, chapter 15, after quoting Isaiah 58 about true fasting

²⁰ Ibid, chapter 12

transgressed against Me, and despised Me, and because they have walked contrary to Me, I also walked contrary to them, and I shall cut them off in the land of their enemies. Then shall their uncircumcised heart be turned. For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.²¹

‘For your first circumcision was and is performed by iron instruments, for you remain hard-hearted; but our circumcision, which is the second, having been instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and from absolutely every kind of wickedness by sharp stones, i.e., by the words [preached] by the apostles of the corner-stone cut out without hands. And *our hearts are thus circumcised from evil*, so that we are happy to die for the name of the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by Him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of the water of life.’²²

This theme of spiritual circumcision, or circumcision of the heart, is a prominent one in Justin’s *Dialogue*, as it was in *Ode 11*. This is to be expected, given that Justin’s discourse is with a Jew who is familiar with the Old Testament. But the task here is one of theological integration. Justin sees salvation in and through Christ as primarily an act of God cleansing and purifying the one who comes to Him. In chapter 13, he also quotes from the great passage Isaiah 52:13 – 54:6, applying it of course to Jesus, emphasizing that the blood of Christ will purify his followers.

‘For Isaiah did not send you to a bath, there to wash away murder and other sins, which not even all the water of the sea were sufficient to purge; but, as might have been expected, this was that saving bath of the olden time which followed those who repented, and who no longer were *purified* by the blood of goats and of sheep, or by the ashes of an heifer, or by the offerings of fine flour, but by faith through the blood of Christ, and through His death, who died for this very reason, as Isaiah himself said...’²³

Justin’s understanding of salvation in Christ is thus a cleansing and purification from our sins and our vulnerability to Satan. Salvation certainly includes forgiveness from God, and both medical substitution and penal substitution uphold the dimension of right standing with God. However, penal substitution separates forgiveness from God from union with Christ by locating forgiveness in the death of Christ alone, elevates forgiveness from God above the fundamental cleansing of the worshiper, the objective over the subjective, and tends to assign the former work to Christ and the latter work to the Spirit. Medical substitution, on the other hand, makes the cleansing of the humanity of Jesus Christ the firm basis for our forgiveness, since to be resurrected into new life is to be justified (e.g. Ezk.37:1 – 14). The worshiper then participates by the Spirit *in Jesus* and receives a new identity *in him*. We are justified by sharing in the new, cleansed humanity of Jesus by the Spirit, because Jesus emerged on the other side of the Sinai covenant with a circumcised heart as the true ‘Israel’ (Dt.30:6), not because Jesus took some amount of punishment from God at the cross such that God had no anger leftover for us. Medical substitution makes the subjective connection of the human person to Jesus by the Spirit the basis for our sharing in the objective shift in legal standing (justification) before God. Hence, our current and future participation in the resurrection of Christ is the foundation for our justification, as Paul said: ‘He was raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). And it makes the work of Christ to save human nature in himself the basis for the Spirit’s work to save human persons. In order to provide cleansing and purification and circumcision of hardness of heart to people, Jesus had to become human, struggle against all the human passions that we have that would have made him veer off on another trajectory, and *share* the place of the guilty among the guilty on the wooden tree of the cross.

For Justin Martyr, Jesus took our curse in the sense that he, the innocent one who did not deserve it, identified with us and shared in our fallen humanity, mortality, and death. He invoked the curse picture of Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 not because he took some consequence from God so that we now do not have to, but because he wanted to make sure that we could physically identify him as identifying with us in our guilt and cursed life. His resurrection marks him out as the truly innocent one, however, and the justified one. To the extent that I can discern an atonement theology in Justin Martyr’s writings, I find it to be medical substitution, not penal substitution. As Justin says in his

²¹ Ibid, chapter 16

²² Ibid, chapter 104

²³ Ibid, chapter 13

Second Apology,

'For our sakes he became man in order to heal us of our ills by himself sharing in them.'²⁴

This fits with the overall picture: all the early theologians believed in medical substitution because they inherited it from the apostles, and behind them, Jesus himself.

²⁴ Justin Martyr of Rome, *Second Apology* 13