

Christ Our Penal Substitute

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Chapter 8 The Ethical Objections Considered

The grand and cardinal objection against Christ's substitution is the philosophic one. It has, therefore, been reserved for separate and special discussion. As already stated, its claim, as a moral intuition, that a just government, human or divine, cannot transfer one man's guilt to another who is innocent, under any possible conditions, because punishment loses its moral significance, and becomes cruelty and wickedness as soon as it is transferred from the sinning person to another. Their position cannot be stated more clearly and boldly than in the following words, quoted from one of their leading professors of philosophy: "The first fundamental principle of ethics is that nobody can be righteous for anybody else. Righteousness is a thing that has to spring from the inmost personality of the person, and nobody can ever be a substitute either for my wickedness or my goodness. Hence, if we believe the teachings of reasonable ethics, we have got to learn to interpret the symbol of the cross in some other way than that old fashioned one..... We are convinced that, for better or worse, enlightened mankind has, in matters of belief, taken a final leave of mere traditions and of blank authority of miraculism in every form. It is accordingly clear to them that henceforth the only safety for human practice lies in founding it in philosophic criticism that shall be luminous, unrelenting, penetrating to the bottom." Or, otherwise stated:

When a man comes and tells me, for instance, that Christ died on the cross for my sins, that he offered up a sacrifice for my sins, and that by virtue of this alone God imparts to me the righteousness of Jesus, if I exercise a mystic sentiment of faith, as it is called, I want to know how literally I am to take that; for if I am to take it literally, then I, as a philosophical thinker, have to say, point blank, it is not true.

The reader must understand what our opponent's position is, that whatever be the Bible's testimony for Christ's penal substitution, it cannot be true, because they know it to be false by an immediate, self-evident, necessary intuition, which is to say that they set their philosophy above all the authority claimed for God's word. To those who know the history of philosophy and the picture it presents of the uncertainty of human metaphysics, this towering self-confidence would appear ludicrous were not the results so tragical. If the philosophy, which they worship, has settled anything, it has agreed that these should be the traits of an intuitive judgment; it should be primary (resting upon no prior premises), self-evident, necessary, and universal. Should it not have given some pause to their philosophic dogmatism to remember that most Christians for several thousand years sincerely believed what these dogmatists pronounce self-evidently false? How was it that not only the most devout Christians, but the greatest thinkers and philosophers of all ages -- a Lactantius, an Augustine, an Anselm, an Aquinas, a Luther, a Calvin, a Pascal, a Claude, a Turretin, a Butler, a Newton, a Chalmers, an Edwards, a Wesley, an Alexander, a Thornwell -- saw no difficulty in this proposition which our Socinianizers find so unspeakably absurd? There is modesty with a vengeance! One would think, to hear them, that intuitions had only been invented, like the telegraph and telephone, in the nineteenth century. Again, how comes it that our new philosophers were not aware that this despised old Bible asserted precisely their proposition, that no one can have righteousness or wickedness for anybody but himself, three thousand years before they were born? The old prophet said, "If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it." Perhaps our opponents should have given the Bible, notwithstanding its offensive traits of inspiration and "miraculism," this much of credit, as not to be so silly and stupid as to contradict itself by then proceeding to teach penal substitution. It does teach both propositions; and had these readers been less overweening, and better acquainted with its contents, they would have seen at least a probable solution in this thought, that the predications in the two propositions are different, so that they do not contradict each other. And this will be found the real solution.

Obviously, their cavil leads us into the midst of that famous Protestant contention, whether inspiration be entitled to make us admit what is to our minds a necessary self-contradiction, or whether the unquestionable presence of such a proposition in a writing claiming inspiration would not be good internal evidence against it? Men who tread with such arrogance the narrow boundary line between logic and theology ought at least to know the answer which true

theology gives to these questions. To the first we answer unhesitatingly, No; to the latter, Yes. This ground has been too thoroughly trodden in the long controversy between true theology and popery for the answer to be unknown to real scholars. These have not forgotten the famous apothegm in which John Locke summed up the Protestant position: that some propositions are agreeable to our reason, some are above it, and some contradict it. The first two kinds logical and rational men accept upon sufficient evidence; it is the last kind, only which they necessarily reject. The Protestant argument is short and clear. In order that any mind may have true and consistent intelligence, there must be in it at least some primary and regulative principia of judgment. In order for a permanent rivulet, there must be a headspring. Second, most certainly that God, whose bosom is the eternal home of truth and intelligence, who implanted these principia in us when he created our spirits in his own image and likeness, will not tell us anything which directly breaks and uproots these principles of thought. This, if attempted, could not be effectuated without uprooting our very intelligence, and thus rendering us incapable of receiving any rational inculcations. But after this simple statement, it is very plain that we are not entitled to deny any proposition claiming to be taught by God, because it seems to conflict with any favorite judgment of our own, unless we are entitled to be certain that our judgment really is one of these necessary principles of thought. And the history of human opinion warns us to be very modest and cautious here, for several reasons. We ought to know how prone our natural egotism makes us all to claim for our cherished opinions this self-evident authority, when in reality they are but deductions of our own, shaped by our prejudices and defective habits of thought. We ought to remember that, in the history of philosophy, several propositions have been long and almost universally held to be primary, self-evident truths, which a later and more correct philosophy showed to be not primary and even false. For instance, in the Middle Ages the whole world of physicists held it to be an axiom, that "nature abhors a vacuum." Nobody now believes that this is either an axiom or a truth. The Italian, Torricelli, exploded it by a question: Then how comes it that in the pump-stock nature does not abhor a vacuum above thirty-three feet? It is related that when Sir Isaac Newton published his Principia, his great German contemporary, Leibnitz, objected, claiming it as an axiom that no one body can communicate energy to another body unless substantively present with it. So that Newton's induction of the attraction of gravitation, by which the mass of the sun pulls the earth and the moon at a distance of ninety-five millions of miles, must be an error. And that he added, "I don't see how Sir Isaac is to keep his planets moving in their orbits unless he can get an angel to go behind and push all the time." Who now feels Leibnitz's difficulty? It was with good reason, therefore, that while the great Protestant logicians refused to bind the human intellect by the "implicit faith" of the popes, they guarded their doctrine in this manner. The self-contradiction asserted must appear between the obvious meanings of two express texts of Scripture, or between such an expressed text and an unquestionable, necessary principium of thought, before we are entitled to reject the professed Scripture on

this ground of self-contradiction. For, if the conflict exists only between an expressed text and one of our logical deductions, or between it and some gloss which we put upon another text, we have no right to say that there is self-contradiction. The error may be in our logic or in our gloss, not in the Scripture.

Now do our Socinianizers practice any such wholesome caution in condemning the Bible doctrine of penal substitution as absurd? They may exclaim, "Yes, it is an ethical intuition that one man cannot justly be made responsible for another man's righteousness or sin;" yet the slightest close analysis will show that they are making a very shallow confusion of their pet proposition with another which is different. There is an intuition, universally held by thinking and just men, for which they mistake their opinion. The true predication is this: The consequences of righteousness or sin may not be transferred to another, unless he is in some way reasonably responsible therefor. Now, in order to identify this proposition (which everybody accepts) with theirs, they must assert that there is no way in which a moral agent can become reasonably responsible except solely by personally doing himself the moral or immoral actions in question. Is that self-evidently true? Is it at all true? Manifestly not. They have heedlessly begged the whole question. Every good jurist, yea, every man of common sense, knows that there are other ways in which moral responsibility may attach besides the personal doing of the responsible acts, as by the voluntary assumption of the responsibility for the sake of some valuable consideration. Here is another class of instances. The law justly holds "accessories before the fact" to a murder guilty of death. Here the law claims two victims for one murder, the life of the assassin and the life of the man who bribed him. Yea, if twelve men combine to hire him, there would be thirteen, each guilty of death for one and the same murder, while only one single hand perpetrated it. How comes this to be just? Because the twelve voluntarily associated themselves in the responsibility of an immoral act, which neither of them personally executed. Again, does the just law punish the accessory for the sin of suborning a murderer, or for murder itself? The correct answer is, for both: for his sin of subornation, because it was his own personal act and was evil, and for the murder, because he voluntarily associated himself in the responsibility of it.

Society presents other instances supporting our principle still more clearly. There are social disabilities which inflict real pain and calamity. which are deserved by men's vices, and which follow them by regular moral law, and are therefore penal, a part of God's temporal punishment for transgression. Not seldom society visits a part of these penal consequences upon persons who did not individually transgress, but who are nearly connected with the actual transgressor. There are, for example, two citizens of high moral and social rank, each of whom has a marriageable daughter who is refined and beloved. One is sought in marriage by a John Doe, the other by a Richard Roe. Both these young men are personally reputable, industrious, and intelligent. The one parent says to John Doe, you cannot have my daughter; because a man whose father is now serving his long

term in the penitentiary for a bad felony cannot be a son in my family, and husband to my pure daughter. The other parent gives the same refusal, and justifies it by reminding Richard Roe that he is filius nullius. The young men sorrowfully protest, and urge that these misfortunes were not their own faults; but each parent persists in declaring: I have nothing against you personally, but you cannot marry my daughter, become a son to her mother and a brother to my other children. But society fully justifies their decision, and there is not one of our opponents who would not concur. Here, then, is the partial transfer of penal responsibility where the consent of the second party is not even asked, yet the judgment may be just. Not seldom society presents counterpart cases which are settled upon the same principle. As a benefit is the antithesis of an injury, so gratitude, recognizing the benefactor's moral title, is the counterpart to just resentment, recognizing the aggressor's moral title to punishment. Sometimes the children of a benefactor share with their father the fruits of the gratitude in the heart of the beneficiary; and all just men regard this as proper. Thus, Barzillai the Gileadite had displayed a splendid loyalty, at the risk of his hoary head, to King David, when in seemingly hopeless defeat. After his triumph over the conspirators, David expresses his gratitude and wishes to recompense Barzillai for his most opportune assistance by honors and enjoyments at court. The patriarch replies that he is now too old to enjoy such rewards, but he asks them for his son Chimham. Now, the history does not say that this youth had personally rendered any service to the king; he was, probably, a boy under military age. But the claim of recompense for him rested solely upon the father's services, which David had just recognized. Did David demur? Did he resort to any of this spurious ethical philosophy to argue that he owed Chimham nothing? Not he! He was too much the gentleman, a gallant and honest soldier. So he answers without a moment's hesitation, "Chimham shall go with me." It is a curious sequel to this history, and in strange correspondence with the tenacious traditions of the Orient, that many generations afterwards, there was at Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, a building still known as the caravansary of Chimham. It would seem that a part of the reward for his father's loyalty was a piece of property taken from David's private patrimony. Here, then, we have an unquestionable instance of the very thing which all our Socinianizers denounce as unphilosophical, contra-ethical, and absurd: one man rewarded for what another man did.

Our opponents, therefore, in their cavil, conflict with the common sense of mankind and with the usages and laws of all families, tribes, and commonwealths. What has so blinded them? We apprehend that they are misled very much by these three sophistical inferences. First, they observe that the principles of imputation and penal substitution are more rarely employed (they erroneously say never) in the ordinary civic laws of the civilized Christian nations. It is true that the use of these principles is much limited by the diminution of barbarism. So they jump to the conclusion that enlightened men have found out they are all wrong. Now, we explained in Chapter III. that the true reason why

penal substitution is not much employed by us in this age is that the magistrates cannot usually find a man who can fulfill the conditions requisite for the proper application of the principle, and not because we have found out it is essentially wrong. The grand importance of this point justifies its repetition. We expressly granted, that wherever there is man or angel under a just government, human or divine, who is personally innocent, *rectus in curia*, and entitled to his franchise of immunity by his own satisfactory obedience to law, the just imputation of the guilt of another can never be made to that creature WITHOUT HIS OWN VOLUNTARY CONSENT. But usually no such human creature can be found; and if found, he has no right to give that consent as to any capital guilt, and that is the reason human legislators and jurists cannot resort to the principle in their usual administration. But in Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, such a person was found for once, *rectus in curia*, above all law, having autocracy of his own life (John x. 18), and freely willing to give it to redeem the guilt of human sinners.

In the second place, these mistaken men are misled by the "vain philosophy" of the utilitarians; they persuade themselves that God's penal administration is nothing more than a benevolent expediency. Deluded by this ethical heresy, they insist on confounding retributive justice with mere revenge. They will not see this vital and holy truth, that such justice is not malice, nor anger, but essential moral principle, the very same in essence with that which prompts a holy God to reward merit, and as absolutely determined to invariable action by God's essential perfections and immutability as is his milder phase of the same attribute which rewards merit with blessedness. After thus stripping God of an essential attribute, what wonder if they misunderstand his moral administration?

Their third source of error is equally shallow and influential with them. Being, in fact, little acquainted with the Bible, its exposition, its logic, and its theology, they fail to make the simple, but vital, distinction between righteousness and sinfulness as personal moral attributes of rational agents on the one hand [entitled to reward and guilt (*obligatio ad poenam*)] and their relations to the will of the Law-giver on the other hand. Then their common sense tells them, as it tells everybody else, that essential attributes, being subjective personal qualities, are not transferable from the person whom they really qualify to another person. And so they jump to the non-sequitur that therefore guilt is equally untransferable, and its imputation an immoral legal fiction. We need no other specimen convicting them of this confusion, than the words of the learned professor already quoted: "The first fundamental principle of ethics is that nobody can be righteous for anybody else. Righteousness is a thing that must spring from the inmost personality of the person, and nobody can ever be a substitute either for my wickedness or for my goodness." Just so; if by righteousness, wickedness, and goodness, he means a moral agent's subjective qualities, of course even a Calvinist says the same. But after he fallaciously substitutes two different concepts of title to reward and guilt, which are not qualities but relations, his inference is worthless. We have overwhelmingly evinced this by many

appeals to the customs and common sense of mankind. The professor himself would promptly discard it in any practical case affecting his own rights. In syllogistic form the process of thought would be this enthymeme: personal subjective qualities are untransferable therefore a personal relation conditioned on actions which these qualities have determined, must be equally untransferable. Manifestly the suppressed premise must be the universal proposition: that all such relations are as inalienable, or as incapable of being substituted as such subjective qualities. But who is absurd enough to believe that? Is there any such canon in logic or science? None! No true logician ever dreamed of it. If we return to the familiar science of algebra, for instance, nearly every process contradicts the proposition; for the constant method of procedure is by substitution the substitution of new but equivalent values in place of those which first stood in our equations to which new values the relations of equality division or multiplicity are logically transferred. Nor does the fact, that in the cases under discussion the relations to be transferred are conditioned on moral actions, make them an exception. On a utilitarian theory of the philosophy of punishments, there may be an appearance of such ground of exception. But that theory is worthless.

Let us take the true theory, that the just punishment of guilt is dictated primarily by God's essential attribute of distributive justice, not by expediency; that the remedial and deterrent effects of punishments among human sinners who are still under a dispensation of hope are secondary and subordinate in God's purpose; and that in his punishment of reprobate men and angels, these have no place at all, but God's whole purpose is moral equalization in his government by the due requital of sin (just as by the due requital of righteousness) to the glory of his own holiness and honor. Then there remains no reason why this purpose of retribution, pure and simple, may not be as completely gained from a substitute as from the sinner, provided a voluntary substitute be found who is able to fulfill the other proper conditions. Such a substitute is our Messiah.

The reasonableness and righteousness of this plan of vicarious redemption may be very shortly proved by pressing this plain question: Whom does it injure? God, the lawgiver, is not injured, for the plan is his own, and he gains in this way a nobler satisfaction to the penal claims of law and to his own holiness, truth, and justice, than he would gain by the punishment of the puny creatures themselves. The Messiah is not injured, because he gave his own free consent, and because the plan will result in the infinite enhancement of his own glory. Certainly, ransomed sinners are not injured, because they gain infinite blessedness, and the plan works moral influences upon them incomparably more noble and blessed. The unsaved are not injured, for in bearing their due punishment personally they receive exactly what they deserve and precisely what they obstinately preferred to redemption in Christ. None of the innocent subjects of God's moral judgment on earth or in all the heavens are injured, because this vicarious redemption of believing men originated a grand system of moral

influences far sweeter, more noble, more pure, and more efficacious than those which they would have felt without it. But how can there be injustice when nobody is injured'?

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