

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 17
The Penal Substitution Theory

Last time we introduced the penal substitution theory of the atonement of the Protestant Reformers. Today we want to continue to look at this theory in greater depth.

One of the greatest of the post-Reformation theologians was the French-Swiss theologian Francis Turretin who wrote a large three-volume work called *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. If you are like me, you've never heard of the word "elenctic" before. What in the world is "elenctic theology?" Elenctic theology is theology that is developed in conversation with one's opponents. Turretin's work is of great value because he develops his theology in conversation with those who oppose it, and in particular with regard to the doctrine of the atonement, he is responding to the work of the sixteenth century Unitarian theologian Faustus Socinus. Socinus wrote a withering critique of the Reformer's doctrine of penal substitution that is remarkably relevant even today. The movement of Socinianism that stemmed from Faustus Socinus continues to exert influence even today among theologians who find his objections to penal substitution often to be unanswerable. But Turretin in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* sought to respond to Socinus and other opposing points of view. He treats the doctrine of the atonement in topic number 14, questions 10 to 14. We want to look more closely at what he has to say on that score.

Turretin's doctrine of the atonement is founded upon his theory of justice which is crucial because this is where he departs from Socinus. Turretin holds that retributive justice (or what he called punitive justice) is essential to God's nature. He says there are two principal virtues in God: justice and goodness. Goodness, he says, "is that by which he [God] is conceived as the supreme good and the giver of all good." So God is supremely good and determines what is good. Everything is based upon his nature. But justice, he says, is "that by which God is in himself holy and just and has the constant will of giving to each his due." On Turretin's view justice is what modern philosophers would call retributive justice. Justice gives to every person what he deserves. That is retributive justice. If a person deserves punishment then it is essential to God to punish that person's sin and to mete out punitive justice.

Turretin acknowledges that there is a diversity of opinion among Christian theologians with respect to whether or not God has to exercise punitive justice. You will remember we saw that most of the church fathers did not think that God had to exercise punitive justice – that he could have just forgiven everyone's sins had he chosen to do so but, in fact, he chose instead to achieve atonement through the sacrifice of Christ. But in response to Socinus' attacks upon the doctrine of penal substitution, Protestant

theologians increasingly turned to the view that, in fact, the satisfaction of divine justice is essential to the remission of sins. God could not have simply chosen to forgive sins without satisfying his essential justice. Therefore punitive justice is necessary for the remission of sins. This is Turretin's view as well.

He offers four arguments or considerations in favor of the view that God must exercise punitive justice in order to remit sins.

1. *Scripture teaches that God detests sin and is a just judge.* Sin is not just something that God doesn't want to put up with; he hates it. So Turretin takes this to represent the very character and nature of God that he is opposed to and detests sin.

2. *Conscience and the universal consent of mankind testify to the necessity of the punishment of evil.* I think what Turretin is appealing to here is the very widespread opinion that justice is retributive in nature – the guilty deserve punishment and evil should be punished. The guilty should get their just desserts. Certainly this point is true with respect to 21st century philosophical thinking about the nature of justice and legal theory. It is very true that the widespread view today is that evil does deserve punishment.

3. *If sins could be put away simply by God's will, then it is not true (as the Scriptures say) that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.* Remember in the book of Hebrews the author speaking of these Old Testament sacrifices says it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin. Well, if justice is not essential to God's nature that statement is not true. God could have willed that through these animal sacrifices he would remit people's sins. He didn't need any sacrifices indeed in order to remit people's sins. Yet the Scriptures says it is impossible for these animal sacrifices to take away sins which suggests that it is impossible for God not to punish sin.

4. *Apart from the necessity of the satisfaction of divine justice no lawful reason could be given for God's subjecting his Son to such an accursed and cruel death.* What else could justify God's allowing his Son to suffer so horrible and accursed a death as the one Christ suffered if it weren't necessary for the satisfaction of divine justice. On Turretin's view retributive justice broadly conceived is essential to the very nature of God.

So when he turns to the doctrine of the atonement, Turretin provides a very interesting analysis of sin. He says that sin can be thought of in three ways.

1. *It can be thought of as a debt which we owe to God.* This is a debt of divine justice that we owe to God. We are in debt to him by owing him the fulfillment of our moral obligations which we have not fulfilled, and therefore we find ourselves in debt to God and to his justice. This was essentially Anselm's point, you will remember, that we owe to God this debt of honor which we cannot pay.

2. *Sin could also be viewed as a kind of mutual enmity between us and God.* Notice that for Turretin this is a mutual enmity. It is not just that we are opposed to God but that he is opposed to us. There is on God's side his divine wrath upon sin that needs to be appeased. There is on our side our sinful rebellion against God. So for Turretin this enmity is not simply on the human side; it is a mutual enmity that exists between sinners and God.

3. *Sin can be regarded as a crime which we have committed and which carries with it the punishment of eternal death.* So we find ourselves criminally liable before the supreme judge and ruler of the world.

So satisfaction for sin must therefore involve payment of the debt, an appeasement or propitiation of the enmity to achieve reconciliation, and punishment for the crime. This multifaceted character of satisfaction is important because the right to punish is not merely the private right of a creditor. Although sins are often compared to debts that we owe to God, God is not just a creditor. The right to punish belongs to God as judge and ruler. Sins are not just debts. They are also crimes which cannot remain unpunished without prejudice to the laws.

So with respect to our sin, God can also be considered under these same three categories. With respect to our debt, God is the creditor to whom our debt is owed. With respect to the enmity, God is the offended party. Finally, with respect to the crime, God is the supreme judge. So with respect to these three categories, insofar as sin is a debt, God is the creditor; insofar as we are in enmity with God, God is the offended party in the dispute; insofar as sin is a crime, God is the judge who condemns that crime.

Turretin believes that the "capital error" that Socinus made was neglecting this third role. Sin is a crime and God is the judge. Socinus thinks of God only in terms of a creditor and an offended party in a personal dispute, and therefore sees no necessity for punishment of sin and for the satisfaction of divine justice. I must say that this error on Socinus' part is one that is repeated almost universally today among Christian philosophers writing on the atonement. The analogy of owing money to a creditor is ubiquitous. It is everywhere used as an illustration. Or the notion that we need to be reconciled to God – illustrations are often given of two persons who have a personal dispute with each other and how can reconciliation between them be achieved. But the notion of sin as a criminal offense which merits and deserves punishment and God in his official capacity as the moral judge of the universe is overlooked and neglected today. Turretin says this is the central error that Socinians commit – they neglect this third role.

Turretin writes God "has the claims not only of a creditor or Lord (which he can assert or remit at pleasure), but also the right of government and of punishment (which is natural and indispensable)." So Turretin recognizes that insofar as you think of God as a mere

creditor or an offended lord, he can assert or remit at pleasure sin. But with respect to the third category – sin as crime – God as the moral governor of the universe and as the supreme and righteous judge cannot just overlook it. It must be punished. He says, “God can relax his right, but not absolutely. He can do it only insofar as his justice will allow (to wit, he cannot act unjustly.)”

Christ as the provision for our sin on God’s part plays a three-fold role as well in dealing with sin. Insofar as sin is a debt we owe to God, Christ is our surety. That is to say, he is the one who pays the debt for us. We can’t pay it, but Christ makes good on our obligations. He serves as the surety for our debt. With respect to sin as mutual enmity, Christ is the mediator between God and man removing the enmity between us and God. Insofar as sin is thought of as a crime, Christ is the priest and victim who, by his sacrificial death, pays the punishment or penalty due for our crimes. So Christ achieves reconciliation with God by being a surety who pays our debt, by being a mediator who takes away the enmity between us and God and reconciles us to God, and as a priest and a victim who substitutes himself in our place and bears the punishment that we were due as a result of our crimes.

Turretin asks the question: under what conditions can such a substitution of an innocent person for a guilty person be made? Normally we don’t think that you can just grab some innocent person and punish him instead of the criminal and thereby satisfy justice. Under what conditions can there be a substitution of an innocent party for the guilty and this can be done lawfully? Turretin gives five necessary conditions for doing this.

1. *There must be a common nature belonging to the sinner and the substitute so that sin may be punished in the same nature which is guilty.* I think he means to exclude here the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. The animals obviously don’t share the same human nature with us. So he is saying that in order for someone to substitute for us it must be another human being. It cannot be a mere animal or a financial payment.

2. *The free consent of the substitute is required.* You cannot just snatch somebody off the street and punish him instead of the guilty party. Rather, this must be a volunteer – someone who comes forward and volunteers to serve as a substitute. Again one is thinking here of Christ’s voluntarily embracing the crucifixion. Think of his prayer in Gethsemane – *let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless not my will by thine be done.* He voluntarily takes on this suffering.

3. *The substitute must have power over his own life so that he may rightfully determine what is done with it.* He is not under obligation to do this. He has power to lay down his life or not to lay down his life as a substitute.

4. *The substitute has to have the power to bear all of the punishment which is due to us and take it away.* I think he would argue here that this would require, as Anselm says, a God-man. Otherwise no one could take away all of the punishment that is due to us.

5. *The substitute must be sinless so that he doesn't have to offer satisfaction for himself as well as others.* He needs to owe nothing to God himself to deserve no punishment himself so that he can give himself as a sacrifice and substitute for those on whose behalf he dies.

Those are the necessary conditions for penal substitution: (1) a common nature of sinner and substitute, (2) the free consent of the substitute, (3) the substitute has power over his life to determine what is done with it, (4) the substitute has the power to bear all of the punishment that is due to us and to take it away, and finally (5) the substitute must be sinless. Turretin says these five conditions when taken together are jointly sufficient for penal substitution. Since Christ obviously fulfilled all of these conditions, it was not unjust for Christ to substitute himself in our place. Turretin writes, "For thus no injury is done to anyone," not to Christ himself, nor to God, nor to the sinner, nor to the law, nor to the government of the universe. Therefore, this voluntary substitution on Christ's part was entirely consistent with God's justice.

Against Socinus' objection to Christ's substitutionary atonement paying the penalty for our sin, Turretin recognizes that while Christ's punishment was not infinite as to duration (he did not suffer eternal damnation as we shall in hell if we reject God's grace), nevertheless he says Christ's suffering was equivalent to eternal damnation on account of the infinite dignity of the person who was suffering. Christ not only suffered a violent and bitter death on the cross but more fundamentally, Turretin says, he was forsaken by God the Father by withdrawing from Christ the beatific vision – that is to say, the vision of God in all his majesty and goodness. The Father withdrew from Christ the beatific vision and he suspended the joy and comfort and sense and fruition of full felicity. In other words, that intimate fellowship with God that the second person of the Trinity had known from all eternity was ruptured and removed from Christ. He says the law required no less than this to answer to the demands of justice. Although a death of infinite value was due for every individual sinner, the dignity of an infinite person, he says, swallows up and absorbs all of the infinities of punishment which are due to us. Even though you and you and me each deserved an infinite duration of punishment for our sins, in view of the infinite dignity of Christ's person that infinity swallows up all of those other infinities and pays for them adequately. He says we cannot doubt the infinite value of Christ's satisfaction, for although his human nature was finite, the satisfaction he gave was infinite because it is relative to the person who is the efficient cause and to whom the obedience and suffering are to be attributed. Do you see his point? He says, yes, Christ had only a finite human nature – a nature like ours. But his person was divine. Think of

our study of the person of Christ in this class. The person of Christ is not a human person. It is a divine person – the second person of the Trinity. He says it is the person who makes satisfaction for sin because it is the person who is the efficient cause – who causes this satisfaction to be made – and to whom the obedience and suffering are attributed. It is the person who suffered, and it is the person who perfectly obeyed the demands of the law so as to achieve the righteousness that can be credited to us. In every case it is not the finite human nature that is the source of the satisfaction of divine justice; it is the person of Christ which has infinite value and dignity because he is God himself – the second person of the Trinity. Although Christ did not suffer for infinite duration, his suffering was of infinite value and therefore easily enough to pay for all the punishment that all of us deserved for eternity.

On Turretin's view Christ did not merely suffer the punishment due for our sins. So far that is what we've emphasized. He was the substitute who bore the punishment that we deserved for our sins. But it wasn't simply that he bore that suffering. Rather, our sins were imputed to Christ rather than to us. In turn Christ's righteousness was imputed, or credited, to us. Justification, says Turretin, consists in the imputation of righteousness. He says this is not just a righteousness of innocence but it is a righteousness of perseverance. That is to say, when Christ removes your sin, you become innocent. But that is not all he does. His righteousness then is also imputed to you so that you are credited with his righteousness. Turretin calls this a righteousness of perseverance. This is the righteousness that will carry you on into eternal life. You are not simply innocent (not just forgiven of your sins), you are positively credited with the righteousness of Christ which enables you to persevere. The remission of sins brings the righteousness of innocence because it takes away the guilt of sins. When your sins are forgiven and your guilt removed you are innocent. You have a righteousness of innocence. But that doesn't in itself supply you with the righteousness of perseverance. The righteousness of perseverance is one by the lifelong obedience of Christ whereby he completely fulfilled the demands of the law. In the same way that the sins that we committed in violation of the law were imputed to Christ, so the righteous actions by which he completely fulfilled the law are imputed to us. There is a kind of mirror image here. Our violations of the law – our sins – are imputed to Christ's account, whereas his righteousness by which he fulfilled the law throughout his entire life is credited to us. Justification, for Turretin, is a lot more than just the death of Christ. It involves his entire life whereby he fulfilled the demands of the law and won that righteousness which is then credited to us.

Lest you misunderstand, Turretin emphasizes that imputation is a purely forensic notion. That is to say, it is a purely legal transaction. It is a sort of bookkeeping device whereby our sins are credited to Christ's account and his righteousness is credited to our account. In neither case does it involve an infusion of the quality into the person involved. Our

sins are not infused into Christ so that he becomes a wicked, selfish, lustful, murderous, cruel, unkind person. Not at all. Similarly, Christ's righteousness being credited or imputed to us doesn't mean that we suddenly become perfect people, righteous, good, perfectly loving, and sinless. Not at all. Turretin does think that the righteousness of Christ is infused to us but this is not part of justification. This is what Protestant theologians called sanctification. The infusion of Christ's righteousness into us is a lifelong process whereby the Holy Spirit gradually remakes our character as we walk in the Spirit so that we become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. But that is sanctification; that is not justification. The infusion of Christ's righteousness is not part of justification. That is simply imputation. So Turretin writes,

For the righteousness of Christ alone imputed to us is the foundation and meritorious cause upon which our absolutary sentence rests, so that for no other reason does God bestow the pardon of sin and the right to life than on account of the most perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us and apprehended by faith.

On Turretin's view, Christ's righteousness is legally imputed to us. That allows God to absolve us from our sins, to forgive us of our sins, and to credit to our account that perfect righteousness that Christ won by fulfilling the law. Similarly, Christ was made sin for us, not subjectively or inherently (since Christ knew no sin), but imputatively because God imputed to Christ our sins. This legal transaction between Christ and us is the basis for our justification which gives us the forgiveness or absolution of sin and then this right to life or the righteousness to perseverance.

I think you can see with what incredible sophistication and thinking this man developed the Reformer's doctrine of the atonement. It is a very impressive achievement.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am really glad you spoke to how Christ's payment can actually be equal to our debt because that was a question that I've had for years and never really been able to come to a good answer. The thing that I still have a question about would be what was the significance of the duration and what was happening during that time with Christ? Was he in a sort of hell?

Dr. Craig: What you are asking about is that intermediate state between Christ's death and resurrection. We know almost nothing about that. There is this very peculiar verse in 1 Peter that says that between his death and resurrection Christ went and preached to the spirits that are in prison who formerly did not obey during the days of Noah. What this seems to suggest is that Christ in this intermediate disembodied state between his death and resurrection went and proclaimed his victory to these condemned persons and proclaimed the success of what he had done. This leads Protestant theologians to think that the exaltation of Christ does not begin with his resurrection. It begins already with

his burial. The state of humiliation which begins with the virginal conception endures until the death of Christ. Then with his death and payment of sin – that temporarily ruptured fellowship with God – then begins the exaltation of Christ with the descent into hell and the proclamation of his victory and then his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Beyond that it is hard to be able to say more because we just don't have any information.

Student: Can we say that this proclamation to those spirits – do we put it in the category of Ephesians 3 of him triumphing over it? Or is it him more like giving people a chance who didn't have . . .

Dr. Craig: I think of it in terms of the former. I don't think that there is anything in Scripture that would suggest that people are given another chance after death. We would maybe like to think that, but the book of Hebrews says it is appointed unto man to die once and after that comes judgment. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that this is a second chance for these folks. Rather it seems to be what you mention from Ephesians 3 that this is Christ's proclamation of his great victory over death and hell and the devil, which is emphasized by the ransom theory. I think a full-blown theory of the atonement would want to include that.

Student: Under this view did Christ pay for the sins of all humans past, present, and future therefore salvation is a free gift awaiting just to be taken? Or did he only pay for the sins of those he knew would accept it?

Dr. Craig: This is a dividing issue among Protestant theologians. Turretin was a Calvinist. He was a Reformed theologian. So he has a long discussion of whom it was for whom Christ died. His view is that Christ only died for the elect. He did not, in fact, die for the sins of the world. Otherwise everyone would be saved. He only died for those whom God had predestined to glory. Turretin's view is limited atonement. But I am trying to avoid that issue as a kind of side track and to focus on the central point of penal substitution.

Student: Technically you can still believe that Christ only died for the sins of those who he knew would one day accept him without going the Calvinist route though.

Dr. Craig: Right, I do believe that this would be a Molinist alternative. Christ knew who would freely embrace his offer of forgiveness, and so died for them. But if anybody were to freely embrace Christ then Christ would have died for him as well. That would be a different view of limited atonement that would be compatible with human freedom.

END DISCUSSION

I'd love to take more questions now but we are out of time. Hang on to them for next week, and we will continue our discussion at that time.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 40:00 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)