

Both of these books offer a partial defence of ‘penal substitution’ as an account of the salvific work of Christ, though in each case the defense is a qualified one. Marshall’s book consists of four somewhat disparate chapters; it is largely non-technical, but (as must be said of any book that has pages with four lines of text and forty of footnotes) it is not aimed at a ‘popular’ readership.

Marshall begins with a defense of the centrality of penal language in New Testament descriptions of humanity’s predicament: humans face, as the just penalty for their transgressions, deliberate exclusion “from the holy society and the presence of the holy God” (29). This exclusion expresses the divine disapproval of sin, and so, divine holiness; later in the book, Marshall will say that God wills this exclusion “in order that his kingdom may be seen to repudiate sin and the sinners who do not repent” (61). His second chapter turns to God’s merciful response to this predicament, and argues that we may appropriately describe the deepest patterns of the New Testament depiction of Christ’s work as both penal and substitutionary. Jesus “becomes one with sinners in their sin…. He undoubtedly acts in the place of sinners, and he undoubtedly suffers the consequences of their sin’—both ‘the pain inflicted by hostile sinners upon other people’ and ‘the pain that comes upon sinners themselves” (65).

The first two chapters, then, form the core of Marshall’s defense of penal substitution, but it is important to note the limitations of the defense. Even if we accept Marshall’s too easy conversion of cultic, mercantile, military, and the other soteriological metaphors of scripture into penal terms, he has still only argued for the centrality of penal concepts to any description of the human predicament, and to the apt description of Jesus’ salvific entry into that predicament. He has not argued that penal concepts provide an explanation of the mechanism by which that substitution effects salvation. In other words, there is little if any attempt to explain by means of penal analogy the identification of Christ with sinners and the transference of guilt to his account. Marshall’s work is primarily exegetical and descriptive—an attempt to demonstrate that if we are faithful to the New Testament we will have no option but to frame the soteriological story penally, yet when it comes to the detail of the picture so framed he simply says that “somehow [the death of Christ] took away their sin and liability to judgment/wrath” (48). Though he does not draw attention to the fact, Marshall does not try to take us much beyond that ‘somehow.’

This defence of penal substitution is therefore fairly modest. I nevertheless wonder whether Marshall has quite done enough to see off the impression of a conflict between God’s holiness and God’s love. In Marshall’s account, these are distinct facets of the one character of God, and he can speak with apparent approval of P.T. Forsyth’s description of a ‘strain’ between the two. He does not consistently follow the hint provided in his own statement that “God’s love wants to see justice done, and his justice requires that people be loved” (34), and present God’s holiness and God’s love as ultimately identical: God’s hatred...
of sin is a hatred of that which harms the creation that God loves and drags it out of fellowship with God and with itself—and so, God’s holiness is the form that God’s love takes when faced with such harm. As a result, his account of the need for God to “be seen to repudiate sin and the sinners who do not repent” can still—despite Marshall’s evident intention—suggest a God who sacrifices people for the sake of a principle, or for the sake of God’s own character, when love alone would have dictated a different path.

The remainder of the book suggests some ways forward. The third chapter provides an attractive and convincing account of the place of the resurrection in Christ’s salvific work. A life of reconciliation with God may be made possible by Christ’s work on the cross, but made real in the resurrection. The resurrection is the establishment of reconciled human life, and it is into that life that those whom God is saving are incorporated. Where Marshall’s emphasis in his account of the cross is substitutionary, his emphasis for the resurrection is representative. Sadly, this chapter is in effect a stand alone paper, and Marshall does not tie this argument back into his defense of penal substitution. He does not, therefore, ask whether the logic of representation and incorporation might go some way to filling the lacuna at the heart of his earlier account of penal substitution; he does not, that is, ask whether the scriptural account of dying and rising with Christ provides a clue to the nature of the identification between Christ and sinners that the penal account requires but cannot supply.

Even more than the third, the fourth and final chapter stands alone: Marshall provides a prima facie case that ‘reconciliation’ is the central category around which much New Testament soteriology can be organized. By this he means that a consistent plot unites much of that biblical material: The harmony between God and the world has been disrupted by people’s enmity to God and to one another; God “treats people as his enemies” but “acts to bring about reconciliation”; this reconciliation is freely offered to all and “begins to be fulfilled in the establishment of his peaceable community”; and “God will finally reject those who refuse to be reconciled” (119–120). As with all such attempts to harmonize, the real fun lies in trying to see what might have been left out.

Steve Holmes’s book is shorter, better suited for a popular audience, and more explicit about its own limitations.

About half of the book is devoted to an energetic survey of biblical and historical material. Holmes argues that the Bible is full of differing ways of telling the story of salvation, and all but empty of detailed explanation of how those stories work. Two historical chapters demonstrate that pre-Reformation soteriology was marked by a similar variety, and often by a similar reticence regarding detailed explanation. Holmes finds only hints of penal substitutionary ideas before the Reformation, and declares that “[the] first full statement of penal substitution” that he can identify is in Calvin (62). He then traces the idea’s subsequent history through the Evangelical Revival and on to the present day.

The second half of the book explores the validity and availability of this story of salvation—and it is here that the deliberate modesty of Holmes’ account becomes most evident. He insists that penal substitution can be no more than one story of salvation among others. If we think there is some field of human experience—the law court, perhaps—that can supply a fully adequate conceptual machinery for explaining the cross, we will inevitably be fitting the cross into a framework the order and plausibility of which can