



[The Biblical Revelation of the Cross](#)

A Bible Study of the Atonement of Jesus Christ - the Righteous Servant

Norman McIlwain

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Why did Jesus die?

It's a simple enough question at first glance: he was crucified. That's what happens: crucifixion kills. But for Christians, as well as for anyone else who wants to understand Christianity, that's inadequate: deeper questioning is called for. Why did Jesus deliberately put himself in a situation where his arrest and crucifixion were inevitable? What, if anything, did his death achieve? What was God's involvement in his death?

In recent years that last question has caused controversy within evangelical circles in particular, and it's a question that won't go away. [Steve Chalke](#) and [Alan Mann](#) drew the question to popular — or rather, unpopular! — attention in their book [The Lost Message of Jesus](#), referring in passing to evangelicalism's shibboleth, penal substitution, as "cosmic child abuse", leading none other than Don Carson, that doyen of evangelical conservatism, to suggest that Chalke has "largely abandoned the gospel." [1]

But has he? Is the notion of penal substitution — the idea that on the cross God was punishing Jesus in place of humanity [2] — truly a core belief of Christianity? Or is it, rather, an inversion of the Christian message, a perverted twist that evangelicalism has swallowed hook, line and sinker?

This book addresses this question in the most straightforward way possible: by studying Scripture. It is, as the subtitle says, a Bible Study, and to follow the discussion clearly you'll need to have either a Bible or [BibleGateway](#) available. After a brief preface in which the author explains his reasons for writing — to offer a positive view of the atonement, in which God's mercy and righteousness are revealed, in contrast to the prevailing negative view, with its emphasis on God's judgement and wrath — the study takes Proverbs 17:26 as its starting point: "It is not good to punish an innocent man" (NIV).

McIlwain asks, "Could God have done that which is not good?" He then takes us on a conducted tour of key [biblical](#) passages about innocence and guilt, notably Ezekiel 18:20, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor

the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." (NKJ); and Proverbs 17:15, "Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both." (NIV)

From this McIlwain demonstrates that the concept of [penal substitution](#) represents a complete travesty of justice. It's a notion that not only goes counter to any form of natural justice that intelligent beings might understand but also runs contrary to the Bible itself: for anyone who accepts the Bible as God's authoritative word, penal substitution as an explanation for the atonement simply will not do — it both misrepresents Scripture and dishonours God himself.

So if this model collapses under its own weight, what does McIlwain offer in its place? How does the atonement work? How does Christ's crucifixion reconcile God and humanity? A study of atonement follows, showing Christ's offering of himself as a covering of righteousness that does away with our sins not by some sort of bizarre economic transfer of guilt but through love, by grace. Forgiveness does not require punishment, least of all the punishment of an innocent victim in place of the guilty party: forgiveness flows from grace, is freely given. When Christ was crucified, it wasn't the wrath of God he was facing: it was the wrath of humanity. Christ wasn't condemned by God: he was condemned by a human court, murdered in one of the worst miscarriages of justice humanity has ever perpetrated.

God's response? The resurrection, the most mind-blowing reversal of a court's decision ever made. "Not Guilty!" declares God, and turns humanity's verdict upside down: God's righteous servant vindicated, raised victorious.

McIlwain avoids the dramatic hype of such terms as "cosmic child abuse", presenting his case with a calm dignity that leaves his readers in no doubt that this is a writer who has thought the issues through from a biblical perspective rather than in reaction to pop culture. Whether your concern is to rediscover a biblical understanding of the atonement or to seek to draw back those who have been driven away from Christianity by the idea of penal substitution, this is one book you can't afford to miss.

Blogs and More: The Debate Goes On...

[Atonement](#): Papers from the [Evangelical Alliance](#) (EA) / [London School of Theology](#) (LST) Symposium on the Atonement (July 2005). Published as [The Atonement Debate](#) (Zondervan, 2008).

[Atonement and Unity](#): The EA reaffirms penal substitution as central to its understanding of the atonement.

[An Open Letter to The Evangelical Alliance](#): A Response to the EA.

[Pierced for our Transgressions](#): Published by IVP in 2007, *Pierced for our Transgressions* claims to offer "a fresh affirmation of penal substitution, engaging with exegetical, theological, pastoral and historical perspectives." Norman McIlwain responds at [Bible Study Online: Pierced for our Transgressions](#).

[No penalty, no atonement](#): Ruth Gledhill's blog at *The Times*, responding to comments

from Jeffrey John (April 2007).

[Ten propositions on penal substitution](#): A concise summary of the issues by Kim Fabricius.

[The Crucifixion - Self harm or child abuse?](#): A Discussion in the Soulspace Forum

Footnotes

1. Don Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, p.186
2. Or, to give it a more nuanced trinitarian formulation, that God in Christ was taking his punishment for sin out on himself. This, of course, raises its own questions: penal substitution, with its idea that God the Father turns his face away from God the Son, breaks the relationship at the heart of the Trinity — it divides God against himself, introducing a dangerous instability at the centre of God's own being. How can a God divided against himself bring reconciliation to humanity? How can destroying a perfect relationship repair a broken one?

[Phil Groom](#), September 2006

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