

The Circumvention Taxonomy

Infinite Worth, Divine Fiat, and the Failed Escape Routes of Penal Substitution

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Central claim

Standard Penal Substitutionary Atonement says that personal guilt creates a penalty that justice must satisfy, yet an innocent Christ bears it so the guilty need not. Every familiar repair—infinite worth, imputation, representation, voluntary consent, shared identity, divine fiat, mystery, proof text, or resurrection—either leaves the transfer and completion bridge unexplained or quietly surrenders one of those defining claims. A materially revised atonement model may remain coherent, but the standard penal-substitution package has not been rescued by renaming its missing mechanism.

Preview:

Core claim	Required bridge	Repair under pressure	Warranted verdict
The guilty personally deserve punishment; the innocent Christ bears it; justice is thereby satisfied.	Explain how another’s suffering transfers liability and completes the very penalty assigned to the offender.	Worth, imputation, representation, consent, corporate union, decree, mystery, textual authority, resurrection, and hybrid models.	A repair succeeds only if it both supplies the bridge and preserves the penal-substitution claims it was introduced to save. The familiar repairs do not do both.

The paper evaluates standard Penal Substitutionary Atonement on its own terms by asking whether its established escape routes both preserve its core commitments and explain the transfer and completion of the stated penalty. The analysis is therefore a focused test of the standard doctrine’s internal coherence.

Visual preview:



The broken bridge marks the gap between a finite act and the penalty PSA assigns to sinners. Infinite worth, divine fiat, representation, and mystery appear around the gap because each is offered as a repair; the shattered mechanism states the paper’s limited demand. The image displays the recurring burden, while the body also tests imputation, consent, collective identity, resurrection, scriptural assertion, and hybrid models.

Abstract

Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) is often presented as the point where divine justice and mercy meet: human wrongdoing merits punishment, an innocent Christ undergoes the punishment in humanity's place, and the guilty may therefore be pardoned without justice being relaxed. The difficulty is not merely that the arrangement sounds severe. The defining claims pull against one another. If penal desert is personal because it is grounded in an agent's wrongdoing, another person's suffering does not automatically discharge it. If the assigned penalty is death, exclusion, or endless separation, finite suffering followed by resurrection does not automatically complete it. A defense therefore needs both a *transfer bridge* and a *completion bridge*.

This paper applies a preservation test to the principal repairs defended in historical theology and contemporary analytic philosophy. Infinite worth changes the value of the substitute without identifying the penalty completed. Imputation declares a new legal status without transferring the historical agency that grounds desert. Vicarious punishment, covenantal representation, corporate identity, voluntary consent, and union with Christ can explain authorization or association, but not by themselves the extinction of another agent's culpability-based liability. Divine fiat, pardon, commutation, and lesser-penalty acceptance can release the guilty, but they do so by relaxing or replacing strict penal satisfaction. Mystery and category-error replies withdraw public explanation; proof texts and tradition underdetermine the mechanism; resurrection confirms a successful outcome only if the disputed satisfaction is already assumed. Hybrid accounts may be coherent precisely insofar as they cease to make penal substitution do the decisive explanatory work.

The result is bounded but severe. The audit does not prove that no future penal theory could state and defend the missing bridges, nor does it reject non-penal interpretations of the cross. It shows that the familiar circumventions do not simultaneously preserve personal desert, innocent substitution, penal satisfaction, and completion of the stated penalty. Evasion is not explanation, and a doctrine does not become coherent merely because every abandoned premise receives a devotional synonym.

Keywords: penal substitution; atonement; punishment; imputation; vicarious punishment; representation; divine fiat; infinite worth; resurrection; philosophy of religion

1 The Doctrine Must Survive Its Own Repairs

Penal Substitutionary Atonement is designed to answer a specific question: how can guilty people be forgiven while justice is fully honored? Its familiar answer is not merely that Christ's death inspires repentance, defeats hostile powers, demonstrates love, repairs a relationship, or offers a sacrificial gift. PSA makes a penal claim. Human wrongdoing makes punishment due; Christ bears that punishment in the place of the guilty; because the punishment is borne, justice is satisfied and forgiveness can follow. Reformation statements and influential evangelical defenses differ in detail, but this cluster remains recognizable (Calvin 1960; Packer 1974; Stott 1986; Craig 2020).

The argument has polemical power because it promises more than divine permission to forgive. The Christian deity under examination does not simply waive liability. The cross is supposed to show that wrongdoing is taken so seriously that its penalty is actually addressed. Mercy does not defeat justice; substitution is said to satisfy it. That promise creates the doctrine's burden. If the explanation later reduces to the claim that the supreme authority may accept whatever arrangement it chooses, the original contrast with simple pardon has disappeared.

This paper uses *God-concept* to mean a specified conception of a deity. The target is not theism in general but the Christian God-concept presupposed by standard PSA: a perfectly just lawgiver who assigns personal liability for sin, treats Christ as innocent, and accepts Christ's passion as satisfaction for the guilty. The paper grants that framework for the sake of internal evaluation. It does not need stance-independent moral facts of its own to ask whether the account applies its stated standards consistently.

The central problem can be seen without assigning numbers to suffering. Suppose an offender deserves imprisonment because of what that offender did. A willing friend may suffer terribly to secure the offender's release. The friend may display love, pay costs, or change the victim's attitude. Yet none of those facts alone makes the friend *the punished offender* or makes the sentence *served*. If the state declares the friend's suffering sufficient, the declaration can release the offender; it still needs an account of why this counts as the fulfillment of retributive justice rather than a commutation made for another reason. David Lewis captures the intuitive asymmetry: third parties can often pay monetary penalties, but authorities would not regard a volunteer's offer to take another's imprisonment or execution as serving the offender's sentence (Lewis 1997).

PSA defenders have not ignored this pressure. Contemporary work distinguishes punishment from hard treatment, develops vicarious punishment, appeals to legal imputation and representative agency, invokes collective guilt and union, argues that voluntary substitution can be permissible, and locates unique authority in the divine lawgiver (Murphy 2009; Hill and Jedwab 2015; Thurow 2015; Strabbing 2016; Craig 2018a; Craig 2018b). These are the strongest versions of the circumventions, and they deserve more than the slogan that punishing an innocent person feels wrong.

The decisive test is preservation. A repair introduced to save PSA must do two things at once: supply the missing explanatory bridge and retain the defining penal-substitution claims. A proposal that becomes coherent by turning punishment into non-punitive suffering, strict satisfaction into pardon, personal guilt into group liability, or penal substitution into another atonement model may be philosophically useful. It is not a successful defense of the package with which it began.

2 Four Commitments and Two Bridges

The preservation test begins by separating four commitments that popular presentations often compress.

Table 1: The core PSA bundle and its explanatory burden

Commitment	What the doctrine claims	What a repair must preserve or explicitly revise
Personal desert	A person's culpable wrongdoing grounds that person's liability to punishment.	Liability is not a free-standing token that can be reassigned without a relation to agency, responsibility, and censure.
Penal treatment	Christ's passion is not merely costly aid; it bears punishment relevant to human sin.	The account must identify who is punished, for what wrongdoing, and why the treatment counts as punishment rather than sacrifice or hardship.
Substitutionary discharge	Christ's treatment removes or satisfies the liability of other persons.	Authorization, consent, and representation must explain discharge, not merely explain why Christ may act or suffer for others.
Penalty completion	Justice receives what the theory says is due: death, wrath, curse, exclusion, or another specified sanction.	The account must state the completion condition and show that the passion meets it without changing units halfway through.

The *transfer bridge* connects one person's treatment to another person's culpability-grounded liability. The *completion bridge* connects the treatment actually undergone to the penalty the theory assigns. These are independent jobs. A representative relation might explain why Christ may act for humanity without showing that crucifixion completes an eternal penalty. Infinite worth might be offered as a completion rule without showing why the suffering of an innocent substitute extinguishes the guilty person's desert.

This two-bridge distinction prevents a common slide. When one objection is answered, the answer is treated as though it solved the whole theory. Voluntary consent addresses coercion; it does not by itself transfer desert. Federal headship addresses representation; it does not specify sanction equivalence. Resurrection may identify divine vindication; it does not show that an assigned penalty was borne. Scriptural authority may supply a reason for accepting a claim; it does not articulate the claim's mechanism.

The test is deliberately conditional. If a defender denies that penal desert is personal, denies that Christ is punished, denies that the guilty person's liability is discharged, or denies that the original penalty must be completed, the resulting model may avoid contradiction. The defender must then state the revision. A coherent departure is better than an incoherent preservation claim, but it cannot continue borrowing the rhetorical force of the premise it abandoned.

The preservation fork

Either a repair preserves the core PSA bundle, in which case it must independently justify both transfer and completion, or it achieves coherence by revising the bundle, in which case it is no longer an unqualified defense of standard PSA. Calling both outcomes "penal substitution" conceals rather than resolves the choice.

3 Punishment Is Not Just Suffering with an Official Label

The first family of replies loosens the concept of punishment. This is understandable because a strict definition generates immediate pressure. Joel Feinberg's expressive account connects punishment with authoritative condemnation of wrongdoing, while H. L. A. Hart and R. A. Duff situate punishment within practices of responsibility, public reason, and censure (Feinberg 1970; Hart 1968; Duff 2001). If Christ is innocent and is not condemned as a wrongdoer, his suffering does not straightforwardly meet that concept.

Mark Murphy therefore distinguishes penal substitution from *vicarious punishment*. On his proposal, the guilty party can be punished through hard treatment imposed on another, so long as the treatment counts institutionally as the guilty party's punishment (Murphy 2009). Daniel Hill and Joseph Jedwab object that punishment need not condemn the person who physically receives the hard treatment; collective penalties can be directed at a class or unit even when only some members committed the triggering offense (Hill and Jedwab 2015). William Lane Craig presses further: some legal punishment does not express moral condemnation, and the divine lawgiver may impute liability or appoint a proxy (Craig 2018a; Craig 2020).

These replies show that the bare sentence "Only the wrongdoer can ever be punished" is too quick. Institutional practices can identify the target of a penalty differently from the body that undergoes its cost. Yet the conceptual possibility of such a practice does not establish its justice or its discharge rule. A teacher can punish an entire class for one student's act. That shows collective hard treatment is possible, not that every uninvolved student deserved it or that the wrongdoer's personal desert was satisfied through the others.

The distinction between *can be called punishment* and *satisfies retributive justice* is crucial. Institutional designation can make a sanction legally operative. It cannot, without further argument, make historical agency migrate. If the doctrine begins from the claim that the offender deserves punishment because the offender culpably acted, the repair must explain how the offender's desert is exhausted when the offender neither undergoes the treatment nor performs the substitute's act.

Table 2: Legal analogies and the limits of their transfer to PSA

Analogy	What it can show	Why substitution is allowed	What it does not yet show
Third-party fine	A monetary liability may be discharged by another person's payment.	Money is fungible; the obligation concerns receipt of a sum, not personal endurance.	That imprisonment, death, condemnation, or exclusion is likewise bearer-neutral.
Vicarious liability	A principal may bear liability for an agent's conduct.	Control, enterprise risk, authorization, benefit, or a defined legal relation connects the parties.	That an innocent principal becomes the historical wrongdoer, or that the agent's own liability disappears.
Legal fiction	A court may treat a person or entity <i>as if</i> it had a legal status.	The stipulated status serves a defined institutional purpose within the court's jurisdiction.	That the fiction makes its underlying description true or turns innocent treatment into deserved punishment.
Collective sanction	A unit may receive a penalty triggered by some members.	Membership and institutional rules identify the penal target as a group.	That the sanction is deserved by each member or discharges every member's personal guilt.
Pardon or commutation	A competent authority can release or reduce a penalty.	The authority changes the legal consequence rather than pretending the original sentence was fully served.	That strict retribution was satisfied by an innocent person's suffering.

The legal analogies are therefore diagnostic, not decisive. They reveal coherent arrangements adjacent to PSA. They also reveal the cost of the move. Fines become payment; vicarious liability relies on causal or institutional relations not mirrored by ordinary human sin; legal fiction creates treatment under law rather than moral desert; collective sanctions raise rather than remove justice questions; pardons release without full penal performance. The analogy works best when the model becomes less like personal retributive substitution.

4 Imputation: Declaring Liability Is Not Transferring Agency

Classic Reformed accounts appeal to imputation: human sin or guilt is legally reckoned to Christ, while Christ's righteousness is reckoned to believers. On this view Christ is not treated as a random innocent. He receives a juridical status that makes punishment fitting within the covenantal arrangement. Craig defends the possibility of such legal imputation by appealing to the unique authority of the divine lawgiver and to legal fictions and vicarious liability (Craig 2018b; Craig 2020).

Imputation can solve a problem of legal classification. If the court validly declares Christ liable, it can explain why the court proceeds against him. The deeper question is whether the declaration preserves the doctrine's original reason for punishment. If desert was grounded in personal culpability, then a declaration cannot make Christ the agent who performed billions of incompatible acts at different times. It can attach liability to him, but the justice of that attachment is precisely what needs defense.

This is not the crude claim that legal statuses are unreal. Ownership, marriage, citizenship, corporate personhood, and liability are institution-dependent yet consequential. Their legitimacy depends on rules, purposes, and relations that can be assessed. A court cannot make a person historically responsible for a murder merely by declaring the person guilty. If the declaration is knowingly false, its legal force does not turn it into retributive justice.

The imputation reply therefore faces a fork. If imputation tracks a real responsibility-conferring relation, that relation must be identified. Representation, union, and collective identity are attempts to

provide it, and they receive separate examination below. If imputation creates liability solely because the supreme lawgiver chooses to reckon it, the theory has reached divine fiat. The declaration may be authoritative within the framework, but the claim that punishment follows personal desert has been replaced by the claim that desert can be reassigned by decree.

The reciprocal imputation of righteousness sharpens the issue. Benefits, honors, standing, and access can sometimes be granted through another's achievement. The fact that a benefit can be credited does not show that culpability and penal desert transfer in the same way. Criminal responsibility is not simply a negative bank balance. Treating both as entries in one ledger assumes the fungibility the theory is meant to explain.

5 Representation, Consent, and Union

5.1 Representation authorizes action, not every consequence

Covenantal or federal representation links Christ to humanity through an appointed office. Representatives can make promises, sign treaties, accept costs, and act for constituents. Representation therefore offers more than a bare fiction. It can explain why one person's act has consequences for others.

But representation is function-specific. An attorney may speak for a client without becoming the client who committed the offense. A head of state may sign a treaty without acquiring every citizen's personal guilt. A parent may pay for a child's damage without becoming the child who caused it. The representative relation must specify which powers and liabilities it carries. It cannot be invoked as a universal solvent.

The relevant question is not whether Christ may act *for* others. It is whether appointment makes punishment of Christ the punishment deserved by each represented sinner, and why it extinguishes rather than merely accompanies their liability. If the answer is that the divine authority defines the representative relation to include precisely that result, representation adds a label to fiat. If the answer cites a natural or covenantal relation, the relation must do more than repeat the desired consequence.

5.2 Voluntary consent removes one objection, not the transfer problem

Jada Twedt Strabbing develops conditions under which penal substitution may be permissible, giving voluntariness a central role (Strabbing 2016). Consent matters. A willing self-sacrifice is not the same act as seizing a third party for punishment. Christian doctrine also identifies Christ as a divine person who accepts the passion rather than a helpless human victim, so the common "cosmic child abuse" caricature is an inadequate substitute for analysis.

Still, permission and satisfaction are different. Consent can make it permissible for a person to donate property, undergo risk, or suffer in rescue. It does not make the consenting person culpable for another's act. A volunteer may permissibly endure what authorities may permissibly impose; neither fact shows that the offender's desert has been fulfilled. Consent answers "May the substitute suffer?" The transfer bridge asks "Why does that suffering discharge another person's penal liability?"

The defender might reply that consent plus representation is sufficient. Yet combining two incomplete relations does not automatically produce the missing one. Representation explains acting for; consent explains willing acceptance. The theory still needs a rule that makes acting-for plus consent equal satisfaction of another's culpability-grounded punishment.

5.3 Union and shared identity risk solving the problem by erasing persons

Union with Christ is sometimes used to deepen representation. Believers are "in Christ"; Christ is the head of a corporate body; therefore his death can count as their death. Joshua Thurow's communal substitution theory offers a philosophically developed version in which Christ addresses the sins of a human community and individuals participate in communal forgiveness (Thurow 2015).

Corporate identity can explain shared consequences and communal repair. Communities can perform wrongs through institutions, sustain unjust practices, and owe collective amends. But the move does not automatically cover each individual's private wrongdoing, and group punishment does not become just for every member merely because the group exists. If Christ is sinless, his membership in humanity does not make him a participant in its culpable acts. If believers join the relevant body through later faith or union, the timing also matters: a relation acquired after the passion cannot be assumed to have already made their historical agency Christ's.

The strongest identity claim would say that Christ and sinners are somehow one penal subject. That would create the needed route only at a high metaphysical price. If personal distinctions remain real, the theory must still explain how one subject's culpability becomes another's desert. If distinctions collapse far enough for punishment to be literally self-punishment, the doctrine threatens its own claims about distinct responsible persons. Mystical union may be religiously significant without functioning as an identity equation in penal logic.

Communal and union models therefore identify genuine alternatives to atomistic liability. They do not provide a cost-free preservation of it. The more work the collective does, the less the theory can continue claiming that each individual's personal desert was strictly satisfied by an innocent substitute.

6 Infinite Worth and the Unit-Switching Problem

The most familiar completion reply appeals to Christ's infinite worth. A finite period of suffering can possess infinite value because the sufferer is divine; infinite dignity, merit, or worth therefore outweighs the penalty due from finite creatures. Anselm's satisfaction account gives status and honor a central place, while later penal accounts use worth to explain the sufficiency of the passion (Anselm of Canterbury 1998; Packer 1974; Stott 1986).

Worth can matter without being a penalty unit. A priceless benefactor can make a gift of extraordinary value, but the gift does not thereby become time served in prison. A sovereign's dignity can magnify the significance of an insult without determining the duration or kind of every fitting response. The conversion requires a rule connecting the property in which Christ is infinite to the property by which the penalty is complete.

Calling the relation qualitative rather than quantitative does not remove the burden. A qualitative rule can be precise: one apology may repair an insult; one restoration may return a stolen object; one amputation may permanently remove a limb. The problem is not the absence of arithmetic. It is the absence of a stated relevance relation. If the penalty is exclusion, death, condemnation, or endless separation, why does the substitute's dignity complete it?

The danger is unit switching. The penalty is described in one currency when its gravity is emphasized and paid in another when completion is defended. Endless exclusion establishes the seriousness of sin; infinite worth then replaces duration. Personal culpability establishes the need for punishment; the substitute's value then replaces identity. The rhetoric retains both premises, but the mechanism uses neither.

6.1 Temporal compression does not preserve an essentially temporal penalty

A related reply proposes that immense or infinite suffering can be compressed into a finite interval. Even if intensity could be unbounded, this would answer only a penalty defined by an amount of suffering. Many PSA presentations identify the penalty as death, curse, abandonment, or separation rather than a scalar quantity of pain. No intensity of a different state is automatically the same sanction.

The knowledge of resurrection also matters to phenomenology, though it is not the central logical point. Finite suffering known to end differs from suffering believed to be irreversible. The theory may

say that the passion has a unique depth inaccessible to human comparison. That possibility does not state a completion rule. It enlarges the unknown term.

Eleonore Stump presses the duration mismatch directly: if the punishment is eternal separation, no amount of suffering is identical to eternal separation (Stump 2018). A defender can deny that eternity is constitutive, reinterpret hell, or specify another penalty. Each move is available. Each revises the sanction that supplied the original contrast.

6.2 The two-natures reply divides the source of worth from the bearer of suffering

The incarnation is sometimes asked to do both jobs: Christ's divine nature supplies infinite worth while his human nature undergoes suffering and death. This can explain why one person has both divine status and human passibility within Christian Christology. It does not by itself show that a property of the divine nature converts finite human suffering into the sinner's penalty.

If the divine nature is impassible, the element that supplies infinity does not suffer in the relevant way. If the human nature suffers, the experienced event remains finite unless another rule is added. Saying that the one person owns both natures may block a simplistic division into two agents, but it does not allow every property of one nature to become a property of the other. The incarnation identifies the bearer; it does not calculate penal satisfaction.

7 Resurrection and the Certificate Written by the Claim

Resurrection is often presented as proof that the payment was accepted. Death is conquered, vindication follows, and the successful outcome confirms completion. For Christus Victor and participatory models, resurrection can do direct explanatory work: it is victory and new life. For PSA, however, it can confirm penal completion only if the contested link is already assumed.

The reasoning risks circularity:

- R1. The passion satisfies the penalty because the resurrection shows that the sacrifice was accepted.
- R2. The resurrection shows acceptance because the passion satisfied the penalty.
- R3. Therefore, satisfaction and acceptance certify one another without an independent completion condition.

Resurrection also intensifies the non-bearing problem when the penalty is final death or endless exclusion. Christ dies and is raised; he is not finally dead. He experiences abandonment language and is vindicated; he is not endlessly excluded. The reply that resurrection occurs *because* the penalty is completed returns to the very claim at issue.

This does not make resurrection the enemy of atonement. It shows that theories should let the event do the work it can actually do. A victory, restoration, recapitulation, or participation account may treat resurrection as constitutive rather than as a receipt for an unspecified penal transaction. The Christian tradition contains several such routes, and major contemporary studies resist allowing one penal metaphor to absorb the entire field (Baker and Green 2011; Rutledge 2015; Belousek 2011).

8 Divine Fiat, Pardon, and the Collapse of Necessity

The authority reply is the most powerful circumvention because it can end every institutional question. The Christian deity is the supreme lawgiver, judge, offended party, and author of the covenant. If this authority can impute guilt, appoint a representative, define punishment, and accept a substitute, no higher court can reverse the settlement. Craig explicitly argues that divine command theory and unique divine prerogatives weaken ordinary objections to imputation and innocent punishment (Craig 2018b; Craig 2020).

The reply can establish legal validity inside the God-concept. It cannot preserve the claim that strict penal satisfaction was necessary independently of the declaration. If the authority may accept a lesser penalty, redefine the recipient, or cancel liability upon a chosen condition, then the authority may alter the penal demand. The arrangement is a pardon, commutation, or constitutive rule. It is not the demonstration that the original personal penalty was fully borne.

This creates a necessity dilemma:

- D1. If retributive justice fixes who must bear which penalty, fiat cannot make another person's different treatment identical to that requirement.
- D2. If the divine authority may replace the recipient, treatment, or completion condition by decree, the original penalty was not strictly necessary.
- D3. Therefore fiat either fails to satisfy the fixed demand or succeeds by changing it.

The second horn may be coherent. A legal pardon is real; a commutation genuinely releases; a sovereign may create a new covenantal path. What disappears is the claim that forgiveness required exact penal satisfaction. The cross may then be a chosen means of revelation, solidarity, transformation, reconciliation, or governance. Those are alternative explanations, not proof that unmodified retributive justice forced substitution.

The mercy claim faces a parallel problem. If every unit of penalty is fully paid, the creditor has remitted nothing. Philip Quinn and Eleonore Stump each press versions of the tension between payment and forgiveness, while Porter develops a less strictly retributive route on which punishment may have expressive or beneficial value (Quinn 1994; Stump 2018; Porter 2004). A defender can distinguish pardon from the payment that makes pardon available. Even then, if a competent authority could pardon without the payment, the passion is not required by strict justice; if the authority could not, mercy operates only after every demand is met.

The dilemma is not that mercy and justice can never coexist. It is that the standard PSA sales pitch claims both full exaction and gracious remission without stating what, after full exaction, remains to be remitted.

9 Mystery, Category Error, Scripture, and Tradition

9.1 Mystery may mark a boundary; it cannot occupy the mechanism

Some theological realities may exceed human comprehension. The demand that every doctrine be reducible to familiar legal practice would be excessive. Yet mystery is legitimate at the edge of a theory, not in the place where the theory claims to explain its central relation.

PSA uses public concepts—guilt, punishment, innocence, substitution, satisfaction, justice, and forgiveness—to distinguish itself from rival accounts. When pressure reaches the relation among those concepts, a category-error reply cannot simultaneously say that the legal language explains and that its ordinary inferential constraints are inapplicable. Either the analogy carries enough structure to support the doctrine or it does not carry enough structure to answer the objection.

The same applies to the claim that divine justice is unlike human justice. Difference is plausible; unspecified difference is not a repair. A successful appeal must say which feature changes, why it changes, and how the revised concept still supports the conclusion. Otherwise “divine” functions as an exemption stamp.

9.2 Textual assertion cannot select its own mechanism

Scripture and tradition can provide reasons internal to Christianity for believing that Christ's death is saving, sacrificial, representative, victorious, or “for sins”. They do not by themselves show that

penal substitution is the only or best mechanism. Historical theology contains satisfaction, ransom, recapitulation, moral influence, governmental, participatory, Christus Victor, non-penal substitution, and penal non-substitution accounts. Oliver Crisp’s nearby models are especially useful because they show how retaining either penalty or substitution does not entail retaining both (Crisp 2007; Crisp 2008).

Proof texts therefore cannot simply be repeated at the point where the philosophical bridge is requested. Exegesis must establish that the text teaches the relevant kind of punishment and transfer, not merely death, sacrifice, representation, curse, or deliverance. Then the philosophical account must show coherence. Authority can warrant assent for an insider; it does not make incompatible predicates mutually explanatory.

Tradition has the same limit. Anselm’s satisfaction theory is not identical to Reformation penal substitution, and the diversity of the New Testament’s images undercuts a simple appeal to one inherited mechanism (Anselm of Canterbury 1998; Baker and Green 2011). Nicholas Lombardo’s work on the Father’s will and crucifixion further illustrates that a theology of ransom and divine intention can address the cross without treating PSA as the default explanatory grammar (Lombardo 2013).

The appropriate conclusion is not that scripture or tradition is irrelevant. It is that an assertion of efficacy and an explanation of efficacy are different intellectual achievements.

10 The Taxonomy: What Each Repair Saves and Spends

Tables 3 and 4 collect the result. A check means that a repair can plausibly address the named pressure. The final column records the commitment it still leaves unsupported or revises. The table is not a claim that every theologian uses every route, nor that all versions of a route are identical. It shows why piling replies together does not automatically produce a complete theory.

Table 3: Circumvention taxonomy, part I: transfer routes

Repair	Pressure addressed	What it can contribute	Unpaid explanatory cost
Imputation	Christ appears legally innocent.	Supplies a juridical status under which action against Christ is institutionally authorized.	Does not transfer historical agency or explain why declared liability tracks culpability-based desert.
Vicarious punishment	The physical recipient and penal target need not be identical.	Makes it conceptually possible for one body to undergo treatment counted as another’s punishment.	Needs a justice-conferring relation and an account of why the guilty party’s desert is exhausted.
Representation	A substitute must be authorized to act for others.	Explains agency on behalf of a constituency and shared legal consequences.	Acting for another is not automatically being culpable or serving that person’s punishment.
Voluntary consent	Innocent suffering appears coercive.	Makes self-sacrifice importantly different from seizure of an unwilling victim.	Permission to suffer does not transfer guilt, desert, or penalty completion.
Communal identity	Individualistic desert makes substitution opaque.	Locates some wrongdoing and repair at the level of a human community.	Does not cover every personal wrong or show that punishing a sinless member satisfies each offender’s liability.
Union with Christ	Representation seems too external.	Offers a deeper participatory relation in which Christ’s acts matter for believers.	If persons remain distinct, the transfer remains; if they collapse, personal responsibility is threatened.

Table 4: Circumvention taxonomy, part II: completion and authority routes

Repair	Pressure addressed	What it can contribute	Unpaid explanatory cost
Infinite worth	Finite suffering appears unequal to the penalty.	Establishes the unique value or status of the substitute.	Supplies no rule converting status into the kind or duration of punishment completed.
Compressed intensity	A finite interval seems too short.	Proposes equivalence by depth rather than duration.	Fails if the penalty is essentially death, exclusion, or endless separation rather than an amount of pain.
Two natures	Divinity supplies worth while humanity supplies passibility.	Identifies one person possessing both divine status and a suffering human nature.	Does not show how a property of one nature changes the completion condition borne through the other.
Divine fiat	No authority stands above the divine judge.	Makes pardon, commutation, imputation, or a new covenant legally effective within the framework.	Preserves release by revising the strict penal demand, not by showing the original penalty fully served.
Mystery or category error	Human analogies may be limited.	Warns against treating every divine relation as an ordinary court case.	Withdraws the public explanation if invoked exactly where guilt, punishment, and satisfaction must connect.
Scripture and tradition	The theory claims revelatory warrant.	Supplies texts, motifs, and historical reasons for treating the cross as salvific.	Does not select penal substitution from rival readings or make the selected mechanism coherent.
Resurrection	The passion needs a sign of success.	Establishes victory and vindication within Christian proclamation.	Certifies penal completion only by assuming that the passion completed the disputed penalty.
Hybrid model	No single image captures atonement.	Allows victory, participation, sacrifice, example, restoration, and forgiveness to work together.	Becomes coherent insofar as penal substitution no longer bears the exclusive or decisive explanatory load.

The pattern is cumulative. Each route can illuminate a real feature of Christian theology. None supplies both bridges while leaving the four core commitments unchanged. Several routes can be combined, but combination does not remove their limits. Imputation plus representation plus consent may explain why Christ is legally appointed and willing. Infinite worth plus resurrection may explain why the event is uniquely significant and divinely vindicated. The theory still needs a non-circular rule showing why this arrangement extinguishes personal penal desert and completes the penalty initially said to be necessary.

11 The Strongest Composite Defense

The strongest defense does not rely on one circumvention. It constructs a composite case: retributive justice may be satisfied through a proxy; punishment need not always express condemnation of the physical recipient; legal systems recognize imputation, fiction, and vicarious liability; Christ voluntarily accepts appointment as humanity's representative; union or federal headship grounds the relation; divine authority validates it; and the unique worth of the divine-human substitute makes the passion sufficient. Craig's contemporary defense gathers many of these strands and is therefore a better target than a simplistic payment metaphor (Craig 2018a; Craig 2018b; Craig 2020).

The composite defense succeeds in showing that several quick objections are not deductive knock-downs. Punishment has contested concepts. Institutional targets can differ from physical recipients. Voluntariness changes permissibility. Legal relations can generate liability. Christian metaphysics can posit representative and participatory relations unavailable in ordinary cases. A critic who merely says "we never do this in court" has not answered the theory.

But possibility is not preservation. Each component of the composite obtains its force by changing one dimension:

- loosening punishment separates hard treatment from condemnation of the recipient;
- legal imputation separates liability from personal agency;
- representation separates the actor from the represented wrongdoer;
- divine authority separates valid release from strict completion of the original sentence;
- infinite worth separates the metric of satisfaction from the penalty's stated kind; and
- resurrection separates success from continued endurance of the sanction.

The defense then treats the flexibility achieved in each dimension as though all original claims remained fixed. That is the central circumvention. Flexibility can make a revised system coherent, but the cumulative price must be stated. The theory no longer shows that personal culpability necessarily brings personal punishment, that Christ receives exactly the penalty the guilty deserve, or that forgiveness waits upon strict penal completion. It shows that a supreme authority can establish a representative arrangement in which an innocent volunteer's costly act becomes the condition of pardon.

That last description may support a serious theology. It resembles non-punitive satisfaction, governmental, participatory, or covenantal accounts at several points. Crisp's distinction between non-penal substitution and penal non-substitution demonstrates why the labels matter: one may preserve representation without punishment or preserve a penal aspect without another person literally receiving the offender's punishment (Crisp 2007; Crisp 2008). The price of coherence is not atheism. It is candor about which doctrine survived.

12 What a Successful Penal Defense Would Have to Supply

A genuinely successful defense would not need to imitate human law at every point. It would need to state its departures with enough precision that readers can see how the conclusion follows. At minimum it should provide the following.

1. **A fixed account of the penalty.** The theory must say whether the sanction is death, suffering, curse, condemnation, exclusion, loss, endless separation, or a structured combination. It cannot change the relevant feature when a mismatch appears.
2. **A responsibility relation.** If liability is grounded in culpable agency, the theory must explain what relation makes Christ liable without making innocence merely verbal. If liability is not so grounded, it must revise the personal-desert premise.
3. **A transfer rule.** The account must explain why treatment of the substitute exhausts rather than merely accompanies the wrongdoer's liability. Appointment, consent, and representation are inputs to such a rule, not the rule's conclusion.
4. **A completion rule.** The theory must identify the property by which the passion completes the stated penalty. If worth, intensity, or status replaces duration or kind, the relevance of that replacement must be defended.
5. **A distinction among satisfaction, pardon, and commutation.** If the authority changes the requirement, the result should be described as release under a new rule rather than literal completion of the old one.

6. **Failure conditions.** The theory must say what would count as inadequate representation, invalid imputation, insufficient treatment, or failed satisfaction. If every possible arrangement is sufficient whenever declared sufficient, the doctrine is an assertion of authority, not an explanation of justice.

These conditions do not prejudice the answer. They locate it. A defender could reject strict retribution, reinterpret the penalty, develop a robust corporate-responsibility theory, argue for a specific non-fungible relation between divine status and sanction, or adopt a plural atonement model. The paper's challenge is not that revision is forbidden. It is that revision must not be advertised as though no defining commitment changed.

13 Conclusion

The familiar circumventions do not jointly rescue standard Penal Substitutionary Atonement. Imputation can create a legal status but does not transfer historical agency. Vicarious punishment can separate the penal target from the physical recipient but still needs a justice-conferring discharge rule. Representation, consent, communal identity, and union explain association or authorization without automatically exhausting personal desert. Infinite worth and compressed intensity change the metric without showing that the stated sanction is complete. The two-natures reply identifies a bearer without providing the conversion. Divine fiat can release the guilty by pardon, commutation, or constitutive rule, but then strict penal satisfaction was not necessary. Mystery suspends explanation; proof texts and tradition underdetermine the mechanism; resurrection certifies completion only after completion is assumed. Hybrid models gain coherence by distributing the work beyond PSA.

The cumulative result is stronger than any one objection. Every route either leaves an independent transfer or completion bridge missing, or revises the very commitment it was introduced to preserve. Combining the routes combines their theological resources; it does not make the unearned inference disappear.

This conclusion does not establish that the crucifixion has no religious meaning, that Christianity has no coherent doctrine of reconciliation, or that every conceivable future penal model must fail. It shows that the standard package is not already coherent merely because sophisticated labels surround the gap. A defender must choose: preserve personal retributive desert and supply the missing bridges, or adopt a different account and name the departure. What cannot survive is the claim that infinite worth, divine authority, representation, and mystery are explanations simply because each can be placed where an explanation should be.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Ordinary-language reconstruction

- P1.** A familiar repair warrants standard PSA only if it both supplies an independently justified transfer-and-completion bridge and preserves the doctrine's core claims of personal desert, innocent penal substitution, liability discharge, and penalty completion.
- P2.** Every familiar repair examined here either fails to supply that independently justified bridge or revises at least one of those core claims.
- P3.** Therefore none of the familiar repairs, as presently defended, warrants standard PSA as a coherent account of strict penal satisfaction.

Scope limit. The conclusion concerns the listed repair families and the standard package they are offered to preserve. It does not entail that every future theory is impossible, that every non-penal account fails, or that Christianity is false.

The inference is deductively valid: if warrant requires a repair with both properties, and every repair lacks at least one property, then warrant from those repairs does not obtain. The second premise is substantive rather than purely logical. Its support comes from the preservation audit in the body and remains open to defeat by a repair that actually supplies both bridges without changing the core.

A.2 Symbols

- $\mathcal{R}$: the set of familiar repair families examined in this paper;
- $J(r)$: repair r supplies an independently justified transfer-and-completion bridge;
- $P(r)$: repair r preserves the core PSA bundle rather than revising one of its defining claims;
- W : the familiar repairs warrant standard PSA as a coherent account of strict penal satisfaction.

A.3 Symbolic form

The bridge requirement can be written:

$$W \rightarrow \exists r \in \mathcal{R} [J(r) \wedge P(r)]. \quad (1)$$

Plain-English annotation. If the familiar defenses really warrant standard PSA, at least one repair in the examined set must do both jobs: justify the missing bridge and preserve the doctrine it is meant to save. A repair that does only one job is not enough.

The audit's substantive finding can be written:

$$\forall r \in \mathcal{R} [\neg J(r) \vee \neg P(r)]. \quad (2)$$

Plain-English annotation. For every familiar repair, at least one problem remains. Either the repair does not justify the transfer-and-completion bridge, or it gains coherence by changing a core PSA claim. This line summarizes the tabled analysis; logic alone does not prove it.

By De Morgan's law, equation (2) is equivalent to:

$$\neg \exists r \in \mathcal{R} [J(r) \wedge P(r)]. \quad (3)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation (3) says the same thing more compactly: there is no repair in the examined set that both justifies the bridge and preserves the whole package. It does not say that no imaginable future repair could ever do so.

Equations (1) and (3) yield the bounded conclusion by modus tollens:

$$\therefore \neg W. \quad (4)$$

Plain-English annotation. Because warrant from the familiar repairs would require at least one successful preserving repair, and the audit finds none, those repairs do not presently warrant standard PSA. The conclusion is about explanatory success, not the metaphysical impossibility of every atonement theory.

Every defined symbol appears in the inference: $\mathcal{R}$ bounds the audited repairs, $J(r)$ marks bridge justification, $P(r)$ marks doctrinal preservation, and W states the exact warranted conclusion under assessment. The formal validity lies in the move from (1) and (3) to (4). The live debate lies in equation (2), which a defender must overturn by producing a repair for which both $J(r)$ and $P(r)$ are true.

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