

**PENAL SUBSTITUTION  
AS AN UNDIVIDED WORK  
OF THE TRIUNE GOD**

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In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas explains,

There are two reasons why the knowledge of the divine persons was necessary for us. It was necessary for the right idea of creation.... In another way, and chiefly, that we may think rightly concerning the salvation of the human race, accomplished by the incarnate Son, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas is not merely reminding his readers that the divine persons cooperate in accomplishing salvation. He is making a much stronger claim—namely, that the Trinity and salvation are inseparably linked in such a way that how one thinks about the Trinity directly affects one’s understanding of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to explore Aquinas’s claim that thinking rightly about the Trinity is necessary for thinking rightly about salvation. To this end, I want to show how one fundamental element of the Trinitarian faith confessed by the church—namely, the undivided operation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—can help us rightly articulate scriptural teaching regarding the atoning work of Christ. As a test case for my thesis, I will examine the doctrine of penal substitution.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, penal substitution has

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q.32, a.1, ad.3, in *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (repr., Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 170.

<sup>2</sup>The converse is true as well. For helpful discussion of the relationship between Trinity and salvation, see Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); and John Webster, “‘It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him’: Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Murray A. Rae (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 15–34.

<sup>3</sup>Penal substitution teaches that through his death on the cross, the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, took upon himself, as our substitute, the penalty for human sin and satisfied God’s justice. The penal death of the incarnate Son flowed from the unified purpose of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Helpful explanations of penal substitution can be found in J. I. Packer’s 1973 Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture titled, “What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” published in J. I. Packer and

been criticized (among other reasons) for offering a deficient account of the atonement from a Trinitarian perspective. In conversation with John Owen,<sup>4</sup> I will argue that inseparable operation not only addresses Trinitarian criticisms of penal substitution but also helps us rightly articulate the saving work of Christ.

My discussion is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will summarize “Trinitarian” criticisms of penal substitution. In the second section, I will outline Christian teaching regarding the undivided operation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, showing how the divine persons work together in every facet of the work of Christ (i.e., his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, enthronement). In the final section, I will show how the undivided action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provides the context for a proper account of penal substitution. I will close by considering what we can learn from Trinitarian critics of penal substitution.

### I. TRINITARIAN CRITICISMS OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION

In recent years, the doctrine of penal substitution has been criticized from a number of angles. Critics assert that penal substitution lacks biblical support, distorts the character of God (by ascribing retributive justice to God), wrongly assumes guilt can be transferred from one person to another, is inconsistent with the ethical teaching of Jesus, severs the life of Jesus from his death on the cross, reflects modern individualism, legitimizes violence, does not encourage Christian discipleship, is pastorally dangerous, and provides no resources to address pressing global challenges.<sup>5</sup>

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Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); and Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>There are four reasons I selected John Owen as a conversation partner. First, Owen’s theology is robustly Trinitarian. Second, he clearly affirms the inseparable operation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Third, he affirms penal substitution. Finally, Owen thoughtfully addresses “Trinitarian” criticisms of this doctrine.

<sup>5</sup>These criticisms can be found in Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011); Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Tom Smail, *Once and for All: A Confession of the Cross* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); and select essays in Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). Responses to these criticisms can be found in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1996); David Peterson, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001); Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological and Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004); Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*; select essays in Tidball, Hilborn, and Thacker,

One recurring criticism alleges that penal substitution represents a “sub-Trinitarian” account of the atonement. I was first introduced to this criticism while pursuing doctoral study at Duke Divinity School. During a church history lecture, J. Warren Smith explained that penal substitution represents a deficient view of the atonement, developed by nineteenth-century evangelicals, in which an angry father has a cathartic moment on his son.

The central Trinitarian concern driving the aforementioned criticism is the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Critics insist that penal substitution undermines the unity of the divine persons by introducing an unacceptable division (or separation) between the Father and the Son. Some critics see in penal substitution a problematic *division of attributes* between the Father and Son. This happens when proponents of penal substitution allegedly attribute love to the Son and wrath to the Father (e.g., a loving Son attempting to win over a sulking Father).<sup>6</sup> Since attributes like love, mercy, and holiness are shared by all the divine persons, any division of attributes is inconsistent with the unity of God. Other critics frame the Trinitarian problem in terms of a *division of will* between the Father and Son. This concern animates the “divine child abuse” objection.<sup>7</sup> As Steven Chalke explains, “The cross is not a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he did not commit.”<sup>8</sup> The assumption here is that penal substitution entails the view that the Father acts unilaterally on the Son apart from the Son’s consent. One critic expresses this concern forcefully: “In penal substitution perspective, the cross involves the Father acting against or upon the Son and so reveals God divided against himself.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, building on the previous point, some

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eds., *The Atonement Debate*; and Steve Holmes, “Can Punishment Bring Peace? Penal Substitution Revisited,” *SJT* 58 (2005): 104–23.

<sup>6</sup>“We must face the reality that, even when it is articulated by its most careful and sophisticated adherents, penal substitutionary atonement remains susceptible to misunderstanding and even bizarre caricature. Accordingly, the drama of the death of Jesus becomes a manifestation of God’s anger—with God as the distant Father who punishes his own son in order to appease his own indignation” (Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal*, 30).

<sup>7</sup>Another concern that animates the “divine child abuse” criticism is a belief that penal substitution legitimizes the violence of parents upon their children: “Particularly appalling is the traditional view that God is responsible for Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice on the cross. This depiction of ‘divine’ or ‘cosmic child abuse,’ as some have named it, wrongly exalts suffering and paves the way for parental mistreatment” (Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, Families and Faith Series [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003], 38).

<sup>8</sup>Steven Chalke, “The Redemption of the Cross,” in *The Atonement Debate*, 34.

<sup>9</sup>Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 293. Similarly, “In the end we find in Pauline discourse the unrelenting affirmation of the oneness of purpose and activity of God and God’s Son in the cross. Thus any atonement theology that assumes that in the cross God did something ‘to’ Jesus is not only an affront to the Christian doctrine of the triune God but also stands in tension with Paul’s clear affirmation in Romans 5” (Green and Baker, *Scandal of the Cross*, 83). See also Smail, *Once and for All*, 86–87.

critics express concern regarding the subject/object relation that obtains between the Father and Son in the cross. The Father (subject) acts on the Son (object). This kind of subject/object distinction is inconsistent both with NT teaching and an orthodox confession of the Trinity. As one critic explains,

This language [of penal substitution] suggests a picture of the Triune God in which the Son is a “detachable person” of the Godhead—from whom the Father can separate himself and remove himself to a distance, over against whom the Father can stand, and upon whom the Father can act for his own sake to satisfy himself.<sup>10</sup>

With these three criticisms in mind, we are now ready to explore the inseparable operation of the divine persons.

## II. UNDIVIDED OPERATION AND THE WORK OF CHRIST

One of the core elements of the Trinitarian faith confessed (historically) by the church is the reality that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act inseparably.<sup>11</sup> This is expressed in the Latin axiom: *opera ad extra Trinitatis sunt indivisa*: “the external works of the Trinity are undivided.”<sup>12</sup> It is my contention that inseparable operation plays a key role in articulating a balanced scriptural account of the work of Christ.<sup>13</sup> In the discussion that follows, I will describe inseparable operation, draw attention to the way it has been affirmed throughout the history of the church, and relate it to the work of Christ.

Inseparable operation entails the following: (1) that all the divine persons are involved in every act of creation, providence, and redemption and (2) that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one will and execute one power.<sup>14</sup> Inseparable operation is a direct

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<sup>10</sup>Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 293. Paul Fiddes registers a similar concern: “One of the problems of a theory of penal substitution is that it depends for its logic upon a strong individualisation of Father and Son as independent subjects” (*Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989], 108).

<sup>11</sup>In the explanation of inseparable operation outlined below, I draw on two earlier discussions in Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment*, Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 116–19; and idem, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” *Them* 36 (2011): 14–16.

<sup>12</sup>External works represent actions of the divine persons in creation, providence, and redemption, while internal works represent actions of one divine person toward another (e.g., the Father eternally begetting the Son or the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and Son).

<sup>13</sup>In this essay, I will use the terms “inseparable operation” and “undivided operation” interchangeably.

<sup>14</sup>Inseparable operation should not be confused with “modalism.” Modalism (or Sabellianism) is a Trinitarian heresy that denies the hypostatic distinctions among the divine persons.

implication of intra-Trinitarian unity (i.e., monotheism). Implicit in the doctrine of inseparable operation is the recognition that the divine persons are not agents in the same ways human beings are. Because of the creator/creature distinction, God's actions possess a unique kind of unity for which no human analogy can easily be given.<sup>15</sup>

John 5 provides a helpful window into the inseparable working of the Father and Son. The Jewish leaders were criticizing Jesus for "working" (healing) on the Sabbath (5:16). In response to criticisms of his Sabbath-observance (or apparent lack thereof), Jesus answers, "My Father is working until now, and I am working" (5:17).<sup>16</sup> Jesus directly equates his Sabbath-healing work with the continuous and providential work of the Father. He invites his opponents to see in his healing the unified agency of the Father and the Son.<sup>17</sup> This narrative is followed by a discourse in which Jesus defends his Sabbath-healing activity by appealing to the unique relationship he shares with the Father (5:19-47). For our purposes, it will be sufficient simply to look at v. 19: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." The reason the Son does nothing on his own is not because of any inferiority on the part of the Son. Rather it is because the Father and the Son do the same work, yet the Son's work is *from* the Father.<sup>18</sup> For example, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son raises the dead and gives them life (John 5:21).

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<sup>15</sup>As Adonis Vidu rightly notes, "God is not an agent like any other agent. In other words, God does not 'do things' the way you and I do things. He has a unique relationship to his actions. His actions spring uniquely from his nature. Finally, his actions have a unity about them not shared with other human actions" (*Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 240).

<sup>16</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations will be taken from the ESV.

<sup>17</sup>"He speaks that we may recognize in him the power of the Father's nature employing the nature that has that power to work on the Sabbath. The Father works in him while he works. Without doubt, then, Jesus works along with the working of the Father" (Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 9.44, in *New Testament: John 1-10*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, vol. 4a of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006], 186).

<sup>18</sup>Patristic commentators rightly note that equality of work implies equality of nature. Commenting on this text, Cyril of Alexandria explains, "Since he is able to accomplish the works of God the Father and to work in concert with the One who begot him, he reveals the identity of his essence. For things that have the same nature with one another will work alike. But for those who do not share a common nature, their mode of working will not be the same. Therefore, as true God of true God the Father, he says that he can do those things equally with him" (*Commentary on John* 2.6 in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 4a:189). Commenting on the same passage, Augustine explains, "Now we understand that the Father does not do something separately, which, when the Son has seen it, he, too, does after having examined the work of the Father.... Rather, with the same power the Son does the very same things that the Father does when the Father does them through the Son" (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 21.2 in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 4a:190).

Another window into the undivided operation of the divine persons can be seen in John 14:9–11. In response to Philip’s request that he show them the Father (15:8), Jesus makes a startling claim: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9b). On what basis does Jesus make this claim? First, he points Philip to the mutual indwelling of the Son and Father: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (14:10a).<sup>19</sup> A second reason the person who sees Jesus sees the Father is because the work of Jesus is also the work of the Father: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, *but the Father who dwells in me does his works*” (14:10b, emphasis added). The Father working through the Son points toward their unity of operation. A parallel exists in these verses between the Son’s mode of existence (i.e., mutual indwelling, 14:10a) and the Son’s mode of operation (i.e., the Father working through him, 14:10b). Thus, we should not think of the work of the Father and Son as two separate workings but one inseparable working.

As we discuss their unified work, it is important to recognize that inseparable operation does not exhaust everything Scripture teaches regarding the work of the divine persons. Divine agency is not reducible to inseparable operation. An irreversible order also shapes the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although the divine persons act inseparably, they do so in an ordered way. For example, Scripture teaches the Father created *through* the Son (Heb 1:2; John 1:1–3; 1 Cor 8:6–8; Col 1:16). We never read of the Son creating through the Father.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the undivided work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we see a recurring pattern: every action proceeds from the Father through the Son and is completed in the Holy Spirit. We should not be surprised to encounter such a pattern when we remember that the manner of working of the divine persons reflects their manner of existing. Stating this formally, we might say the temporal mode of *operation* of the three divine persons in the economy of salvation reflects their eternal mode of *subsisting*. Hence, a robust scriptural account of divine agency involves two elements. On the one hand, the working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is inseparably the work of the three (*ad extra*). On the other hand, in this single act, the divine persons work according to their relative properties (*ad intra*). The Father acts with the other divine

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<sup>19</sup>That the divine persons mutually indwell one another points to their unity of essence (cf. John 1:1; 10:30).

<sup>20</sup>A similar pattern can be seen in the accomplishment of salvation. The Father sends the Son (Matt 10:40; Luke 4:43; 10:16; John 3:16; 5:23–24, 30–47; 6:38–44, 57; 7:16, 28–29; Gal 4:4–6) and the Father and Son together send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 15:26). In the unfolding of the blessings of salvation narrated in Eph 1, these spiritual blessings have their ultimate source in the Father (1:3); they come to believers through the work of the Son (seen most clearly in the repeated references to being “in Christ”); and finally, they are applied to God’s children by the Holy Spirit (1:13–14). Similarly, in Eph 2:18, Paul explains that believers have access to the Father *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit.

persons according to his mode of being “from no one” (unbegotten). The Son acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being “from the Father” (generation). The Spirit acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being “from the Father and the Son” (procession). Combining these two elements we might say that the divine persons act inseparably through the intra-Trinitarian *taxis*: from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Inseparable operation has been affirmed throughout the history of the church. For example, it represents a key element of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology. As he explains in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, “The works of the Father and the Son are inseparable.... Just as the Father himself and the Son himself are inseparable, so also the works of the Father and Son are inseparable.”<sup>22</sup> That the divine persons work inseparably is an assumption Augustine shares not only with the Latin pro-Nicene tradition but also with the Greek-speaking theologians of the East.<sup>23</sup> For example, in his “Answer to Ablabius,” Gregory of Nyssa explains:

We do not learn that the Father does something on his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the word for the operation is not divided among the persons involved. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs, whether in reference to God’s providence for us or the government and

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<sup>21</sup>For a helpful discussion of Trinitarian agency, see Giles Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples: Sapientia, 2007), 115–53. As Emery explains, “The three persons act in one same action, but each performs this action in the distinct mode of his personal relation, that is, according to his proper ‘mode of existing’ in accordance with the Trinitarian order. The Father acts as the source of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the Son acts as Word of the Father, the Holy Spirit acts as Love and Gift of the Father and Son” (ibid., 138). See also John Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 4–19.

<sup>22</sup>Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 11–27, vol. 79 of *Fathers of the Church*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 166.

<sup>23</sup>“Although this doctrine is fundamental to late fourth-century, orthodox, Latin theology, it is important that we do not think of ‘inseparable operation’ as a peculiarly Latin phenomena. The inseparable operation of the three irreducible persons is a fundamental axiom of those theologies which provide the context for the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 and for the reinterpretation of Nicaea, which came to be the foundation of orthodox or catholic theology at the end of the fourth century. It is a principle found in all the major orthodox Greek theologians of the later fourth and fifth centuries, and enters later Orthodox tradition through such figures as John of Damascus in the eighth century” (Lewis Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless [New York: Routledge, 2000], 56; idem, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 280).

constitution of the universe, occurs through the three Persons, and is not three separate things.<sup>24</sup>

Medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas also affirm inseparable operation. Notice how this assumption shapes his explanation of the causality of the divine persons in creation: “And therefore to create belongs to God according to his being, that is, His essence, which is common to the three persons. Hence to create is not proper to one Person, but is common to the whole Trinity.”<sup>25</sup> Because the divine persons are one, they work as one. This is why actions like creation cannot be attributed exclusively to one divine person. Similar accounts of divine agency can be found among post-Reformation theologians.<sup>26</sup> As John Owen explains, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are

undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence.<sup>27</sup>

Having examined the inseparable operation of the divine persons, we will consider how their undivided action relates to the work of Christ (i.e., his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and enthronement). We will begin by briefly examining a sermon Augustine preached on Matt 3:13–17.<sup>28</sup> Augustine begins by observing that the baptism of Jesus manifests all the divine persons: “So we have the three, somehow or other, clearly distinguished: in the voice the Father, in the man the Son, in the dove the Holy Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Although it may strike contemporary readers as unusual, “separate” revelation of the divine persons poses a problem for Augustine: “Now someone may say to me, ‘Demonstrate that the

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<sup>24</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, “An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, LCC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1954), 261–62.

<sup>25</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 6, in *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, 1:237.

<sup>26</sup>See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (1899; repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 129–59; Richard A. Muller, *The Triunity of God*, vol. 4 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 255–74; and Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 105–32.

<sup>27</sup>John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, vol. 3 of *Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1965), 93.

<sup>28</sup>English citations from Sermon 52 will be taken from Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 3.3, *Sermons III (51–94) on the New Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn: New City, 1991).

<sup>29</sup>Augustine, *Sermon 52.1*, 50.



three are inseparable. Remember you're speaking as a Catholic, speaking to Catholics."<sup>30</sup> How does one reconcile inseparable operation with the apparently "separable" manifestation of the divine persons at Jesus's baptism?

After reminding his audience of the scriptural basis for inseparable operation, Augustine restates the problem:

If the Father does nothing without the Son and the Son nothing without the Father, won't it follow, presumably, that we have to say the Father too was born of the Virgin Mary, the Father suffered under Pontius Pilate, the Father rose again and ascended into heaven?<sup>31</sup>

He faces a theological dilemma. It appears that he must either abandon his claim that the Son never acts without the Father or he must acknowledge that the Father suffered, died, and rose again. After dismissing both options, Augustine explains,

The Son indeed, and not the Father, was born of the Virgin Mary; but this birth of the Son, not the Father, from the Virgin Mary was the work of both Father and Son. It was not indeed the Father, but the Son who suffered; yet the suffering of the Son was the work of both Father and Son. It wasn't the Father who rose again, but the Son; yet the resurrection of the Son was the work of both Father and Son.<sup>32</sup>

Having stated his solution, Augustine then demonstrates from Scripture that the birth, death, and resurrection of the Son are the joint work of the Father and Son. Although it was only the Son who was born, Scripture teaches that the birth of Son was the joint work of the Father and the Son. Galatians 4:4-6 teaches that the Father brought about the birth of the Son while Phil 2:6-7 teaches that the Son brought about his own birth (by emptying himself and taking the form of a servant). Although it was only the Son who died on the cross, Scripture teaches that the passion of the Son was the joint work of the Father and the Son. While Rom 8:32 teaches that the passion of the Son was brought about by the purpose of the Father, Gal 2:20 teaches that the Son brought about his own death. Finally, although it was only the Son who rose from the dead, Scripture affirms that the resurrection of the Son was the joint work of the Father and the Son. According to Phil 2:9, it was the Father who raised the Son. According to John 2:19 and 10:18, the Son raised himself.

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<sup>30</sup>Augustine, *Sermon* 52.2, 51.

<sup>31</sup>Augustine, *Sermon* 52.6, 52-53.

<sup>32</sup>Augustine, *Sermon* 52.8, 53-54. Augustine offers this same explanation in other places in his writings (cf. *De trinitate*).

John Owen builds on this grammar of Trinitarian operation in his explanation of Christ's saving work.<sup>33</sup> One clear window into the undivided work of the divine persons can be seen in Owen's discussion of the resurrection in his massive work on the ministry of the Holy Spirit (*Pneumatologia*). Owen notes that the resurrection of Christ is "assigned distinctly [in Scripture] to each person in the Trinity": the Father, in Acts 2:24; the Son, in John 10:17-18; and the Holy Spirit, in 1 Pet 3:18.<sup>34</sup> Owen identifies two reasons Scripture assigns the resurrection to each of the divine persons. First, the external works of the Trinity are "undivided."<sup>35</sup> Second, the resurrection is attributed to each of the divine persons on "account of their especial respect unto and interest in the work of redemption."<sup>36</sup> Scripture relates the resurrection to the Father on account of his role as supreme judge removing the sentence of the law (Acts 2:24).<sup>37</sup> Scripture relates the resurrection to the Son because of his role as mediator (John 10:17-18).<sup>38</sup> Finally, Scripture relates the resurrection to the Holy Spirit because of the Spirit's efficacy in reuniting the soul and body of the incarnate Son (1 Pet 3:18; Rom 1:4; 8:11; 1 Tim 3:16).<sup>39</sup> This grammar of Trinitarian agency can be extended, in principle, to every facet of Christ's work—his incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, exaltation, enthronement, session, and second coming. With this understanding of undivided operation in place, we are now in a position to respond to Trinitarian criticisms of penal substitution.

### III. UNDIVIDED OPERATION AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION

The inseparable operation of the divine persons has four implications for penal substitution. First, it implies that the Father and Son (along with the Holy Spirit) jointly willed the death of the incarnate Son. If we merely concentrate on biblical texts focusing on the Father's role in sending the Son, we might get a distorted picture of the agency of the divine persons. It is important to hold together everything Scripture affirms regarding the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Alongside texts focusing on the Father's role in "sending" the Son (John 3:16; Rom 8:32), we must also remember

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<sup>33</sup>For a helpful discussion of Owen's understanding of inseparable operation, see Tyler R. Wittman, "The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency and Christology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2013): 284-300. A dispute exists over Owen's understanding of inseparable operation in relation to earlier tradition. Wittman argues that Owen held a traditional (Augustinian) understanding of the agency of the divine persons.

<sup>34</sup>Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 181.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 181-82.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 182-83.

that the Son's decision to become our substitute was his own. Anticipating his death (and resurrection), Jesus explains,

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:17-18)

Thus, with the Methodist theologian William Burt Pope we can rightly affirm,

It was not an atonement offered to one Person in the Trinity by Another witnessed by a Third. The Son Incarnate came to do the will of God: His own will, and the will of the Holy Ghost, as much as the will of the Father.<sup>40</sup>

Recognizing their unity of will protects us from imagining that the Father imposed his will on the Son or that the Son attempted to win over an unwilling Father. The former error is reflected in an evangelistic illustration I was taught to use in witnessing. Imagine a father who has the responsibility of operating a bridge over which commuter trains regularly run. While the bridge is raised, the operator's son begins playing in the gear area. Unfortunately, a train full of passengers is speeding toward the bridge at the same time. The father faces a horrible dilemma: allow his son to be crushed by the gears or allow a train full of passengers to perish. The father chooses to save the passengers on the train and, in the process, takes the life of his son. Although it clearly illustrates the concept of substitution, this illustration does not accurately reflect scriptural teaching regarding the unity of the Father and Son in the cross. Contrary to Scripture, it suggests a division of purpose between the Father and Son.<sup>41</sup>

Penal substitution, however, posits no division of will between the Father and Son.<sup>42</sup> Notice how John Owen carefully affirms the unified work of the Father and Son in the cross:

If the Lord Christ, according to the will of the Father, and by his own counsel and choice, was *substituted*, and did *substitute* himself, as the mediator of the covenant, in the room and in the stead of sinners, that they might be saved, and therein bare their sins, or the punishment due unto their sins, by undergoing the curse and penalty of the law, and therein also, according to the will of God,

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<sup>40</sup>William Burt Pope, *Compendium of Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889; Hong Kong: Forgotten Books, 2012), 102.

<sup>41</sup>A better illustration might involve a father and son jointly together choosing to sacrifice the life of the son in order to save the people on the train.

<sup>42</sup>Not only does the cosmic child abuse criticism assume a division of purpose between the Father and Son but it also wrongly assumes that divine persons possess multiple wills.

offered up himself for a propitiatory, expiatory sacrifice, to make atonement for sin, and reconciliation for sinners, that the justice of God being appeased, and the law fulfilled, they might go free, or be delivered from the wrath to come; and if therein, also, he paid a real satisfactory price for their redemption; then he made satisfaction to God for sin: for these are the things that we intend by that expression of satisfaction.<sup>43</sup>

In this rich description of the Son's atoning work, Owen carefully elucidates the agency of the Father and Son, using the active and passive voice with the verb "to substitute." Christ "was substituted" (according to the Father's will) and "did substitute himself" (by his own counsel) that he might make satisfaction for human sin.<sup>44</sup>

Second, the love that sent the incarnate Son to the cross was the undivided love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Fundamental to the Trinitarian faith of the church is a distinction between common and personal properties. Common properties are shared by all the divine persons. Examples include holiness, aseity, eternity, simplicity, sovereignty, grace, justice, will, and mercy. Personal properties are proper to one of the divine persons in such a way that they constitute the basis for distinguishing one divine person from another.<sup>45</sup> Historically, Christian theologians have recognized three

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<sup>43</sup>Owen, *Of the Satisfaction of Christ*, in *Works*, 2:425. Following this summary, Owen makes three additional points: (1) this satisfaction flowed "from the will, purpose, and love of God the Father" (Ps 40:6-8; Heb 10:5-7; Acts 4:28; John 3:16; Rom 8:3); (2) it was accomplished by the "voluntary consent" of the Son (Phil 2:6-8); and (3) Christ "was substituted, and did substitute himself, as the mediator of the covenant, in the room and stead of sinners, that they may be saved" (ibid.).

<sup>44</sup>To rightly read this statement, we need to remember that for Owen, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not possess three separate wills. Will is an attribute of the divine nature. This will is shared by the divine persons according to their mode of subsistence. The Father possesses the will according to his mode of being from no one. The Son possesses the will according to his mode of being from the Father. The Spirit possesses the will according to his mode of being from the Father and Son. We misread Owen if we assume three separate wills. Another important context for Owen's understanding of the divine will in salvation is his account of the eternal covenant among the divine persons (i.e., *pactum salutis*). This eternal covenant reflects the fundamental unity of divine persons. For an overview of Owen's teaching on the *pactum salutis*, see Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 67-99. Owen made an important contribution to Reformed discussion of the *pactum salutis* by explicitly including the Holy Spirit (ibid., 86). This reflected his understanding that all the divine persons are involved in every act of God *ad extra* and corrected an earlier tendency to see the covenant of redemption merely in terms of the Father and Son.

<sup>45</sup>As John Owen explains, "The *distinction* which the Scripture reveals between Father, Son, and Spirit, is that whereby they are three hypostases or persons, distinctly subsisting in the same divine essence or being. Now, a divine person is nothing but *the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner*. As in the person of the Father there is the divine essence and being, with its property of *begetting the Son*, subsisting in an especial manner as the Father, and because this person has the whole divine nature, all the essential properties of that nature are in that person" (*A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *Works*, 2:407 [emphasis original]).

personal properties: “paternity” (Father), “filiation” (Son), and “procession” (Holy Spirit).

Love is not a personal property; it is a common property.<sup>46</sup> Thus, as one theologian rightly explains,

The divine attributes that required and provided an atonement are the attributes of the three persons: there can be no distinction between the holiness and love of the Father and the holiness and love of the Son.<sup>47</sup>

The claims of critics notwithstanding, penal substitution does not teach that a “loving” Son had to win over an “angry” Father. Scripture is clear that the death of Christ jointly reflects the love of the Father (Rom 5:8; 8:31-39; Eph 1:4-5; John 3:16; 1 John 3:1-2), the love of the Son (Rom 8:31-39; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25-26), as well as love of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5; 15:30).<sup>48</sup> Notice how Owen affirms the unity of love between the Father and Son in the cross:

That *this love was the same in Father and Son*, acted distinctly in the manner that shall be afterward declared; so, vain are the pretenses of men, who, from the love of the Father in this matter, would argue against the love of the Son, or on the contrary.<sup>49</sup>

As an essential (common) attribute, the Father and Son share the same love:

The love of the Father in sending of the Son was an act of his will; which being a natural and essential property of God, it was so far the act of the Son also, as he is partaker of the same nature, though

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<sup>46</sup>It is true, however, that in the theological tradition exemplified by Augustine (and later by Aquinas), love is associated with the person of the Holy Spirit. Augustine spoke of the Holy Spirit as the “bond of love” between the Father and Son. Aquinas understood the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit as a procession of love.

<sup>47</sup>Pope, *Compendium of Theology*, 101.

<sup>48</sup>“God the Father did not stand aloof from the cross of Christ. It is God’s heartbreak for the sins of the world that is demonstrated there. At this point, the depth of the love of God the Father for the world he created through his Son and by his Spirit becomes clear. From first to last, God’s dealings with fallen humanity have been characterised by his love. After the Fall, God came seeking Adam in the Garden of Eden. In fact, Ephesians 1:4-5 speaks of his love for us reaching back ‘before the creation of the world.’ The extent of this love leads him to take action, to give his Son to take away the sins of the world (John 3:16) and to make us children of God (1 John 3:1-2). It is the longing of the triune God to reconcile the world to himself which is revealed there. We see on the cross, the love of God the Father which led him to give his Son; the love of God the Son which led him to sacrifice himself; and the love of God the Holy Spirit which binds them together in their unity of loving purpose” (David H. McIlroy, “Towards a Relational and Trinitarian Theology of Atonement,” *EvQ* 80 (2008): 28.

<sup>49</sup>Owen, *Of the Satisfaction of Christ*, 421.

eminently, and in respect of order, it was peculiarly the act of the Father.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of this statement, Owen gestures toward the fact that this common love is enacted distinctly by the divine persons in a way that reflects their personal properties. Elsewhere he explains that divine love emanates from the Father as source, flows through the Son, and is communicated to us by the Holy Spirit:

The emanation of divine love to us begins with the Father, is carried on by the Son, and then communicated by the Spirit; the Father designing, the Son purchasing, the Spirit effectually working: which is their order.<sup>51</sup>

Third, the wrath that was satisfied on the cross was the undivided wrath of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as love is a common property, so also is the wrath that was satisfied in the cross (Rom 1:18; 5:9; Eph 2:3). Owen's opponents (Socinians) argued that penal substitution is incoherent not only because it ascribes contradictory motives in God but also because wrath and love are differently ascribed to the Father and Son (i.e., a wrathful Father and a loving Son).<sup>52</sup> Addressing God's wrath, Owen explains,

The anger of God against sin is an effect of his essential righteousness and holiness, which belong to him as God; which yet hinders not but that both Father, and Son, and Spirit, acted love towards sinners.<sup>53</sup>

Scripture attributes wrath both to the Father and the Son (Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4-5; Eph 2:3; 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9; Rev 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1; 19:15).<sup>54</sup> Thus, we see a unity of attributes in the atoning work of Christ.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, inseparable operation helps us think rightly about the subject/object relation in the suffering and death of Christ. Critics insist that penal substitution makes the Father exclusively "subject"

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 436. The reason love is "eminently" appropriated to the Father is because of his role as *principium*—a reality toward which Owen gestures when he says, "in respect of order."

<sup>51</sup>John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 302.

<sup>52</sup>The Socinian position "represents the Son as more kind and compassionate than the Father; whereas if they are both God, then either the Father is as loving as the Son, or the Son as angry as the Father" (Owen, *Of the Satisfaction of Christ*, 435).

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 436.

<sup>54</sup>Many of the OT references to God's wrath (Exod 22:24; 32:10-11; Lev 10:6; Num 16:46; 25:11; Deut 9:8; 2 Kgs 22:13; Ps 2:5-12; 21:9; 78:21) should be seen in relation to the three persons and not merely the Father.

<sup>55</sup>Commenting on the origin of redemption as a "divine transaction," Pope explains, "the Love of the Triune God is its source, the Justice of the Triune God is its necessity, and the Wisdom of the Triune God is its law" (*Compendium of Theology*, 2:293).

in relation to the Son and the Son exclusively “object” in relation to the Father. As one critic explains:

The New Testament portrays Golgotha along two story lines—one with God as subject, the other with Jesus as subject. It will not do, therefore, to characterize the atonement as God’s punishment falling on Christ (i.e., God as subject, Christ as object) or as Christ’s appeasement or persuasion of God (Christ as subject, God as object).<sup>56</sup>

To distinguish the work of the divine persons entirely in terms of a subject/object relationship would undermine their essential unity; nevertheless, penal substitution does not assume that the Son *qua* Son is the “object” of the Father’s action. As we saw above, the decision for the Son to become a propitiation for human sin was a *joint decision* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> The Son, therefore, is “subject” just like the Father.<sup>58</sup> This is precisely Owen’s point when he explains that Christ “according to the will of the Father, and by his own counsel and choice, was *substituted*, and did *substitute* himself.”<sup>59</sup> That all three persons are “subjects” in relation to salvation can be seen in Owen’s explanation of the primary “agent” in salvation:

The agent in, and chief author of, this great work of our redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are

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<sup>56</sup>Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal*, 113. Similarly, “Paul does not treat God as the subject and Jesus as the object of the cross” (*ibid.*, 122).

<sup>57</sup>The subject who delivers Jesus Christ up to death is not the Father alone. For the Trinitarian axiom *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* means that if one does it, they all do it. So it is the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who gives himself over to this experience” (Bruce McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 364).

<sup>58</sup>As John Stott explains, “We must never make Christ the object of God’s punishment or God the object of Christ’s persuasion, for both God and Christ were subjects not objects, taking the initiative together to save sinners” (*The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary ed. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006], 151). Similarly, “It is inherent in this understanding that the death of Christ is not the event that persuades God, otherwise unwilling, to forgive. Rather, the death is purposed and initiated by God himself. The death is the death of God himself, since the Son is one with the Father, and we are correct to see God dying on the cross, as Charles Wesley clearly taught” (I. Howard Marshall, “The Theology of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 59). In their otherwise helpful response to Trinitarian criticisms of penal substitution, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach explain that one divine person of the Trinity can be the “subject of an action of which another is the object” (*Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 131). This position allows them to affirm that Father and Son “are fulfilling different roles in a plan to which both are equally committed” (*ibid.*, 132); however, this move is precisely what inseparable operation rules out. Although they affirm the concept of “inseparable operation,” they appear to understand this principle differently from the way it has been historically articulated in the church. For example, they make no distinction between actions of the divine persons *ad intra* and actions *ad extra*. Moreover, they appear to bracket Christology speaking about “the Son” rather than focusing on the incarnate Son in his human nature.

<sup>59</sup>Owen, *Of the Satisfaction of Christ*, 425.

of the Deity are undivided and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed."<sup>60</sup>

To see the subject/object relationship in proper perspective,<sup>61</sup> it is important that we view it not only in Trinitarian perspective but also within the context of biblical teaching regarding the two natures of Christ. This teaching is helpfully summarized in the Chalcedonian definition (AD 451):

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man.

A distinction between Christ's divine and human natures played a key role for the church fathers in providing a coherent theological account of the suffering of the Son on the cross. How can we say that the eternal Son "suffered" since suffering is a creaturely reality? The church fathers (notably Athanasius) answered that the eternal Son suffered *in his human nature*. To suggest that the Son *qua* God suffered would be to imply that God's nature is somehow deficient and subject to change.<sup>62</sup> Thus, within a Chalcedonian framework, we must affirm that it was not the eternal Son *qua* God who suffered and died in our place but rather the incarnate Son *in his human nature*.<sup>63</sup> In the latter context, the cross should be seen not as a unilateral action of the Father on the eternal Son but rather an action willed by all the divine persons toward the incarnate Son.<sup>64</sup> The Son, therefore, is both

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<sup>60</sup>Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, in *Works*, 10:163.

<sup>61</sup>The subject/object relation that obtains in the cross is far more complicated than critics of penal substitution acknowledge. The discussion that follows simply aims to address criticisms of penal substitution on this point. A full discussion of the subject/object relation vis-à-vis the divine persons is outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>62</sup>Helpful discussions of divine impassibility can be found in Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000); and Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why it Matters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 13–47.

<sup>63</sup>In his explanation of the satisfaction of Christ, Owen reminds his readers that the person substituted for sinners was the incarnate Son: "That the person thus substituted was *the Son of God incarnate*, who had power so to dispose of himself, with will and readiness for it; and was, upon the account of the dignity of his person, able to answer the penalty which all others had incurred and deserved" (*Of the Satisfaction of Christ*, 424).

<sup>64</sup>Although Scripture often appropriates this action to the Father (John 3:16; Rom 8:32; Gal 4:4), this reality does not exclude the other persons. As I argued above, the divine persons enact a single agency in creation, providence, and redemption. Thus, when a biblical text mentions one divine person, this should not be seen as excluding the others: "It is to make us aware of the trinity that some things are even said about the persons singly by name; however, they must not be understood in the sense of excluding the other persons, because this same three is also one, and there is one substance and godhead of Father and Son and Holy Spirit" (Augustine, *De trinitate* I.19, in St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill [Brooklyn: New City, 1991], 79).



object *and* subject of the events that constitute his passion.<sup>65</sup> He is the subject from the standpoint of his divine nature (as the one who willed his death), while he is the object from the standpoint of his human nature (as the one who suffered on our behalf). This is the meaning of penal substitution from a Trinitarian perspective.<sup>66</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thomas Aquinas was right: Trinity and salvation are inseparably linked. By reminding us of the intimate relationship that exists between the divine persons and Christ's atoning work, critics of penal substitution have done us a favor. Although their criticisms miss the mark in the case of classical accounts of penal substitution (e.g., John Owen), their concern regarding the unity of the divine persons nevertheless is legitimate. These critics rightly remind us that one cannot dismiss key aspects of Trinitarian doctrine without deleteriously affecting one's theology of salvation.

Through his death on the cross, the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, took upon himself, as our substitute, the penalty for human sin and satisfied God's justice. The penal death of the incarnate Son flowed from the undivided eternal purpose of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have seen that penal substitution is dependent on the unified operation of the divine persons in such a way that one cannot coherently reject inseparable operation and affirm penal substitution.

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<sup>65</sup>Here again we have to think through the situation of penal substitution in a more integrated way that abandons the logic of an action of the eternal Father upon the eternal Son. Jesus Christ is both the subject and the object of what happens in his passion and death. He is the subject because the outpouring of wrath in the event of the cross is not the unilateral act of God the Father (as though such a thing were even possible). It is the act of the triune God and therefore the act of the God-human as well. He is the subject even as he makes himself to be the object upon whose body and in whose soul a sentence is carried out. He is the subject of his own passion, not just in the sense that all that happened in Jerusalem on that final weekend was received by him willingly (which might still leave him passive), but in the sense that his earthly trial and execution was the medium in and through which he himself was actively judging a sinful human race and executing a just judgment. So the proper meaning of 'penal substitution' is that the penalty that God as Judge willed to be the consequence of human sin is a penalty that God himself (the triune God in the person of the Son) takes upon himself" (McCormack, "The Ontological Presuppositions," 366).

<sup>66</sup>In a chapter titled, "Atonement and the Perfection of the Divine Agency," Vidu argues that a proper understanding of divine agency (informed by the doctrine of divine simplicity) plays a key role in affirming penal substitution (*Atonement, Law, and Justice*, 235-72). Vidu's argument parallels and compliments the argument I have outlined above. Inseparable operation is part of what Vidu calls "the perfection of divine agency."