

The Atonement Debate within Contemporary Evangelicalism

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The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love". If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil. (The Lost Message of Jesus by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann p182-183)

It was this quote from a brief section, in the last chapter of a short book that turned academic debate into public controversy. Over the last 20 years there had been developing within British and North American evangelical academia a discussion over what is the correct way to understand the work of Christ on the cross? The chief concern was the status of the doctrine of penal substitution, is it the best model? The only model? Is it scriptural? Is it helpful or harmful?

The Lost Message of Jesus by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann and Steve's subsequent article on the atonement in the Christianity magazine fathered mountains of correspondence, an EA sponsored debate then in July 2005 a 3 day symposium at the London School of Theology. In the latest edition of **Idea** (March/April 2006) it reports The Evangelical Alliance's Board statement clarifying its position on the atonement which makes clear that the revised basis of faith adopted in September 2005 is to be understood as affirming Jesus' death as offering penal substitutionary atonement.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the thinking that has led some who would see themselves as evangelical to doubt the validity of the penal substitution explanation of atonement. A particular focus will be the book by Joel B Green and Mark D Baker, **Recovering the Scandal of the Cross** though it will not be limited to just that. [In the autumn 2004 the Research Seminar of the London School of Theology used this book as the basis of a terms discussion]. Other books that at least in part reflect this thinking are Tom Smail's, **Windows on the Cross**, the St John's College Symposium lectures in **Atonement Today** edited by John Goldingay and, **Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society** by Alan Mann. The IVP **Dictionary of Jesus and**

the Gospels and its companion volumes have articles that follow this line of thinking.

One benefit of this controversy is the stimulus it has given to serious thought on the central fact of 'Christ crucified' for us. The provocation to think through again, at depth, what scripture teaches was involved in God reconciling us to himself and to consider how we can effectively communicate this saving message to a dying world.

The outline of this paper is as follows: by way of introduction and setting the scene I will outline the biblical data that provide the building blocks for the doctrine of the atonement. Then I will briefly summarise the main models of the atonement that have gained support within the Church at various times in its history. This introductory section concludes with a more detailed description of the doctrine of penal substitution.

The main body of the paper examines the questions that have provoked the re-evaluation of penal substitution, the criticisms levelled at this doctrine and the proposed alternatives. At each stage I will give my evaluation of these points.

Setting the Scene

5 biblical metaphors

It is commonly accepted that in NT there are five main images or metaphors used to explicate the saving significance of the death of Jesus. These images are taken from five different spheres of life:

- the court room: justification (Rom 3:21-4:25; 1Cor 1:30)
- the market place: redemption (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14)
- personal relationships: reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19; Col 1:20-21)
- worship: sacrifice (Heb 10:12; 1 Cor 5:7)
- battleground: triumph over evil (Gal 1:4; Col 2:15;)

Frequently these images are compressed together so in Romans 3:21ff Paul brings together images of law court, *justified*, market place, *redemption* and worship, *sacrifice of atonement*. As always the teaching in New Testament is task related, applied theology and nowhere is there an attempt to give systematic and comprehensive treatment of the significance of the death of Christ. This is the work of the theologians of the church.

3 theological models

In terms of systematic theology there have been, in broad terms, three main ways of understanding the atonement. These are distinguished by whether the primary focus of the death of Christ is seen mainly in relation to the devil or humanity or God.

Christus Victor

The predominant view expressed by the early church fathers was that of the model of triumph or as it commonly known today as the Christus Victor model. There were two main variants of this model; that developed by Irenaeus placed little emphasis on the death of Christ but saw in the life of Christ a **recapitulation** of Adam's. Where Adam failed Christ succeeded and as our representative head gained for us life eternal. Others, including Gregory of Nyssa stressed the idea of **ransom**; we are set free from slavery to the devil because in his death Christ paid our ransom. In Gregory's development of this theme there was the idea that God 'tricked' the devil, *the hook of deity* was covered by *the bait of flesh*. Others found the idea of God deceiving the devil morally dubious and thought more in terms of a miscalculation by the devil and of him deceiving himself (Origen). The early church fathers did incorporate other ideas of the atonement in their writings but Christus Victor was the major theme of their teaching. Gradually, however this model lost currency in the church. A range of reasons have been suggested for its decline in popularity including its implication that the devil had some legitimate rights over man, and its dualistic world view. More recently it has been argued that the increasing domestication of the church from the time of Constantine meant a model based on ideas of conflict were less attractive.

*... the Christus Victor motif fell aside ... because the church had lost its sense of confrontation with the world.The idea – of the church in history posing an alternative to the world – fell out of favour as a result of the so-called Constantinian shift. With it went the Christus Victor motif of atonement, which assumes a confrontation of forces of good and evil.
(Christus Victor, Ecclesiology, and Christology art. by J Denny Weaver in The Mennonite Quarterly Review)*

By the end of the first millennium Anselm (1033-1109) and Abelard (1079-1142) wrote what have become the classic expressions of the two other models of atonement. Both wrote in reaction to the Christus Victor model, for Anselm the key focus was on how the death of Christ impacted God himself. While for Abelard the central point was how it affected man.

Satisfaction: The Divine Aspect

Anselm's famous work is entitled **Cur Deus Homo?** (Why did God become Human?). In it he articulates what has become known as the doctrine of satisfaction, it is from this soil that penal substitution grew, though it is important to note that strictly speaking Anselm did not teach penal substitution itself. He does think of Christ acting as our substitute and teaches that the death of Christ offers satisfaction for the debt owed to God by sinful man; however in Anselm's teaching it is not the justice of God that is satisfied but his honour. This is because Anselm used the structure of

the feudal society of his day, with its tiered hierarchy of reciprocal obligations, King, lord, serf etc to make his explanation come alive.

Moral Influence: The Human Aspect

Abelard articulated what is known as the Moral Influence theory. The cross is here seen as a demonstration of the extent of God's love that moves sinners to repent. Lack of repentance is the only thing that needs to be overcome. For Abelard the cross was not essential for sins to be forgiven. "Didn't Christ pronounce forgiveness before his crucifixion?" asked Abelard. The cross was not to change anything in God but was the greatest evidence of God's love and was designed to draw man to respond to him. Abelard thus emphasised the subjective nature of the atonement, what it does in man. Besides minimising the significance of the cross Abelard clearly overestimates the ability of man to respond to this overture from God.

Within these three broad types of atonement theory are a wide range of variations both ancient and modern but it is useful to keep this scheme in mind when assessing current suggestions for how our thinking about the atonement can be improved.

Comparing the 5 biblical metaphors to the 3 major models of systematic theology reveals that the Christus Victor model stresses the battlefield and commercial motifs, while the Satisfaction model emphasises the sacrificial and law court images. The Moral Influence theory concentrates on the picture of reconciliation.

Penal substitution: the development of doctrine

The doctrine of penal substitution falls clearly within the realm of Satisfaction model of the atonement but in it there has been a move from Anselm's concern primarily with the honour of God to God's justice and holiness. This move in thought was clear by the time of the Reformation in the writings of Luther and Calvin and the seeds of penal substitution are clearly evidenced in their writings. So Wolfhart Pannenberg states that,

Luther was probably the first since Paul and his school to have seen with full clarity that Jesus' death in its genuine sense is to be understood as vicarious penal suffering' (p274 The Atonement in Martin Luther's Theology by Timothy George in The Glory of the Atonement).

Henri Blocher, after reviewing Calvin's teaching on the atonement as it is found in his sermons, commentaries and the Institutes writes of

Calvin's constant reliance on the logic of penal-sacrificial substitution (p303 The Atonement in John Calvin's Theology by Henri Blocher in The Glory of the Atonement)

Luther and Calvin however did not articulate penal substitution as a full blown theory. In part this was because at the Reformation the key debate was how the benefits of Christ's death were accessed rather how they were achieved.

With the exception of the Socinians and a few other radicals, theologians on both sides of the Reformation divide believed that the death of Christ on the cross had secured an objective satisfaction for sin, one that was of infinite value, and without which no salvation was possible... (p263 The Atonement in Martin Luther's Theology by Timothy George in The Glory of the Atonement.

Another factor to be borne in mind is that both Luther and Calvin weaved other models into their teaching on the atonement. This is why in 20th century Gustav Aulen could, with selective reading, argue that Luther was in fact the champion of the Christus Victor model.

There is debate about when penal substitution was developed into a clear theory. Critics of penal substitution usually place it late with particular emphasis being given to the role of Princeton Theologian, Charles Hodge (1797-1878). However it would appear that for Calvin's successors and others who systematised the doctrine of the Reformation, penal substitution was a key category in their understanding of the atonement. In some critics the supposed late dating of penal substitution's appearance as a theory in theological debate is used to undermine its validity. They dismiss it as a late arrival which had limited currency until 20th century. A more serious charge made by Joel Green is that it gradually became the only model of atonement that was taught.

Penal Substitution: definition

Wayne Grudem's simple definition is,

Christ's death was "penal" in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a "substitution" in that he was a substitute for us when he died. (Systematic Theology p579)

A fuller definition is found In **Recovering the Scandal of the Cross**

...humanity has, in its sin, turned away from God and so merits divine punishment. Jesus, in his death on the cross, died in place of (substitute for) sinful humanity at God's behest, and in doing so he took upon himself the punishment humanity ought to have suffered. (Recovering the Scandal of the Cross p114).

Penal Substitution: Biblical Foundations

As with other doctrines penal substitution is not derived from one text or passage of scripture but from a whole complex. David Peterson in his chapter, **The Atonement in Scripture** in the book **Where Wrath and Mercy Meet**, identifies and comments on the key scriptures that support this doctrine. Adopting a biblical theological approach he starts with the sacrifices in the Pentateuch, moves on to consider the prophets and Psalms before turning to the gospels and the writings of Paul concluding with Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John.

In considering Old Testament sacrifices, the Passover lamb and the Day of Atonement are given special attention along with detailed discussion of the use of the Hebrew verb *kpr* (*to atone, to cover*). The issues here are complex but his conclusion is clear,

Atonement is not simply a matter of removing guilt or defilement by purging but of averting the wrath of God by offering the life of a substitute.

He quotes Gordon Wenham in support.

Wenham contends that seen in its wider Old Testament context the burnt offering in particular can be regarded as 'a ransom payment for the worshipper'

It is noted that the Psalms and the prophets in general make clear two important points regarding sacrifice. Firstly they had a wider significance than atoning for sins that is they were used to express thanks, homage, devotion and the fact that divorced from a life of faithfulness sacrifices were worse than useless. The next major discussion centres on Isaiah 53; for Peterson the language of *carrying* and *bearing* in verses 4, 11, 12 point to the Servant's death as substitutionary.

This terminology in the context suggests that the Servant bears the sin of others by enduring its consequences for them. He is 'stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted' (53:4) because 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (53:3). ... Those who deny the theme of penal substitution in this chapter appear to be guilty of special pleading. [I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment].

In the gospels the ransom saying of Mark 10:45, Christ's words at the Last Supper and the use of cup metaphor in his prayers in the garden of Gethsemane all support the idea that in his death Christ bore our punishment, God's wrath against sin on our behalf. Turning to Paul, Peterson readily acknowledges Paul uses a wide range of images to

explain Christ's death but argues that penal substitution is not only an important image amongst others but the foundation of the other perspectives which look to the benefits we have gained rather than how they were attained. So for instance, after discussing 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 he notes,

a relational blessing ('reconciliation with God') rests on forensic forgiveness (v19 'not counting their trespasses against them', v21 'righteousness'). In the parallel passage in Romans, 'being reconciled to God' (5:10) similarly depends on 'being justified by faith' (5:1,9). (p37)

Peterson sums up his thoughts about the Pauline material,

Paul's teaching about Christ suffering the judgement of God against sin in our place is fundamental to his other claims about the out come of Christ's sacrifice, such as reconciliation and justification. (p65)

His summary of Hebrews is equally clear.

Hebrews consistently portrays the atoning work of Christ as the fulfilment of the Day of Atonement ritual. At the heart of this portrayal is the presentation of Christ as the sinless saviour, who 'bears the sins of many' in his death, and delivers those who are cleansed and sanctified by his 'blood' from the awesome judgement of God. (p55)

For those wanting to defend and teach penal substitution it is important that such an outline and not just a few individual proof texts form the basis of our argument. As my maths teacher was fond of saying, it's important not just to give the right answer but that you show your working-out.

Elements of the biblical exposition of penal substitution have been called into question recently by some evangelical scholars. For example, there is much debate on the theology of atonement implicit in the rituals of Leviticus or the correct translation of *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25. But the issues involved are not primarily the exegesis of isolated texts. It rather relates to how we put together a whole theological framework, interpretive grid, in which these texts are understood. Having said that, I still have to find an explanation of Isaiah 53 which removes the idea of penal substitution that is convincing, but just battling over this text will not persuade others that penal substitution is valid. However care should also be taken to avoid simply a reactionary stance. It is possible that the interpretation that has been placed on some texts or words need to be reassessed. Agreeing with the exegetical suggestions of some who doubt penal substitution does not mean it is necessary to agree with their theological conclusions. So for instance, Don Carson is happy to accept that *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25 is

probably rightly translated as 'mercy seat' thus accepting that the debate about whether it should have been *expiation* or *propitiation* was in the end an irrelevance.

There is fairly widespread recognition that the OT background is the "mercy seat," the cover of the ark of the covenant over which Yahweh appeared on the Day of Atonement and on which sacrificial blood was poured...It follows, then, that Paul is presenting Jesus as the ultimate "mercy seat", the ultimate place of atonement. (Atonement in Romans 3:21-26 in The Glory of the Atonement p129)

Recent 'Evangelical' Critique of Penal Substitution

Seeing a penal aspect to the work of Christ has always had its critics; at the Reformation it was Socinius and some of the Anabaptists, in the modern period liberal scholars starting with Schleiermacher have similarly found such ideas anathema. Two things are important in the current situation. Firstly, though some of the arguments against penal substitution sound very familiar to old objections these are now coming from our friends. Secondly, they are not simply a repeat of former discussions but reflect in part the impact of post-modern sensibilities and approaches to subjects such as knowledge, hermeneutics and authority.

5 Key Questions

I want to approach the 'evangelical' critique of penal substitution by firstly listing the five key questions that Joel Green and Mark Baker raise in **Recovering the Scandal of the Cross**. These are:

1. Is penal substitution biblical? To what degree is it grounded in Scripture?
2. Is it so enculturated that it supports rather than subverts the prevailing values of the society? So it is argued that the atomistic individualism means problems are seen as simply the results of individual decisions, the unemployed are lazy, the homeless are irresponsible, without any real sense of the systemic nature of such problems.

Theories of the atonement like penal substitution preserve and support such thinking, since they locate responsibility ... primarily at the level of the individual. (p25)

3. Having grown out of a modern world view is it irrelevant to a post-modern one?
4. In non-western cultures, in particular those that are shame based rather than guilt based, does it have any currency?

5. Isn't it true that, *this brand of atonement theology has been understood in ways that have proven detrimental to the witness of the church?* (p32). Examples of this are given as:
- a. The cross as a manifestation of God's anger
 - b. Portrayal of God as a sadist and Christ as a masochist lends support to *the legitimization of unjust human suffering or the idealisation of the victim*. Atonement as 'divine child abuse' is one of most provocative ways of making this point.
 - c. The death of Christ entails no ethical implications for the church. *What basis for moral behaviour remains* if we have already been declared not guilty?
 - d. The cross has nothing to say to the issues of racial reconciliation, wealth and poverty, or the environment.

At this stage it is worth noting the balance of these questions and implied criticisms. In the main they deal with cultural and socio-political concerns. Henri Blocher in his article, **The Sacrifice of Jesus: The Current Theological Situation**, notes that Paul Tillich in the last century had argued that in the 16th century angst was focused on the fear of damnation but that in 20th century it was no longer a living issue - the concern was fear of meaninglessness. In this context penal substitution is an idea that does not *belong to what is available for belief*. Without quoting Tillich a similar logic appears under the surface in some of these questions.

Blocher wisely comments that we should not ignore the fact that the concepts which make up the theory of penal substitution are offensive to the modern mind. He then suggests Luke provides a model in Acts of how to handle this. There, writing to a Gentile audience *the sacrificial meaning of the death of Christ is diplomatically left in the background*. However, he strongly asserts that public opinion does not make truth, so we need to be sensitive to how we communicate not what we communicate.

Criticisms of Penal Substitution

Returning to the questions raised about penal substitution it is characteristic of those who want to revise the evangelical understanding of the death of Christ that in introducing the subject they are full of apparently straightforward questions and their initial comments are full of 'ifs, buts and maybes' however their conclusions are very fiercely critical of the traditional view. So in chapter 5 of **Rediscovering the Scandal of the Cross** having raised the questions the authors quickly argue that the relevant scriptures about the atonement have been read through the lens of 19th century criminal justice. This they contend resulted in a *fundamentally flawed understanding that distorted biblical words and phrases so they were no longer recognisable*. (146f)

The major criticisms can be summarised as:

1. Justice is understood in terms of retribution rather than in covenantal or relational terms.
2. The unity of the Father and the Son is distorted, *as one member of the Trinity is punishing another member of the Trinity (p147)*. [The Swing Bridge illustration].
3. The wrath of God is more prominent than his love; it gives *a picture of God who has a vindictive character (p147)*. Green and Baker note that proponents of penal substitution would protest that they explicitly state *that because God loved us, he sent his Son to die for us*. Yet the impact of the overall presentation still

...feels a little like having the owner of a dog who is barking, growling and straining at its leash say, "Don't worry, he doesn't bite." Maybe it is true, but the combination of the messages we receive leads us to keep a safe distance from the dog. (p151)

In the end doesn't this model tell us that Jesus died to save us from God?

4. Scriptural metaphors are misinterpreted. This is closely related to the preceding point. Those who hold to penal substitution are accused of the sin of reading a metaphor literally. They *do not respect the distance between the sacrificial and legal images and the reality of Jesus' death*. We should, it is argued, stress the symbolic nature of that language.
5. The resurrection of Jesus is not essential in this model.
6. Sin is reduced to moral failure or transgression of law.
7. It is weak on ethical implications. *According to the logic of the model, an individual could be saved through penal substitution without experiencing a fundamental reorientation of his or her life. (p147)*
8. It neutralises the significance of the suffering of Jesus.

Finally we might be [wrongly] drawn to a penal substitutionary account of the significance of Jesus death because it gives us permission to disregard the suffering of Jesus. (p25).

Though the physical pain that Christ bore on the cross is frequently dramatically portrayed it is done so in a way that tends to encourage us to believe that suffering is now done away with for the Christian.

Jesus suffering is effective, not exemplary. (p27)

9. It is given as the full and only necessary explanation of the atonement.

(A similar list is given in Derek Tidball's, **The Message of the Cross** (p32f) though there it is couched in more qualified terms.)

Comment on Criticisms

Some of these criticisms have some validity but they are not fatal. They point to the need of taking care in teaching. They do not demand the dismantling of the doctrine. So for instance, it can be easily accepted that the covenantal dimension of justice has not always been emphasised without having to radically change one's thinking about the cross.

Further, most of these points are only fully valid if the last one is true, if penal substitution is the only explanation given of the work of Christ. The most reputable advocates of penal substitution repeatedly make clear that it is not the only perspective that scripture gives of the work of Christ. Roger Nicole has been a champion in the defence and explanation of penal substitution, see his Festschrift **The Glory of the Atonement**. In the concluding chapter of that book he writes,

A linchpin in a mechanical contrivance makes possible the unified function of several other parts. If the linchpin is removed, the other parts no longer perform their own functions but float away in futility. This, I believe is precisely what occurs in the doctrine of the atonement. (p447) ...penal substitution is the vital center of the atonement, the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation and flies off the handle so to speak. (p451)

Penal substitution is the centre not the circumference, the essential foundation not the whole structure. Another way of putting this is that penal substitution is an answer to a specific question about the work of Christ not the answer to every question. It does not endeavour to explain every benefit or consequence of Christ's sacrifice but it does reveal how a holy God can justly forgive sin which is the source of all the other benefits.

Frequently in these criticisms there are what Henri Blocher terms, disjunctive presuppositions. This is the tendency to think in terms of either/or rather than both/and. So frequently critics of penal substitution set up a choice between two ideas. God's judgement is either, intrinsic or extrinsic, restorative or retributive. Or the cross is either about legal imputation or costly identification, our relationship to God is either forensic or personal. God is in essence love or justice.

Blocher rightly recognises this tendency is related to a desire to have all teaching appear rational and reflects an unwillingness to recognise the creator/creature distinction.

...naturalistic criticism ...assumes that what man could not do or would not require, God will not do or require either. Such criticism is profoundly perverse, for it shrinks God, the Creator, into the image of man, the creature, and loses sight of the paradoxical nature of

the gospel of which the New Testament is so clearly aware. (When man justifies the wicked it is a miscarriage of justice, which God hates, but when God justifies the ungodly, it is a miracle of grace for us to adore.) (p47).

This is to be countered not by logic but by exegesis. Packer quotes Calvin as an example of how to do this. So Calvin commenting on 1 John 4:8-10 writes

the word propitiation has great weight: for God, in a way that cannot be put into words, at the very time when he loved us, was hostile to us till he was reconciled in Christ. (p19 What the Cross Achieved)

Constantly scripture brings together what can be thought to be mutually exclusive (e.g. God's predestinating and the free acts of his enemies). All the disjunctions supposed to be involved in penal substitution have been like the dividing wall of division torn down (Blocher works through some of these in detail in his article) and what God has united let no man separate! In all of theology we are dealing with divine mystery; a scheme that removes that element has missed something vital.

Another general comment on these criticisms of penal substitution is that they seem to attack the worst expositions of this doctrine. So for instance, contrary to criticism 2 Don Carson writes:

*Without exception, competent treatments of what is meant by substitutionary atonement focus on the concurrence of the Father and the Son in the plan of the cross, on the different ways in which both Father and Son suffer, and on the resolution of the Son to do his Father's will ... (Don Carson in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* p186).*

Turning to specific criticisms, criticism 3 on the wrath of God does give me pause for thought. In pastoral experience it is all too easy to find people whose image of God is shaped by an inappropriate fear of him. [The wasp illustration]. It is also possible to find churches which trumpet grace but are known for being judgemental. We do need to face this and consider if this aberration is rooted to any extent in an inaccurate portrayal of the death of Christ. However it is important to note that the critics do not just want to make the wrath of God less prominent, they want to redefine it. So the wrath of God becomes merely a way of describing the fruit and consequence of sin and does not involve God's active involvement or describe God's attitude in any way.

The "wrath of God" is, for Paul, not an affective response on the part of God, not the striking out of a vengeful God. (p95).

It is quite possible to disagree with the first part of this sentence and not be in agreement with the second half. That is God's wrath is as affective as his love but wrath is not vindictively spiteful. The presence of non sequiturs is a regular feature in revisionist discussions of atonement. So Joel Green can write,

for Paul, wrath is not a divine property or essential attribute of God. (p54)

as though such a statement is clearly an argument against penal substitution but Carson can agree with him here.

... wrath unlike love, is not one of the intrinsic perfections of God. Rather it is a function of God's holiness against sin. Where there is no sin there is no wrath, but there will always be love in God. (p67 The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God)

but on the same page Carson writes

Wrath like love includes emotion as a necessary component.

Behind Green's comments on the wrath of God is a redefinition of wrath which is depersonalised and de-emotionalised, that is actually referring to the impartial and inevitable consequences of sin in a person or a culture. Though this can be seen as part of God's judgment it is not the whole picture - what of Aaron's sons before the altar, what of God's reaction to the golden calf, of Uzzah, what of the exile, what of Ananias and Sapphira, or Christ's warning to churches in Revelation? It is difficult to conceive of sitting down with the apostle Paul and find him arguing that God's wrath did not involve God's active involvement in judging sin, an involvement that included his whole being. Is it not implicit Christ's exhortation in Matt 10:28 that we do indeed need, in some, sense to be saved from God?

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Of deep concern is that hidden in these criticisms of penal substitution is not just a redefinition of wrath but of sin and indeed God himself. Steve Chalke for one wants God's essence only to be seen as love with holiness just one expression of love.

Criticism 4 relates to the understanding of biblical metaphors. Henri Blocher is again very helpful. He notes the emphasis on the metaphorical nature of scriptural language is neither sophisticated nor even handed.

It is not enough to say: Metaphors! We should distinguish between occasional, 'live' metaphors and regular systematic, metaphors which ... come near to concept status.

The legal and sacrificial metaphors in Scripture have such a frequency and regularity, they constitute such a stable network, with predictable use, they are so insistent, that they may not be dealt with as 'mere' metaphors.

Blocher also points out that when these writers deal with concepts they are happier with, friendship with God, marriage intimacy in relation to God, which are no less metaphors, they do not seem to require the same qualification.

He notes too that non-biblical metaphors are introduced which are vague. Frequently in **Atonement Today** it is said that on the cross Christ absorbed our sin, with hints of Christ's blood acting as some sort of spiritual stain remover.

Advocates of penal substitution are accused of isolating the legal metaphor but Blocher argues that in the best exponents the opposite is true. In them, each of the five main sets of models found in scripture are presented not as options to be selected from but as different perspectives all vital to appreciating the death of Christ for us. In such expositions the penal category is seen as the unifying and underlying concept. So, for instance, we are released from bondage to spiritual powers because we are no longer liable to the penalty due to sin and the Devil's chief weapon of accusation is removed because the price has been paid in full.

Criticism 6 concerns reductionist definitions of sin, sin as merely moral failure or transgression of a law.

Our tendency is often to focus on particular sinful acts. New Testament writers by contrast, tend to focus on particular sinful acts, as manifestations of a deeper problem. (Green p206).

No serious bible teacher, whatever their view of the atonement, would quibble, but again behind this criticism seems to lurk a view of sin which so emphasises sin as a power and tyrant which humans are victim to and

need rescuing from that man's plight appears primarily that he is a victim and not a violator, simply a prisoner of war and not a rebel.

Alan Mann's attempt to contextualise this point raises a smile.

Sin has rather unhelpfully been reduced solely to the presence of wrongful actions when in reality ... it would have far greater meaning for individuals living in our post-industrialised society to describe it as an absence of mutual, intimate, undistorted relating that ultimately leads the post-modern self into a lack of ontological (or narrative) coherence ☺ (Atonement for a 'Sinless Society' p19)

Greater meaning? Are you sure Alan? A cheap shot I know but it is a feature of some of the discussion that those wanting to revise atonement theology to make it more relevant undermine their case by the opaqueness of their writing.

To conclude this assessment of the criticisms of penal substitution it should be agreed that they do have some weight but they are a call to more careful and sensitive articulation of penal substitution not its denial.

New Ways of Articulating the Atonement

Recovering the Scandal of the Cross does not only offer a critique. It also proposes a way forward. It does not give a new statement of what an evangelical doctrine of the atonement should be. Rather it suggests a method, some guidelines and evaluates some proposals as a way of suggesting how a range of culturally contextualised theologies could be formulated.

The method is one of finding culturally relevant metaphors that address how the problem of sin is experienced in a particular context and show how Christ's work is the answer to those needs. Scriptural terms are not just to be repeated but contextualised. The writers find that this method has scriptural precedent. They argue that one of the reasons for the plurality of metaphors used to describe the significance of the death of Christ was that different cultural contexts demand different images. To an extent the point has value but it is overdrawn. So Green writes,

The words "a sower went out to sow" may invite a hearing among folks in ancient Galilee but would not attract an audience among the urban elite in Athens or Corinth. (p171).

However Mark's Gospel is thought to have been written for the church in Rome, but he didn't change the parable. Further the key difference in NT

audiences was not cultural but spiritual, between believers and unbelievers. I think there is a legitimate concern that at times evangelistic preaching has preached the gospel modelled on Romans 1, which was written to the church and not on the model of the evangelistic messages in Acts. The comparison with Acts is revealing, the themes are the same but the tone and amount of theological depth is different. Could a confusion of kerygma and didache be the cause of some of the issues that Green and Baker seek to address?

New proposals often seem to argue that the fact of a variety of metaphors means that we are free to choose which ones will work in a particular situation. I think it is more accurate to argue we have a variety because no one metaphor can capture the full significance of what happened on the cross. This means if we don't give each of them their biblical prominence we preach a truncated distorted version of God's revelation.

Two other points about method. First, it appears that Green is in danger of giving more authority to what he sees as the apostolic method than he does to apostolic content. Second, he does give some guidelines which should control the development of new metaphors but I wonder if they are sufficiently rigorous.

Joel Green's Guidelines

1. *Atonement is the acute need of the human community.* So while lostness can be described in various ways we must make clear that humanity does not have the resources to save itself. It needs God.
2. *Human response is a necessity.* This is not just in terms of belief in the cross but lives that are shaped by it. *Atonement theology cannot be separated from ethics.*
3. *God, acting on the basis of his covenant love, on his own initiative, was at work in the cross of Christ for human salvation.* But, *it will not do ... to characterize the atonement as God's punishment falling on Christ.* This reveals a strange paradox, Green is very open to exploring and experimenting with a whole range of new metaphors but he is closed to this one. An example of arrogant humility?
4. *What happened on the cross is of universal significance.* So an atonement theology to be rooted in the New Testament must not accord privilege, explicitly or implicitly, to one group over another.

Within these broad guidelines the church in its missional endeavour is to pursue creative theological reflection. It would be perverse to try and argue with that. The question is, are these guidelines enough to avoid error? Paul's example of being a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles is to be our model as we attempt to be a post-modern to post-moderns etc, but how do we ensure we stay on track? My over-riding concern is how far is a post-modern agenda subverting the gospel?

Two more observations, firstly, guidelines 2 and 4 pick up concerns that appear in the New Testament. It is clear that Paul had to correct

misunderstandings that people had developed about the gospel from his teaching and preaching. In Romans 6 he addresses the concern that accepting his gospel leads to license and in Galatians that justification has no social consequences. The fact that he had to address these issues shows that having the right model of atonement preached does not guarantee it will automatically produce a life style according to the guidelines. According to Green could we not argue that Paul's thinking was obviously inadequate because the churches he influenced had problems of discrimination and insensitivity to sin? The other concern I have about these guidelines is that they suggest to me that what is being sought is **one** explanation of the atonement which fulfils all these criteria when that is precisely what penal substitution is criticised as being, a one size fits all explanation.

Finally **Rediscovering the Scandal of the Cross** ends with the vision of *hundreds of places throughout the world, where communities of Jesus' disciples are practicing the craft of theologian-communicator and struggling with fresh and faithful images of broadcasting the mystery of Jesus' salvific death. (p221)* I am attracted by encouragement to creative communication to new situations but it sometimes feels that, *the faith once delivered to the saints*, is so very difficult to grasp as well as to communicate.

Drawing to a Conclusion

In this final section of the paper I want to do two things. Firstly to make some final observations then state my conclusion.

The first of my general observations revolves around the question, who is in the firing line? All too often it appears that it is not the best formulations of penal substitution that are dealt with but what appears to be a bible belt fundamentalist variant which is culturally narrow, socially disengaged and politically reactionary.

I am also concerned that the crucial place that penal substitution has had in evangelical theology has not been given its full due. It is not equivalent to some detail of a popular eschatological scheme but a core belief. At the beginning of 20th century no evangelical would have disputed it. It was a defining characteristic. In similar vein the consequences of removing it from our theology would have systemic effects. Like pulling the thread in your favourite jumper, only to find that it is the thread that held it all together.

It is worth noting too that the criticisms of penal substitution actually attack the whole category of satisfaction as a model of the atonement. This is a model that has always been reflected in the teaching of the church and has for the last 1000 years been the dominant model.

Conclusion

I am in agreement with Joel Green and others that penal substitution is not the only model for understanding the atonement and that where it is given that status it distorts the truth. It is also true that penal substitution can be and has been taught crudely. It is also true that the Christus Victor model has not been given the emphasis that scripture warrants and that more work should be done on this. So Richard Gaffin, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, writes

As a fair generalisation, historic Christianity, including Protestant orthodoxy, is weak in not recognising adequately Paul's teaching that the cross destroys sin in the sinner as a corrupting and enslaving power ... (Atonement in the Pauline Corpus in The Glory of the Atonement p141).

We need as well to work hard at translating our message of the cross into contemporary images that connect with our culture and that when engaging with non-western cultures this presents even greater challenges. Having said all that wholeheartedly this is a quantum leap from saying that penal substitution is not biblical and is a harmful doctrine. In fact it is the heart of the gospel of God's glorious grace.

Three last thoughts:

1. We need to guard against being PC (politically correct) about PS (penal substitution). Shibboleths are dangerous. We need to remember that reformers taught the concept without using the phrase. Packer points out that James Denney at the beginning of the 20th century staunchly defended the essential ingredients of penal substitution but was strongly against the phrase itself. In more modern discussions there is clearly a spectrum of views and some, while arguing against the term are very close to the key ideas. This means there is a real need to listen when people say things which sound so different, just in case they are just using a different vocabulary to say the same thing. Just to complicate things some writers are happy to use the word 'penalty' but without it for them involving any sense of personal judgement by God.
2. Acts 15 and the events leading up to it are eloquent testimony to the high value to be placed on unity and the great efforts that should be made to maintain it.
3. Even so the search for 'relevancy' can be a seductive and corrosive current which can erode the whole superstructure of evangelical theology.

Questions

1. How well do we explain the death of Christ in our preaching of the gospel?

- a. Are we guilty teaching penal substitution crudely?
- b. What of the other models of atonement, are they taught?.
2. Is our exposition of the cross limited to evangelistic contexts? Would it be an accurate summary of your teaching programme that you preach nothing *except Christ and him crucified*? What is implied if this is not so?
3. What would be the main practical dangers or consequences of rejecting penal substitution?
4. How do you think you should respond to this controversy as a leadership team?
5. What do you think an evangelical is? Is it important to be one?

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