

THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD FOR A SIN-RAVAGED WORLD

Personal reflections on the recent atonement debates

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Living outside the UK at the time of the publication of *The Lost Message of Jesus*¹ meant I was largely unaware of most of the heat and sadly often harsh words which it provoked on all sides. The book caused controversy, and, in many ways, rightly so. One of the difficulties, however, is that Chalke and Mann's rather inflammatory discussion of the atonement forms only a small, although perhaps highly indicative, part of the book. That can detract from the number of valid points they make. Nevertheless, because their treatment of the atonement has resonated with what a number of other scholars have been saying (especially in the USA but in the UK as well), it is important that we reflect not only on what they are saying but also (more importantly) *why they are saying it*. For a significant and vocal minority within the evangelical constituency is now calling into question what had until very recently been regarded as indispensable and axiomatic. As indicated by the subtitle, my aim is to touch on a number of areas which the recent controversies have highlighted, not so much to have the last word on each area but to make sure that each area is at least acknowledged when we evaluate this debate. This is not the place to engage with *The Lost Message of Jesus* in depth, but to attempt something of a broader perspective. And let me also say that these are very much embryonic thoughts – to spur reflection and contradiction – rather than a completed thesis.

The unfortunate fact is that there is far too much reductionism going on – and sad to say, it is going on in all sides of the debate. One of the reasons that the opposition to what we might call a traditional understanding of the gospel is so trenchant is that they are reacting to OUR distortions. We have not got the Bible 'right'. The fact that opponents might often resort to a similar, if often mirror-image, reductionism is neither here nor there. So, as Daniel Strange indicates in his excellent Evangelical Library Lecture², under God's providence, the fact that these debates occur at all can be positive. They force us back to our bedrock, to see if and where we went wrong in the first place. That's what I want to focus on – rather than throwing stones and casting aspersions. To do this, I firstly wish to make two appeals – to ourselves and (by extension, I suppose) to those with whom we debate. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, I'll refer in this paper to some of the new challenges to traditional thinking as "radical".

INTRODUCTION

(i) An appeal to Embrace Biblical Complexity

Some time back, I was having an amusing conversation with my colleague and friend Rico Tice. He'd been helping in a training evening I was doing for our Discipleship Explored leaders, and I'd been giving an overview of Philippians. At the end, Rico asked me to summarize "the one thing" that the letter was about. I ummed and ahed and came out with something. But I'd been reluctant. We chuckled about it the next day and he remarked that it illustrated the key difference between us – he the evangelist (who is rather like an extreme form of systematic theologian!) likes his bullet points and headings, his memorable packets of information; I the bible teacher instinctively

¹Steve Chalke with Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, (Zondervan, 2003).

²Daniel Strange, *The Many-Splendoured Cross: Atonement, Controversy and Victory*, Evangelical Library Lecture, London 2005. Now to be found on www.beginningwithmoses.org

preferring to let the text's complexity rest and float around a bit – remaining challenging and not a little perplexing. It's a temperament thing more than anything, I suspect. And there are dangers with both. I actually think it is a helpful exercise to attempt simple summaries of texts – if one cannot get anywhere near to a summary statement, it probably reflects a failure to gain a thorough grasp of the issue. We must nevertheless be careful to guard against reductionism. We need room for “both/and”s much more than we might think – while of course steering clear of an eastern philosophical relativism. Clarity in our teaching does not necessarily negate the possibility of embracing and rejoicing in complexity. For some things simply cannot be reduced to a sound-bite, and that is probably never more true than with the atonement (that most other-unworldly and alien of doctrines).

Daniel Strange makes this sort of appeal by citing Vern Poythress and his idea of symphonic theology. As someone who is rather obsessive about music, I like this idea very much (and it chimes with Dick Lucas' helpful hermeneutical method of seeking *the melodic line* in a biblical text or book). A great Beethoven symphony is astonishingly complex, but there is still a clarity of thought and purpose underlying the whole thing. That is its genius. This analogy works on two levels – both that of the bible itself and in terms of the great assembly of interpreters from across the world and down the centuries. Engaging in faithful and clear biblical theology is analogous to analyzing the symphonic blending of various musical instruments to express the variations of a symphonic theme, using harmony, rhythm, counterpoint and melody. We don't always see or hear the melodic line immediately or by ourselves. This is precisely why we need one another as co-interpreters as we handle the diversity of the biblical texts – and we gain insights from different perspectives. But a great composer will always bring out the melodic line at some point, even if it's in embryonic form initially. Isn't this precisely what is going on with a biblical theology of salvation? Isn't this precisely why it demands a lifetime of study?³

(ii) An appeal for BOTH Clarity AND Faithfulness within that Complexity

A pastor-teacher's job is primarily to teach the Bible – and not our system. Systems are dangerous precisely because they can squeeze out biblical complexity. Again this harks back to a temperament thing: good communicators (especially evangelists!) will inevitably and *reasonably* crave neat sound-bites. Furthermore, when we are dealing with controversy, our systems are essential means to faithfulness. When discussing an issue of doctrine and gospel truth, it is not enough simply to retort with a verse or a passage – we have to explain how this fits within the overarching biblical framework. Systems only become problematic if we fail to remain suspicious of them. Consequently, there is a dynamic tension at work – to be clear, we need our systematic statements and our pithy summaries; but to be faithful we have to embrace the often unsettling diversity and complexity of scripture.

One place where we can get into trouble here is in our use of sermon illustrations. In his contribution to the Oak Hill Atonement symposium⁴, Paul Weston has a very helpful section on this. He cites the famous moment in *Miracle on the River Kwai*, where an innocent soldier is executed after some supposedly missing tools.

“It is worth reflecting also upon the way that illustrations about the cross are used. I've noticed that often they are used at the conclusion of material on Jesus’

³ One of the privileges of working at All Souls has been the chance to get to know Uncle John Stott in the last year or two. I was very struck a few months ago when we bumped into each other in the street and he asked if I had a specific book on the Incarnation. He was doing some thinking and study on the issue and wanted to follow something up. Here is a man in his mid-80s, who has written some seminal works (including more than one on this very issue!) and who is still engaging with the core doctrines. I hope and pray that I become even half as disciplined now, let alone in my retirement!

⁴ David Peterson (Ed), *Where wrath and mercy meet* (Paternoster, 2001).

death – as a way of ‘clinching the argument’ (so to speak) in the mind of the listener. But if what we’ve been saying about the unique nature of the cross is sound, then analogies will simply not exist (and are not needed to do this kind of job)...

...Perhaps then our illustrations might help listeners to get nearer to the truth about the cross when we distance ourselves from them and emphasize their inadequacies in the light of scripture.”⁵

Jim Packer’s was making a similar point in his justly famous article “*What did the cross achieve?*”⁶ He pointed to what he called ‘crude’ methods of presenting the atonement. He referred to presentations in ‘popular piety’, which are “devotionally evocative without being theologically rigorous”.⁷

Now I mention these two quotes to you because I’m someone who has been caught out in precisely this way. In Andrew Evans’ *Themelios* review⁸ of the Oak Hill symposium book, he also reviewed the first edition of my book, *Cross-Examined*.⁹ Evans pointed out that I might have done precisely what Weston had warned us not to do, in my use of the illustration from Captain Corelli’s Mandolin. While I think that the illustration still stands (and through correspondence with him, I think he does too), the observant will notice that in the 2nd Study Guide edition, I’m much more circumspect and careful in how I top and tail it!¹⁰

The irony in all this is that very often those who claim a more radical approach (NB Carson’s book on the emerging church gives a pretty helpful overview of what these are¹¹) often claim to be doing justice precisely to the bible’s complexity – and they often accuse conservatives (usually justly) of not doing this. But to achieve this, they often do so by a rather extraordinary method: they don’t simply sideline the traditional view(s); they actually reject them, as if the traditional views are somehow in and of themselves *an impediment* to relishing the complexity and diversity. All the time they claim to be multi-faceted while often completely excluding the more conservative position! That is both illogical and unfair. What I am seeking to do, therefore, is to regain a sense of the bible’s diversity and complexity in this area. I am conscious that there will be aspects which I do not highlight or that I haven’t even thought of. Hopefully readers will be able to make stimulating contributions of their own. We can then have a better grasp of how the traditional view not only makes sense of that complexity, but that it is also central to it. To do this, I will take 5 areas that we can either sideline or distort when we preach the atonement.

⁵ *Wrath & Mercy*, 149

⁶ This article has been included in a number of anthologies: e.g. *The J I Packer Collection*, A E McGrath (ed.) (IVP, Leicester, 1999) pp 94-136.

⁷ *Packer Collection*, 115.

⁸ *Themelios* Vol. 27:2 (Spring 2002), 86. NB the 3rd book in this review was Joel Green & Mark Baker’s *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (IVP USA, Downers Grove 2000), which is one of the more influential, scholarly treatments of the atonement from the evangelical constituency.

⁹ Mark Meynell, *Cross-Examined* (IVP, Leicester, 2001).

¹⁰ Mark Meynell, *Cross-Examined (Study Guide edition)*, (IVP, Leicester, 2005).

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *Becoming conversant with the emerging church*, (Zondervan, 2005).

I. CREATION: Redemption Logic AND Common Ground

In trying to grasp what is going on in these debates, I am conscious of the real possibility of not hitting the mark at all. Being out of the country has not helped; but nor has the diversity of views which have been brought to bear on the discussions. I sometimes feel slightly like a blind museum guide groping for the light switch. But the first suspicion I have is this. Can I detect a growing sense amongst conservative evangelicals that those who emphasize the need to preach creation theology as being a tad soft or woolly? That may be taking it too far – but to my mind, if we leave out creation, nothing makes sense. Put like that, most would I'm sure agree entirely. I would be amazed if those reading this had never heard a sermon series on Gen 1-3 (and in fact, we were in the process of doing precisely that at All Souls when I started working on this paper). But how much does this actually underpin and inform *everything* we teach? Or are we always in a rush to get to the clincher of the atonement and gospel appeal. Is a robust doctrine of creation *explicit* in our evangelistic preaching?

Coming at it from a completely different point of view, it is interesting to compare this with South African and South American Liberation Theology. This is a crude and unfair generalisation, but the fundamental mistake of Liberation Theologians is not that they incorrectly expose oppression and the church's failures and complicities. They are surely right about these (we'll come back to this later). The problem is that they start in the wrong place. Too often, their paradigm is founded in the Book of Exodus and not in Genesis. They start with the fact of Israel's Egyptian captivity – which is why they think the urgent challenge is liberation from oppression (although for some, it should be noted that the Exodus is probably no more than a convenient biblical peg from which to hang their political agenda). We must be careful – having lived cheek by jowl with extreme poverty and the fallout from oppression in Uganda, I cannot simply dismiss it. But this is akin to dishing out aspirins to cure the symptoms of AIDS – it takes away the headache but hardly destroys the virus. You have to start with Genesis – Fall, of course, but Creation also – before you can even begin to consider God's prescription.

□ **Gospel Outlines** – many will be very familiar with the Gospel outline 2 Ways 2 Live (2W2L) devised by the great Sydney evangelist John Chapman and developed by Phillip Jensen and others. I think that in many ways this is an excellent tool. It is not the be all and end all (and never claims to be) and it does have flaws because of the complexity that it inevitably overlooks. But one area that is particularly helpful is that it starts explicitly and deliberately with creation. Redemption doesn't make sense at all without a doctrine of creation. Otherwise, crucial questions would be unanswerable: Whose world is it? Why does God get involved/love the world? Why are we accountable to him? These questions are neatly addressed by the verse 2W2L uses to clinch its point:

You are worthy our lord and God to receive glory honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.
(Revelation 4:11)

God is worthy precisely because he is our maker. As his creatures, we are accountable to him; as our creator, he is already a God who has invested himself profoundly in our existence. While the gospel is all of grace and profoundly undeserved, it is perhaps not so remarkable - and I know that this is not quite the right word because there is nothing in the gospel that is unremarkable - that he should be committed to us. He made us and he always therefore longs for our best interests – even at great personal cost. I suppose what makes it still remarkable is that even the best human parents find their limits in loving their children – many a mother or father gets to the end of their tether with a newborn's incessant cries and sleeplessness. They feel that they have reached a point where they simply want to give up. God never does because he gives everything he has to give – which is just as well because we owe him everything we are.

□ **Individualism** - One of the many repercussions of a healthy (and dare I say biblical) doctrine of creation is that undermines the pervasive individualism of western evangelism and western worldviews. This is a frequent charge against traditional evangelical presentations of the gospel – a charge laid at us not just by radicals and liberals but also by some African brothers and sisters who are uncomprehending about our individualistic pietism. We have reduced redemption a “me and God” transaction. This is epitomized by the discordant and jarring conclusion to the otherwise beautiful song “Above all powers”

*Crucified, laid behind the stone;
You lived to die, rejected and alone;
Like a rose trampled on the ground,
You took the fall and **thought of me**, above all.*¹²

However, a clear doctrine of creation puts me in my place within the whole of creation. Redemption then becomes not just a matter redeeming *me*, nor even a matter of redeeming us but a matter of redeeming creation – a creation subject to frustration and groaning because of the terrible bondage from which it needs a true liberation (to echo the language of Rom 8). God’s is fundamentally a global plan. We are the pinnacle of creation as creatures made in the image of God – but we are not the sum total of creation. God has a profound commitment and concern to *everything* he’s made. Ironically, despite its right starting point, this is a flaw in 2W2L itself. The impression is very much of the gospel a God-me issue – he saves me and I get right with him. Nothing about the church, nothing about rest of creation. To be fair, it is simply designed to present a summary of the gospel and more importantly to make a clear challenge to response. But the individualism inherent in 2W2L is perhaps a reflection of our wider problem to which we should be alert.

□ **Common ground** – in the OT & NT, creation is the key of our common ground with those we’re preaching to and reaching out to. After all, wasn’t it the fact that the prophets’ stunning confidence that that the God of their little nation Israel, Yahweh, was the creator of all nations ground their appeal to other nations. How else could Isaiah or Amos have the audacity to confront their neighbours? Or take the psalms – Ps 47 the nations are told to clap their hands to God because he is the *king of all the earth*, and he *reigns over the earth*. Or even more clearly in Ps 96: 3-5:

*“Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols but the Lord made the heavens.”*

Finally there is Paul in Athens Acts 17 – he can launch straight in with confidence because we share a basic created humanity with all other people – we’re on equal footing. This is crucial for anyone involved in cross-cultural mission. As Paul quoted the pagan poet Aratus, *we are his offspring*. We have things in common across cultures and languages. This is crucial as we engage with preaching in an increasingly postmodern and therefore fragmented world.

□ **Creation Ethics** - Could it be that a failure to cherish a strong doctrine of creation with all its implications is one reason why British evangelicals today seem reluctant to engage deeply with contemporary societal ethics (as opposed to personal ethics of godliness and usually, sexuality). We appear to have forgotten our humanity. Quite apart from the pitfalls and overwhelming challenges of getting hands dirty in social action (and no one can accuse Steve Chalke for one of not having done that), there still remains, surely, a human duty to be concerned for fellow human beings who are fellow-creatures of the living God? After all, this was precisely what lay at the heart of the arguments of Olaudah Equiano, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and many others involved in The Abolition of the Slave Trade bill gaining its royal assent on 25th March 1807. Slaves were

¹² From *Above all powers, above all thrones*, by Lenny LeBlanc & Paul Baloche © 1999 Lensongs Publishing/Integrity's Hosanna! (emphasis mine)

fellow human beings (in contrast to the ugly contention of the traders that they were mere beasts of burden). A slave's ethnic origins or religious background were immaterial, and Acts 17 and Genesis 2 were foundations to this contention. No wonder, then, that Josiah Wedgwood's famous abolitionist medallion carried these words: *Am I not a man and a brother?* These were evangelicals mostly – and they were not just concerned for family of believers, our brothers and sisters in Christ; they were absolutely committed to the brotherhood of man as well.¹³

II. SIN: Victims AND Culprits

Much has been said about the key deficiencies of the new radical positions about the atonement – and every conservative rebuttal that I've come across seems to home in fact that they are weak on the doctrines of sin and therefore divine judgment. And this is of course very true. I think there is a logical consistency in this – if you are wanting to get rid of penal substitution (for whatever reason – perhaps out of sincere agreement with the frequent charges made against its apparent barbarism), then you have to downplay sin and God's holiness. But where is this coming from?

There is a particularly emotive point in Steve Chalke & Alan Mann's book where they assert the need to talk not so much about original sin as original *goodness*. It is quite clever really, one of those pendulum-swing moments – because who of us would dispute it, especially after this paper's first point about creation? But who of us in our evangelistic preaching regularly builds on our common ground with fellow beings equally made in the image of God, even though that image has been seriously marred, though by no means obliterated, by sin? There is a challenge there I think. But at the same time, we of course have no liberty to undermine what is clearly a pervasive biblical theme. We are sinful. After all, Jesus himself was clear about it, and could refer to his audience as “*you, who are evil...*” (Lk 11:13); then in Mark 7 he can say that it is what came out from within people that made them unclean. We cannot avoid the subject; we must teach it clearly and faithfully.

I suspect, however, that we have not been careful and nuanced enough when we have, and perhaps this is a problem our detractors have rightly observed. Sin might be a profound problem – but it is not a simple one:

□ **Sin is me, me, me** – this is a common enough assertion. It is a thoroughly biblical concept and one could find countless examples of this. We seek independence from God and his authority; we are characterised by lawlessness and an independent spirit from birth. Romans 1-3 and Ephesians 2:1-10 are obvious places to start. This is crucial and is where the application of all our preaching hits home, surely? If personal repentance is the appropriate, or even only, correct response to the gospel, then a person needs to be convinced somewhere along their line of their need to do it. We have lived in God's world as if it were ours, without God getting more than a vague nod of acknowledgement at best.

However, not only are we missing a trick as communicators if we leave it there, we're not actually teaching the whole counsel of God. If we did, the radical charges against us would be harder to sustain. I am well aware that I am now stepping onto thinner ice than some would be comfortable with – but I feel justified at least in asking these questions so please hear me out!

¹³ For more on this, download Hugh Palmer's deeply challenging sermon at All Souls on 25th March 2007, the 200th Anniversary of Abolition (www.allsouls.org).

□ **Sin is us, us, us** – there must surely be a corporate aspect to sin? To deny this is perhaps simply the result of our persistent western individualism yet again. It figures not just in our perceptions of redemption, but inevitably in our understanding of our sin. But what about the chilling low point of the Tower of Babel (or Tower of Babylon to be more accurate) in Genesis 11? People ganging up on God to make a name for *themselves*? Am I any less culpable if I join in with something that everyone else is doing? To use that as an excuse was by no means a sufficient defence at Nuremberg, was it? Or take Psalm 2 – *the nations together raging against God*. The Bible evidently points to the corporate nature of sin, which presumably means that there can be such a thing as institutional sin. The thought may make us feel very uncomfortable and, of course, helpless. Yet, isn't this actually something of what it means to be in Adam? We shouldn't just leave it to the liberals and radicals to draw attention to this. We all know that they omit personal sin – it is simply that we mustn't do the opposite and omit corporate sin.

There is a flip side to this, though – and this is the most important thing to mention here.

□ **Sin is them, them, them** – how often have we preached about our experience of sin not just in terms of what we have done wrong, but in terms of what others have done to us or those we know? For there is a sense in which we are victims of *others'* sin. This surely offers significant common ground with hearers to speak of the reality of our shared victimhood? Just think of Psalm 137 or David's terror and drowning psalms. Many in our world have to varying degrees felt the heel of the oppressors boot. But it often takes life in a so-called developing country to grasp the reality of this. This is what radicals are *right* to point out, as Steve Chalke does in his article *Redeeming the cross*¹⁴ when he asks the relevance of the cross for foreign policy, trade justice, people trafficking.

So there are dangers of reductionism all round.

- Conservatives just home on the guilt-trip of me, me, me
- Radicals on the them, them, them

Both reductions profoundly distort the biblical understanding of humanity and the atonement. So like the liberation theologians before them, radicals are quite prepared to present Jesus as a victim of injustice (and he *was*, thus making his identification with victims profound). We conservatives must not forget the truth of this. But the scandal of the cross is that Jesus is actually identifying with us as culprits and perpetrators *as well* (hence 2 Corinthians 5:21 – *he became sin for us* - a truly shocking statement). Radicals should not deny the reality of this either.

So again, perhaps this is why western evangelicals have got into such a muddle about the relationship between evangelism and social involvement. Could this merely be an outworking of our inherent individualism? Could this be why our African brothers and sisters not only consider the debate itself as rather a depressing western luxury but also fairly hard to relate to. Let me quote from Tim Keller writing in a slightly different context in his book *Ministries of Mercy* about how secular ideologies view social ills.

“The ideology of the Left believes big government and social reform will solve social ills, while the Right believes big business and economic growth will do it. The Left expects a citizen to be held legally accountable for the use of his wealth, but totally anonymous in other areas, such as sexual morality. The Right expects a citizen to be held legally accountable in areas of personal morality, but totally autonomous in the use of wealth. The North American ‘idol’ – radical individualism – lies beneath both ideologies. A Christian sees either “solution” as fundamentally humanistic and simplistic.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Downloadable from www.oasistrust.org

¹⁵ Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy* (P&R Publishing, 1989), p. 26

My disturbing suspicion is that many of us evangelicals have not even got round to thinking about a solution at all. We have assumed that we just need to get people right with God because their personal sin is the root of the problem. That is absolutely true, of course. But the Bible is much more trenchant and wide-reaching in its diagnosis of the world's problems than our systems allow (just read the charges laid against the people by the prophets Amos and Isaiah for starters), which is why we can end up distorting it so much. Worse still, *we ourselves* can become culpable as part of the problem, by not figuring out where we actually *contribute* to the corporate sins of oppression and exploitation, however unwittingly.

III. JUDGMENT: Good News AND Bad News

I suspect that our distortion of the bible's view of sin (or perhaps a better way of putting that is to see it as our ideological partiality in our presentations of sin) is a root for how we view the doctrine of divine holiness and judgment. Yes, judgment is terrifying and gruesome. If sin is about me (which it is), and God hates sin (which he does) then I am in serious danger. This must not be denied – despite some radical attempts to do just that.

But what is happening when we conservatives preach about judgment, especially if we preach about it too speedily? Well, of course, I do not wish to deny that we are preaching truth and that the Lord will never allow his word to return empty. He is sovereign and can use any and every messenger to communicate and convert. However, we have no excuse not to slog away at trying to communicate contextually and relevantly while being faithful to the old, old story.

□ **No God, No Sin** – this first point is a simple and obvious one, but I do think it needs touching on briefly. To borrow the now rather hackneyed advertising play on words,¹⁶ if there is no God, there can be no sin. After all, if someone does not have a clear perception of a Creator God (to whom we are accountable), then sin (as explained in Scripture as primarily an offence against God and not in tabloid sleaze terms) has to be meaningless. There is no God against whom we have rebelled, therefore there is no rebellion. And if there is no sin, then there can be no judgment. It hardly needs spelling out, and yet we sometimes forget this.

However, if you *Know God*, then you *Know Sin*. And if you know God and you know Sin, then you know judgment. God must judge because of who he is and what sin is. But it all stems from an understanding of God. This is why it is crucial to centre on Jesus and how the Bible presents him,¹⁷ because then all three will occur. It will also avoid what you find in quite a lot of radical, not to mention liberal thinking, which forms the next point.

□ **A false dichotomy between God's love and holiness** - To read some radical writing, we could be forgiven for thinking that the temple was the Sadducees' idea and that the Pharisees were the ones who devised the strict separation laws of the Pentateuch! We could also be forgiven for having the impression that it took Jesus to come along and see sense at last (out of a love for those who had been excluded) and wash the whole system away. This is utter nonsense of course, although like all these things not without the smallest grain of truth. God caused the Pentateuch to

¹⁶ “*Know HMV, Know Music; No HMV, No Music*” – now adopted by the Financial Times (No FT, No Comment etc)!

¹⁷ Which incidentally is precisely the goal of the course Rico Tice devised, Christianity Explored, in that it seeks to take enquirers to meet Jesus as Mark's gospel presents him

be written, he designed the Temple, he judged at the Passover – and he sent Jesus. But the Bible's complexity is such that the God of the OT is clearly the God of love throughout – famous passages like Deuteronomy 7 are a case in point; and Jesus in the gospels talks about hell more than anyone else in Scripture. *It will not do* to resort to such simple reductions. God's love and holiness are inseparable despite their complexity. To follow this one up you can do a lot worse than starting with Don Carson's *Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*¹⁸. Still we must ask, have we been equally reductionistic? Well, this is where I think our individualising of sin has led to a problem

□ **Judgment is a topic of praise** – The book of Revelation contains startling words throughout, but none perhaps as counter-cultural in our western Christian climate as these:

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying: We give thanks to you Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for destroying those who destroy the earth. Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of the covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm. (Revelation 11:16-19)

Quite apart from what these verses may or may not be saying about those who cause environmental disaster (!), these verses make many of us feel very uncomfortable. Is not part of the problem the fact that we have individualized sin? For once we have done that, it becomes very hard to see how judgment can be a topic of praise.¹⁹ Of course when we have been saved, we rejoice in the blood of the lamb. We might rejoice that God does right and is seen to do right. But what about the judgment of those who sin around us? We are squeamish about that.

I think it is perhaps only when we really begin to empathise and pastor the helpless victims of persecution and injustice that we can begin to grasp what is so good about it. In fact, we will grasp why judgment is so *essential*, for a world without it is chillingly bleak. I will never forget a Congolese student in Kampala.²⁰ He had been a banker in Kisangani (Congo's second city), which was a scary job in Mobutu's Congo because the dictator tended to treat the national banks as his private domain. This friend had managed to keep something of his integrity and was doing quite well: he described how he had 3 cars that worked and 2 that did not, which was not bad going! He, his wife & their 4 daughters even lived comfortably in a large house. Yet the end came eventually and when order and chaos broke down, they had to flee for their lives. They ended up as refugees, living altogether in one room in Kampala, with only enough money for one meagre meal every 2 days. He ended up as a student at KEST²¹ where we became friends. He said to me, with tears welling up: "I couldn't believe in the gospel or trust that God was good, were it not for judgment." This is an appeal for vindication and justice in a world where there is little hope of either.

Now we can't leave it there, of course. For the more we like Christ we become, the more we align ourselves to God's perspective on the world, and therefore the more pained and heartbroken we are when his name dishonoured. There is then a profound satisfaction at the righting of wrongs and

¹⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (IVP, 2000)

¹⁹ After all, how many contemporary 'worship' songs focus on this!? I'm not necessarily suggesting we should have many because it would be very hard to find a way to avoid jingoism. We often call for judgment on injustice and evil, but we don't usually actually *rejoice* in it.

²⁰ I was able to include a brief mention of this friend in the Study Guide edition of *Cross-Examined* (p62)

²¹ Kampala Evangelical School of Theology

restoration of honour to God at judgment. That is good news – and both the vindication of sin’s victims and the restoration of God’s honour are integral to the rightness of judgment. Perhaps you can sum it up like this. Because we sinners are victims, judgment is good news; and because we sinners are culprits, judgment is bad news. It is BOTH! The former is why we cry out for the justice and holiness of God (*how long o Lord?*); the latter is why we cry out for the mercy of God (*have mercy on me a man of unclean lips*). I would want to say, then, that ultimately it is only penal substitutionary atonement that does justice to both aspects of this.

IV. TRINITY: Every Member Ministry

Those who would challenge penal substitution often do so on the grounds that the doctrine both fails to do justice to and even in fact distorts classic Trinitarian belief. It is this assumption that presumably lies behind the infamous charge that it is cosmic child abuse. That is an outrageous thing to say, of course, but it is not hard to see *why* it is said. For at first sight, penal substitution is *altogether* objectionable and barbaric. After all, where is the difference between this and the violence of ancient pagan rituals? Take this particularly gruesome practice, for example:

If Spanish chroniclers can be believed, the Aztecs sacrificed 20,000 to 50,000 people a year in their capital, Tenochtitlan ... To feed the need for such huge numbers of victims, the Aztecs arranged a peculiar agreement with their neighbours to fight regular ceremonial battles not for conquest, but to allow each side to capture large quantities of sacrificial victims. Apparently most of the victims seized in what was called the War of Flowers considered sacrifice an honour or an unquestionable act of fate.²²

In order to make their gods favourable, the Aztecs needed to be brought round by the gruesome bribes of human lives. Worse still, there could never be any certainty that their prayers would be answered; so more sacrifices were constantly required to bolster their claims. We find that repulsive, and rightly so. It was precisely this sort of barbarity, which apparently made watching Mel Gibson’s recent blockbuster about the Mayan civilisation, *Apocalypto*, such an ordeal.

However, the charge of child abuse, while outrageous, is also hugely ironic – it is a rejection of a conservative distortion of penal substitution perhaps, but one that is distorted because it is *not Trinitarian enough!* It is precisely because of a fully-orbed doctrine of the Trinity that penal substitution to bring about both expiation and more importantly propitiation, ceases to be unjust and abusive. In fact, I suspect (although I’ve not thought this through enough so it gives you something to chew over) that penal substitution is the only way to be thoroughly Trinitarian!

I am conscious of treading on dangerous ground now because I am not enough of a systematician to ensure faithful nuances here. But allow a few scriptural pointers to show that in different ways, Father Son & Holy Spirit are all intimately involved in every aspect of the atonement. This list is by no means exhaustive.

□ God The Father:

- **He judges sin** (he is the *Ancient of Days*, the *Lord of Hosts*, *God Almighty*): it is clear throughout scripture that his defining characteristic is his *holiness*. Thus in Isaiah 6, he is described by the angelic beings with the 3-fold *Holy, holy, holy* – which, as Alec Motyer famously notes in his commentary, is used:

²² David Ewing Duncan, *The Calendar*, (Fourth Estate, 1998), pp. 27-28.

to express superlatives or to indicate totality. Only here is a threefold repetition found. Holiness is supremely the truth about God, and his holiness is in itself so far beyond human thought that a 'super-superlative' has to be invented to express it" 23p77

It is not good enough to say that God is love as if that is the only defining mark of God. His holiness is such that sin is repugnant and a personal affront, and therefore must be judged. So the Father is therefore the judge of all. And yet...

- **He plans the atonement.** This is especially noticeable in the Old Testament sacrificial system, which is providentially contained within the covenant law. Thus, remarkably, the law provides within its very own code the means by which a law-breaker can have his or her own lawbreaking covered and dealt with. Then in the New Testament, it is the *Father who sends the son* (a key concept in John's gospel: The Father is *the one who sends the Son*, and the Son is *the one sent*²⁴) – this is most explicit in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- **The personal cost** – what I have wondered about saying here has given heebie-jeebies to all the experts I've talked with – and rightly so. I will probably get showered with angry complaints (depending on the size of readership this site gets!). It is risky language because it sounds as if it undermines the essence and eternity of the Trinity. That is certainly not my intention. But what I am groping after is a sense of the personal cost that the Father endured, alongside that of the Son who endured separation from his eternal Father at the crucifixion. To put it crassly, the cross was not done blithely or unfeelingly by either Father or Son. So there is a sense in which the Father had the experience of becoming 'sonless' for us because of his LOVE for us. Now that is very risky language and should not be readily quoted elsewhere without a 1000 qualifications and careful contextualisation. But you will hopefully get something of what I am trying to say. Suffice it to say, the Father was not immune to the agonies of the crucifixion.

☐ **God The Son:**

- **The Incarnation** – it is axiomatic in incarnational and Trinitarian theology that you can't divorce the Son from Father (hence the dodgy sound of what I have just written!). He is fully Man, fully God; *he was God and was with God*. (John 1:1) Everything we say must be consistent with this premise.
- **He judges sin** (e.g. Acts 17:30-31). There is no dichotomy between the 'gods' of the Old and New Testaments, and it is a truism to observe that Jesus talks about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He knew that he was going to judge. Yet conversely, he knew what he was destined for. Isn't that precisely why the cross presented such a terrifying prospect for him in the Garden of Gethsemane? He knew what judgment entailed. He knew how appalling sin is. He therefore knew how righteous the condemnation of sin is.
- **The cross is his deliberate will** – It is his profound understanding of sin, righteousness and judgment, quite apart from the joy of intimacy with the Father, which combine to make his obedience all the more remarkable. His was not the foolish bravado of ignorance, but the astonishing courage of the fully informed. So in Luke 9:51, *'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'* Then there was Gethsemane – he did everything out of deliberate, and certainly not grudging, obedience to the Father, the one who sent him.
- **The Last Supper** (Luke 22, cf 1Corinthians 11) – Jesus' startling and bizarre interpolations to the ancient, Passover liturgy unequivocally demonstrate that his was to be a deliberate act of self-giving, to be remembered until his return, and even beyond (cf Revelation 5). The supper memorial service was his gift to the church as a means to keeping this central – no other

²³ J A Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, (IVP) p77

²⁴ For example: John 1:33, 7:18, 8:18, 8:29, 9:4, 10:36

detail or achievement of Jesus' life and ministry is afforded such a focus. The cross was uppermost in his mind throughout his ministry, and not just at the end.

The wonder of all this is that when we put the pieces of the puzzle together we find an awesome completeness in the gospel. Thus a consequence of Jesus' Incarnation is that he fully identifies with all humanity in all our God-created and God-intended perfection. A consequence of Jesus' atoning death is that he fully identifies with us as rebels against God, in all our culpable sin, by becoming sin for us; and with us as victims of sin as he himself was a victim of others' sin.

□ **God The Holy Spirit:**

- **He is Judge** – while we don't always see him in these terms, but it is nevertheless important to stress that he is the *Holy Spirit* who in John 16:8 is understood to bring *conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment*. He is the one who brings about the washing of repentance and faith (Titus 3:5-8), and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-23). He is intimately concerned with right and justice.
- **Other involvement** - we must presumably see his involvement in the atonement with the same concern for right and holiness as the other 2 persons of the Trinity. This can be seen in:
 - Spirit-revealed prophetic preparation (Isaiah 53 etc cf Luke 24; cf 1 Peter 1:10-12 and 2 Peter 1:21)
 - He propels the spiritual battle that culminates at the cross – notice Mark's very unusual vocabulary in Mark 1:12, where the Spirit 'compelled Jesus to go into wilderness' where he would battle with Satan. As we learn in the other synoptic gospels (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), the wilderness temptations were nothing less than a satanic attempt to divert Jesus from the Cross.
 - He witnesses to the cross after the event (for instance, 1 Corinthians 2)

So all three persons are intimately involved in the gospel drama. Well, of course they are; if the Cross was genuinely a divine plan, how could they not be? Yes, there is impenetrable mystery here. After all, how was the Trinity relating "during" those three dark hours on the cross? That is perhaps as mind-boggling as it gets. But would we have our God any other way! We have to say this if we're to be consistent with Bible's presentation. I make no claims whatsoever to being a patristic scholar but surely the whole point about the formation of Trinitarian doctrine was that it seemed the best way after centuries of wrangling to hold together in tension all the different biblical angles and trajectories. And please note, these formations seek to *embrace* all that has been said about God's holiness, the redemption and substitution of Christ; they didn't simply ignore them to make their system work better. For more on this, Garry Williams' article on Chalke & Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus* is an extremely helpful tour de force on the patristic background to penal substitution.²⁵

In conclusion to this point, the Bible surely causes us to say that at the cross, *God is saving us from himself by himself*. The Cross is a Trinitarian endeavour driven by God the Trinity's righteousness and justice, *and* his merciful desire to justify (cf Romans 3:25-26). To paraphrase John Stott, the cross is God's self-satisfaction by his self-substitution. Consequently, as Stott also notes:

*"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."*²⁶

²⁵ This can be found at www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/punished.html

²⁶ J R W Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p.151.

V. BLOOD – Symbolic AND Effective

The purpose in making this brief, concluding section is that it shores up confidence in biblical consistency in revealing penal substitution as central to God’s gospel. Others cover this in detail elsewhere so I will only touch on this briefly – and cheekily allude to the details in chapter 8 of *Cross-Examined*.

In a world that obviously knew nothing of the medical advances of the last century, the sight of blood was especially serious. Heavy bleeding was immediately life threatening, and unless it could be stopped, death was inevitable. Heart-pumped blood sustains life. As the Old Testament Law puts it, ‘the life of every creature is its blood’ (Leviticus 17:14). Once shed, life slips away. In the Bible, however, its connotations were even more sinister. Thus Leon Morris writes:

*...the Hebrews understood ‘blood’ habitually in the sense of ‘violent death’ (much as we do when we speak of ‘shedding of blood’).*²⁷

This connotation of violence has fuller biblical significance of blood when we put it into the context of the very event Jesus was celebrating with his followers on that fateful night: The Passover. It was about a death – given up to protect the life of another.

To cut a long story short, we find that when Paul talks about the atonement, blood is central and foundational. In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, Jesus’ shedding of blood was not just symbolic; it was also effective in and of itself. Thus Paul and others speak of the achievements of Jesus death in these striking terms:

Sin’s effects:	Victory at the Cross	BECAUSE CHRIST DIED IN OUR PLACE
We Are Guilty	JUSTIFICATION	We have now been justified by his blood . <i>(Romans 5:9)</i>
We Are Alienated	RECONCILIATION	[God was pleased through Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through his blood , shed on the cross. <i>(Colossians 1:20)</i>
We Are Enslaved	REDEMPTION	In him we have redemption through his blood . <i>(Ephesians 1:7)</i>
We Are Defiled	CLEANSING	The blood of Christ ... [will] cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death <i>(Hebrews 9:14)</i>

The point of this table²⁸ is that it encapsulates a simple but crucial point. For these foundational achievements of the atonement, the substitution of Christ’s death in place of the sinner’s (as alluded to by the biblical shorthand of the phrase ‘Christ’s blood’) lies at the very heart.²⁹ It is not without biblical backing, therefore, that Roger Nicole called it the linchpin of the gospel:

*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... Thus penal substitution of Christ is the vital centre of the atonement, the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation and flies off the handle so to speak.*³⁰

²⁷ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, (Paternoster, 1995), p. 219

²⁸ I am grateful to my friend and colleague Paul Blackham for alerting me to the classical analysis of Jesus’ death under 5 headings, each corresponding to the 5 categories of offering as outlined in Leviticus. The one that is missing from this table is the grain offering, indicating dedication to the Holy One (cf Gordon Wenham’s NICOT commentary on Leviticus, Eerdmans, 1979)

²⁹ There is clearly a relationship between *Christ’s substitution for us, his representation of us and our participation in him* at the cross – but this is not the place to consider the profundities of this relationship!

³⁰ Strange, *Many-Splendoured Cross*, p.36.

N. T. Wright found himself (perhaps unexpectedly) drawn into the thick of the debate surrounding Mann and Chalke's book because of his generous endorsement of it. It therefore encouraging to find him making this comment in answer to a question about the accusation that versions of penal substitution reduce God to a "cosmic child abuser". Some of what he is quoted to have said certainly chimes with much of what I have been saying in this paper:

There are some ways of preaching and expounding penal substitution, which do indeed reduce it to the crude terms of God demanding someone suffer and not caring much who it is.

I must interject at this point to say that I do not think I have EVER heard proponents of substitutionary atonement explain it in these terms. This is a straw man used by its opponents, I fear. Still, let him continue:

This is an attempt to put the vast ocean of God's saving love into the small bottle of one particular category. When you track penal substitution from its New Testament statements (Mark 10:45, Romans 8:3 etc) back to its roots in Isaiah 53, you discover that in its proper form it is part of a much larger theme, which is God's vindication of his justice and saving love and his demolition of pagan power and authority. Sometimes evangelicals haven't wanted to embrace or even notice the larger themes and so have falsely accentuated the sharp edge of penal substitution in isolation from them. I think Steve is reacting to that kind of skewed presentation. Think of it like this. In a musical chord, the 'third' (in a chord of C major, this would be the note E) is the critical one that tells you many things, e.g. whether the music is major or minor, happy or sad. That E is vital if the music is to make the sense it does. But if the player plays the E and nothing else, the E no longer means what it's meant to mean. Likewise, substitutionary atonement is a vital element in the gospel. Miss it out, and the music of the gospel is no longer what it should be. But if you only play that note you are in danger of setting up a different harmony altogether.³¹

Now, I do not actually agree with everything here (but that is the topic for another time), and he is (perhaps understandably) being over-generous to Chalke and Mann. But where he points to the centrality of penal substitution while encouraging a thorough engagement with its wider biblical context, he must surely be on the right track. We may not distort the doctrine in quite the crude terms that Wright suggests we do, but I am not confident that are entirely innocent in our expositions. By all means let us relish the wonder of substitutionary atonement in all its biblical centrality and importance; only make sure we let all the facets of this divinely revealed diamond shine with all their brilliance. Or to be consistent with Wright's analogy, let us allow the biblical harmonies resonate around the critical and significance-laden third.

CONCLUSION

Christ's astonishing death on the cross was indeed a **Victory** over the principalities and powers of evil AND a **Satisfaction** for sin AND a **Model** for the ethics of love AND a **Restoration** of God's created order AND the **Coronation** of God's king AND the **Redemption** of those enslaved to sin AND... AND...

Can we ever exhaust its significance? This is not to suggest that they all work in the same way, nor that we are required to place the doctrine of substitution merely as one amongst many. Surely it is better to understand (as I think the Bible expects us to understand) penal substitution as the means to atonement, of which these achievements are all facets and consequences. Then we are in a stronger position to detect their various inter-relationships. As Strange encourages us to ask, are we dealing with, *'musically, the difference between major and minor themes? Narratively the*

³¹ Found at www.ntwrightpage.com/Wrightsaid_October2005.htm

*difference between major plot and subplot? Geographically the difference between an epicentre and a ripple?*³²

We must listen to radical teachings. They are usually used by God to expose our own weaknesses. We must learn from them, while sifting carefully through what people are saying to ensure faithfulness and consistency with the Bible's complexities.

Let me allow Don Carson to have the last word in what is a classic Carson trumpet call, albeit in the context of the wider debates raging around the so-called Emerging Church. In many ways he stridently articulates the crucial point that I have been trying to make in a rather more long-winded fashion!

So what shall we choose?

Experience or truth? The left wing of an aeroplane, or the right? Love or integrity? Study or service? Evangelism or discipleship? The front wheels of a car, or the rear? Subjective knowledge or objective knowledge? Faith or obedience?

Damn all false antitheses to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings where oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ.

*The truth is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all – of the truth and of our experience. The Bible insists that we take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).*³³

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All Souls, Langham Place
March 2007

³² Strange, *Many-Splendoured Cross*, p35.

³³ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 234.