

Some theological reflections in the light of recent controversies

Introduction

The night before his crucifixion the Lord said to his Father, 'I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do' (John 17:4).² On the cross, he said 'It is finished' (19:30). What was this work?

The Integrating Principle - Obedience

The words of Jesus in John 17:4 guide us: it was the work his Father had given him to do. It was the course of his obedience on earth, that work described in Philippians 2:5-11 which culminated in his death on a cross. On its completion the Father highly exalted him and he was given the glory which he had before the beginning of the world (John 17:5). He entered on to the reward promised in the eternal covenant of redemption referred to in Isaiah 53:10-12, John 17:2-5 and Hebrews 12:1-3.

Obedience is the overarching category within which to understand the work of Christ. Obedience was the great representative work he completed on behalf of those federally united with him in eternity, the 'one act of righteousness' of which Paul speaks in Romans 5:18 which cancelled out the 'one trespass' of the first Adam and marked a new beginning for humanity. On the basis of the imputation of his righteousness, they are justified. By this work of the second man, the last Adam, a new creation is inaugurated.

Any description of what Christ accomplished on the cross must have this broad, cosmic perspective in view and see the work of Christ characterised by obedience. It is what God requires. It is what man must render. Where Adam failed, Christ succeeded. Two elements in Christ's obedience are rightly

distinguished but never separated: his obedience to the precepts of the law and his obedience to the penalty of the law. He had to obey the law perfectly as man because man had failed to do it. He had to bear the penal sanction of the law - death.

'Preceptive' and 'penal' are better descriptions than active and passive, because all of his obedience was active, no more so than in his death where he loved the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength as no human being has ever done; and all was passive in the sense that his humiliation was a state he entered at conception and which characterised his whole life and death.

This work was part of Christ's priestly work, of a piece with his continuing work of intercession in heaven. It was also a work that was complete before his resurrection though without resurrection it would have had no saving efficacy, accessibility or perpetuity.

But the culminating point of this work was at the cross.

It is not (yet) a point of controversy among evangelicals that Christ's obedience unto death on the cross was somehow central to salvation. What is too often in controversy is precisely what 'happened' on the cross - what Christ accomplished and how. This is where we turn to a passage rightly valued for its richness on the meaning of the cross - Romans 3:21-26. It does not say everything there is to be said on the subject but as a single passage it says more than any other in the New Testament.

The 'Problem': Wrath active through retribution: the background to Romans 3:21-26

A study of 3:21-26 requires a grasp of the preceding argument in Rom 1:18 - 3:20. Paul proclaims the revelation in the gospel of a righteousness of God to be received by faith. This is necessary because of the

prior existence of another reality - the wrath of God. This is being revealed in the course of history as God judicially hands man over to the sinful course of life he has chosen (1:18-32). It is further 'stored up' for the end time, even for the moral man and the Jew who know better but do not do it (2:1-5; 17-24). The conclusion is that not one is righteous, neither Jew nor Gentile (3:9-20); all are under sin, every mouth will be silenced on the last day. There is no escape, and there is no escaping the conclusion - the wrath of God against human beings because of their sin is the presupposition for the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel. Emil Brunner says: '...the objective aspect of the divine which corresponds to the condition of man is the wrath of God. Hence a theology which uses the language of Christianity can be tested by its attitude toward the Biblical doctrine of the wrath of God, whether it means what the words of Scripture mean'.³

We must pause to look at this great truth which is central to understanding the cross and is the one thing that detractors of penal substitution have to ignore, explain away or play down. Indeed this is to say that the debate about the atonement is nothing less than a debate about our view of God.

1. WRATH IS NECESSITY.

If God is a holy God then wrath is a necessary response to sin. Wrath is 'no capricious passion, but the stern reaction of the divine nature towards evil',⁴ his 'holy reaction to evil'.⁵

2. IT IS PERSONAL.

C.H.Dodd in his commentary on Romans⁶ explained God's wrath as 'the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe' and A.T.Hanson in *The Wrath of the Lamb*⁷ followed him. Certainly there is a 'process' of wrath described in Romans 1 but it is process which God initiated and which he

superintends. The interposition of secondary causes do not cancel out the agency of the first cause who put those secondary causes into place. The 'impersonal' argument has been put more recently in slightly different form by Stephen Travis⁸ and is answered well by Garry Williams in his EA lecture in July 2005.⁹ Williams points out that '...with God the creator it is quite possible for a punishment to be intrinsic, to follow from an act, and yet still to be retributive in character' (that is, to be divinely inflicted punishment).

3. WRATH IS OPERATIVE IN RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE.

The divine logic is that sin deserves to be punished. Retribution has not as its main aim the reformation of the offender, nor merely the declaration of what is right and wrong, nor the warning of others lest they offend, but the visiting of sin with its just deserts. This is the very essence of justice. Man is responsible and the principle of retribution treats him as responsible, not as sick or ignorant or under the influence of others. Retribution protects both human dignity and divine honour. The only alternative to retribution is a change in the law and that means a change in the character of God.

Retribution is seen in the Old Testament for example in Psalm 106 which gives six examples of what incurs God's wrath: discontent (13-15); rebellion (16-18); idolatry (19-23); unbelief (24-27) apostasy (28-32) and obstinacy (32-33). Moreover the form that God's wrath takes expresses the *lex talionis* principle - an eye for an eye. There is in other words a correspondence between crime and punishment: God 'hands over' people to their choices - if they are greedy, to meat that will kill them; if they make alliances with pagan nations, to the rule and the gods of those nations, as Stephen teaches in Acts 7:41, 42. Paul makes *paredwken* ('he handed over') a principle of history in Romans 1.

But there is more direct infliction too - Dathan and Abiram are struck dead immediately for trespassing on the holy.

All this is subject in the case of God's people to two crucial qualifications: **first**, God's undergirding love and faithfulness to them expressed in the *covenant* and in such passages as Hosea 11: 8-9: 'How can I hand you over O Israel...?'; and **second**, *the provision for the aversion of retributive punishment* either by the sacrificial system, the sacrifices being expiatory or attached to those that were; or by a mediator (Moses in Exodus 32,33 or Phinehas among the Midianites (Num 25:10f; Ps 106:28-31). The prophets reminded Israel and Judah time and again of God's wrath but also that in the end he was amazingly gracious: 'You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD' (Ezek. 20:44). The covenant God is faithful when he is gracious.

The New Testament references to wrath also demonstrate retribution and the 'correspondence' principle of punishment as in Romans 1. One of the contemporary objections to penal substitution is that 'revenge' is unworthy of God. How can one who bids us turn the other cheek or prays 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' be one with a God who inflicts punishment on those who offend him? Is this not this the 'myth of redemptive violence' to use Walter Wink's ¹⁰ phrase? But no-one taught more on hell, which is the ultimate in retribution and correspondence, than the Lord Jesus Christ and Paul's teaching is the same as that of Jesus. In Romans 12:19-21 he asserts that we are not to take revenge but he then says: '..but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"'.

Why not say 'do not avenge yourselves because God is a God who does not take revenge'? On the contrary Paul affirms that God is a God of retribution. The restoration of justice has been temporarily delegated to the state in international relations and internal peace and security, but on a cosmic scale and in the sphere of sin, God avenges himself and his own. He is the guardian of justice. And for this reason we leave it to him.

4. IT IS AT WORK NOW.

Romans 1 asserts in that sin and its consequences are the punishment for sin.

5. WRATH IS PRIMARILY ESCHATOLOGICAL.

See Romans 2:5; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Thess 1:5-10. It is this eschatological wrath that the proponents of wrath as 'impersonal' or merely 'cause and effect' fail to deal with. It is this wrath from which Christ saves us, not the outworking of it in history. Yet for believers, those within the covenant, the experience of even 'historical' wrath is transformed from the infliction of judgment to fatherly chastisement.

The solution: satisfaction accomplished through substitution.

Wrath is relieved by satisfaction through substitution. First, we will consider **substitution**. The Old Testament sacrificial system was built on this principle. The sacrificial animal was a substitute for the sinner who offered it. The heart of the system was the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The blood of a bull was sprinkled on the mercy seat lest the High Priest should die. In addition there were two goats: the scapegoat was sent into the wilderness, representing visually what was accomplished in the death of the sacrificial goat - the taking away of sins by a substitute. This is taken up in Hebrews 9 and applied to Jesus as the sacrificial animal who dies (vv7,12) and the

scapegoat who takes away sin (v28).

Then again of course we have the substitution of Isaac by a ram in Genesis 22 and above all the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 who 'bears their iniquities', all together pointing us to Jesus Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Two points emerge in the Old Testament system:

(1) THE PRINCIPLE OF GRACE.

Substitution is an expression of grace. It bears witness to the truth that atonement is God's work. In Psalm 78:38, 79:9 it is God who atones. This is most expressly stated in Leviticus 17:11 (NIV): 'For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life'. This states the principle of substitutionary atonement: life is given for life, of the victim for the offerer. It was given by *God* for this purpose. Atonement is ultimately his provision.

(2) THE PRINCIPLE OF INADEQUACY.

In the sacrifices the people of God could see the principle of grace but also the inadequacy of their system. Sacrifices had to be repeated. The priest himself was sinful. Some sins could not be atoned for but were visited with the death penalty. All pointed to the need for a greater sacrifice. God in his grace would reveal not only substitution but self-substitution.

The principle of substitution is impossible to deny. Moreover so too is what substitution achieved, that is - **satisfaction**. Concluding a study of the *kipper* (atonement) word-group in the OT, Leon Morris ⁴¹ found that both within and outside the sacrificial system it meant much the same thing: averting punishment especially the divine anger, by the offering of a ransom which could be a life or money. See Exod 32:30; Num 35:33; Num 16:41-50; 2 Sam

21:1-14; Deut 21:1-9. Remember also Psalm 106. Until atonement is made the displeasure of God rests upon the sinner.

John Stott ⁴² has a useful discussion of what satisfaction means: (1) the satisfaction of God's law in that its sanctions are met; (2) upholding moral order in the universe. Emil Brunner says: 'The Law of his divine being, on which all the law and order in the world is based...the logic and reliable character of all that happens, the validity of all standards...the Law itself in its most profound meaning, demands the divine reaction, the divine concern about sin...if this were not true, then there would be no seriousness in the world at all; there would be no meaning in anything, no order, no stability...'; ⁴³ (3) the satisfaction of God himself. This occurs in (1) and (2) in that there is no law or moral order outside of or greater than God which are to be satisfied independently of him. But this third point also takes into account the Biblical expressions of very personal reactions to sin - God's being provoked (Dt. 32:16; Ps 78:40,41); 'burning' (Gen 39:19; Ex. 32:19; Jer. 4:4; Deut 4:24 - 'God is a consuming fire') and of 'satisfaction' itself in which God's anger is spent, accomplished, poured out (Lam 4:11; Ezek 7:7,8). Hence Stott's conclusion is that the biblical means of atonement is God's self-satisfaction by self-substitution.

What we learn from God's provision of atonement is that *God's wrath is entirely compatible with God's love* - indeed a Christian understanding of the gospel requires these two realities. This is not to say that wrath and love are of equal ultimacy. Love is essential to God; wrath is reactive to sin. Love will be forever; wrath can be assuaged. But that both are real and compatible is essential to the gospel. The cross is where wrath and mercy meet. To quote only one of many such statements: James Denney says of

1 John 4:9,10: 'So far from finding any kind of contrast between love and propitiation, the apostle can convey no idea of love to any except by pointing to the propitiation - love is what is manifested there; and he can give no account of the propitiation but by saying, Behold what manner of love. For him, to say 'God is love' is exactly the same as to say 'God has in His Son made atonement for the sin of the world'.¹⁴ To posit a conflict between God's love and wrath is biblically impossible.

Morris concludes that while we want to do away with the crude notion of man bringing gifts to appease an angry deity, the concept of propitiation cannot be expunged from the Old Testament. The principle of retribution is that 'the soul that sins shall die'. The principle of substitution is that God may accept another death in the place of the sinner. The principle of satisfaction is that thereby God's wrath is quenched.

In this light therefore we return to Rom 3:21-26.

The Righteousness of God

Verse 21: 'But now...' the righteousness of God is manifested. This righteousness is evidently that referred to in 1:17 and is the answer to man's plight. Its revelation is independent of the law (probably meaning here the 'law covenant', the law as a system) yet the law and the prophets bear witness to it - it is new but has been long announced. It is in fact the righteousness of God. This is the righteousness of God on the basis of the imputation of which God justifies sinners (Rom 4:5; 5:1,9,10; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9).¹⁵

Verses 22,23, 24a: It is a righteousness that is received through faith and is for all who believe, for all have sinned - there is no distinction in the plight or the remedy.

Verse 24b: Now Paul brings in the death of Christ.

What is its place in this argument? It is the rationale for justification through faith alone. It is the reason why God can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Christ Jesus, the justifier of the ungodly. It is the justification for justification. Sinners are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith (or, through faith in his blood).

If the origin of justification is God's grace, its historical basis is 'the *redemption* that came by Christ Jesus'. *Apolutrosis* is liberation on the payment of a price. It is the ransom of which the Lord speaks in Mark 10:45. In the New Testament sinners are seen as being in bondage which is many-sided but is specifically to (1) the law and (2) to sin.¹⁶ Quite evidently what is uppermost here is deliverance from the guilt of sin which is precisely what justification is (cf Eph. 1:7, Col 1:14; Heb 9:15).

How is this redemption effected? It is because Jesus Christ was 'put forward' by God 'as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith'. In John Murray's words commenting on 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45), 'Redemption, therefore, in our Lord's view, consisted in substitutionary bloodshedding ...with the end in view of thereby purchasing to himself the many on whose behalf he gave his life a ransom'.¹⁷

What does Paul mean by *hilasterion* in Rom 3:25? A first century Greek would have thought in terms of propitiation. In the LXX it translates 'mercy seat' in 22 out of some 27 appearances. It means 'place of atonement' or 'means of atonement'. In addition the *hilaskomai* word group is used overwhelmingly to translate the Hebrew *kipper* which Leon Morris says 'carries with it the implication of a turning away of the divine wrath by an appropriate offering'.¹⁸ There

are therefore good *linguistic* reasons for 'propitiation' or 'mercy seat' (that is, a propitiatory offering or place) over C.H. Dodd's preferred alternative of expiation, and probably for propitiatory offering / sacrifice over 'mercy seat' as the introduction of a Levitical 'cult' word seems out of place here. In addition the *contextual* considerations for 'propitiation' (either 'place' or 'means' is secondary) are overwhelming. Expiation has sin as its object; it means the cancelling out, putting away or covering of sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier between man and God. Propitiation has God as its object. It means the pacifying of his wrath. In Morris' words, '...while other expressions in verses 21-26 may be held to deal with the judgement aspect, there is nothing other than this word to express the turning away of the wrath. Wrath has occupied such an important place in the argument leading up to this section that we are justified in looking for some expression indicative of its cancellation in the process which brings about salvation'.¹⁹ Propitiation is secured as a result of expiation of guilt. 'God is propitiated as the result of the expunging, the wiping out, the making atonement for the sin. What has been done satisfies God and he therefore forgives; he is propitiated as the result of expiation'. (D.M. Lloyd-Jones).²⁰

So propitiation must be there; the work of Christ on the cross is directed first to God and by his sacrifice God's wrath is assuaged. The very thought contains the idea of substitution. Because Christ died, God's wrath is quenched in respect of those who believe. There is real redemption because there has been a real propitiation.

In verse 25 the phrase 'through his blood' surely emphasises the Old Testament context of sacrifice. Compare Rom 5:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 1:20. The life is in the blood; it is the blood that atones.

Verses 25b, 26: Finally, the purpose for which this is done: there is the justification of God and the justification of sinners. Our thinking must be guided by the last phrase - that God may be just, not merely be *seen to be* just, and the justifier. To summarise a complex argument, the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ enables God to maintain his righteous character in postponing punishment of sins in the past and in justifying those who in the present age place their faith in Jesus.²¹

God may therefore be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. The cross is at one and the same time the satisfaction of God's justice, the demonstration of it and the provision of a 'righteousness of God' on the basis of which God justifies the ungodly.

'Romans 3:21-26' says Don Carson, 'makes a glorious contribution to Christian understanding of the "internal" mechanism of the atonement. It explains the need for Christ's propitiating sacrifice in terms of the just requirements of God's holy character'.²²

What did Christ accomplish on the cross? Christ accomplished the removal of wrath active through retribution by providing satisfaction through substitution. More simply, with regard to God Christ accomplished satisfaction; with regard to man Christ accomplished righteousness leading to justification. How did he accomplish it? He did it by consenting to be a wrath-bearing sacrifice, or as we may also call it, by penal substitution, effecting redemption and reconciliation, providing the rationale for justification.²³

I shall return to 'penal substitution' later and try to show how, whatever else may be true of Christ's achievement, penal substitution is the infrastructure without which everything collapses. Let's now look

briefly at the current debates. The fundamental objection is to 'penal substitution' as a description of what Christ 'did' on the cross.

Steve Chalke, 'The Lost Message of Jesus' and recent objections to 'penal substitution'.

This book created a furore in 2004 mainly after it was publicized by a review in *Evangelicals Now*. It is not a book primarily about the atonement but to recapture Jesus' lost message that 'the kingdom of God, God's inbreaking shalom, is available now to everyone through him'. In the course of the book Chalke is dismissive of what he sees as evangelical shibboleths including the need to be born again. His basic conviction about God is that God is love and is never defined as anything other than love.²⁴ He quotes 1 John 4:8 yet not verses 9,10 which explain that God's love is most clearly seen in the cross - indeed, in Christ's propitiatory sacrifice.

He says:

'John's gospel famously declares, " God so loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). How, then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son? 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. The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love'.²⁵

He is concerned because he thinks the world sees evangelicals as hard and censorious and the implication is that this is due at least in part to a theology of the atonement that legitimises power and a God of anger, justice and power. We need to restate everything in terms of love and tell people that God loves them and that they are fundamentally good rather than originally sinful.²⁶ And so on.

Chalke's book is bad in theology and exegesis. A

wrong view of God, of man and of the cross, were the accurate headings in the 'Evangelicals Now' review. Moreover it makes its point by setting up and knocking down straw men - caricatures of positions he wants to demolish.

But what is behind this? Chalke's book did not come out of thin air and the recent EA debate in July revealed a movement within broader evangelicalism that opposes penal substitution. One of the speakers was Joel Green the co-author with Mark Baker of *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*²⁷ which argues against penal substitution. What are the arguments of those who oppose penal substitution?

Garry Williams in an excellent paper defending the doctrine categorises (and answers) four them as follows. A number of the answers will have been anticipated in what I have already said.

1. PENAL SUBSTITUTION ENTAILS A MISTAKEN DOCTRINE OF GOD, principally in that it ascribes retributive justice to God. What has already been said covers the main answers to this objection.

2. PENAL SUBSTITUTION CONFLICTS WITH THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY BY SEVERING THE PERSONS.

Williams quotes Joel Green: 'any atonement theology that assumes, against Paul, that in the cross God did something "to" Jesus' is 'an affront to the Christian doctrine of the triune God'.²⁸ Williams in his argument quotes in reply among others, Stott: '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'.²⁹ Also, John Owen says: 'The Agent [Subject] in, and chief author of, this great work of redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are of the Deity are undivided

and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed'.³⁰ Remember the words of Jesus in John 10:17,18 - he lays down his life, no-one takes it from him, yet this is why - even when he is forsaken - the Father loves him. The Son is willing; the Father sends; the Son is sent; the Father strikes (Matt 26:31 - quoting Zech 13:7); the Son bears. This is not anti-trinitarian; it is the profound heart of the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity.

3. PENAL SUBSTITUTION THRIVES IN THE SOIL OF MODERN WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM.

This is a strange criticism to make of a doctrine that depends on the federal unity of the Surety and the members. The corporate - covenantal context of penal substitution is the very opposite of individualistic. It is the more modernist interpretations of the cross that are individualistic.

4. PENAL SUBSTITUTION CANNOT LOOK BEYOND ITSELF (IT IS SOLIPSISTIC).

This has various elements. (1) 'It cannot make sense of the life of Jesus'. But the obedience of Christ as we have seen was both preceptive and penal all his life long. At the cross it all came to a climax: he was loving his Father with all his heart and mind and soul and strength even as he bore his Father's wrath. But his life was an experience of the curse all the way through. (2) 'It cannot make sense of the cosmic scope of Christ's work on the cross'. Williams says: 'Penal substitution teaches that on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ exhausted the disordering curse in our place. It is thus that there can be resurrection and new creation, because the curse, our punishment, has been spent'. (3) 'It cannot ground the work of sanctification'. But it is rooted in the same doctrine of union with Christ: we died with him as well as he for us. Moreover the freedom of redemption is an incentive to holy living. (4) 'It

amounts to cosmic child abuse'. This is a common feminist critique of the cross. Coupled with this is the accusation of 'violence' paraded as salvific. How can one respond? (i) As long as we believe the Bible we have no option but to see the death of Christ ordained by the Father. (ii) To object to Christ's death as 'violent' is at root to strike against any system of justice in a fallen world; for ultimately, Christ's death was punishment for sin. (iii) The willing approach of Christ to his own death makes any suggestion of 'abuse' blasphemous. His was a loving obedience as was the Father's gift costly.

Other objections to penal substitution are:

5. IT IS RELATIVELY NEW.

Chalke alleges (in a website article) that it first emerged in Anselm, matured under Calvin and came to full growth in Hodge. But Williams in an *Evangelicals Now* article³¹ gives plenty of evidence of the doctrine in the Fathers and cites Justin Martyr, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

6. PENAL SUBSTITUTION IS THE CAUSE OF OR CONTRIBUTORY TO EVANGELICALS BEING REGARDED AS HARSH AND CENSORIOUS.

This begs many questions. (1) How widespread is that image? (2) Is there a causal connexion? (3) What difference would changing either the theology or the image make to the acceptance of the gospel? (4) Who are we listening to most - the world or the Word?

7. IT REPRESENTS A 'BOOKKEEPING' OR 'COMMERCIAL' MODEL OF ATONEMENT.

'Yes - and...?' almost suffices as an answer to this. Remove the emotive and negative connotation of 'bookkeeping' or 'commercial' and what you have is the fact that the atonement involves substitution, imputation and exchange. Alleluia!

8. IT REPRESENTS GOD AS BEING IN A 'LEGAL BIND' - subject to a law bigger than himself. We must be careful how we preach the atonement if we use language of 'God's having a problem' etc. God's law is unchanging not because it is an expression of his will by which he is then bound eg as King Darius was by his edict and then had to pronounce another one to get himself out of a 'fix'; but because it expresses his character which is unchanging. But God is not subject to powers higher than he; he is being self-consistent in sending his Son to the cross. But this objection is a distortion of the real doctrine.

9. THERE ARE MANY MODELS OF THE ATONEMENT IN SCRIPTURE AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION IS ONLY ONE AND PROBABLY NOT THE BEST.

This is the line taken by *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*: that the NT material on the atonement is varied and that we should construct similarly varied models to suit different situations today - one of which may be penal substitution. So penal substitution may at best be one of a constellation of models of the atonement but no more. How do we respond to this 'one of many metaphors' argument? That there is 'polyphony' in Scripture in speaking of the death of Christ is not denied. What is denied is: (1) that the various pictures used are mere metaphors and we are free to jettison them to reach a 'deeper' truth; (2) that we can pick and mix between them; (3) that they give us licence to create our own equally valid metaphors. What must be remembered is that (1) these are God's accommodation to our weakness and being God's language they have divine authority; (2) they reveal truth about the atonement; (3) they will harmonise perfectly and not be conflict - there is in them a consistency because God's truth is ultimately one truth and we should expect a cogent picture to

emerge; (4) we should not be surprised if one 'model' is seen to be dominant, central, even indispensable, to the understanding of all the others. It is demonstrable that 'penal substitution' (which after all is not a biblical 'model' in the same way as 'reconciliation' but is theological shorthand to describe a biblical truth) summarises the truth of God as to the 'mechanism' of the atonement.

In *The Glory of the Atonement*³² Roger Nicole explains why, with reference to other 'models' of the atonement, penal substitution is the 'linchpin'. (1) If there is a model of Christ as our example (1 Pet 2:21) then the self-giving must be properly motivated - not an empty gesture. (2) If the cross was to move us to love God, then how are we to be moved by death as an expression of 'love' that meets no need in us? It is a strange expression of love - as likely to repel as attract. (3) If the cross is a victory, then it is a victory over Satan because it deals with human guilt. For Satan's power over believers is to accuse, and when a believer can point to the cross and say 'he took my guilt' Satan is cast down (John 12:31; Rev. 12: 10,11 - 'they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony'.) (4) If the cross is a governmental display of God's justice, then unless Christ really bore the sin of men it is a flagrant act of injustice in itself. (5) If the cross is in any sense seen as a vicarious repentance - this cannot be. A vicarious sacrifice is possible; a vicarious repentance is not. We have to repent; if Christ had repented for us, we would not have to. At his baptism he was not repenting, only identifying with us.

So Christ's substitutionary interposition as a 'sin-bearer who absorbs in himself the fearful burden of the divine wrath against our sin and secures a renewal of access to God'³³ is the 'linchpin' of the doctrine of the atonement which makes possible the

unified function of the other parts. If the linchpin is removed, the rest fail to function. So whether our problem is guilt, alienation, bondage to sin, captivity to Satan, death or the cosmic curse, it is met by the work of Christ as a wrath bearing sacrifice. As Garry Williams was brave enough to say at the EA debate, this is not a discussion 'within the family'. Penal substitution is not all there is to the cross but it alone makes sense of all there is and if we reject it we are flying in the face of the Scriptures and of God's grace. To the question 'Can one be an evangelical and reject the doctrine of penal substitution or even reject its central and essential role?' the answer must be 'No' - unless the word evangelical has lost all meaning.

The New Perspective (NP)

The nub of the NP is its redefinition of justification by faith and therefore of the gospel. Proponents of the NP differ on many things but let's take N.T. Wright as its most influential exponent at least in the UK. For Wright³⁴ the gospel is the announcement of a great victory of Christ, not an account of how people get saved. It is 'an announcement of the true God over against false gods'; the true God has sent his Son to redeem his people from bondage to false gods. The proclamation of the gospel results in people getting saved; through the proclamation the Holy Spirit works on man's hearts and they believe the message. The very announcement is the means whereby God reaches out and changes hearts.

Justification meanwhile is *implied* by the gospel but is not itself the gospel. "The 'gospel' is the announcement of Jesus' Lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterised solely by faith in him. 'Justification' is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith

belong as full members of this family on this basis and no other".

Justification is therefore an ecclesiological doctrine not a soteriological one - to do with how the people of God are defined, not a declaration that an individual is right with God. Implicit in this is that the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis of justification is denied.

What consequences does this have for their understanding of the cross work of Christ? One would expect an interpretation along the lines of the 'victory' model and this is borne out at least in Wright's exegesis of texts in Romans.³⁵ On Romans 3:21-26 Wright supports 'propitiation' as the meaning of *hilasterion* on lexical but primarily contextual grounds, as do more conservative scholars. It is 'exactly [the idea of punishment as a part of atonement] that Paul states, clearly and unambiguously, in 8:3, when he says that God "condemned sin in the flesh" - i.e. the flesh of Jesus'.³⁶ But what does Wright say on 8:3?

'God, says Paul, condemned sin. Paul does not, unlike some, say that God condemned Jesus. True, God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus; but this is some way from saying, as many have, that God desired to punish someone and decided to punish Jesus on everyone's behalf. Paul's statement is more subtle than that. It is not merely about a judicial exchange, the justice of which might then be questioned (and indeed has been questioned). It is about sentence of death being passed on "sin" itself, sin as a force or power capable of deceiving human beings, taking up residence within them. And so causing their death (7:7-25). To reduce Paul's thinking about the cross to terms of a lawcourt exchange is to diminish and distort it theologically and to truncate it exegetically. For Paul, what was at stake was not simply God's honor, in some Anselmic sense, but the mysterious power called sin, at large and destructive within God's world, needing to be brought to book, to have sentence passed and executed upon it, so that, with its power

broken, God could then give the life sin would otherwise prevent. That is what happened on the cross'.³⁷

Wright therefore sidelines penal substitution and the imputation of righteousness even while 'agreeing' with the texts that teach both.

Guy Prentiss Waters³⁸ confirms the impression that Wright's theology of the cross is more to do with breaking sin's power than removing its guilt. The connection between justification (remember - that you are a member of God's covenant people, not that you are right with God through faith) and Christ's death is vague. On Rom 3:25a Wright says "Thus is God's righteousness revealed in the gospel events of Jesus' death and resurrection: God has been true to the covenant ('covenant faithfulness' is Wright's understanding of *dikaiosune theou*), has dealt properly with sin, has come to the rescue of the helpless and has done so with due impartiality between Jew and Gentile".³⁹

'Vague' is the only word that Waters can use to describe the connexion Wright makes between the death of Christ and the believer's pardon. He comments 'Since Wright rejects imputation as a Pauline category ... he cannot mean by "atonement" and "propitiation" what these terms have traditionally been understood to mean. Atonement and propitiation cannot, therefore, play a central role in Wright's real understanding of the significance of Christ's death'.⁴⁰ Wright gives us a primarily *Christus Victor* view of the atonement, focussing on the defeat of sin as power rather than dealing with guilt. The *obedience* of Christ is his succeeding where Israel failed, entering into the 'exile' of the cross and re-emerging in resurrection to new covenant life.

Sinners are saved by identification with him in his death and resurrection - he is representative but not strictly a substitute.⁴¹

Conclusion

There is absolutely no need for evangelicals to be defensive about the doctrine of penal substitution. There is nothing new in the recent attacks once the contemporary wrappings have been removed. The evangelical understanding of the cross does full justice to the biblical material. It most fully expounds the character of God as he has revealed himself as Triune love and holiness. The 'high mysteries' of his Name an angel's grasp transcend, but we should glory in understanding them as well as we can. Let us regard the Word as more authoritative than the world. Understand the doctrine accurately. Preach it carefully but passionately. It alone is the power of God unto salvation. Moreover never let penal substitution be sidelined as one understanding of the atonement among many, whatever truth there is in other aspects of the multifaceted cross. In a real sense, penal substitution is the gospel.

'Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
in my place condemned he stood;
sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah! what a Saviour.'

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References

1. This article was originally delivered as a paper at the Westminster Fellowship in October, 2005.
2. Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (Crossway Bibles, 2001) unless otherwise stated.
3. *The Mediator*, (Lutterworth 1927) 152.
4. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 3rd Ed., 1988), 150.
5. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP 1986), 103.
6. Moffatt New Testament Commentary, 1932; Fontana, London 1959.
7. SPCK, London, 1957.
8. In *Christ and the Judgement of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (Marshall Pickering, 1986).
9. All references to 'EA Lectures' are to the lectures held at the London School of Theology on 6-8 July 2005 under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance following the controversy caused by Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003). A number of these papers can be seen on the EA website, www.cauk.org/theology.
10. Quoted by Chalke, op cit, 125.
11. See *Apostolic Preaching*, chaps 5,6.
12. Op cit, 122-23.
13. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Westminster Press, 1947, edition), pp. 444-445, quoted by Stott, loc cit.
14. James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, (1902; Shepherd Classic Edition, 1981) 276.
15. For a brief discussion as to why this does not mean 'God's covenant faithfulness' as eg N.T.Wright would have it see Don Carson's useful exposition of this passage in *The Glory of the Atonement* (ed. Charles Hill and Frank A. James III, IVP, 2004); and for a longer discussion see *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, (Stephen Westerholm, Eerdmans 2004, pp 286-96).
16. As to the law, we are in bondage (a) to its curse which is its penal sanction and Christ redeemed us from this curse being made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13); (b) to the law of works as a condition of salvation from which we are redeemed by the perfect obedience of Christ being constituted righteous by that obedience (Rom 5: 19) and (c) from the ceremonial law and its tutelary role. Hence obedience for Christ also meant fulfilling all the ceremonies of the law (Luke 2:22-24; cf Matt. 3:15) for he was born under the law (Gal 4:5).
As to sin, we are in bondage to sin 'in all its aspects and consequences' (Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 46) and salvation is not fulfilled until the redemption of our bodies. Redemption embraces all salvation including the eschatological deliverance from sin (Rom 8:23, Eph 1:14). But in Rom 3:24 Paul has in mind something already accomplished and in this regard we think of bondage to (a) the guilt of sin and (b) the power of sin.
17. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Banner of Truth edition, 1961 reprint 1979), 47.
18. Op cit, 170.
19. Ibid, 201. See also Carson, op cit, 130; Stott, op cit, 172.
20. *God's Ultimate Purpose* (Banner of Truth, 1978), 156-57.
21. 'His righteousness' in vv 25,26 being his attribute of justice, not the righteousness whereby he justifies the ungodly; the former is 'demonstrated' (*eis endeixin*) at the cross, the latter, on the basis of which generations before Christ were proleptically justified, is 'made manifest' (*pephanerwtai*) - v 21. See Douglas Moo's discussion, *Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, Romans 1-8* (Moody Press, 1991) pp238-43.
22. *Glory*, 138.
23. Sinclair Ferguson in a lecture at Keswick in July 2005 listed six consequences of the Fall from which Christ's death redeems us: guilt (by justification), alienation (in reconciliation), bondage to sin (in redemption), captivity to Satan (by victory over the devil), death (through his death and resurrection) and the cosmic curse (by inaugurating the new creation as the last Adam).
24. *Lost Message*, 63.
25. *ibid*, 182-83.
26. *Ibid*, 67.
27. *Paternoster*, 2001.
28. *Recovering* 57.
29. Op cit, 151.
30. *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* Bk.I, chap.III; Works (Banner of Truth edition) vol 10, 163.
31. October 2004.
32. Postscript on Penal Substitution, *Glory*, 445.
33. *Ibid*, 446.
34. *What St. Paul Really Said*, Lion, 1997.
35. *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol X (Abingdon, 2002).
36. *Ibid*, 476.
37. *Ibid*, 578.
38. *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (P&R, 2004).
39. Wright on *Romans*, 477.
40. Waters, op cit, 142.
41. Interestingly, Wright is obviously an influence on Chalke - he is frequently cited and commended Chalke's book as 'rooted in good scholarship'.