

In the recent debate over the nature of the atoning work of Christ, it has been suggested that the doctrine of penal substitution belongs particularly to the Reformed tradition, especially to a line leading from John Calvin, through to Charles Hodge.¹ This appears to be an attempt to marginalise the doctrine into belonging to only one strand within evangelicalism, and to suggest that today's understanding of penal substitution is the historically unrepresentative child of nineteenth-century American Reformed thinking. Certainly the understanding of the atonement as a work of propitiation has been strongly held by those in the Reformed tradition (to which this writer is happy to belong). However, there is clear evidence that a much wider constituency of evangelicalism, whilst not ignoring other biblical images for the work of the Cross, have consistently seen penal substitution as central to the gospel.

The eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival ably demonstrates this. From great names such as Whitefield and the Wesleys, to unheralded and obscure lay preachers, from Calvinist to Arminian, all preached the gospel urgently, convinced, as John Wesley put it, that nothing in the Christian system 'is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the Atonement'.² Crucial to their understanding was that the saving work of Christ on the cross was a propitiatory sacrifice.

For both John and Charles Wesley, penal substitution was of great importance.³ On 21st May 1738, after a long spiritual struggle, Charles Wesley was able to trust in Christ alone for salvation. The blessing that came from this was immense, as he confided in his Journal that day, 'I now found myself

at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ... I saw that by faith I stood'; as he later wrote in a famous hymn, 'No condemnation now I dread: Jesus, and all in him, is mine!' ⁴ His brother John's conversion came a few days later as he heard Luther's Preface to *Romans* being read aloud. He felt his 'heart strangely warmed' and was able to trust for salvation in Christ alone, who had taken away his sins and saved him 'from the law of sin and death'.⁵ The dawning realisation that through the cross, Jesus Christ had freed them from the condemnation due for their sins, set the hearts of the Wesley brothers aflame, and liberated their ministries. It inevitably became key to their message. Within a year of his conversion Charles Wesley found himself boldly declaring the theme before the University of Oxford: 'all the world being wrapped in sin by breaking of the law, God sent his only Son our saviour Christ into this world to fulfil the law for us, and by the shedding of his most precious blood, to make a sacrifice or amends to his Father for our sins, and assuage his wrath and indignation conceived against us for the same'.⁶

The same emphasis echoes through John Wesley's sermons. This is important, because these were not simply published as a record of what the great leader of Methodism had preached, but they were to be expository models for other preachers, and a summary of Methodist teaching. So in Sermon V, on Justification by Faith: 'To him that is justified or forgiven... God will not inflict on that sinner what he deserved to suffer, because the Son of his love hath suffered for him'. The language of propitiation is much used by John Wesley. He writes in the same sermon: 'Jesus Christ is described as the one, 'whom

God hath set forth for a propitiation, through faith on his blood', and again as 'the whole and sole propitiation'. In Sermon CXIX, Wesley summarises the plain tenor of the new covenant, the gospel message, as 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God hath given to be the *propitiation* for thy sins, and thou shalt be saved'.⁷

Such teaching cannot simply be dismissed as the enthusiastic utterances of the pulpit. In his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, the same views are set out with startling clarity. So on Romans 3:25, Wesley writes:

'25. *Whom God set forth* – before angels and men, *a propitiation* – To appease an offended God. But if, as some teach, God never was offended, there was no need of this propitiation. And if so, Christ died in vain. *To declare his righteousness* – To demonstrate not only his clemency, but his justice, even that vindictive justice, whose essential character and principal office is, to punish sin.'

The atonement demonstrated both God's justice towards sin, which had to be punished, and his mercy, for the just punishment for sin was willingly paid by his Son. It was crucial to Wesley that God should be seen to maintain his justice, as he adds in his comments on the next verse:

'The attribute of justice must be preserved inviolate. And inviolate it is preserved, if there was a real infliction of punishment on our Saviour. On this plan all the attributes harmonise. Every attribute is glorified, and not one superseded no, nor so much as clouded.'⁸

The only way God could show forth his justice and mercy in perfect harmony, without destroying the

integrity of either, was through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. Merely forgiving, or doing away with sin, without the due punishment being dealt with, would not have maintained the integrity of God's character. Such thinking is echoed in his understanding of the work of atonement in the Old Testament. Of the 'mercy seat', the covering of the ark in Exodus 25:17-18, John Wesley comments: 'This propitiatory covering, as it might well be translated, was a type of Christ the great propitiation, whose satisfaction covers our transgressions, and comes between us and the curse we deserve'. He also contemplates the awesome nature of what is foreshadowed by the mercy-seat: above it are the cherubim, facing each other, but looking downwards towards it. Here is depicted the longing of the angels of glory 'to look into the mysteries of the gospel, which they diligently contemplate, 1 Peter 1:12.'⁹ John Wesley rightfully shows that here we are handling deep mysteries. We should tread carefully and reverentially, for we have entered into the holiest place.

The teaching of penal substitution was something the founder of Methodism was keen to defend. When Andrew Ramsay in his *Principles of Religion* rejected the view that the death of Christ was designed 'to appease vindictive justice and avert divine vengeance' as 'frivolous and blasphemous notions', Wesley objected strongly. 'These "frivolous and blasphemous notions" do I receive as the precious truths of God. And so deplorable is my ignorance, that I very believe all who deny them, deny the Lord that bought them'.¹⁰ Early in his life, John Wesley had found the writings of William Law helpful. However, in 1756 Wesley protested over

the denial of the doctrine of justification by faith contained in some of Law's later statements, such as, 'There is no wrath in God, no fictitious atonement, no folly of debtor and creditor'. To counter what Law had written, Wesley quotes an unnamed sixteenth century author: -

'As man owed his Creator the perfect obedience of his whole life, or a punishment proportioned to his transgression, it was impossible he could satisfy him by a partial and imperfect obedience... There was need, therefore, of a Mediator who could repair the immense wrong he had done to the Divine Majesty, satisfy the Supreme Judge, who had pronounced the sentence of death against the transgressions of His law, suffer in the place of His people, and merit for them pardon, holiness, and glory'.

Yet, for Wesley, the propitiatory work of Christ was no cold, legal transaction – it was the 'inmost mystery of the Christian faith'. It was the supreme proof of the love of God, and came through 'the grace of the Son, who freely took our curse upon him, and imparts His blessing and merits to us'. The propitiatory death of the Saviour was no personal act of violence inflicted on him by the Father: it was an act of free, willing, loving submission within the Trinity. Wesley amplifies this loving act in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit were at one, by reference to Isaiah 53. Although mankind had forsaken God, and so was liable to the highest punishment, 'the Mediator voluntarily interposed himself between them and the just Judge. And the incomprehensible love of God, that he might spare them, 'spared not his own Son'. ... 'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all'.¹¹

The same emphasis remained strong in the next generation of Wesley's followers. The famous

Methodist scholar and commentator Adam Clarke, takes up the strain. Commenting on Romans 3:25-27, he explains the way of salvation: 'faith alone, in the mercy of God, through the propitiation made by the blood of Jesus is that, by which you can be *justified*, pardoned and taken into the Divine favour'.¹²

When dealing with the words of Isaiah 53:6, 'The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all', Clarke's comments are unambiguous:

'He was the subject on which all the rays collected on the focal point fell. These fiery rays, which should have fallen on all mankind, diverged from Divine justice to the east, west, north, and south, were deflected from them, and converged in him. So the Lord hath caused to meet in Him the punishment due to the Iniquities of ALL'.¹³

The teaching of John Wesley, repeated in the work of Adam Clarke and others, became foundational to the army of lay preachers and class leaders, who were the key players in the local Methodist circuits and societies. One such circuit was that around the Shropshire town of Madeley, scene of the faithful ministry of John Fletcher, for a time the right-hand man of Wesley. Manuscripts from some of the sermons of these lay preachers still exist. They show how cross-centred Methodist lay preaching of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was, and the way in which they understood the atonement. As one preacher, using Romans 3:25 as a text, put it - 'A Propitiation means an atoning sacrifice, by which the Wrath of God is appeased. But how did He become this propitiation? I answer, by putting Himself in our Place, and drinking the Cup of Justice due to our sins'. Then, referring to Romans 8, 'God spared not his own son...', the preacher amplified the theme - 'He spared Him not

– But laid the whole weight of vindictive justice on His sacred Head – and He valiently [sic] accepted the dreadful Task’. The cost, the preacher emphasised, was awful and immense, ‘He must drink the whole cup to the very Dregs – that He might become in the fullest sense our Propitiation’. The challenges to love and obedience that flowed naturally from such an understanding were strongly put: ‘how cold are our returns of love to him who hath given Himself to bear our curse and suffer all our punishment... Here is the foundation of all our Blessings. The Saviour hath put himself in our place and born all the curse due to our sins... He is at once our atonement and our righteousness’. ¹⁴

Not only did the early Methodists delight to preach the Cross, they loved to sing its story. In singing of the saving work of Christ, the language of ‘penal substitution’ was never far away–

For what you have done
His blood must atone:
The Father hath punished for
 you his dear son,
The Lord, in the day
Of his anger, did lay
Your sins on the Lamb, and he bore
 them away’. ¹⁵

Or again:

‘Accomplished is the sacrifice,
The great redeeming work is done;
‘Tis finished! All the debt is paid;
Justice divine is satisfied;
The grand and full atonement made;
God for a guilty world hath died’ ¹⁶

This awesome message these lay preachers gladly sang, and earnestly shared. They proclaimed it to the agricultural workers, the colliers, the tradespeople, of Madeley and the growing industrial Black Country. They and countless other Methodists across England preached what they had learned from Wesley, and Fletcher and Clarke, but more than that, they proclaimed the fruits of their plain reading of the Bible, which echoed with their personal experience. This evangelical message was spiritually liberating, and propelled them out into barns and cottages and kitchens, to tell what God had done through Christ for them. Their sermons brought comfort in distressing and troubled times, and hope of an eternal future with Christ. They filled Methodist class meetings and chapels: many ordinary, hurting, struggling, needy people heard them gladly, and embraced their message. The awesome teaching of penal substitution brought blessing to souls then, and lovingly, wisely, and reverentially preached now, evangelicals can have every confidence that it will continue to do the same.

References

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