

The Atonement Wars

“There is no substitute for substitution”

It was Palm Sunday in our local church, and the focus of the entire service was the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor painted a verbal picture of Holy Week in Jerusalem, including the agony in Gethsemane and the political and religious intrigue regarding the interaction between the Jewish authorities and the Roman government. Finally he gave a description of the crucifixion, focusing on the technique as it applied to the victim. If a picture is worth a thousand words, this pastor certainly painted a graphic one. The account of the crucifixion itself was so well done that I could almost hear the crowd crying out “give us Barabbas,” and I could almost feel Jesus’ struggle on the cross as he tried to get His breath. I knew the historical resources that the pastor used as the palate for this spellbinding picture, and even though I had not seen Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ,” still I felt I was there “when they crucified my Lord.” Then the pastor abruptly pivoted toward his conclusion and appeal. He gave only a passing nod to Jesus’ death for our sins and having provided for our eternal life as he launched into his application. Here are his actual words: “He died for you so you could approach Him today with whatever it is that is weighing you down. Maybe it is a relationship that is not right at home or school or work. Maybe it’s a financial crisis. Maybe your kids are breaking your heart. Maybe you are disappointed in yourself. You can’t get over the hump, or some behavior in your life. You are lonely, sick, or grieving. The cross is where God’s best meets man’s worst as we see the cross with fresh eyes.”

I have no idea what view this pastor holds regarding the atonement, but it really doesn’t fit any of the historical views. Maybe one could dub it the “life application atonement.” This type of appeal becomes more significant in the current environment now that we observe an open, frontal attack on the cross itself as the propitiatory sacrifice and substitutionary death that pays the penalty for our sins. Inside evangelicalism, with its plethora of odd and often heretical teachings, we now have at least major skirmishes breaking out regarding the meaning of the death of Christ—if not all-out war. Many major voices identified and accepted as fellow evangelicals now chime in to challenge and target the Penal Substitutionary Atonement (hereafter referred to as PSA).

Mark Driscoll comments in his blog, “...a war is brewing over this issue. This is the issue we must be willing to fight over. If we lose this (PSA) we lose the Gospel. If you deny this (PSA) you have essentially lost the Christian faith...As my substitute He endured what I deserve in order to give me what I don’t deserve.”

But Driscoll represents a small minority of voices rising to challenge this attack on the atonement. Many church leaders apparently are just too distracted in their seeker-sensitive endeavors even to be aware. Worse yet this issue is not seen as sufficiently important. Admittedly, there have and always will be differences of opinion about certain peripheral aspects of theology, such as the time and manner of second coming, or baptism, etc. But PSA has, until recently, been the default setting for evangelicals of all description. Understandably, the liberal/modernistic church has for decades since the turn of the 20th century rejected PSA by dubbing it a “slaughter house” religion.

(Harry Emerson Fosdick). But this new “Atonement War” is now being waged openly in an evangelical-on-evangelical conflict.

Two books written by evangelicals were the two precipitating factors; one was published in the United Kingdom, and the other in America. In *The Lost Message of Jesus*, widely known British evangelical Steve Chalke opposed PSA. His inflammatory statement that PSA was a form of “cosmic child” abuse caused concern and open controversy among other British evangelicals. In the U.S., Joel Green and Mark D. Baker recently authored *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, published by InterVarsity Press. Green and Baker’s thesis is that the New Testament displays a rich array of interpretations of the cross. Some have called their view the “kaleidoscope atonement.” Their burden is to show that a monopoly exists on the view of the atonement (PSA) and that there actually are many other biblical metaphors that can enable us to communicate the cross in fresh ways to our postmodern culture. Green and Baker are not content to place PSA in the mix of cross metaphors. They are suggesting that PSA is based on a mistaken concept of God’s wrath. They see PSA as promoting a “divisive child abuse model of the atonement” (p. 181). Green is a professor at Fuller Seminary, and Baker, at Biblical Seminary. These authors and a growing list of evangelicals who endorse them represent voices of dissent from a long strain of mainline evangelicals. They assert that PSA is unbecoming of a God of love, and not an adequate expression of the biblical view.

Those attacking PSA cleverly begin their assault on PSA by emphasizing that a variety of views of the atonement exist in the scriptures. As we will see shortly, there are other truths taught in scripture regarding the cross. But these critics then proceed to call for the rejection of PSA and wish to eliminate PSA altogether. Most challengers suggest PSA is repulsive—making God into a psychopath or a cosmic child abuser. Other challengers employ the bouquet of roses metaphor as a full bouquet of atonement stories—differing colors and differing fragrances can appeal to a wider range of individuals. However they press for plucking out and discarding the PSA rose entirely and are bent on purging PSA from the church.

Perhaps here we need to define PSA more specifically. Tom Schreiner provides the following definition:

The Father, because of His love for human beings, sent His Son, (who offered Himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy His justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that at the cross both God’s holiness and love are manifested.... I am not claiming that it (PSA) is the only truth about the atonement taught in the scriptures, nor am I claiming that PSA is emphasized in every piece of literature, or that every author clearly articulates PSA. But I am saying that PSA functions as the anchor and foundation for the other dimensions of the atonement. I define penal substitution as follows: The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy his justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God’s holiness and love are manifested.¹

Wayne Grudem offers this definition:

Christ’s death was ‘penal’ in that he bore a *penalty* when He died. His death was also a ‘substitution’ in that He was a *substitute* for us when He died. This has

been the orthodox understanding of the atonement held by evangelical theologians, in contrast to other views that attempt to explain the atonement apart from the idea of the wrath of God or payment for the penalty for sin. This PSA view is sometimes called the *vicarious atonement*. A vicar is someone who stands in the place of another or who represents another. Christ's death was therefore 'vicarious' because He stood in our place and represented us. As our representative, he took the penalty that we deserve. (Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p.254).

Indeed, as Dr. Schreiner stated, PSA is not the only teaching in scripture regarding Jesus' death. There are truly other aspects to Jesus' death. But the atoning death of Jesus stands alone in that it is the centerpiece of reconciling sinners to our holy and heavenly Father. Other matters that are corollary such as Christus Victor exist, but cannot serve as replacements for the central issue of PSA. We shall discuss them.

The Moral Influence theory

This view of the atonement limits Christ's death to a radical example of His love that influences sinners morally but does not pay any price on their behalf. God's justice demands no payment for sin. First Peter 2:21 is the primary text for this view. "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example." But just a few verses later (v. 24) Peter refers to the substitutionary aspect of the cross, "He Himself bore our sins in his body on a tree..." Even in this primary passage regarding the moral influence of Christ's death, it can't stand alone without the central message of substitution.

Christus Victor

This view attempts to limit Christ's work on the cross to the defeating of the powers of evil. Indeed, Col. 2:15 asserts; "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him." Indeed Christ's death defeated the powers of darkness. But directly preceding this statement in verse 14, Paul points to the substitutionary aspect of the cross by stating, "By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailed it to the cross." Here as in other contexts, PSA stands in the central place.

These two views (Christus Victor and the Moral Influence Theory) are indeed presented in scripture. But they can't stand alone. These views are only complementary to the sacrificial death of Christ. Someone over the course of my studies referred to the various presentations of the cross as a choir in which all the biblical references to the cross are harmonious. I would like to adjust the metaphor and suggest that the sacrificial death of Christ is the "soloist" and the other biblical references to the cross are "background singers" that enhance the soloist's voice.

The Governmental Theory

This view states that there is no actual payment of sin at the cross. Rather, the cross was a public display of God's grief because of our sin and that His government is based on law. In this view this public display of Jesus' suffering is intended to cause people to feel sorry for their sin and repent. This view has no reference point in scripture.

The Ransom to Satan Theory

This theory was first put forward by Origen in the post-apostolic era and suggested that Satan was tricked into accepting Christ's death in exchange for the souls of sinners, not realizing that Christ would rise from the dead. Origen based this on a misunderstanding of Mark 1:45 and 1 Timothy 2:6. In recent years this view has been revived by various Word-Faith teachers, especially Kenneth Copeland. They teach that Christ purchased a ransom for sinners by literally suffering in Hell after his death on the cross in order to render a payment to Satan (Phil Johnson). They also teach that Jesus became a sinner in Hell, and after becoming a ransom and Satan's tormenting of Him, Jesus became "born-again." By this view Copeland can assert that Jesus did not pay for our sins on the cross. Jesus, the one who became a sinner in Hell after suffering there, was born again by the Father and later was raised to life on the third day. Jesus, while still in Hell became the original born-again sinner. The application point among Word-Faithers is that as Jesus was born-again, the "first born among brethren," so also every born-again believer becomes a son of God with the same power and authority as Christ. But the whole theory is flawed because Jesus became a sacrifice to God. Satan has no rights in God's redemptive scheme.

Paula White, a divorced Word-Faith TV personality, recently added a bizarre dimension to what Jesus did on the cross. In her new book *The Seven Places Jesus Shed His Blood* she refers to Jesus' seven wounds and shamelessly asserts, for example, that "Jesus' hands were pierced for your total dominion." She states "If you want dominion, and want to break the spirit of poverty, sickness, disease, generation curses, God really did this for you on Calvary." Larry Hutch, on the TV program with her, then asserts "Jesus is not the only begotten son of God. He is not. I am also a son of God for he is the first-born of many." Like the Governmental Theory, the Ransom to Satan theory has absolutely no reference point in scripture.

Concluding Remarks

"In summary, Christ died instead of us (substitution) as a sacrifice that took away the guilt of our sins (expiation), the wrath of God (propitiation), God's alienation from us (reconciliation), and delivered us from our captivity to the curse of the law, the penalty of sin, and the pollution of sin, (redemption)... The objectors to PSA openly dismiss the view that Christ alone, in a unique ministry, representing His people, stood in for us under the judgment of God, and by His blood atoned for us, satisfying God's justice by his substitutionary death. Either Christ has endured God's justice for us on the cross, or we must do so for ourselves in hell... They must assume God will accept what Paul calls 'rubbish' in Phil. 3:8. They shamelessly replace what Christ has done for us with what we can do for ourselves. (David Linden)

"The bottom line is this: God does not dismiss his wrath against sin and sinners by a wave of his hand. Mercy is no magical wand that causes the holiness and justice of God to disappear. Either Jesus Christ is my substitute, has endured and suffered in himself and thereby satisfied the wrath of God I deserved, or I must do so forever in Hell." (Sam Storms).

"...There was but one way to bring about the desired salvation which would be in harmony with God's character, the law of God, the nature of sin and the needs of man. This one way was by the substitutionary blood atonement of the incarnate Son of God." (Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement*, p.9)

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ⁱ <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2005/10/schreiner-on-penal-substitutionary.html>