
A table of contents for *Epworth Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_epworth-review-01.php

The Doctrine of the Atonement

(6) A question and an affirmation

STEPHEN H. TRAVIS

'SO Jesus came to save us from God?' I met her at a conference, and she was now trying to organise in her mind the implications of what she had been taught about the death of Christ. She could see that there must be something wrong with the conclusion she had reached, but she could not see another way forward in the light of the teaching she had received. Snippets of sermons and more systematic teaching in study groups had conveyed to her the message that Jesus' death was a self-offering to God whereby he bore the punishment which God would otherwise have inflicted on human beings, and so turned away God's hostility towards us.

The tradition of her church was, of course, what is generally called conservative evangelical, and the understanding of the atonement which she was struggling to express was the theory of 'penal substitution'. This understanding of the work of Christ is the classic Reformation doctrine, expressed thus by Calvin:

> This is our acquittal: the guilt which held us liable for punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God. (*Institutes* 2.16.5).

But Calvin was in fact rather careful to safeguard his exposition from the kind of distortion often associated with this doctrine, the distortion which drives a wedge between an angry Father and a loving Son:

> . . . Our reconciliation by the death of Christ must not be understood as if the Son reconciled us to [the Father] that he might begin to love those whom he had before hated; but we were reconciled to him who already loved us, but with whom we were at enmity on account of sin. (*Institutes* 2.16.4).

Nevertheless, this tradition of theology is often subjected to a measure of caricature, as when Frances Young writes:

> The most common misconception when sacrifice language is applied to the death of Christ runs something like this: 'God was angry with sinners. The Jews had tried to placate his anger by symbolically offering the lives of animals to him in place of their guilty selves. But this was inadequate and so Jesus offered a perfect sacrifice. He dies as our substitute to appease God's anger.'

And again:

> Conservatives favour a doctrine of atonement which sees Jesus, the man, bearing punishment in our stead to satisfy the wrath of God.[1]

Yet, if there is an element of caricature in such descriptions, it is hardly the fault of the 'caricaturist'. For however carefully the more sophisticated expositions of penal substitution may be expressed, it seems to be almost inevitable that the doctrine should suffer distortion by the time it has reached ordinary Christians such as the friend whom I mentioned at the beginning. And

popular hymns and choruses serve to express and reinforce the distortion. Consider, for example, two of today's popular Christian songs.

> . . . My condemnation falls on him.
> This love is marvellous to me,
> his sacrifice has set me free,
> and now I live
>
> *Graham Kendrick*

Like many traditional hymns, that seems to me to use scriptural language in a way which properly leaves open the precise interpretation to be attached to Christ's death. But what about the following lines?

> He was pierced for our transgressions,
> and bruised for our iniquities;
> and to bring us peace he was punished . . .
>
> *Maggi Dawn*

Here we have a paraphrase of Isaiah 53:5, which draws the notion of punishment from the dubious translation of the New International Version. [2] Thus is the idea reinforced and celebrated, that on the cross Jesus was bearing instead of us the punishment inflicted by the Father. And it is only a short step from there to the question of my friend at the conference.

Now let me make clear what I am aiming to do in this article. I was invited to contribute something 'from a conservative evangelical (if one must have a label) point of view'. I propose, therefore, to attempt two things. First, to indulge in some self-criticism of the tradition from which I write. And secondly to express an affirmation of what this tradition holds to be important. It would take much more than the available space to develop this into a comprehensive understanding of the atonement, but I shall at least try to put down a couple of markers.

Penal substitution

As my quotations above suggest, there is a long tradition in western theology of understanding Christ's death as his suffering in our place, enduring the punishment due to our sins so that we might be delivered from that punishment and so be restored to fellowship with God. Such a view has often been criticised on a variety of grounds. For instance, it is said to drive a wedge between an angry Father and a loving Son; or the notion of such transfer of punishment is dismissed as immoral or impossible. But the question I wish to explore is whether words such as 'penal' and 'punishment' rest on a misunderstanding – or at least a one-sided understanding – of the nature of divine judgement.

There is no denying the extreme seriousness with which the biblical writers take the theme of God's judgement on human wrongdoing. That is a necessary background for any talk about atonement. A good deal of theological writing in recent years has focused on the cross of Christ as a demonstration of God's willingness to identify with human suffering. But, as a colleague of mine has put it, we must be wary lest the problem of justifying God in the face of human suffering should become more important than the problem of justifying human beings in the face of human sin.

However, I want to argue that the New Testament writers do not generally speak of divine judgement in terms of God imposing retributive punishments upon human acts of wrongdoing. Rather, they see judgement expressed in people's

experience of the consequences of their choices and actions. Retribution, strictly speaking, refers to a penalty or punishment inflicted on a wrongdoer from outside, not intrinsically 'built into' the act to which it is attached. But New Testament writers understand both salvation and condemnation primarily in relational terms: people's destinies will not be imposed on them as reward or punishment, but will be a confirmation and intensification of the relationship with God or alienation from him which has been their experience in this life.

Thus already within the Old Testament there is the idea that God 'rewards' his people by his presence with them and 'punishes' them by withdrawing his presence or 'hiding his face' from them (e.g., Psalm 73:23,25; Deuteronomy 31:17-18; Isaiah 59:2; Jeremiah 7:29; 12:7-13). This is not reward and punishment properly so called, because the experience of God's presence or absence is inherent in the circumstances of seeking or rejecting God.

His judgement (in the negative sense) involves his allowing people who have forsaken him to experience the effects of that break in relationship. This is graphically expressed in the declaration that God has withdrawn his protection from his disobedient people and 'handed them over' to their enemies (Psalm 78:62; 106:41).

In the Synoptic Gospels we find Jesus speaking of God's judgement not so much in terms of penalties imposed by divine retributive justice but in relational terms. Those who have not affirmed relationship to Jesus will be rejected from the presence of the Son of Man (Mark 8:38). The solemn words 'Depart from me' express this separation (Luke 13:27; Matthew 25:41). Judgement, then, means not so much that retribution is imposed on people's deeds, as that 'those who have lived in fellowship with God continue in that relationship, and those who have turned their backs upon him continue in that outer darkness they have made for themselves'.[3] The Fourth Gospel underlines with equal force the theme that those who do not respond to Christ are out of relationship to him and experience God's wrath (John 3:36) and remain in darkness (12:46). Their condition is self-imposed: they prefer darkness and that is what they get (3:19-21). Faced with one who has 'the words of eternal life', they 'go away' (6:69), and the condemnation on the final day will seal the destiny they have chosen (12:46-48).

When we come to the thought of Paul we find the themes of judgement and atonement brought more explicitly into connection with each other. And Paul's letters, of course, are the main biblical source of the penal substitution theory. But what if Paul's understanding of divine judgement is something like that which I have just outlined? It would make a crucial difference, as I shall try to argue, taking one key passage as a test case.

> . . . Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation [or 'propitiation'] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:24-26 RSV)

This tightly argued passage has been a key text for advocates of the theory of penal substitution. The word which the RSV translates 'expiation' is normally given by them the meaning 'propitiation' – a meaning which it has at least sometimes in the Old Testament (e.g., Numbers 16:46; Daniel 9:16). In other words, Paul is saying not that Christ's death serves to expiate or take away sin, but that it turns away God's wrath. Since the wrath of God has been a major theme

from Rom 1:18 onwards, it would be odd if Paul's exposition of the work of Christ in this passage did not include an explanation of how the threat of this wrath is removed. So, according to the penal substitution theory, the death of Christ is to be understood as a sacrifice which satisfies God's wrath against human sin, a sacrifice which he accepts instead of punishing human beings with his wrath. Thus God's righteousness or justice is demonstrated. He has found a way of delivering us from his wrath not by ignoring human sinfulness – which would be unjust – but by himself bearing, in the person of Christ, the punishment of sin. The New Testament writers 'see Christ as suffering in such a way as to remove from God the stigma of being unjust in remitting our penalty'. [4]

This interpretation involves seeing a tension, a potential contradiction, in Paul's use of 'righteous' and 'justifies' (which have the same word root in Greek) in the final part of verse 26: because God does not withhold punishment, but takes it upon himself, he is able to uphold his righteousness or justice even while justifying the sinner.

Despite its respectable pedigree, it is questionable whether this interpretation conveys what Paul actually means. There are two points to be made. The first has to do with the reference to expiation or propitiation. A long debate (summarized in the standard commentaries) has polarized the meaning of these two terms. Whichever meaning may have been at the front of Paul's mind, he surely intended to say *both* that through the work of Christ human sin is expiated or cancelled *and* that the wrath of Romans 1:18ff therefore hangs no longer over those who have faith in Jesus.

However, to say that Christ's death has the effect of removing God's wrath does not commit us to the penal theory. It is a question of how Paul actually understands 'the wrath of God'. In Romans 1:18ff Paul declares that 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven'. But what he goes on to describe is not the retributive inflicting of punishment by God 'from outside', but God's allowing people to experience the consequences of their refusal to live in relationship with him. Three times Paul says, 'God gave them up . . . ' (Romans 1:24, 26, 28, alluding to Psalm 106:41). People adandon God; therefore he allows them to experience the effects of the resulting alienation. As Karl Barth put it:

> The forgetting of the true God is already itself the breaking loose of his wrath against those who forget him (Romans 1:18). The enterprise of setting up the 'No-God' is avenged by its success . . . Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire.[5]

God's wrath is his judgement experienced as alienation from God. At the cross Christ did not suffer punishment from God and thereby avert his wrath; he entered into humanity's experience of sin's consequences, so as to destroy sin and thereby to restore people to relationship with God.

The second point concerns the meaning of 'righteousness' in verses 25-26. Rather than seeing a tension between the upholding of God's justice and his justifying of sinners, commentators are increasingly coming to recognise that 'righteous' here expresses the same meaning as the initial declaration of God's righteousness in Romans 1:17. It is, as we have learnt from Old Testament scholars, God's loyalty to his covenant by which he commits himself to restore and sustain Israel (see, for example, Isaiah 51:5, 6, 8, where 'deliverance' in the RSV represents the Hebrew root *tsdq*, elsewhere translated 'righteousness'). But now in the gospel this covenant loyalty is seen to embrace a saving purpose for all who

have faith – Gentiles as well as Jews (Romans 1:16-17). Paul does not mean, therefore, that God had to find a way of expressing his wrath and punishment against sin so as to be able to justify sinners without abandoning his justice. To say that God 'is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus' means that he demonstrates his faithfulness and promise of salvation by accepting those who have faith in Jesus.[6]

If these considerations hold true, it is misleading to attribute to Paul the idea that on the cross Christ bore divine punishment and thereby diverted such punishment from the rest of humanity. And so a 'penal' theory of the atonement does not exactly represent his teaching – though, of course, it would take a much longer discussion of Paul and the rest of the New Testament to argue this in detail.

This is not to deny that God takes human sin with absolute seriousness, or that Christ on the cross experienced divine judgement on our behalf. But it is to suggest that to speak of Christ on the cross suffering our 'punishment' is to go further than the New Testament writers themselves go.

What Paul's language does imply, I believe, is that Christ entered into and bore on our behalf the destructive consequences of sin. Standing where we stand, he experienced – and thereby exhausted – the consequences of our alienation from God. In him God took responsibility for the world's evil and absorbed the pain and destructiveness of it into himself. This understanding of the work of Christ does not drive a wedge between the Father and the Son, as the language of punishment is almost bound to, however carefully its advocates may seek to guard against such unfortunate implications. It makes clear that atonement is achieved not by the Father transferring (immorally?) punishment from all humanity on to an innocent victim, but by God taking upon himself the destructive consequences of sin.

Christ died for all . . .

I come now, more briefly, to my affirmation of what conservative theology holds to be important. If I am willing to jettison the word 'penal', I will not readily let go of 'substitution'. Traditionally, it is the two words together which have been the object of theological criticism – even theological abuse – to which I have referred earlier. But the notion of substitution has biblical warrant, for example in Jesus' description of his self-giving as [literally] 'a ransom instead of many' (Mark 10:45). It affirms that Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He 'stands in for us' when we would be lost without him. And that is the heart of the New Testament's proclamation of the grace of God, the heart of the evangelical message. There is something objective about what the cross achieved, something which happened there before, and apart from, any human response.

There is, of course, no need to affirm the idea of Christ as substitute to the exclusion of other terminology. One of the more arid aspects of discussion about the atonement has been the debates in which those who wish to understand Christ in his death as 'substitute' or as 'representative' have tried to batter each other into the ground. In fact the two terms need each other. 'Substitute' stresses that Christ has done what we could not do for ourselves; 'representative' stresses that we share in the benefits of his work only as we are united with him. [7]

It is clear in Paul's letters that these two themes must be held together, for he frequently puts side by side statements which on their own might naturally be understood to express one theme or the other. For example, 'He died for all . . .' (2 Corinthians 5:15) might be interpreted in terms of Christ as substitute. But the

sentence immediately goes on:' . . . that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.' This latter part of the sentence asserts that atonement functions through our participation in the life of Christ our representative. There are a number of other passages where Paul has a statement such as 'Christ died for us' followed immediately by the words 'so that' and a clause expressing our participation in Christ (e.g., Romans 8:3-4; 14:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10; cf. Galatians 2:20). [8]

In recent discussion of Paul's thought attention has rightly been given to his focus on 'participation' and 'representation' as a way of expressing how humanity is involved in and affected by the work of Christ. However, it needs to be emphasised that the form of those sentences, 'Christ died for us, so that . . .', implies that in his death Christ achieved something objectively *before* the fruits of it were available to the subjective experience of those who have faith in him. Our 'participation' in Christ crucified and risen *depends* on his first 'dying for us'. It was while we were 'helpless', 'ungodly','sinners','dead' that Christ died for us (Romans 5:6, 8; Colossians 2:13-14). The varieties of Paul's language about Christ's death cannot simply be collapsed into the theme of participation. We are unlikely to find a doctrine of the atonement which does justice both to Christian tradition and to human experience unless we take seriously Paul's insistence on the objectivity of what Christ achieved as well as his exhilaration at how people are transformed by participation in Christ. [9]

The evangelical tradition's stress on an objective atonement, through which God in Christ achieved for us the salvation which would otherwise be unobtainable, is not the whole story. But without it there is no story worth telling.

Notes

1. *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London, SPCK, 1975), pp. 11, 86.
2. I should make it clear that I am concerned here with the NIV translation only in this verse. In general it is a version which I commend.
3. T. F. Glasson, *His Appearing and his Kingdom* (London, Epworth, 1953), p. 90.
4. L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1966), p. 388.
5. *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eng. tr. London, Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 51. I have argued in detail that Paul understands divine judgement in this non-retributive way in *Christ and the Judgement of God* (Basingstoke, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1986).
6. See J. A. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London, SCM, 1989), pp. 115-6; J. D. G. Dunn, Romans 1-8 (Dallas, Word, 1988), pp. 173-6.
7. See further C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: a Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 160-7.
8. M. D. Hooker has illuminated the idea of 'interchange' which such texts express, especially in the articles 'Interchange in Christ' and 'Interchange and Atonement', reprinted in *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).
9. I have found in P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian Idea of Atonement* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989) a helpful exploration of the need for balance between 'objective' and 'subjective' in theories of the atonement.