

The Cross (Mick Taylor)

Crossfire!

Crucifixion has always been controversial. Barbaric and shameful as a means of capital punishment, it was eventually abandoned even by the Romans. It was therefore staggering to the ancient world that a 'new' religion would declare that salvation had been achieved through a crucified messiah. How could a message so utterly ridiculous and a saviour so pathetically weak achieve anything? Yet though the cross was a *stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*, (1 Corinthians 1:23) to many it proved to be the *very power of God*. (1 Cor 1:18) Throughout the history of the church the message of the cross has not lost its power to offend or to provoke - or, praise God, to save.

And it is not just outside the church that the cross has caused controversy. Within the Christian community there have always been seasons of wrestling with how best to understand the true significance of Christ's death. In recent years this has recurred again but this time within the evangelical community. The debate has focused on what is called the doctrine of **penal substitution**. That is the teaching that, on the cross, Christ died in our place as our substitute and took the penalty for our sin for us.

Wayne Grudem defines penal substitution in this way: *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. (Wayne Grudem – Systematic Theology p 179)*

Biblical Foundations

For many of us, teaching on penal substitution was imbibed almost with our mother's milk, for others it was on hearing this message for the first time that we turned to Christ. It is as uncontroversial as bread and butter, its part of our regular staple diet. So it is disturbing when we hear that some have come to the opinion that it not just unnecessary and unbiblical but positively harmful, even poisonous. Others, while not so extreme in their comments, question whether penal substitution is an adequate or helpful way of understanding what Christ did for us on the cross.

The Bible doesn't read like a systematic theology. You can't look in the index and then turn to one chapter and find a complete description and definition of a particular doctrine. So it is with penal substitution. The ingredients for this doctrine are found throughout scripture.

In the Old Testament the Passover (Exodus 12) and the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) are key elements. The Passover was where faithful Israelites were saved from death through the death of a lamb. It pointed to the ultimate *Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* (John 1:29) On the Day of Atonement the two goats are clearly substitutes. The death penalty that sinful people deserved was taken by them. It is, however, Isaiah 53 that states most powerfully and with crystal clarity that Christ took our punishment.

*...he was pierced **for our transgressions**, he was crushed **for our iniquities; the punishment** that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned*

*to his own way; and the **LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.** (Isaiah 53:5-6)*

The New Testament builds on the foundations of the OT and in a whole array of ways; through allusions, images, quotes and direct statements it makes the point that Christ took our punishment. Here are just a few examples.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Christ asks

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39)

What is the cup which is so devastating to contemplate but the cup of God's wrath?

The cup (poterion) refers not only to suffering and death but, as often in the OT also to God's wrath. (for example Isaiah 51:15; Jeremiah 25:15 see also Rev 14.10)(D.A. Carson)

More than once in the Book of Acts the inspired summaries of apostolic preaching give the theologically laden reference to Christ *hanging on a tree.* (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29) The significance of this phrase might not be obvious to modern readers but in context it is a way of saying that the punishment of God's curse for sin is taken for God's people by Christ. Paul makes this clear in Galatians where he writes:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Galatians 3:13)

In less opaque language Paul explicitly writes that

... there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... (why? Because)...God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, (Romans 8:1 & 3)

What could be clearer? There is no condemnation because there is no fear of judgment and there is no fear of judgment because another has been condemned in our place.

Critics – ancient and modern

What Paul writes in Romans 3:21-26 really should put an end to all the arguments about penal substitution. In his magisterial commentary C E B Cranfield writes:

We take it that what Paul's statement ... means is that God, because in His mercy He willed to forgive sinful men and, being truly merciful, willed to forgive them righteously, that is, without in any way condoning their sin, purposed to direct against His own very Self in the person of His Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved. (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T & T Clark; vol. 1, 1975, p. 217.)

That's why we can rightly sing in the words of the old hymn:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

Seeing a penal aspect to the work of Christ has always had its critics; at the **Reformation** it was **Socinius** and some of the **Anabaptists**, in the modern period liberal scholars starting with **Schleiermacher** have similarly found such ideas anathema. One of the most surprising features in recent discussions is that similar objections are now coming from our friends, people some of us have studied with, evangelised alongside and cheered on in their mission. People we love and who are happy to be known as evangelicals.

There are a number of fronts on which they attack penal substitution - the most serious of course is that it is not biblical. An answer to that charge I have begun to outline above but all their concerns deserve detailed and informed responses rather than dismissing in a few sentences. Thankfully a number of writers have taken on this assignment.

Where Wrath and Mercy Meet by David Petersen edit.

The Glory of the Atonement by Charles E Hill and Frank A James III edit

Pierced for Our Transgressions by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach
(see also related web page <http://www.piercedforourtransgressions.com/>)

Balance and harmony

In the context of this debate about penal substitution it is important to note two balancing points:

Firstly, penal substitution is a part of biblical teaching on the cross – it's not the complete picture. One claim that is made is that the teaching of penal substitution has been taught to the exclusion of other biblical perspectives. So it is asserted that the cross as a model and motivation for discipleship is missed. Or the note of triumph that rings so loudly throughout the New Testament has been drowned out. The danger of one truth being so emphasised that it eclipses other truths must clearly be avoided. Where this is true we should readily agree that distortion occurs. N T Wright has put 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...***

(http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wrightsaid_October2005.htm)

The importance of the linchpin

The second balancing point in a discussion of this topic is that while penal substitution is not the whole truth about the atonement it should be central to our

understanding of Christ's achievement for us on the cross. *It is part of the truth and not the whole but it is central not peripheral, and not optional!* Or to put it another way, penal substitution is an essential foundation but not the whole structure. **Penal substitution is an answer to a specific question about the work of Christ not the answer to every question.** It does not endeavour to explain every benefit or consequence of Christ's sacrifice but it does reveal how a holy God can justly forgive sin and so becomes the source of all the other benefits. The scholar **Roger Nicole** has put it like this:

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. (p447) ...penal substitution is the vital centre of the atonement, the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation and flies off the handle so to speak. (p451) (The Glory of the Atonement by Charles E Hill and Frank A James III edit.)

So penal substitution is the basis of other blessings. We are set free from sin, death and the devil because his hold over us, our guilt before God, is removed by Christ's death in our place. Similarly we are reconciled to God because the barrier between God and us has been removed by that same sacrificial death.

Thank You for the Cross...

Finally, the doctrine of penal substitution is important because it underlines and clarifies a number of vital truths. Our fundamental problem is not only that we are **victims** of Satan's power but that we are **violators** of God's holy requirements. Sin is not simply missing God's best for us but an act of **rebellion**. We are not just **prisoners of war** in spiritual conflict, we are **traitors**.

It is only as we see the depth of our plight, the bleakness of our situation and the unworthiness of our lives that God's salvation is seen in all its splendour and the necessity of our guilt being dealt with is fully grasped. *Other perspectives on the cross are vital for a full understanding of the gospel and enjoyment of all its benefits, but without penal substitution we are in danger, not just of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but of losing the bathroom along with the whole house because we will have fatally destroyed a strategic part of our foundations.*

There is much to learn from present discussions. Controversy is not all bad. Church history indicates that it is often a sign of spiritual vitality. It shows that people think that truth matters and that theology has the power to shape our worldview and thereby our values, attitudes and actions. Current questions about the atonement are a stimulus to have our thinking refreshed by forcing us to think deeply and carefully about all that scripture teaches about Christ's sacrifice for us. Such reflection can only lead to renewed power and devotion as we glimpse again all that He did for us.

*And once again I look upon the cross where you died
I'm humbled by Your mercy and I'm broken inside.
Once again I thank You
once again I pour out my life...*

Further Reading:

Where Wrath and Mercy Meet by David Petersen edit.

The Glory of the Atonement by Charles E Hill and Frank A James III edit

Pierced for Our Transgressions by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach
(see also related web page <http://www.piercedforourtransgressions.com/>)

The Atonement Debate within Contemporary Evangelicalism by Mick Taylor
<http://www.newfrontiers.xtn.org/uploads/Atonement.pdf>

The content of the above series of blogs on recent theological debate about aspects of Christ's death on the Cross was previously published in the Newfrontiers magazine in 2008