

MARK CARTLEDGE

Conference Report: *Why Did Christ Die? A Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance and the London School of Theology, 6-8th July 2005

The publication of the book *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann caused wide-spread debate in Evangelical circles on the theology of the atonement. Mark Cartledge reports on the symposium held at the London School of Theology to further public debate on the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement.

Introduction

At the beginning of July I attended a symposium at the London School of Theology (formerly London Bible College) convened to discuss the theology of atonement in the light of recent controversy within the Evangelical constituency. I had already booked myself into the symposium when the editor of *Anvil* invited me to write a short report. It appeared to me that the symposium would provide much of interest to think about, so I said 'yes'. In the event, there was certainly much to discuss and in the light of a very packed programme I am only able to reflect on the highlights as I see them and offer a few reflections by way of a response. These reflections are based on my own notes and any handouts available at the time, although I have also consulted Howard Marshall's paper posted on the Evangelical Alliance website.

The reason for the symposium in the first place was the reaction by the Evangelical constituency to the popular level book jointly authored by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann entitled *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003). I admit to not reading a lot of evangelical paperbacks, and not having read this book. However, this is not a difficulty since it is only two paragraphs that have apparently caused the storm. In a book that aimed to assist Christians in communicating the

gospel to the contemporary world, the authors criticised the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA) in a number of ways. As a response to the 'storm' the Evangelical Alliance (EA) arranged a debate last year at which the different views were expressed and it was agreed that further reflection was necessary in order to respond to the 'problem' in a thoughtful and academically rigorous manner. The symposium was the occasion for such an engagement and was again organised by the EA in conjunction with the London School of Theology and open to any who wished to attend.

The Event

The opening session set the background to the debate, first by David Hilborn, then by Steve Chalke and finally by Chris Wright. This immensely helpful and gave an account of the story so far. David Hilborn outlined EA(UK)'s stance on penal substitution, stating that although the word 'penal' was not used in the 1970 Basis of Faith, or in the new 2005 statement, it is nevertheless implied in both as the background papers to both statements make clear. That is, the intention of those drafting both statements is that *the doctrine of PSA is implicit*. Steve Chalke, in response to David, felt that the whole affair had the character of a 'heresy' trial, saying he had personally suffered verbal and written attack, and had been excluded from certain Evangelical contexts as a consequence. His view was that the atonement is a multifaceted doctrine and therefore cannot be narrowly defined. The manner in which PSA has been taught within his lifetime had been 'rogue'. Following Steve, Chris Wright stated that he believed that a 'caricature' of PSA had been the target of Steve's criticism and we should not 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. The cross of Christ was more than a 'cosmic sympathy card'. This had helpfully set the scene for the discussions that followed.

Two addresses followed that day. The first by Steven Holmes was an historical investigation into the use of the language of penal substitution within British Evangelicalism. He argued from British eighteenth to twentieth century sources that within Evangelicalism substitution was a key category of thought but that the word 'penal' was not always used. Indeed PSA had been supplemented with a range of metaphors, even if it had been accepted from 1800. Joel Green offered an academic critique of the doctrine of PSA in the second paper. He asked the question: must we imagine the atonement in PSA terms? He noted that the catholic creeds are silent on this matter, which led to the question of whether we 'inhabit the land' without identifying one particular model as necessary. He argued that in the New Testament there are multiple models of the atonement and that there is no one 'persistent' theory. This plurality is also to be seen in the post-apostolic era. All models and metaphors must engage with the historical life of Jesus, as the fulfilment of OT prophecy, including rejection and suffering. Indeed the whole narrative context of the gospels must shape our theology of atonement. He wondered whether PSA advocates were sufficiently self-reflective with regard to their own context, and in particular modernity with its accent on mechanisation and individualism (my saviour, from my sins). In what ways did PSA affect Christian discipleship in terms of the ethics of service, ongoing transformation and the way of the cross? His examples suggested people

'converted' with PSA as the model did often live lives limited in aspects of discipleship.

On the second day Chris Wright gave an overview of the nature of atonement in the Old Testament, which was extremely lucid and helpful. He outlined what the OT described as having 'gone wrong' and what had been done to 'put it right'. The OT describes the human predicament in terms of broken relationships (creator-creature), disturbance of shalom, rebellion against authority, guilt necessitating punishment, uncleanness and pollution, shame and disgrace and finally death. The ways in which the predicament is addressed was stated with reference to Genesis (rescue, blessing, faith, justice, prayer and obedience), the Passover (liberation, renunciation of idolatry, protection from wrath, and consecration to God), and the Apostasy of Exodus 32-34 (prayer, judgment, compassion and grace). He subsequently described the OT sacrificial system and the language that is used in relation to it. To atone in relation to sin means to cover, ransom and wipe clean, thus restoring the creative order. In the prophets the sacrificial cult of Israel is put firmly within the covenant of Israel with Yahweh, thus the 'putting things right' concerns the restoration of covenant relations. Finally, in the Psalms there is a paradox: there is a deep awareness of sin but an almost total absence of reference to atoning sacrifice. Therefore sacrifice is strongly relativised and 'putting things right' is seen largely as a matter of God's grace. These writings do not deny Leviticus but point beyond it and anticipate the epistle to the Hebrews.

The subsequent paper by Graham McFarlane looked at the relationship of the doctrines of the Trinity, creation and atonement. In many ways this was an ambitious task and it was inevitable that certain restrictions were made. Therefore, despite the title, the doctrine of the Trinity was only given a brief mention at various points and it was largely a reflection on the atonement in light of the doctrine of creation. This was a complex paper and I offer what I regard as some of the key points. Graham began with the question: why did God bother to create in the first place? It is the arena for his disclosure and revelation; and it is also the stage for the drama of atonement. It is the background and sets boundaries and grammar for our beliefs, even though it is fallen. This affects the nature of what it is to be human, which is defined theologically not in biological terms but relational ones. One's true identity is discovered in the matrix of relationships established by the creator. Sin introduces unbelief and distrust, distortion, self-determination and death. Chaos and alienation is introduced between the self, others and God, and at the material and cultural levels. Therefore the whole of creation is in need of redemption. Since God is the creator, he can also re-create. Jesus as the wisdom of God is able to re-create both on behalf of God and creation, thus providing the means of reconciliation through the cross. It is there that the life of one is offered for the other and the power and problem of sin is destroyed, and through the resurrection the relationship of the creature to the creator is restored.

These papers were followed by optional papers offered simultaneously: penal substitution and postmodern culture (Anna Robbins), penal substitution and the myth of redemptive violence (Stuart Murray Williams), penal substitution and christus victor: continuity and divergence (Mike Ovey) and socio-political

perspectives, liberationist/feminist/black/pacifist etc (Lynnette Mullings). Since I am unable to 'quad-locate'(!), I cannot comment on three of the papers. I attended the paper by Anna Robbins and found this to be one of the most creative pieces, even if it had a very experimental feel to it. She was the only person I heard who started at the contemporary end of the question and was driven by the need to communicate the gospel to this generation, rather than clarify biblical and theological meanings independently of the contemporary context. It is hoped that some of the ideas presented in the paper will be developed critically and constructively.

These 'track papers' were followed by three short exegetical studies on Isaiah 53 (Sue Groom), Romans 3.35-36 (Simon Gathercole, read by Max Turner in his absence because of the disruption to the London transport system that day) and Hebrews 9 (Steve Motyer). Sue Groom's paper was largely historico-grammatical and provided useful material for reflection. Simon Gathercole's paper was a defence of PSA and the NIV translation against the non-penal view of John Ziesler. Steve Motyer's paper argued that PSA 'does not provide a useful summary of Hebrews' teaching about the atonement, and that Hebrews does indeed say different things about what Jesus did for us on the cross – things that are truly glorious, and worship-raising, but aren't penal substitution'. For me this paper was the high point of the conference and therefore it influenced my own thinking in relation to where I stand on the matter.

In the evening Howard Marshall offered a paper on the basis of PSA in the New Testament. This was a masterful display of scholarship in relation to the New Testament. He argued that the biblical imagery is intermingled and therefore cannot be kept apart and that each metaphor is not intended to carry all the theological weight. There is judgment, wrath and punishment language in the NT and we cannot escape engaging with all aspects if we are to do justice to the texts themselves. In particular, he argued that wrath in this context refers to the attitude of God and parallels the language of judgment. If God can feel other emotions, such as tender compassion, then why can't he feel 'some kind of revulsion against evil'? God is both holy and loving and they need to be held together. Judgment therefore upholds the right (= justice), brings restraint and restitution, satisfies God's holiness (interestingly not his honour) and is a proportionate penalty. The ultimate penalty, of course, is exclusion from the kingdom of God and is eschatological. Howard argued that this language appears to be the most properly basic in the NT and cannot be dispensed with. Some metaphors overlap more strongly with it, e.g. redemption and reconciliation, compared to others, e.g. sacrifice (where penalty can simply mean costly). Therefore, these other metaphors belong together with the forensic language of penalty and judgment, and sacrificial language is understood to imply the forensic sense.

On the Friday morning after worship, Garry Williams completed the symposium papers with an account of PSA in terms of justice, law and guilt. Garry introduced his paper by first dealing with the charges against PSA. These included a mistaken view of God in its ascription of retributive justice, severing of the persons of the Godhead, its link to western individualism, and its solipsism (not able to look

beyond itself and therefore excluding the life of Jesus, the cosmic scope of the cross and work of sanctification in the believer). In a very sophisticated and detailed paper he articulated an answer to all of the charges identified. Thus he argued that retributive justice was also relational, that the unity of the persons of the Trinity *ad extra* was a theological presupposition, PSA arises from corporate and covenantal theology and therefore is not mechanistic but mystical, does include the life of Christ as the representative of Israel, makes sense of the cosmic effect of the cross by engaging with its disordering curse. Much more was said and could be described but space is limited. Nevertheless, the theological conclusion was that PSA is central to the biblical witness because of its explanatory power. It affirms rather than denies other models because the cross has its fundamental basis in the justice of God.

This paper was followed by a closing panel session responding to previously submitted questions from participants and chaired by David Hilborn. Panel member included Howard Marshall, Joel Green, Alan Mann (the co-author with Steve Chalke) and Robin Parry. This was an important occasion to conclude the symposium and allow all the various parties a final exchange of views.

Reflections

As a participant in the symposium I offer four reflections.

The first reflection is to say that I enjoyed the symposium very much and felt that the contributions were largely of a high standard. It was clear to me that all speakers had in fact worked very hard in preparing their material and had clearly taken their respective tasks with utter seriousness. All of the participants I spoke with had appreciated this commitment and it provided much food for thought and discussion. However, it seemed to me that the symposium was really organised to give an opportunity for PSA to be re-affirmed academically, despite its caricatures by popular preachers. This was never stated as an aim, but seemed to become fairly clear as the main sub-text of the symposium. In many ways it was a largely successful event, especially for those wishing to assert PSA both within the EA and the wider Evangelical constituency.

The second reflection is to observe that the symposium arose in my judgment because of two fundamental issues: the need to communicate the gospel in an ever-changing context and therefore to attend to issues of context and translation; and the concern of a theological tradition, in this case Evangelicalism, to respond to a challenge from within its own tradition to an important set of beliefs, namely those surrounding PSA. If the church is to engage with contemporary culture it needs to attend to the worldviews, beliefs and values embedded within it. This is a missionary imperative and therefore requires disciplined attentiveness to the contemporary end of the question. To believe that we can do 'pure' theology from a rarefied location and that we can subsequently 'apply' to our context is to live in a theological bubble of our own making. It is the case that the world in which we live intrudes from without and from within (often without us realising it). Therefore great self-reflection is required as well as contemporary engagement if we are to be faithful to the gospel imperative. The symposium I fear only really

engaged explicitly with the contemporary contextual question in one or two papers, suggesting that despite the challenge the real issue was theology proper not context, as if the two could ever be separated! It is a question of theological method and is related to another issue.

This 'storm' has raised some serious questions with regard to biblical hermeneutics. The issues I believe are not necessarily to do with word studies and what the text might have meant in its original context, although of course these tasks are essential to the theological project. Rather, I have in mind the ubiquity of presuppositions and prejudices that we *bring* to the text in the first place. I do not expect two people, one from a Wesleyan and the other from the Reformed tradition, to read the Bible in the same way. To expect that they would is simply unrealistic or naive. Exegesis will never solve the problem by itself because how texts are read is part of the problem. This is because, however reverently each person treats the sacred text, they use different conceptual apparatuses to organise their reading, and the communal practices of worship and devotion reinforce such differences. What this scenario did was to challenge a dominant reading tradition and such a challenge has brought something of an identity crisis for those who are guardians of that particular reading tradition. It also highlighted something of the plurality of contemporary Evangelicalism in this regard: plurality is pervasive, despite homogenous strategies of resistance. Therefore, broader theological hermeneutics must be involved if the 'problem' is to be better understood in the first place, never mind 'solved'.

The third reflection is a statement of my own theological commitments and a positioning in relation to the discussion. Howard Marshall, very helpfully in my view, offered a typology of Evangelical understandings of PSA. These are: (1) that the principle of PSA does not figure in the New Testament at all; (2) that PSA is only one of a number of pictures/metaphors/analogies used in the New Testament; (3) that PSA, although one of a number of pictures/metaphors, occurs to such an extent that it is not only indispensable but also the most important one in the New Testament; and (4) that PSA is the underlying principle present in all the others and the factor that makes them cohere. During the conference my views did not change but they did become better informed. I arrived believing in the doctrine of penal substitution but wishing to locate it within the range of biblical metaphors. All the metaphors complement each other and therefore must be held together in the unity and diversity of the biblical witness in order to inform our understanding (hence 2 above). To my mind the notion of sacrifice based on the Day of Atonement is the most properly basic conceptual framework and field and therefore holds the central position. It is on this central metaphor that forensic imagery builds and derives its currency, not the other way around. Others wishing to affirm either positions (3) or (4) would no doubt disagree with this assessment and position forensic language as both central and where not explicit regard it as implicit and therefore ever pervasive within the atonement language. In other words they would change my accent. This can be done because the language is indeed inter-related. The question is where the weight of evidence lies or is placed. But that depends significantly on how you interpret the biblical material. So I am back to my broader theological hermeneutics. It is at this point that one's reading tradition comes into play.

I do not believe that a properly biblical theology allows us to use the individual metaphors without attending to the whole of Scripture; and rooting the metaphors in the narrative of salvation history does this. Both the narrative and the metaphors contained within Scripture are required and are indeed inter-related. Therefore the life, death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation of Christ, in the context of promise-fulfilment, provide the necessary framework within which the metaphors function in the canon. In addition, I believe that a second framework is required, namely the doctrine of the Trinity (incidentally there was a significant lack of pneumatology at the symposium and this hampers evangelical thinking). This doctrine is an essential theological context for understanding the metaphors (as indeed Garry Williams noted, although from a Reformed-Augustinian perspective) and without such a doctrine as a theological framework all sorts of problems with the doctrine of God in relation to atonement arise. I would suggest that it is not just a caricature of PSA that is at work here causing problems, but inadequate frameworks for the location of the metaphors as well. I suspect that most popular preachers of PSA have no proper understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the tendency to misunderstand that 'these three are one' *ad extra* in the contemporary western church does not assist us in this regard.

Finally, in the midst of the fellowship came some disturbance. Not only were bombs exploding in central London, but in the middle of what I was considering was an honest discussion among friends and family, the tone changed and certain charges were made by someone apparently interested in drawing a mark in the sand. At the outset of the symposium it was stated that this was neither an ecclesiastical court nor a heresy trial. That anyone might construe the symposium in such terms was news to me! However, some people clearly thought that the seriousness of the issue raised meant that boundary drawing was a distinct possibility [in effect saying that position (1) above was not an Evangelical position, although possibly including position (2)?]. This dimension made me reflect on the social psychological setting of the symposium. No doubt there were people like me simply enjoying the conversation and the intellectual stimulus of excellent papers. However, some people were bringing a level of personal scrutiny that perhaps made others feel under increasing psychological pressure. As I have reflected on the sequence of papers, it appeared to be set up to solve a 'problem', namely the inadequacy of a popular paperback book and the attention it had raised because of the media response to the celebrity status of Steve Chalke (who incidentally did not attend the whole conference – not surprisingly!). Thus we started with the problem defined, subsequently given academic strength before discussions were facilitated. Towards the end of the conference two papers gave the 'solution' to the problem before the symposium was closed via a panel discussion. This certainly raised a question in my mind as to how the power was being exercised in such a process and emphasised once again the role of contextual factors in the narrative for, and the space allocated to, the formulation of theology. Of course, theological discourse cannot escape power dynamics, but it certainly raised a question as to how such a tricky scenario could have been handled differently. I have no solution but simply make the observation.

Conclusion

I wish to express my sincere thanks both to David Hilborn (for organising) and Derek Tidball (on behalf of LST) for facilitating an important theological discussion. I believe that EA will post all the symposium papers on their website. I would suggest that all parties continue to engage in conversation in a spirit of humility and love so that the unity that is found in Christ might be demonstrated to the rest of Church and the wider world.

Dr Mark J. Cartledge is Lecturer in Christian Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter