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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD<sup>1</sup>

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In the weeks before Easter 1779 an Undergraduate at King's College Cambridge called Charles Simeon was racked with a consciousness of his guilt before the judgement seat of God. In the words of his biographer:

He spent hours trying to reconcile his sense of guilt with the mystery of the sacrifice of Christ as portrayed in the communion service of 1662. He had no evangelical training to throw light on the subject. There was no one he knew to whom he could turn. The skies seemed brazen overhead and when he looked down it was only to see his horrific reflection as a sinner beyond hope. In this frame of mind he suddenly came upon a phrase to the effect that 'the Jews knew what they did when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering.' Like a flash it came to him, 'I can transfer all my guilt to another! ... I will not bear [my sins] on my soul a moment longer'. Looking back in happy retrospect over the years, he recorded later, 'accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus; and on the Wednesday began to have hope of mercy; on the Thursday that hope increased; on the Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday morning, Easter Day, April 4th, I awoke early with these words upon my heart and lips, "Jesus Christ is risen today! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul, and at the Lord's table in our Chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.'<sup>2</sup>

One hundred and seventy-five years later another Cambridge Undergraduate, David Watson, was presented with exactly the same answer to his awareness of sin. In his autobiography *You are my God* he recalls a breakfast time conversation with John Collins, then curate at All Souls Langham Place in London, that was to lead to his conversion. As he records the matter, Collins raised the issue of his need for God's forgiveness, and this led into an explanation of how this forgiveness was made possible by the death of Christ:

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture was given as the Tyndale Doctrine Lecture in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> H. E. Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London, 1977), p. 28.

## DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD

He explained that... our primary need of God consists in our need for forgiveness. In countless ways we have broken God's laws, we have gone our own way, we have done our own thing. That is why God is naturally unreal in the experience of us all, until something is done about it. Surprisingly, I did not need much convincing about this. I knew there were some things in my life of which I was ashamed. I would not like the whole of my life to be exposed. I could also see that, logically, this was a possible explanation for the sense of God's remoteness and unreality. If he did exist and I had turned my back on him, it followed that there would be a breakdown of communication.

'Yes,' I said after further discussion, 'I'm prepared to admit that I have sinned and so need forgiveness.'

John then described the next step as believing that Christ had died for my sins. 'Oh dear,' I thought to myself. 'Here are those religious clichés which don't mean a thing. Anyway, how can the death of Jesus all those years ago possibly have any relevance to me today?' John unexpectedly took a piece of toast and placed it on his upturned left hand.

'Let this hand represent you, and this toast represent your sin.' Looking at the semi-burnt piece of cold toast I thought it was a fair analogy. 'Now, let my right hand represent Jesus, who had no sin on him at all. There is a verse in the Bible which speaks about the cross like this: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one of us to our own way; and the Lord (God in heaven) has laid on him (Jesus) the sin of us all."' (Isa.53: 6). As he said that, John transferred the toast from his left hand to his right hand. 'Now' he said, once again with that winsome smile, almost like a chess player saying checkmate, 'where is your sin?'

'I suppose my sin is on Jesus,' I replied, going along with his analogy. In my heart I was beginning to see it, even though my mind wanted something much more intellectually profound. Perhaps that was the meaning of the cross. Perhaps Jesus did somehow take upon himself the sin and guilt of us all so that we, sinners though we all are, could be free to know the love and forgiveness of God without any barrier at all.<sup>3</sup>

These accounts of the events leading up to the conversion of two of the most influential Evangelical leaders of their respective generations point us to the centrality of the idea of penal substitution for Evangelical Christianity. To be an Evangelical Christian has traditionally meant not only believing in Jesus Christ, but believing also that the burden of our

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<sup>3</sup> D. Watson, *You are my God* (London, 1983), pp. 19-20

sin and consequent guilt was carried by him on the cross and by being so carried was done away with. There have been those within the Evangelical movement who have put forward a different understanding of the cross, but they have, on this subject at least, been outside the Evangelical mainstream.<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer is thus entirely correct to declare in his 1974 Tyndale Lecture *What did the Cross Achieve?* that belief in penal substitution 'is a distinguishing mark of the worldwide evangelical fraternity'.<sup>5</sup>

Like most of Evangelical theology, belief in penal substitution was not something that was invented *de novo* by the first fathers of Evangelicalism in the eighteenth century. It was instead an interpretation of the meaning of the cross which had been a central element in the teaching of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant orthodoxy, but which had been eclipsed from the end of the seventeenth century onwards by the rise of the dominance of moralism and rationalism within both the Anglican and Dissenting traditions.

The fact that penal substitution can be found in the teaching of the sixteenth-century Reformers is easy to demonstrate. Three examples will serve to illustrate the point.

Firstly, in a famous passage from his 1531 commentary on Galatians Luther declares:

Hereby it appeareth that the doctrine of the Gospel (which of all other is most sweet and full of singular consolation) speaketh nothing of our works

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in his book *The Problem of the Cross* (London, 1919) the Liberal Evangelical V. H. Storr rejects the traditional doctrine of Penal Substitution as something which is 'artificial, hard, external, and too often pictures God as scheming to overcome a difficulty in which he has been placed by human sin' (p. 75). He argues instead that the cross is simply a demonstration of God's holiness and love, showing 'what sin meant to God, and what it cost to forgive it' (p. 85). Likewise the distinguished Evangelical missiologist Max Warren in his book *Interpreting the Cross* (London, 1966) rejects the idea of the: 'pacifying of an angry God, as though sin and its punishment could be bought off by an innocent victim being substituted for the guilty. That is to make the atonement wholly external and fundamentally unreal' (p. 24). He prefers to say: 'What was wrought out for us men and for our salvation by the coming in the flesh of Jesus Christ and by his living and dying, was both a revelation of the human heart, "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17.9, AV), crucifying goodness, and also a revelation of the heart of God which utterly condemns evil but loves the evil doer even when he is doing evil' (p. 24).

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle, 1998), p. 85.

or of the works of the law, but of the unspeakable and inestimable mercy and love of God towards us unworthy and lost men: to wit, that our most merciful father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and so to be holden under the same that we could never be delivered from it by our own power, sent his only Son onto the world and laid upon him the sins of all men, saying: Be thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged upon the cross; and briefly, be thou the person which hath committed the sins of all men; see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them. Here now cometh the law and saith: I find him a sinner, and that such a one as hath taken upon him the sins of all men, and I see no sins else but in him; therefore let him die upon the cross. And so he setteth upon him and killeth him, by this means the whole world is purged and cleansed from all sins, and so delivered from death and all evils. Now sin and death being abolished in this one man, God would see nothing in the whole world, especially if it did believe, but a mere cleansing and righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly in Book II.xvi of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* John Calvin writes that it was not by accident that Christ died as a criminal, but that the way he died points us to what was really taking place:

...when he is placed as a criminal at the bar, where witnesses are brought to give evidence against him, and the mouth of the judge condemns him to die, we see him sustaining the character of an offender and evil doer. Here we must attend to two points which hath both been foretold by the prophets, and tend admirably to comfort and confirm our faith. When we read that Christ was led away from the judgment-seat to execution, and was crucified between thieves, we have a fulfillment of the prophecy, which is quoted by the evangelist, 'He was numbered with the transgressors' (Is. liii.12; Mark xv.28). Why was it so? That he might bear the character of a sinner, not of a just or innocent person, inasmuch as he met death on account not of innocence, but of sin. On the other hand, when we read that he was acquitted by the same lips that condemned him (for Pilate was forced again and again to bear public testimony to his innocence), let us call to mind what is said by another prophet, 'I restored that which I took not away' (Ps. lxxix.4). Thus we perceive Christ representing the character of a sinner and a criminal, while at the same time, his innocence shines forth, and it becomes manifest that he suffers for another's and not for his own crime. He therefore suffered under Pontius Pilate, being thus, by the formal sentence of the judge, ranked among criminals, and yet he is declared

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<sup>6</sup> M. Luther, *A Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 272.

innocent by the same judge, when he affirms that he finds no cause of death in him. Our acquittal is in this – that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God (Is. liii.12). We must specially remember this substitution in order that we may not be all our lives in trepidation and anxiety, as if the just vengeance, which the Son of God transferred to himself, were still impending over us.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, in his *Catechism* of 1570 the Elizabethan Dean of St Paul's, Alexander Nowell, explains:

That Christ suffered not only a common death in the sight of men, but also was touched with the horror of eternal death: he fought and wrestled as it were hand to hand, with the whole army of hell: before the judgment seat of God he put himself under the heavy judgment and grievous severity of God's punishment: he was driven into most hard distress: for us he suffered and went through horrible fears, and most bitter griefs of mind, to satisfy God's just judgment in all things, and to appease his wrath. For to sinners whose persons Christ did hear bear, not only the sorrows and pains of present death are due, but also of death to come and everlasting: so when he did take upon him and bear both the guiltiness and just judgment of mankind, which was undone, and already condemned, he was tormented with so great trouble and sorrow of mind that he cried out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'<sup>8</sup>

Turning now to the seventeenth century, three further examples will demonstrate that the same line of thought was central to the thought of orthodox Protestant theologians in that century as well.

My first example is taken from the treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by the great Puritan theologian John Owen, first published in 1647. In this work he argues that we are under 'obligation' before God to pay the penalty our sins deserve and that:

the death of Christ made satisfaction in the very thing that was required by the obligation. He took away the curse, by 'being made a curse,' Gal iii: 13. He delivered us from sin, being 'made sin,' (2 Cor. 5:21). He underwent death, that we might be delivered from death. All our debt was in the curse of the law, which he wholly underwent. Neither do we read of any relaxation of the punishment in the Scripture, but only a commutation of the person; which being done, 'God condemned sin in the flesh of his Son,' Romans

<sup>7</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xvi.5 (Grand Rapids, 1975), pp. 438-9

<sup>8</sup> G. E. Corrie (ed.), *Nowell's Catechism* (Cambridge, 1853), p. 159.

viii.3, Christ standing in our stead: and so reparation was made unto God, and satisfaction given for all the detriment that might accrue to him by the sin and rebellion of them for whom this satisfaction was made. His justice was violated, and he 'sets forth Christ to be a propitiation' for our sins, 'that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus,' Romans iii.25,26.<sup>9</sup>

My second example is taken from a series of lectures on the *Apostles' Creed* which were given by John Pearson, the future Bishop of Chester, under the Commonwealth, and which were published in 1659.

Commenting on the word 'dead' in the fourth article of the creed he writes:

We all had sinned, and so offended the justice of God, and by an act of that justice the sentence of death passed upon us: it was necessary therefore that Christ our surety should die, to satisfy the justice of God both for that iniquity as the propitiation for our sins, and for that penalty, as he which was to bear our griefs. God was offended with us, and he must die who was to reconcile him to us. *For when we were enemies, saith St. Paul, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.* (Rom. 5:10)<sup>10</sup>

My third example is from the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* by the Reformed theologian Francis Turretin, published between 1679 and 1685, a work which represents the final flowering of the Genevan Calvinist tradition at the end of the seventeenth century.

Responding to the argument of the Unitarian theologian Faustus Socinus that Christ's death on the cross was merely an example of patience and love he maintains that Isaiah 53, understood as a prophecy of Christ, rules this notion out:

All things which indicate a true satisfaction occur here: the moving and meritorious cause (viz, our sins, not his own): he was wounded for our transgressions (vv.4-6); and the bearing of punishment because he hath borne our griefs (v.4); the imputation of our sins to Christ by God as a Judge – 'the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all' (v.6); the voluntary undertaking of Christ as our surety because he was afflicted and opened not his mouth (v.8); an expiation for sin and full payment of the debt; because he laid down his life for sin and was taken from prison and from judgment (vv.8-10). Now with what propriety could all this be said if Christ had laid

<sup>9</sup> J. Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London, 1959), p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> J. Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (Oxford, 1870), p. 386.

down his life merely to exhibit an example of patience and love and not to make satisfaction for sin?<sup>11</sup>

The six examples uniformly assert that the teaching of Scripture is that Christ satisfied the demands of God's justice by bearing the penalty for sin demanded by God's law in his own person on the cross.

If we now move from description to evaluation and ask what is the value of this way of looking at the cross, it seems to me that it has three great strengths.

- It attempts to take seriously the teaching of Scripture. We can see this clearly in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century examples we have looked at, all of which take their orientation not from a priori speculation about how God might have saved humankind from sin but from the teaching of the Bible concerning what God has done to save us from sin. The same is also true of modern expositions of the doctrine such as Packer's Tyndale lecture mentioned above or H. E. Guillebaud's *Why the Cross?*<sup>12</sup> or John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*.<sup>13</sup>

Methodologically this has to be the correct starting point since only God truly knows why he sent his Son to die for us and the primary and definitive place in which God speaks to us is through the pages of the Scriptures which his Spirit inspired (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21, John 15:26-27).

- It takes seriously the fact that what took place on the cross had to do with the satisfaction of God's justice.

Thomas Cranmer makes this point brilliantly in his 1547 Homily *Of the Salvation of Mankind* when he talks about:

the great wisdom of God in this mystery of our redemption, who hath so tempered his justice and mercy together, that he would neither by his justice condemn us unto the everlasting captivity of the devil, remediless for ever without mercy, nor by his mercy deliver us clearly, without justice or the

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<sup>11</sup> F. Turretin *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA, 1994), p. 429.

<sup>12</sup> H. E. Guillebaud, *Why the Cross?*, 2nd ed. (London, 1946).

<sup>13</sup> J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester, 1986).

## DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD

payment of a just ransom: but with his endless mercy he joined his most upright and equal justice.<sup>14</sup>

Cranmer's insistence that God's justice as well as his love had to be satisfied by the death of Christ embodies an important aspect of biblical teaching. According to the biblical witness God is a righteous God, a God who does what is just and right, upholding the righteous, and punishing the wicked. Thus for example the Psalmist declares:

The Lord judges the peoples; judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish thou the righteous, thou who triest the minds and hearts, thou righteous God. My shield is with God who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day. (Ps. 7:8-11)

Similarly Psalm 119:137 exclaims: 'Righteous art thou, O Lord and right are thy judgements', Abraham asks rhetorically in Genesis 18:25 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?', and Zephaniah states concerning Jerusalem: 'The Lord within her is righteous, he does no wrong; every morning he shows forth his justice' (Zeph. 3:5).

It is this just and righteous God who has acted for us in Christ, and thus Paul declares that the good news of what he has done for us reveals the 'righteousness of God' (Rom. 1:17), and in a key passage later on in Romans he maintains that God's offering of Jesus on the Cross as an atoning sacrifice

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. (Rom. 3:25-26)

As C. E. B. Cranfield comments, what Paul is saying here 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

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<sup>14</sup> J. Leith, (ed.) *Creeeds of the Churches*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1973), pp. 240-41

person of his Son the full weight of that righteous wrath that they deserved.<sup>15</sup>

It is this truth which the doctrine of Penal Substitution has consistently upheld.

- It does justice to those places in the Bible where Christ is said to have suffered in our place.

Examples of such verses would be:

Mark 10:45: 'For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

2 Corinthians 5:21: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

Galatians 3:13: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree."'

1 Peter 2:24: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.'

In each of these verses the clear teaching is that Christ did something for us in our place, and this is a truth which the doctrine of Penal Substitution has rightly emphasised. It should also be noted however that it is an unfair criticism of the doctrine to say that its emphasis on Christ acting on our behalf means that it separates Christ from us in a way that makes it difficult to see how what Christ has done can be credited to our account. As well as stressing that Christ acted on our behalf as our substitute those who have advocated this way of looking at the cross have also wanted to say that what Christ has done affects us because we are united to him.

Thus Luther writes in his tract *The Freedom of a Christian* published in 1520 that through faith the believer is united to Christ like a bride to her bridegroom:

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<sup>15</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh, 1975), p. 217.

## DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD

...Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

Here we have a most pleasing vision not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption. Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned nor died, and is not condemned, and he cannot sin, die, or be condemned; his righteousness, life, and salvation are unconquerable, eternal, omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up. These were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than all the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell.<sup>16</sup>

In similar fashion, Packer notes that:

Anticipating the rationalistic criticism that guilt is not transferable and the substitution described, if real, would be immoral, our model now invokes Paul's description of the Lord Jesus Christ as the second man and last Adam, who involved us in his sin-bearing as truly as Adam involved us in his sinning (1 Cor. 15:45ff, Rom. 5:12ff.).<sup>17</sup>

In other words, just as we are lost in sin because we are united to Adam, so we are saved from sin because we are united to Christ.

There is thus much to be said for the doctrine of Penal Substitution and one can see why it has been widely accepted in Protestant theology. However in its traditional formulation it is also vulnerable to four serious criticisms:

1. Its use of the term 'propitiation' to describe what Christ has done is misleading.

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<sup>16</sup> M. Luther, *Three Treatises* 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA, 1970), pp. 286-7

<sup>17</sup> Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God*, p. 110

2. It is trapped in a retributivist view of punishment which takes an insufficiently serious view of the way that God deals with sin.
3. It underplays the seriousness of God's response to sin.
4. It has a tendency to underplay the importance of the resurrection.

To take the first point first, we have already seen in the quotations from Owen and Pearson the use of the word 'propitiation' to describe the effect of God's offering himself on our behalf. The use of this term is taken from the AV translation of three New Testament passages, Romans. 3:25, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. The basic idea being expressed by the use of this term is that the death of Christ appeases God's judicial wrath so he ceases to be angry with us, and the use of the term is still defended by Conservative Evangelical writers today. Thus John Stott declares:

It is God himself who in holy wrath needs to be propitiated, God himself who undertook to do the propitiating, and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. Thus God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it in his own Son when he took our place and died for us.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the careful qualifications of the idea of propitiation made by Stott, and in spite of the linguistic arguments in favour of propitiation put forward by Leon Morris in his *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*,<sup>19</sup> on the grounds that in the LXX and contemporary Greek literature the nouns *hilasterion* and *hilasmos* used in the passages in question would have been understood to mean 'propitiation', the use of the term remains highly problematic.

This is because what must ultimately determine our translation of these nouns is not primarily the evidence of the LXX or contemporary Greek literature, but the sense that we can make of them in the context provided by the theology of the books in which they are found and of the New Testament as a whole. Seen in this context the severe comments by George Caird about the use of this term still seem justified:

One term, however, notwithstanding its use in the AV, must be discarded from the start. There was not in 1611, nor is there today, any justification for the use of 'propitiation' in this connection. 'Propitiate' is a transitive verb which requires a personal object, and which entails a change of attitude in the person propitiated. But in the New Testament atonement in all its

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<sup>18</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London, 1955), chs 4-5.

forms has its origin in the unchanging purpose and love of God. If we are true to New Testament evidence, we shall not frame any sentence about atonement or salvation with Jesus as its subject which could not equally have God as subject. The only exceptions, more apparent than real, are sentences which speak of Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father and understanding his purpose. The continued use of 'propitiation' in theological debate is more the waving of a partisan flag than an aid to understanding.<sup>20</sup>

The two key points that Caird makes here are that the concept of propitiation demands:

- a) a personal object who is propitiated
- b) a change of attitude in the person thus propitiated

In the New Testament neither of these elements is present.

As Stott himself admits, in the New Testament God is never said to be the object of propitiation: 'it is true that nowhere in the New Testament is God explicitly said to be propitiated'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore God's attitude to us does not change. *We* are reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19). He is *not* reconciled to us. God's attitude to us before, during and after the atonement is his unchanging love as Romans. 5:8-10, and 1 John 4:8 make clear, and, as we shall see, it is precisely the opposition to us of this unchanging love that make atonement both possible and necessary.

P. T. Forsyth takes us to the heart of the issue in his book *The Cruciality of the Cross* when he declares that the cross of Christ came from God's grace it did not make God gracious:

We can no longer speak of a strife of attributes in God the father, justice set against mercy, and judgment against grace, till an adjustment was effected by the Son. There can be no talk of any mollification of God, or any inducement whatever, offered by either man or some third party to procure grace. Procured grace is a contradiction in terms. The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace. What was historically offered to God was also eternally offered by God, within the Godhead's unity. The redeemer was God's gift.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> G. B. Caird & L. D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford, 1994), p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> J. S. Stott, *The Letters of John* rev. ed. (Leicester, 1988), p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London, 1909), pp. 40-41.

It might be argued that those like Stott who continue to uphold the use of propitiation would agree with what Forsyth says about the cross as the fruit rather than the cause of God's gracious attitude towards us. Stott, for example, declares 'Let us be clear that he did not change from wrath to love, or from enmity to grace, since his character is unchanging.'<sup>23</sup>

However, precisely in arguing this point they would be undermining the case for propitiation, because if God's attitude is one of unchanging love and grace then it does not need to be changed, and if it is not changed then there is no propitiation.

If we then ask what translation would be preferable to propitiation in Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2 and 1 John 4:10 I would argue that the RSV is right to use the word *expiation* since this brings out the key truth that what takes place through the saving work of Christ is not a change in God's attitude, but a change in us by means of which our sins are done away with.

If we take Romans 3:25 first of all, it is clear that in Romans the death of Christ saves us from the wrath of God. We can see this in Romans 5:9: 'Since therefore, we are now justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.'

However as Judith Gundry-Wolf notes in her article 'Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat' in the *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*,

that still does not mean that Christ's death propitiated God. For Paul the wrath of God is God's judgment (see Rom. 2:5, 3:5-6) which destroys all unholiness and sin. In the light of the threatening wrath of God, the need of sinners can be said to be not *the transformation of God's attitude towards them* but the transformation of their *sinful existence before God* through its destruction and new creation. This transformation of sinners is precisely the significance Paul sees in the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

If we then go on to look at 1 John 4:10, it is again clear that the change takes place in us not God. 1 John 4:10 is completely explicit that it was *because* God loved us that he sent his Son to deal with our sins. The purpose of Christ's death as 1 John portrays it is not to persuade God to look favourably upon us but to deal with our sin. Thus 1 John 1:7 declares, 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin'. As Stott observes: 'this is the only explicit reference in the letter to the saving power of the death of Jesus Christ' and what it tells us is that:

<sup>23</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 174.

<sup>24</sup> G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, D. G. Reid (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester, 1993), p. 282, italics hers.

God has made provision to purify us from whatever sin would otherwise mar our fellowship with him or each other. This provision is *the blood of Jesus, his Son*, that is to say, the virtue of his death for our sins.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar fashion, in 1 John 1:9 God's forgiveness of our sins is linked with the fact that he cleanses us from all unrighteousness. In the theology of 1 John, therefore, the purpose of the death of Christ is not to appease God, but to purify and cleanse us from that which blocks our relationship with him, and 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 must be interpreted in this light.

To move on to the next criticism, we need to note first of all that a retributivist view of punishment is one that sees the purpose of punishment as inflicting retribution on a person committing an offence. Thus a parking offence might be met with a parking ticket, burglary with imprisonment and murder with life imprisonment or death. On a retributivist view of punishment in each of these cases the offender would be getting the punishment he or she deserved. They would be getting their 'just desserts'. The traditional view of penal substitution has operated within this ethical framework. The offence we have committed is sin against a holy God and the just punishment for sin is the physical death of the body and the eternal death of the soul. This is what we deserved, but it is not inflicted upon us because on the cross God in Christ took the punishment for us.

For example, Turretin writes:

If Christ did not suffer eternal death, but only a temporal death of three days, still no less did he pay what we owed as to infinity of punishment. If it was not infinite as to duration, still it was such equivalently, as to value on account of the infinite dignity of the person suffering. For it was the suffering not of a mere man, but of the true God, who purchased the church with his blood (Acts 20:28) so that what was deficient in finite time is supplied by the condition of the divine person (which added an infinite weight to a temporary passion). Yet we may not infer that as the person suffering was infinite, one drop of his blood was sufficient for our redemption. Although any suffering whatever might have infinite value by reason of the sufferer, still his death alone could possess infinite value objectively in respect of the Judge inflicting it. The dignity of the person can increase the dignity of the punishment endured, so that the more exalted the person is who suffers, so much the heavier is the suffering to be

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<sup>25</sup> Stott, *The Letters of John*, p. 81.

considered; yet it cannot satisfy that species of punishment denounced by the law. Death alone answers to and fulfils the demands of law and justice.<sup>26</sup>

Working along the same lines, Packer argues that the Cross shows us:

that God's demands remain what they were, and that God's law of retribution, which our conscience declares to be right, has not ceased to operate in his world, nor ever will; but that in our case the law has operated already, so that all our sins, past present and even future, have been covered by Calvary.

So our conscience is pacified by the knowledge that our sins have already been judged and punished, however strange the statement may sound, in the person and death of another. Bunyan's pilgrim before the cross loses his burden, and Toplady can assure himself that:

If thou my pardon has secured,  
And freely in my room endured  
The whole of wrath divine,  
Payment God cannot twice demand,  
First from my bleeding surety's hand  
And then again from mine.<sup>27</sup>

There can be no denying the emotive appeal of this way of viewing the cross; however, the problem with it is that the retributive view of punishment (which does not have explicit biblical backing) is difficult to justify. It is open to the simple question 'What is the point of meeting an offence with a penalty?'. The classic answer to this question is that punishment restores the moral balance of the universe which has been disrupted by sin.

As St Augustine put it:

If there were sins and no consequent misery, that order... is dishonoured by lack of equity... the penal state is imposed to bring [the universe] into order. Indeed it compels the dishonourable state [of the sinner] to become harmonised with the honour of the universe, so that the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 436.

<sup>27</sup> Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God*, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *On Free Will*, 111: IX: 26.

Vernon White comments in his book *Atonement and Incarnation*:

A working definition of the distinctive meaning of retribution therefore emerges. Retributive reaction to offence is good, and has meaning, in so far as it harmonises, corrects imbalance and restores order. It must occur not just to deter others, not just to underline the moral seriousness of the offence, not just to bring the offender to a proper and painful sense of shame, but because retributive suffering just *is* the proper balance to sin: it sets it in proper relief; it 'harmonises' it in terms of the overall standards, structures, and fabric of the moral universe. Things are set right by retributive suffering in the way in which a whole canvas is set right when its black spots are painted into the shadow of a sunlit landscape. Conceived in this way it therefore becomes a necessity, a categorical moral imperative: it has to happen, whether or not the offender is reformed by it, for his sin remains a moral blot on the landscape until the balancing suffering is introduced in this way.<sup>29</sup>

Linked with this idea of the restoration of the moral balance is the idea of the restoration of the status quo. The proper moral order of the universe, which has been disrupted by sin is restored when sin is met with appropriate punishment. This is at first sight a very attractive theory of punishment and one to which we instinctively respond. However, as White goes on to point out it is seriously flawed.

1. The status quo is never properly restored.
2. It is difficult to see how the suffering of an offender balances out the suffering caused by the original offence.
3. It doesn't work in the field of personal relationships since the infliction of punishment cannot by itself restore a broken relationship.

He maintains that we need to argue for a re-creative rather than a retributivist view of punishment. We need to seek to create a new kind of good rather than try to restore the balance of the past. In fact, White argues, the only justification for a retributivist view of punishment is that amongst human beings it prevents punishment going too far and thus protects their human rights. And as he says 'here we are bound to put down another theological marker relating quite specifically to atonement theory. For this last point betrays the fact that retributive logic actually demands a

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<sup>29</sup> V. White, *Atonement and Incarnation* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 94.

less strenuous reaction to evil than recreative logic. It is satisfied with less.<sup>30</sup>

This moves us on to the third criticism of the traditional doctrine of penal substitution, which is that it takes an insufficiently serious view of the way God deals with sin. The point of criticism here is that the doctrine suggests that God is not that concerned about sin as such, but only with punishment being inflicted upon sins committed. To put it simply, it suggests that God is happy as long as the *penalty* for sin is paid by someone. If we ask why the Atonement 'works' the view presented by theologians such as Turretin is simply that God is content because the infinite penalty demanded for sin, has been paid for by the infinite worth of the suffering of the Son of God.

As White explains, the problem with this approach is that paradoxically it does not take seriously enough the concern that the Bible and the Protestant tradition rightly has with God's justice and his wrath as God's total rejection of sin, and is less easy to combine with a stress on God's love than an alternative 're-creative' approach.

Looking at how what he has said about the retributivist theory relates specifically to the atonement, White notes that given the propitiatory, juridical and substitutionary language used to describe the atonement in the Bible and the Christian tradition:

*prima facie* it certainly does seem that a prior retributivist logic fits naturally into these Biblical concerns and theological categories, to explicate the atonement and the basis of reconciliation: God's anger burns until the demands of justice, conceived as a balance of suffering for sin, are met; and either because we are unable to suffer sufficiently to balance the books, or because God's love intervenes, this distribution of penal suffering is placed entirely on Christ in our stead: his is the symbolic or equivalent reparation for what we do not or cannot pay back ourselves.

Yet in fact precisely the contrary is true. If the retributivist logic is replaced by a recreative logic, these Biblical concerns surrounding the Christ event will fare better, not worse. A recreative logic actually does more justice, not less, to the wrath of God, because, as already indicated, it takes a more 'strenuous' reaction to deal with the redemption of a whole situation, compared to the limited notion of a mere retributive balance, or even mere destruction. Furthermore, as such, it finds wrath and justice wholly

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

compatible with the aims of love, and does not have to trade them off against each other, as does the logic of retributive penal substitution.<sup>31</sup>

It is sometimes argued that biblical teaching concerning the condemnation of the damned at the last judgement supports the concept of retribution since it depicts God as inflicting upon them a purely retributive punishment in which there is no re-creative element at all. Moreover, since it is God himself who inflicts retribution it follows that retribution must be a moral good.

Two responses can be made to this argument.

Firstly, it is now widely accepted on the basis of biblical texts such as John 3:17-21 and Galatians 6:7-8 that the fate of the damned is not simply a punishment imposed upon them by God, but is a fate which they themselves have chosen.

Thus Kallistos Ware writes in *The Orthodox Way*:

If anyone is in hell, it is not because God has imprisoned him there, but because that is where he himself has chosen to be. The lost in hell are self-condemned, self-enslaved; it has been rightly said that the doors of hell are locked *on the inside*.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar fashion Packer states in *Knowing God* that the pains of hell

are not arbitrary inflictions; they represent, rather a conscious growing into the state in which one has chosen to be. The unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him, and he shall have his preference.<sup>33</sup>

Eternal damnation is then not a matter of God inflicting retributive punishment upon people, it is a matter of his respecting the freedom he has given them, even if they exercise that freedom to reject him for ever.

Secondly, the fact that the fate of the damned has no re-creative element in it can be seen to reflect the fact that the final judgement is precisely the *final* judgement. It is the point beyond which there is no future for the damned except the dreadful fate which they have chosen. This is not because God has ceased to care for them, or would not re-create them if he could, but because they have reached a point where nothing more can be

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> K. Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London, 1979). p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London, 1981), p. 170.

done for them – even by God. C. S. Lewis makes the point brilliantly in *The Problem of Pain*:

In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: 'What are you asking God to do?' To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what he does.<sup>34</sup>

However, the fact that at the end of time God simply gives over the damned to their fate does not mean that up to that point he has not sought their re-creation.

It might also be worth asking whether we can actually see the existence of hell itself as a moral good. If that which is good is that which is desired by God, and if what he desires is the salvation of all people (Rom. 11:32, 1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Pet. 3:9) then it could be argued that hell is precisely *not* what is desired by God and is therefore not good. The existence of the damned in hell would then be a form of existence which God has rejected for his creatures but which they in their perversity and pride insist on hanging on to.

The fourth and final criticism of the doctrine of Penal Substitution in its traditional form is that it does tend to downplay the importance of the resurrection.

John Stott for instance, argues that the purpose of the resurrection is to make known what took place on the Cross:

Of course the resurrection was essential to confirm the efficacy of his death, as his incarnation had been to prepare for its possibility. But we must insist that Christ's work of sin bearing was finished on the cross, that the victory over the devil, sin, and death was won there, and that what the resurrection did was to vindicate that Jesus whom men had rejected, to declare with power that he is the Son of God, and publicly to confirm that his sin-bearing death had been effective for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>35</sup>

This way of understanding the relationship between the cross and resurrection has a long heritage in the Protestant tradition. Thus Calvin declares in his commentary on John's Gospel:

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<sup>34</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Glasgow, 1977), p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 238.

the whole accomplishment of our salvation, and all the separate parts of it, are contained in (Christ's) death.<sup>36</sup>

However, elsewhere Calvin himself teaches us better. Thus he writes in Book II of the *Institutes*:

although in his death we have an effectual completion of salvation, because by it we are reconciled to God, satisfaction is given to his justice, the curse is removed, and the penalty paid; still it is not by his death, but by his resurrection, that we are said to be begotten again to a living hope (I Pet. 1:3); because, as he, by rising again, became victorious over death, so the victory of our faith consists only in his resurrection. The nature of it is better expressed in the words of Paul, 'Who [Christ] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification (Rom. iv.25); as if he had said, By his death sin was taken away, by his resurrection righteousness was renewed and restored. For how could he by dying have freed us from death, if he had yielded to its power? How could he have attained the victory for us, if he had fallen in the fight?'<sup>37</sup>

Having looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional doctrine of Penal Substitution we are left with the question of what an understanding of the cross would look like, that conserved the strengths and avoided the weaknesses of the traditional position.

In the second half of this paper I shall attempt a sketch of what I think such a way of looking at the cross should look like.

## I. THE PURPOSE OF GOD

To begin at the beginning, the first thing we need to understand is what God's long term intention for the universe is, because any atonement theory has to relate to what we think God is attempting to achieve in relation to his creation. Now God's intention in this area is not something about which we have to guess because St Paul has clearly informed us what this intention is in Ephesians 1:10 where he tells us about God's

plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in P. Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, op. cit., II.xvi.13

That is to say, God's ultimate purpose is to unite all things in heaven and on earth to himself in his Son Jesus Christ. As F. F. Bruce puts it in his commentary on *The Epistle to the Ephesians*:

This is the grand purpose of God which embraces all lesser aspects of his purpose within itself – the establishment of a new order, a new creation, of which Christ shall be the acknowledged head.<sup>38</sup>

As the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us, this purpose which God has corresponds to God's own nature. God himself is three Persons who are united with each other in love and he desires to share that unity first of all with his church (John 17:20-23) and then ultimately, through Christ, with the whole of the creation. As Kallistos Ware puts it in his book *The Orthodox Way*,

To love means to share, as the doctrine of the Trinity has so clearly shown us: God is not just one but one-in-three, because he is a communion of persons who share in love with one another. The circle of divine love, however, has not remained closed. God's love is, in the literal sense of the word, 'ecstatic' – a love that causes God to go out from himself and to create things other than himself. By voluntary choice God created the world in 'ecstatic' love, so that there might be besides himself other beings to participate in the life and the love that are his.<sup>39</sup>

God's purpose in creation is thus that of love. God wills that he should share with his creation that eternal relationship of love in which he himself exists. However we should not be misled by sentimental human ideas of love into thinking that because God's purpose is one of love this means that God will not insist on having things his way and will allow his purpose to be frustrated.

On the contrary, Paul tells us in the very next verse in Ephesians (Eph. 1:11) that God 'accomplishes all things according to the council of his will'. God's love is the ultimate 'tough love'. It is a love that will brook no obstacle in achieving the goal which it intends. And, indeed, as the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian George MacDonald maintains, it is in the very nature of love, properly understood, that it has this inexorable quality.

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<sup>38</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, 1961), pp. 32-3.

<sup>39</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 56.

## DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD

Nothing is inexorable but love. Love which will yield to prayer is imperfect and poor. Nor is it then the love that yields, but its alloy...For love loves unto purity. Love has ever in view the absolute loveliness of that which it beholds. Where loveliness is incomplete, and love cannot love its fill of loving, it spends itself to make more lovely, that it may love more; it strives for perfection, even that itself may be perfected – not in itself, but in the object.... Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed. And our God is a consuming fire.<sup>40</sup>

In this quotation MacDonald connects the nature of love to the fact that 'Our God is a consuming fire' and he is quite correct to make this connection. This is because according to the biblical witness the God who is love and the God whose judgement is as a consuming fire are one and the same. It is the same Lord described in Psalm 145:9:

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made

who is described in Isaiah 10:17:

The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame; and it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day. The glory of his forest and his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away. The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down.

The God who meets us in such terrible judgement is the God whose compassion is over all that he has made because the purpose of his acts of judgement is to further his purposes of love by removing all that stands in their way.

If we think of the biblical story line, after Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden God makes a new start for humanity by calling Abraham and promising to make him a great nation and a source of universal blessing (Gen. 12:3). In order to keep this promise God enacts terrible judgement upon the Egyptians and the peoples of Canaan and, when she strays from her calling, upon Israel herself. Finally, when God fulfils his promise to Abraham by coming to his people in the person of his Son all but a small remnant of Israel refuse to believe and thus come under God's judgement – a judgement embodied in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. However, as Paul argues in Romans 9-11, even this judgement

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<sup>40</sup> C. S. Lewis (ed.), *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London, 1983), pp. 1-2.

implements God's loving purposes in that it gives the Gentiles opportunity to believe which will in turn eventually lead Israel back to God. Furthermore the salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike is not the end of the story for the full redemption of humanity will usher in the redemption of all of God's creation (Rom. 8:18-21).

Seen in this perspective, then, the story of God's anger is good news. It is good news because it is the story of how God's loving purpose is at work in history judging and overcoming all opposition and achieving the good end which God has intended from the beginning.

In the words of C. S. Lewis:

You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the 'lord of terrible aspect', is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of the conscientious magistrate, not the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire himself, the love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.<sup>41</sup>

Or as Karl Barth puts it:

If God does not meet us in his jealous zeal and wrath – exactly as He meets Israel according to the witness of the Old Testament, exactly as He meets it later in the crucifixion of his own Son – then He does not meet us at all, and in spite of all our assertions about divine love, man is in actual fact left to himself. That man is not abandoned in this way, that God is really gracious to him, is shown in the fact that God confronts him in holiness. It is in this way that God is present with him, taking over and conducting the cause which sinful man is impotent to conduct himself. It is in this way that God reconciles man to himself. The fact that God does not permit Israel, the righteous or the Church to perish means that he cannot allow them to go their own way, unaccused, uncondemned and unpunished, when they are and behave as if they were people who do not participate in this salvation and protection.<sup>42</sup>

God's wrath and God's love are thus not to be seen as two aspects of God's character which exist side by side and have somehow to be reconciled.

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<sup>41</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1940), pp. 35.

<sup>42</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 366.

Rather, God's wrath is God's love in action overcoming all opposition to his loving purposes.

In my description of God's loving activity I have several times referred to God's acts of judgement as manifestations of his love. This points us to the fact that just as we must not separate God's anger from his love, in similar fashion we must not set God's mercy and God's justice side by side as if they were two separate attributes of God which need to be harmonised. As I noted earlier on in this paper, the justice of God is a major theme of the biblical witness to what God is like, but his justice is only understood rightly when it is seen as an expression of his mercy and hence of his love. In the words of the Anglican Evangelical theologian Tom Smail:

The God who speaks in the Scriptures is both just and merciful in everything that he does; the two are entirely consistent because the God who exercises both of them is entirely consistent with himself and faithful to himself and his purposes in all his works and ways.

That comes out clearly in the way the Old Testament prophets, and in particular Isaiah, speak of God's justice. He speaks for example of Jerusalem as the place 'once full of fair judgment, where saving justice used to dwell' (1:21). When he is looking forward to God's people returning from exile he says to the anxious, 'Be strong, fear not, your God is coming with judgement, coming with judgment to save you' (35:4), and in the second part of the book God identifies himself to the prophet, 'There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour' (45:21) where the meaning clearly is not 'a righteous God and in spite of that a Saviour,' but rather 'a righteous God and therefore a Saviour.'

Verses like that could be multiplied from the Psalms and other Old Testament writings. We should not forget either that in the Old Testament we have a book of Judges which tells the story not of legal officials holding courts and imposing sentences but of men and women God raised up precisely to save and deliver his people from the oppressing Philistines. All this serves to make the point that in God righteousness and salvation, justice and mercy, are not in conflict but are complementary descriptions of how consistently and faithfully he pursues his single purpose for his people and his world. In the God who revealed himself in word to the prophets and even more in the person and passion of Jesus Christ, mercy is at the heart of justice, and his justice is his faithful commitment to mercy.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> T. Smail, *Windows on the Cross* (London, 1995), pp. 42-3.

It is in the perspective of the purpose and character of God as I have just described them that we have to understand what God is doing in the cross of Christ. The cross is the ultimate example of how the anger and justice of God are good news because in the cross God's love is at work as his merciful judgement overcomes our opposition to him. The cross is then definitely not the story of how God began to love us because our sins were atoned for and his justice satisfied by the death of Christ. Rather it is the story of how, because God loved us, He sent his Son to do away with all those things that make us hateful in his sight.

To quote St Augustine of Hippo:

Our being reconciled by the death of Christ must not be understood as if the Son reconciled us, in order that the Father, then hating, might begin to love us, but that we were reconciled to him already, loving, though at enmity with us because of sin. To the truth of both propositions we have the attestation of the Apostle, 'God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8). Therefore he had this love for us even when, exercising enmity towards him, we were the workers of iniquity. Accordingly, in a manner wondrous and divine, he loved even when he hated us. For he hated us when we were such as he had not made us, and yet because our iniquity had not destroyed his work in every respect, he knew in regard to each one of us, to hate what we had made, and love what he had made.<sup>44</sup>

What we shall look at next is how the cross enacted God's love for us by doing away with what was hateful in his sight.

## 2. DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST

In an article entitled 'Can one Man die for the People?', Tom Smail voices the critical questions that we have to answer if as Christians we want to say that Christ's death changed the human situation before God.

What is it that this one man can do that is so critical and transforming, not just for his contemporaries but for countless numbers of people far removed from him in time and distance? What by dying can one man do that will make possible and actual a new and reconciled relationship to God for all people?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Tract in John*, 110.

<sup>45</sup> J. Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London, 1995), p. 74.

To begin to answer these questions posed by Smail we first of all need to realise that the cross does not stand alone but is the first part of a twofold act of God for our salvation the first part of which is the resurrection. As Calvin reminded us, It is not the cross alone that saves, but the cross and the resurrection together. Paul makes this point clear in Romans 4:25 when he writes that Jesus was 'put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification'. In the words of Charles Cranfield:

What was necessitated by our sins was, in the first place, Christ's atoning death, and yet, had his death not been followed by his resurrection, it would not have been God's mighty deed for our salvation.<sup>46</sup>

The question then becomes how it is that Christ's death and resurrection together constitute the mighty deed of God for our salvation. Here I think the correct answer is given to us by Karl Barth in his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism* in which he declares:

In the death of Jesus Christ, God took man's place in order to suffer in his place the destruction of sinful man and, at the same time, to realise the existence of the new obedient man. The way is therefore open to restore the lost right of man, his right to live as the creature of God. The grace of God against which man sins triumphs in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Barth makes two key points in this quotation.

The first of these is that in the death of Christ on the cross the destruction of sinful man was undertaken by God. That is to say, the death of Christ on the cross was not just the *punishment* but the *death* of our old sinful nature. This again is a point which is underlined by St Paul who declares that when Christ died on our behalf we died with him. Thus we read in Galatians 2:20, 'I have been crucified with Christ' and in 2 Corinthians 5:14, 'we are convinced that one died for all therefore all have died'.

As the great Scottish theologian James Denney observes in his Expositors Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians:

Is it logical to say, 'One died for the benefit of all: hence all died?' From that premise is not the only legitimate conclusion 'hence all remained alive'? Plainly if Paul's conclusion is to be drawn, the 'for' must reach

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<sup>46</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1975), p. 252.

<sup>47</sup> K. Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ Through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964), pp. 72-3.

much deeper than this mere suggestion of our advantage: if we all *died*, in that Christ died for us, there must be a sense in which that death of his is *ours*; He must be identified with us in it: there on the cross, while we stand and gaze at him, He is not simply a person doing us a service; He is a person doing us a service *by filling our place and dying our death*. It is out of this deeper relation that all services, benefits and advantages flow; and that deeper sense of 'for', to which Christ is at once the representative and substitute of man, is essential to do justice to the Apostle's thought.<sup>48</sup>

If we ask why it was that Christ had to die our death on the cross in order that we might be saved the answer is also given to us by Paul, this time in Romans 6:6-7:

We know that our old self was crucified with him that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin.

That is to say, our fallen nature was slain in the death of Christ in order that we might have liberation from the domination by sin which our old nature necessarily entails. Thinking of it in terms of our earlier discussion we can see how Christ's death thus brings together God's judgement and God's love. The cross is an act of God's judgement in that on the cross the death penalty is carried out on us as sinners. Our sinful existence has no right to exist before God and is therefore brought to an end. It is at the same time an act of love since the purpose of this judgement is to destroy our enslavement to sin in order that we might become free to be the people God intends us to be.

This is a point made forcefully by Martin Luther in his *Lectures on Romans* delivered between 1515 and 1516. Commenting on Romans 6:3, Luther notes that in Scripture there is alongside the temporal death of the body, a form of eternal death which is a 'very great evil' in which 'it is man that dies, while sin lives and remains for ever'. This is the eternal death suffered by the damned. However, there is also a form of eternal death that is a 'very great good'. This is the form of death that took place in Christ:

It is the death of sin and the death of death, by which the soul is freed and separated from sin and the body from corruption, and the soul is united by grace and glory with the living God. This is death in the strict and proper sense of the word (for in every other death some mixture of life remains, but

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<sup>48</sup> J. Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London, 1894), pp. 194-5.

not in this one, in which there is nothing but life itself: eternal life). It is only this death that the conditions of death fit absolutely and perfectly; whatever dies in it, and in it alone, vanishes entirely into everlasting nothingness, and nothing ever returns from it (indeed it inflicts death also upon eternal death). Thus sin dies, and also the sinner when he is justified, for sin does not ever return, as the apostle says here: 'Christ dies no more,' etc. (Rom. 6:9). This is the principle theme of the Scripture. For God arranged to take away through Christ whatever the devil brought in through Adam. And the devil brought in sin and death. Therefore, God brought about the death of death and the sin of sin, the prison of prison and the captivity of captivity. As he says through Hosea: 'O death, I will be thy death; O hell, I will be thy bite.' (Hosea 13:14)<sup>49</sup>

It was this death – the death of death and the death of sin – that was undertaken on our behalf by Christ through his death on the cross thereby achieving the expiation of our sins referred to in Romans and 1 John. Our sins are no longer a barrier between us and God, because in Christ our sinful existence has been brought to an end. It is a closed chapter. That is why in Matthew's account of the death of Christ the curtain of the Temple is torn in two and the tombs of the saints are cracked open (Matt. 27:51-53). The sin and death which barred access to God and kept the saints in their graves have been done away with by the death of Christ.

However, there is more to the work of Christ than simply the termination of our existence as sinners. The work of God in Christ is not simply, or even primarily, a destructive work. It is primarily a work of re-creation. This brings us on to Barth's second point which is that the purpose of Christ's death is to 'realise the existence of the new obedient man'. In the words of Peter in 1 Peter 2:24: which we have quoted above: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness'.

This purpose was not achieved through the cross alone because if all there was was the cross then the story of God's involvement with humankind would have reached its terminus point on Calvary. If we were to have a future our old existence as sinners had to be replaced with a new kind of existence.

This new kind of existence is what has been made possible for us by Christ's resurrection on the third day. The resurrection is an act of divine re-creation in which a new way of being human is opened up in which we are not only dead to sin but alive to God. That is why Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:17: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has

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<sup>49</sup> M. Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 179-80.

passed away, behold the new has come' and why he writes in Romans 6:10-11 'The death he died he died to sin once and for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.' That is why Christ declares in John 11:25-26: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.'

If we consider the cross and resurrection together what we therefore have is, as I have indicated, a twofold divine operation in which to quote John Stott who here rightly unites the cross and resurrection:

We have died and risen with him, so that our old life of sin, guilt and shame has been terminated and an entirely new life of holiness, forgiveness and freedom has begun.<sup>50</sup>

Or, as Calvin puts it:

our old man is destroyed by the death of Christ, so that his resurrection may restore our righteousness, and make us new creatures. And since Christ has been given to us for life, why should we die with him, if not to rise to a better life? Christ, therefore, puts to death what is mortal in us in order that He may truly restore us to life.<sup>51</sup>

The last point we need to consider is how we enter into what Christ has done for us by his dying and rising. The answer to this question is that it is by faith expressed in baptism. That is to say, it is certainly true that according to the New Testament we enter into a right relationship with God through faith, as verses such as John 3:16 and Romans 3:26 make clear. However, it is also true that in the New Testament perspective acceptance of what Christ has done leads to baptism and it is in baptism that we appropriate for ourselves what Christ achieved for all humanity in his death and resurrection.

Thus Paul tells us in Romans 6:4:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father we too might walk in newness of life.

and, similarly, in Colossians. 2:12:

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<sup>50</sup> J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 278.

<sup>51</sup> J. Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh, 1961), pp. 122-3.

....and you were buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

And if we ask how we are enabled to walk in newness of life, the answer is through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit poured out by the crucified and risen Christ (John 19:30, Acts 2:32-33), the Spirit given to us at our baptism (Acts 2:38, 1 Cor. 12:13), who makes the new life wrought for us by Christ through his death and resurrection an ever increasing reality in our lives and enables us to relate to God the Father as his obedient daughters and sons (Rom. 8:1-17) thus fulfilling God's original intention that we should live in relationship to him, enjoying the same unity with him that Christ himself shared (John 17:20-23).

To put it another way, through the death and resurrection of Christ and the work of his Spirit within us, we are enabled to enter into that New Covenant between God and his people prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34, 32:38-40) and referred to by Christ in his explanation of the meaning of the bread and wine at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor. 11:23-25). As Smail explains, in Jeremiah's prophecy:

The forgiveness that is promised is a renewal of Israel's relationship with its God, its return from the exile of sin into the kingdom in which people know how to love God and how to love each other.<sup>52</sup>

It is this renewal, which is so much more than simply God not punishing his people's sins, that has taken place through the work of Christ for us as we are set free from sin through the death of our old selves and given the power to live lives of love in the power of the Spirit. Furthermore, as I noted earlier, Paul makes clear in Romans 8:18-23 that what we experience now is only the beginning of a cosmic regeneration that will be fully completed at the end of time when: 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and achieve the glorious liberty of the children of God', and the divine intention set forth in Ephesians 1 will find fulfilment.

So, to return to where we began, how did the cross fulfil God's creative intention by doing away with what is hateful in God's sight? By bringing an end through Christ's death to our old existence dominated by sin so that through Christ's resurrection we might enter into a new future in which through faith and baptism we are dead to sin and alive to God in the power

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<sup>52</sup> T. Smail, *Once and For All* (London, 1998), pp. 36-7.

of the Spirit, a future which will find its completion in a renewed universe when the kingdom is manifested in its fullness at the end of time.

In the words of Karl Barth:

What then, we ask is that in which we believe? We believe that Christ died in our place, and that therefore we died with him. We believe in our identity with the invisible new man who stands on the other side of the Cross. We believe in the eternal existence of ours which is grounded upon the knowledge of death, upon the resurrection, upon God.<sup>53</sup>

Understanding the atonement as achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ appropriated by us through faith and baptism also enables us to make full use of the other models of the Atonement that have been put forward alongside the penal substitution model.

The Christus Victor model taught by some of the early Fathers<sup>54</sup> and defended by Gustaf Aulen in his book *Christus Victor*<sup>55</sup> saw the death of Christ as a victory over the devil and all the powers of darkness. As has been recognised from the Middle Ages onwards the way this idea was presented by some of the early Fathers was seriously flawed either because they suggested that the Devil had legal rights over humankind or because they saw the work of Christ in terms of God's deception of the Devil.

Nevertheless we can see from texts such as John 12:31, Colossians 2:14-15, and 1 John 3:8 that victory over Satan and the powers of darkness is an important element of New Testament Teaching, and the approach to understanding the cross and resurrection which I have advocated allows us to see how this victory was achieved. As sinners we were held captive by the Devil in moral opposition to God, but since we are now new people in Christ this is no longer the case (Eph. 2:2-7). Furthermore, Satan, the accuser, can find nothing in us to accuse since we are dead to sin and hence dead to the law's condemnation (Rev. 12:10-11).

In his treatise *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm sought to replace the idea of a victory over Satan with a *Satisfaction* model which depicted God as being like a Medieval monarch whose honour as ruler has been called into question by the disobedience of his subjects. According to Anselm in this situation either God must punish us eternally for our disobedience or we must offer him 'satisfaction' or recompense for it. We cannot offer this satisfaction, but the infinite merit of Christ's voluntary obedience in his

<sup>53</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford, 1968), p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> See for example Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Orations* 22-4 or Augustine of Hippo, *De Trinitate* 13:19.

<sup>55</sup> G. Aulen, *Christus Victor* (London, 1953).

life and supremely in his death offered to the Father on our behalf is sufficient to outweigh our disobedience, and so we are not condemned to eternal damnation.

In its original form Anselm's argument goes way beyond the teaching of the New Testament, but his central argument that God has a right to absolute obedience from us, and that the work of Christ must deal with our failure to provide was a fundamentally sound one. The view of the atonement I have been exploring can include this insight by stressing that our disobedience was replaced by the obedience of the Son of God in his living and dying (Rom. 5:18, Phil. 2:8, Heb. 5:8-9), and that his obedience opened up the way for us to be obedient to God in our turn in the way I have described.

The *Exemplarist* model associated with Peter Abelard<sup>56</sup> and Hastings Rashdall's influential book *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*<sup>57</sup> saw the work of Christ as changing the human situation by providing the supreme example of how much God loved us thereby leading us to love God in return. The idea that Christ reveals how much God loves us is certainly one which has New Testament support (see for example John 3:16, Rom. 5:8, 1 John 3:16 & 4:8). Nevertheless, as numerous critics have pointed out, there are two big problems with a purely exemplarist approach. Firstly, it is difficult to see how Christ's death can be an example of love unless that death was for some loving purpose. Simply dying does not necessarily show love. Secondly, this approach rather naively assumes that human beings on their own are capable of responding to God's love once it has been revealed to them – an idea which underestimates the power of sin in fallen human beings.

The approach I am suggesting avoids these difficulties by seeing Christ's death as having a loving purpose – to liberate us from the sin that wrecks our relationship with God. It also argues that we are not left to respond to God on our own, but that it is the power of the Holy Spirit which makes a response of loving obedience possible.

### 3. ONE DIED FOR ALL?

As we have seen, in 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul declares that Christ 'died for all'. The question we then have to ask is to whom the word 'all' refers. Does it refer to all human beings or simply to those who put their trust in Christ? Did Christ die for everyone or only for believers?

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<sup>56</sup> See his *Epitome of Christian Theology* and his *Commentary on Romans*.

<sup>57</sup> H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London, 1920).

In the seventeenth century this issue of whether Christ died for all or only for some was an extremely divisive one. Indeed the division between those of a Calvinist persuasion who held that Christ died to save only the elect and the Arminians who held that Christ died to make salvation available for all was one of the factors that led to the outbreak of the English Civil War.

Today the issue of the scope of Christ's atoning work is unlikely to spark off civil war, but it still remains a contentious issue which generates strong feelings on both sides of the argument. We can see this if we consider the views of J. I. Packer and Michael Green.

Packer declares in ringing tones in his introductory essay to the Banner of Truth edition of John Owen's great Calvinist treatise *The Death of Death* that to understand Christ's death aright we have to believe that Christ died to save the elect alone:

It cannot be over-emphasised that we have not seen the full meaning of the Cross until we have seen it as the divines of Dort display it – as the centre of the gospel, flanked on the one hand by total inability and unconditional election, and on the other by irresistible grace and final preservation. For the full meaning of the Cross only appears when the atonement is defined in terms of these four truths. Christ died to save a certain company of hopeless sinners upon whom God had set his free saving love. Christ's death ensured the calling and keeping – the present and final salvation – of all whose sins he bore. That is what Calvary meant and means. The Cross saved; the Cross saves. This is the heart of true Evangelical faith...<sup>58</sup>

Green, on the other hand, is equally emphatic in his book *The Empty Cross of Jesus* that the belief that Christ died for the elect alone is a gross distortion of the gospel message:

Such a theory verges on the blasphemous, and it totally contradicts 1 John 2:2 where the writer assures us that 'he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world'. There is a glorious prodigality of grace in God. There is no parsimonious and precise equating of the work of Christ with those who will respond.<sup>59</sup>

Given the 'clear blue water' between these two positions this is clearly an issue on which a decision has to be made one way or another. In order for this decision to be an informed one we need to look carefully at why the

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<sup>58</sup> J. I. Packer in Owen, *Death of Death*, Introduction.

<sup>59</sup> M. Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (London, 1984), p. 84.

advocates of each position think the way they do, and it is to this task we now turn.

The position advocated by Packer is known variously as the theory of 'limited atonement' (because it holds that Christ died to save only a limited number of people) or 'particular redemption' (because it holds that Christ died to redeem a particular set of people).

The classic statement of this position is that put forward by the Calvinist theologians at the Synod of Dort in 1619 (the 'divines of Dort' referred to by Packer). They declared:

it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to him by the Father....

If we ask why they argued this way, the answer is that there are two roots to their thought.

The first root is a number of New Testament passages which seem to indicate that the purpose of Christ's death was to save his people. Not just to make their salvation possible, but to really and effectively achieve their salvation. Examples of such passages would be:

Matthew 1:21: '...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'.

Ephesians 5:25-27: 'Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word that he might present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.'

Titus 2:14: '...who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds'.

The second root is the conviction that a belief that Christ died for all leads either to universalism or to a denial of the sovereignty of God. The argument goes that if we believe that Christ died for all we also have to believe in one of two unsatisfactory alternatives. Either:

a) Since God is sovereign if Christ died to save all humans then all must be saved. Or:

b) Since we know that not all will be saved, it follows that in an indefinitely large number of cases Christ's saving work has been rendered ineffective by human sin and therefore the purpose of God in the death of Christ is frustrated by the sin of Man. In Packer's words: 'the enthroned Lord is suddenly turned into a weak, futile figure tapping forlornly at the door of the human heart which he is powerless to open'.<sup>60</sup>

To avoid being impaled on the horns of this particular dilemma they therefore argue that Christ did not die to save all.

While seeing the logic of this position those on the other side of the argument would maintain that the demands of theological logic have to give way to the witness of the New Testament and that while the New Testament does indeed teach that Christ died to save his church it also teaches that he died for the whole world.

Advocates of this position would point to texts such as the following as showing the universal scope of Christ's redeeming work:

Colossians 1:19-20: 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.'

I Timothy 2:4-6: '[God]... desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.'

I John 2:2: '... he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world'.

Thus I. H. Marshall comments on I John 2:2:

...John adds that the efficacy of this sacrifice is not confined to the sins of his particular group of readers it reaches out to all mankind. The universal provision implies that all men have need of it. There is no way to fellowship with God except as our sins are forgiven by the virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus. At the same time John rules out the thought that the death

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<sup>60</sup> Packer in *The Death of Death*, p. 20.

of Jesus is of limited efficacy; the possibility of forgiveness is cosmic and universal.<sup>61</sup>

So, which side of the argument is right? Speaking personally, I can see the attraction of the Dort position. It is neat, tidy and leaves no loose ends. However, as Alister McGrath notes, 'its critics tend to regard it as compromising the New Testament's affirmation of the universality of God's love and redemption' and I think that these critics are correct. The overall weight of New Testament teaching pushes us to the classic Anglican affirmation made in the Communion service in the *Book of Common Prayer* that on the Cross Christ made 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, *for the sins of the whole world*'.

In the great words of Charles Wesley:

The world he suffered to redeem;  
For all He hath the atonement made;  
For those that will not come to Him  
The ransom of His life was paid.<sup>62</sup>

What does all this mean for us? On the one hand we still have to declare with the seventeenth Anglican article that we only enjoy the benefits of Christ's atoning work because in an act of particular grace God has chosen that we should do so and has enabled us to do so through the work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, when we are tempted to despair of our own salvation or that of other people we can look to the fact that Christ died and rose for us and for them and therefore in confidence claim the benefits of his work in faith, prayer and thanksgiving for them and for ourselves.

#### 4. PENAL SUBSTITUTION?

In this paper I have suggested an alternative way of understanding the work of Christ to that put forward in the traditional doctrine of Penal Substitution. I would still want to affirm, however, without equivocation, that the work of Christ was both penal and substitutionary.

- It was *penal*, because on the cross Christ fulfilled Divine justice, by paying the necessary and inevitable penalty for sin which is death.

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<sup>61</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978), p. 119.

<sup>62</sup> C. Wesley 'Father whose everlasting love' quoted in Marshall, *ibid.*, p. 119.

- It was *substitutionary* because what Christ did he did in our place as our substitute and representative.

However, as compared to the traditional doctrine we need a better understanding of both the penalty and the substitution. As we have seen, the purpose of the penalty was not simply to inflict retribution upon sinners in the person of their representative, it was instead to destroy for ever that sinful type of human existence which frustrated the loving purposes of God. The penalty inflicted by God's justice was also a penalty inflicted by God's mercy – a 'severe mercy', but a mercy nonetheless. As we have also seen, Christ is not simply our substitute and representative in his death, but also in his resurrection. Christ not only died for us, but he also lives for us so that we might live in him.

*I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)*