



# **Redeeming the Cross**

## **The Lost Message of Jesus & the Cross of Christ**

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A Tale of Two Reactions - publishing *The Lost Message of Jesus* has been a roller coaster experience. On the one hand I've lost count of the number of people who've contacted me about the positive impact it has had on them. How it has given them a clearer understanding of Jesus' divinity, their need to follow him, surrender their lives to him, go back to church, forgive those with whom they have fallen out, serve their local community and so on.

Others, however, have responded very differently. I have been branded 'a heretic', 'a false teacher', accused of 'abandoning the faith' and of 'peddling a modern and inadequate gospel'. Others have called for my book to be banned and have even withdrawn their support for my work. Why? Well, at the centre of it all, in the words of one of my critics, I have 'the wrong view of the cross.'

My initial response was to try to ignore these attacks – after all, my book isn't specifically discussion of the atonement; it's about Christ's graciousness. Though I write about the cross, I do so without ever even using the term 'atonement', let alone the more technical words, which theologians use to describe the way it works, such as substitution, satisfaction, representation, propitiation, expiation etc.

Indeed, I still have no desire to become involved in a technical debate about how the cross works. As Scripture says 'he was wounded for our transgressions, by his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53:5), and for me that is enough. But the debate is not just about the atonement, its scope is even bigger. In the end it is about the very nature of God, and as a consequence the task of Christian mission and the attitude of the Church. With all these I am very concerned.

Is there a connection between the public's, almost universal, perception of certain elements of the Church as judgemental, guilt inducing, bigoted and self-righteous and what we have come to believe about the cross? In truth, behaviour is always linked to belief. What we believe shapes the way that we behave. Thus, what we believe about the cross (and therefore God's character) fundamentally shapes our statements about, and attitude to, the world and wider society. Our thoughts, words and deeds paint a clear portrait of our understanding of God. The way that people think of us is far more of an accurate reflection of who we are than we care to acknowledge. Put another way, erroneous theology will always lead to dysfunctional missiology.

The historian and scholar David Bebbington claims that one of the four pillars of evangelicalism is 'crucicentrism' (cross-centredness). But perhaps our thinking about the cross has become shallow and inadequate. Our culture now views the death of Christ as some kind of ancient myth or irrelevant religious event. Is that their fault or ours?

*The Lost Message of Jesus* is not written out of any rejection or 'playing down' of Biblical authority, sin, repentance, the cross, the resurrection, the gospel, Jesus' divinity or the role of the Church – but out of a deep passion for all of these. The life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus form the fulcrum around which the entire course of human history turns. But the vital questions for our mission are what does that mean and what is its scope?

Has Christ's death on the Cross got any relevance or meaning beyond the individual eternal destiny of his followers? What does it mean, if anything, for the wider affairs of our communities; the UK's foreign policy; the war on terrorism; trade justice; people trafficking; the hopes, ambitions and fears of countless millions of people? Can it offer us any direction as we think about the global challenges humanity faces at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What was the cosmic reason for Jesus death? And what are the implications today for us as individuals, as the Church and society as a whole?

Firstly, I am convinced that, if we are to take the New Testament seriously, a robust theology of the cross is multicoloured rather than monochrome. More than that, I am sure that this spectrum includes a clear substitutionary element along with a number of others, among them identification ('I want to know Christ and...the fellowship of his sufferings'), example ('Take up your cross and follow me') and representation ('Through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one man the many will be made righteous'). It is important to recognise, however, that no single theory can capture the breadth and profundity of the cross.

Those who criticise me for *The Lost Message of Jesus* hold a particular view of what happened on the cross (or 'model of the atonement') commonly known as 'penal substitution' – penal referring to punishment, substitution to Christ acting in our place. Initially, though not explicitly, rooted in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), penal substitution was substantially formed by John Calvin's legal mind in the reformation. The model as it is understood and taught today, however, rests largely on the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American scholar Charles Hodge.

Almost all Christians across the world today have heard Hodge's theory preached: a righteous God is angry with sinners and demands justice. His wrath can only be appeased through bringing about the violent death of his Son.

The extraordinary thing is that supporters of penal substitution, following Hodge's lead, tend to hold it as a 'God-given truth' – the only biblical explanation of the atonement. Indeed for them, to question this model is to question the atonement itself. So, for instance, one recent letter I received claims that I 'demolish the fundamentals of the Christian faith' and another that I am 'liberal'. However, this supposed orthodoxy is no orthodoxy at all. In reality, penal substitution (in contrast to other substitutionary theories) doesn't cohere well with either biblical or Early Church thought. Although penal substitution isn't as old as many people assume (it's not even as old as the pews in many of our church buildings), it is actually built on pre-Christian thought. A point pressed home by conservative Evangelical scholar George Eldon Ladd in *A Theology of the New Testament*: '*In pagan Greek thought the gods often became angry with men, but their anger could be placated and the good will of the gods obtained by some kind of propitiatory sacrifice. Even in the Old Testament, the idea of atonement as the propitiating of an angry deity and transmuting his anger into benevolence is not to be found.*'

What we say about the atonement naturally flows out of our understanding of the character of God. I believe, as I make clear in my book, that the most profound theological truth expressed in the whole canon of scripture is that 'God is love.' (1 John 4:8). Indeed, again I have been attacked for 'overemphasising God's love and failing to put it in context'. However, as Derek Tidball, of the London School of Theology, explains in *The Message of the Cross* '*Love is not a quality that God possesses, but the essence of God himself. It is not a minor attribute that characterises God on occasions, but the very heart of God, his essential being. It is not a component part of God, but his very nature. Before God is anything else, he is love.*' So what of God's anger? It is an aspect of his love. Every father will be wronged by his children; it's a simple fact. All of us who know the joy of having children also know the pain of their rebelliousness – and yet a good parent does not seek retribution. No, through our mistakes, we have learnt that whenever our anger is motivated by anything other than our love it is dangerous and destructive.

The theological problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and foremost concerned with retribution flowing from his wrath against sinners. The only way

for his anger to be placated is in receiving recompense from those who have wronged him; and although his great love motivates him to send his Son, his wrath remains the driving force behind the need for the cross.

Of course, many Christians learn to live with this dichotomy. On the one hand they believe in God's grace and goodness, and on the other that one of the central acts of their faith is bound up in his vengeance and wrath. The only way that they cope with this tension is simply to dismiss it as 'a divine paradox'. However, for the rest of the world, it is just a massive contradiction.

In *The Lost Message of Jesus* I claim that penal substitution is tantamount to 'child abuse – a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.' Though the sheer bluntness of this imagery (not original to me of course) might shock some, in truth, it is only a stark 'unmasking' of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology. And the simple truth is that if God does not relate to his only Son as a perfect father, neither can we relate to him as such.

If we follow Hodge's understanding of the atonement it is Jesus' death, no more no less, that becomes our 'good news'. This reductionist approach shrinks or 'down grades' the whole gospel to a single sentence: 'God is no longer angry with us because Jesus died in our place.' Indeed, that is exactly why evangelistic presentations based on penal substitution often don't even bother to mention the resurrection, because for them it serves no direct purpose in the story of our salvation.

Ironically, what Hodge most neglected was to let Jesus speak for himself. It is difficult to see how penal substitution fits with the words or attitude of Jesus. For instance, if the whole gospel centres on Jesus' death, what was the good news he told his followers to preach (Luke 9:6) before the crucifixion? And if God needed a sacrifice to placate his anger, how could Jesus forgive sins before his sacrifice had been made? In fact, why did Jesus preach at all? The rest of his ministry was ultimately unnecessary if it is only his death that makes things new. Surely we can't embrace a theology in which Jesus' entire 33-year incarnation could be reduced to a long weekend's activity.

It is interesting to note that in Jesus' own explanation of his Father's relationship with mankind, the prodigal son, the father is not presented as angry or vengeful or as seeking justice and retribution – instead he simply runs to greet his wayward child, showers him with gifts and welcomes him home. The father in the story is wronged, but chooses to forgive in order to restore a broken relationship – there is no theme of retribution. Instead, the story is one of outstanding grace, of scandalous love and mercy – how different it would read if penal substitution was the model of atonement offered.

Then we come to Jesus' teachings on anger (Matt 5:22) and retaliation (Matt 5:38ff). Is it not strange for Jesus (God incarnate) on the one hand to say 'do not return evil for evil' while still looking for retribution himself? Similarly wouldn't it be inconsistent for God to warn us not to be angry with each other and yet burn with wrath himself, or tell us to 'love our enemies' when he obviously couldn't quite bring himself to do the same without demanding massive appeasement? If these things are true, what does it mean to 'be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48)? If it is true that Jesus is 'the Word of God' then how can his message be inconsistent with his nature? If the cross has anything to do with penal substitution then Jesus teaching becomes a divine case of 'do as I say, not as I do'. I, for one, believe that God practices what he preaches!

So it is that, as New Testament scholars Joel Green and Mark Baker explain in their book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, '*Penal substitution... is unbiblical not just because it distorts or leaves out biblical concepts but also because of its attempt at having one image or model serve as an all-encompassing theory, the only correct and needed explanation of the atonement.*'

But, if penal substitution does not do justice to the story of our salvation through Christ, what other options are open to us? For me, the most empowering and motivating understanding of

the atonement is that which most closely resembles the thinking of the Early Church. As they struggled to make sense of Jesus death and resurrection, the Early Church leaders (notably Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa and Origen) wrote about the cross in terms of a ransom. Of course, Jesus said himself that he came 'to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45). But to whom was this ransom paid? The Early Church was adamant that it was not to God. As Origen put it: *'To whom did he give his life as a ransom for many? Assuredly not to God, could it then be to the Evil One? For he was holding fast until the ransom should be given him, even the life of Jesus; being deceived with the idea that he could have dominion over it, and not seeing that he could not bear the torture in retaining it.'*

This early model which, following the work of Gustav Aulen in 1930, has become known as *Christus Victor* (Christ the Conqueror) sees Christ's life, death *and* resurrection put together as his victory over all the forces of evil and sin, including the earthly and spiritual powers that oppress people. It is Jesus' resurrection that gives the hope of the new heaven and the new earth, where sin is banished and all things are made right again. Jesus' emergence from the grave shows us no political power, no unjust regime, no sinful structure can triumph, even in death. It is Easter Sunday, not Good Friday, that shows the new kingdom in all its glory and God's love in all its fullness. It is the resurrection which finally puts the *Victor* in *Christus Victor*! On the cross Jesus does not placate God's anger in taking the punishment for sin, but rather absorbs its consequences and, in his resurrection, defeats death. Or, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, *'Thus, life being introduced to the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.'*

C. S. Lewis' *'The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe'*, although obviously not a theological textbook, is a great starting point for anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of the Christus Victor model.

None of us can fully understand the great mystery of Jesus life, death and resurrection. But, what we can say is that, through this central event of all history, God – because of his great love for us – intervened to repair or put right his broken relationship with a world out of harmony with his purpose. It is important that we remember that whatever model or models of the atonement we favour, they are all simply metaphors designed to help us to gain glimpses into a great mystery. But as the New Testament makes abundantly clear the cross is cosmic, not just individual, in its impact. So it is that *The Lost Message of Jesus* was not written to explore again, what I believe to be, the life changing and world shaping implications of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Here is the truth at the heart of the universe - there is a God who embraces the marginalised and calls each one of us to echo him. Which means that the biggest question for every follower of Christ is simply this, what are we going to do about it?

*The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann is published by Zondervan priced £8.99.

The Evangelical Alliance has arranged a public debate on this and other issues raised by Steve Chalke's new book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Steve Chalke himself will be speaking, along with others to be announced. The meeting will take place on Thursday 7th October, 7.30pm at Emmanuel Christian Centre, Marsham Street in Westminster, London. Tickets £3. Booking is advised, as places are limited. To reserve a place, contact Julia Murphy on 020 7207 2114 or email [acute@eauk.org](mailto:acute@eauk.org). To pre-pay, send a cheque to Julia Murphy, "The Lost Message of Jesus" Debate, Evangelical Alliance, Whitefield House, 186 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BT.