

To what extent can a presentation of the Atonement that rejects “penal substitution” and favours other models of the Atonement be a valid form of Christian gospel?

Jonathan Appleby, May 2007

The Atonement may be defined as that sacrificial work of Christ on the cross which made salvation possible for man. There have been many models of the Atonement put forward since the Early Church, each with a distinctive ‘slant’ on the significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection in the message of salvation, and each relying to a greater or lesser extent on Scripture.

The most dominant model of the Atonement in reformed thinking is that of Penal Substitution, and holding this view of the Atonement has come to be regarded as a test of orthodoxy amongst evangelical believers. Penal Substitution is often regarded as the only model of the Atonement which has a Scriptural basis. In the following paragraphs some of the historical models of the Atonement will be examined very briefly.

In the Early Church the dominant model of Christ’s work was what is now known as *Christus Victor* (Christ the Conqueror). Early Church leaders (notably Origen and Irenaeus) saw the death of Christ as a ransom paid to Satan, in order to cancel Satan’s just claims and ‘absorb’ sins consequences¹. This view is supported by Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:45 that he came ‘to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’. The Christus Victor model was revived by Gustav

¹ Steve Chalke, ‘Redeeming the Cross’, *Oasis Trust website*, 2004, <<http://www.oasisuk.org/temp/RedeemingspthespCross.pdf>>, [accessed 20 May 2007].

Aulén in 1931, and has become popular because it ‘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’,² and is thus not ascribing meaning only to a few days of Jesus’ 33-year life on earth. The statement in 1 John 3:18 that ‘the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work’ is but one example of Scriptural support for this model. C.S. Lewis in ‘The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe’ paints an allegorical picture of Christus Victor in which the decisive victory occurs at resurrection, a ‘Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time’.³

Anselm (1034 - 1109) proposed a model of Atonement known as the Satisfaction Theory. Anselm said that Jesus’ sacrifice was a tribute paid to God, rather than a ransom paid by God to Satan. The tribute paid by Jesus in his sacrifice was an infinite or perfect satisfaction for man’s sin, and thus restored God’s honour and dignity, and allowed Jesus to pass on his reward to sinners in the form of forgiveness.⁴ Anselm’s theory grounds the necessity of the Atonement in the honour of God, rather than the justice and holiness of God which is the driving force behind Penal Substitution, as will be explained below.

The 16th century Reformers put forward a model of the Atonement known as Penal Substitution, as a development of the Satisfaction Theory. Advocates of Penal Substitution hold that it is grounded in Scripture, in particular in Paul’s writings. For instance, in Romans 3:23-26 Paul writes ‘God presented [Jesus] as

² Steve Chalke, ‘Redeeming the Cross’, *Oasis Trust website*, 2004, <<http://www.oasisuk.org/temp/RedeemingspthespCross.pdf>>, [accessed 20 May 2007].

³ S. Mark Heim, ‘No more scapegoats’, *Christian Century*, (September 5, 2006), p.27.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1956), p.385.

a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice. . . .’ The Greek for the phrase ‘sacrifice of atonement’ speaks of a sacrifice which satisfies the righteous wrath of God.⁵ The atonement thus propitiates God and reconciles him to the sinner; the reconciled God then justifies the sinner (as seen in Romans 3:24), who accepts the reconciliation.⁶ Penal Substitution sees Jesus’ sacrifice as vicarious; that is, provided by the offended party rather than the offending party. This aspect is hinted at in John 1:29, when John the Baptist says ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’.

Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142) formulated the Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement as a reaction to Anselm’s Satisfaction Theory. Abelard held that God’s nature did not require satisfaction for sin. The death of Christ was therefore not expiation for sin, but rather a manifestation of the love of God, suffering in and with his sinful creatures.⁷ Jesus’ suffering was purely to reveal God’s love and lead sinners to repentance, and was not needed to satisfy God’s justice; Jesus’ death was directed at man rather than at God.

The Socinians in the 16th century advocated the Moral Example Theory of the Atonement, as a reaction to Penal Substitution. This model has similarities to the Moral Influence Theory, and states that there is no need for the punishment of sin; God can pardon it if he wants to. ‘Christ saves men by revealing . . . the way of faith and obedience as the way of eternal life, by giving them an example of

⁵ Walter W. Wessel, in *The NIV Study Bible*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), p.1675.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1956), p.373.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.386.

true obedience, and inspiring them'.⁸ In this theory there is thus no connection between the cross and salvation.

The Governmental Theory was developed as a 'half-way house' between Penal Substitution and Moral Example and was first stated by Grotius (1583 – 1645). In this model Christ's death is a substitute for a penalty to show the world that God is displeased with sin, and to emphasise God's moral government of the world. This model rests on the idea that God is in charge of the law and can set it aside or commute sentence if he so wills it. Another important concept is that Jesus death is not a punishment, but rather a means by which punishment is no longer necessary.⁹ This model is still popular today amongst Arminians and some Methodists.

Limited space does not permit examination of some modern theories, including Schleiermacher's Mystical Theory and McLeod Campbell's Vicarious Repentance Theory to name just two. The remainder of this essay will instead concentrate on the contrasts between Penal Substitution and the Christus Victor model, and attempt to show that Penal Substitution is not the only valid form of Christian gospel.

J. Denny Weaver has argued recently in a paper on the Christus Victor model that there is an evolutionary nature in the fall and rise of atonement models, influenced heavily by the nature of society and church in the period in question.¹⁰ Thus in the early church the dominant situation was of a church in opposition to

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p.387.

⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p.806-7.

¹⁰ J. Denny Weaver, 'Violence in Christian Theology', *Cross Currents*, 51.2, (Summer 2006), p.170.

the world and the Roman empire, and frequently subject to violent oppression. Jesus was seen as the liberator, modelling the values of the heavenly kingdom, and the focus was on the resurrection as the point where sin and death were overcome. An illustration of this viewpoint is in Colossians 2:13-15, where Paul writes of Jesus 'having disarmed the powers and authorities ... triumphing over them by the cross'. The readers of Colossians would have readily equated the powers of evil with the earthly powers and authorities, and the Christus Victor model would have resonated with their situation.

Moving on to the middle ages, the church was no longer in opposition to the state; in Europe it was the state, and was responsible for the administration of justice, as well as having military influence. In such a situation it is easy to see how the Latin legal minds of 16th century theologians would look at the work of Jesus on the cross, and see the paying of a penalty and the appeasement of righteous authority, and find a connection with their world-view.¹¹

If Weaver is correct, this would explain why theologians such as James Cone have embraced Christus Victor as a model which speaks to oppressed peoples in the modern world.¹² Weaver also notes a change from pacifism in the early church, to a church in the middle ages which had become more comfortable with violence in a 'just cause'.¹³

Another contrast between these models of Atonement is the contrast between rationalism and passion. Penal Substitution as a model is rational and lends

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock, 'Salvation by Resurrection', *Ex Auditu*, 9.01, (2006), p.2.

¹² J. Denny Weaver, 'Violence in Christian Theology', *Cross Currents*, 51.2, (Summer 2006), p.169.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.160.

itself to definition and categorisation. Advocates of Christus Victor on the other hand, have emphasised the passion and the heart aspect of God's love, looking to passages such as the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31) as an illustration of this.

An interesting feature of Penal Substitution is that it does not draw heavily on the words or attitudes of Jesus himself in the gospels. Steve Chalke asks 'why did Jesus preach at all?' if his ministry on earth was to be regarded as of so little import.¹⁴ The Christus Victor model in contrast appears to have a more balanced view of the whole work of Christ, seeing him as prophet (in his earthly ministry), priest (in his sacrifice) and king (in his resurrection). Perhaps this is simply because Christus Victor takes a 'bigger picture' approach rather than concentrating on one aspect of Christ's atoning work.

In conclusion, it is clear from the brief analysis above that Penal Substitution is not the only reasonable model of the Atonement; the Christus Victor model shows that there is at least one strong contender amongst the alternatives, and moreover one which claims a holistic view of Scripture as its basis. It is also clear from the sources cited that many who favour Christus Victor rather than Penal Substitution are very active in both evangelism and social justice, suggesting that their theology is being translated into action.

Writing this essay has caused me to re-assess my own beliefs. Hitherto, Penal Substitution was the only model of the Atonement with which I was familiar.

¹⁴ Steve Chalke, 'Redeeming the Cross', *Oasis Trust website*, 2004, <<http://www.oasisuk.org/temp/RedeemingspthespCross.pdf>>, [accessed 20 May 2007].

Having reflected on this subject, I am now able to see the value of, and the biblical basis for, models which emphasise God's love, grace, mercy and honour, as well as justice. I can see in Scripture that our holy God is angered by sin, but I am not persuaded that this aspect of God's character is so overriding as to make Penal Substitution the only valid model of the Atonement.

Bibliography

All bible quotations from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology*, (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1956).

Chalke, Steve, 'Redeeming the Cross', *Oasis Trust website*, 2004, <<http://www.oasisuk.org/temp/RedeemingspthespCross.pdf>>.

Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002).

Heim, S. Mark, 'No more scapegoats', *Christian Century*, September 5, 2006, p.22-29.

Pinnock, Clark H., 'Salvation by Resurrection', *Ex Auditu*, 9.01, (2006), p.1-11.

Weaver, J. Denny, 'Violence in Christian Theology', *Cross Currents*, 51.2, (Summer 2006), p.150-176.

Wessel, Walter W., Text Notes on Romans, in *The NIV Study Bible*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1987).