

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SHACK AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST (Part I)

The Scriptural support for the doctrine of penal substitution, as we will see, is overwhelming. Nonetheless, there is perhaps no other single doctrine that has elicited such harsh criticisms, even from those claiming to be *Evangelical*. B. B. Warfield, writing at the turn on the 20th century observed this growing hostility, “The ultimate result has been that the revolt from the conceptions of satisfaction, propitiation, expiation, sacrifice, reinforced continually by tendencies adverse to evangelical doctrine peculiar to our times, has grown steadily more and more widespread, and in some quarters more and more extreme, until it has issued in an immense confusion on this central doctrine of the gospel. Voices are raised all about us proclaiming a ‘theory’ of the atonement impossible, while many of those that essay a *theory* seem to be feeling their tortuous way very much in the dark. That, if I mistake not, is the real state of affairs in the modern Church. I am not meaning to imply that the doctrine of substitutive atonement – which is, after all, the very heart of the gospel – has been lost from the consciousness of the Church. It has not been lost from the hearts of the Christian community. It is in its terms that the humble Christian everywhere still expresses the grounds of his hope of salvation. It is in its terms that the earnest evangelist everywhere still presses the claims of Christ upon the awakened hearer. It has not even been lost from the forum of theological discussion. It still commands powerful advocates wherever a vital Christianity enters academical circles: and, as a rule, the more profound the thinker, the more clear is the note he strikes in its proclamation and defense. But if we were to judge only by the popular literature of the day – a procedure happily not possible – the doctrine of a substitutive atonement has retired well into the background. Probably the majority of those who hold the public ear, whether as academical or as popular religious guides, have definitely broken with it, and are commending to their audiences something other and, as they no doubt believe, something very much better. A tone of speech has even grown up regarding it which is not only scornful but positively abusive. There are no epithets too harsh to be applied to it, no invectives too intense to be poured out on it.”¹ Individuals associated with what is called *The Emergent Church* are among the more out-spoken critics of penal substitution going as far as to call it *cosmic child abuse*.² Recently Tony Jones, one time national director for the Emergent church, triumphally declared, “Some people today may find it compelling that some Great Cosmic Transaction took place on that day 1,980 years ago, that God’s wrath burned against his son instead of against me. I find that version of atonement theory neither intellectually compelling, spiritually compelling, nor in keeping with the biblical narrative.”³ The author of *The Shack* shares this overt animosity for the doctrine of penal substitution as well, declaring in an interview that he rejects the doctrine explicitly. Not surprisingly, the Jesus of *The Shack* shares this perspective as well. This is another confirmation that this particular Jesus is to be classified as *another Jesus* (II Cor. 11:4) and part of *another gospel* (Galatians 1:6).

I. UNDERSTANDING THE CROSS OF CHRIST: THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

Our faith is in the Son of God, “who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20) cf. 1:4. All of the essentials of the atonement are found here. His redemptive work is grounded in the love that expressed itself in the cross, the word “loved” being an aorist in tense and referring to the event of the cross as the issue of eternal electing love (cf. Eph. 1:3-6; 2:4, etc.). The verb, “gave,” means *to hand over, to deliver over* (cf. Rom. 4:25; 8:32; Eph. 5:2), and in this context suggests these important things:

- (1) *First*, His death was *voluntary*. He gave Himself. “The will of God is at the same time Christ’s will. *He accepted his suffering and death consciously and voluntarily*. The Son of Man, of whom is said that he is delivered up, gives himself. He gives “his life as ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He declares: “I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:17-18). His death is a deed. He is no martyr; he is the Mediator.”⁴
- (2) *Second*, His death was a *penal sacrifice*, for He had to deliver Himself over to the cross. The aorist of the participle again points to the cross as the event at which the delivering took place. And it was a delivering of Himself over to the divine penalty for sin. He, thus, was a sacrifice, and His sacrifice was designed to deal with the reality of our sin and guilt. Bavinck helpfully develops this theme by noting that “inasmuch as the Reformation had learned to know sin primarily as guilt, atonement became central in the work of Christ. Sin was of such a nature that it aroused God’s wrath. Needed above all to still that wrath, to satisfy God’s justice, was the satisfaction accomplished by the “God-man.” He achieved it by putting himself in our place as the guarantor of the covenant, taking upon himself the full guilt and punishment of sin, and submitting to the total demand of the law of God. Hence the work of Christ consists not so much in his humility, nor only in his death, but in his total—active as well as passive—obedience. He accomplished this work in his threefold office, not only as prophet by teaching us and giving us an example and exhorting us to love but also as priest and king.”⁵
- (3) *Third*, his death was *substitutionary*. It was “for me,” Paul says, a personal reference that is expanded to all the elect in other places in his writings (cf. Eph. 5:2; Gal. 1:4). Incidentally, as S. Lewis Johnson pointed out, it is never said in the New Testament that Christ loves the world. He loved the church, and He loves me; the special relation that He bears to His own is the New Testament stress (cf. Rev. 1:5).⁶

CONCLUSION: The apostle has set forth for us the true nature of the cross-work of Christ. It is found in the voluntary, penal substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God who, uniting us with Himself, has died our death under judgment and has raised us up with Him in His resurrection. Thus, any notion of the atonement that avoids penal substitution ends up with an equally distorted understanding of Christ’s resurrection. Packer’s comments on our text deserve reflection. “The measure (‘gave himself’) and the personal particularity (‘for me’) of the love of the atonement-maker for Paul, and by parity of reasoning for every other believer, is here made plain, and so is God’s way of freeing us from the dominion of the death-dealing law that by nature all denizens of this fallen, evil world are under. What does God do? He exchanges our sin-serving existence for a Spirit-led existence by incorporating us, invisibly and intangibly, yet really and truly, into the space-time, trans-historical death and resurrection of our Savior, who now through his indwelling Spirit can truly be said to live in us and shape us as we live our new life in faith-fellowship with him. Atonement—Christ’s dying for us—is thus foundational, says Paul, for entry upon the new life—Christ living in us—which is a life totally free from sin’s penalty and significantly free from sin’s power and ruling over us also.”⁷ *The Shack* presents a gospel that is devoid of the central feature of the cross of Christ: that of penal substitution.

The author, William P. Young, not surprisingly, talks like Brian McLaren, who likewise speaks contemptuously of penal substitution as “divine child abuse.”⁸ Long ago, J. I. Packer addressed this distortion. “The penal substitution model has been criticized for depicting a kind Son placating a fierce Father in order to make him love man, which he did not do before. The criticism is, however, inept, for penal substitution is a Trinitarian model, for which the motivational unity of Father and Son is axiomatic. The New Testament presents God’s gift of his Son to die as the supreme expression of his love to men. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son’ (John 3:16). ‘God is love, . . . Herein is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (I John 4:8-10). ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). Similarly, the New Testament presents the Son’s voluntary acceptance of death as the supreme expression of his love to men. ‘He loved me, and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20). ‘Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends . . .’ (John 15:13f.) And the two loves, the love of Father and Son, are one: a point which the penal substitution model, as used, firmly grasps.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield IX (rpt. Baker, 1981) p. 297.

² Cf. Steve Chalke, The Lost Message of Jesus (Zondervan, 2003) p. 182. He writes, “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love.” If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.” (p. 182). Brian McLaren and N. T. Wright gave Chalke’s book glowing endorsements.

³ <http://www.blog.belief.com/tonyjones/2009/04/why-jesus-died.html>

⁴ J. V. Gendern and W. H. Velema, Concise Reformed Dogmatics (P & R, 2008) p. 480.

⁵ H. Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics III (Baker, 2006) p. 345.

⁶ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., class lecture notes, Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Fall, 1984. I owe my analysis of this passage to Dr. Johnson.

⁷ J. I. Packer, “The Atonement in The Life of the Christian,” in The Glory of The Atonement eds. C. E. Hill and F. A. James III (IVP, 2004) p. 411.

⁸ B. McLaren, The Story We Find Ourselves In (Jossey Bass, 2002) p. 102.

⁹ J. I. Packer, “What Did The Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” The Tyndale Bulletin (1974) p. 17.