

The Cross and the Caricatures

a response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John, and a new volume
entitled *Pierced for Our Transgressions*

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Introduction

About ten days before Easter, the question of the cross suddenly impinged on me from two different directions. Late one night, I read an article on the atonement by the leading American Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson; the next day I had a telephone call from the *Sunday Telegraph*, asking me to comment on a forthcoming radio talk by the Dean of St Albans, the Very Revd Dr Jeffrey John. Both of them – to say nothing of other discussions I find myself in from time to time, and of course the question of the pastoral and evangelistic meaning of the cross within the course of a busy ministry – made me realise I ought to try to say something further on the subject. My resolve in this direction has been stiffened, this last week, by reading a new book entitled *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by three authors connected with Oak Hill College in London (details below). This essay cannot be a full discussion of all the relevant matters; that would take a substantial book. It is one small step in the direction of putting down some markers for the ongoing debate.

But only a small step. I am under no illusions that, even if I were to write a thousand pages on the subject, I would ever exhaust it. In any case, I am one of those who think it good that the church has never formally defined 'the atonement', partly because I firmly believe that when Jesus himself wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal. Of course, the earliest exponent of that meal (Paul, in 1 Corinthians) insists that it matters quite a lot that you understand what you are about as you come to share in it; but still it is the meal, not the understanding, that is the primary vehicle of meaning. What is more, I happen to believe, as a reader of the New Testament, that all the great 'theories' about atonement do indeed have roots there, and that the better we understand the apostolic testimony the better we see how they fit together.

1. Robert Jenson: Which Story Does 'Atonement' Belong In?

Be that as it may. I found the article by Jenson (like much of his work) very stimulating ('On the Doctrine of the Atonement', in *Reflections* [Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton], vol 9, Spring 2007, pp2–13). His main point is that standard theories of atonement (of how, in other words, Jesus' death effected our reconciliation with God) have located the cross within conceptualities and narratives other than the biblical one, to which the gospel writers and Paul all point as the proper matrix for understanding the event ('Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*'). Anselm cut the cross loose from its scriptural moorings and placed it within a feudal system of honour and shame; Abelard, within a story of a divine teaching programme; the Greek Fathers, within the world of mythical satanic powers. None of these is without biblical resonance, but equally none grapples with the actual story the biblical writers tell, and the way in which the gospel writers in particular present the meaning of Jesus' death primarily through a narrative, a narrative which offers itself not just as an echo of bits and pieces of the ancient scriptures of Israel, but as the continuation of that story and the bringing of it to its climax. (This last way of putting it is my own; it is, in effect, a summary of the third chapter of my recent book *Evil and the Justice of God* (SPCK, 2006); but is I think true to what Jenson was arguing.) Unfortunately (from this point of view), Jenson's own positive proposal seems to me merely to propose another story, this time a theologian's analysis of the work of the three persons of the Trinity, which, though it is I believe intimately related to the story the biblical writers tell, yet appears to pay scant attention to (for

example) the narratives of creation and fall, of the call of Abraham, of the exodus, the conquest, the monarchy, the exile and restoration, and so on. Jenson is clearly aware of this problem. I suspect that the article is a 'taster' for a book Jenson is still to publish, in which he will work it all out in proper detail.

All of this I pondered as I read the article late at night; and it prepared me, in a way I had not expected, for the telephone call the next day from the *Sunday Telegraph*. The reporter told me that the Dean of St Albans was about to give a talk on Radio 4 denying one of the traditional interpretations of the cross. I refused to make any comment until the reporter had read me substantial sections of the talk; having now read the full text I have of course seen more of the nuances in it, but there is no reason to retract what I said then, which was (a) that the Dean seemed to be rejecting a caricature of the biblical doctrine in question, (b) that this rejection was bound to be heard as a rejection of the doctrine itself, and (c) that it was a shame for the BBC to be highlighting this kind of thing in the middle of Holy Week. One or two other bishops, I gather, said similar things. There the matter might have rested. I commented briefly on the controversy in my sermon to diocesan clergy on Maundy Thursday, and encouraged them to embrace, and preach, the genuine biblical doctrine, while avoiding both the caricature and the rejection of the caricature as if it were the reality (see http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Word_Cross.htm).

2. Jeffrey John: Caricaturing the Cross

Now, it seems, the fuss has itself become news. The *Church Times* carried an article (13 April 2007, p5) describing how Dr John has received abusive hate mail (well, we all get that), and a silly headline ('Christ did not die for our sins'; well, we all get silly headlines too, and they are not usually written by the reporter). And in a letter published in the same issue of the paper, he protests that he is simply following the line taken by the 1995 Doctrine Commission report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, which itself at this point follows the famous 1938 Commission.

I am glad, of course, that Dr John gives such a high value to such reports – higher, perhaps, than the authors themselves would have done; speaking as one of the authors of the 1995 Report, I would say that it represented a complex conversation frozen in a moment of time rather than a definitive conclusion. But he might perhaps have looked closer. *The Mystery of Salvation* notes that substitutionary atonement is taught in the Thirty-Nine Articles, and that this enshrines 'a vital truth', which can best be got at through the language of 'vicarious' suffering (p212). And, while perfectly properly emphasizing that the ultimate subject of the action in the death of Jesus is God himself (presumably God the Father), the Report notes (p213), immediately after the passage quoted from the 1938 Report to which Dr John refers ('the notion of propitiation as the placating by man of an angry God is definitely unChristian'), that 'it is nevertheless true that in Paul's thought the effect of expiation is the same as that of propitiation – to neutralise the sin that is the cause of God's displeasure and so to avert God's wrath (however that should be understood).' While noting the obvious problems with a crude doctrine of propitiation (a loving Jesus placating a malevolent God), the Report goes on to point out (p214) that both Athanasius and Augustine, as well as Calvin, spoke in terms of God himself providing the propitiation for his own wrath. The problem of the crude formulation was, in other words, already well known in the Greek and Latin Fathers, and this did not prevent them from continuing to see Jesus' death in terms of propitiation even while insisting that the work from start to finish was the result of God's love. Granted, the 1995 Report does scant justice to the history of the idea of substitution, both penal and otherwise, giving the bizarre impression that the idea was merely invented by Anselm and developed by Calvin, as though it were not also to be found in several of the Fathers, a good many of the mediaeval writers, and more or less all the Reformers, not least Martin Luther. But that is only to say that the Report, like all such productions, should not be taken as a definitive account either of what Anglicans are supposed to believe or of what they believe in fact.

We might also note that the 1995 Report had also spoken, earlier, of Jesus as having 'died our death, sharing our failure, *condemnation*, despair and godforsakenness' (p103, italics added). Earlier again, and more fully (and answering in a measure to Jenson's request for the story of the cross to be more biblically rooted), the Report stated:

In going to the cross, Jesus acted out his own version of the total story, according to which Israel, represented by himself, must be the people in and through whom the creator God would deal with the evil of the world and of humankind. The cross, as the execution of Israel's Messiah outside Jerusalem at the hands of the pagans, was thus the great summation of Israel's exile, which was itself the fulfilment and completion of the ambiguous and tragic story of Israel as a whole. At the same time, the cross was the supreme achievement of Israel's God, returning to Zion as he had promised, to deal with his people's sins and their consequences. (p77f.)

Dr John is thus mistaken if he supposes that the 1995 Report shares his enthusiasm for doing away with all talk of God's condemnation of sin and of that condemnation being a key element in the meaning of the cross. What about the 1938 Report? Here again things are more nuanced than Dr John's rejection of a caricature would indicate. In a special Note 'On the Wrath of God against Sin', the 1938 Report comments:

It is to be observed . . . that in the New Testament the "love" and the "wrath" of God in relation to sin and forgiveness are closely connected [referring in a footnote to Romans 5:8 in parallel with Romans 1:18], and that is an important sense in which the assertion of God's "wrath" against sin is the indispensable presupposition of any properly Christian doctrine of forgiveness. There can be no forgiveness where there is indifference towards either the offender or the offence.

After giving an illustration in which someone's 'wrath' at the betrayal of trust expresses condemnation of the deed but the desire to be reconciled with the perpetrator – as opposed to a pure, cold hostility – the Report concludes that

"Wrath" in this ethical sense is not only compatible with love, but in its purest form cannot exist apart from love. Righteous wrath cannot be based on self-concern, nor at its best is it consistent with any loss of self-control such as characterises the primitive emotion of anger. (*Doctrine in the Church of England*. London: SPCK, 1938, 71.)

Thus we should not be surprised when the Report goes on to stress that God's love 'is a holy love, and therefore always actively affirms itself both in condemning sin and also in striving to restore and to remake the sinner' (p91). Like Jenson, the Report insists that the meaning of the Cross must be taken in its larger narrative context. And, like traditional Anglicanism as expressed in Cranmer's liturgy and the Thirty-Nine Articles – but not like Dr John – the Report declares that 'The Cross is a satisfaction for sin in so far as the moral order of the universe makes it impossible that human souls should be redeemed from sin except at a cost. Of this cost the death on the Cross is the expression...Thus the Cross is a "propitiation" and "expiation" for the sins of the whole world' (p92f.). Of course, there is much more to what the Report says than that; but not less. If Dr John wishes to invoke these Reports – not, I insist once more, that they carry, for Anglicans, the same authority as scripture or even as the church's historic liturgy and Articles – he should note that they offer something whose existence he does not wish to acknowledge: a way of affirming that the Cross does after all have something to do with God's wrathful condemnation of sin but which is not the same as the caricature that both Reports, like Dr John and many of the rest of us, reject.

All of which brings us back to Dr John's talk itself. It wasn't long, and of course Dr John would no doubt say, as I have done, that an essay several times the length would still not be enough to do justice to the topic. But it is therefore all the more frustrating to see how many of his short minutes he used up in presenting a sad caricature of the biblical doctrines of God's wrath, God's moral providence, and of the atonement itself.

He began by discussing the widespread view that suffering is a punishment from God. He instanced a bizarre funeral sermon, a Cretan bishop declaring that an earthquake was a punishment for people using birth control, and the idea that York Minster was struck by lightning in retribution for David Jenkins's consecration. (Already his language shows where he is going: 'some people . . . were seriously wondering whether God had personally hurled a thunderbolt at York Minster in a fit of pique . . .'). But this is childish. The biblical doctrine of God's wrath is rooted in the doctrine of God

as the good, wise and loving creator, who hates – yes, hates, and hates implacably – anything that spoils, defaces, distorts or damages his beautiful creation, and in particular anything that does that to his image-bearing creatures. If God does not hate racial prejudice, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from his creation, in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully and enslave one another, he is neither loving, nor good, nor wise. To trivialize – almost to domesticate! – this massive biblical doctrine, rooted as it is in the doctrines of God as creator and as the one who will restore his creation at the last (in other words, in the biblical sense, ‘judge’), into a few anecdotal trivialities about God petulantly hurling thunderbolts around is hardly the way to begin a serious argument.

But it gets worse. Dr John declares that the earlier parts of the Old Testament operate with a simplistic sin-leads-to-judgment philosophy in which sinners are struck down on the spot, good fortune follows virtue and misery follows vice. Now of course there are parts of Deuteronomy which do indeed sound like that, just as there are one or two Psalms (one of which Dr John quotes and tells the Psalmist he ought to get out more) which offer something like that. And no doubt, as general prudential wisdom goes, it is fairly commonplace not only in Israel but in much of the ancient, as indeed the modern, world. There is some truth in it: avoid crime and folly and you will normally have a more peaceful life than a fool or a criminal. The catch, of course, is the word ‘normally’; and in Psalm after Psalm, and in Jewish texts from every period, we discover that the ‘normal’ is regularly thwarted. The Bible is far, far more complex than Dr John allows. Genesis itself, which he quotes in relation to the judgment of Sodom (though that had been delayed some while, it seems, and was by no means a foregone conclusion in Genesis 18), is quite clear in chapter 15 that God’s moral providence is keeping an eye on the wickedness of the Amalekites and will only bring judgment upon them when they have manifestly and richly deserved it. (Curiously, right at the end of his piece, Dr John describes the view he rejects as one of God ‘inscrutably allotting rewards and retributions’, but the view he has been attacking is precisely that God’s actions are not inscrutable, but can be read off on a quite clear moral index. Does Dr John think God acts in the world? Does he think that some, or any, of God’s acts can be understood within some kind of moral index? Is it not Dr John, for most of his piece, who is advocating an ‘inscrutable’ providence?)

Dr John then offers, as his knock-down example that this idea of God condemning people for particular sins is ‘nonsense’, the passage at the start of Luke 13 where Jesus is informed about some Galileans whom Pilate had killed in the Temple. Dr John describes the passage very strangely, suggesting that the Galileans were sectarians who had been holding an illegal sacrifice, and that Pilate had burned them along with their sacrifices, neither of which is in Luke’s text. He then implies that it is the disciples who continue by telling Jesus about the eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, whereas in Luke it appears to be Jesus himself who raises this point. He suggests, in both, that the disciples may be gloating over these wicked sinners getting their come-uppance, which again is imported into the text; Luke doesn’t say the people who initiate the conversation are disciples, and though gloating is a possible interpretation it is not necessary. But the real problem here is that, trying to make the point that suffering is not (for Jesus) the result of divine condemnation, he cuts off the text a verse too soon. ‘Do you think,’ asks Jesus, ‘that these people were worse sinners than anyone else?’ Dr John leaves it there; but Jesus goes on (Luke 13:5), ‘No, I tell you, *but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.*’ And Luke’s gospel continues with warnings of this sort, warnings about what will happen to Jerusalem and its inhabitants unless they repent, and warnings which then reach their climax when, as we watch the last events unfold, *Jesus himself takes upon himself the warnings which he had announced for the city and the nation*, dying on a charge of which, as Luke makes clear, he was innocent but a good many around Jerusalem were manifestly guilty. The substitution of Jesus for Barabbas is merely one sharp focal point of a larger theme which, though Luke highlights, he certainly did not invent.

Dr John has, in other words, quoted in his favour a passage which, as part of a larger whole, tells strongly in the opposite direction. He is still eager to point out that the simplistic ‘sinners-get-punished-while-the-righteous-get-rewarded’ theology doesn’t work, and doesn’t work in the gospels or in the case of Jesus, without noticing precisely that it is this – the righteous suffering the fate of the sinners – that actually lays the foundation for the very doctrine he is eager to expunge.

And expunge it he does, when he comes to Paul. Quoting 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13 ('God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin,' and 'Christ became a curse for us'), he tells us the explanation of these verses he was given as a child and declares that, because that explanation is repulsive and nonsensical, we must reject it. His summary starts quite mildly: God was very angry with us, and had to punish us, but instead he sent his Son as a substitute to die for us, so that God stopped being angry with us...But then, inserting into this account the things Dr John realised he disliked at the age of ten, and which he wants to attack to bring down the whole edifice, he goes on: 'What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created, and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of this own Son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this we'd say they were a monster...It just doesn't make sense to talk about a nice Jesus down here, placating the wrath of a nasty, angry Father God in heaven...sending a substitute to vent his punishment on.'

Well, yes. We must of course grant that many Christians have spoken, in effect, of the angry God upstairs and the suffering Jesus placating him. Spoken? They've *painted* it: many a mediaeval altarpiece, many a devotional artwork, have sketched exactly that. And of course for some late mediaeval theologians this was the point of the Mass: God was angry, but by performing this propitiatory sacrifice once more, the priest could make it all right. And it was at least in part in reaction against this understanding of the Eucharist that the Reformers rightly insisted that what happened on the cross happened once for all. They did not invent, they merely adapted and relocated, the idea of the propitiation of God's wrath through the death of Jesus. We must of course acknowledge that many, alas, have since then offered more caricatures of the biblical doctrine. It is all too possible to take elements from the biblical witness and present them within a controlling narrative gleaned from somewhere else, like a child doing a follow-the-dots puzzle without paying attention to the numbers and producing a dog instead of a rabbit.

This is what happens when people present over-simple stories with an angry God and a loving Jesus, with a God who demands blood and doesn't much mind whose it is as long as it's innocent. You'd have thought people would notice that this flies in the face of John's and Paul's deep-rooted theology of the love of the triune God: not 'God was so angry with the world that he gave us his son' but 'God so *loved* the world that he gave us his son'. That's why, when I sing that interesting recent song 'In Christ alone my hope is found', and we come to the line, 'And on the cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied', I believe it's more deeply true to sing 'the *love* of God was satisfied'. I commend that alteration to those who sing that song, which is in other respects one of the very few really solid recent additions to our repertoire. So we must readily acknowledge that of course there are caricatures of the biblical doctrine all around, within easy reach – just as there are of other doctrines, of course, such as that of God's grace.

But how does the caricature relate to what we find in the New Testament? Actually, how does it relate to Dr John's initial summary? There he states, as we saw, that *God* sent Jesus to do this: yes, and that's what the New Testament says too, at all the key points; and if we ask why, the answer is always, in Paul, John and everywhere else, the wonderful greatness of God's merciful love. You can't play off the juridical account of atonement, so called, against an account which stresses God's love. As those Doctrine Reports rightly saw, they belong together. If God is love, he must utterly reject, and ultimately deal with, all that pollutes, distorts and destroys his world and his image-bearing creatures.

So what should we make of Paul at this point? Dr John never says. Is he content simply to say that the key Pauline statements must be left out of consideration as we construct an atonement theology we can believe today? If so, how can he later quote 2 Corinthians 5:19 ('God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'), which, a mere two verses before the one he seems to reject, might be thought to be part of the same argument? What does he make of the explicit statement – this, I think, is as clear as it gets in Paul – in Romans 8:3, where Paul says explicitly that God *condemned sin in the flesh* of Jesus Christ? Paul does not say that God condemned *Jesus*; rather, that he condemned sin; but the place where sin was condemned was precisely in the flesh *of Jesus*, and of Jesus precisely as the Son sent from the Father. And this, we remind ourselves, is the heart of the reason why there is now 'no condemnation' for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Or what account does Dr John give of Romans 3:24-26? Here, whatever we may think about the notorious *hilasterion* ('propitiation'? 'expiation'? 'mercy-seat'?), in the preceding section of the letter (1:18-3:20) God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness, and by the end of the passage, in accordance with the 'justice' of God, those who were formerly sinners and under God's wrath are now justified freely by grace through faith. To put it somewhat crudely, the logic of the whole passage makes it look as though something has happened in the death of Jesus through which the wrath of God has been turned away. It is on this passage that Charles E B Cranfield, one of the greatest English commentators of the last generation, wrote a memorable sentence which shows already that the caricature Dr John has offered was exactly that:

We take it that what Paul's statement that God purposed Christ as a propitiatory victim means 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 person of His Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved. (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. 2 vols Edinburgh: T & T Clark; vol 1, 1975, p217.)

Now I do not ask that Dr John, or anyone else, necessarily accept this as the correct interpretation of Romans 3:24-26; nor that, whether or not they accept this exegesis, they believe that this is a true statement of God's intention in the death of Jesus. All I ask is that Dr John admit that this very careful statement, in which the propitiatory effect of Jesus' death is seen as the result of God's overarching and overwhelming mercy and love, and in which the persons of the Trinity are held in extremely close union, is not subject to the critique he has levelled against what increasingly looks like a bizarre (if sadly still well known) caricature.

Let me put it like this. If Dr John were to turn on the radio and hear someone arguing the foolish and unwarranted case, on the basis of two or three anecdotal examples and a revulsion which they had had since the age of ten, that all gay men are promiscuous paedophiles and that therefore no such thing as permanent, faithful and stable gay partnerships were possible, he would rightly object that a gross caricature was being allowed to stand as the premise of the argument, and that the conclusion therefore did not follow. That is the kind of situation I find myself in when faced with his caricature of substitutionary atonement.

Not everyone likes Paul, of course – especially some Anglicans. But what about Jesus? Unless we are to go the route of the 'Jesus Seminar', and say that Jesus' death was simply an accident which he never intended and for which, therefore, he offered no theological grid of interpretation, we must give some account of the self-understanding of Jesus in relation to the death which, as at least one substantial stream of scholarship has agreed, he must have known was just round the corner. There were ancient Jewish grids of interpretation available to him, and all the signs are that he made his own creative construal of them, understanding his vocation as the point of convergence of several rich strands of scriptural narrative, heavily freighted with the sense of Israel's long destiny coming to a dark and decisive climax. In particular, the early Christians were clear that Jesus' death was to be understood in terms of Isaiah 53, and they were equally clear that this was not a new idea they were wishing back on Jesus. 'The Son of Man,' he said, 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). These words – which many have of course been unwilling to credit to Jesus precisely because of the frantic attempt to prevent him alluding to Isaiah 53 – capture the very heart of that great chapter, and as I and others have argued elsewhere it is extremely likely, historically, that he made that entire section of the book of Isaiah thematic for his self-understanding.

Ironically, Dr John himself alludes to Isaiah 53 at the end of his talk, suggesting that Jesus 'bears our griefs and shares our sorrows', without realising that if you get one part of Isaiah 53 you probably get the whole thing, and with it not only a substitutionary death but a penal substitutionary death, yet without any of the problems that the caricature would carry:

He was wounded *for our transgressions*
and bruised *for our iniquities*;
upon him was *the punishment that brought us peace*

and *with his stripes we are healed*.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned every one to his own way;
And YHWH *has laid on him the iniquity of us all*.
(Isaiah 53:5–6.)

It is with the Servant, and the theology of the whole of Isaiah 40-55, that we find the explanation for the otherwise bizarre idea of one person standing in for the many (which, as Dr John says, we might otherwise find incomprehensible and deeply offensive). The sense which penal substitution makes it does not make, in the last analysis, within the narrative of feudal systems of honour and shame. It certainly does not make the sense it makes within the world of some arbitrary lawcourt. It makes the sense it makes within the biblical world, the Old Testament world, within which the creator God, faced with a world in rebellion, chose Israel – Abraham and his family – as the means of putting everything right, and, when Israel itself had rebelled, promised to set that right as well and so to complete the purpose of putting humans right and thus setting the whole created order back the right way up. And the long-promised way by which this purpose would be achieved was, as hints and guesses in the Psalms and prophets indicate, that Israel's representative, the anointed king, would be the one through whom this would be accomplished. Like David facing Goliath, he would stand alone to do for his people what they could not do for themselves. *It is because Jesus, as Israel's representative Messiah, was therefore the representative of the whole human race, that he could appropriately become its substitute*. That is how Paul's logic works. 'One died for all, therefore all died,' he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14; and thus, seven verses later, 'God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin,' he concluded seven verses later, 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (5:21). And it is within that argument that we find the still deeper truth, which is again rooted in the dark hints and guesses of the Old Testament: that the Messiah through whom all this would be accomplished would be the very embodiment of YHWH himself. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Underneath all this discussion is a deep concern which has emerged again in our own day, notably in the writings of the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. In his magisterial *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), he demonstrates, with sharp examples from his native Balkans, that it simply won't do, when faced with radical evil, to say, 'Oh well, don't worry, I will love you and forgive you anyway.' That (as the 1938 Doctrine Report already saw) is not forgiveness; it is belittling the evil that has been done. Genuine forgiveness must first 'exclude', argues Volf, before it can 'embrace'; it must name and shame the evil, and find an appropriate way of dealing with it, before reconciliation can happen. Otherwise we are just papering over the cracks. As I said early on, if God does not hate the wickedness that happens in his beautiful world, he is neither a good nor a just God, and chaos is come again. Somehow I sense that Dr John knows this, since he writes movingly of Jesus Christ as God coming down into the midst of the mess and the muddle to be with us and . . . to rescue us – though he never says how this rescue is effected. But again and again I sense in Dr John's writing the problem which Anselm already identified: you have not yet considered how serious sin is. It isn't that God happens to have a petulant thing about petty rules. He is the wise and loving creator who cannot abide his creation being despoiled. On the cross he drew the full force not only of that despoiling, but of his own proper, judicial, punitive rejection of it, on to himself. That is what the New Testament says. That is what Jesus himself, I have argued elsewhere, believed what was going on. That is what the classic Anglican formularies and liturgy say.

Recently, looking for something else, I came upon this:

God is love, say [some], and therefore he does not require a propitiation. God is love, say the Apostles, and therefore he provides a propitiation. Which of these doctrines appeals best to the conscience? Which of them gives reality, and contents, and substance, to the love of God? Is it not the apostolic doctrine? Does not the other cut out and cast away that very thing which made the soul of God's love to Paul and John? ...Nobody has any right to borrow the words 'God is love' from an apostle, and then to put them in circulation after carefully emptying them of their apostolic import. ...But this is what they do who appeal to love against propitiation. To take the condemnation out of the Cross is to take the nerve out of the Gospel...Its whole virtue, its consistency with God's character, its aptness to man's need, its real dimensions as a revelation of

love, depend ultimately on this, that mercy comes to us in it through judgment. (James Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Expositor's Bible, Hodder, 1894, p221f.)

When I read that, it sounded as though Denney were addressing Dr John directly. And I was put in mind of a characteristically gentle remark of Henry Chadwick, in his introductory lectures on doctrine which I attended my first year in Oxford. After carefully discussing all the various theories of atonement, Dr Chadwick allowed that there were of course some problems with the idea of penal substitution. But he said, 'until something like this has been said, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the full story has not yet been told.' For myself, I prefer to go with Henry Chadwick, and James Denney – and Wesley and Watts, and Cranmer and Hooker, and Athanasius and Augustine and Aquinas – and Paul, Peter, Mark, Luke, John – and, I believe Jesus himself. To throw away the reality because you don't like the caricature is like cutting out the patient's heart to stop a nosebleed. Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and all because of the unstoppable love of the one creator God. There is 'no condemnation' for those who are in Christ, because on the cross God condemned sin in the flesh of the Son who, as the expression of his own self-giving love, had been sent for that very purpose. 'He did not spare his very own Son, but gave him up for us all.' That's what Good Friday was, and is, all about.

3. Pierced for Our Transgressions

That is why I was all the more frustrated when I came upon a new book by the recently appointed Principal-elect of Oak Hill College, Mike Ovey, and two students of that college, Steve Jeffrey and Andrew Sach. The book is entitled *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (IVP, 2007). It is substantial, with over three hundred pages of text and detailed annotations, and carries enthusiastic commendations – no fewer than ten pages of them! – from the great and good of the particular tradition within which the authors stand. Let me say, by way of introduction to my comments on this book, that I can fully understand the frustration, within that tradition, at the way in which some recent writers from within the evangelical world have cast doubt, or worse, on penal substitution as a whole. There do seem to me to be some evangelicals who have done what Jeffrey John has done – rejected the doctrine because of the caricatures.

At this point, however, I must turn aside for a moment, not to vindicate myself particularly but to muse on a phenomenon. One of the most lively and effective Christian leaders in the UK in recent years is Steve Chalke of Oasis Trust and Faithworks. When I was myself working in London Steve came to see me a couple of times, with an assistant. They had been reading my books on Jesus and wanted to be sure they had understood what I was getting at; clearly they were excited by the way I was reading the gospels and by the portrait of Jesus and his kingdom-bringing work that I was advancing. Steve then (together with Alan Mann) produced a short, sharp, clear and challenging little book called *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan 2003). He sent me an advance copy. Since – almost embarrassingly at times – the book follows quite closely several of the lines of thought I have myself advanced, though giving them a good deal more energy through shrewd use of anecdote and illustration, I could do no other than write a strong commendation. What I said was this:

Steve Chalke's new book is rooted on good scholarship, but its clear, punchy style makes it accessible to anyone and everyone. Its message is stark and exciting: Jesus of Nazareth was far more challenging in his own day, and remains far more relevant to ours, than the church has dared to believe, let alone preach.

Part of that was quoted prominently on the front cover. I stand by every word I wrote.

Imagine my puzzlement, then, when I heard that a great storm had broken out because 'Steve Chalke has denied substitutionary atonement'. After all, the climax of my book *Jesus and the Victory of God*, upon which Steve had relied to quite a considerable extent, is the longest ever demonstration, in modern times at least, that Jesus' self-understanding as he went to the cross was rooted in, among other Old Testament passages, Isaiah 53, the clearest and most uncompromising statement of penal substitution you could find. I shall return to this below, and to the puzzle that

many of the new right-wing (so-called 'conservative') evangelicals have turned their back on the deepest and richest statement of the doctrine they claim to cherish, namely the one lived and announced by Jesus himself. But back to Steve Chalke. I was puzzled, as I say, when I heard about the fuss, because I hadn't remembered Steve denying at that point something I had been affirming, and since I had been strongly and deeply affirming the substitutionary (and, yes, penal) nature of Jesus' death I wasn't sure whether I had missed something. I was prepared to say, in effect, 'Well, I obviously missed that bit when I read the book, and if he said that I disagree with him,' and to write it off as a warning to read a book extremely carefully before commending it. And so it might have rested, at least for me; I have been far too busy in the last three years to take any part in what I gather have been ongoing and at times acrimonious inter-evangelical discussions.

But, faced with the Oak Hill book, and its angry denunciation of Steve Chalke (pp25f, 327f), I thought I ought to take another look. (The show now runs and runs: on the day that I am writing this (April 20), the *Church of England Newspaper* has a letter from someone saying, casually, that Steve Chalke, like Jeffrey John, 'denies penal substitution' and thus undermines more or less everything else in the Bible.) I have just re-read Steve's short chapter on the meaning of the cross within the mission of Jesus. He says many things I agree with, and, though he doesn't actually make the main point that I made in *Jesus and the Victory of God* chapter 12, drawing on Isaiah 53 in particular, he does say,

Just as a lightning-conductor soaks up powerful and destructive bolts of electricity, so Jesus, as he hung on that cross, soaked up all the forces of hate, rejection, pain and alienation all around him. (*The Lost Message of Jesus* p179).

Earlier on in the chapter he had expressed puzzlement at how 'basic statements of the gospel' in ordinary churches would focus mainly on sin and judgment rather than with the love of God, and at the way in which the cross, seen as the answer to the punishment due for our sin, was becoming the sum and substance of the gospel to the exclusion even of the resurrection (except in the sense of a 'happy ending'). Steve is not alone in this puzzlement, and with good reason. As we shall see, the Bible and the gospel are more many-sided than that. It is in that context that Steve makes his now notorious statement:

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 that "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. (p182f)

Now, to be frank, I cannot tell, from this paragraph alone, which of two things Steve means. You could take the paragraph to mean (a) on the cross, as an expression of God's love, Jesus took into and upon himself the full force of all the evil around him, in the knowledge that if he bore it we would not have to; but this, which amounts to a form of penal substitution, is quite different from other forms of penal substitution, such as the mediaeval model of a vengeful father being placated by an act of gratuitous violence against his innocent son. In other words, there are many models of penal substitution, and the vengeful-father-and-innocent-son story is at best a caricature of the true one. Or you could take the paragraph to mean (b) because the cross is an expression of God's love, there can be no idea of penal substitution at all, because if there were it would necessarily mean the vengeful-father-and-innocent-son story, and that cannot be right.

Clearly, Steve's critics have taken him to mean (b), as I think it is clear Jeffrey John and several others intend. I cannot now remember what I thought when I read the book four years ago and wrote my commendation, but I think, since I had been following the argument through in the light of the arguments I myself have advanced, frequently and at length, about Jesus' death and his own understanding of it, that I must have assumed he meant (a). I have now had a good conversation with Steve about the whole subject and clarified that my initial understanding was correct: he does indeed mean (a). The book, after all, wasn't about atonement as such, so he didn't spell out his view

of the cross in detail; and it is his experience that the word 'penal' has put off so many people, with its image of a violent, angry and malevolent God, that he has decided not to use it. *But the reality that I and others refer to when we use the phrase 'penal substitution' is not in doubt*, for Steve any more than for me. 'There is therefore now no condemnation' in Romans 8:1 is explained by the fact, as in Romans 8:3, that God condemned sin in the flesh of his Son: he bore sin's condemnation in his body, so we don't bear it. That, I take it, is the heart of what the best sort of 'penal substitution' theory is trying to say, and Steve is fully happy with it. And this leads to the key point: *there are several forms of the doctrine of penal substitution, and some are more biblical than others*. What has happened since the initial flurry of debate about *The Lost Message of Jesus* has looked, frankly, like a witch-hunt, with people playing the guilt-by-association game: hands up anyone who likes Steve Chalke; right, now we know who the bad guys are.

All of which brings us back to Oak Hill, specifically to Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach. Naturally I have an interest in this, because at one point J, O and S quote with approval from my Romans commentary, and then express surprise that I so positively endorsed Steve Chalke's book, which, they say, 'strongly criticizes the propitiatory and penal ideas Wright expressed here' (p85, n123). But life is more complicated than that. J, O and S seem to assume that all references to propitiation, penal theories, substitution and so forth are basically saying the same thing, so that to affirm one is to affirm all, and to question one is to deny all. Part of the whole point of the present essay is to deny that this is so, and to argue for a form of penal substitution which is not open to the objections raised against some other forms.

And my sorrow, reading *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, is not only that the book seems to be unaware of this possibility, but that, despite the ringing endorsements of famous men, it is deeply, profoundly, and disturbingly unbiblical. That, perhaps, is not the response that J, O and S expect, and I shall have to spell out what I mean in more detail. But let me first say that one of the book's merits – it has several! – is that it firmly and decisively knocks on the head an old *canard* which is repeated yet again in a letter in the *Church Times* (20 April 2007, p13): that 'penal substitution' was invented by Anselm and developed by Calvin, and that it excludes and even contradicts other ideas, not least the 'Christus Victor' theme. Over against this, J, O and S offer a catena of passages from Justin Martyr, Eusebius of Caesarea, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Gelasius of Cyzicus, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. Of course, some will object to some of their exegesis; but (to look no further) the fact that both Athanasius and Augustine have to explain that it is not self-contradictory to think of God, in his love, propitiating his own wrath by sending his own Son, shows both that they were saying substantially the same as more recent advocates of substitution have done, and that they were already meeting the objections that much more modern anti-substitution writers have raised. (It is not clear to me why J, O and S omit all mention or discussion of Anselm from their list, and indeed from their entire discussion; nor why they would not draw attention to Martin Luther himself as a major exponent of the doctrine. Possible examples even earlier than Justin may be found in Ignatius, *Trallians* 2.1; *Letter of Barnabas* 5.1f, quoting Isaiah 53; and *Barnabas* 7 (on the scapegoat) and 8 (on the sacrificial heifer). The idea that it was only Anselm and Calvin who invented, developed and propagated the doctrine is, alas, perhaps unintentionally endorsed by the Appendix to the 1995 Report. And of course the Anglican Reformers, including those who wrote the Articles and Prayer Book, gave clear expression to the same basic line, despite what people sometimes assert.)

What then do I mean by saying that *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is deeply unbiblical? Just this: it abstracts certain elements from what the Bible actually says, elements which are undoubtedly there and which undoubtedly matter, but then places them within a different framework, which admittedly has a lot in common with the biblical one, but which, when treated as though it *were* the biblical one, becomes systematically misleading. An illustration I have often used may make the point. When a child is faced with a follow-the-dots puzzle, she may grasp the first general idea – that the point is to draw a pencil line joining the dots together and so making a picture – without grasping the second – that the point is to draw the lines *according to the sequence of the numbers* that go with each dot. If you ignore the actual order of the numbers, you can still join up all the dots, but you may well end up drawing, shall we say, a donkey instead of an elephant. Or you may get part of the elephant, but you may get the trunk muddled up with the front legs. Or whatever. Even so, it is possible to join up all the dots of biblical doctrines, to go down a list of key dogmas and tick all the

boxes, but still to join them up with a narrative which may well overlap with the one the Bible tells in some ways but which emphatically does not in other ways. And that is, visibly and demonstrably, what has happened in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, at both large and small scale.

Large scale: when the authors set out their systematic (and would-be biblical!) theology, in chapter 3, they offer a clear, unambiguous example of a problem which has lain deep within some strands of western theology, both Catholic and Protestant, for many generations. *They ignore the story of Israel*. Yes, they draw on the Old Testament here and there: the Passover lamb and other sacrificial types. They make plenty of use of Old Testament passages and themes. But there is no sense that the basic biblical answer to the problem we encounter in Genesis 3-11 (the problem, in other words, of human sin and its consequences) begins with Genesis 12, with the call of Abraham; that the entire Old Testament narrative demands to be seen within this framework; and that the very passages they appeal to in the New Testament demand to be read in the same way. Their grand narrative goes from creation, fall, sin and judgment to the internal relationships within the Trinity and thence to penal substitution. But the fully biblical meaning of the cross, as presented by the four evangelists, is that the cross means what it means as the climax of the entire story of Jesus – and that the story of Jesus means what it means as the climax of the entire narrative to which the gospels offer themselves as the climactic and decisive moment, namely, the story of Israel from Abraham to Jesus (just read Matthew 1), *and thus the story of Israel seen as the divine answer to the problem of Adam*. This is a point which the authors have scarcely begun to grasp, foundational though it is to all second-Temple Jewish and New Testament thinking (see, eg, 94 note 153, where the centrality of Adam in the argument of Romans 3-8, which is precisely the point I am making, is advanced as a reason why it might be difficult to see the passage as a retelling of the Jewish story; for a moment, on p95, they suggest that Abraham's family should have been the means of blessing for all, but they never see that this is a major key to the entire biblical worldview). I have explored the biblical narrative from this point of view in several places, not least the central chapter of my recent book *Evil and the Justice of God*, and I have watched with frustration as those who profess to be 'biblical' in their orientation shy away from listening to what the text actually says.

This is abundantly clear in the small-scale detail of the exegesis of Romans and Galatians, which is of course central to any discussion of the meaning of the cross in early Christianity. Somehow, J, O and S manage to discuss the key passage in Romans 3 (3:24-26) without any acknowledgement that the passage is framed within a larger argument which is all about 'the righteousness of God', which, admittedly itself a controversial topic, is Paul's way at least of saying what has to be said in answer to the problem of idolatry, sin and wrath which has been set out in 1:18-3:20. And this leads to a complete marginalisation of Abraham in Romans 4, where the question of forgiveness of sins (4:6-8) is framed within a lengthy and careful exposition of Genesis 15, the chapter where God made the covenant with Abraham to which, Paul argues, he has now been faithful in the death and resurrection of Jesus (4:2f). In other words, Paul is determined to see the answer to human sin and its consequences as the long-term outworking of God's call of and covenant with Abraham; it is God's faithfulness to that promise which has meant that he has, at last, sent Jesus to do that which Israel as a whole had failed to do. Jesus' death, described densely if precisely in 3:24-26, means what it means within that framework.

The same is true, if anything even more obviously, in Galatians 3, where the entire argument from verse 6 to verse 29 is framed by the question, Who are the true children of Abraham? – though you'd never have known that from J, O and S. Why does this matter? Well, the point about Israel being under the curse of the law in 3:10-14 is not to be at once construed as a general statement of the sinful plight of all humanity, and the cross as the moment when Jesus took the sin, and the curse, of all. Even if that is a point which Paul might well have agreed with, it is not what he is saying in these verses. Had he been, he should have said something like 'Christ became a curse for us, so that we might be freed from the guilt, penalty and power of sin', whereas in fact he says, 'Christ became a curse for us, *so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles*, and that we (presumably Jewish Christians) might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith'. In other words, Paul is addressing a very specific problem here, which only comes into view once you grasp the biblical worldview in which Abraham (or, more fully, the promise which God makes through him) is the answer to the plight of all humanity. The acting-out, by Abraham's family, of the primal sin of Adam (the point Paul makes in Romans 5:20 and then Romans 7:7-25), means that

the blessing looked as if it might, so to speak, get stuck: if Israel has failed in her calling, how will God be true to what he promised to and through Abraham? This brings us back to Romans 3:1-9, another passage which makes no impact on J, O and S in their understanding of the later part of Romans 3: Israel has been unfaithful to her commission, but God remains faithful. The answer is that God has dealt with this very specific problem in the Messiah's becoming a curse, bearing in his own body the curse which hung over Israel, and thus unblocking the road for the promise to flow through to the Gentiles, as always intended.

Part of the problem, of course, is that Paul never says the same thing twice when discussing the cross. The cross plays a thousand different (though interlocking) roles within his various arguments. Taking these references effectively out of their exegetical contexts and making them speak within a different context, a different line of thought (not a totally different one, of course, but one which has been fairly drastically reshaped by a fairly decisive omission of one of the most important points, and then reshaped further around a different kind of narrative which, yes, owes more to Anselm and others after him than to Paul), is bound to produce distortions.

But the biggest, and most worrying, unbiblical feature of *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is the outright refusal to have anything seriously to do with the gospels. This is a massive problem, which I believe to be cognate with all kinds of other difficulties within today's church, not least within today's evangelicalism. There is no space here to open up this question more than a very little. Let me just tell it as I see it on reading this new book.

I was startled, to begin with, at the fact that the foundational chapter, entitled 'Searching the Scriptures: The Biblical Foundations of Penal Substitution', has precisely six pages on the Gospel of Mark, a good bit of which consists of lengthy biblical quotations, and four on John. And that's it for the gospels. I don't disagree with most of those ten pages, but it is truly astonishing that a book like this, claiming to offer a fairly full-dress and biblically-rooted doctrine of the meaning of the cross, would not only omit Matthew and Luke, and truncate Mark and John so thoroughly (sifting them for prooftexts, alas), but would ignore entirely the massive and central question of *Jesus' own attitude to his own forthcoming death*, on the one hand, and *the way in which the stories the evangelists tell are themselves large-scale interpretations of the cross*, on the other. One would not know, from this account, that there was anything to all this other than Mark 10.45 ('the Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many') and a few other key texts, such as the 'cup' which Jesus prayed might pass, but which he eventually drank. And here, of course, I declare a substantial interest.

I grew up in a theological world where the question, Did Jesus think he was the Isaianic 'Servant'?, was a matter of considerable interest. Those who were prepared to allow some kind of substitutionary interpretation of Jesus' death tended to say 'Yes'; among the best of those accounts, thirty years ago, was R T France's book *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale, 1971). Those who were eager to rule out such an interpretation were strongly opposed to thinking that Jesus could have thought any such thing; among the best-known of those accounts, back then, was Morna Hooker's book *Jesus and the Servant* (SPCK, 1959). The debate has rumbled on, with Germans like Joachim Jeremias and Otto Betz on France's side and others like Otfried Hofius on Hooker's. In recent Jesus-scholarship, the 'Jesus Seminar' school of thought has naturally denied that Jesus had any thought of dying, let alone any advance theological interpretation of such an event, while the so-called 'Third Quest' has mostly maintained a discreet disjunction between understanding what Jesus thought his own kingdom-proclamation was all about and what he may have thought about his increasingly likely early and violent death. Now, people will have different views about all this, but it can hardly be a matter of indifference to a book purporting to tell us in a full and quite final way what the meaning of the cross really was, and to defend the 'substitutionary' interpretation against others. *And the frustrating thing is that I and others have made a case for understanding Jesus' own vocation in terms of Isaiah 53* in a way which simultaneously grounds something that can reasonably be called 'penal substitution' in the vocation of Jesus himself *and* makes it clear that this view does not partake of the caricature that the doctrine is sometimes subjected to, and hence is not subject to the critiques of that caricature that are advanced from time to time. This is why it is so frustrating, to the point of becoming almost funny, to find people like J, O and S debating earnestly whether N T Wright really believes in penal substitution (p94f). *Go and read the book*, I wanted to say to them. I have provided the fullest and most detailed argument I know for saying

that Jesus really did make Isaiah 53 centrally thematic to his self-understanding; I have located it historically; I have tried to demonstrate that the early church's understanding of Jesus' death developed from that point but were not essentially fresh or foreign. I am forced to conclude that there is a substantial swathe of contemporary evangelicalism which actually doesn't know what the gospels themselves are there for, and would rather elevate 'Paul' (inverted commas, because it is their reading of Paul, rather than the real thing, that they elevate) and treat Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as mere repositories of Jesus' stories from which certain doctrinal and theological nuggets may be collected. And this, sadly, chimes in with other impressions I have received from elsewhere within the same theological stable – with, for instance, the suggestion that since Paul's epistles give us 'the gospel' while 'the Gospels' simply give us stories about Jesus, we shouldn't make the reading of the latter into the key moment in the first half of the Communion Service. (In case anyone should rub their eyes in disbelief, I have actually heard this seriously argued more than once in the last year or two.)

I think this problem, actually, goes back to the Reformation itself, though that is another, and much longer, story. But let me put it like this, as a proposition whose proof is, once more, *Jesus and the Victory of God* chapter 12, *Evil and the Justice of God* chapter 3, and the sundry other things listed in the Bibliography at the end of this piece. The gospels, as whole narratives, are deliberately telling the story of Jesus and his kingdom-inauguration in such a way as to say, on the one hand, that this is how the long story of Israel (which is, remember, the story of how the creator God is redeeming the whole world) is reaching its God-ordained climax, and in such a way as to say, on the other hand, that it is this story to which the crucifixion of Jesus is itself the climax. The understanding of the cross offered by the four canonical gospels, in other words, is not to be reduced to a handful of prooftexts taken here and there. These are merely the tips of the iceberg. The evangelists' understanding of the cross is that it means what it means as the climax of *this story* – the story of Israel compressed into the story of its representative, the Messiah, whose task was precisely to draw the threads of that narrative together. Read in this way, the multiple strands of idolatry, sin, evil, wickedness, oppression, violence, judgment and all the rest throughout the Old Testament come rushing together and do their worst to Jesus. He takes their full force, and does so because that was God's purpose all along. That is why, though I have argued here and in many other places for something that can be called 'penal substitution', I regard the 'Christus Victor' theme as the overarching one within which substitution makes its proper point, though that would take a lot longer to demonstrate. And it ought to be quite clear, if we read the gospels in this way, that what many have seen (and dismissed!) as the mere 'political' or 'historical' reasons for Jesus' death – Pilate's duplicitous vacillation, the Chief Priest's cynical scheming, and so on – are themselves part of the 'theological' interpretation of the cross offered by the evangelists.

I hope it is now clear what I meant by saying that my main problem with *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is that it is hopelessly sub-biblical. My heart sinks when I read what the great contemporary heroes of conservative Christianity have said inside the front cover. Peter Adam from Melbourne says that the book shows how the cross integrates into the big themes of the Bible, whereas, if I am right, it is precisely the big themes of the Bible that have been ignored. Don Carson says that the book successfully refutes some people who 'are not listening very carefully to what either Scripture or history says', whereas it seems to me that it is the authors of this book who are not paying proper attention to Scripture itself. I was going to quote more – 'its great strength lies in its comprehensive exegesis of the biblical text itself', says one dear and good man; 'they have a firm grasp of the biblical material', says another; and so on, and so on. It becomes embarrassing. I have this unhappy sense that a large swathe of contemporary evangelicalism has (accidentally and unintentionally, of course) stopped its ears to the Bible, and hence to the God of the Bible, and is determinedly pursuing a course dictated by evangelical tradition rather than by scripture itself. And then they are surprised that those who do not fall within that tradition cannot hear what they are saying – and sometimes denounce them as unbelievers. (Which is not to say that there are not unbelieving stances taken on this issue; merely that the charge should be withheld until we have actually *listened* to what people are saying, and can be sure that it really is unfaith, rather than a firm grasp on part of the scriptures that evangelical tradition has screened out, that is driving the objection.)

Not, of course, that I claim myself to be infallible in my own interpretation of scripture. But it will not do (to anticipate an obvious reaction) to suggest that some recent works from the same school have effectively holed my exegesis, eg of Paul, below the water-line. Just because I have not had the time to respond, for instance, to Mark Seifrid, Don Carson and others in some of their recent polemic, does not mean that I am conceding the points they have made – not least because I see no evidence that they are really trying to hear what I and others are saying, but are instead simply waving us away as hopeless ‘new perspective’ people. There are large issues here of theological method and biblical content, all interacting with other large issues of contemporary hermeneutics: would I be totally wrong, for instance, to see some of the horrified reaction to Steve Chalke, and to some of the ‘Emerging Church’ reappropriation of the gospels, as a reaction, not so much against what is said about the atonement, but against the idea, which is powerfully present in the gospels, that God’s kingdom is coming, with Jesus, ‘on earth as in heaven’, and that if this is so we must rethink several cherished assumptions within the western tradition as a whole? Might it not be the case that the marginalisation of the four gospels as serious theological documents within Western Christianity, not least modern evangelicalism, is a fear that if we took them seriously we might have to admit that Jesus of Nazareth has a claim on our political life as well as our spiritual life and ‘eternal destiny’? And might there not be a fear, among those who are most shrill in their propagation of certain types of ‘penal substitution’, that there might be other types of the same doctrine which would integrate rather closely with the sense that on the cross God passed sentence on all the human powers and authorities that put Jesus there? John 18 and 19 as a whole (and not only in individual words and phrases), and 1 Corinthians 2 and Colossians 2 as wholes, have an enormous amount to say about the biblical meaning of the cross which you would never, ever guess from reading *Pierced for Our Transgressions* and other works like it.

Two final notes. First, the notion of ‘sacrifice’ is a highly contested and problematic concept within all contemporary discussion. I have no problem whatever with saying (a) that the Passover lamb clearly had something to do with warding off God’s judgment; (b) the New Testament writers identify Jesus as the true Passover lamb; therefore (c) the NT is aligning Jesus with this type of sacrifice and this type of atoning significance. Nor do I have any quarrel with seeing the NT adopting ‘Day of Atonement’ ideas in its interpretation of Jesus’ death, and seeing that there, too, there is a clear sense of the sacrificial animals bearing the sins of the people in a substitutionary way. But problems remain. For a start, you cannot easily align sacrifice and lawcourt. When an animal is killed sacrificially, it is by no means clear that it is simply taking the punishment which would otherwise fall on the worshipper. That would be a crude diminishment of even the Passover, where the idea of averting wrath is paramount; it does not work at all for several of the sacrifices, and attempts to make it work (for instance, in J, O and S’s attempted refutation of John Goldingay on pp47f) are lame and unconvincing. We shouldn’t forget that of the two goats on the Day of Atonement, the one over whose head confession of sin was made was the one that was *not* sacrificed, presumably because it was thereby unclean. As a historian and theologian, I have a sense that we all need to do a good deal more work on ‘sacrifice’, to understand more of its depths and meaning before we flatten it out into ‘animals taking our punishment’ and then transfer that wholesale to Jesus. I am not saying that there is nothing penal or substitutionary in the OT sacrificial system, merely that the whole is much greater and more complex than this particular part.

Second, in Paul in particular ‘sin’ is not just human wrongdoing. It is a force, a power, almost equivalent (in Romans 7, for instance) to ‘satan’ itself. One of Paul’s clearest statements of God executing sentence of condemnation at the cross, as I said before, is found in Romans 8:3, where it is ‘sin’ itself, as an almost personified force, that is condemned. This element, which sits so close to the ‘Christus Victor’ theme found in 1 Corinthians 2 and Colossians 2, is not taken into account in the Procrustean bed offered by *Pierced for Our Transgressions*. Had it been, a more nuanced – and, once again, a far more biblical! – account might have opened up.

I am not saying, then, that Jeffrey, Ovey and Sach have got it all wrong. Far from it. They point in all kinds of good and helpful directions. But there is no evidence that they have actually listened to what other people are saying – including people like myself who strongly affirm the biblical doctrine of penal substitution but equally firmly insist on its being understood within its truly biblical context and not some other. There is much more to be said about their book, no doubt, and what I have said here has inevitably been unbalanced in terms of a proper review. But I have thought it

important to make it clear that, in rejecting the sweeping dismissal by Jeffrey John of any kind of substitutionary atonement, I am making a plea for some vital and deeply biblical distinctions between different *types of* that doctrine.

Conclusion

Sadly, the debate I have reviewed – with the honourable and brief exception of Robert Jenson's article which began this whole train of thought – shows every sign of the postmodern malaise of a failure to *think*, to read texts, to do business with what people actually write and say rather than (as is so much easier!) with the political labelling and dismissal of people on the basis of either flimsy evidence or 'guilt by association'. We live in difficult times and it would be good to find evidence of people on all sides of all questions taking the attitude of the Bereans in Acts 17, who 'searched the scriptures daily to see if these things were so', instead of 'knowing' in advance what scripture is going to say, ought to say, could not possibly say, or must really have said (if only the authors hadn't made it so obscure!).

I am aware, as I said at the outset, that this is only a tip-of-the-iceberg treatment, written in haste in the midst of many other pressing engagements. Yet I hope it will serve as at least an amber light in the path of various people in various positions who speed down the road of their particular affirmations or denials without thinking that there might be interesting intersections coming up at which they ought, at least, to slow down and watch for traffic on connecting roads. Because a lot of these roads *do* connect up, actually, and those of us whose calling is to hold together the church as best we can – while not capitulating to the laissez-faire 'anything goes' of the times – need to put up some signposts to those connections, and even give out a few maps as to where some of those roads might lead to, or have come from. It would indeed be good, sooner or later, if someone would work out a full map of all the different things people have meant by 'penal substitution', so that distinctions could be more finely drawn between the very different versions of that doctrine on offer. I have pointed towards that task but have not taken it very far.

And it would be good, above all, if all participants in debates about the atonement might be able to agree on something which again I haven't explored here very far but which seems to me crucially important. As I said at the start, when Jesus was going to his own death, he indicated pretty clearly that he saw all the lines of scriptural narrative converging at this point; and, to help his disciples get the full meaning and benefit of what was about to happen, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a *meal*. That meal – which was much more than a Passover meal, but not less – contains in itself not only all the various meanings of 'atonement' that are worth considering, but also the means by which theories can be turned into real life. Personal, practical, political life. Kingdom-of-God-on-earth-as-in-heaven life. And that, after all, is what 'atonement' ought to be about.

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