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SYMPOSIUM ON PENAL SUBSTITUTION

By Mike Ovey

In July the Evangelical Alliance held a symposium on penal substitution following the controversy over the book 'The Lost Message of Jesus' by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann. The event, which covered three days, was hosted by the London School of Theology (formerly London Bible College).

In the first session David Hilborn explained the context of the debate and Steve Chalke followed him. Chalke repeated his assertion that penal substitution told the 'wrong story' about God and called for debate by evangelicals on this point. Chris Wright responded by gently but clearly affirming penal substitution and suggesting a key question was whether we felt wrongdoing deserved punishment.

The second session saw a presentation by Steven Holmes on the historical significance of penal substitution amongst evangelicals since the late 18th century. Holmes argued that penal substitution had been consistently present at the start of this period, although as the 19th century wore on, it had been questioned. He suggested that the change was due, at least in part, to different ideas about punishment arising in the 19th century.

In the third session Joel Green, from the United States, contended that the debate on penal substitution was an 'intra-mural' debate. This appeared to mean that he thought it was a secondary issue. He presented three arguments against penal substitution:

- First, that it dislocated the cross from its historical context. (He did not consider the significance of the text, 'cursed be he that hangs on a tree')
- Second, that it produced a distorted picture of God. This was not well explained but Green has argued elsewhere that penal substitution tears apart the Trinity.
- Third, that it cuts the nerve to social action.

Questions in this session focused particularly on the third point during which Green stated that John Stott had not been involved in proper social action until he had stopped writing about penal substitution. This latter point was not well received by the meeting. Green also criticized Billy Graham who on a recent tour persisted in preaching the gospel and refused to answer questions regarding homosexual practice.

In the fourth session Chris Wright gave a thorough account of sacrifice in the Old Testament and asserted the fundamental nature of penal substitution and its presence in the Old Testament.

Next Graham MacFarlane of LST gave an account of God the creator in relation to His creation. This left no logical place for judgement and punishment (and therefore penal substitution), although he did not explicitly deny them. MacFarlane argued that God required a mediator between himself and creation, and he justified this assertion by citing Proverbs 8 and the references to Wisdom who 'is not God'. His argument required that Wisdom be different in being from God but MacFarlane was apparently oblivious to the fact that this interpretation of Proverbs 8 is almost identical to how Arius used it, or that such an understanding had been condemned by the ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325AD. MacFarlane went on to argue that in the New Testament it is Jesus who constitutes the mediation between God and creation and that Jesus is both God and man. Again he was apparently

oblivious to the work of the Council of Chalcedon, which asserted that Christ, in whom the two natures are united, is divine. These points were not satisfactorily answered in the questions that followed.

The sixth session consisted of a number of seminars, some of which were uneventful, others of which provoked strong reaction, such as the contention that those who believed in penal substitution were unpleasant and angry people.

The seventh session consisted of three short exegetical papers; on Isaiah 53, Romans 3:24ff and Hebrews. The first paper was given by Sue Groom who said little about the relationship of penal substitution to Isaiah 53 and was apparently surprised by a question referring her to Phinehas' propitiation of the guilt of Israel by the killing of Cozbi and Zimri (Num 25). The second paper was a judicious defence of penal substitution by Simon Gathercole. The third was an account of Hebrews by Steve Motyer, whose opening remark suggested we did not need to understand Old Testament sacrifice in order to understand Hebrews. From there an account of the New Covenant was provided which seemed to overlook the forgiveness of sins. The author was questioned both about the concept of sin in Hebrews and the presence of punishment ideas for sin.

In the eighth session Howard Marshall gave a clear endorsement of penal substitution.

The ninth session was a paper by Garry Williams in which he picked up and dealt with all the objections to the doctrine that had been referred to during the conference, and some that hadn't but are in the literature. It was a compelling performance. He also made it clear that if one accepted the arguments of Chalke and Greene ('wrong story' about God and distorted view of God), then it was impossible to see the issue as secondary, they themselves were defining it as primary by their arguments. This was the contentious part of the talk because it indicated action was required.

The tenth session consisted of questions put to a panel. Joel Green was not faced with having to answer how he would respond to Garry's paper, which was highly unsatisfactory because this was exactly where the issue then lay. At this stage Alan Mann commented that there were some things in the book (which he and Chalke wrote) which were 'crass' and some things that were 'wrong' and that he personally had not yet felt able to reject all forms of penal substitution, although he felt Steve Chalke had. In the circumstances such a statement required a good deal of honesty and humility.

The gathering was closed by the Principal of LST who argued that, whilst he personally believed in penal substitution, thought that co-existence between the pro and anti camps was possible. Given the analysis provided by Garry Williams and the manifest positions of Chalke and Green, this was a highly unsatisfactory note on which to finish.

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