

*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* by Leon Morris (1955) is one of the finest scholarly studies of the great theological terms used to describe the atonement. It gives an in-depth analysis of the Greek words for redemption, blood, propitiation, reconciliation, and justification in their preaching and in writing the New Testament. Morris addresses the meaning and use of these words in the New Testament and Septuagint, as well as their Hebrew counterparts. It is a book well worth having in your library and well worth diligent study. However, Morris does provide an excellent concluding chapter that summarizes the major conclusions reached in the book. We reproduce that chapter here.

## **The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross**

by  
**Leon Morris**

### **Conclusion**

In the foregoing pages we have surveyed some of the more important words used in the New Testament to describe the atoning work of the Son of God in the belief that modern research has much light to shed on the meaning of these terms, enabling us to see more clearly what they conveyed to those first Christian writers and readers. We have made no attempt to deal systematically with the bulk of the New Testament evidence, and there are other categories of considerable importance which we have not even noticed. But these studies are in the nature of a preliminary approach wherein we have cleared some of the ground, and begun to appreciate some of the metaphors which the men of New Testament days found helpful when they wished to draw attention to one aspect or another of a divine action they found it impossible to describe fully.

Our examination of the evidence has, we think, demonstrated that there is much support for objective as opposed to subjective views of the atonement, and none of the concepts we have considered fits naturally into a subjective view. Something happened on Calvary quite objective to man, and it is because of this that we can have the completest assurance of our salvation. In the last resort it depends on what God has done, and not upon some effect of that action upon the human heart (which is not to deny that there is such an effect, and that it is important). Thus redemption points us to a price paid, and we saw that the contention that it means no more than deliverance will not stand examination. It points us to the evil plight in which man finds himself as a result of his sin, in that he is in a state of slavery from which he cannot break free, and also in that he is under the condemnation of God, for it was in connection with disasters like these that the ancient world made use of the redemption terminology. But no less is our attention drawn to the price paid, for price was of the very essence of redemption, and was in point of fact that which distinguished it from other methods of deliverance. Even though the process might be used metaphorically to describe God's action in saving His people from Egypt, or from exile, yet even here there is the thought of cost; and so is it also in the New Testament. The salvation which Christ effects is not thought of as something brought about with effortless ease, but as something purchased only at the price of His blood. There seems not the slightest doubt that the New Testament writers thought of redemption as an objective thing, a process whereby Christ paid the price which brought them

into salvation, and the idea that this means no more than that His example inspired them to be better men seems hopelessly inadequate. Whatever redemption is, it is something purchased by Christ; and in the first place it is outside of man, though the application of redemption to the individual, of course, calls for the exercise of faith, and hence to something subjective.

The people of God on the scriptural view are those who have entered into covenant with Him, and this might well be viewed as an activity of man as well as of God. But the initiative is always thought of as resting with God, and man's part is only the accepting of a covenant whose terms have been laid down by God. Thus the very idea of covenant, as the Bible understands it, puts the stress on the divine activity, and this is reinforced by the fact that the covenant in the New Testament is established only because the Son of God died for man and thus put away his sin. There is very little place for human activity in this way of viewing Calvary, and once again we see that atonement is essentially something wrought for, rather than in, man.

It is not otherwise with the use of the term 'the blood', which is often used by modern writers as indicating that in some sense it is the life of Christ that saves men. This is an idea which may be stated in various ways, some of which may demand some sort of subjective view of the atonement, although there are others which find a bigger place for the objective. But our examination of the evidence leads us to think that the view that 'the blood' directs our attention primarily to 'the life' is erroneous, and that, in point of fact, the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments stress the death when they make use of this expression. While it is not impossible to understand the death in the Abelardian fashion, yet the impression left by those biblical passages which refer to the blood of Christ is that they are pointing us to the death of the Lord considered as the means whereby sin is dealt with, not merely the means whereby man may be inspired to deal with it.

We found it necessary to make a rather full examination of the passages speaking of propitiation, because there is a tendency to think that those scholars who have equated the Greek term with expiation have said the last word. We saw that the Bible has a great deal to say about the wrath of God, and that it leaves us in no doubt as to the fact that, although God is a God of love, yet He does not regard sin complacently, as something which does not matter greatly. On the contrary, sin calls forth the implacable hostility of His holy nature, and until something is done about it this puts the sinner in an unenviable position. If, then, we are correct in thinking that propitiation signifies the removal of the divine wrath by the offering of the Son, then this is strong evidence that the essential process of atonement is something which is done on behalf of man by his Saviour. We get something of the same idea from the concept of reconciliation which implies a state of enmity between God and man, and the removal of this state of enmity by the death of the Christ. The New Testament indicates that the reconciliation was effected by the removal of the cause of the enmity, namely, sin, and this was done in some way by the death of the Lord. These two conceptions, then, alike indicate that the essential process of atonement took place on Calvary, and that it was more than simply man's acquiescence in God's judgment on sin and his turning away from evil to serve God.

When we came to deal with justification we saw that this is essentially a legal term signifying a verdict of acquittal, and that this may be understood to come about in various ways, many of

them congruous with a process of salvation by works as, for example, it was understood among the Jews. But the particular manner in which the New Testament understands justification to come about is by the way of the cross. Man is justified because Christ died, and this seems to include the thought that He bore man's penalty. At any rate it signifies, from another angle, that something took place exterior to man in the process whereby man's salvation was effected.

Thus each of the concepts we have examined bears its testimony to the fact that subjective views of atonement are inadequate. Again we repeat that this is not to deny that they do draw attention to important truths, or that there is a subjective aspect to the atonement no matter how objective the theory we prefer. But we affirm that the essential process took place once for all on the cross, and such evidence as the concepts we have been investigating points strongly to something which was done quite outside of man, but in some way for his benefit.

The majority of scholars would agree today on some such statement, but there remains the further question of how we are to understand this objective factor, and in particular of whether we are to say that Christ's death was representative only, or that it was also substitutionary. That Christ died as our representative is widely recognized, but most scholars would affirm that there is no need of the substitutionary idea, all that is valuable in it being preserved in the concept of representation. That is to say, it is accepted that He died on our behalf, but not that He took our place.

In the preceding pages we have drawn attention to certain aspects of our subject which bear on this problem. In the light of what has already been adduced it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the idea of substitution must be included in our understanding of the atonement. The concepts of propitiation and justification in particular seem almost to demand that we understand them in a substitutionary manner and, to say the least of it, the other concepts are congruous with this interpretation. We have also seen that there are able scholars who feel that some such way of viewing the atonement is necessary. While it would be out of place to undertake a full examination of the concept of substitution in this place, yet a few observations may be in order.

First may we go back to a statement of James Denney:

God condones nothing: His mercy itself is of an absolute integrity. He is a righteous God, even in justifying the ungodly; and the propitiation which He sets forth in Christ Jesus, dying in His sinlessness the death of the sinful, is the key to the mystery.

Once more, is not the word which spontaneously rises to our lips to express this the word substitution? (*The Expositor*, Sixth Series, III, p. 449)

In these words Denney reminds us of a fact which we must always bear in mind in dealing with the atonement, namely that the forgiveness sinners receive is not at the expense of ignoring sin's consequences. 'God condones nothing', and we must not theorize as though He has become indifferent to the wages of sin. While admittedly it raises problems, substitution does emphasize this aspect of atonement, and alternative concepts do not always do so.

Then let us notice that there is more than one way of understanding substitution, and some ways are more worthy than others. Thus Moberly says:

A stranger, hired for money to undergo a loss of limb or liberty, would always be an insult to true equity. But one who was very closely identified with the wrong-doer in condition, or blood, or affection; a tribesman dedicating himself for a tribal wrong; the willing representative of a conquered nation, or army; the father, on behalf of his own child; the husband, for the sake of his wife; is it impossible to conceive circumstances under which a willing acceptance of penalty on the part of some one of these, would as truly be the deepest hope of the transformation of the guilty, as it would be the crown of his own nobleness? (*Atonement and Personality*, London, 1924, p. 78)

He goes on to develop the thought that we never do see such a close substitution here on earth; but the question remains whether we do not see the circumstances he speaks of perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. At any rate when we speak of substitution in connection with His death, we should bear in mind that He made Himself one with those for whom He suffered, so that the substitution which results is not the substitution of a casual stranger, but of one who stands in the closest possible relationship with those for whom He died.

A very suggestive treatment of the subject is given by P. Althaus in his essay in *Mysterium Christi* (London, 1930, p. 214) where he distinguishes between what he terms 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' substitution. He finds the former in such spheres as the miners working underground for the community, substituting for them, and the latter in such activities as the mother who suffers for the sin of her lost son and longs to lead him to repentance. 'The substitute watching over the danger and distress of his people desires to lead them to a share in that watch. The significance of substitution here is clearly not that of gain through the relief resulting from the stronger undertaking an act for the weaker, but rather giving those thus represented the active fruitful power which characterizes the representative.' Without committing ourselves to believing that Althaus has solved all the problems of substitution we may yet feel that there is something very valuable in the thought that substitution, as we see it in the atonement, is not some purely external thing, which stops when it sees the wages of sin borne by the Substitute, but something which only reaches its consummation when the sinner comes to view sin with the same mind as his Substitute.

'God condones nothing'; 'one . . . very closely identified with the wrong-doer'; 'inclusive substitution'. These three expressions do not represent an 'Open Sesame' to the problems of atonement, but at least they do indicate, when taken together, that a rightly understood substitution is a very fruitful concept, and one we can ill afford to overlook when estimating what Christ did for us on Calvary.