

277 Exam time: Alpha minus?

Did you read my article about evangelism?^[275] I wonder how you reacted to its radical ideas? My friend 'Ian' was unhappy at my idea of *not* focusing on persuasion. OK, I accept that there was a fair bit of persuasion going on in the early church, but...

1) *Does the church today have to use the same model of witness as used then?* Discuss.

In the meantime, here's what shocked me when I reread my article. In the table, I wrote:

Underlying theology:

We are rejected by God unless...
...we accept that God punished Jesus instead of us;
believe that, and you're forgiven (propitiation of God's wrath)

2) *Is that **really** the core of what we believe about God?* (I may have over-egged it, but that **is** essentially what I was taught, and what I believed for 50 years. Stark isn't it?!) Discuss.

3) *Does that sound like the message of Jesus, when crowds flocked to hear him?* Discuss.

I've already done my corrections (after Ian 'marked my paper' – joke!) on one of my ideas,^[276] and disagreed on another, but I was hugely encouraged that a church leader should say, '*the NT never says explicitly that Jesus was punished or experienced wrath*'.

When I asked where that radical view came from, and which books expressed it, he said, 'Having come across rival atonement theories, I did my own study of the NT, carefully looking at each passage to see what it did and did not say explicitly.' But he stressed the word 'explicitly', saying that there are many expressions in the NT which people could read and say, 'it is obvious that this is about punishment/wrath'.

He did suggest three books, two of which I already have, and then did a quick tour of some of the main passages used in support of penal substitution, the central one being Isaiah 53, one of the most-quoted passages in the NT. His point was that it uses poetic language, and why, where it's quoted in rational prose, is there no *explicit* teaching about Jesus being punished by God?¹

And to add to that: there was no mention of *any* kind of substitutionary view of atonement until early in the second millennium, and the idea of *penal* substitution wasn't expressed until well into that millennium.

So our job then, as 21st-century Christians, is to persuade unbelievers that God punished Jesus, and unless they believe that, they can't be full members of the church?!

Does anyone have the feeling that something might have gone astray here?

But God is so *desperate* to have people know his love that even when the church gets things badly wrong, he will still use us.

¹ For an alternative reading of Is 53, try Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel*, ch 8; hard going but I found it very helpful.

And our final question on this paper:

4) The Alpha Course has proved to be a very effective evangelistic tool. To what extent might centring on community, sharing a meal, and being free to express your doubts be a factor?

Maybe we could take the penal substitution *out* of Alpha?!

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