

## **76 How do we communicate God's love today?**

On my journey of faith-and-writing these past months (almost a year now), those of you who have been following me, will have seen how my views have migrated. OK, there was a sea-change when I first 'discovered' the Trinity [0], a couple of years ago, but what I mean by migrated is that there have been other changes, even to the extent of disagreeing with myself!

But when I 'discovered' the concept of restorative justice [2], through Derek Flood's excellent book, *Healing the Gospel*, I became convinced that the metaphor of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), as retributive justice, was simply wrong – that it was a mistaken interpretation of scripture.

OK, I may have expressed it in terms of 'I used to think... but now I've realised that I was wrong, and this is the truth', but actually that was exactly the same as saying that 'I'm (now) right and you are wrong'. I may have switched my view, but I had maintained my dogmatism! In my defence, I have been very excited by discovering the more restorative view of the good news – indeed, it has transformed my life – but that's really no excuse for my dogmatism. Sorry!

In an effort to make this good news available to others, I have been looking at other biblical metaphors to help us appreciate the good news [1]: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth, and I've since realised that adoption is another helpful metaphor.

As I talked more, read more, studied my Bible more, and talked with Christian friends who were still supportive of PSA, I came to accept that I had been wrong to write it off totally. Where I have reached now is to agree with one of those friends, who said that he accepted that, for certain people and in certain circumstances, PSA is 'not pastorally sensitive, to say the least'.

To see how pastoral sensitivity can be important in communicating the good news, think about people who have had bad relationships (perhaps abusive) with their human fathers; for them, talking about God as Father isn't the helpful. While it is still true that God is our heavenly Father, that is not the most helpful way to introduce them to the Person we hope they will come to know and love.

So, let's look at what someone will have to understand and appreciate if they are to come to faith through the PSA model.

To start with, people need an understanding that God is utterly holy and cannot abide sin. But in the 21st century, very few people outside the church have any understanding of the biblical concept of 'sin'. To most people 'sin' is the sort of naughty stuff you read about in the News of the World, which places sin 'out there' and of little relevance to me because, 'I try to live a good life, help other people, love my family, give money to charity, etc'.

So then people need to understand that because we are thoroughly sinful (from birth?), therefore God will punish us for our sin and for our rebellion against God's authority.

Once we've got that across, we can get to the really good news that, because God loves us, he has sent his son to die for us. Then we need to explain how Jesus takes our sin upon himself (an interesting concept).

Then, because Jesus has had our sin laid upon him, God turns away from Jesus, and God punishes Jesus instead of us; Jesus is separated from his loving heavenly Father: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Once people have understood all this, they are in a position to pray a prayer of confession and to receive Jesus into their lives by faith.

As I've written this, it has made me realise just what a complicated and unintuitive metaphor PSA is. It's not surprising that we feel that we have to use metaphors to try to explain this metaphor. For example, the Alpha Course uses the demands of the Nazis that a number of people must be killed, and an unmarried priest offers to die instead of a man who has a wife and family at home.

If PSA is the only metaphor, then we have no choice but to try to get all this across to people; if PSA is the predominant metaphor then even if people come to faith through other metaphors, we will have to explain PSA to them at some stage.

So where I am today is that if we want to get people to come to faith in the 21st century, I'm not convinced that explaining PSA is the best approach. So please, let's think of different ways to communicate God's wonderful love for us.

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