

## THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICALISM II A Review Article

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***The Atonement Debate***, Derek Tidball, David Hilborn,  
Justin Thacker, et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,  
2008. 360 pp, pb, \$15.99.

The previous review article raised the issue of increasing doctrinal diversity in Evangelicalism, diversity that includes points of view that fairly recently would have been called liberal. Further evidence of this trend is provided by the series of books that debate the Evangelical *bona fides* of three to five different views of some doctrine or practice: for example, four views of divorce, four views of sanctification, four views of hell, etc., etc. Perhaps this trend should not be too surprising since Evangelicalism has always been premised on the acceptance of considerable doctrinal diversity within a framework of agreement concerning a relatively small number of fundamental teachings. Nevertheless, it came as something of a surprise and disappointment when the inerrancy of Scripture was added to the list of debatables for Evangelicals. It would seem that if that doctrine is debatable, then virtually every doctrine becomes debatable. So I guess it should not be too much of a shock that even the atoning work of Christ is now a subject of debate among those who claim the name Evangelical. Do you have to accept the atoning work of Christ to be considered an Evangelical? For some Evangelicals the answer is no longer yes.

This book is a collection of essays and reactions from both sides of the atonement divide within Evangelicalism. The participants in this version of the debate are for the most part British. Some defend the view that the death of Jesus must be viewed as a payment (atonement, expiation, propitiation) for sin. Others reject the idea of punitive wrath of God against sin and reduce the cross to an expression of love.

All participants claim that the death of Christ has central significance for Evangelicals, but the disputed question is how the cross operates as the heart of Christian faith. Was Christ's death a payment for sin that satisfies the demands of the law of a holy God, or was it only a display of God's love that makes an appeal to us?

The catalyst for this debate was *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Stephen Chalke and Alan Mann (2005). Chalke and Mann emphati-

cally rejected the view that Christ on the cross was paying a penalty for sin that satisfied the demands of the law of a holy God. Though supporters of Chalke and Mann claim that what they are seeking is tolerance for a variety of views in Evangelicalism, Chalke and Mann do it in a most intolerant way. They press their view with the most provocative language, saying that the teaching that the Father sent Christ to make expiation for sin promotes “cosmic child abuse” and is a total contradiction of the biblical statement that “God is love.” They believe teaching a substitutionary atonement is “biblically, culturally, and pastorally deficient and dangerous.” It soon becomes clear that the target of their attack is an objective complete payment for sin. They and their supporters seem to fear that “instant forgiveness” removes the urgency and motivation for reformed living, especially at the level of society. How can complete forgiveness of individuals’ sins provide motivation to remove societal sins like economic oppression and racism? Justification does not change anything. Transformation of society and a gospel with social impact require something more—a greater appeal to our action. This need is filled by the cross as a symbol of love.

A foundation of the non-atonement view is a critical view of Scripture. The Old Testament texts that drive home the principle that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins are dismissed as remnants of pagan thought that became obsolete as priestly religion was superseded by prophetic religion as a result of the reforms of the 8th century BC prophets. What God wants is not sacrifice but social action. The claim that atonement is antithetic to the Bible’s view of God rests on a rejection of a significant portion of Scripture, and therefore it must rest on a thoroughly critical view of Scripture.

On the historical plane, defenders of this non-atonement view try to argue that an atonement/satisfaction understanding of Christ’s death is a late intrusion into evangelical thought, which reads the view of 18th century proponents of an atoning death of Christ, like Charles Hodge, back into earlier texts. It is true that throughout history there have been advocates of interpretations of Christ’s death that minimize a substitutionary atonement and that focus on the cross as an appeal to our love and action. Names like Abelard and Faustus Socinus come to mind. (*The Atonement of the Death of Christ: In Faith, Revelation, and History* by H.D. MacDonald gives a good overview of the history of the discussion.) But every view that eliminates a real payment for sin from the meaning of the cross cuts the heart out of the gospel and replaces justification with sanctification as the immediate aim of the cross. (Sanctification is an aim of the cross, but via justification, which alone makes real sanctification possible.)

Since Christian doctrines are like connected links of a golden chain, a break in one link of the chain affects the whole. We have

already noted how the non-atonement view advocated in this book rests on a critical view of Scripture. It also encompasses a false view of God, since it denies or minimizes his wrath against sin. It is unable to deal with the paradox of wrath and love in God, because it fails to understand the paradox of law and gospel that is reconciled only at the cross of Christ (Romans 3). It confuses the relationship of the persons of the Trinity. It is unable to deal with the paradox of the unity and the distinction of the roles of the persons of the Trinity in the drama of salvation—unity as the one God of salvation but distinction in roles the atonement. (The Father sends the Son and accepts the payment for sin that he renders. The Son willing assumes the burden of our sins and removes it by his death.) It is hard to say which is the chicken and which the egg here. Does rejection of divine wrath and law lead to a rejection of the atonement as unnecessary, or does rejection of the atonement necessitate a rejection of divine wrath? It really does not matter since both aspects of divine revelation must be kept in balance to retain a biblical view of God. In the cross of Christ we see the holy act of a loving God and the loving act of a holy God.

Those who wish to downplay the atonement made at the cross often claim that they are simply trying to preserve the richness of biblical imagery concerning the cross. The arguments of Chalke make it clear that this is not true. Their purpose is to remove penal substitution and vicarious satisfaction from the meaning of the cross. Defenders of the vicarious atonement do not deny that the cross is a display of God's love that makes an appeal to us. What they deny is that it can be reduced to this. The saving act of God is not simply the incarnation *per se*. The incarnation was the divine prerequisite for the saving act of atonement, but Jesus did not come only to live as a man but to die as a man. Defenders of the atoning death of Christ do not separate his life from his death, for they teach that both the active and passive obedience of Christ is substitutionary. It is rather the opponents of the passive obedience on the cross who also minimize the value of Christ's life by reducing it to being a model. Christ's life and death are in fact a model, but they are more.

Perhaps here is the point to say a few words about expiation and propitiation since there is some confusion of the terms by parties on both sides of the debate. "Expiation" stresses that Christ's death was a real and complete payment for sin. For that reason, "expiation" is the best of the old Latin terms to describe the essential meaning of Christ's death. "Propitiation" places more emphasis on a change of feeling and appeasing wrath. In pagan thought gods and goddesses were propitiated by sacrifices that flattered them, appeased them, and turned away their wrath. If I paid your debt to your creditor, that could be called an "expiation." Perhaps the following illustration will

clarify the difference. If I pleaded with your creditor to cancel your debt, and he did it, that could be called a "propitiation." Thus it is possible to have a propitiation without an expiation, that is, a debt that is cancelled without a payment. But that is not what happened at the cross of Christ. Christ's death can be called a propitiation because it first was an expiation. The debt was not simply cancelled. It was paid in full. The change of God's verdict concerning us from guilty to innocent was not an arbitrary overlooking of sin. It was based on a real payment of redemption. The term "propitiation" may sometimes be used by those who wish to deny expiation by making the cross simply an appeal to God's love, but when the term "propitiation" is used by defenders of the atonement, the purpose is to emphasize the reality of God's wrath against sin which made an expiation necessary. The change that took place as a result of Christ's death was not a temporal change in God. It was a change in our status before his judgment. The cross did not persuade God to be something he had not been before. God always loved sinners, and this love led him to send his Son. God's wrath against sin and sinners still remains even after Christ's death and will be expressed eternally in hell. The cross is both the greatest expression of God's love and God's wrath.

It is hard to understand how this atonement debate can be dismissed as "an intramural conversation" in Evangelicalism. The very meaning of the gospel is at stake. If Evangelicalism cannot even agree on the meaning of the cross, the name becomes an empty shell. Since Evangelicalism is not a denomination or even a formal confederation, it cannot exercise church discipline in the same sense that a church body can. Evangelical societies can, however, set standards of membership and, dare we say it, a minimum confession. The label Evangelical on a group will cease to have meaning if the members cannot agree on even the core of the gospel.

Advocates of a non-satisfaction interpretation of the cross sometimes like to argue that they are trying to keep the gospel relevant in an age that cannot accept a God would give his Son to death to provide a salvation that man cannot provide for himself. But this is not a new problem. Such a God has never been and never will be acceptable to the natural reason of the world. The arguments of 21st century opponents of the cross are no different than the arguments of the 1st century opponents (1 Co 1 & 2). What is at stake here is the same thing that was at stake in the first century. The issue then as now is whether the church will keep preaching the cross in spite of the offense of the cross. There is no evangel without the cross.