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Has the Message of Jesus Been Lost?

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The authors begin with a lament, suggesting that Christianity has lost its identity in postmodern society. "What once profoundly shaped communities and changed lives has today been sidelined in society. The radical message of Jesus is now seen as nothing more than an ancient myth containing little, if any, historical truth or contemporary relevancy. Misleading potted versions of the story of Jesus have been filtered down to us through bland civic religion, caricatured snippets from the mouth of Ned Flanders, Homer Simpson's nerdy Christian neighbour, and the sickly sweet, saccharine-flavoured version of Christmas presented to us by retailers and the media each October through December." This is not a pretty picture.

Chalke, who has become the major focus of this controversy, suggests that Christian belief "for many people seems increasingly like a huge jigsaw puzzle." In his words, "We feel we have been handed loads of jumbled-up pieces and we just can't work out how they all fit together. The one thing we lack is what we need most—the lid with the picture on it. Without that big picture, all we have are the random pieces of 'theology' that we have managed to pick up along the way. And we are often at a loss to see much, if any, relevancy or relationship of the separate pieces to one another."

Most of us can sympathize with Chalke's lament about the disconnected state of postmodern Christianity. So much of what passes for evangelicalism in this age of confusion is actually an assortment of truth claims, habits, doctrines, and practices that lack any coherent focus or overarching understanding.

Appropriately, Chalke points to God's love, preeminently demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, as the proper focus and "picture" that should frame our theology. Unfortunately, Chalke's understanding of God's love sets him at odds with any biblical notion of God's wrath and righteousness. Specifically, Chalke suggests that a focus upon God's wrath is profoundly unhelpful in this culture, and notions of hell, punishment, and judgment are simply out of step. He cites Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," as a particularly unfortunate message. "Preaching like Edwards' has been all too representative of the portrayal of the gospel by the Church over the last few hundred years, and, by implication, of any popular understanding of the message of Jesus," he argues. Edwards, you will remember, described the predicament of the sinner as similar to a spider who is held over the fire. Just as that spider faces sure destruction by fire, if he is not rescued, a sinner faces sure and certain judgment and punishment, if he or she is not redeemed. This kind of message is described by Chalke as "ferocious rhetoric" which is gladly "a thing of the past." Nevertheless, he claims that the "residue of such portrayals of the gospel" still do much damage around the world.

“People still believe that the Christian God is a God of power, law, judgement, hell-fire and damnation.” Where did Jonathan Edwards possibly get such an idea?

Chalke’s simplistic and unfair caricature of Jonathan Edwards serves as a signal of what is to come. The Bible is very clear about God’s holiness, and does not flinch from warning of His wrath poured out upon sin, and upon sinners. At the same time, God’s love is demonstrated in that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” [Romans 5:8] In other words, the Bible presents God’s love as a *holy* love—a redeeming love that is demonstrated in the atoning sacrifice accomplished by Jesus Christ. The very point of Jonathan Edwards’ sermon was to warn sinners of the wrath to come, and to implore them to turn to Christ in faith.

Later in the book, Chalke and Mann critique what they call “the myth of redemptive violence.” This notion is drawn from postmodern theologian Walter Wink, who calls for a radical reinterpretation of the cross and its meaning. Chalke has adopted a similar program, rejecting the doctrine of penal substitution and adopting what amounts to a moral influence theory of the atonement.

According to Chalke and Mann, the cross simply serves as a profound demonstration of the love of God. On the cross, Christ “absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our relationship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it.”

The doctrine of penal substitution—the understanding that, on the cross, Christ died in our place, bearing the penalty for our sin—is described as “a form of cosmic child abuse.” In their words: “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.” They go further to suggest that “such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love.’”

The penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement—the doctrine that has stood at the very center of evangelical faith—is rejected as based on a misunderstanding of the cross, described as a “twisted version of events” that is “morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith.”

Lest their point be missed, the authors go further: “If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetuated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.” Look at that statement closely. This audacious claim, so in keeping with postmodern sensibilities, directly rejects clear biblical passages that speak of God’s wrath poured out upon sin, of the necessity of Christ’s atonement, and of Christ’s atonement as propitiation which demonstrates God to be both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” [Romans 3:26]

As Chalke and Mann see it, “the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love.”

There is little new here. After all, the moral influence theory of the atonement is hardly a recent development. Nevertheless, this understanding of the cross not only falls far short of the biblical testimony, it requires a direct and unqualified rejection of the apostolic preaching.

Last year, Steve Chalke emerged as a figure of controversy among British evangelicals, and *The Lost Message of Jesus* stood at the center of that controversy. The Evangelical Alliance, the established coalition of evangelicals in Great Britain, publicly criticized the book, charging that Chalke “has tended to avoid, rather than seriously address, the key biblical texts typically cited in defence of the penal substitutionary view.” Reaching out to Chalke in hopes of reconciliation, the Evangelical Alliance released a statement that called him to reconsider his position. “We trust that instead of dismissing penal substitution out of hand as a false teaching tantamount to ‘cosmic child abuse,’ Steve will recognize its significant place in the range of atonement theories to which Evangelicals have characteristically subscribed.”

Some openly called for Chalke to be expelled from the Evangelical Alliance. The group’s *Basis of Faith* does not use the specific terms “penal,” “penalty,” or “punishment” in its text, but the Executive Council of the Evangelical Alliance, in adopting the *Basis of Faith*, “took it as entailing and implying penal substitution.” As the statement continued, “We believe that its affirmations of universal human sin and guilt, divine wrath and condemnation, and the substitutionary, sacrificial and redemptive nature of Christ’s death, together comprise the key elements in the doctrine of penal

substitution.”

Chalke later released a statement explaining that his book “isn’t specifically [a] discussion of the atonement.” Instead, he argued that his work is about “Christ’s graciousness.” Furthermore, Chalke claimed to have “no desire to become involved in a technical debate about how the cross works.”

Regrettably, his book puts him right in the middle of a “technical debate” about the cross. Chalke did not merely argue evangelicals should emphasize the love of God demonstrated in Christ’s death on the cross, he explicitly condemned the historic evangelical understanding of the cross, based solidly in the Bible, as “divine child abuse.”

His explanation only added fuel to the fire. “The theological problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and foremost concerned with retribution flowing from his wrath against sinners,” Chalke insists. “The only way for his anger to be placated is in receiving recompense from those who have wronged him; and although his great love motivates him to send his Son, his wrath remains the driving force behind the need for the cross.”

The claim that a penal understanding of the cross represents “divine child abuse” has been asserted by feminists and liberal theologians in the past. Now, Chalke presses his argument even further.

“In *The Lost Message of Jesus* I claim that penal substitution is tantamount to ‘child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.’ Though the sheer bluntness of this imagery (not original to me of course) might shock some, in truth, it is only a stark ‘unmasking’ of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology. And the simple truth is that if God does not relate to his only Son as a perfect Father, neither can we relate to him as such.”

The audacity of this statement is almost breathtaking. Rather than pointing to the cross as the love of God demonstrated in his provision of the very sacrifice he has demanded, Chalke caricatures a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement and adds insult to injury. Furthermore, he explicitly argues that a God who would require the sacrifice of His only Son is not a “perfect Father,” and cannot be trusted.

In recent weeks, the controversy has been reignited as the Evangelical Alliance announced the adoption of a new *Basis of Faith* which comes far closer to stipulating a penal substitutionary understanding of the cross. The new wording asserts belief in “The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.”

In its recent statement, the Evangelical Alliance also announced a symposium to be hosted by the London School of Theology in 2006, intended to clear the air and focus on the most important issues at stake in the controversy.

Evangelicals in the United States should watch this controversy with both interest and concern. Attacks upon the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement are hardly new—in fact they are to be found among some who would claim to be evangelicals in the United States. Evangelical identity is at stake in this controversy. But, far beyond that, the Gospel is at stake.

