

Editorial sparks atonement debate

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)—A Presbyterian controversy spilled into Baptist life when Southern Baptist leaders criticized a Baptist state newspaper editor for agreeing with a hymnal committee that omitted a popular hymn because of [the phrase “the wrath of God was satisfied”](#) by Christ’s death on the cross.

Alabama Baptist Editor Bob Terry published an editorial Aug. 8 commenting on a decision by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not to include the hymn “In Christ Alone” in its [new hymnal](#). Terry attributed the dust-up to “a question about whether God was an angry God at Golgotha whose wrath had to be appeased by the suffering of the innocent Jesus.”

GLORY TO GOD:
THE PRESBYTERIAN HYMNAL



“Sometimes Christians carelessly make God out to be some kind of ogre whose angry wrath overflowed until the innocent Jesus suffered enough to calm him down,” Terry wrote. “It is the ultimate ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine where God is against us but Jesus is for us.”

Some popular theologies hold Jesus’ suffering appeased God’s wrath, Terry said.

“That is not how I understand the Bible, and that is why I do not sing the phrase ‘the wrath of God was satisfied,’ even though I love the song ‘In Christ Alone,’” he stated.

Several Baptist leaders voiced concerns about Terry's position in an Aug. 12 story in Baptist Press. Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, posted a blog describing the meaning of Christ's death as a major issue in the "conservative resurgence" controversy that centered on biblical inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention two decades ago.



Bob Terry



Al Mohler

"At stake is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the central message of the Scriptures, whenever the penal substitution accomplished by him is questioned, much less denied," Mohler said.

The atonement—literally "at-one-ment"—is the doctrine that sinners are reconciled to God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It has confounded theologians for centuries. Verses scattered through the Old and New Testaments convey both images of expiation, the covering or blotting out of sin, and of propitiation, the appeasing of an offended deity.

Expiation and propitiation

The earliest explanation for how the atonement works, often called the moral influence theory, holds the cross illustrates the lengths to which God goes to set a new example for restoring lost relationships between God and man. It was the view taught by the Catholic Church Fathers in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

The second explanation chronologically, the "Christus Victor" theory, is

associated in the 2nd century with Irenaeus, best known for opposing Gnosticism, an ancient heresy that salvation is attained by intuitive knowledge rather than obedience to the God of Scripture.

Different versions of Christus Victor view Christ's death as a ransom paid to the devil to purchase human redemption and his resurrection as proof that he is the ultimate victor over sin and death.

Those views reigned for 1,000 years, until the 11th century theologian Anselm posited what is called the "satisfaction" theory, in which mankind owes a debt not to Satan but to God himself. The satisfaction model holds Christ suffered as a substitute on behalf of sinful humans to satisfy the demands of a holy and sovereign God.

Calvin's legal terminology

During the Reformation, John Calvin, who was trained as a lawyer, transformed Anselm's ideas into legal terminology. Calvin viewed man as guilty before God's judgment and worthy of death but believed the Son of God stood in man's place to bear the wrath and condemnation of a righteous God.

Today, conservatives tend to incline toward Calvin's "penal substitutionary" view of the atonement, while liberals find it ethically suspect.

American theologian Harry Emerson Fosdick, a key figure in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the 1920s and 1930s, referred to it as "slaughterhouse religion." Frank Stagg, a New Testament professor at two Southern Baptist seminaries whose career spanned 50 years, spoke disparagingly of "bloody cross religion."

Fisher Humphreys, a longtime professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Beeson Divinity School, argued that while the trajectory of Jesus' ministry made crucifixion historically inevitable, it was

not theologically necessary in order for God to be able to forgive sins.

British Baptist theologian Steve Chalke sparked controversy in 2008 by comparing penal substitutionary atonement to “cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed.”

Many theologians say all the theories are metaphors, and all are helpful in contributing to fully biblical understanding of the atonement. Others think those who do not believe in substitutionary atonement are not Christians.

Baptist Faith & Message

The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message stated that in his death on the cross Christ “made provision for the redemption of men from sin.” In the version adopted in 2000, the language was changed to Christ’s “substitutionary death on the cross.”

Seminary students today probably would be surprised there ever was any debate among Southern Baptists about the meaning of the crucifixion, Mohler said.

“While the vast majority of Southern Baptists resisted the temptation to revise the faith in order to meet the demands of the modern liberal worldview, some within the Southern Baptist academy were doing their best to shift the denomination to a more liberal position,” he wrote.

Clarification from Terry

After overwhelming response to his editorial, Terry added a clarification that he does not deny penal substitutionary atonement. “That anything I write would call into question the atoning work of Jesus Christ is inappropriate, and to those who read this editorial that way, I apologize,” he wrote.

Terry questioned whether part of the confusion stemmed from different meanings of the word “wrath.”

“If the meaning is that on Calvary God’s punishment for our sins was poured out on Jesus, then that is certainly biblical and something I would never question,” Terry said. “That is my understanding of penal substitutionary atonement and is what I have written through the years.

“If the meaning of ‘wrath’ is that God is vindictive and took joy in punishing his Son, then that is not how I find God described in the Bible.”