

The wrath of God satisfied?

Tom Stuckey

One of today's most popular hymns mentions the wrath of God and seems to suggest that Christ died to placate his anger.

Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live.

Do you stop singing when you come to this verse? I used to because it did not fit into my understanding of God as love. The word 'satisfy' was a problem because it not only suggested division within the Trinity but what I saw as 'divine child abuse'. I, like the compilers of *Singing the Faith*, tried to produce different words. You may wish to go further and follow Bishop Shelby Spong who obliterates such phrases and has abandoned the idea of Jesus being a 'divine rescuer'. Having spent the last three years writing a book on the atonement I now sing the above verse with enlightened confidence, though I suspect the authors would not subscribe to my theological re-interpretation.

It is easy in our age of sound bites and dumbing down to forget that the cross is meant to disturb and be offensive. J.B.Green & M.D.Baker in their book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* fired warning shots against attempts to downplay its scandalous nature. It has always been difficult to understand why Jesus had to die. His disciples also had this problem. Even after the resurrection Jesus has to rebuke two of them with the words 'Oh how foolish you are! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things?' (Lk.24.25f).

The apostle Paul speaks of 'the lunacy of the cross' and stretches its scandalous nature to the point of obscenity by saying God made the Messiah 'to be sin' (2 Cor.5.21). Of course you can say 'that's Paul! Jesus did not see it in this way.' Didn't he? Jesus, as the servant of the Lord, will have pondered the troubling words of Isaiah:

We esteem him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. (v.4)
The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (v.6)
Yet it pleased the Lord to crush him: he hath put him to grief (v.10)

The theology here is violent, victimising and offensive. Does divine love have to be revealed through brutality and torture? I believe God reveals himself in this way not only to trouble our feelings but to attack our minds. The cross is deliberately scandalous because it curses proud intelligence, shames every human desire to dominate and exposes our flawed minds and withered relationships. In the cross God is holding up a mirror to us. Its dark horror reflects something of the darkness which can hide within the human person.

Of course if you think every one is really good inside, as most nice people do, then the above suggestion of 'human darkness' is something you will not wish to acknowledge. When however you are on the receiving end of some of the terrible stuff that surfaces in religious people, (and I include 'church people') then the apparent 'niceness' can be paper-thin. The first 'holy week' is full of examples of 'good people' complicit in the death of Jesus.

While I do accept some of the more sanitised explanations of why Jesus had to die I cannot dismiss 'the wrath of God is satisfied' since, like his shameful death there are features within atonement theology meant to disturb. While I do not believe God is a celestial sadist - a Shylock deity demanding his pound of flesh, I find I now have to take the idea of God's wrath very seriously.

The wrath of God

C.H.Dodd, a New Testament scholar who influenced a past generation of ministers, interpreted God's wrath in terms of 'cause and effect in a moral universe'. If I jump from a building I damage myself through the law of gravity. When I sin, I reap the negative consequences of the universal moral law. Today we would have to modify his simple cause and effect theory since we live in an interconnected world where all lives are intrinsically bound together. Issues of global injustice and the growing gap between rich and poor suggest very complex interactions of cause and effect. Thus innocent people in other parts of the world suffer because of my self-centred actions.

Paul does not explain God's wrath in this mechanistic way. He does not imagine it in terms of human anger since even our righteous anger is compromised by sin and produces outcomes which are not necessarily good. God's wrath is 'indignation against injustice, cruelty and corruption, which is the essential element of goodness and love in a world in which moral evil is present'. (1) Paul moreover does not take responsibility away from God for actions associated with violence and threat. Paul in Romans 1.18 makes it very clear that wrath cannot be detached from God. Divine wrath is God's personal act of trashing our idolatry.

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf from his personal experience of the horrors of the 1990s Balkans conflict says 'I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? My resistance to the idea of God's wrath was as a casualty of war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, *my* people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. How does God react to such carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.' (2)

God's wrath is not vindictive indignation or uncontrollable rage. God is not like Gaddafi. Although, we may wish to dissociate God from violence, the Biblical tradition does not. God's wrath directed against Israel, even more than against other nations, is a recurrent theme within the Old Testament. The entire removal of divine punishment from his Covenant people would simply allow them to be no different from anyone else. They would then cease to be his 'holy people'. The refusal to use coercions and to inflict harm or damage is really a refusal to enforce boundaries. The student who is warned by his professor that he will fail the course if he does not do the required assignments cannot blame the professor if he fails. Such are people of the covenant. It can be argued that the Exile in Babylon was God's desperate attempt to get Israel to return to their covenantal vocation. God's wrath has little to do with retributive justice and everything to do with restorative justice.

Demanding satisfaction

Some boys are playing football outside your house and suddenly there is a crash and a splintering of glass. Their ball is in your lounge. They come to your door, looking guilty and are full of apologies. 'My dad will pay for the damage and everything else'. You are annoyed and upset but their contrition and desire to make good 'satisfies' you.

Now imagine situation two. The boys come to your door, smirking and say 'can we have our ball back'. You are not satisfied. Imagine situation three. The same lads throw stones at the window of a sweet old lady who lives on her in your neighbourhood. When you approach them they are abusive and threatening. The treatment of the lady gets worse; broken windows, vile names, graffiti on her door. You and other neighbours contact the police but nothing happens. You are certainly not satisfied.

The idea of satisfaction has been around for more than eight hundred years. Tertullian (160-225), a church leader and former lawyer had to sort out disciplinary issues which arose when Christians denied their allegiance to the Church during a period of persecution but returned when persecution ceased. Should these backsliders be readmitted or excluded? If admitted what satisfactory discipline should be agreed as a penance so that those who remained faithful and those who did not could again be reconciled? Thus the idea of satisfaction entered the Church, permeated the feudal society of the Middle Ages and is still around.

In post Apartheid South Africa, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission assumed it as part of the process of healing memories and enabling victims and oppressors of to live together. Oppressors and victims had to face each other in a public place and listen to one another's stories. The 'satisfaction' required was that the 'truth' had to be declared and the stories acknowledge by both parties.

'Satisfaction' is part of the process of righting wrongs, publicly acknowledging accountability, making restitution if necessary and healing memories to enable a deep and lasting reconciliation. It is about love being demonstrated corporately through justice being done and being seen to be done.

If we associate 'giving satisfaction' with feudal knights in armour throwing down gauntlets because their honour has been impugned, as one theory of the atonement might suggest, then we will be led astray. If we set it in a legal framework, as the theory of penal substitution does, then we will again misunderstand. We must think of satisfaction not in terms of a legal requirement but in terms of a covenant relationship between God and his people. Without some act of satisfaction in a fractured relationship, enmity becomes frozen, the parties will find it hard to let go and move on together into a new future.

Why did Jesus have to die?

The obvious answer is that Jesus died because wicked men sought to obliterate him and his mission. The Eastern tradition of the Church focuses on the incarnation. Christ leaves heaven to enter the prison house of this world and release us from Satan's captivity. Victory is declared by the resurrection. The death of Christ is therefore of secondary importance. This is a good solution for those who argue that the Western tradition is tainted with violence and divine child abuse. The wrath revealed is human rage. Why did Jesus have to die? It was not to give satisfaction nor was it absolutely necessary for our salvation. The death of Jesus was an inevitable consequence of his mission of liberation.

Unfortunately the solution underplays the scandal of the cross and removes the divine

‘necessity’ that Christ ‘must suffer’. While I accept some parts of this interpretation I think it is fatally flawed because it avoids the issue of justice. My preferred solution accepts incarnation and resurrection but focuses specifically on the death of Christ. This explanation advanced by Tertullian, Augustine and Calvin and does not gloss over the difficult ingredients of Isaiah 53.

Augustine argued that when human beings sinned, God let them follow the path they had chosen. By withdrawing themselves from God they fell under his wrath. Yet in wrath there is mercy for God is justice and love. When God drew back the devil rushed in. He had already abandoned justice because of his obsession with power. God rescues us from the devil’s power not by using more power but by the return to justice. Christ is the justice and righteousness of God and when put to death releases all humanity from the prisons of injustice. Atonement therefore demonstrates that justice comes before power. Power is single and invidious; justice is relational and corporate like the Trinity. Why did Jesus have to die? He died to demonstrate and restore God’s justice and righteousness.

These two traditions are not opposed to each other but complementary. In my book I argue that all atonement theories and explanations are contextual. When I sing ‘the wrath of God is satisfied’, because of my above reflections, I am filled with a sense of wonder. Our mysterious God in Christ has chosen a path of vulnerable discipleship not only to re-established justice but to set in progress a path for its full and final accomplishment.

Tom Stuckey, Past President of the Methodist Conference

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(1) C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973, p.109

(2) M. Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture stripped of Grace*, Michiga: Zondervan, 2005, p.138f.