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Is the Apostolic Preaching of the Cross “Insane?”

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The Very Reverend Dr. Jeffrey Philip Hywel John believes that the church’s traditional understanding of the cross of Christ is both “repulsive” and “insane.” His comments on the cross and atonement ignited a firestorm in Great Britain and the controversy has now spread to America as well. Anglicanism does not seem to have whatever it takes to deal with heretics these days, and so the church simply leaves them in places of influence, such as Dr. John’s position as Dean of St. Albans.

As a report published in *The Telegraph* [London] makes clear, the controversy over his latest comments came even before his message was broadcast on the BBC:

The Very Rev Jeffrey John, who had to withdraw before taking up an appointment as bishop of Reading in 2003 after it emerged he was in a long-term homosexual relationship, is set to ignite a row over one of the most fundamental tenets of Christian belief.

Clergy who preach this Easter that Christ was sent to earth to die in atonement for the sins of mankind are “making God sound like a psychopath”, he will say.

In a BBC Radio 4 show, Mr John, who is now Dean of St Albans, urges a revision of the traditional explanation, known as “penal substitution.”

A look at [Dr. John’s message](#) will reveal that he does not call for a revision of the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement. Instead, he calls for its repudiation. Here he describes what he was taught as a child:

The explanation I was given went something like this. God was very angry with us for our sins, and because he is a just God, our sin had to be punished. But instead of punishing us he sent his Son, Jesus, as a substitute to suffer and die in our place. The blood of Jesus paid the price of our sins, and because of him God stopped being angry with us. In other words, Jesus took the rap, and we got forgiven, provided we said we believed in him.

In other words, he was taught the biblical understanding of the cross and its significance. Now, this is the very understanding he describes as “insane.” In his words:

Well, I don’t know about you, but even at the age of ten I thought this explanation was pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical. What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created, and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own Son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this we’d say they were a monster.

Well, I haven’t changed my mind since. That explanation of the cross just doesn’t work, though sadly it’s one that’s still all too often preached. It just doesn’t make sense to talk about a nice Jesus down here, placating the wrath of a nasty, angry Father God in heaven. Christians believe Jesus is God incarnate. As he said, ‘Whoever sees me has seen the Father’. Jesus is what God is: he is the one who shows us God’s nature. And the most basic truth about God’s nature is that He is Love, not wrath and punishment.

So Dr. John will now discard the idea that Jesus died on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice, and will invent a meaning for the cross more in line with his own theological prejudices.



What Dr. John repudiates is precisely what the Bible teaches. The Bible does not merely assert that Christ died on the cross for our sins — it goes on to explain why this substitutionary death was necessary. In Romans 3, the Apostle Paul explains that God put forth Jesus on the cross as a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins. God's love is demonstrated in the fact that, even as his own righteousness demanded a perfect sacrifice for sin, He determined to send the Son as that perfect sacrifice. In Paul's words, this means that God is both just *and* the justifier. He rightly *demand*ed an acceptable sacrifice in order to satisfy His wrath, but He also *provid*ed that same sacrifice.

This same understanding of the cross is taught by Jesus as He told the disciples of his impending death *for* sinners. It is the logic of the link between the sacrifices of the Old Testament and the sacrifice of the very Son of God, the foundation of the new covenant. This is the teaching of the Apostles on the day of Pentecost and of the entire book of Hebrews.

There are really only two options available for explaining what the Son of God was accomplishing on that cross. The first option is that taught by the church for centuries — that the meaning of the cross is objective, revealing God's objective satisfaction in accepting the obedience of the Son, even unto death on a cross, as the payment for sin. This is what Dr. John now explicitly rejects.

The second option is to define the meaning of the cross in essentially subjective terms, arguing that Christ dies in order to effect a change in us, rather than in God. This is a foundational teaching of Protestant liberalism, but it creeps into far too many evangelical pulpits as well.

Here is how Dr. John describes the meaning of the cross:

On the cross God absorbs into himself our fallenness and its consequences and offers us a new relationship. God shows he knows what it's like to be the loser; God hurts and weeps and bleeds and dies. It's a mystery we can hardly glimpse, let alone grasp; and if there is an answer to the problem of suffering, perhaps it's one for the heart, not the reason. Because the answer God's given is simply himself; to show that, so far from inflicting suffering as a punishment, he bears our griefs and shares our sorrow. From Good Friday on, God is no longer "God up there", inscrutably allotting rewards and retributions. On the Cross, even more than in the crib, he is Immanuel, God down here, God with us.

The ground of our salvation is the substitutionary atonement accomplished by Christ. Our response in faith to Christ is essential to our experience of salvation, but the work of our salvation is fully accomplished by Christ.

What will Dr. John do with Paul's explanation of the Gospel and the meaning of the cross? Well, probably something like what he does with Paul's teachings on homosexuality. It takes no genius to detect a pattern here. Dr. John, who entered into a homosexual civil union last year, obviously disregards the Apostle Paul's very clear teachings on homosexuality. What would keep him from doing the same with an atonement theology he finds to be "insane"? Obviously, the answer to that question is "nothing."

He explicitly rejects the wrath of God. His authority for doing so is Julian of Norwich, who wrote, "For I saw that there is no manner of wrath in God, neither for short time nor for long;-for in sooth, if God be wroth for an instant, we should never have life nor place nor being."

The only obstacle to accepting that argument is the Bible. As represented in that quotation, Julian of Norwich denies what the Bible unquestionably declares — the God will pour out His wrath upon sin.

Writing in *The Guardian* [London], Giles Fraser throws his lot in with Dr. John. In his words, "For, once again, what [John] has been saying is nothing other than a truth known by most people in the pews: that the idea of God murdering his son for the salvation of the world is barbaric and morally indefensible. It turns Christianity into "cosmic child abuse".

We are left with an unavoidable choice. We must stand with the Apostle Paul in seeing the cross as the place where God is shown to be both "just *and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Or, we must stand with Dr. John and Mr. Fraser in describing the New Testament's teaching of the cross as "insane" and a form of "cosmic child abuse." On

this question there is no middle ground.

For further reflection: No model or theory of the atonement can exhaust all the biblical materials on the glory of the cross. We must insist that the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross is central and essential, but that does not mean that we deny that other models can extend and enrich our understanding of the cross.

We discussed [Dr. John's Lenten Message](#) and the controversy over his comments on Thursday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#).

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