

HARBOUR FAITH COMMUNITY: Outright “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18)

On 10th December 2023 I posted the following on Facebook –

Back in 2009 I wrote an article identifying those who deny the Biblical truth of **“PENAL SUBSTITUTION”**. Well, the so-called **‘Progressive Christian’** group, **‘Harbour Faith Community’** in Carrickfergus, have just published an article in which they attempt to ‘shred’ this Biblical truth which is at the very heart of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as we read for instance in **1st Corinthians 15:1-4**.

This is the link to their spiritually scurrilous article –

<https://harbourfaith.com/blog/2023/12/5/you-never-needed-a-theory-of-atonement?fbclid=IwAR2o3knONCTI3dJZY9Z7KHlChWhLMvzoiqT0DebviAZRcbwpFYa2jRcJuyE>

and this is the link to my 2009 article –

<https://www.takeheed.info/pdf/2009/July/enemies-of-the-cross-of-christ.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0oggMBjkWpimEg-HCED0woDbFcmKKeNOQd5fajuWwiSCle7xDk26J4vQ4>

One of those I mention in my article was the ‘emergent guru’ **BRIAN McLAREN** and in recent times he has been quoted by **‘Harbour Faith’** so no real surprise that they have in effect embraced his **‘divine child abuse’** rejection of **“PENAL SUBSTITUTION”** – **“blind leaders of the blind”** (Matthew 15: 14).

Much of what is written in the **‘Harbour Faith’** article is addressed in my 2009 article so in truth much of their heresy is not new or original. However I would like to refer to a number of portions in their article and show from God’s Word just how wrong and how far off the mark they are.

Paul wrote to young Timothy **“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”** (2nd Timothy 2: 15). In his comments on **“rightly dividing”** Pastor John MacArthur wrote

‘Literally ‘cutting it straight’ – a reference to the exactness demanded by such trades as carpentry, masonry, and Paul’s trade of leather working and tentmaking. Precision and accuracy are required in biblical interpretation, beyond all other enterprises, because the interpreter is handling God’s Word. Anything less is shameful.’

‘Pastor’ Steve Ames and the **‘Harbour Faith Community’** are most certainly not **‘cutting it straight’** and are in fact **‘shameful’** in their mishandling of the truth of God’s Word as we will now see. The first portion I want to mention is where they wrote –

‘It turns out that the cross was never God’s wrath poured out on Jesus - the wrath was always ours. It was ours because we just couldn’t accept the outrageous message of grace that Jesus offered, and so we killed him to hide our own nakedness.’

As is the case with many false teachers there can be an 'element' of truth in what they say or write and such is the case here. Peter stated **"Him (Christ) ... ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain"** (Acts 2: 23). 'Human wrath' certainly manifested itself in the events of the crucifixion of Christ with the mockings, spittings, scourging, crowning with thorns, beating with a reed and even the spearing of the Lord after He had died. That's the 'element' of truth **BUT** the **'Harbour Faith Community'** statement denies the true reality of **'God's wrath'** being vented on Christ.

'Pastor' Steve Ames and the **'Harbour Faith Community'** just do not understand what was happening in totality on the cross and so they fail to **"rightly divide the word of truth."** Some years ago I wrote an article in which I explained what happened on the cross – it was in the context of exposing the faulty Seventh-day Adventist understanding of and teaching about the cross – this portion is relevant to this article

A very important teaching concerning **'putting things right between God and His people'** is found in **verse 5 of Leviticus chapter 16** –

"And he shall take of the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats [PLURAL] for a [SINGULAR] sin offering."

For things to be **'put right between God and His people'** **BOTH GOATS** were a vital complimentary part of the **SINGLE 'sin offering.'** I hope now to show that **BOTH** do symbolise the work of Christ at Calvary ...

I want to ask a simple question – what was the purpose of a **sin offering**? In short – it was to remedy the problems caused by sin. And what are those problems? The scriptures show that they are twofold –

(1) GOD'S ANGER (2) MAN'S GUILT

For a **sin offering** to be effective it must turn away God's anger and it must remove Man's guilt.

What turns away God's anger? In **Exodus 12:13** God said to His people **"when I see the blood, I will pass over you."** The applied blood of the **SACRIFICED** lamb [**"WITHOUT BLEMISH" v 5**] was able to deflect the anger of God poured out upon the land of Egypt. It was in theological terms a **'propitiation'** for God's anger.

What can remove Man's guilt? Only full payment of the prescribed penalty can remove the guilt for an offence committed. In theological terms this is **'expiation'** of guilt. However Jewish law did allow for a **SUBSTITUTE** who was both willing and able to discharge a debt or penalty on behalf of someone within their family circle. **Such a SUBSTITUTE was known as a "kinsman redeemer"** [see Ruth 4:4].

On the Day of Atonement the **SACRIFICED** blood of **"the Lord's goat"** served as a **'propitiation'** and pictured the visible shedding of the precious blood of Christ [**"as of a lamb WITHOUT BLEMISH" 1 Peter 1:19**] at Calvary. Paul wrote concerning the work of Christ at Calvary **"whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood"** [Romans 3:25]

I wrote of the **'visible shedding of the precious blood of Christ'** but there was another aspect of the work of Christ at Calvary. There was what I might term **'the invisible suffering of the body of Christ.'** Here I am referring to the 3 hours of unnatural but supernatural darkness that enveloped the death scene at Calvary. This I believe is where the Atonement effected by Christ surpassed the symbol.

We read in **Hebrews 10:4** **"It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should TAKE AWAY sins"** and verse 11 declares **"And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices which can never TAKE AWAY sins"**. Whilst the sacrificial blood of animals acted [in the mercy and grace of God] as a temporary **'propitiation'** for God's anger the animal substitute could not **TAKE AWAY** Man's guilt because it had no **"kinsman"** relationship to the one seeking forgiveness and cleansing from sin.

Christ, as **"God manifest in the flesh"** [1 Timothy 3:16] had that relationship and as such was both willing and able firstly as a **SACRIFICE** to visibly shed His blood to **'propitiate'** God's anger [just like **'the Lord's goat'**] because He was the sinless [**"WITHOUT BLEMISH"**] Son of God. Then secondly in the darkness, as an acceptable **SUBSTITUTE** [Son of Man] He was again both willing and able to invisibly suffer [see also Psalm 42:7 and Jonah 2:3] and **TAKE AWAY**, that is **'expiate'** Man's guilt [just like **'the scapegoat'**]. **Hebrews 9:27-28** summed it up **"As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgement, So Christ was once offered TO BEAR the sins of many"**.

No wonder the writer to the **Hebrews in chapter 10** having told how the animal sacrifices could never **"TAKE AWAY SINS"** trumpeted forth **THE GOOD NEWS** concerning the work of Christ at Calvary in verse 12 **"But this man [Christ] after he had offered one sacrifice for sins [in contrast to the oft repeated animal sacrifices] FOR EVER sat down on the right hand of God"**.

To emphasise the finality and complete perfection of this sacrifice [that it had solved the **'twin' problems of God's anger and Man's guilt**] he went on to write in verse 14 **"For by one offering he hath perfected FOR EVER them that are sanctified"**.

Isaiah predicted this **'TAKING AWAY'** in chapter 53 **"Surely he [speaking prophetically of Christ] hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...the Lord having**

John the Baptist pointed to this **'TAKING AWAY'** when he said of Christ **"Behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world"** [John 1:29]

The writer to the **Hebrews** pronounced this **'TAKING AWAY'** in chapter 9:26 **"but now once in the end of the world hath he [Christ] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself"**

Peter proclaimed this **'TAKING AWAY'** in 1 Peter 3:24 **"Who his own self [Christ] bare our sins in his own body on the tree"**.

I referred to **Isaiah 53** and I want to add these thoughts. In the book **'Christ In all The Scriptures'** by **A M Hodgkin** we read the following –

‘After His resurrection our Lord not only “opened the scriptures” to His disciples but also opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures (Luke 24: 27-32) ... this brings us to the fifty-third chapter (of Isaiah), the most perfect picture of our suffering Saviour in all the Old Testament Scriptures. Seven times we are told He has borne our sins: (1) Wounded for our transgressions; (2) Bruised for our iniquities; (3) **The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all;** (4) **For the transgression of My people was the stroke upon Him;** (5) **Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin;** (6) **He shall bear their iniquities;** (7) **He bare the sin of many.’**

The portions I have typed in red show clearly that **punishment for sin was being laid on Christ by GOD as verse 10 of Isaiah 53** clearly states – having prophetically identified the perfection and sinlessness of Christ in verse 9 we then read **“YET it pleased THE LORD to BRUISE Him; HE hath put Him to grief: when THOU shalt make His soul AN OFFERING FOR SIN ...”**

This **‘wrath of God being poured out on Jesus,’** and contrary to its outright denial by **‘Pastor’ Steve Ames** and the **‘Harbour Faith Community,’** is affirmed in the New Testament when we read for instance as Paul wrote to the believers in Rome -

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (Romans 8: 32)
In Vines Dictionary of New Testament words it says this – **‘In Romans 8: 32 it is used of God “delivering” His Son to EXPIATORY death’.** This confirms what I wrote about the necessity of **‘expiation’** in my article-excerpt on pages 2-3.

Paul also wrote this to the believers in Corinth – **“For he (God) hath made him (Christ) to be sin for us, who (Christ) knew no sin ...” (2 Corinthians 5:21).**

In my 2009 article when commenting on this verse I quoted from Pastor John MacArthur’s book **‘The Murder of Jesus’** and this is part of the quote I cited –

‘When Christ hung on the cross, He was bearing the sins of His people and He was suffering the wrath of God on their behalf. Second Corinthians 5:21 explains the cross in a similar way “He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us.” In other words, on the cross, God imputed our sin to Christ and then punished Him for it (cf. 1 Peter 2:24) ...The holy Son of God who had never known even the most insignificant sin would *become* sin – an object of God’s fury’ and that is **‘penal substitution’.**

To conclude this section I want to return to **Isaiah 53** and focus on words from **verse 5 - “the chastisement of our peace was upon him”.** What precisely does that mean? Pastor John MacArthur explains it very succinctly – **‘He (Christ) suffered the CHASTISEMENT of GOD in order to procure our peace with God.’**

In a helpful article on <https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-does-isaiah-535-mean/#:~:text=So%20peace%20is%20secured%20by,through%20our%20Lord%20Jesus%20Christ>. We read this – **‘So peace is secured by the Servant undergoing the punishment for us. This is not only substitution but **penal substitution,** because before we can be forgiven God’s just anger against sin must be propitiated so that we can have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Another helpful article located on <https://www.gotquestions.org/wounded-for-our-transgressions.html> says this about the entire **verse 5** –

‘The fact that Christ was wounded for our transgressions clearly points to the doctrine of the **substitutionary atonement**. His death was vicarious—that is, He died for us sinners. **Christ suffered death as our substitute. He received the penalty our sins deserved**, and we received, in exchange, the blessings His righteousness had earned. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5: 21). It’s an amazing trade.

Moving on, the second portion I want to mention is where **Harbour Faith Community** wrote –

All you have to do is embrace the simple message that God has always loved you and the cross shows how Jesus would stop at nothing to bring you that truth. Complicated theories of atonement only muddy the water and you’re better off without them.

I want to ask this question’ – Was the Apostle Paul guilty of positing a **‘complicated theory of atonement’** when he wrote in **1 Corinthians 5: 7** “**Christ our Passover is SACRIFICED for us**”.

Passover was one of three major festivals observed by Jews on an annual basis. In his book **‘Israel’s Holy Days in Type and Prophecy’** **Dr Daniel Fuchs** wrote this –

‘The Passover was a sacrifice. Modern theologians dispute this but without any basis. It was an unusual sacrifice. In many respects it differed from the later sacrifices of the Law, but in some aspects it was similar to what later became the sin offering, combined with the peace offering. **It is very important to realize its sacrificial aspect.**

The proofs of its sacrificial characteristics are clear and abundant ... the selection of the lamb ... the method of sprinkling the blood with hyssop ... all testify to its **sacrificial** character. In fact Moses himself said “It is the **sacrifice** of the Lord’s Passover who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses.

The purpose of this **sacrifice** was that the blood of the Passover lamb would be sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels of the Jewish homes, so that the homes would be **protected from the destroying angel**. It is impossible for any theologian who takes the Scriptures seriously to come to any other conclusion. Exodus 12:13 says “when I see the blood I will pass over you” ...

Whether or not one believes in the doctrine of substitution, an objective reader of Exodus 12 must admit that the doctrine is there ... Alexander McLaren expresses this truth as follows “Christ is not spoken of as ‘our Passover’ because the Mosaic ritual had happened to have that ceremonial; but the Mosaic ritual had that ceremonial mainly because Christ is our Passover, and, by His blood shed on the cross and sprinkled on our consciences, does **in spiritual reality** that which the Jewish Passover only did in outward form.’

What Alexander McLaren was basically saying was that the original **Passover Lamb** saved those sheltering under its blood from the judgment of God and helped secure deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The **'spiritual reality'** of Christ as **"Passover"** is that those trusting in and sheltering under His shed blood will be safe from the coming judgment of God and have been delivered from the bondage of sin.

Commenting on **1 Corinthians 5: 7** Pastor John MacArthur wrote **'the church (Christians) ... has been separated from the dominion of sin and death (God's judgment on sin) by the perfect Passover Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ'**.

Geoffrey B Wilson in his commentary on **1 Corinthians 5: 7** wrote **'He (Paul) chose to speak of Christ's death in terms of the Passover sacrifice because he saw that there was the same objective necessity for it. In other words he views the death of Christ as the one sacrifice by which the life of His people was secured'**.

By **"rightly dividing the word of truth"** Dr Daniel Fuchs, Alexander McLaren, Pastor John MacArthur and Geoffrey B Wilson have unitedly demonstrated that **Penal Substitution** is not some **'complicated theory of atonement'** as the **'Harbour Faith Community'** allege but is rather the very heart of **"the gospel of Christ (which) is the power of God unto salvation"** (Romans 1:16).

Moving on once more, the third and final portion I want to mention is where **Harbour Faith Community** wrote –

Maybe this time we can receive the Christ child not as a sacrifice waiting to be made in order to appease an angry God, but as a profound expression of the love of God we already have.

The **'this time'** mentioned refers of course to the fact that **'Harbour Faith Community'** published their article just a few weeks before Christmas 2023. Their desire is of course to remove any notion of Christ being born to die as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners, termed theologically as **penal substitution**.

Well, has God's Word anything specific to say on the matter of the purpose for which Christ was born into the world. The answer is a resounding **'yes'** so let's go to **Galatians 4: 4-5** **"But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons"**.

Those verses follow on from **verse 3** that makes clear how humanity is by nature **"in bondage under the elements of the world."** Pastor John MacArthur makes these very helpful and enlightening comments about that verse –

"elements" – 'it is best to see to see it here as a reference to the basic elements and rituals of human religion. Paul describes both Jewish and Gentile religions as elemental because they are merely human, never rising to the level of the divine. Both Jewish and Gentile religion centred on man-made systems of works. They were filled with laws and ceremonies to be performed so as to achieve divine acceptance.'

In contrast to this **“bondage”** to man-made rules and rites, which could never accomplish reconciliation to and with the Holy God of heaven, Paul then outlines in **verses 4 and 5** the divine intention and means for such necessary reconciliation – the birth and eventual sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How would Christ **“redeem”** people? Christ by His death would **“redeem”** people. What does it mean to **“redeem”** someone? Turning to **Vine’s Expository dictionary of New Testament words** we read the following –

‘denotes to “buy out” especially of purchasing a slave with a view to his freedom. It is used metaphorically in Galatians 4: 5 of the deliverance by Christ of Christian Jews from the Law and its curse’.

Whilst the letter to the Galatians was dealing specifically with a problem for Jews who had become Christians, nevertheless the problem of God’s broken law and the curse of death was universal as Paul detailed in his letter to the Romans –

“we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one ... For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God ..., Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.” (Romans 3: 9-10, 23 & 29).

Christ’s death to **“redeem”** people would have universal application in the sense that it would avail for both Jew and Gentile alike. That is the intent and meaning of what Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5: 19 “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself”**. The word **“world”** must not be understood in any individual universalistic sense but rather as encompassing individuals from every ethnic group (Jew and Gentile) without distinction.

Israel had rejected and crucified their Messiah and Christ’s salvation now had wide universal benefits for both Jew and Gentile – Paul wrote in **Romans 1: 16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Gentiles)”**.

The act of **“redeeming”** someone involved paying a price to **‘buy out’** as we read above. Referring to instructions given by Paul to the elders of the church in Ephesus as he was taking his leave of them, Dr Luke wrote in **Acts 20: 28** what Paul said to them **“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers to feed the church of God, which he (Christ) hath purchased with his own blood”**.

True Christians, as they look forward to remembering the birth/incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ are VERY conscious that He would become **‘a sacrifice waiting to be made in order to appease (propitiate) an angry God’** – that is the clear and unequivocal teaching of Scripture and those who believe alone on His **penal substitution** for their salvation then **“receive adoption” (Galatians 4: 5)** into God’s family and at that point become His children.

To conclude, when people are born into this world they are “**enemies**” (Romans 5:10) of God, they are by nature at war with Him and there is no peace between them and God.

Paul wrote this concerning Christ in Colossians 1: 20 “**having made peace through the blood of his cross**” (penal substitution). Returning again to Romans 5: 10, Paul wrote “**when we were enemies of God we were reconciled to God by the death of his son**” (penal substitution).

‘Pastor’ Steve Ames and ‘Harbour Faith Community’ state ‘the cross was never God’s wrath poured out on Jesus,’ - ‘Complicated theories of atonement only muddy the water,’ and ‘we can receive the Christ child not as a sacrifice waiting to be made ... but as a profound expression of the love of God we already have.’

They are the ones who are not only ‘**muddying the water**’ but utterly **poisoning** the life-giving waters of eternal life found solely through faith alone in the **penal substitutionary death** of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the sub-heading to this article reads, they are **outright “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3: 18)**. The **‘love’** they write of is some vague, automatic, nebulous love of God that is nowhere to be found in Scripture.

God’s **‘love’** is only known, understood and possessed by those who have been “**born again**” saved through faith alone in Christ alone. Writing to “**born again**” believers, John wrote “**Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son, to be the propitiation for our sins.**” That is what true Christians never forget as they turn their thoughts to the child born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.