PISTOLS AT DAWN

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Categories: Observations, Theology

Sometime in the early 1990s I wrote a piece for an in-house journal about what was going on when Kouya people became Christians. Sadly (or perhaps not) I've lost both my copy of the journal and the original file - and yes I did have it backed up, I just lost the backup as well. Anyway, coming from an Evangelical background, I'd always heard that to become a Christian you had to repent of your sins and follow Christ. Repentance leading to forgiveness was the heart of the gospel as I had heard it. However, the Kouya seemed to have a different view of things. I did not doubt that my Kouya friends were believers, but they certainly had not experienced the conversion process in the same way that I had. For them the heart of the Gospel was to cast themselves on Christ who had overcome the power power of Satan and the spirit world and to trust him to keep them safe. As I considered what I was seeing, I realised that the common thing in our experience was demonstrating faith in Christ to do something we could not do ourselves - for the Kouya that was to deliver them from evil, for me it was to deliver me from my sin.

Before becoming Christians the Kouya didn't have a great sense of what sin was all about, but they did show faith in Christ. And it is faith that saves us (Ephesians 2:8) not theological knowledge. Once saved they did grow into an understanding (often far too legalistic) of how God expected them to live - but that wasn't what got them into the kingdom. And before I get too arrogant, I didn't have the Kouya's understanding of the reality and power of spiritual forces before I became a believer - it was partly living amongst them that helped me learn more in this area.

For me, this was just an issue about how to present the Gospel in a different cultural context and I didn't think much about it once the article was finished (hence, I lost the article). However, over the last couple of years, I've found myself returning to this issue because of the stink that has been created (and which shows no sign of abating) in the evangelical world because of Steve Chalke's comments in his book the Lost Message of Jesus. I'm not going to rehash what was said in that book - mainly because I haven't read it. However, the essential issue is about how we view what Jesus did on the cross. My experience and understanding was coloured by my cultural background and I saw the route to salvation and Jesus work on my behalf in terms of forgiveness for sins - Jesus was punished in my place. The Kouya saw things differently and saw Jesus work in terms of a victory over the power of death and hell.

Now the simple truth is that we were both right and both wrong. The Bible uses both ideas in it's presentation of what Christ did so myself and the Kouya people I lived amongst had each grasped part of the story. Jesus work on the cross is so all encompassing and far reaching that no one picture can cover all that he achieved and the Bible resorts to a number of different ways of explaining what happened. Of course, each particular culture picks up on those aspects of Christ's work which most fit their needs and experiences. Jesus being punished for our sin (penal substitutionary atonement) is the commonest theme in western evangelical circles, whereas the conquering Christ (*Christus victor*) was the theme the Kouya picked up on.

The sad thing is that Steve Chalke, perhaps wishing to raise awareness of other models of the atonement, seems to have denied penal substitutionary atonement. In reaction to this, many evangelicals in the UK seem to have gone in the other direction and now deny any other model of the atonement as having any validity. As things have moved on, much of the church in the UK seems to be splitting into two camps the *anti-PSA* and the *PSA-alone* crowds. At times some fairly intemperate language is being thrown around in this debate. Adrian Warnock, a blogger I generally respect highly, seems to have applied Paul's curse in Galatians 1:18 to anyone who disagrees with his stance - which rather condemns me and the whole Kouya church to hell - which to be honest, I'm not very keen on. To be fair to Adrian, he did later back off and say that he personally wasn't cursing anyone as he didn't have the right to do so - though I'm still left with the feeling that I've been cursed ever such a little bit!

For the record, and in case anyone else wants to curse me, I do believe in penal substitutionary atonement. I just don't think that it is the only pattern of the atonement in the Bible. I believe that what was achieved on the cross is so momentous that noone can ever grasp the full meaning of it this side of heaven, much less before coming to a knowledge of Christ. I believe passionately that salvation is by grace, through faith and that when we come to him, Christ gently reveals to us more and more about our lostness and about what he did to restore us to a relationship with his father. Doctrinal correctness is not a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom of God.

The debate on this issue is ongoing and you can follow links to more discussion if you look at the comments on Adrian's blog. Henry Neufeld and Peter Kirk in particular have a lot of interesting stuff to say. I don't think I fully agree with anything that I've seen written by anyone on this debate, but I value each of these Christian brothers for the clarity of their thinking and their willingness to take a few hits for standing up to how they see Scripture working out in practice. However, you can rest in peace, I'm certainly not about to curse anyone!

One of the big lessons for me from this whole debate is how much we need the insights of the world church in our theological debates.Â I strongly believe that insights from the church outside of the Western world would help us to see things which we just don't see from our cultural reference points.

One of the best posts I've read on the history of this subject is an oldish one by Andrew Jones. He has this great picture which I'll close with.