

British Baptist Crucicentrism since the Late Eighteenth Century

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On 24 May 1791 William Carey, soon to become the pioneer of the Baptist Missionary Society, was ordained to the Christian ministry at his meeting house in Harvey Lane, Leicester. His friend Samuel Pearce, minister in Birmingham, preached the evening ordination sermon. Pearce's text was Galatians 6:14, 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.' His message was that, as a minister, Carey should concentrate on proclaiming Christ crucified.¹ This gathering of Baptists who were about to launch the worldwide mission of the Anglo-American Evangelical churches strongly believed that the cross was the fulcrum of the Christian faith. Andrew Fuller, who had delivered the charge to the people on the day of Carey's ordination, was of the same mind. In a sermon on a different occasion Fuller insisted that the death of Christ was not so much a portion of the body of Christian doctrine as its life-blood. 'The doctrine of the cross', he declared, 'is the christian doctrine.'² A similar refrain was sustained by Baptists during the nineteenth century. 'Of all the doctrines of the gospel', wrote the contributor of an article on the atonement to the *Baptist Magazine* in 1819, 'there is none more important than this'.³ A similar point was made in a more florid way in the same journal eighteen years later. 'To take away the atonement from the Christian', announced the author, 'would be much the same as to blot out the sun from the solar system.'⁴ Nor was the flow of equivalent remarks stanchied in the twentieth century. Henry Wheeler Robinson, an eminent and broad-minded Baptist scholar, wrote in 1916 that 'By common consent, at the historic centre of Christianity, there is the Cross'.⁵ Near the end of the century Dermot

McDonald, a more conservative Baptist, demonstrated at book length that the Bible ‘centres on the Christ of the cross and the cross of Christ as its essential content’.⁶ It is not surprising that in a review of understandings of the atonement by Stephen Holmes, a Baptist academic writing in 2007, he announced on the first page that ‘Christ crucified – the message of the cross – is central to Christian life and thought and must remain so.’⁷ Although, as we shall see, there was not absolute unanimity among British Baptists about the atonement being the kernel of the Christian faith, the degree of concurrence in that conviction was striking.

Accordingly the issue to be explored here is rarely the degree of prominence accorded to the cross but generally the different ways in which crucicentricism was expressed. Why did Baptists formulate their sense of the significance of the death of Christ in altering fashions over the centuries? Andrew Fuller provides a valuable signpost. In a dialogue ‘On the Peculiar Turn of the Present Age’, Fuller explained that what he called, following the apostle Paul, ‘the course of this world’ is ‘incessantly varying according to times, places, and circumstances’. Fuller was feeling for what a later generation, borrowing from Germany, would call the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times. ‘Like the tide’, he went on, ‘it is ever rolling, but in different directions.’ Consequently distinct ages, like distinct countries, showed different tempers. Fuller was aware that his own period was very different from the era of the Reformation, when superstition reigned, opposing religious principles were suppressed by force and even the Reformers were marked by ‘unchristian bitterness’. Fuller’s own times, by contrast, regarded such behaviour as ‘very censurable’, understood ‘the rights of conscience’ and upheld ‘the sacred duty of benevolence’. The theologian was describing the milder stance of the Enlightenment that had arisen during the eighteenth century. He warmly approved the change, what he called the ‘improvement’ of his own age.⁸ Elsewhere he endorsed other values of the age of reason such as free enquiry and a wariness of

metaphysics.⁹ Fuller was himself a man of the Enlightenment. Yet at the same time he believed that the tendencies of the times had to be resisted whenever they undermined scriptural truth. He lamented, for example, the ‘spirit of indifference’ that was pervasive in his day.¹⁰ His apologetic output was directed against those who, in the manner of the sceptical versions of the Enlightenment, elevated reason above revelation. The challenge for Fuller, and equally for the other Baptists discussed here, was not to sacrifice what they discerned as truths of the Bible while at the same time expressing themselves in a manner intelligible to their generation. They were constantly trying to relate gospel and culture.

The tendency among the Particular Baptists in the late eighteenth century was to move, under the combined influence of the Evangelical Revival and the Enlightenment, from a higher to a lower form of Calvinism. Some among them had fallen under the sway of hyper-Calvinists whose writings so stressed the eternal purposes of the Almighty that human effort to spread the gospel was superfluous. Calls to the unconverted to accept Christ, often described as the free offer of the gospel, were unacceptable.¹¹ By the middle of the century the predominant theologian among the Particular Baptists was John Gill, minister of the Horsleydown church in Southwark. Although Gill did not discourage the free offer of the gospel, some of his opinions, particularly his endorsement of eternal justification, tended to shift the emphasis away from the response of the sinner to the secret counsel of God.¹² Neither Gill’s style nor his content made concessions to the rising enlightened spirit. Other factors, however, tended to foster a milder type of Calvinism. The Bristol Academy, the one institution in the land for training Baptist ministers, steered clear of the higher forms of Calvinism throughout the century. It early took in converts from the Evangelical Revival, whose urgent imperative to spread saving truth ignored intellectual inhibitions against preaching the gospel.¹³ The principal of Bristol from 1779, Caleb Evans, was an early reader

of Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*, a book which provided a firm theological foundation for uninhibited evangelism while being entirely compatible with the Enlightenment temper. Fuller was among the circle of ministers of the Northamptonshire Association who drank in Edwards's teaching during the 1770s. The transforming effect on the doctrine of the atonement is evident in the writings of Robert Hall, snr, one of Fuller's colleagues in the association. In 1772 Hall's association letter on particular redemption dwelt on the number of the sins accounted to Christ being the exact equivalent of those committed by the elect. Seven years later, in a sermon that was developed into his *Helps to Zion's Travellers* (1781), Hall contended that the worth of the sacrifice was the infinite majesty of the person who had offered it.¹⁴ The older understanding dwelt on the limitation of the benefits of the atonement to a few; the later position accepted that the potential number of converts was immense. The contrast was between a narrow view based on traditional speculation and a broad outlook more in accord with the expansive spirit of the age.

Modification of the understanding of the cross, however, could go too far. The rational Dissenters who embraced the Enlightenment without reservation found an outspoken champion in Joseph Priestley, the prolific Presbyterian theologian and scientist. Priestley early discarded the atonement along with the divinity of Christ, holding that both constituted debasements of the simplicity of the gospel proclaimed by the human Jesus. He insisted in his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) that any doctrine of atonement denied what he termed the '*natural placability of the divine being*'. The Almighty, that is to say, needed no sacrifice to persuade him to pardon freely. The cross was merely an example of obedience to the will of God under the severest trial. The authorities to which Priestley appealed were 'the whole tenor of scripture, and the dictates of reason'. His admission that he found it hard to square his interpretation with individual texts in the New Testament letters

shows that, for Priestley, reason could in the last resort trump scripture.¹⁵ That was not the stance of the Particular Baptists. For all their sympathy for the Enlightenment, they resisted, with a few exceptions, the appeal of rational Dissent. Caleb Evans of Bristol published an extended reply to Priestley entitled *Christ Crucified: or the Scripture Doctrine of the Atonement briefly Illustrated and Defended* (1789). Evans was no foe of enlightened thought, upholding the typical Enlightenment values of happiness and benevolence in his discourses, but he omitted any appeal to reason and answered Priestley's charges one by one. 'The whole system of salvation through the blood of the Lamb', Evans declared, 'is a system of the purest and most exalted benevolence that ever warmed the heart'.¹⁶ There was harmony, according to this Particular Baptist leader, between the atonement and the assumptions of the age so long as they were not allowed to subvert explicit biblical teaching. By contrast the old General Baptists, inheriting their Arminianism from the seventeenth century, were more often drawn into the current of rational Dissent. Gilbert Boyce, one of their messengers or regional ministers, for instance, became hesitant about the doctrines of the divinity and atonement of Christ. Although discussions with Dan Taylor, the leader of the New Connexion of General Baptists that emerged from the Evangelical Revival, induced Boyce to speak more honourably of the person and work of Christ,¹⁷ many of the other old General Baptists adopted convictions much like Priestley's. This position, usually labelled 'Socinian' after the rationalist Reformer Socinus who had rejected the divinity and atonement of Christ, was the persistent target of much orthodox Baptist criticism over ensuing years.¹⁸ Evangelical Baptists, whether Particular or General, despite their sympathy for enlightened principles, were concerned to maintain robust teaching about the cross.

The most powerful restatement by a Baptist of the Reformed view of the atonement in terms acceptable to the age came from Andrew Fuller. His position therefore deserves

considerable attention. Fuller took as his starting point the obligation of sinners to believe the gospel. This principle of duty faith, for which he remained best known over subsequent generations, was founded on Jonathan Edwards's distinction between natural and moral inability. Human beings were not compelled by the nature God had given them to reject the gospel. Rather, those who did not embrace the gospel did so because of their own moral failings. Fuller trumpeted this conviction in his book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785) together with its implication, against the hyper-Calvinists, that Christians must preach the gospel to all. That led to a challenge from Dan Taylor, the General Baptist leader. If the gospel was for all, then did not Christ die for all? Fuller resisted Taylor's Arminian conclusion, but realised that he had to give ground. Fuller recognised that the sufferings of Christ were 'of *infinite* value, sufficient to have saved all the world...if it had pleased God'.¹⁹ There was a universal dimension to the atonement. Yet Fuller maintained the Calvinist position that redemption was of a specific body of people by contending that its particularity consisted in 'the sovereign pleasure of God with regard to the application of the atonement'.²⁰ Even if there were provision sufficient for everybody in the atonement, only certain people would actually be called to faith. Abraham Booth, the respected minister of the Particular Baptist church in Little Prescott Street, London, was unhappy with this surrender of the principle of limited atonement. It savoured too much of Arminius.²¹ Fuller, however, could quote John Owen, the touchstone of Puritan orthodoxy, in favour of the axiom that the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient for the whole world.²² Fuller was working out a theology of the cross by putting emphasis on an existing strand in the Reformed tradition.

Another aspect of his distinctive teaching related to the penal nature of the atonement. Fuller appears to speak ambiguously on this topic. He could deny that he believed that Christ had been punished on the cross; but equally he could affirm that he never doubted that

Christ's sufferings were penal. The reconciliation of these utterances is found in Fuller's statement that the sufferings of Christ 'were a punishment, and he sustained it, yet were really and properly the punishment of our sins, and not his'.²³ The atonement, that is to say, was penal; but the Saviour was never the object his Father's displeasure. Fuller was wanting to draw out the implications of the distinction between treating the cross as a commercial transaction and presenting it as a moral achievement. Against the tradition going back to the mediaeval theologian Anselm, the atonement was not the payment of a debt. The language of the blood of the cross being the price of our salvation was merely metaphorical. Rather, the atonement was a case of the punishment of crime. Unlike a debt, criminality cannot be transferred. Hence the imputation of our sins to Christ was also figurative. The Saviour did not really become a sinful agent and hence he was not himself punished as a sinner.²⁴ Abraham Booth was again displeased with Fuller's way of expressing himself. Booth thought that there had been too much toning down by ministers of the harshness of expression in the Bible, which stated unequivocally that Christ became sin. Hence Christ was indeed punished for our sins.²⁵ The difference may appear small, but for both men it was critical. Booth believed that to concede the point was to exclude the highest form of substitutionary satisfaction, and so leave no standing ground against the Socinians.²⁶ Fuller, by contrast, held that preachers must not go beyond the expressions of scripture to expound a theory suggesting that injustice might have been done at the cross. Any such hint would risk alienating the contemporary mind. Fuller was accommodating gospel to culture more than Booth.

That is most evident in a further facet of Fuller's understanding of the cross. While never abandoning the belief that Christ died as a substitute for sinful humanity, he also came to expound a version of the governmental theory of the atonement. The Almighty, on this

view, was bound to uphold his authority by requiring a public demonstration of the awfulness of sin. God was presented as a ruler who might have remitted sin as Priestley wished, by simply pardoning offences, but that policy would not have created fear in wrongdoers. Public order had to be maintained in the universe as much as in the well administered modern state. The sacrifice of Christ, according to Fuller, was an expression of ‘the moral government of God’.²⁷ Fuller derived the governmental theory in the mid-1790s from the New England theologians who, operating within the framework created by Jonathan Edwards, developed his ideas further – from Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, from Stephen West and Jonathan Edwards junior.²⁸ It was a view shared in England by Abraham Booth. The death of Christ, according to Booth, was ‘*intended* to maintain the rights of Divine government’.²⁹ Yet Booth, who was suspicious of the American authors, was unhappy with Fuller’s treatment of the theme. Booth maintained that, while the vindication of God’s authority was a subordinate purpose of the atonement, that was not its grand aim, for it was primarily designed to show mercy to sinners. Booth dismissed Fuller’s view as that of the Dutch Arminians.³⁰ Fuller’s understanding was indeed that of Hugo Grotius, the Dutch Arminian jurist of the early seventeenth century, but it also had a great deal in common with the writers of his own day who were trying to come to terms with modern theories of punishment. The Italian intellectual Cesare Beccaria had set out in his book *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) that penal policy should be designed to deter further crime and so to ensure the welfare of society.³¹ In the spirit of Beccaria, Fuller contended that the cross revealed God’s view of evil and his determination to punish it; and Fuller declared roundly that ‘[t]he end of punishment is not the misery of the offender, but the general good’.³² Fuller was moving, with the general drift of Enlightenment thought, towards seeing punishment less as retribution than as deterrence. His allusion to the ‘general good’ even offers a justification that might have been acceptable to Jeremy Bentham, the contemporary utilitarian legal

theorist. Fuller's case for a governmental understanding of the cross was cast in terms readily understood by his enlightened contemporaries.

The Enlightenment synthesis offered by Fuller met stout resistance. Some of his Particular Baptist coreligionists considered his notions subversive of inherited Reformed teaching. 'We fear', wrote John Cox, minister at Woolwich in the 1840s, 'that the doctrines of sovereign election, and effectual grace in calling, so dear to our forefathers, will be given up for the doctrines which exalt the creature, and bring divine truth down to human reason.'³³ In Scotland James Alexander Haldane, pastor of the Edinburgh Tabernacle, condemned what he called the 'new system'. Fuller's idea that Christ died for all but that the elect alone received benefit from his death seemed to Haldane 'less plausible than Arminianism'. The punishment of the Saviour was no mere metaphor since he spoke on the cross, according to Psalm 40:12, of 'mine iniquities'. And the correct way of interpreting the atonement was not through the novel terminology of government but through the traditional language of covenant: Christ was supremely the 'covenant-head' of his people.³⁴ Likewise in Wales the redoubtable Baptist leader Christmas Evans repudiated the universal aspect of Christ's sacrifice in a widely circulated book of 1811, subsequently attributing his views to another author who was rebutting Fuller.³⁵ In England there was also substantial antagonism to Fuller's opinions. In 1831 William Rushton of Liverpool insisted that, because Fuller made the atonement sufficient for all, 'there is only verbal variation' between him and the Arminians.³⁶ Two years later James Hargreaves, minister at Waltham Abbey Cross, Essex, argued more temperately against Fuller's followers, whom he called 'the generalizing Calvinists', that 'The Redeemer ... redeemed the church, and the church only, with his own blood'.³⁷ Hargreaves was a moderating voice because, like Fuller, he believed in duty faith and the free offer of the gospel, but others around this time repudiated both these convictions.

In 1829-30 the Baptists of Suffolk and Norfolk divided into rival associations over Fullerism in this wider sense.³⁸ The high Calvinist conservatives in this split were sternly opposed to understanding faith as a moral obligation, but in the process they were reaffirming their allegiance to particular redemption in the traditional sense. Other Strict and Particular Baptist Associations sprang up to uphold a similar viewpoint, creating a current of Baptist life that flowed separately from the mainstream down into the twenty-first century. They were standing for the position of John Gill, a pre-Enlightenment understanding of the atonement.

The mainstream of Baptist life, however, embraced Fuller's interpretation of the cross. Because Fuller provided a version of atonement theory compatible with the Evangelical urge to proclaim the gospel and the intellectual assumptions of the age, his views spread rapidly and widely. In the north of England, Charles Whitfield, the dynamic minister of Hamsterley in county Durham from 1771 to 1821 who was responsible for much of the growth of Baptist churches in his area, accepted the views of Fuller.³⁹ In the south, Joseph Webb, the incoming minister of Tiverton in Devon, avowed at his ordination as early as 1801 not only his belief in duty faith but also his conviction that 'all the ends of good government' were met by the death of Christ.⁴⁰ Crucially, the principals of the three Particular Baptist academies training ministers that operated in the early nineteenth century, John Ryland of Bristol, William Steadman of Horton near Bradford and William Newman of Stepney in London, taught Fuller's system, swaying the minds of the next generation of ministers.⁴¹ 'The atonement of Christ', declared Newman in 1832 when contributing a definition for the *Baptist Magazine*, 'is the infinite satisfaction made by his obedience and death to the government of God'.⁴² In Wales, John Philip Davies, minister at Tredegar, Monmouthshire, published in 1822 an influential sermon rejecting the view of limited atonement as a commercial transaction that Christmas Evans had advocated and instead urging Fuller's

doctrinal position.⁴³ Although the opposition of Haldane kept a higher form of Calvinism alive in Scotland, Fuller's views spread there too. The theology often described as Fullerism prevailed long down the nineteenth century. It remained, for example, the position of John Stock, whose *Handbook of Revealed Theology* (1862) reached a fourth edition in 1883. Why, asked Stock, cannot God forgive outright? Because, ran the answer, 'God is a Judge and a Ruler...his business is to enforce law'.⁴⁴ Fuller's understanding of the atonement, with its heavy but not exclusive reliance on the governmental theory, became the reigning paradigm among British Baptists.

The polarisation between the minority who resisted Fullerism and the majority who embraced it must not obscure the continuing underlying unity of the Baptists in their crucicentrism. John Ryland, a close ally of Fuller, made much of the atonement. In delivering the charge to two students entering the ministry after training at Bristol in 1802, he urged that 'We preach Christ crucified' should be their theme and even that when they preached about Christian duties they should depict gratitude for the cross of Christ as the strongest motive.⁴⁵ Likewise Christmas Evans, an opponent of Fullerism (though a wavering one), dramatised the atonement in the pulpit as a debate between, on the one hand, Divine Love and Mercy and, on the other, Divine Justice. Love and Mercy presented themselves before a graveyard, wanting to free those buried there from the bonds of death, but Justice denied them entry. Only when Jesus agreed to die to save the dead was a solution found.⁴⁶ The way in which piety centred on the cross among all Baptists was particularly evident at three stages in the Christian life. At conversion they often became aware that the sufferings of Christ were designed for them. Thus Elizabeth Worley Nichols, wife of the pastor of North Collingham Baptist Church in Nottinghamshire, found joy in her soul when she experienced conversion in 1808 because of her discovery of 'the love of Christ in dying for

the redemption of sinners'.⁴⁷ A second juncture when Baptists recalled the cross was at communion. 'Every administration of the Lord's Supper', according to James Hargreaves in 1833, 'is a virtual acknowledgement of the nature, necessity, and importance of the atonement.'⁴⁸ And on their deathbeds, in the third place, the saving work of Christ often became especially precious. John Coombs, minister at Bridport in Dorset, who died in 1850 after two years of severe suffering, declared that he believed he would be one of those who had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, 'adding, with emphasis, "yes, in the blood of the Lamb – that blood has cleansed me."⁴⁹ A sample of Baptist obituaries from the middle years of the nineteenth century shows that as high a proportion as 36% referred to the atonement, a remarkably high figure considering that the Bible was mentioned in only 25%.⁵⁰ The cross was the fulcrum of the spiritual life as well as a central theological preoccupation.

The great Baptist pulpiteers of the Victorian age held, by and large, to the outlines of the scheme that Fuller had bequeathed them. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the greatest of them all, consistently dwelt on the atonement. 'The cross', he reported of his college for preachers, 'is the centre of our system.'⁵¹ Spurgeon adhered to a form of penal substitution without reserve. Christ, he declared in a sermon of 1880, was responsible for 'bearing divine wrath in our stead'.⁵² Yet he was content to set the doctrine within a Fullerite framework. Spurgeon had commissioned John Stock's *Handbook of Revealed Theology* with its firm governmental element;⁵³ and at his college the tutor in systematic theology, David Gracey, gave his imprimatur to Fuller's method and quoted the earlier theologian's views of sin and the atonement with approval.⁵⁴ Spurgeon, however, opposed any watering down of 'justification by the righteousness of Christ and atonement by his blood' as a result of what he called in 1867 'mystic and rationalistic obscurations'.⁵⁵ Spurgeon's challenge to liberalising theological trends in the Downgrade Controversy of 1887-88 began with a note of protest

against ‘men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice’.⁵⁶ His target was not, as has sometimes been supposed, his General Baptist contemporary John Clifford, who, although he welcomed fresh statements of the atonement, did not loosen his grasp on the doctrine. In an address to the last General Baptist Association before its merger with the Baptist Union in 1891, Clifford took ‘The Coming Theology’ as his theme. Theology, he believed, was turning to the figure of Christ and becoming more scientific. ‘But’, he went on, ‘will the cross of Christ retain its central place in the Coming Theology? Unquestionably, and with increased guarantees of security and power.’⁵⁷ The chief individual to influence Baptist thinking about the cross in the later nineteenth century was not a member of the denomination but R. W. Dale, the leading Congregationalist of his generation. Dale’s study of *The Atonement*, the Congregational Union Lecture for 1875, was an attempt to restate the governmental theory in a way that vindicated its ethical foundations. Spurgeon’s theological tutor David Gracey, like later critics, felt that the book unduly exalted the authority of the moral law external to the Almighty,⁵⁸ but within a year of its publication the volume was already being recommended to the students of the Baptist Regent’s Park College.⁵⁹ For many years no work on the subject was more widely read.⁶⁰ It helped ensure the persistence of a version of the governmental scheme.

Yet already an entirely different approach to the doctrine of the atonement was being canvassed. The rise of Romantic taste during the nineteenth century affected the whole intellectual mood. The older categories of the Enlightenment, its firm analytical divisions, its belief in empirical method and its admiration for public affairs, steadily gave way to more diffuse ways of thinking, a delight in imaginative avenues to truth and an idealisation of the home. Although the advance of Romanticism was gradual, it represented a fundamental reorientation in habits of conceptualising the world that could not fail to impinge on theology.

In 1890 the Scottish United Presbyterian James Orr diagnosed the consequences for the understanding of the cross. There had been, he explained, an increasing tendency to give a spiritual interpretation that removed what was seen as ‘the hard legal aspect’, so that in extreme forms the judicial dimension had been almost entirely eliminated.⁶¹ The basic principle of the atonement, a later commentator explained, had been ‘changed from justice to love, whilst the view of God on which it rests is that of Father, rather than Judge or Moral Governor.’⁶² The governmental theory, once a progressive way of conceiving the work of Christ, now increasingly seemed an outdated fiction. Younger folk growingly favoured milder theories, apparently more suitable to a kindly Heavenly Father, which concentrated on the moral influence of the cross. In many Anglican circles, and even among some Nonconformists, attention shifted away from the atonement entirely, the incarnation taking its place. German theologians from Schleiermacher to Ritschl encouraged the process. Spurgeon roundly censured those who ‘affect obscurity, quote Strauss, [and] frequently speak of Goethe (careful as to the pronunciation of the name)’.⁶³ There was a new cultural mood to encounter.

The first indication of a drastically revamped doctrine of the atonement along Romantic lines among Baptists came in 1857. Charles Williams, an able young minister in Accrington, preached a sermon before the Lancashire and Cheshire Association expounding a broader view of the sacrifice of Christ than many could tolerate, leading to a split in the association. The editor of the *Baptist Magazine* saw Williams’s sermon as a denial that Christ died as a vindication of the honour of God.⁶⁴ In the following decade a reviewer in the same journal condemned *The Vicarious Sacrifice* by the American Congregationalist Horace Bushnell for reducing Christ’s death to ‘a sacrifice to the malice and cruelty of men, and not a sacrifice to God at all’,⁶⁵ but soon very similar preaching was heard from a British Baptist

pulpit. Samuel Tipple, minister in the select south London suburb of Norwood, had drunk deeply from Romantic wells and so taught that Christ came to reveal that God was ‘the perfection of Fatherliness’. Tipple professed to hold no firm theory of the atonement, only ‘glimpses which my eye has caught’, but he believed that the passion of the Redeemer was designed to help human beings grow more ‘towards the likeness of His self-sacrificing, suffering love’.⁶⁶ The Baptist leader who went furthest in this direction, though not so far as Tipple, was J. G. Greenhough, who was president of the Baptist Union in 1895. Greenhough, who had been one of Spurgeon’s worries at the time of the Downgrade Controversy, interpreted the cross as fostering ‘the spirit of love and human brotherhood which Christ has diffused abroad’.⁶⁷ The new cultural influences clearly led some in a more liberal theological direction. For those most swayed by the Romantic temper of the age, the cross was only a dimension of the life of Jesus. Thus Greenhough urged that we should not limit what the apostle Paul intended to convey by the word ‘cross’ to the death of Christ, but that we should understand ‘all that was included in the incarnation mystery’.⁶⁸ The small number of Baptists who thought like Tipple or Greenhough were exceptions to the rule that crucicentrism prevailed in the denomination.

The Romantic tide did not necessarily sweep preachers into theological liberalism. F. B. Meyer, one of the more conservative among the prominent Baptists around the opening of the twentieth century, was one of the leaders of the Keswick movement. The Keswick Convention and its imitators taught that holiness, like salvation, is attainable by faith alone. Its ethos was profoundly Romantic, even its base, in the Lake District of England, being associated with the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, the heralds of English Romanticism.⁶⁹ Accordingly Meyer typically adopted Romantic modes of expression, discarding phraseology about the atonement out of keeping with the temper of the age. There was now no hint of the

governmental theory, but instead Meyer explained that ‘the eternal nature of God came out in the sacrifice of Calvary.’ Yet that change of expression did not entail a surrender of the core of traditional teaching about the cross. Meyer still insisted that the cross was a true sacrifice where Christ ‘put away the penal results of Adam’s fall’.⁷⁰ He was explicitly resisting modern thought and Broad Church teaching. Nevertheless the way in which reformulation of the doctrine tended to veer into more liberal paths is evident in a restatement of the idea of atonement by Vincent Tymm, the principal of Rawdon College, in 1903. Tymm had no reservations about taking the cross as central and did not treat the Almighty as only a Father, seeing him also as the King of all the earth. Yet he argued that thinking about the atonement had rested on the false assumption that the divine nature demands the punishment of all sin. He was attacking a premise of Fuller’s system, which he set out at the opening (though without naming Fuller) as his target. For Tymm the penal theory was not biblical, but ‘an ecclesiastical counterfeit’. Instead he held that ‘it was God’s design to render the crucifixion a spectacle to the world, and through what, with all reverence, may be called its dramatic power, to work upon the hearts and consciences of men’.⁷¹ The result is a rather insipid variation on the theme of the moral influence theory. The Romantic impulse, though not inevitably inducing broad theological attitudes, did normally lead in that direction.

Hence it is not surprising that there was a conservative reaction. It became vocal, as in America, in the wake of the First World War, though in Britain the phenomenon of Fundamentalism was on a much smaller scale than on the other side of the Atlantic.⁷² The chief issue in the 1920s was not the atonement but loyalty to the Bible. Many of those who clung tenaciously to a conservative view of scripture in these years were nevertheless inclined to forbearance if the broader minded clearly accepted Christ’s redemptive work. Thus C. Hanmer Jenkins, a Welsh missionary serving in France, reported to the Baptist

Missionary Society foreign secretary in 1922 that he was happy to use a particular manual of theology even though the author gave questionable interpretations of Old Testament books since ‘on all the fundamentals, the Cross, and Atonement he is perfectly sound’.⁷³ Yet there were occasions when treatment of the atonement was a cause of Fundamentalist dismay. John Thomas, as president of the Baptist Bible Union, a militant Fundamentalist organisation, wrote in 1921 that the word ‘Evangelical’ was being abused by teachers who rejected ‘the vital doctrine of the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God’.⁷⁴ Thomas was writing about the most recent book by T. R. Glover, a Baptist classical scholar who was a fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge, *Jesus in the Experience of Men* (1922). In this volume and his earlier work, *The Jesus of History* (1917), Glover laid much more stress on the human experience of encounter with Christ than on his achievement at the cross. Suspicion on this score contributed to a groundswell of opposition to Glover’s candidacy for the presidency of the Baptist Union in 1923 and persisted after he overcame it.⁷⁵ The anxieties came to a head when, in 1931, Glover wrote a booklet for the Baptist Union called *Fundamentals*, claiming provocatively that the idea of atonement ‘in the popular sense...is hardly to be found in the New Testament’.⁷⁶ H. Tydeman Chilvers, the pastor of Spurgeon’s Metropolitan Tabernacle, headed a campaign for the booklet to be withdrawn. A tense meeting of the council of the Baptist Union eventually decided that a second pamphlet would be issued to bring out teachings on the atonement neglected by Glover, its author being Percy Evans, the principal of Spurgeon’s College.⁷⁷ The publication of parallel books on the same theme was an indication that there were divergent Baptist opinions on the cross.

The weightiest contribution to Baptist thinking about the atonement in the earlier twentieth century came from Henry Wheeler Robinson, the principal who moved Regent’s Park College from London to Oxford. As an Old Testament scholar, he published a series of

studies of the cross in Job (1916), Jeremiah (1925) and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (1926) that laid the foundations for several more constructive theological statements culminating in *Redemption and Revelation* (1942).⁷⁸ Wheeler Robinson displayed immense learning, opening a contribution to a theological symposium with a quotation from the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana and an allusion to the founder of the Jesuits Ignatius Loyola.⁷⁹ He shared with Glover an emphasis on experience, but his philosophical foundations were far deeper. He wrote in 1916 of ‘the supreme value of personality’, showing a debt to the personal idealist school that was then fashionable;⁸⁰ and later he absorbed the philosophy of organism advocated by A. N. Whitehead.⁸¹ Both represented sophisticated versions of the intellectual currents associated with Romanticism that were still flowing powerfully in the twentieth century. On the doctrine of the cross, Wheeler Robinson quoted Bushnell with approval and dismissed ‘penal substitution in its crudest form’.⁸² Theories of the atonement, he believed, were merely metaphors that broke down if pressed too far.⁸³ Yet his statements of the significance of the cross convey a rare profundity. ‘The Gospel declares’, he wrote in his first contribution to the subject, ‘that God vindicates His own cause by entering the world through His Son, and through His Cross bears the burden of suffering caused by the sin of man, and by the grace of this sin-bearing, both in Jesus and in all in whom the Spirit of God is, makes the world with all its sin a more glorious place than would have been a world of innocence without sin.’⁸⁴ On this remarkably comprehensive view, the atonement reflects the eternal heart of God but takes place in time, and it involves the creation of human solidarity by the Holy Spirit, all themes Wheeler Robinson made his own. Unlike many others deeply swayed by contemporary preconceptions, he was concerned to bring out the objective dimensions of the atonement. In his day, he complained in 1939, there was too much hiding of ‘the divine authority and the sterner aspects of God’s inevitabilities’.⁸⁵ Wheeler Robinson managed to relate the cross to a cultural atmosphere

strongly shaped by the legacy of Romanticism by adding to, rather than subtracting from, the store of ideas drawn from the Bible clustering around the subject.

Few managed to bridge the divide between the more and less conservative tendencies within the denomination as capably as Wheeler Robinson. For much of the twentieth century there was an uneasy coexistence between the two standpoints, each of which was powerfully reinforced from outside the ranks of the Baptists. On the one hand, biblical scholarship, often published by the Student Christian Movement (SCM), seemed to show that older expositions of the atonement were untenable. The idea that the term 'blood' denoted life, not death, and so did not signify the cross had originated in nineteenth-century Germany, but was adopted in England by the Anglican B. F. Westcott, the Methodist Vernon Taylor and the Congregationalist C. H. Dodd. Baptists disputed so formidable a consensus at their peril. Again, Dodd insisted that 'propitiation' was an illegitimate translation of the Greek at 1 John 2:2, wrongly implying that God's wrath was averted by the crucifixion. 'Wrath' in the New Testament, according to Dodd, was an impersonal force of nature rather than a personal attribute of the Almighty.⁸⁶ Broader minded ministers, such as H. V. Larcombe of Sutton, Surrey, echoed Dodd in rejecting the word 'propitiation' for mistakenly suggesting 'the placating of an angry God'. Larcombe, though admitting that more was to be said about the objective dimensions of the cross, found the moral influence theory of the mediaeval thinker Abelard appealing.⁸⁷ More conservative ministers, on the other hand, took their cue from a different body of scholarship, the publications of the Inter-Varsity Press (IVP). Their understanding of the atonement was normally founded on two works published by IVP, an abridged version of *The Death of Christ* (1902) by James Denney, a leading theologian of the United Free Church of Scotland, and *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (1955) by Leon Morris, an Evangelical Anglican teaching in Australia, that stressed the objective side of

Christ's work.⁸⁸ The conservative-inclined normally upheld the view that the cry of dereliction on the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?', represented a real abandonment of the Son by the Father at the moment he bore the sins of humanity and so incurred the divine wrath. That, for instance, was the conviction of Paul Tucker, minister of the East London Tabernacle and a leader of the Baptist Revival Fellowship, in 1966.⁸⁹ Although the two standpoints on the atonement represented by SCM and IVP did not come into collision in any major controversy, they were both strongly represented within the denomination. A study outline published by the Baptist Union in 1990 inevitably recommended SCM and IVP titles in rough balance.⁹⁰ Baptists were part of a larger theological world pulled in two directions.

From the 1960s a fresh cultural wave swept over the denomination. Charismatic renewal, a movement bringing a rejuvenating sense of the work of the Holy Spirit, transformed many churches. Although some moved into new organisations outside Baptist life, most remained to propagate their new outlook. Already by 1981 it was said that candidates for the Baptist ministry came largely from churches affected by the charismatic movement.⁹¹ Renewal represented not so much a theology as a spirituality that was moulded by the temper of the times. Its greatest impact was on worship, where there was typically a downplay of words in favour of gestures, supremely the raising of hands, and symbols, such as banners.⁹² The whole movement can be seen as a form of religious Expressionism, a term for the cultural phenomenon that came to be labelled Postmodernism.⁹³ There were distinct tendencies in the early days of renewal to shift, in the atmosphere of celebration, from a theology of the cross to a theology of glory; and the earlier notion of 'healing in the atonement' was revived in charismatic circles, leading to the belief that the cross brought physical health. Most substantially, as time went on some of those caught up in renewal

began to see the cross alone as less central to the faith.⁹⁴ Thus Steve Chalke, a dynamic Baptist charismatic in south London who created his own network of churches and social ministries under the label ‘Oasis’, began to favour the *Christus Victor* understanding of the atonement and so to conceive the life, death and resurrection of Jesus together as achieving redemption. ‘It is the resurrection’, he wrote, ‘which finally puts the *Victor* into *Christus Victor!*’⁹⁵ Nigel Wright, a minister fully identified with renewal who from 2000 was to serve as principal of Spurgeon’s College, questioned three years earlier whether penal substitution was the best way to express the reality of atonement. Christ, he argued, did not suffer ‘extrinsic’ punishment from the wrath of God but ‘intrinsic’ punishment created by alienation from his Father.⁹⁶ Other Baptists not associated with the charismatic movement also expressed reservations about penal substitution. Thus Paul Fiddes, the principal of Regent’s Park College, argued in a full and lucid treatment of the doctrine of the atonement published in 1989 that, while the cross represented both punishment and substitution, the two ideas could not legitimately be combined.⁹⁷ The Baptists most committed to penal substitution, by contrast, were those who, with Reformed views, served outside the Baptist Union. So by the opening of the twenty-first century the mainstream denomination seemed open to criticism that it had weakened its corporate attachment to a full-blooded doctrine of the cross.

Controversy on the subject flared up in 2003. In that year Steve Chalke co-authored a book entitled *The Lost Message of Jesus*, passionately contending that Christ is for the marginalised. It contained a vivid passage about the atonement: ‘The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he hasn’t even committed.’⁹⁸ The phrase ‘cosmic child abuse’, taken from a feminist theologian, provoked huge offence. Because Chalke was prominent in the Evangelical Alliance, others who believed in penal substitution, such as Mike Ovey, principal of the Evangelical Anglican

Oak Hill College, soon issued rebuttals. With two colleagues, Ovey published a thorough vindication of penal substitution, *Pierced for Our Transgressions* (2007).⁹⁹ Chalke, however, stuck to his guns, saying explicitly that penal substitution was mistaken and dangerous. The notion was associated with an image of Christians as ‘judgmental, guilt-inducing, censorious, finger-wagging, bigoted and self-righteous’.¹⁰⁰ Chalke drew substantial support, especially from Baptists who admired Chalke’s vision of social commitment. The Evangelical Alliance held a symposium in 2005 to try to pour oil on troubled waters, with three Baptist contributors arguing in favour of penal substitution but holding that it was only one way of understanding the cross among many.¹⁰¹ Such efforts to hold the Evangelical constituency together did not altogether work. The Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), for example, which had co-operated with organisations such as Spring Harvest, an annual convention where Chalke was prominent, withdrew from involvement. It was part of a new tendency towards polarisation within the Evangelical world that was gathering pace in the early twenty-first century.¹⁰² On the one hand there were those such as Ovey and the leaders of the UCCF, largely Reformed by conviction, who wanted to maintain sound doctrine and who saw penal substitution as central to the task. On the other there were activists such as Chalke and his supporters, often inspired by charismatic renewal, who wished to engage wholeheartedly with contemporary culture and regarded penal substitution as an encumbrance. Theology, according to Chalke, must be informed by the Bible, but also be ‘related to its specific cultural context’.¹⁰³ The dispute, like that between Booth and Fuller two centuries before, was about how far to go in adapting doctrine to the contemporary mood.

The Baptists of Britain were therefore overwhelmingly crucicentric during the two and a half centuries that have been reviewed. The exceptions were those who were carried

away with enthusiasm for new cultural attitudes – for Romantic sensibility in the nineteenth century or for Expressionist ways in the twentieth. The remainder of the Baptists were devotionally attached to the cross as the means of their salvation, but they faced the task of putting their convictions about Calvary into formulae that would be understood in their day. In the wake of the Enlightenment most Baptists dropped the hyper-Calvinist view of the cross but equally proved resistant to the Socinian standpoint. Andrew Fuller elaborated a way of understanding the atonement that, while carefully biblical, was deeply moulded by the thought of his age, and, though Abraham Booth and many subsequent figures believed that Fuller had gone too far in embracing enlightened opinion, Fullerism triumphed in the denomination. Fuller's paradigm, combining metaphorical punishment with moral government, remained the dominant way of conceiving the atonement during the nineteenth century, still being accepted by Spurgeon and the bulk of his contemporaries. By then, however, a new theological approach associated with Romanticism was replacing God as Moral Governor with God as Father. It created a general, though by no means universal, trend towards liberal conclusions about the cross, and led to a backlash by conservatives in the inter-war years. At the same period Henry Wheeler Robinson developed a profound understanding of the atonement, but the tendency to polarisation between the conservative and the less so persisted. By the opening of the twenty-first century charismatics were much more willing to modify their attachment to penal substitution than the Reformed. The issue between them was once more how far to go in accommodating the gospel to the culture. In wrestling with this perennial problem of Christian strategy, the Baptists of Britain rarely lost sight of the cruciality of the cross.¹⁰⁴

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³ B. G., 'On the Atonement of Christ', *Baptist Magazine* [hereafter *BM*] (November 1819), p. 469.

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⁵ Henry Wheeler Robinson, 'The Cross of Job' [1916], *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 49.

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- ¹⁰⁴ This paper, originally delivered at the Andrew Fuller Conference 2010, has appeared under a slightly different title in the *Baptist Quarterly* [insert volume, year and page range]. I am grateful to the editor for permission to reproduce it here.