

Review of Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society* (2nd ed.)

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Mann A 2015. *Atonement for a Sinless Society* (2nd ed.). Eugene:
Cascade Books.

1. Introduction to the Author

Alan Mann works in education, supporting children with complex special educational needs. He is a graduate of The London School of Theology (LST) where he studied for a Bachelor of Theology and a postgraduate course in Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation. Mann has worked for a number of UK-based Christian leaders and organisations, and has contributed to numerous books, magazines and online publications. For several years he served as an Open Learning Tutor for LST, specialising in Christianity in Contemporary Culture and Theology of the Poor. He lives in the UK with his family. In addition to *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, Mann has authored the following books: *The Lost Message of Jesus* (2004, co-authored with Steve Chalke), *A Permanent Becoming: A Contemporary Look at the Fruit of*

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

the Spirit (2008), and *Different Eyes: The Art of Living Beautifully* (2010, co-authored with Steve Chalke)².

2. The Purpose of the Book

In very simple terms, Mann's book, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, offers to do just that, to show how the atoning work of Christ might be applied to such a society that does not acknowledge sin. That is, how is the atonement relevant for a society where the concept of sin is irrelevant, at least in traditional Christian terms?

Mann likens it to speaking a foreign language. When the story of the Cross of Christ is told, often it is told in a 'foreign cultural language' that is difficult for others to understand and accept, not because the cross of Christ is irrelevant, but because language itself is irrelevant. The book encourages us not to persist in thinking of the atonement in narrow terms by presenting its significance in out-dated expressions.

It is not that the language we used to speak of the atonement was unfruitful or incomprehensible, but rather that society has changed in such a way that if we continue to use the same language, for the majority of people the atonement will be confusing, unpalatable and loathsome. Therefore, we should not be overconfident that we have pinned down the meaning of the atonement and how we ought to express it.

Mann uses the example of Pentecost to illustrate the purpose of his book. People were surprised by the message of Jesus being preached by the disciples in their own language at Pentecost. Jesus' disciples had a captive audience to proclaim the gospel to, because their audiences

² Author profile provided by Alan Mann.

were able to understand the message. Similarly, Christians today need to surprise the people of this age by telling them the story of the atonement in their own language. In so doing we are able to capture the attention of the people of our day, communicating the atonement account with deep meaning and significance that is relevant for their own postmodern lives.

It is our responsibility to read the atonement in light of the context in which we find ourselves, in order that we may communicate the gospel of Christ effectively and profoundly. In order to do this, we need to recognise the concerns of our time, as well as the prevailing philosophical and the cultural contexts in order that we may engage our society, a society that for the most part considers itself as ‘sinless’. As Christians we are called to discover new expressions of our faith, and while this may be risky, it is one that is creative and exciting. Mann encourages his readers to speak meaningfully of the atonement so that it may be heard and understood by such a ‘sinless society’, and while it is in the end God who reconciles us to himself, we have an important part to play in communicating the gospel story successfully to our contemporaries.

3. Evaluation

I read the first edition of *Atonement for a ‘sinless’ society: engaging with an emerging culture* (1st ed.; 2005) 7 years ago and used it as a foundation for my doctoral dissertation (Mann makes mention of my work, along with others, on the first page of his second edition). I remember being more impacted by the first edition than I was by the second. With that said, I still find much value in many of the insights and social commentary presented in this book. Some of these insights are new and fresh. Without a doubt the book is worth a read. It demands

serious consideration and by nature calls for engagement. The arguments in the book are to be taken seriously, especially in terms of how the material might be applied effectively as we proclaim the atoning work of Christ and his kingdom. The book is no doubt challenging. Notwithstanding, if I am to be entirely honest, I find that there is enough material in the book to make a conservative evangelical like myself feel somewhat uneasy. Whether this is a good thing, I am unsure. It does, however, help to put this into perspective by considering its strengths and weaknesses.

3.1. Strengths

Perhaps the greatest strength in the book is the desire by the author to communicate the atonement in such terms that ‘surprise’ people from a ‘sinless society’ in a language that they understand and that makes sense to them. My own research has sought to do something somewhat similar, communicating the atonement in the context of African metaphysics, in an effort to show how the atonement may be meaningful to African people.

One might imagine that the reader, if he is not careful, too quickly concludes that the author himself wishes to disregard the notion of sin. Yet, it needs to be clear that the question Mann is asking is, ‘what does a ‘sinless society’ substitute for sin and how does the atonement address those concerns?’ Mann argues that, ‘shame is a very real narrative, that is often self-generating, and self-originating, rather than a product of institutionally-driven perceptions’. We all know how the atoning work of Christ addresses the traditional issue of sin, but how does it address the question of shame, especially for a culture that does not acknowledge personal sin? Mann believes that sin has been reduced solely to wrongful actions and that this is unhelpful, when in fact sin may have far greater meaning for our time if it is described as ‘an

absence of mutual, intimate, unpolluted relating that ultimately leads human beings into a lack of self-coherence'. My understanding is that Mann is not disregarding the traditional Christian concept of sin, but that there is more to consider. The book continues in significant detail and discourse on this line of thought. And while I *do* consider this a strength, it's obviously not immune to criticism. Mann's thoughts are not as clear-cut or as black and white as we might like them to be, and this is what makes the book interesting and thought-provoking.

While much of the book is inward looking, I appreciated the way in which Mann sought to demonstrate how, through the atoning work of Christ, we are no longer the victims who have a need to be empowered by shame, because our identity is not found in our own narrative, but in the narrative of our Creator (and may I add, our Saviour). In our Creator's narration, we are freed 'from the shame that has haunted us, free from the fear of failing our ideal-self'. This concept was extended into his use of Jesus' own narrative, namely his Passion, where he highlights some of Jesus' own struggles, as well as other gospel narratives to develop his argument. His analysis of Judas' narrative of shame and Peter's narrative of shame and denial in contrast to Jesus' narrative is really quite striking. This, Mann does rather powerfully and convincingly.

Apparently, in today's 'sinless society' it is the sinners who are the victims. But Mann shows us the power of this 'victimisation' in the New Testament narrative, whereby Jesus experiences severe and genuine victimisation and becomes the ultimate victim, suffering innocently at the hands of the powerful religious and political structures. As postmodern readers, those who see themselves as victims, read the Passion narrative, they are 'dumbfounded—not by God's holiness, but

by his status as the ultimate victim. And so all the other victims wait to be judged by God for, as everyone knows, the ultimate victim wins’.

Consequently, having read quite an exhaustive amount of material on the atonement, I still find Mann’s *Atonement in a Sinless Society* an informative read for our postmodern society, as well as for other societies that substitute sin for shame. But I would supplement his book with Martin Luther’s theology on the Atonement³, Scot McKnight’s, *A Community Called Atonement*, Hans Boersma’s, *Violence, hospitality and the cross: reappropriating the atonement tradition*, and most recently, Fleming Rutledge’s book, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. Altogether I think these would make a holistic balanced approach for presenting the atonement in a ‘sinless’ and postmodern society.

3.2. Weaknesses

Despite the strengths of this book, there are weaknesses, but many of these weaknesses, I acknowledge, may well come from my own conservative Evangelical background, and so they may not necessarily be as objective as I might like.

To begin with, Mann’s use of *at-one-ment* is clichéd. Not only is it overused in ‘pop theology’, the atonement is ironically much more than *at-one-ment* and all that that envisions. But with that said, I do appreciate the theme of reconciliation in Mann’s work.

I also disliked Mann’s use of ‘the Other’, finding it vague and unnecessary, when God, or Jesus might have been used. To give him

³ cf. Luther’s Commentary on Galatians, and his Large Catechism and Small Catechism.

credit, while ‘the Other’ is used throughout the book, God and Jesus are used in the book appropriately, but somewhat sparingly. I never quite understood the need to employ the expression ‘the Other’ in the context of Mann’s book.

Mann’s effort to understand and engage with a ‘sinless society’ and to offer a theology of atonement is indeed honourable, but I wonder how one might creatively introduce sin in relationship to the Christian God *in* a ‘sinless society’. Furthermore, while much of what is written in the book can be observed in our society, whether it be in the books we read, television, media or social media, one wonders how many people from the so called ‘sinless society’ relate to how their internal lives are portrayed in this book. Would they describe themselves similarly? I am unsure, but it is a nagging question.

Stories and individual narratives are emphasised in the book. Mann suggests that expressions of stories and narrative might act as one kind of repentance. While the idea is of course fascinating and perhaps even helpful to some extent, it seems to have three problems: (1) Repentance is more than telling one’s own story, though that is a start; it is also about a change of behaviour. (2) People do not seem to engage with stories as much as they once did (asides from film, sitcoms and the odd novel they might read), and (3) people are generally not interested in each other’s stories, especially if they are unfortunate. Everyone simply gets on with their own story.

On the one hand Mann appears to call our attention to shame as the substitute to sin in a ‘sinless society’, which may well be true, but then he *also* highlights shame in the narrative of scripture. I wonder whether humanity from the very start has suffered from a shame-filled conscience (Adam and Eve) *along* with their awareness of sin against an Almighty God. Perhaps the difference is that the traditional

awareness of sin is absent from today's modern society, as Mann points out. But I don't think a shame-based society is particularly modern, as Mann seems to suggest. The difference, I think, is that the traditional 'sin' aspect is missing. Mann observes,

The sinless self is *sinned against*, not the sinner. They are the helpless victims of social structures, institutions, and corporate bodies. It is with these perpetrators that responsibility lies, not with the "innocent victims" of their distorted practices. Obligations, and responsibilities lie fairly, and squarely with institutions in the story the sinless self tells. Therefore, there are no duties they have failed to fulfill, no forbidden acts about which they should feel guilty, no 'sins' that need confessing.

In light of this, Mann argues that it is of the utmost importance for Christian communities to rethink their liturgical practices that are more meaningful and relevant for such a 'sinless society'. He feels that 'it must be a liturgy that is recognizable to the self as one that carries something of their own story—or, at the very least, it must leave space so that their story can be told'. No doubt such a liturgy may be done well, but I fear it could too easily fall into therapeutic type liturgies, or the shallow liturgies of postmodern seeker-sensitive churches which already exist. Perhaps there is room for further reflection and experimentation for such liturgical practices.

Nevertheless, after reading the book, I am left wondering, surely whether we live in a 'sinless society' or not, all of us know the difference between right and wrong, and thus we are all aware of our own wrong doing, whether we are willing to call it out for what it is, is another matter.

4. Application

Despite the above weaknesses, *Atonement in a Sinless Society* certainly has much to offer in terms of Christian narrative and practice, by way of exciting and meaningful applications.

While I do not wish to diminish the substitutionary aspect of the atonement, and all its other important motifs, Mann's work might well prove to be a helpful guide for evangelism and mission in societies where sin is understood very differently from its traditional Christian counterpart. And while I am rather hesitant that preachers should omit the concept of a traditional understanding of sin, I do believe that issues of shame and how the atonement deals with this effectively could and should be included in preaching and Bible interpretation. Mann has already done some of the interpretation work for us. The same could be said for biblical counselling. I think there is much value in using some of Mann's ideas of shame, identity and personhood, especially in light of how these relate to the atoning work of Christ. As Christian parents, I believe it is important that our children are taught the traditional concept of sin (at least from a certain age), even *in* a 'sinless society', but with that said, I also believe that there is more than enough room to demonstrate how Jesus and his atoning death deals with our shame, making us whole persons reconciled to God (or the 'Other', as Mann puts it). I found Mann's theology very helpful here.

Perhaps I am most interested to see how Mann's theology and concepts might be adopted and interwoven into the arts, especially in creative writing, poetry, novels and the visual arts. I think of how N.D. Wilson's most recent film, *The River Thief* (2015) might have adopted some of these themes provocatively and wonderfully. As powerful and relevant I think penal substitution is, perhaps *Atonement in a Sinless Society*,

offers us new, fresh perspectives in which to think, and write meaningful narrative, and produce compelling cinematography for our time.

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