

Atonement: engaging with an emerging theology

Christopher de la Hoyde

Alan Mann's *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society* was published in 2005 as the debate over his claims in his book *The Lost Message of Jesus* (co-authored with Steve Chalke) continued to rage. Although Mann denies aiming to add fuel to the fire by publishing his own work, the majority of which was written in 1999, his work is nevertheless part of a growing movement among many self-professed evangelicals to displace the penal substitutionary atonement as the central and controlling model of Christ's atoning work on the cross, and to replace it with a message of 'acceptance without judgement'. Mann's ideas in *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society* are not simply a weightier consideration of the concepts outlined in *The Lost Message of Jesus*. While in the earlier publication, he and Chalke question the *validity* of the penal substitutionary model of the atonement, here his focus is on the *appropriateness* of such a model in today's postmodern, post-industrialised culture. His focus here is avowedly more 'missional' than 'theological'.

The aim of this paper is to show, through outlining and appraising Mann's central thesis, that, while much of Mann's analysis of contemporary society and the post-industrialised self is both instructive and challenging to our ways of communicating the gospel, the conclusions he draws are dangerous to our understanding and presentation of the truth about Jesus' work on the cross.

Mann's ideas

a. A 'sinless', chronically shamed society

Central to Mann's thesis is that, in our postmodern, post-industrialised Western society, the concept of sin has become polluted. 'One of the problems facing the church, and the issue at hand here, is that the word "sin" has become just as tainted, polluted and defiled in the postmodern mind as the word itself indicates.' Sin is caricatured as something pleasurable, fun, exciting. And 'the idea that such acts may be insults to God, to the fabric of the world, seems to be lost forever.'

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Mann goes on to argue that this pollution has come about for two reasons. First, it has grown out of a poor understanding of sin among Christians – that 'we are bad people because we do bad things.' The Church has missed the point that 'sin' is 'first and foremost about the quality of our relationships with each other, the world we live in and the God who created it.' Sin has thus been reduced to the 'presence of wrongful actions', rather than 'an absence of mutual, intimate, undistorted relating.' Because of this, 'the conservative option of preaching the sinfulness of humankind in the vain hope that people will come, hear and

respond to such a message' must be dropped. The word and concept of 'sin' have been so polluted to the modern mind, that it has been 'rendered almost useless as a descriptor of the needs and inadequacies of individuals in relating to "Others".'

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and confess: "Against you alone have I sinned".'*

Second, the word 'sin' has become distorted due to an absence of the 'Other' in the postmodern mind: 'driven by the ideals of therapy and consumption ... there is no goal for the actions of the self save the fulfilment of its desires.' Thus the only person against whom an individual can be said to have 'sinned' is against himself. 'To be self-centred is a twenty-first century virtue ... One who fails at "project self" must gaze into the mirror and confess: "Against you alone have I sinned".'

Any concept of guilt has therefore been rejected. The elevation of human rights above human responsibilities has led to a world where the self is always the victim, always 'more sinned against than sinner'. As Mann puts it, 'we move ever closer to a society free from personal guilt, free from the traditional religious language of sin.'

The postmodern, post-industrialised self is, however, far from content. But the centre of his or her discontent must be located somewhere other than convention categories of guilt. Instead it must be seen as a 'chronic, internalised dis-ease, typically labelled "shame".' This kind of shame is not to be confused with that experienced in cultures based on the honour and shame model of morality, where shame is concerned with wrong caused to another person. Rather, it is the inability of the 'real-self' to live up to the 'ideal-self', the inability to be the person we would have ourselves and others believe we are. In fact, the 'shamed person effectively ignores the "Other" as the individual becomes acutely aware of his or her own internal struggles.' He or she is concerned only with 'shoring up the self, making intimacy with the 'Other' impossible, and ensuring that the concept of responsibility, guilt or fault holds sway only with regard to the self.

b. An irrelevant doctrine

It is to a society like this that we must show the pertinence of the Christian gospel. How can we speak meaningfully and sufficiently to the chronically shamed, post-industrialised self? Mann asks. His answer: certainly not by preaching the traditional model of the atonement.

Mann does not argue, however, as he seems to in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, that the penal substitutionary model is invalid *per se*. 'That Jesus' death deals with sin and guilt is self-evident,' he writes.¹ Rather, drawing, he claims, on the example of Calvin, Abelard, Anselm and Irenaeus in employing diverse models of the atonement to appeal to the society in which they were living, Mann argues:

While we must not lose sight of any model that might bring reconciliation between Creator and creature, neither must we inflate one over and against any of the other possible interpretations of Jesus' work – especially ones that can speak more meaningfully and salvifically as the gospel rubs up against ever-new contexts.²

Penal substitutionary atonement cannot be seen as the model which 'interprets Jesus' death fully, completely, without remainder'. In fact, in a

¹ Alan Mann, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society* (Paternoster, 2005), 59

² Mann, 50

society where the post-modern self perceives his need as being saved from self-judgement, not from divine wrath, Mann argues that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as a means of engaging with the chronically-shamed self is almost entirely barren:

What the chronically shamed person craves above all else, is a self-consistency; an ontological coherence; that is, a wholeness of being ... The purpose of mission is to allow people to see how the gospel can bring about this desire.³

The penal substitutionary atonement model simply cannot respond to this. The chronically shamed self is already painfully aware that he or she is 'guilty, sinful, stained', that he or she fails to be what he or she wants to be. So any model of the atonement which focuses on this as the human being's essential problem will only serve to deepen this sense of shame. Because the postmodern self is what Mann terms a 'pre-moral being', unable to conceive of any 'sin' except against the self, such talk of guilt and sin that must be atoned for will only lead to further shame and isolation of the self. Penal substitutionary atonement cannot deal with the predicament of the chronically shamed self or fulfil the desire for ontological coherence and undistorted relating – it can achieve only the opposite.

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Furthermore, penal substitutionary atonement, Mann suggests, fails to reflect the richness of God's relationship with his creatures, focusing on a mechanical process of the removal of guilt, than on a loving relationship between God and human beings. Atonement has become 'associated with functional processes rather than with the zenith of a dynamic relationship between Creator and created.' While it may be appropriate to bring people eventually to see their sin and guilt, our preaching, discourse and liturgy centred around human deprivation and the need for forgiveness should be dropped in favour of a model that brings people 'reconciliation and atonement prior to dealing with issues of moral sin and guilt.'

c. Stories and salvation

In order to do this, Mann suggests that we need to understand the importance of narrative in our attempts to understand ourselves and the world around us. We are fundamentally story-telling creatures, he says, who are weaving together narratives about ourselves all the time, 'Narratives ... give a coherence to human lives.'⁴

This is particularly true in our postmodern society. For centuries, post-Enlightenment epistemologies rejected narrative and parable as ways of discovering truth, in favour of 'reason, rationality and logic'. However, the dominant grip that modernity had on our cultural and philosophical thinking has now begun to weaken, and we have become part of 'a world where truth and untruth, fact and fiction, history and myth are one and the same thing. In this world you are only human if you have a story to tell.'⁵

In fact, that is exactly what the chronically shamed person's 'ideal-self' is: an idealised story told by the self about the self. And it is the failure of the 'real-self' to live up to this story that creates the deep sense of internalised shame in the postmodern mind. As the stories fail to be

³ Mann, 38

⁴ Mann, 63

⁵ Mann, 66

realised, the self is unable to relate to the 'Other' for fear of being exposed, and is thus thrown into a constant state of crisis. Desperately and defensively it churns out more and more fabricated stories to itself and to the world around it, in an attempt to reinterpret the events in which it is caught up.

Mann argues that an understanding of how narrative functions is therefore of supreme importance in engaging with the postmodern self. He illustrates this by pointing us to the discipline of 'narrative therapy'. Narrative therapy has sprung out of the recognition of the plight of the 'storied-self' and the importance of narrative in constructing identity. Narratives can become prisons of meaninglessness that isolate and alienate the self, in which people are trapped rather than liberated. By helping the counselee, whose story about the world is failing and unable to meet his or her needs, to adopt a counter-narrative which will call into question and eventually displace the old story they have been telling about themselves, 'slowly the therapist and the counselee engage in co-authoring a new story. They construct a new identity.'

On this basis, Mann critiques the over-emphasis placed upon reason and logic in the church's modern-day presentation of the atonement, arguing for a return to the narrative models of evangelism thrown out by the Enlightenment. In a world where 'meaningfulness and sufficiency' are more important than truth, Christians must allow the biblical story to be heard as a narrative, and not simply a collection of 'soulless' facts. As he states:

For some, this is a worrying idea, and yet recognising this fact is of far greater value than any attempt to rationalise the story of salvation, or formalise it into statements of fact or truthful propositions, which have little meaningful credibility in a postmodern context. As a story, on the other hand, it has the potential to encounter the post-industrialised self in ways that are meaningful and sufficient and which may ultimately lead to a conversion of the storied-self.⁶

If the adoption of a new narrative is to be the way that the postmodern self will be converted and come to see the truth and uniqueness of the Christian claim, as he suggests, then Christians must work to find out how to present the Christian narrative so as best to engage with the society he finds himself in. Since the Bible is full of metaphors, symbolism and imagery about the atonement, some that involve sacrifice, some that do not, we must feel free to choose the narrative of the atoning work of Jesus that best speaks to the postmodern people with whom we are seeking to engage – we must try on versions to 'see how they fit'. In doing so, as he suggests, 'we will provide the grammar of faith out of which they can re-narrate a new, authentic ontologically coherent, "converted" self.'⁷ The postmodern self will be converted as they come to see themselves as a character in the story of which God is the author, and not themselves.

d. An alternative narrative

Mann turns therefore to the story of the last few hours of Jesus' life as told in the gospels for a counter-narrative which might be adopted by the chronically shamed self. As he says, 'The reader of the story ... needs the freedom to impress their emotion, intuition and imagination onto the narrative, so that it may become meaningful and sufficient for them, even if the Christian community may tremble at the relativism this implies.'⁸ Thus he finds three stories interwoven which might speak powerfully to the postmodern mind.

⁶ Mann, 91

⁷ Mann, 99

⁸ Mann, 123

e. Judas

Judas' plight represents the ontologically incoherent plight of the postmodern storied-self. As Judas' personal narrative collapses in the most dramatic way possible, Mann suggests that the chronically shamed self might be invited to identify with Judas' story. Judas fails to live up to the 'ideal-self' he has been narrating and becomes the ultimate 'anti-self', divided from himself and from others. His betrayal of Jesus turns him from failing to be 'for Jesus' to being actively against him, and his suicide is ultimately an attempt to hide from his 'real-self' once and for all. In all this, however, he must not be seen as merely a perpetrator – he is also a victim, as the disciples fail to follow him out into the darkness after the last supper and leave him to his fate, too absorbed in their own plight to care about him. Thus Judas offers to the chronically shamed self both a point of identification and a warning as to the ultimate isolation brought about by the way they are living: death.

f. The disciples

The disciples also serve as a point of identification in their inability to act consistently. Mann points us to Peter's narration of his 'ideal-self' in his declaration that he would not desert Jesus, and the failure of his 'real-self' to live up to that in his denial of Jesus. Likewise, the other disciples all fall down in their attempts to live lives of ontological coherence by failing to stand with Jesus as they had promised to. In this way, the reader is given the freedom to see in the plight of the disciples his or her own plight, not being 'against Jesus' but failing to be 'for him'. In identifying with the disciples there remains the possibility for change and 'conversion' as Jesus plays out his narrative, and they live through the story beyond crucifixion and through to resurrection.

g. Jesus

Mann's suggestion is that these two life-stories act as a foil to Jesus' own life-story, a backdrop against which Jesus' ontological coherence can be all the more vividly seen. Jesus narrates himself – his 'ideal-self' – throughout the gospels as he repeatedly declares his intention to die, but he does so most vividly in the narrative of the Last Supper as he symbolically acts out his death. But, as Mann points out, this will not be a death like Judas' death, the ultimate expression of his ontological incoherence and a separation from the self and from others. Rather it will be the ultimate expression of his ontological *coherence*, of his oneness with himself: 'Paradoxically, his intent to die will ultimately prove his narrative and ontological coherence. His willingness to go to Golgotha will be in continuity with his story.'⁹

For Mann, this is one of the most significant aspects of Jesus' atoning work – the ontological coherence it represents and offers. His willingness and determination in living out his 'ideal-self' even to the point of an intentional death brings with it the possibility of narrative coherence in a world where all other narratives fail. It is a counter-narrative which they might adopt as their own narrative. In this way, Jesus' death offers hope to the hopeless.

The reader is beckoned into the narrative by the hope that, perhaps, here is the narrative possibility of liberation from his or her own ontological incoherence, here is a counter-story with which to tell his or her own story.¹⁰

It is not just Jesus' oneness with himself, however, that is lived out through his death. He also lives out his oneness with others and with his Father. In his death, Mann suggests, Jesus demonstrates 'the constant

⁹ Mann, 112

¹⁰ Mann, 113

presence of mutual, undistorted, unpolluted relationship'. He continues to submit to his Father:

Despite this apparent abandonment by God, Jesus is unwilling to go down the same route. Almost in an act of 'forgiveness' toward his Father, Jesus maintains his relationship by offering the gift of his life to the 'Other', setting his death in the context of a person-to-person relationship.¹¹

What is more, he continues to act in relationship towards his fellow human-beings. His death was an act of being isolated, excluded, tormented and abandoned, separated from community. As Mann writes, 'Even before his last breath, Jesus was already "dead" because he was cut off from human relating, suspended between heaven and earth in a place of non-meaning.'¹² Yet he continued to act towards those tormenting him in undistorted relationship, praying, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.' This is to be seen as the purpose of his crucifixion. In dying, Jesus absorbed the relational dysfunction of others, and opened up the possibility for the mutual, unpolluted, undistorted relating with the self, with other human beings and with God that was previously absent.

The narrative of the cross is therefore to be seen as the offer of 'non-judgemental welcome', an offer backed up by Jesus' actions towards the woman caught in adultery in John 8 and his parable about the prodigal Son in Luke 15. In both of these instances, Mann suggests, Jesus is not interested with underlining the guilt and sin of the individual concerned, but with restoring the 'absence of mutual, unpolluted, undistorted relating' which was causing their shame. The cross brings atonement through the demonstration of the power of 'other-centred living', offering a counter-narrative, with which the chronically shamed self can be re-storied. As he writes, 'The cross ... is not a place of judgement for the inadequacies and insufficiencies of human relating. Indeed, it is a place of acceptance, of embracing the human condition. Atonement is the presence, of embracing the "Other" without condemnation.'¹³

But how is this re-storying to happen? How will the chronically shamed self be 'converted'? Mann suggests that it is through a retelling of the story of the crucifixion which weaves in the story of the individual to the story of Jesus, allowing the postmodern individual to identify with Jesus' story. To this end, he proposes that the church abandon its conventional liturgy on the communion service which invites the individual to speak of guilt and sin, and Jesus' penal substitutionary work on the cross. This only serves further to alienate the chronically shamed self. Instead, there should be a 'certain ambiguity' within the liturgy which allows the individual to find the aspect of the story which best suits his or her situation. The communion table, like the cross it represents, would therefore be a place of acceptance without judgement, where the storied-self could be gently and gradually restored into that mutual, unpolluted relating for which it was created. As Mann puts it:

It is the narrative moment in which we are called to go with Jesus to Golgotha, the place of human non-being, to put to death our ontologically incoherent, storied-self and exchange it for a meaningful and sufficient counter-story – a story of at-one-ment for a 'sinless' society.

¹¹ Mann, 136

¹² Mann, 138

¹³ Mann, 139

The good

There is much that is useful and insightful about Mann's ideas.

a. An engagement with society

First, his insight into the postmodern, post-industrialised, post-Christian culture is penetrating. He diagnoses accurately the taintedness of the word and concept of 'sin' in our society. He sees clearly the prevalence of rights over responsibilities and the ensuing culture in which 'fault' and 'guilt' are almost always displaced onto the other. And his recognition of the 'chronic, internalised dis-ease' of shame and its consequences of relationship breakdown is piercing. We really do live in a society in which the only sin considered serious is a failure of the 'real-self' to live up to the 'ideal-self', and where the 'Other' exists only to 'shore up the self'.

In our presentation of Christ's atoning work, it is imperative that we take on board such insights, that we heed the warning that, 'despite our confidence that we have the atonement pinned down, it remains anathema to the majority of people we encounter within our towns and cities because we insist on speaking a language that was once fruitful but is now incomprehensible.' Our tendency as evangelicals to use categories with which we are comfortable and to continue to stick with our traditional ways of communicating and reasoning is often more the result of laziness and arrogance than of theological conviction. We do indeed need to find a way of communicating the truth of the gospel to a postmodern, post-industrialised world in a language it understands.

b. Atonement more than a function

In the same way, Mann usefully warns us against the pitfall of reducing the atonement to a mere functional process and not 'the zenith of a dynamic relationship between creator and created.' Mann helpfully warns us against a 'thin' view of the human condition and an inadequate view of sin. Human beings are complex creatures and our concept of sin must be broad enough to encompass all the aspects of the human condition. To reduce sin to a set of actions which are displeasing to our Creator is to take sin out of the context of relationship, and fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of the creator's purpose for the human being to live in 'mutual, unpolluted, undistorted relationship' with himself and with each other. Sin is first and foremost about the breakdown of relationship.

Thus the atonement must be seen not just as a way of doing away with sin, as some cold dispassionate transaction whereby someone is punished in our place, but as the culmination of that relationship for which human beings were created.

c. The importance of narrative

Mann's recognition of the place of narrative in how we think about ourselves and our world is pertinent, particularly in our postmodern society which places so much importance on narrative for discovering truth. In such a culture, narrative must surely play a significant part in our initial engagement with people in terms of God's atoning work through Jesus.

After all, the cross-work of Jesus is presented throughout the New Testament as the culmination (so far!) of the story of God's reconciling for himself a people to be his own. God has not chosen to reveal himself in the form of concepts and ideas, but as the author and main character of an epic narrative. The atonement is not a set of theological propositions but, as stated before, the zenith of a dynamic relationship between God and man. In a world where apologetics and reasoning are no longer seen as reliable ways of demonstrating truth, then a retelling of God's work as a story must surely be the best way of engaging with contemporary individuals.

d. The gospels as narrative

An understanding of the significance of narrative will also inform and enhance our reading and presentation of the gospel accounts. If the people with whom we are seeking to engage are indeed storied beings telling stories about themselves, then we do need to engage with those stories and offer them a counter-narrative. Many of the individual stories within the gospels seem to be constructed in such a way as to allow this very easily to happen, consisting of an event in which Jesus does or says something significant together with the response of those around him. The reader is therefore able not only to see some aspect of Jesus and the progressive story of God's atoning work through Christ, but to see themselves implicated in the story as reflected in the responses of those around him. Mann's recognition of this in his retelling of the story of the last supper and crucifixion, though flawed as we shall see, does make good use of this aspect of the Gospels. Again the reader, rather than being asked to assent to a set of propositions about the atonement, is invited to see themselves in the story and to engage with the counter-narrative of God's atoning work in Jesus. For ultimately the substitutionary work of Jesus on the cross, as the culmination of God's atoning work for his people, is, as we shall see, the counter-narrative to counter all other narratives. Allowing people to have their own narratives critiqued and reshaped by that narrative is the essential work of the evangelist.

The bad

For all these useful and insightful points, however, Mann's work fails as an adequate representation of what Christ died to achieve. This failure can be seen on a number of levels.

a. A sin-denying society

First, there is the sense throughout that Mann, for all his engagement with a postmodern, post-industrialised, post-Christian culture, allows that culture to shape his understanding of the gospel and not the other way round. Thus he sees clearly that the 'sin' as a category is a non-signifier to the postmodern mind and that 'shame' is the presenting issue. Yet his diagnosis that this generation is more impervious to understanding its sin than any other before must surely be held up to question. While the word may currently be particularly unhelpful due to its connotations, human beings have always been reluctant to see themselves as accountable to an 'Other'. It has always been the role of the Holy Spirit alone to convict the world of 'sin and righteousness and judgement' (John 16:8). Thus the post-modern mind cannot be said to be more hardened to its accountability than any other – it is always a supernatural work to bring true conviction of sin.

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Rather, the chronic 'shame' he speaks of and its consequences for relationships with the self, the others and God, must surely be seen as an expression of that sin which is at the heart of the human condition: heart-rebellion against God. Men and women cannot be said to have merely failed at being 'for Jesus'. They are said expressly in scripture to be 'against him' (e.g. Colossians 1:21). That is the kernel of their problem. To relegate sin to one in a whole host of problems to be dealt with, to remove it from the centre of the human being's predicament with regard to God, is to deny the biblical witness (e.g. Romans 1-3), to fail to see to the core of the human problem and to allow one's culture to shape one's understanding of God, rather than the other way round. In his introduction, Mann says, 'The

task we are faced with, therefore, is not to go on a crusade to search out the sin that has hidden itself among the ruins of modernity.¹⁴ But surely that is exactly what we must do! While we heed Mann's warnings regarding the unhelpfulness of the language we use and the approach we take, surely our goal must be to show postmodern society and the chronically shamed individuals that the heart of their condition is indeed sin. Of course, in doing so, we must not allow that weak conception of sin as wrongful acts towards an angry God to hold sway. We must tell the biblical story of a God of grace who created the world. We must tell of a God of love who created human beings to be in relationship with him. We must tell of a race that has chosen to worship the self instead of God, of shattered relationships and a world under a curse. We must tell of a God of justice who hates evil and loves good, and who is passionately committed to justice and to punishing all evil. And we must tell of a God of who has acted throughout history to reconcile a people to himself, whose justice and love and grace were all satisfied and displayed in the zenith of that relationship – in the cross of Christ. But we must tell that story, and not allow our culture to warp our understanding of God's character and story.

b. A central doctrine

Penal substitutionary atonement is therefore at the heart of God's character and is the only means of dealing with the heart of our predicament as human beings. While paying attention to Mann's warnings about reducing the atonement to a functional process, we must reject Mann's suggestion that other models of the atonement might speak more pertinently and faithfully to different generations.

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As Howard Marshall has shown convincingly in his contribution to the debate on the atonement called by the Evangelical Alliance in July 2005, penal substitutionary atonement cannot be seen as one among many models to be 'tried on for size', as Mann suggests. The Bible does use many different metaphors to describe the atonement – sacrifice, curse, redemption, ransom, reconciliation, forgiveness, transfer. Yet, as Marshall shows convincingly: 'essentially the same basic principle is expressed in each of these different understandings of the death of Jesus. The principle of one person bearing the painful consequences of sin is the modus operandi of the different understandings of the cross.'¹⁵ Penal substitutionary atonement is therefore the central and controlling model out of which all the different metaphors flow.

Any understanding of the death of Jesus which seeks to downplay the punishment of Christ for our sins will of course be more attractive to any generation, as it also downplays human responsibility and divine justice. Yet any such understanding fails to deal with the heart of the human condition, and fails adequately to represent God's character as both just and the one who makes men right with himself.

c. God's story of salvation

Therefore, while we must not downplay the importance of narrative, and of allowing people to hear the Christian story and see themselves in it, we cannot simply play pick-and-mix with our understanding of the atonement. God does not give us merely a story. He also gives us he interpretative

¹⁴ Mann, 12

¹⁵ Howard Marshall, *A Theology of the Atonement*, www.eauk.org/theology .

clues to understanding the significance of that story through the rest of the New Testament. It is not simply a story that we can use to our own ends, which we may plunder and recreate and rewrite for our current needs.

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Thus Mann's use of the parable of prodigal son in Luke 15 and of the account of Jesus with the adulterous woman in John 8 must be called into question. Mann uses these stories to advocate a model of atonement based on acceptance without judgement. But he seems to have plucked them entirely out of their context and to have ignored the complementary truths of the rest of the New Testament witness about Jesus' work on the cross. While Mann states in his introduction and in his conclusion that he has overstated his case for the sake of provoking discussion, we must surely beware of adapting our understanding of the atonement based on a thesis so devoid of rigorous biblical argument and so shallow in its dealing with the theological issues involved.

The biblical story of the atonement is a rich and fulsome account of a God who has intervened in history in love and grace and justice, to demonstrate his holiness, to reconcile to himself a people, and to address the heart of our human condition through the atoning work of his son on the cross. Ultimately, we must conclude that, while Mann's attempt to engage with society is admirable, it is ultimately out of a desire to conform to the pattern of society rather than critique it, that his thesis flows. His concern, above all, seems to be to remove from the message of the atonement anything that might offend the contemporary mind. And surely that is always the first step towards serious compromise.

Christopher de la Hoyde co-leads a new church plant which is part of the Crowded House network in Sheffield. He is currently a third year student with the Northern Training Institute.

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info@northerntraininginstitute.org
www.northerntraininginstitute.org
www.theporterbrooknetwork.org