

THE ATONEMENT AND SUBSTITUTION

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MODERN SCHOLARS in general are inclined to view the cross as a many-sided process. They repeat with genial approbation 'Theories of the atonement are right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny' and proceed to affirm the truth in the theories of people as diverse as the early Fathers, Anselm, Abelard, Luther, and others. They agree that there are more facets than one man can well take in, and that therefore we must have many approaches to the problem. But curiously one exception appears commonly to be made in this general chorus of goodwill. Penal substitution is firmly excluded from the happy circle. It may be given a hesitant commendation in the early stages of the discussion, but in the final assessment no significant place is assigned to it. (A refreshing exception is J. W. C. Wand's recent work, *The Atonement* (London, 1963), in which the author deals sympathetically with substitution, transaction and satisfaction as well as exemplarist views, the concept of victory, vicarious penitence, and mystical union. He finds value in them all.)

This is to ignore an important strand of biblical teaching. In the New Testament substitution is not the whole truth about the atonement, but it certainly is part of the truth. Thus it is impossible to give adequate consideration to Mark 10: 45, 'For verily the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many', without seeing a reference to substitution. This is implied in the concept 'ransom', and expressed in the presupposition *anti*. Again, the agony in Gethsemane appears meaningless without the concept of substitution. It could not have been death as such which agitated our Lord. Lesser men have often faced death calmly, including not a few who owed their whole inspiration to Him. It was not death, but the kind of death that He faced, that troubled Him. It was a death in which He would take the place of sinners. This is seen also in the cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mk. 15: 34). There are mysteries here, and I do not think that any man has been able to explain how one Person of the Trinity could be forsaken by another. But that does not give us licence to empty the words of their plain meaning. Some 'explanations' of the words amount to a rewriting of them. Others suggest that Jesus was mistaken. Both seem to be evasions due to an unwillingness to face that to which the words point. They indicate that Christ was dying the death of sinners and that therefore His intimate communion with the Father was broken for the time being.

NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

Substitution is involved in the prophecy of Caiaphas, 'that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not'. This is explained as a prophecy 'that Jesus should die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God that are scattered abroad' (Jn. 11: 50ff.). The repeated statement in 1 John that Jesus is 'the propitiation for our sins' (1 Jn. 2: 2; 4: 10) points in the same direction. It means that the wrath of God formerly rested on sinners, but that because of the propitiatory death of Jesus that wrath no longer rests on them. It is difficult to understand this other than as a way of saying that Jesus bore that wrath, *i.e.* that He took the place of sinners.

This is to be seen also in several Pauline statements. Thus Paul tells us that God made Christ 'to be sin on our behalf' (2 Cor. 5: 21). With this we should take the other statement that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us' (Gal. 3: 13). It is difficult to see what these passages mean other than that Christ in His death bore the full consequences of man's sin. He stood in the place of sinners. This will also be the case with Romans 3: 21-26. In this passage Paul's line of argument is that God is shown to be just in the means whereby sin is for-

given. He is not arguing, as some modern scholars suggest, that God is shown to be just in the fact that He forgave sin. It is not forgiveness as such, but forgiveness in a particular way, forgiveness by the way of the cross, which Paul sees as demonstrating that God is just. I do not see how we can escape the conclusion that He is seeing in Christ's cross the meeting of the full demands of the law, *i.e.* Christ has borne what sinners should have borne. This is probably the reasoning also behind several passages in which Paul speaks of Christ as being closely identified with sinners in His death (*e.g.* Rom. 6: 3ff.; 2 Cor. 5: 14). And we should not overlook the reference to Christ as 'a substitute-ransom (*antilutron*)' for men (1 Tim. 2: 6). This must surely mean that He paid a ransom in their stead.

Then there are passages which speak of Christ as bearing our sins (Heb. 9: 28; 1 Pet. 2: 24). The force of these sayings is often missed because men do not give attention to the Old Testament background. The bearing of sin is not a common New Testament concept, and the context does not explain the term in either of the passages noted. However the idea is found tolerably often in the Old Testament where passages like Numbers 14: 33 and Ezekiel 18: 19f. make it clear that the bearing of sin means the bearing of the penalty of sin. It does not, as some modern treatments suggest, mean enduring with as good a grace as possible the opposition of sinners. It is the penalty of sin, the consequences of sin, that is in mind when sin-bearing is referred to. Thus when Christ is said to have borne our sins the meaning is that He has borne our penalty. He has taken our place.

It is thus clear enough that substitution is a persistent strand of New Testament teaching. It is not the whole, but it is an important part.

Despite this persistent scriptural evidence most modern scholars refuse to take the concept of substitution seriously. Mostly it is characterized as hopelessly immoral and few recent theologians feel the need to give it sustained attention. It is enough for most of them to note its appearance as a historical fact and its survival as an historical curiosity. But this is no way to treat a seriously held conviction argued on solid scriptural grounds. It must be accorded careful examination and rejected only if the evidence warrants it. And in this case it most certainly does not.

IS SUBSTITUTION IMMORAL?

The charge that substitution is immoral must be taken seriously. If this really is the case, then it is difficult to see how Christian men can retain the view, or, for that matter, how they could ever have held it. But is it? When the objection is examined closely it will be seen to rest on the view that substitution is a completely external transaction. The Father is thought of as one Person, the Son as another, and the sinner as a third. The Father has in mind to punish the sinner. Into this situation steps the Son, separate from both. He proceeds to intervene, taking the sinner out of the way and standing in his place.

This view is rightly to be rejected. Substitution must be understood carefully and this is not the biblical understanding of it. When the Bible talks about substitution it does not view it as operating in this fashion. For the writers of the New Testament it is tremendously important that Christ is one with the Father, and that, from another point of view, He is one with sinners. He is one with the Father and therefore His substitutionary bearing of sin means that God Himself bears our sin. He does not stand idly by while some third party shoulders the burden of the guilty. He bears it Himself.

But also the Son is one with sinners. He has a right to suffer for us, for He is one with us. The New Testament insists again and again that the saved are 'in' Christ. The Church is spoken of as a body of which Christ is the head. The one-ness of Christ with His people is important in trying to estimate the Bible's teaching on substitution.

It must moreover be borne in mind that there are dangers in rejecting out of hand the whole concept of substitution. To say that substitution is immoral and quite unthinkable comes easily to modern theologians. But such a position seems to have calamitous consequences which are not usually faced. If Christ did not stand in my place, if He did not take my sin upon

Him, then my sin remains upon me. What other possibility lies open? To rule out substitution as immoral seems to carry with it the implication that redemption is impossible. This calamitous consequence should be faced by all who deny substitution.

SUBSTITUTION AND REPRESENTATION

In any case those who deny the possibility of substitution commonly accept the category of representation. Indeed this is the usual way in which they face the scriptural evidence that we have adduced for substitution. Some of the evidence, they say, means representation but not substitution. Where the teaching of the ancient writer is clearly substitution they feel they cannot accept it, and maintain that representation preserves all that is of value in substitution without suffering from its defects.

To this two things should be said. In the first place, representation, as a theological term, suffers from lack of definition. Most people who use it never stop to explain what they mean by it. It is interesting to notice that the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that representation means 'the fact of standing for, or in place of, some other thing or person, esp. with a right or authority to act on their account; substitution of one thing or person for another'. Such a definition shows the very great difficulty of formulating a clear difference between representation and substitution. Unless we are careful we find that all that we are doing is exchanging one form of words for another, but with no essential change of meaning. The thought of Christ's suffering as representative is much closer than many people think to the idea that it is substitutionary.

The second thing to say about this idea is that where we can legitimately distinguish between representation and substitution the latter appears to be the superior idea. In representation there is the thought of personal choice, of personal delegation. What distinguishes representation from substitution is that representatives have responsibility delegated to them by those they represent, whereas in the case of substitution no such initiative rests with the delegators. Once we realize this we see that representation for all its current popularity is not an outstanding category whereby to interpret the atonement. It leaves the initiative in the hands of man where the Bible rests it squarely in the hands of God.

It would seem that one reason why many theologians are suspicious of the concept of substitution is that they feel it allows the sinner to continue happily in his sin, secure in the knowledge that his Substitute has taken away his penalty. He has nothing to fear and he can continue in his sin. This is ruled out by the Bible view that the sinner is at one with his Saviour. The substitution the Bible speaks of is substitution like that which T. F. Torrance has in mind when he talks of 'a substitution where the guilty does not shelter behind the innocent, but such a substitution that the guilty is faced with the Light, that man is dragged out of his self-isolation and brought face to face with God in His compassion and holiness.' (*The Scottish Journal of Theology*, vii, p. 252.)

It is important to realize that substitution as the New Testament sees it is not an external thing at all. The man for whom Christ has died is caught up in Christ's action. He sees sin in a measure as Christ sees it and his whole life is affected as a result.

In the last resort it would seem that we are shut up to three possibilities. One is that Christ's death did nothing to our sins. He simply suffered out of love to man and the whole effect of His death is its influence on us. The second possibility is that Christ bore our sins, that He took our place, that He was in short our substitute. The third possibility is that Christ did not actually bear our penalty but something different which effects more or less the same thing. The inadequacies of the moral view are too well known to need comment here. The third view is essentially that of Duns Scotus, the view of *acceptilatio*. This view has been rejected wherever it has been seriously studied. It is a great pity that modern theologians do not stop to reflect how often their theories reduce ultimately to this one. If the first and the third views are inadequate we are left with the thought of substitution. Christ died in our stead.