

# THE CROSS AND SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

A paper about the atonement should need no justification. If the doctrine is under attack (as it frequently is) then there is a need to expound and defend it biblically against its cultured despisers. Even if it is not explicitly under attack, the centrality of the atonement to Christian doctrine requires that we continue to preach it and teach it. So, whether in season or out of season, we all need to be theologians of, and preachers of the atonement.

The focus here will be on the aspect of the atonement usually termed 'substitution', for which Robert Letham's and Karl Barth's definitions are helpful:

Christ himself willingly submitted to the just penalty which we deserved, receiving it on our behalf and in our place so that we will not have to bear it ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

In His doing this for us, in His taking to Himself – to fulfil all righteousness – our accusation and condemnation and punishment, in His suffering in our place and for us, there came to pass our reconciliation with God.<sup>3</sup>

Although these definitions understand substitution in terms of substitutionary punishment, the issue of penalty will not be treated here below.<sup>4</sup> I intend in this paper simply to answer three questions in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper arose out of an invitation to speak on this subject to the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society in April 2003. I am grateful to the committee for this invitation, and to the members of the society for their incisive questions. I should also thank Garry Williams and Stephen Catto for their very helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester, 1993), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, CD IV/1, p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed it elsewhere, in my 'Justified by Faith, Justified by his Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4.25', in D. A. Carson, P. T.

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connection with substitution. First, *is substitution still important?* Second, *is substitution still alive?* Third, *is substitution still biblical?* The aim of this third section will be to sift the evidence which has traditionally been used, but also to offer two suggestions of new areas of biblical material which might usefully be taken on board in future discussions of substitution.

### I. IS SUBSTITUTION STILL IMPORTANT?

When does a gospel become a false gospel? Paul knew a heresy when he saw it in Galatia, but Galatians gives us no hard and fast principles to define the limits of acceptable doctrine. This question of where lines should be drawn has become an issue much discussed currently in the USA with the rise of openness theism, a controversy which seems to have aroused much more than common discomfort. The most recent book on the subject is entitled *Beyond the Bounds*, which as the title suggests, argues that openness theism is not only wrong but dangerously wrong.<sup>5</sup> In this volume, there is a useful essay by Wayne Grudem which is not focused specifically on the issue of openness theism, but attempts to tackle more widely the problem of heresy. He gives, among other things, some helpful general criteria to assess what constitutes false teaching: for example, under the heading of 'Effect on personal and church life', he asks questions such as, 'Will this false teaching bring significant harm to people's Christian lives, or to the work of the Church?'<sup>6</sup> This question is significant for our consideration of the *status* of the doctrine of substitution.

The principal reason for this is that it seems to be logically impossible to have true assurance of salvation if we do not accept that Christ died in our place. The problem with logic of course is that people are not always so consistent that they will inevitably be so logical. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if we do not believe that Christ has in *his* death exhausted the punishment that *we* would otherwise face, then we cannot be certain of escaping the consequences of our sin. Assurance is no optional add-on to the gospel, or something reserved for senior saints: the New Testament constantly asserts or presupposes that assurance of future salvation in Christ is part and parcel of the Christian life. Romans 8:31-39

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O'Brien, M. A. Seifrid (eds), *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume II: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Tübingen/Grand Rapids, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> J. Piper, J. Taylor, P. K. Helseth (eds), *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> W. Grudem, 'When, Why and for What Should We Draw New Boundaries?', in Piper *et al.* (eds), *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 363.

is one of the most well-known expressions of Christian assurance, in which Paul exhorts his readers: 'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' The ultimate basis for salvation and assurance in Romans 8 is elaborated at the beginning of the chapter: Christian believers have passed *from* being bound to the Law of sin and death *to* the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ (8:2). Hence, 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (8:1). This is grounded in the atoning work of Christ, in which through the punishment of sin in his flesh, the goal of the Law is reached. Passages such as John 10:11-18 and 1 Peter 1:3-9 are clearly written with a similar aim of instilling assurance. The New Testament, then, assumes that the believer should be able to sing Daniel Webster Whittle's close paraphrase of 2 Timothy 1:12:

I know Whom I have believed,  
And am persuaded that He is able  
To keep that which I've committed  
Unto Him against that day.

There are two contrasting possibilities if one rejects substitution. The first and more obvious consequence of abandoning assurance rooted in the cross of Christ is presumably insecurity at the prospect of judgement. Calvin brings out this point with his characteristic clarity:

We must specially remember this substitution in order that we may not be all our lives in trepidation and anxiety, as if the just vengeance, which the Son of God transferred to himself, were still impending over us.<sup>7</sup>

Calvin rightly recognizes that no doctrine is an island, and sees clearly the practical, pastoral relevance of substitution.

The alternative to this 'trepidation and anxiety' is that rejection of substitution leads to a *false* assurance, as a person is led to rely on something *other than the cross*, whether that be confidence in doctrinal orthodoxy, in membership of the correct ecclesiastical party, or in one's moral calibre.

The integral connection between substitution and assurance is one principal reason, I think, for defending the doctrine of substitution so

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.5. Quoted in M. Davie, 'Dead to Sin and Alive to God', *SBET* 19 (2001), p. 162.

vehemently. As Fitzsimmons Allison argued in his instructively titled book *The Cruelty of Heresy*, one of the central aspects of false teaching is that it has pastorally disastrous consequences.<sup>8</sup> It is very difficult sometimes to argue that some doctrines are heretical because they detract from God's glory, or even in some cases, that they are inconsistent with Scripture. In the case of substitution, however, it seems that the combination of the Bible's clarity on the issue (as we will see below) and the fact that it is an essential requirement for assurance means that it is not a legitimate area of disagreement among Christians.

## 2. IS SUBSTITUTION STILL ALIVE?

### A REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE BY LETHAM, PETERSON AND TIDBALL

At the present time we are actually extremely well served with good literature on the subject. There is of course a lot of bad literature on the atonement, but three recent books in particular are excellent examples of both polemical (in the good sense) defence of the faith, and constructive exposition of doctrine according to its inner logic. The three books are Robert Letham's *The Work of Christ*,<sup>9</sup> *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, edited by David Peterson,<sup>10</sup> and Derek Tidball's *The Message of the Cross*.<sup>11</sup> All three defend the classic doctrine of penal substitution.

#### *Letham*

Robert Letham's *The Work of Christ* has the advantage of not being a book about the cross *per se*; rather it follows the pattern of the traditional taxonomy of the work of Christ as the threefold office: Christ as *prophet*, as *priest*, and as *king*. As one might expect, the account of the atonement comes under the second head, as part of Christ's priestly work. He expounds the doctrine of the atonement principally in terms of *penal* substitution. The Levitical sacrificial system, he argues, provides evidence of the penal doctrine in the OT, and Letham's exegesis is generally maximalist in its interpretation of OT texts in penal-substitutionary terms.

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<sup>8</sup> C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (London, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Contours of Christian Theology; Leicester, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> D. Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> D. Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (Bible Speaks Today Bible Themes; Leicester, 2001).

Corresponding to this are the key NT passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18, and so on. Relying on Leon Morris, Letham sees the principal argument for substitution in the preposition *for* (Christ dying *for* us), and in the famous reference to propitiation (*hilastērion*) in Romans 3:25. (We will be returning to these biblical passages later.) He goes on to *defend* the doctrine of penal substitution, arguing both against theological objections, and the caricature of the penal doctrine as 'stock exchange divinity'. This is an image drawn from Edward Irving via Colin Gunton, parodying penal substitution as a kind of mechanical commercial transaction.<sup>12</sup> Letham comments: 'Talk of penal substitution as "stock exchange divinity" is simply a coded message; its author means "I do not like it".' (p. 137).<sup>13</sup> The distinctive emphases of Letham's book are a welcome integration of the cross into the work of Christ as a whole, and an emphasis on the death of Jesus in the wider context of his earthly ministry. He notes the way in which penal substitution does not push aside other models of the atonement. While Letham provides an elegant exposition of the doctrine in itself and in the face of critics, it is a shame that the section ends with the rather damp squib of some reflections on Anglican and Roman Catholic dialogue. Again, much of the theological meat of Letham's discussion about the atonement comes in an appendix on limited atonement at the end of the book. But these are rather superficial criticisms of a book full of excellent theological exposition.

### *Peterson et al.*

The book *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* is a multi-authored work, but all the chapters really provide a justification for the ongoing importance of penal substitution today. Editor David Peterson contributes two chapters on the biblical evidence ('Atonement in the Old Testament' and 'Atonement in the New Testament'). Garry Williams' chapter is entitled 'The Cross as Punishment for Sin', and there are essays by M. Ovey ('The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament') and P. Weston ('Proclaiming Christ Crucified Today'). All the contributors are, or at least were, lecturers at Oak Hill Theological College, a Church of England training institution.

The various chapters make some points which emerge again and again. The biblical section of the book focuses rightly on the scapegoat part of Leviticus 16, rather than on the offerings whose blood is sprinkled in the

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<sup>12</sup> See C. Gunton, 'Two Dogmas Revisited: Edward Irving's Christology', *SJT* 41 (1988), p. 367.

<sup>13</sup> Letham, *Work of Christ*, p. 137.

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Holy of Holies. Peterson and Williams identify the phrase 'bearing the sins' as tantamount to 'bearing punishment', and assert that the scapegoat does both: they argue for the penal dimension in that the goat goes to its death,<sup>14</sup> and to an *eretz gezerah* ('place of cutting off') in Leviticus 16:22.<sup>15</sup> Then the book argues that the motif of substitution comes to a high point in Isaiah 53, where Israel's salvation is connected very directly with the servant, who is identified as a scapegoat.

Peterson's first chapter helpfully picks up the observation in the Isaiah commentary of John Oswalt, which points out that the emphasis in Isaiah 53:4 is on 'he' who does something for *us*. (This is a point which we will stress further later.) The observation is of 'the repeated contrast within the Song between what "he" the Servant does or endures and the "we", "us" or "their" group'.<sup>16</sup> The substitutionary aspect is particularly clear in the emphatic language of 53:11, which Oswalt renders as 'it is *their* iniquities that *he* carries'.<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 53:4 could also be said to make a similar point: 'our sicknesses *he* carried'.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* is on the way in which this is taken up in 1 Peter. And we shall see later the same pattern in numerous Pauline statements.

The final chapter of the book does not follow the general approach of *defending* the doctrines of penalty and substitution. Nevertheless, it provides some very salutary points which should influence the way in which we reflect on, and preach substitution. The general focus of the chapter is on the need for us to trust the biblical narratives in our preaching and not be over-reliant on illustrations. In particular, we should not use illustrations primarily to 'clinch' the argument. Moreover, Weston also observes how a number of illustrations of substitution popularly used can actually have very unhelpful theological implications. The example which he takes is the often-used illustration of substitution from *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, where the Japanese prison camp officer finds a shovel missing and threatens to execute all the prisoners if nobody owns up to the theft. One person steps forward to confess, and is executed, although later

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<sup>14</sup> Williams notes that one meaning of *azazel* is 'complete destruction'.

<sup>15</sup> The jury is still out, however, on whether this is the correct interpretation, as the phrase could simply mean a distant place. Wenham, however, lists both options as possibilities without adjudicating between them. See G. J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, 1979), pp. 233-5.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, 'Cross as Punishment for Sin', p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> J. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66* (Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 388, cited in Williams, 'Cross as Punishment for Sin', p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 386, cited in Williams, 'Cross as Punishment for Sin', p. 80.

it is discovered that due to a miscount, there had not in fact been a missing shovel. But the innocent man had died as a substitute for the many. Weston objects that over-use of emotive illustrations often leads the hearer away from the biblical text, and to focus more on the illustration. What he is equally concerned about, however, is the portrait of *God* which such an illustration paints. Weston's chapter rightly calls for a properly trinitarian understanding of the atonement, wherein God himself undertakes to receive the penalty for sin on our behalf. All talk which carries the implication of a divine punishment on a third party needs the corrective of the theology of the 'self-substitution of God' (Stott) or 'the judge judged in our place' (Barth).

### *Tidball*

Derek Tidball's *The Message of the Cross* is organised principally around passages of Scripture, rather than around the components of the doctrine of the cross. If Letham's book has the merit of setting the theology of the atonement within the wider area of Christ's work more broadly, then Tidball sets it within a wider New Testament theology of the cross. Themes such as the folly of the cross in preaching (pp. 200-215), the ministry of proclaiming reconciliation (pp. 225-6), and 'a cruciform way of life' (p. 232) also occupy a key place. These sections constitute the theological meat of the book, but in general there is an excellent devotional tone, as the book begins with a review of the understanding of the cross in evangelical history and spirituality, and ends with the great hymns of praise in Revelation.

The middle part of the book deals with the four Gospel narratives. Here, Tidball holds back from seeing substitution here and propitiation there, and instead allows the narrative power of the accounts to shine through. Tidball defends the view that Jesus identifies himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah 52-53, but does not theologize much beyond that here.

Perhaps the most interesting section of the book is the first, which deals with Old Testament anticipations of the cross. He affirms quite rightly the clear presentation of substitution in the Passover, and in Isaiah 52-53, and also deals with Genesis 22 and Psalm 22. In his treatment of Leviticus 16, Tidball focuses on the blood sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, and only devotes a sentence to the scapegoat, which is more clearly substitutionary. He contends that substitution underlies the presentation of the sacrifices in the Levitical system here, which is a fair position to argue. The problem, however, comes when he responds to those who are reluctant to understand the slaughtered offerings in Leviticus 16 in substitutionary terms. He comments: 'The sophisticated objections of

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contemporary men and women sometimes seem to arise more from pride than from anything else. They stand against the long and forceful current of the church's history' (p. 77). The problem with the argument here is not so much with the content: when it comes to the clear depiction of substitution in Isaiah 53 and in the NT, I would be tempted to agree. The problem is more with applying this, as Tidball does, specifically to the Levitical system. Leviticus 16 is extremely complicated, and Tidball does not show his usual care here in dealing with the different scholarly interpretations.

He is on much more solid ground in his treatment of Isaiah 53. Interestingly, he highlights the connection between the 'suffering servant' and the scapegoat, rather than with the sin offerings and the burnt offering. Here, Tidball's criticisms of Paul Fiddes hit the nail on the head. Comments of Fiddes such as 'if the cross of Christ has power to turn the sinner towards good, we may truly say that it wipes away sin' and 'the Song of the Suffering Servant SHOWS us the power of sacrifice to transform other human lives'<sup>19</sup> receive this response: 'to conclude that the full extent of God's purpose was to bring sinners to repentance by influencing them through the example of the servant is grossly deficient' (p. 108). His explanation of the substitutionary character of Isaiah 52-53 echoes what we noted in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, a point which Tidball makes extremely well: 'the emphatic nature of the interplay between HE and OUR in these verses suggests that substitution... is in mind' (p. 107).

With this observation in mind, we can turn to a reassessment of some of the biblical evidence. But I hope that it is also clear from a brief overview of these books that reports that penal substitution is dead (whether from triumphalistic liberals or over-anxious evangelicals!) are greatly exaggerated.

### 3. IS SUBSTITUTION STILL BIBLICAL?

Tidball's remark on Leviticus 16 above indicates the need to be clear about where substitution is in the Bible, and where it is not. Whatever position one takes on Leviticus 16, what should be avoided is the sense one gets from Tidball's exposition that in denying that substitution is in a particular part of the Bible is to deny that it is in the Bible at all. I will attempt here, then, to provide something of an analysis of what I perceive

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<sup>19</sup> P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London, 1989), pp. 79-80.



has been helpful and unhelpful in wider biblical scholarship on this question.

The basis of substitution should, in my view, begin with Genesis 1-3, and the understanding that sin leads to death. In Genesis 2, God issues the threat of death for sin: 'you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die' (Gen. 2:17). In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve receive the penalty of death for their sin (Gen. 3:22-23) and this is maintained in the continual references in the OT to the fact that one dies because of sins, usually one's own. To take one example, in 1 Kings 16:18-19, Zimri 'died for the sins which he had committed in his evil-doing before the Lord'. The NT formulae subvert that expectation of dying for one's own sins in saying that Christ died. Christ had no sin, and yet died for sins. We are sinners, and yet will not die for our sins. We can see very clearly the point about the pattern 'he... for us' or 'he... for them' in the following examples:

Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6)

Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8)

Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3)

he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21)

who gave himself for our sins (Gal. 1:4)

who gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13)

who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:6)

and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)

the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11)

Christ suffered for you (1 Pet. 2:21)

He himself bore our sins in his body (1 Pet. 2:24a)

By his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet. 2:24b)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3:18)

These examples constitute a significant number of cases of the 'he... for us', or 'he... for them' pattern. However, it is not the case that all statements about Christ's death '*for us*' require the meaning 'in our place': the meaning of 'for' can be 'for the benefit of'. Nevertheless, the fact of the interchangeability of statements about Christ's death *for sins* and Christ's death *for us* indicates a substitution. If the statements were limited to talk of Christ's death 'for us', then it is possible that the continual implication was of Christ's death *for our benefit*, rather than *in our place*. Statements

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about Christ's death *for our sins*, on the other hand, mean *taking the consequences of our sins*. The biblical assumption is that death is the consequence of sin, and therefore Christ takes that consequence even though the sin is not his own. In his death, Christ receives the penalty that was due to us.<sup>20</sup> While it would in theory be possible to develop this in a non-penal way, in fact it is at this point in the logic where substitution and penalty become very difficult to prise apart.

In my view, this kind of evidence is much more compelling than complex arguments about the identification of the *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25. It also has the advantage of being very much easier to explain in the pulpit. If we are to assess in retrospect the significance of the Dodd-Morris debate over expiation and propitiation, it is Morris's arguments more broadly for a proper understanding of divine wrath which have survived the exegetical test.<sup>21</sup> Dodd's frankly feeble arguments for the immanent character of divine wrath simply do not work for Romans 1-2, which is precisely where they need to work if his argument about expiation in Romans 3 is to be believed. On the other hand, Morris's arguments for a clear meaning of 'propitiation' from *hilastērion* in Romans 3:25 are not straightforward either, as they rely on pagan Greek parallels to counterbalance the fact that the OT evidence points in a different direction.<sup>22</sup> A growing number of evangelical and non-evangelical commentators tend to view the reference to Jesus as *hilastērion* much more in terms of the *mercy-seat* of Leviticus 16, where the term *hilastērion* clearly does mean 'mercy-seat'. The idea of propitiation is much better derived from the flow of the argument more broadly, and the idea of specifically *penal* substitution perhaps comes more easily from Romans 8:3 than from Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly, *ransom* has to imply substitution, although the dominant image is of *price*, rather than of *place*.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris's main works here are *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London, 1965) and *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1965).

<sup>22</sup> Morris's argument that *hilastērion* cannot refer to the object of the mercy-seat on the basis of the absence of the article must now be considered invalid on linguistic grounds. Since *hilastērion* is the *complement* in the sentence, one would not expect an article. The propitiation view (not necessarily based on Morris's old linguistic evidence) is still followed however by D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1996), esp. pp. 234-6, and Peterson, 'Atonement in the Old Testament', pp. 41-2.

<sup>23</sup> However, the demonstration of the divine justice in Rom. 3:25-26 does, in my view, point to a penal understanding of Christ's death. (See my forthcoming essay, 'Justified by Faith, Justified by his Blood: The

Similarly, when one looks at the sacrificial system, there is additional complexity there. Part of the problem is that in German scholarship there is considerable support for the idea of substitution, but not substitution (let alone *penal* substitution) in the sense in which Anglo-American theologians would generally understand it.<sup>24</sup> The view of scholars such as Gese is that in bringing the sin-offering, the worshipper is making an offering which by its death represents the total dedication of the worshipper. Although this may well not be right, the issues surrounding the debate are difficult. Despite the fact, then, that some evangelicals have traditionally invested a lot in the sin-offerings, and the *hilastērion*, I would suggest caution here. This is by no means to say that these are ruled out as evidence, but I would be inclined to encourage more boldness in the 'death for sins' formulae than in some of these other images.

## TWO PROPOSALS

Finally, it may be stimulating to consider two themes which are not ordinarily employed in expositions of substitutionary atonement.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The first is the idea of ransom in Mark 10:45.<sup>25</sup> A point which surprises me in the three books I have mentioned is that they focus (rightly) on the Isaiah background to Mark 10:45, but not on the legal background in Exodus, which probably provides clearer evidence of substitution.<sup>26</sup> This mirrors a strikingly consistent pattern in the commentaries. They mention

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Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:25', in Carson, O'Brien, Seifrid (eds), *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume II: The Paradoxes of Paul.*

<sup>24</sup> See for example H. Gese, 'Atonement', in *Essays on Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, 1981), pp. 93-116. This line of thought has had an enormous influence in Germany on both OT and NT scholars, such as Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher.

<sup>25</sup> France defines *lutron* ('ransom') as 'deliverance by payment of an "equivalent"': R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle, 2002), p. 420.

<sup>26</sup> Peterson, 'Atonement in the Old Testament', p. 30, following C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge, 1959), p. 342, attempts to include the ransom language as part of the Isaiah background by arguing that *lutron* is a possible rendering of *asham* in Isa. 53:10, but this is difficult, as *lutron* language never translated *asham* in the LXX.

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Exodus in passing if at all, and then proceed immediately to a long discussion of the apparently far more interesting material in Isaiah. This is true of the commentaries by Cranfield, Lane, Evans and France.

In Mark 10:45 here, Jesus will 'give his life', a phrase clearly meaning to die. The sense of the term 'ransom' is not immediately obvious. In the modern context, it evokes the image of the kidnapper who abducts, for example, a child, and then communicates with the parents in order to procure the payment of a price, on condition of which he will set the child free. Nor is the general OT language of Israel's national restoration particularly closely related to Mark 10:45.<sup>27</sup> The closest parallel to the language of Jesus here in fact comes in the Old Testament judicial law. In Exodus 21, the judicial principles are explained, according to which any who commit murder are themselves subject to capital punishment: 'Anyone who strikes someone a fatal blow shall surely be put to death' (Exod. 21:12). The chapter delineates what the fair ways are to restitute losses, when one has incurred them at another's expense. The same chapter contains the classic expression of measure-for-measure restitution, *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*: 'If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.' (Exod. 21:23-24).

A few verses later is the case of the goring bull. If a bull gores a person to death, the bull must be stoned (21:28). However, if it emerges that the bull has a track record of goring, then the owner of the bull is held responsible for not restraining the bull properly. In this case, the owner is liable for the death penalty:

If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death (21:29).

There is a codicil added to this clause, however. It is possible for the owner to escape death by paying (presumably to the family of the victim) whatever they ask:

However, if payment is demanded, the owner shall give a ransom for his life, whatever is demanded (21:30).

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<sup>27</sup> See for example, M. D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, 1994), p. 55, following her earlier work.

Similar language is used later on in the book of Exodus, where during the course of the census, each Israelite must pay the Lord with an offering, in order that he might not receive judgement:

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must give the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them'. (Exod. 30:12).

These passages each share in common with Mark 10:45 a connection between 'giving', 'ransom' and '(his) life': the idea of payment (as in Jesus *giving* his life) to avoid legal retribution, or to avoid the punishment of plague. This is achieved by Jesus' paying his own life. All three (four, including 'his') terms in Mark 10:45 are the same as those used in Exodus 21:23 where the person who has killed must pay a ransom for the victim. The language which Jesus uses, then, envisages his own life as a 'price' which is paid for human sin.

He asked them again: 'Whom do you seek?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you seek me, let these men go.' This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken: 'Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.' (John 18:7-9).

Secondly, John 18:9. This is the famous incident with which John's account of the trial and death of Jesus (and consequently also Bach's *St John Passion*) begins. The officers and soldiers ask for Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus replies 'I am he', and then says 'So if you seek me, let these men go'. So far we see a demonstration of Jesus' charity, as Tidball puts it, 'showing evidence of the remarkable care for others that would be evident throughout'.<sup>28</sup> However, the Gospel-writer John sees far more than this in Jesus' statement. As he puts it: 'This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one."' (18:9). The key aspect here is that if the reference is simply to the physical security of the disciples, the author's explanation is an extremely odd one. The message is much more likely to be that Jesus' death which he must face *alone* as the 'lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' is the guarantee that not one of the disciples will be lost and perish in eternity. It

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<sup>28</sup> Tidball, *Message of the Cross*, p. 170; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 1991), p. 579, provides a more nuanced account.

## THE CROSS AND SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

is the fact that Jesus dies alone and thereby guarantees rescue for the disciples that implies substitution here.

These are brief expositions which would require further strengthening, but they are offered here as suggested material (in particular the judicial language from Exodus) which future discussions of substitution could beneficially utilise.

### CONCLUSION

All that remains is briefly to summarise. We saw first with a little help from Calvin and Grudem that substitution is indeed a central Christian doctrine, the rejection of which will be pastorally (and theologically) disastrous. This requires that we engage with the text of Scripture ourselves, not to see substitution everywhere, but to defend the doctrine vigorously by paying attention to the numerous places in Scripture where it clearly does stand out prominently. This may seem a daunting prospect, but we have, to accompany us in this task, three fresh expositions of the historic doctrine. Letham, Tidball, and the staff of Oak Hill Theological College have put us all in their debt by the lucid defences which their volumes provide. This is one debt, however, which can be repaid, by the ransom price of our attentive (and critical) reading of their books.

This new view of substitutionary atonement emphasized punishment over satisfaction (Jesus's crucifixion as a substitute for human sin) and paralleled criminal law. Today, the phrase "substitutionary atonement" is often (correctly or incorrectly) used to refer to the penal theory of atonement. This week's meditations touch the surface of 2,000 years of complex theological process. Inspiration for this week's banner image: The cross is not just a singular event. It's a statement from God that reality has a cruciform pattern. Jesus was killed in a collision of cross-purposes, conflicting interests, and half-truths, caught between the demands of an empire and the religious establishment of his day. Penal Substitutionary Atonement has been the most difficult subject I have written on. There have been several versions of this page as I have wrestled my way through it. Decoding Nicea is a captivating look at the true story of the Council of Nicea. What Substitutionary Atonement Is Not. I want to write on this difficult subject because of a false understanding that is rampant throughout Reformation Christianity (Protestantism). So what did Jesus do on the cross? What Substitutionary Atonement Is. There are one central problem with Protestant, and especially evangelical, understanding of the atonement. They diagnose the wrong problem and, therefore, propose the wrong solution. Evangelicals tend to believe that our problem is that we need our sins forgiven.