

# The Concept Of Substitution

**Introduction.** We have songs (such as He Bore It All and Hallelujah, What A Savior) that assert the substitution theory as scriptural fact. The doctrine of substitution has become so ingrained among the denominations and among Christians that it is stated as an assumed fact. But popularity does not establish truth.

The substitution theory teaches that Jesus took our place on the cross, died in our stead, suffered the guilt and punishment that rightly belongs to us, became a curse in our place, and that Jesus did everything in our place as a substitute.

But stop for a moment and think with the knowledge we have of the scriptures. Can you think of a place in the Bible where Jesus says He was taking our place? Can you think of a text that declares Jesus as our substitute on the cross? It should not take long for us to realize that the Bible never explicitly declares Jesus to be our substitute nor said that He died in our place.

## I. ***Understanding The Concept***

### A. Origin of substitution.

1. The origin of the theory of Jesus' vicarious death can be traced historically to the 11th century to a person named Anselm. Though several of the conclusions of Anselm were later rejected, he set the tone for the Protestant Reformation with his approach of philosophy and logic instead of taking his position strictly from the scriptures.
2. In *An Outline of Christian Theology*, William Newton Clarke explains, "Anselm, in the eleventh century, introduced the worthier idea that the ransom or satisfaction was paid by Christ not to Satan but to God. He argued that the enormity of sin required an infinite satisfaction to God if he was to release the sinner; that this satisfaction was due to God from man, and could be justly offered by no other; that nevertheless it could actually be rendered by no one inferior to God himself; and that this reason God became man, in infinite mercy, in order to enable humanity, in the person of Christ, satisfy him for its sins. This explanation proceeds upon the analogies of civil law, and views the satisfaction due to God as debt. At the Reformation, this doctrine was modified by the introduction of the analogies of criminal law. In this view, the satisfaction that was due to God consisted in punishment. It was now held that Christ actually took the place of sinners in the sight of God, and as their substitute suffered the punishment that was due to them, including, as many Reformers taught, the sufferings of hell. Upon him fell all the punishment of all the sins of all the men for whom

he died; against them, therefore, penal justice could have no further claim" (319).

3. The theory of substitution is cross connected with the five points of Calvin, standing on the two legs of the imputation of our sins to Christ and the imputation of His righteousness to us. James Buchanan, in his book *The Doctrine of Justification* declares, "Socinians, and others, who deny the substitution of Christ in the room of the guilty, the imputation of their sins to Him, and the vicarious nature of His sufferings and obedience, as a satisfaction to the law and justice of God, are the only parties who can consistently reject the imputation of His righteousness as the ground of their pardon and acceptance; indeed, they must do so, for they sweep away the whole ground on which the doctrine of imputation is based. But those who admit these fundamental truths, cannot consistently refuse this unavoidable inference from this, that what he did, as their substitute and representative, was done for them; and that, to be available for their benefit, it must be, in some way, made over to them, or put down to their account. To this extent, they must all admit the fact of imputation. If they ascribe any efficacy to the work of Christ at all, considered as a vicarious work accomplished by Him on behalf of His people, which merited or procured anything for them, His merit must be reckoned to them, if they are to derive any real benefit from it" (329).

B. Implications of substitution.

1. Lewis and Demarest in their book *Integrative Theology* explains beyond doubt the nature of substitution. They illustrate substitution by: (1) referring to the practice during our American Civil War that allowed one man to volunteer as a substitute for another who was drafted for military service. This was a strict one person substitution for another to fight in battle; the first man did not have to fight at all, nor serve even a moment in military service because his substitute did it in his place; (2) a young lady was arrested for possession of an unregistered gun. Her boyfriend convinced the judge to let him spend her sentence of three days in jail in her place; she was not forgiven her infraction of law but didn't have to spend a moment of punishment for it because her substitute paid the price and suffered the guilt and punishment in her place; (3) a Catholic monk stepped in a World War II Nazi concentration camp and was executed "in his place"; and, (4) a "substitute" on a football team goes into the game in the place of another player; this "other" player sits on the sidelines and takes no part at all in the game because his substitute is in there doing it "for" him.

2. Now we may not see the problem yet, but let me illustrate the doctrine clearly and maybe we will be alarmed. In the sense of the substitution theory, if Jesus, when He died on the cross, removed God's wrath against sin, satisfied divine justice, paid all our debt in our place, took our punishment for sin upon himself, became guilty with our guilt, was cursed in our stead, then Jesus has already done it all in our place. How can we be charged with anything if Jesus has already done it all? If Jesus has already taken my punishment upon himself, then I do not have to worry because my punishment was removed 2,000 years ago! I cannot be held accountable to God for what I have done because my substitute has already taken that on himself and removed any responsibility from me! Just as the boyfriend took the punishment of the woman with the unregistered handgun by spending three days in jail in her place, she is no longer accountable to the law. She cannot be punished or condemned for he took the punishment for her.
3. This is exactly what Charles H. Spurgeon taught in a sermon titled "Sin-Bearer." Spurgeon said, "We are henceforth legally dead to the punishment of sin. If I were condemned to die for an offense, and some other died in my stead, then I died in him who died for me. The law could not a second time lay its charge against me, and bring me again before the judge, and condemn me, and lead me out to die. Where would be the justice of such a procedure? I am dead already; how can I die again? I have born the wrath of God in the person of my glorious and ever-blessed Substitute; how then can I bear it again? Where was the use of a Substitute if I am to bear it also? Should Satan come before God to lay an accusation against me, the answer is, 'This man is dead. He has born the penalty, and is dead to sins,' for the sentence against him has been executed upon Another."
4. The only conclusion that can be reached from the substitution position is universal salvation or John Calvin's limited atonement. If Jesus died in the place of all humanity, then all humanity is universally saved. John Calvin realized this was not possible. Therefore he taught the concept of limited atonement, that is, Jesus died for only the saved few and not for all people. This is why Calvinism virtually removes any human effort from the process of salvation. Limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the impossibility of falling from grace (the LIP of TULIP) are the direct results of the substitution theory. It is interesting that we have rejected Calvinism and the TULIP but have accepted substitution. But the two cannot be separated. To accept substitution demands the acceptance of Calvin's teachings.

5. The Bible teaches, however, that we are still accountable for our actions (Romans 2:6; 14:10, 12). The word of God says nothing about Christ acting as our substitute.

## II. ***Substitute? In What Way?***

### A. Problems with substitution.

1. Since substitution is universally accepted, it is important for us to also consider to what extent someone could argue Jesus to be our substitute.
2. Not only does the theory of substitution fall under the weight of the scriptures in regards to accountability, but it also falls under the weight of its own implications.
  - a) Jesus did not take our place in physical death.
    - (1) Since Jesus died for all people, how did He physically die in the place of all people?
    - (2) All people must physically die (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore Christ did not take our place in physical death.
  - b) Jesus did not take our place in spiritual death.
    - (1) Jesus did not die spiritually and, therefore, could not have taken our place in spiritual death. Some have tried to teach that Jesus died spiritually on the cross, explaining the three hours of darkness and Jesus' statement "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
    - (2) However, the Bible never attributes the darkness to Jesus being spiritual separated from God. Further, Jesus declared that the Father would never leave Him or forsake Him (John 8:28-29; 16:32). To even suggest that Jesus was spiritually separated from God should make us shutter at its implications.
  - c) Jesus did not physically die to take the place of our spiritual death.
    - (1) There is a punishment for sins that is worse than physical death (Hebrews 10:26-39).
    - (2) A physical death cannot stand in the place of eternal, spiritual death. His physical death could not be a substitute for our spiritual death.
  - d) Jesus did not take our place on the cross.
    - (1) How could Jesus have taken our place on the cross for sins when none of us have ever been scheduled to die on the cross in the first place?
    - (2) For Jesus to be our substitute on the cross means that I was supposed to be on the cross. But the Bible does not teach that man was to be on the cross.

- e) Jesus did not take our place in suffering for righteousness.
  - (1) There have been Christians who have suffered more physical anguish, pain, and torture than Jesus suffered.
  - (2) If Jesus took their place in suffering, why did the apostles suffer? Why did Jesus tell James and John that they would drink the cup He was about to drink (Mark 10:38-39). Jesus did not take our place in suffering.
- f) Jesus did not take our place in punishment for sins.
  - (1) The penalty for sins is eternal death, eternal separation from God, and consignment to eternal torment.
  - (2) Jesus did not experience any of these and therefore did not take our place for punishment.
- g) Jesus did not remove the wrath of God against sin.
  - (1) God's wrath is still in place against all sinners (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9). If the death of Jesus on the cross appeased and took away the wrath of God against sin, then the very nature of God was changed.
  - (2) We would expect that God would not longer have any such wrath and would render no punishment for sins on anyone.

B. Bending the figure.

1. The proponents of substitution recognize this problem. Some will suggest that what Jesus suffered was not the exact same punishment for sins that we might receive in eternal torment; it was just "equivalent" punishment, but not the same in quantity or quality. But to accept this doctrine lays God open to the charge being unjust.
2. If what Jesus endured was ample punishment for sin, then those who are condemned should be able to insist on the same suffering and punishment for their sins. If six hours on a cross to the point of physical death is sufficient punishment for God to accept as a penalty for sin, why then will God inflict a far worse punishment on sinners? Why would it not be unjust for God to inflict eternal punishment on the lost when a few hours of torture and physical death is sufficient payment for their sins?

**Conclusion.** Our time has expired to continue with the problems of the theory of substitution. I want this lesson, however, to begin to cause you to think about substitution and its relationship to the gospel message. Substitution is not found in the scriptures. In future lessons, we will look at the consequences of substitution and then discuss what Christ did do since He did not take our place.

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