

Redeemer OPC, Hawaii

Adult Sunday School

The Person and Atoning Work of Christ (7)

“Substitution in the Atonement”

- I. Introduction. Substitution is all-important to the atonement that Christ made for the sins of His people. Even Karl Barth recognized the importance of the concept of substitution to Biblical doctrine. He said the Greek word *hyper* word in the New Testament, and it means “in behalf of.” While Barth got a lot of other things in the Bible and the gospel wrong, to the point that we do not consider him Christian, nor his Neo-Orthodoxy at all orthodox, he did get that one matter correct because it is so clear in Scripture. The concept can be found in Rom. 5:12-21, where Jesus is presented as the representative of His elect people in the same manner that Adam was the representative of his people, his posterity who would descend from him by ordinary generation. The difference is that Jesus Christ was successful in His task, where Adam was not; thus, Jesus is called the last Adam. The point is that representation as the federal head of a covenant requires substitution in doing for those he represents, as their substitute, what must be done for benefit to accrue to them.
- II. The Old Testament Concept of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement...
 - A. The High Priest Had to Make the Offering. As priest, he was the representative of the people before God. In order to qualify to be representative for Israel, he first had to offer a bull and sprinkle its blood for his own sins. Then he could offer a sacrifice for the people’s sins. The difference between him and Jesus Christ whom he foreshadowed was that Jesus was sinless, and needed to make no offering for Himself. This made Christ a better priest.
 - B. Animals to Be Offered for the People.
 1. The Scapegoat. The high priest placed his hands on its head and confessed Israel’s sins. He was symbolically laying Israel’s sins to the account of the goat. This is a picture of imputation, by which our sins are laid “upon the head” of Christ; that is, charged to His account. Then the scapegoat was driven outside the camp, away from the place where God’s blessing was, never to return, symbolically taking Israel’s sins with it. This is a foreshadowing of the expiation (taking away) of the sins and guilt of the elect by Christ in His death upon the cross, outside the

camp, when God removed all blessing from Him as part of the punishment He suffered for our sins. The scapegoat was a scapegoat because it bore the “blame,” so to speak, for our sins, as Christ did on the cross with our sins and guilt imputed to Him. He did this in place of His people as our Substitute, just as the scapegoat was seen as a substitute for Israel.

2. The Goat of the Sin Offering. The high priest sprinkled its blood on the mercy seat on top of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle. The mercy seat was also known as the propitiatory or reconciliation; it was symbolic of where the wrath of an angry God was appeased so that God would be favorable to the sinner whose sin debt was paid for, and He reconciled the sinner to Himself. 2 Cor. 5:18 tells us that God reconciled us to Himself through Christ, not counting our trespasses against us, and He accomplished this when “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Note the substitutionary language, “on our behalf.” Note also that the mercy seat “covered” the ark, where the law of God that condemns men for sin was kept, so mercy “covered” judgment. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word for atonement is “a covering.” At the same time, mercy was found upon the ark of the covenant, where the law that was perfectly kept by our Substitute was found. Substitution was central and essential to all that happened on the Day of Atonement.

C. The New Testament Correspondence. As we have alluded above, the NT teaches that all of the OT ritual of atonement foreshadowed the greater reality of what Christ did. The OT rituals could not take away sin. They were means of grace by which God preached the gospel to His people, and in which He pictured an atonement to come that was promised to take away the sins of His people.

D. Shedding Sacrificial Blood. The Hebrews knew that all sin incurs death. The shedding of blood by sacrifices indicated a life given over unto death to satisfy the demand of death as the penalty for sin. But the sacrifices also demonstrated that God allowed for a substitute to be put to death in place of the sinner. The OT sacrifices pointed to the Substitute God would provide who would give His life once for all as a sacrifice unto death, instead of and in place of His people. So the penalty would be satisfied by His death instead of theirs.

III. Two Aspects of Substitutionary Action in the Atonement.

- A. Expiation. The removal of guilt on the horizontal level. As the scapegoat was sent out of the camp with the sins of the people on its head, so the sins of all God's people are imputed to Christ's record and "sent outside the camp" to Calvary, where He takes them away "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). So, Christ is the fulfillment of what we see foreshadowed in the scapegoat. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—expiates it. He received by imputation the sins and guilt of all His people transferred to His "head" to be our Sin-Bearer. Our iniquities are laid upon Him, and He removed them, having taken them outside the camp where God cursed Him instead of blessing Him. And in all this, He was our Substitute.
- B. Propitiation. This is the vertical aspect, between the Father and the Son, with the elect people as beneficiaries. As mentioned, this is appeasing the wrath of God and satisfying divine justice by payment of our moral obligation to penalty for our sins; it was done by our Substitute, Jesus Christ. Without a Substitute who is fully God and fully man, sinless man, there could be no salvation. As sinners, we cannot expiate our sins, nor pay a penalty to make propitiation. A Penal, Substitutionary Atonement by Christ was necessary to do what we cannot do for ourselves—satisfy divine justice.
- IV. The Covenant and Substitution. All people are conceived under the covenant of works, sometimes articulated as "in Adam" because he was the federal head of that covenant and represented all who descend from him by ordinary generation. All are breakers of the covenant of works, so that we are conceived subject to the curse. The covenant of grace allows the elect to have a Substitute to fulfill the terms of the covenant of works on our behalf. Gal. 3:10-13 says that Christ became a curse "for us" (*hyper*). This is substitution by the Representative of His people who was cursed in order that we would be blessed. In the Bible, the figure of speech for having God's blessing upon His people was to have His face shining upon them, the light of His countenance lifted up to them (cf. the benediction in Num. 6:24-26). This infers that blessing removed, and curse added, would be to have God turn His face away, so that His favor was gone and darkness would descend. This is exactly what happened to Christ upon the cross. God made pitch-black darkness descend upon the whole earth at midday as a sign that He had, figuratively speaking, turned His face away and turned His back on His Son; and, literally speaking, He had removed all blessedness from Jesus and added His curse in its full infinite weight and torment on His own Son in place of those whom He represented in the covenant of grace. Our Substitute paid it all.