

BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

---

Aecio Cairus



RELEASE

12

# **SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT**

**Aecio Cairus**  
**River Plate Adventist University**  
**May 2015**

## The Substitutionary Atonement

The substitutionary atonement is “the center of gravity in Christian life and thought because it is the center of gravity in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, one might think that the sacrificial and expiatory (atoning) meaning of Calvary is above dispute within Christian theology. Unfortunately this is not the case, as we will see in this article.

### The Centrality of Christ’s Sacrifice for Sin

Though at the time of Christ Israel expected the Messiah’s deliverance to consist primarily of saving the nation from its enemies (Luke 1:72–75), Heaven defined His earthly mission at the outset as being “to save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).<sup>2</sup> His public ministry was ushered in by proclaiming Him “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), alluding to the divine act by which the sin of the world, “the iniquity of us all,” was laid on Him, as “a lamb” who is led “to the slaughter” (Isa 53:6, 7)—an act with the character of “an offering for sin” (v. 10; cf. Luke 4:16–22; Matt 8:16–18). The cross, as a Christian symbol, testifies that Christendom has grasped—always, everywhere, and by all kinds of people—the central significance of this act of God in Christ.

We will first review the Seventh-day Adventist conviction on this issue, and then proceed to assess its biblical foundation. Then we can compare it with elaborations of this position and other views, compatible or not, throughout history.

### The Seventh-day Adventist Conviction

Two of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, as defined by their highest denominational authority, the General Conference in session, make reference to the cross event as a substitutionary sacrifice atoning for sin. The fourth fundamental belief states:

God the eternal Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ . . .  
He suffered and died voluntarily on the cross **for our sins**

---

<sup>1</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, “Atonement,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), s.v. “atonement.”

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from NKJV unless otherwise noted.

**and in our place**, was raised from the dead, and ascended to minister in the heavenly sanctuary in our behalf. He will come again in glory for the deliverance of His people and the restoration of all things (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

In this statement, the expression (here with emphasis added) “**for our sins**” expresses in non-technical language the idea of expiation and atonement, while “**in our place**” does the same for substitution. However, the more technical terms appear in the ninth fundamental belief:

In Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God’s will, His suffering, death and resurrection, God provided the **only means of atonement for human sin**, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life, and the whole creation may better understand the infinite and holy love of the Creator. **This perfect atonement** vindicates the righteousness of God’s law and the graciousness of His character, for it both condemns our sin and provides for our forgiveness. The death of Christ is **substitutionary and expiatory**, reconciling and transforming. The resurrection of Christ proclaims God’s triumph over the forces of evil, and for those who accept the atonement assures the final victory over sin and death. It declares the Lordship of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee in heaven and earth will bow (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, in practice the Seventh-day Adventist community has not always been so forceful in its presentation of the subject as in its official position. Thus Ellen G. White could write in 1892:

Christ has not been presented in connection with the law as a faithful and merciful High Priest, who was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. He has not been lifted up before the sinner as the divine sacrifice. His work as sacrifice, substitute, and surety, has been only coldly and casually dwelt upon; but this is what the sinner needs to know. It is Christ in his fullness as a sin-pardoning Saviour, that the sinner must see; for the unparalleled love of Christ, through the agency of the holy Spirit, will bring conviction

---

<sup>3</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, second edition (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 121.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

and conversion to the hardened heart. It is the divine influence that is the savor of the salt in the Christian. Many present the doctrines and theories of our faith; but their presentation is as salt without savor; for the Holy Spirit is not working through their faithless ministry. They have not opened the heart to receive the grace of Christ; they know not the operation of the Spirit; they are as meal without leaven; for there is no working principle in all their labor, and they fail to win souls to Christ. They do not appropriate the righteousness of Christ; it is a robe unworn by them, a fullness unknown, a fountain untouched.<sup>5</sup>

The precise meaning of the theological terms of the Adventist conviction is reviewed below in dealing with the Biblical basis for the doctrine.

## **The Biblical Basis for the Doctrine**

### **What is Meant by Atonement**

In contrast to most theological terms, which derive from biblical Greek or ecclesiastical Latin, “*atonement*” is of Anglo-Saxon origin. The Middle English verb *atonen* implied “to become *at on* [at one],” that is, “in accord.” Thus “to atone” originally had the general idea of removing obstacles to being in peace, or promoting reconciliation. In English usage it came to mean “satisfaction given for wrongdoing,” and thus a synonym of “expiation,” both in the sense of making reparation for wrongdoing and the means by which such satisfaction is given.<sup>6</sup>

In the Old Testament of the King James Version (KJV), “atonement” was used to express the Hebrew verb *kāphar*, in its Piel form *kipper*, through the circumlocution “to make atonement” (instead of directly “atone”), or the noun form expressing this action, *kippurim*, the atonement itself (Exod 30:10, 16). The KJV, which dominated the English-speaking world for centuries, did not use the term “expiation,” though this was already in circulation in the English language since the sixteenth century. “Reconciliation,” however, was used in the Old Testament as an alternate translation of the same *kipper* group of words (Lev 8:15; Ezek 45:15, 17; Dan 9:24). In the New Testament, the Greek word *katallage* (Rom 5:11) is translated once as “atonement,” in

---

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, “The Perils and Privileges of the Last Days,” *Review and Herald*, November 29, 1892.

<sup>6</sup> D. B. Guralnik, ed. *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), s.v. “atone,” “atonement,” “expiate,” and “expiation.” See also *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* online for the same entries.

its other three occurrences (Rom 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18, 19) it is translated “reconciliation.” There is, therefore, no clear-cut difference between “reconciliation” and “atonement,” as far as the translators’ choice is concerned.

What is clear, however, is the predominant sacrificial background of “atonement” and “reconciliation.” Most of the nearly 150 occurrences of *kāphar* relate to the blood of sacrifice and the sanctuary. To the same root belong *kōpher*, “ransom,” such as given to the sanctuary in order to avoid a plague (Exod 30:12) or avert death (Job 33:24), and *kappōret*, the cover of the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:17).

In view of the fact that an equivalent root in Arabic means “to cover,” it has been supposed that *kāphar* originally had the same idea in Hebrew.<sup>7</sup> Then *kipper*, the intensive stem in which the conjugated verb always occurs in the Old Testament, could express the idea of “complete coverage,” or entire satisfaction for an offense.<sup>8</sup> However, in contrast to English idioms such as “cover up,” there is no suggestion of deception or illegality in the context of any *kipper* occurrence.

*Kappōret* was rendered in the Septuagint (LXX) as *hilasterion*,<sup>9</sup> a term from the same root as *hilaskomai*, “to make gracious,” “to placate.”<sup>10</sup> The same root appears in the LXX translation of *kipper* as *exilaskomai* and *hilasmos*, often in sacrificial contexts. In the New Testament *hilasmos*, “propitiation” or “expiation,”<sup>11</sup> appears in the phrase “propitiation for our sins” in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

As in the case of most abstract nouns (–ment or –tion endings), “atonement,” “expiation,” and “reconciliation” may designate the atoning/reconciling action itself or its effect (consequence). Also, when pointing to the action itself, they may express a function or, more concretely, the means by which the function is performed. All these possible uses of the terms may be exemplified in biblical passages.

---

<sup>7</sup> See R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago, IN: Moody Press, 1980), 1: 452, 453, where Harris says, “There is, however, very little evidence for this view.”

<sup>8</sup> An alternative sense of the Semitic root, “to wash,” seems less likely in view of Genesis 32:21 and 20:16. See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 3:302.

<sup>9</sup> TDNT, 3:318.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:314. Though *hilaros* means “happy, cheerful” in Greek, both the LXX and NT context of *hilaskomai* occurrences contain no reference to placating the Deity or changing His attitude from anger to cheerfulness, as “propitiation” sometimes does in the pagan world. In Luke 18:13 *hilaskomai* (in the imperative of entreat) merely implores God to “be merciful,” and any idea of placating is certainly excluded from the thought of Matthew 16:22, “be merciful to yourself.”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:317.

## Reconciliation as the Final Effect of the Atoning Work

As mentioned before, “reconciliation” is presented in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19. Here God “has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (v. 18), or “committed to us the word of reconciliation” (v. 19). Such a word not only proclaims that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (v. 19) when He “made him who had no sin [to be] a sin [offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (v. 21 NIV margin, cf. Isa 53:10),<sup>12</sup> but it also announces that this act of God has inaugurated “a new creation,” one in which those who are in Christ have already entered (v. 17), but that will not be fully realized until the *eschaton* (Rev 21:1). Only then, when “[s]in and sinners are no more,” a single “pulse of harmony and gladness” will beat “through the vast creation” and total reconciliation will be complete.<sup>13</sup>

This is the final effect of the atoning work, which involves a process described in the Bible with sanctuary language.

## Reconciliation as a Sanctuary Function

As already mentioned, the *kipper* passages have a predominant sanctuary and sacrificial context. Most occurrences are in Leviticus (about fifty times) and other Pentateuch passages. The object of the verb, implicit or explicit, is almost uniformly sin.<sup>14</sup> The effect of the atonement is forgiveness (Lev 6:7), conceived as annulment of the sin.<sup>15</sup> The precise form in which blood sacrifice will accomplish this cancellation will be explored later in this article.

Circumstances that call for atonement in the sanctuary context are of two kinds. One is a guilty conscience for specific sins, even though they are mostly subsumed under the category of “uninten-

---

<sup>12</sup> Lit. “made Him a sin,” but the sin offering is often (more than 150 times) called just “sin” in the sacrificial system (e.g., Hos 4:8; thus Lev 4:25 speaks lit. “of the blood of the sin,” etc.). Note that Jesus became the substitute for the penalty of sin, but was never tainted by the moral evil present in sin (1 Pet 2:22).

<sup>13</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1907), 678.

<sup>14</sup> The sin might be “unintentional” (through guilty inattention, Lev 4:2, 3; on the part of a priest, 3–12; the congregation, 13–21; a ruler, 22–35; or one of the common people, 27–31), or it may be “guilt” for “trespasses” (5:1, 4, 5, 15); “sin” in general (5:17) or even a “trespass” of sacrilegious oath (6:1–7, see esp. 6:3).

<sup>15</sup> This may be seen in Isaiah 28:18, a rare instance in which the verb is not applied to sin, and therefore functions as an external semantic control. Here the *Pual* (passive form of *kipper*) is applied to a “covenant with death,” which scorners think they possess, so the powers of evil will not touch them (28:15). The prophet announces that this supposed protective covenant will be “annulled” (*kuppar*, 28:18) by the overriding power of God’s judgments.

tional” (Lev 4 and 5; Num 15:22–26). The “unintentional” aspect of those sins is noted in contrast to cases when an Israelite deliberately transgresses the law out of spite for God’s covenant. In these cases he is to be “cut off” (Num 15:30, 31) from the community and placed outside, where the promises of the covenant will not apply. In this way sacrifice and atonement for specific sins (after confession and restitution, where applicable; e.g. Lev 6:1–7) retained the Israelite within the circle of the covenant, while ignoring a guilty conscience would have placed him outside. The daily (evening and morning) sacrifices did as much for the community as a whole.

But the mere retention within the circle of the covenant could not guarantee those promises either. A second circumstance made atonement necessary in the sanctuary: a *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement)—not as a reaction to a specific sin for which an Israelite felt guilty at a particular time, but as a day of introspection about one’s relationship with the covenant as a whole, a solemn occasion that necessitated fasting and repentance on the part of every individual (Lev 23:27, 29, 32), since God would test the applicability of the covenant promises to both the individual and the nation as a whole. The general character of this repentance, as opposed to sacrifice and atonement for specific sins, is noted in the ritual as being necessary to “make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, for all their sins; and so he [the High Priest] shall do for the tabernacle of meeting which remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness” (Lev 16:16). God’s judgment and verdict of approval for the covenant relationship with Israel and its blessings was annually represented by the acceptance of a goat sacrificed “for the Lord” (16:8, 9, 15) and the sending away of the “scapegoat” on which all the charges against God’s people had been compiled (16:21, 22).

But the ritual in the earthly sanctuary was not an end in itself; it pointed, as a “shadow,” “figure,” or “copy” (Heb 8:5; 9:9, 24), to heavenly realities. In OT times there was already an awareness that the temple (*heikal* or *bayit*) of God was really in heaven (e.g., Ps 11:4; 1 Kgs 8:27, 43), as emphasized in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the heavenly realities were not static conditions of divine existence, as if they were the counterpart of a pagan Olympus; their activities determined the future course of the history of salvation and eschatology, and were reflected accordingly in long-term prophecies such as Daniel’s. This prophet’s concern for the sanctuary (Dan 9:17) was rewarded by heaven with revelations that went way beyond the 490

---

<sup>16</sup> See the book of Hebrews and Rev 11:19; 14:17; 15:5; 16:17; cf. Acts 17:24.

years allotted to Israel and the Jerusalem temple (9:24–27). The 2,300 evenings and mornings in Daniel 8:14 started in the Persian age (8:20; 9:25) and concluded with the heavenly *Yom Kippur* (v. 14), which was to start in 1844.<sup>17</sup> The judgment in Daniel 7 revealed God’s verdict of approval for the covenant relationship with His people of all ages (7:9–14, 22, 26, 27), and the complete fulfillment of its attendant blessings at the second coming of Christ. He specifically promised this coming using the language of those prophecies (e.g., Matt 26:64; cf. Dan 7:13) at several critical moments of His ministry.<sup>18</sup>

Atonement and reconciliation in the New Testament is also couched in sanctuary language. Christ is the High Priest who was “to make propitiation (i.e. atonement, *hilaskomai* = *kipper*) for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:14–17). As such He was “appointed . . . [to] offer both gifts and sacrifices for sin” (5:1), thus becoming “the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (5:9). But the High Priestly function of Jesus did not stop with offering sacrifice; it continues with intercession: “It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Rom 8:34); “for if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (5:10). In this sense, the “Advocate” work of Christ (1 John 2:1), upon which John grounds His act of propitiation “for our sins” and those “of the whole world” (2:2), is also an atoning sanctuary function.

Even more explicit is the sanctuary background of Jesus’ propitiation, both as *hilasterion* = *kapporet* (Rom 3:25) and *hilasmos* = *kippurim* (1 John 2:2; 4:10). However, these passages refer to Jesus Himself as the means of reconciliation, so they will be dealt with in the next section.

---

<sup>17</sup> A pre-advent phase of the judgment is needed in order to determine the reward brought by Jesus at His second coming (Rev 22:12), a verdict rendered final when all humans meet before God’s throne (20:11–15).

<sup>18</sup> In the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the relevant terms include “Son of Man,” “coming,” and “clouds of heaven.” See also Matthew 16:27 (Son of Man coming with angels—the “thousand thousands” of Dan 7:10—at the momentous revelation of His Messianic mission to the disciples); 24:30 (“Son of Man,” “coming,” “clouds of heaven,” “power and great glory”—cf. Dan 7:14—at another crucial time, the eschatological discourse of Christ). Parallels are found in Mark 14:62 and Luke 22:69 with the same language. Though “sitting at the right hand of God” is obviously connected with Psalm 110:1, it can also be derived from Daniel 7:9, where “thrones” (plural) were “put in place” or “set up,” (not “cast down” as in the old KJV), which reflects the surprise of more than one throne in heaven.. There are no “thrones” in this chapter but those of God, which are immediately put to use in judgment (notice “Judge,” “sat,” and “books”); the “thousand thousands” of angels, in contrast, “stood” (not sat, v. 10), in a posture of service. Hence the second throne is, like the first, a throne of glory and judgment, equal to the one that belongs to the Ancient of Days.

An important gain obtained from reviewing reconciliation as a sanctuary function is the proper understanding of the literal character of the terms, especially in relation to the heavenly sanctuary. While the sanctuary terminology for the sacrificial work of Christ is quite obvious and has been universally recognized in Christendom at all times, there is a tendency, especially in the theology of the last centuries, to see that language connection as merely metaphorical or figurative—as being a descriptive resource for biblical times rather than sober reality. This is one of the roots of the denial of substitutionary atonement in some circles. But such metaphorical understanding of the sanctuary terminology for the work of Christ reverses the biblical relationship between symbol and reality. It is the ritual and its props that are a shadow and figure of the history of salvation, not the other way around. Rather than being a metaphor of a metaphor, the atoning work of Christ is the reality indicated by shadows and symbols; Christ's death is the only true propitiatory sacrifice. This implies that the language of atonement and propitiation is metaphorical or figurative only when applied to the earthly sanctuary, while it is literal and proper when applied to the work of Christ.

### **Atonement as the Means of Reconciliation**

Though Jesus did act as our High Priest by offering sacrifice, He did so by the sacrifice of Himself, through whom “we have now received the reconciliation” (Rom 5:11). Jewish and Gentile sinners are equally justified by faith through the grace of God, who set forth Christ Jesus as a propitiation or sacrifice of atonement (*hilasterion* = *kappōret*, Rom 3:25). *Hilasterion* is the term which in the earthly sanctuary designated the ark cover (“mercy seat,” Heb 9:5). This represented the throne of God, as intimated by images of cherubim, which were integral to the artifact (“of one piece” with it, Exod 37:7, 8).<sup>19</sup> The ark cover was the place of revelation (25:22; Num 7:89), where the Lord would meet Moses and speak to him, and where the cloud of God's glorious presence (*Shekinah*) appeared (Lev 16:2). Towards this artifact the *Yom Kippur* ritual was addressed (16:1–16),

---

<sup>19</sup> Though in 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Kings 19:15, NKJV, God appears as He “who *dwells* between the cherubim (*yōshēb kerūbīm*),” *yōshēb kerūbīm* can also be rendered by “He who *sits* upon the cherubim” (“enthroned,” NIV). In Ezekiel 10:1, 2 there is a well-known description of God's heavenly throne as being “above the head of the cherubim,” and there is no scriptural reason to suggest that God “dwells” between or among cherubim more than among the “thousand thousands” (Dan 7:10) of other heavenly servants. In contrast, the cherubim are definitely attached to the throne of God in the cited passage of Ezekiel as well as in Revelation 4:4. Their duties seem custodial, as suggested in the ark cover by the faces turned towards its center (Exod 25:20).

so the *kappōret* by itself came to connote the work of atonement.<sup>20</sup>

The New Testament is well aware that, as prefigured in the mercy seat, in Christ “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” being the “image of the invisible God” (Col 2:9; 1:15; cf. 1:19; John 1:14), and that God has spoken to us through Him (Heb 1:2). But He is *hilasterion*, not primarily as the site of God’s indwelling or revelation, but fundamentally because He is the propitiation (*hilasmos*, expiation) itself (1 John 2:2; 4:10). This was a “propitiation by his blood” (Rom 3:25), an atonement by blood sacrifice, “the blood of His cross” (Col 1:20).

### **Blood Sacrifice as Means of Atonement**

There is an instinctual dislike for blood sacrifice among many modern people, and especially by those who object to substitutionary atonement. They tend to conceive of expiatory blood sacrifice as “primitive” and irrational. This misconception arises from outdated ideas about “primitives,” in spite of the sheer weight of centuries of careful anthropological work among illiterate peoples of our own age, and historical-archaeological research about the peoples of antiquity, which clearly show that those peoples are our peers as far as mental prowess is concerned.

Though “primitive” religions are as diverse as mankind itself, in general terms blood sacrifice in those systems of belief is a means to communicate with the Deity (as in communion or “peace offerings” in the Old Testament). Expiatory sacrifices in particular are a powerful medium to express recognition of the fact that there is guilt on the part of the individual worshiper or worshipping community. The primitive mind is not irrational, as it has been often misread, but has an intuitive grasp of drama and symbols. Killing the sacrificial victim is not a naive attempt to deceive the deity into accepting the life of an animal in lieu of the punishment of the transgressor, but an acted-out statement of the fact that the transgression is worthy of death. Just as a guilty plea in a court of law is a way to “throw oneself on the mercy of the court,” so is the death of the animal victim a visual aid and a dramatic prop in order to entreat mercy for the transgressor in whose stead the beast dies.

Old Testament religion was not radically different from the world of its time in this respect, except perhaps in two particulars: (1) the blood ritual of atonement was specifically revealed by God in order to provide expiation: “the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I [the Lord] have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls”

---

<sup>20</sup> In 1 Chronicles 28:11 David furnishes Solomon with plans for the “house of *kappōret*,” the Most Holy place where atonement was performed.

(Lev 17:11), implying a promise of acceptance and forgiveness (4:35), which was to be realized through the fulfillment of the symbols during the history of salvation; but even so, (2) the faithful worshiper was aware that expiatory sacrifice “could not make him that did the service perfect, in regard to the conscience” (Heb 9:9; cf. 10:1, 2), since the service manifestly dealt with symbols, figures and props, but not with reality itself.

Since the method of killing the sin offering was slaughtering the animal by cutting its throat (Heb. *šāḥat*, Gk. *sphazo*; Lev 4:4, 15, and often in the book; Rev. 5:6, 9), the blood of the animal rapidly drained from the wound while the beast died just as promptly. Hence “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev 17:11), as long as it remained in the body of the victim, while once it was shed it spelled the death of the victim. In this way “blood” represents both life or death, according to whether it is considered before or after its shedding. Jesus did not die by bleeding, as John 19:34, 35 makes clear. Yet the New Testament often refers to the “blood” of Christ in order to signify His saving death (Matt 26:28 and parallels: Rom 3:25; 5:9; 1 Cor 10:16; Eph 1:7; 2:13; Col 1:20; Heb 9:12, 14; 10:19, 29; 13:12; 1 Pet 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11 etc.). The obvious reason is that His death is understood as the sin offering for the entire world (John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal 3:10,13).

### **Substitution in Sacrifice**

The sacrificial victim in the sanctuary had to be spotless, without blemish (Lev 1:3), so that the sin for which it died might be for somebody else’s blemish and not its own sin. That blemish, for which it died symbolically, was the moral fault of the sinner who confessed it in the sacrifice (Lev 1:4; 16:21). Christ, the true “lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet 1:18–21), asserted His role as the Lamb of God of Isaiah 53:6, 7, who was “numbered with the transgressors” (Luke 22:37; Isa 53:12), specifying in John 15:13 that this was fulfilled in His “laying down his life for his friends.”

As the lamb of God taken to a sacrificial death, Jesus bore or carried our sins (Isa 53:6, 7; John 1:29; 1 Pet 2:24; Heb 9:28). Any bearing of sins implies suffering the corresponding penalty (Deut 24:16; Ezek 18:20), which in the case of Christ included the feeling of dying in estrangement from God (Mark 15:34). The bearing of sin at the cross can also be described as the imputation of our guilt to the Sinless One (Gal 3:13), in exchange for the imputation of His sinlessness, or righteousness, to us—that is, our justification (Rom 5:9, 18, 19; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Cor 1:30). The biblical doctrine is that Jesus substituted for us in a death meant as a punishment for sin; in other words, that He offered

an expiatory and penal sacrifice. While its biblical character is clear, the concept is much resisted and needs to be examined presently.

### **The Need for a Real Atoning Death**

Just as sacrifice is not a primitive or irrational concept, death is not an ancient or primitive requirement for forgiveness. Beyond its symbolic use in animal sacrifice, antiquity did not consider an atoning death a real requirement for divine acquittal. In monotheistic religions other than biblical Christianity, such as post-biblical Judaism and Islam, God is believed to forgive sin simply by mercy, without requiring a vicarious death. In ancient Israel the connection between earthly rites and heavenly reality did point to a future death in the course of salvation history, but the precise way in which this was to play out in later events was rather obscure. This is why the revelation of God's plan in the mysterious "servant song" of Isaiah 53:6, 7 was necessary. It was not a carryover from primitive times, but the disclosure of a divine plan formed in eternal times.

Even when granting that it is not a primitive concept, the need for a vicarious death is resisted by many today as being unnecessary and/or unjust. These objections require closer examination.

### **The Need for Death as Punishment for Sin**

In the first place, denying that death is the unavoidable wages of sin because sin can be simply forgiven originates in a shallow conception of sin and God's law. Sin is a pervasive reality "because all sinned" (Rom 5:12; cf. Gen 3:22–24; Isa 59:1, 2; Eph 2:1), and this caused an estrangement from God—an "enmity" (Rom 5:10; cf. 8:7; Eph 2:12; 4:18; Col 1:21)—rooted in the fact that sin, by definition, is "lawlessness," a transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4).

But the law is not just something God has; in a very real sense, the law is something that God is. It is perfect (Ps 19:7, 8), just as God is perfect (Matt 5:48); it is "holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12); even more importantly, it is in essence love (Rom 13:8–10), just as God is love (1 John 4:8). Thus at the time when God's people were being constituted, they were wondering what kind of God He was who called them to such a privileged relationship (Exod 3:13; cf. Gen 17:7; Lev 26:12). Therefore, a public disclosure of His being was needed; He made sure the people "saw no form . . . only heard a voice" (Deut 4:12) that "declared . . . the Ten Commandments" (v. 13). The self portrait of God for the human race is therefore the Decalogue, as the very transcript of His character. Thus, while an ordinary offense can normally be forgiven and forgotten simply by mercy, without demanding compensation or punishment, God could not grant humans impunity

for transgressions of His law because “He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim 2:13).

Because of this close connection between the law and God’s character, His holiness stands in unremitting antagonism to sin (Hab 1:13; John 1:29; Gal 6:7). This antagonism is conceptualized in the New Testament as “wrath” (Rom 1:18; 2:5; 4:15; 1 Thess 1:10). Such wrath is expressed in the law itself, since it decrees the penalty of death for transgression (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:1). Sinners cannot cleanse themselves of the taint of sin (Prov 20:9), whatever their later ethical accomplishments may be (Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16).

Understanding the grievousness of sin leads to recognize, therefore, that the inescapable wages of sin is death. The next question is whether accepting the death of a substitute for the sinner can be considered acceptable from the viewpoint of justice.

### **The Acceptability of a Substitute in Punishment**

There is no doubt that strict justice demands the punishment of the transgressor, not a substitute. By definition, the substitute in atonement must be innocent, since otherwise he would be suffering for his own transgression and not be a substitute at all. Therefore the opponents of substitutionary atonement claim that such a concept is unjust, seeing that the transgressor goes free and the innocent is punished.

But the accusation of injustice against substitutionary atonement ignores the depth of the human predicament and/or the depth of God’s love. As we have seen above, sin is a pervasive reality to which no mere human has ever escaped, and it is also a deadly reality in the presence of God’s majestic law. Being “just,” then, in the sense the opponents claim, would imply the perdition of all humanity; it is a damning justice. Here the dictum of Roman law applies better than anywhere else: *summum jus summa injuria*, “extreme justice is extreme injustice.”

This was not an option open to the God who loved the world (John 3:16). As God’s holiness opposes sin, God’s love continuously seeks to deliver sinners from their predicament. This is not a construct of NT times: it is already present in the first recorded reaction of God to human sin. In Genesis 3:9 we see the Lord searching for the fallen human pair: “Where are you?” (cf Jer 3:11–14; Hos 6:1). And not only in Eden, but throughout history: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

Thus, instead of relinquishing the sinner to death, God chose to die Himself, in the person of Christ, for the sinner: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners,

Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). This act of God in Christ (for here God was “in Christ” [2 Cor 5:19]) reconciled us to Himself (Rom 5:10; 3:25; Col 1:20; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 John 2:2), and at the same time manifested supremely His love, which is the love of the Father (John 3:16; Rom 8:32), the Son (Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 5:14), and the Holy Spirit (Heb 9:14; Rom 15:30).

There should be no artificial distinction between the life of Christ and His death on the cross as the means of atonement. It is not death as a state of non-existence that reconciles us to God, but Christ’s act of dying or surrendering His life (Matt 27:50; Luke 23:46; John 19:30), namely the life that began with His incarnation as a subject under God’s law (Gal 4:4, 5) and continued in perfect obedience to God’s will (1 Pet 2:22 [Isa 53:9]; John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 John 3:5). As seen above, sacrificial “blood,” seen at the time it is shed, is both life and death.

But in view of the fact that strict justice demands the death of the transgressor, not a substitute, we may ask, “Can there be injustice in God, even if it is a loving kind of injustice?” A sober examination of facts shows that this is not the case.

In every transgression three factors are involved. There is a transgressor, a norm or standard that was transgressed, and an authority under which the norm is binding. In this scenario only one person is guilty, but two persons (lawgiver and transgressor) are directly related to the situation. This is not to suggest that God is responsible (much less guilty) for the wrong choices freely made by man, since He had given him a perfect free will, without evil propensities, and adequate warning (Gen 2:16, 17). But since “sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Rom 5:13), and since the Lawgiver is also the Creator of man, who endowed him with freedom of the will, He cannot be considered a stranger to the full control and sovereignty over the events.

In view of the three factors involved in every transgression, three theoretical options might have been open to God. The transgression already accomplished, something had to yield in one of the factors. Therefore God could: (1) destroy the transgressor, and thus destroy the whole of mankind; or (2) forgive the sinner without punishment, which implies impunity for transgression, and (3) absorb the punishment Himself, as the Author of the law.

As we have seen above, the first option was not really open to God in view of His love. The second option, directed against the second factor, is the road taken by post-biblical Judaism and Islam. But impunity for transgression is not only a nightmare from the viewpoint of the government of the universe, based on God’s law: as seen before, the grievousness of sin and the majesty of God’s law imply that impunity would have been tantamount to God denying His own

character. Only a course of action directed against the third factor, by absorbing the punishment Himself as a substitute for the transgressor, was acceptable to God.

The talk of injustice in substitutionary atonement is related to an imperfect concept of the nature of Christ. If God had accepted the death of an innocent person, totally unrelated to the transgression, as a substitute for the death of the transgressor, such acceptance might have been considered with some justification a gross and cruel injustice, even if the substitute had given himself up voluntarily to death, since “a person shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deut 24:16; cf Jer 31:30; 2 Chron 25:4; Isa 3:11; Ezek 18:4, 20; Gal 6:5, 7); nobody “can by any means redeem his brother nor give to God a ransom for him” (Ps 49:7). But things are different when the substitute is God Himself. In the cross, God, being “in Christ,” was “reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19).

This may be compared to facts in our everyday experience. The owner of a car damaged in a collision, without fault on his part, may: (1) exact payment from the party at fault, who might not be able to afford it or (2) absorb the cost of repair himself, if he so decides out of mercy for the impecunious liable party. He has no right to seek payment from a third, uninvolved party, whether this party is willing or not. However, the owner is within his rights to repair the car out of his own pocket (or his own insurance). The second course of action is not strict justice, as forcing the at-fault party to pay might be, but it is not a cruel injustice either; it is righteousness tempered with mercy. Not strict justice, but also nothing that justice can object to.

So it is not by chance that the most vocal opponents of substitutionary atonement also oppose the full deity of Jesus. In Reformation times Socinians already opposed both substitutionary atonement and the doctrine of the Trinity of God, and Islam denies not only that Jesus is God but even the fact that He died on the cross. In this we may see the extent to which substitutionary atonement and the divinity of Jesus are interlinked.

### **The Paradox of a Dying God**

Granted that Jesus is both God and man, can we really speak of the death of Jesus as God absorbing in Himself the punishment of death? God is the very “ground of being,” the uncreated Creator without whom nothing makes sense in the universe. He is Himself life (John 14:6; 1:4; 1 John 5:11). How can God die?

Noticing this paradox is not something new. It was noticed by the early Christians almost as soon as it happened. Soon after Pentecost, Peter addressed the crowd in the Jerusalem temple with an

indictment for the “men of Israel,” accusing them of having “killed the Originator of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:12–15, NKJV mg). The word *archēgos*, here employed by Peter to describe Jesus, was used by Jews and pagan Greeks to refer to God as the originator of all good things and the founder of religion.<sup>21</sup> Hebrews, the only other NT book where it occurs (2:10; 12:2), also uses it in the sense of origination.<sup>22</sup> Note also that Peter in Acts 3:14, 15 contrasts the act of freeing a “murderer” (*phoneus*, “a killer,” Barabbas) with killing the “*archēgos* of life.” This antithetical parallelism (killer vs. life-giver) clearly shows that the intended meaning of *archēgos tēs zōēs* is something akin to “source of life.” Thus Peter’s statement shows that reflection on the divine and human natures of Christ in a single Person is not a phenomenon starting in late antiquity or the Middle Ages.

Jesus’ divine nature certainly could not die, but a “nature” (from Latin *natus*, “born”) is only a component in the system somebody possesses by birth, while personality implies the functioning of the total system throughout life. The Person of Christ died, even if His divinity did not. Again, we see that the combination of divinity and humanity in Jesus was indispensable in order to absorb the punishment of death. A God masquerading as a human being could never die, and a human being pretending to be God would only be delusional. Christ, the God-man, alone was able “to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb 9:26).

### **The God-Man as the Head of a New Humanity**

Soon after the first humans’ sin, God revealed a path to extricate humanity from its predicament. Eve had been deceived by Satan, “that serpent of old” (Rev 12:9), into cooperating with him for the perdition of the human race. But God promised that this evil alliance would be broken by an “enmity” among them, thus implying a new friendship between humanity and Himself (Gen 3:15a). Evil would be crushed in its head by the “Seed” of the woman—not just some of Eve’s many descendants but a singular “one. . . who is Christ” (Gen 3:15c; Gal 3:16). So, “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” and the corresponding sentence of

---

<sup>21</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 112.

<sup>22</sup> The translation “Prince of life” does not fit as well, since Jesus was never proclaimed by His disciples to be a princely or leading figure before His death, and in any case it is unclear what “leader of life” might try to convey to the “men of Israel,” unless it is precisely being life’s Founder or Author (cf. ESV, NIV).

death (Gal 4:4, 5). God marked this Son as His gift to mankind by having Him born from a woman but not from a man—born not “of the will of man” but of God’s Holy Spirit, just as believers in Him would (though not in the flesh) in a new birth (John 1:13; 3:5). In this way, they receive “the adoption as sons” (Gal 4:5) and, through faith in the only true Seed who is able to crush and defeat evil, participate in the collective Seed that constitutes the new humanity created in Christ (Gal 4:5; 3:26–29; 2 Cor 5:17).

God’s people, therefore, are such by faith in Christ, by standing “in Him,” and not independently, as is reiterated a number of times in Ephesians 1:3–14. This is why Christ is the “last Adam” or the “second Adam” (1 Cor 15:45, 47). The first Adam “is a type of Him who was to come,” for “as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification” (Rom 5:14, 18). The fact that all believers are subsumed “in Christ” as the head of the new humanity also explains how is it possible for all of them, as for Paul, to “have been crucified with Christ” so that now “Christ lives in” them (Gal 2:20). It also explains why a single act of sacrifice substitutes for the death penalty of them all. Though ultimately this sacrifice will only benefit those who identify with Christ and make of Him their personal Savior, the provision of grace is made for all (Heb 2:9); just as everyone is under the sentence of the first death (Rom 5:12), in view of the fact that as “in Adam all die,” so too “in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). The death-dealing power of Adam’s sin, therefore, is nullified by the work of Christ, and it is only the post-resurrection second death (Rev 20:6), which is the responsibility of those who refuse to stand “in Christ” as part of the new creation, the death which is definitive and eternal.

### **Atoning Death in the Ordinances of the Church**

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were ordained by Christ Himself (Matt 28:19; Luke 22:19) to be performed by His disciples. Both contain direct references to His atoning death.

In baptism we are “baptized into His death,” since immersion in water depicts the fact that “we were buried with Him through baptism into death,” just as emergence from the liquid tomb is a figure of resurrection in order to “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3, 4). Ordinances are not just visual commemorations of past events, as static figures or illustrations might be; they are solemn statements acted out by the believer. Hence baptism is “not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Pet 3:21, NAS), a conscience “cleansed” from sin by “the blood of Christ” (Heb 9:14). In

this “appeal,” gestures and body movements join solemn words in an acted-out prayer in which the believer appropriates the atoning death provided by God, being “crucified with Christ” so that “it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20), “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:27).

Jesus also enjoined us to reenact a solemn statement in His Supper: “do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). Note that we are not merely commanded to say something or to show something, but to “do” something. In a dramatic performance there is total involvement of the senses and bodily perception. What, exactly, are believers commanded to do? “Take, eat” the bread, and “drink from it [the cup], all of you” (Matt 26:27). Eating and drinking food of all kinds is a life-sustaining action.<sup>23</sup> Since eating and drinking Eucharistic bread and wine is obviously not necessary in order to sustain physical life, it is safe to conclude that the bread and the wine function as props in this scene ordained by the Lord to be reenacted. When eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Supper, which are designated His “body” and “blood of the new Covenant,” we appropriate for us His sacrificial death. We could never have eternal life were it not for Christ’s “body which is given for you” and His blood which is “shed for you” (Luke 22:19, 20). But “if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Thus, in eating and drinking the elements designated by Jesus as His “body” and “blood” we are acting out our recognition that there is no eternal hope for us except through His sacrifice. This is not just an action of the officiating ministers; it is performed by all believers who thereby “proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor 11:26). Public proclamation (*katangelía, exangelía*) of the saving actions of Christ is one of the priestly functions of all believers (1 Pet 2:9).

Substitution is prominent in these solemn statements. In baptism, Christ’s death becomes our own death (Gal 2:20; 3:27). The gesture of eating and drinking the saving “flesh” of Christ’s death (John 6:51) in the Lord’s Supper reenacts the participation of believers in sacrifice. In the same way as, when eating the flesh of an animal, its death substitutes for the death of those who are sustained by food, so the death of Christ replaces our death as a sin offering, and the righteousness of God replaces our own (2 Cor 5:21).

---

<sup>23</sup>Total fasting (an aid to self-examination or “afflicting the soul”) is literally “oppressing the life breath” (*nepheš*, Lev 16:31; Num 29:7) since prolonged abstention of food and liquids would lead to death, and even shorter periods weaken us in a noticeable way.

### **Atoning Death as Victory over Satan**

The effects of the death of Christ in reconciling the world (2 Cor 5:19) to God are multiple. As a “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom 3:25, NIV), His death frees the believer from the estrangement caused by sin, for “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13; cf. 1 Pet 1:18, 19; Rev 5:9). Furthermore, this saving death frees believers from sin itself: “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:14; Heb 9:12, 15; 1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5; 7:14). This can also be expressed as being “justified by His blood” (Rom 5:9) or saying that the blood of Christ shall “cleanse your conscience” (Heb 9:14). In addition, as the “blood of the [new] covenant,” His death sanctifies sinners (Heb 10:29; 13:12; cf. 1 Pet 1:2 with Exod 24:8). This sanctification enables their victory over Satan, for “they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 12:11). Victory is a concept that requires further elucidation, to which we now turn our attention.

### **Atoning Death as Historical Victory over Evil Forces**

Outside biblical revelation, religion is guided only by the weak light of reason and feelings emanating from a fallen human nature. This natural religion is what we call “paganism.” Pagan religions typically work in a timeless frame of reference, or circular time. Thus they tend to view evil as a more or less permanent feature of reality; for them “the world is made that way.” Whatever solution they offer is also timeless or circular: human ills are treated by priests, kings, and gods, but in spite of the limited success of treatment, they go on forever. Illness, catastrophes, and other evils may be thwarted or removed from a specific place or sufferer, but by and large they remain, just as those who attempt to prevent and remove them persist as fixed features of existence.

In contrast, biblical religion is historical. History, in the biblical worldview, is indeed a story: it moves from point A to point B permanently. In this story God is viewed as engaged in a momentous struggle with the forces of evil, from which He rescues and redeems His people within history itself, and finally eradicates evil forever.

The conflict of God is with evil forces, identified in the New Testament as a struggle against supernatural “principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). The decisive battle was fought on “the cross,” where, “having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col 2:14, 15). The apparently unassailable weapon of those enemies was the death they obtained for this world through human sin, for “the sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:56). But the hostile strength of

sin and death was broken in the “victory” earned “through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57) by His blood (see preceding section), even though the full results of such victory will be visible only after the resurrection (v. 54), “for the last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (v. 26).

### **Atonement as Rescue and Redemption**

The language of rescue and redemption (close synonyms) also requires attention. In the Bible, the first references to God as rescuer and redeemer have to do with national liberation at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, where they lived in conditions of slavery. In Exodus 6:6 God promises He will “rescue you [verb *nāṣal*] from their [the Egyptians’] bondage, and I will redeem [*gāʾal*] you.” Though both Hebrew terms are used for rescue, the first emphasizes forcible removal from the power of the enemy, while the second underlines the personal relationship between the rescuer and the rescued, and so the legitimate claims of the former over the latter. God will act with “an outstretched arm” (*bizrōaʾn<sup>e</sup>tūyāh*) and free His people (*gāʾal*, 6:7). This powerful and faithful action of God is frequently referenced in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod 15:16; Deut 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 15:15; 24:18; 2 Sam 7:23; 1 Chron 17:21; Neh 1:10; Ps 74:2; 77:15; Isa 51:10; 63:9; Mic 6:4). A similar terminology is used when speaking about a “second Exodus” from Babylon, even though living conditions in that place differed from those in Egypt, and spectacular miracles were not so much in evidence as in the first Exodus.

Then redemption took on a more personal meaning. One clear example is Psalm 130, a heartfelt cry “out of the depths” (*de profundis*), where hopes of redemption from sin (v. 8) rest on the assurance that God’s “unfailing love” (v. 7, NIV) leads Him to obtain forgiveness for His people. These hopes are based on God’s self-revelation as “merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abounding in goodness and truth [i.e. loyalty to His covenant promises]” (Exod 34:6, 7; cf. Ps 86:15; 103:8–10; 145:8; Isa 44:22; Jer 3:12).

The center of the NT understanding of the work of the Messiah is precisely the fulfillment of those hopes, “for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). This implies to “redeem” believers from the curse of the law against transgressors (Gal 3:13), who, once rescued from the curse, receive the “adoption as sons [and daughters]” (4:5). Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed, and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Such redemption was not obtained with the same ransom as victims of ordinary slavery or hijacking—that is, “with corruptible things like silver or gold”—but “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1

Pet 1:18, 19), in a sacrificial sin offering. Here the sacrificial language of blood and animal victims is mixed with the language of ransoming, often heard in the market of slaves and prisoners of war (who were frequently the same people in the ancient world), and deserves separate attention.

### Atonement as Substitutionary Ransom

The terminological mixture in 1 Peter 1:18, 19 is not incongruous because, in spite of its use in the slave market, the word “ransom” (*lytron* = *kōpher*) is also a sanctuary term (Exod 30:12; cf. Job 33:24; Ps 49:7, 8) sharing the *kāphar* root with *kipper*, the act of atoning.<sup>24</sup> The Greek *lytron* is, by etymology, a “means (*-tron*) of release (*ly-*”); and the *-tron* part refers specifically to payment in the Hellenistic era.<sup>25</sup> Jesus used the term in His saying about unselfish service, climaxing when He was to “give His life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). All nineteen NT occurrences of *lytron*, or its derivatives *lytroō*, *lytrōsis*, *antilytron*, and *apolytrōsis*, refer to the Messianic mission of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

More than any other group of terms, the *lytron* words highlight the vicarious, substitutionary nature of the atonement. Both in composites (*antilytron*, 1 Tim 2:6) and prepositional phrases (*anti pollōn*, Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45), *lytron* is coordinated with *anti*, a preposition which in transactional contexts can only mean “in place of,”<sup>27</sup> and not “to the advantage of” somebody, since its basic sense is quite the opposite of advantage: “against” somebody (cf. the English “anti-” derivatives). “In place of” is indeed the predominant sense in the more than 470 NT occurrences of *anti*, as in “an eye for an eye,” *ophthalmon anti ophthalmou* (Matt 5:38). In other words, “ransom” is money conceptualized as handed over “against” the release of the prisoner, because it is given in exchange for the prisoner. Thus “against” may come to mean “in place of,” but never “to the advantage of”; that would be an oxymoron. Therefore, on linguistic grounds alone, the sacrifice of Christ was done “in place of,” not just “on behalf of,” the sinner.

Apart from the coordinated preposition, substitution is the very idea of “ransom.” A person who is ransomed experiences a dramatic

---

<sup>24</sup> In the Old Testament, it may also be used as a technical name for covering substances (such as pitch, Gen 6:14), blood money (forbidden in the legal system, Num 35:31, 32, but sometimes possible as out-of-court arrangements, Prov 6:35; 13:8; Amos 5:12), and the sacrifice of nations as pawns in the international chessboard (Isa 43:3).

<sup>25</sup> See *TDNT* 4:340.

<sup>26</sup> Another derivative, *lytrōtēs*, lit. “ransomist,” occurs only once referring to Moses (Acts 7:35) as “liberator” of Israel.

<sup>27</sup> *TDNT* 1:372, 373; 4:342.

transition, going from being wholly under a hostile power to being wholly free. “On behalf” of the captive is too tepid a way to express such transition. Ransoms are always expensive (as in “a king’s ransom”), but given as the only way to secure the release of the captive. In a very real way, ransom money substitutes for the captive.

But in order to establish substitution in atonement, we might even forget about prepositions and lexical meanings of the NT words used to describe redemption. We only need to look at the facts concerned. From the very beginning, the sinner is in a desperate predicament, being under the power of death (Gen 2:17; 3:3) and excluded from eternal life (3:22; Rom 5:12; 6:23). In his discourse on the bread of life, Christ assures us that He came for the express purpose of giving believers eternal life when raising them from the dead “at the last day” (John 6:38–40, 44, 54); hence whoever believes in Him “has everlasting life” (v. 47; cf. 3:16; 1 John 5:12). This dramatic reversal, He says, was secured at the price of His “flesh” given voluntarily “for the life of the world” (John 6:51; cf. Matt 20:28). This sacrifice Peter calls the “ransom,” “the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet 1:18–21). Paul, on his part, teaches that “we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom 5:10), an act accomplished when Christ “gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us” (Gal 1:4). And not only the apostles, but the entire choir of the redeemed of all ages praise Jesus “because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God men from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9, NIV; cf. 1:5). Since Jesus experienced the death that the sinner deserved, and through this ransom the sinner gets the eternal life only Jesus among humans deserved, substitution is a plain fact of the history of redemption (*apolytrōsis*). In this story the most salient reality is that the sinner was rescued from his own death through the death of Jesus; it is “redemption through His blood” (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14).

Substitution, then, is the idea of Christ’s death being “for us” (Rom 5:8; 1 Thess 5:10; Eph 5:2; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 3:18) and not merely “in our behalf” or “for our sake.” If any doubt remained, we may note that Paul forcefully states substitution in saying that God “made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21; see pp. 10–12). Nothing could be plainer: Christ is our righteousness, and we are His sin;<sup>28</sup> He is the

---

<sup>28</sup> “You, Lord Jesus Christ, are my righteousness, and I am your sin”; M. Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. Theodore G. Yappert (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1955), 110, cited in George R. Knight, *The Cross of Christ: God’s Work for Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008).

ground for our undeserved reward, and we the ground for His undeserved punishment. One wonders, if this central fact is not accepted as substitutionary atonement, what else might count as such.

### **Summary of the Biblical Evidence for Vicarious Atonement**

Heavenly voices defined the earthly mission of Jesus when introducing it to the world: at incarnation, as saving people from their sins; at the beginning of His public ministry, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This salvation from sin through self-sacrifice is therefore the center of the atoning (reconciling) work of God in Christ.

Atonement is a sanctuary function, symbolized by sacrificial rites in the earthly sanctuary and actually realized in the history of redemption, through Calvary's real sacrifice and the heavenly sanctuary. "Blood" defines the means of this atonement as a perfect life shed as a substitute for the life the sinner has forfeited. Death, either that of the sinner or of a substitute, is an inescapable result of sin, as demanded by a law which is a transcript of God's holy character. Barring the destruction of the whole of humanity (which was negated by God's love), this demand necessitated the absorption of the punishment by the lawgiver Himself in the person of the Son of God, the only acceptable substitute, as being fully divine as well as fully human.

The centrality of His death and its substitutionary character are underlined in both baptism and the Holy Supper, the two ordinances established by Jesus Himself. The sacrifice to which those statements refer, acted-out by the believer, constituted a victory over the forces of evil, realized when the sinner was "redeemed" or "ransomed" by the death of the divine-human Son of God in exchange for (*anti*) his or her own.

Both the language of "sacrifice" and "ransom," therefore, establish the substitutionary (vicarious) nature of Jesus' death, as do the facts of the matter themselves: His death frees us from eternal death, a liberation to be fully realized as believers are raised from the dead "at the last day."



**Biblical Research Institute**  
**General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists**

12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600

Website: [adventistbiblicalresearch.org](http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org)  
E-mail: [biblicalresearch@gc.adventist.org](mailto:biblicalresearch@gc.adventist.org)  
Phone: 301-680-6790  
Fax: 301-680-6788