Defending Substitution

An Essay on Atonement in Paul

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To Pete and Dirk

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Preface

This book originated in a request from Francis Watson (my colleague at the time in Aberdeen) to present a paper in the Pauline Soteriology section at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, in 2006. I am grateful to Francis for this and also to John Webster (now at the University of St. Andrews) and Miroslav Volf (Yale University) for responding to the paper. This paper then underwent a process of binary fission in which the material on 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5 became separated into two lectures. I am thankful to the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary (especially Charles Gieschen) in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for the invitation to deliver the lectures at their Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology and Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in January 2008. In 2010 the material expanded into three lectures, which were given as the Annual Biblical Studies Lectures at Campbellsville University, Kentucky, at the kind invitation of Jarvis Williams. Some of the material was also presented at Tyndale University, Toronto, 2011, and as the Robert Saucy Lectures at Biola University, thanks to Ben Reynolds and Clinton Arnold, respectively. Last and by no means least, I am grateful to Craig Evans for the

opportunity to give the material here as the Hayward Lectures at Acadia University in 2011, and to publish them in the Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology series.

I am also grateful to those who have read parts of this book in its written form. Morna Hooker, Dan Bailey, and Richard Bell kindly read parts of chapter 1 and helped me avoid various misunderstandings. David Shaw read the introduction and chapter 1, and James Carleton Paget went well beyond the call of duty in reading the whole manuscript.

In writing the book I was concerned not to sacrifice too much the accessibility that was necessary to a series of public lectures, and so I have tried to stick as closely as possible to their original style in order to make the argument as easily comprehensible as possible, both in clarity and brevity. The argument here is of course only a rather cursory one, and I readily anticipate reviewers' criticisms that I have omitted this or that passage that might have supported or damaged my case, or omitted responding to this or that objection that could be lodged against the argument. Others might complain that I have not set the Pauline evidence in its larger theological framework or the individual passages in their wider literary context. I can only respond that if one were to do all of that, the book would have had to multiply enormously in size. On Callimachus's principle that "a big book is a big evil" (μέγα βιβλίον μέγα κακόν), I hope that the brevity of this book is more an advantage than a disadvantage.

I would like to dedicate this book to fellow musketeers Dirk Jongkind and Pete Williams. It has been a privilege (as well as great fun) speaking together with them at *Bible and Church* events over the past few years. Long may our friendship continue.

Abbreviations

A.H.	Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*
AJA	*American Journal of Archaeology*
Alc.	Euripides, *Alcestis*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
Diss.	Epictetus, *Dissertationes*
Fab.	Hyginus, *Fabulae*
IG	*Inscriptiones graecae*
IGBulg	*Inscriptiones graecae in Bulgaria repertae*
IJST	*International Journal of Systematic Theology*
Il.	Homer, *Iliad*
JHS	*Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Mor.	Plutarch, *Moralia*
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*

OCD[3]	*Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Edited by S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996
Off.	Cicero, *De officiis*
P. Hercul.	Papyrus Herculanensis
PIBA	Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association
Pr. Man.	Prayer of Manasseh
Pyth.	Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
Spec. Leg.	Philo, *De specialibus legibus*
Tusc. Disp.	Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
V.P.	Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Introduction

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" goes the opening line of the old spiritual. I sometimes remark to students that, out of its original context, there are two possible answers to this question. The question—ambiguous as it is—probably is a *nonne* question, expecting the answer "yes." In that sense, the answer might presuppose Christian identification with Christ on the cross or participation in his death, a human participation grounded in the fact that in his death Christ *represents* us. "We have *died with* Christ" (Rom. 6:8).

On the other hand, one might also answer "no" to the question. It was an event that took place before the church's very existence. Christ died *alone*, as illustrated by the fact that, on his arrest, he insisted that the disciples were not to accompany him (John 18:8–9). In a crucial sense, then, we were *not* there. He *was* there, taking our place in our stead.

The former understanding of Christ's death—as a representative act in which believers participate—has become an uncontroversial axiom in biblical scholarship and Christian theology. The latter, on the other hand, has become highly contested. It is in the light of this controverted status of "substitution" that this book

aims to argue that Christ's death for our sins *in our place*, *instead of us*, is in fact a vital ingredient in the biblical (in the present discussion, Pauline) understanding of the atonement. It should be emphasized, however, that the argument here does nothing to undermine the importance of representation and participation. Rather, the point is that substitution can happily coexist with them.

1. The Importance of Substitution

Why such a focus on substitution? In my view, substitutionary atonement is an important doctrine for at least two reasons.[1] First, it is vital to our understanding of what the New Testament says about the death of Christ and the gospel, and such understanding is a clear necessity for the church and for biblical scholarship. For Christians today, being clear on what it means that Christ died for our sins is essential both to the Christian's relationship with God as well as for the communication of the gospel. Second, substitution has often also been held to have important pastoral implications.[2] To take just one example, it is frequently thought to be vital to Christian assurance. As Calvin argued,

> 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.[3]

If this is right, it illustrates the pastoral importance of substitution: knowing that Christ has died in our place means that we

1. See further the theological implications of substitution drawn in G. Röhser, *Stellvertretung im Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2002), 128–45.

2. This is not at the expense of other dimensions of the atonement. Some pastoral implications of participation, for example, are drawn out in passages such as Romans 6 and Hebrews 4.

3. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5, quoted in M. Davie, "Dead to Sin and Alive to God," *SBET* 19 (2001): 162.

need no longer fear that we are still in our sins. The first matter that must be dealt with in any discussion like this, however, is to define the key term. What exactly is substitution?

2. Defining Substitution: Christ in Our Place

I am defining *substitutionary* atonement for the present purposes as Christ's death in our place, instead of us. The "instead of us" clarifies the point that "in our place" does not, in substitution at least, mean "in our place *with us*." (Jesus was, for example, baptized *in our place with us*—that is, the baptism was not a substitution.) In a substitutionary theory of the death of Jesus, he did something, underwent something, so that we did not and would never have to do so. This definition can be generally agreed upon; although there is considerable debate about the validity of substitution as an aspect of the atonement in Scripture (as well as a good deal of caricature of the idea), there is not so much debate about what substitution is.

We can illustrate this definition with some individual comments, here from Martin Luther, Robert Letham, and Karl Barth. We begin with Luther, who argues the following:

> Paul guarded his words carefully and spoke precisely. And here again a distinction must be made; Paul's words clearly show this. For he does not say that Christ became a curse on his own account, but that he became a curse "for us." Thus the whole emphasis is on the phrase "for us." For Christ is innocent in so far as his own person is concerned; therefore he should not have been hanged from the tree. But because, according to the Law, every thief should have been hanged, therefore, according to the Law of Moses, Christ himself should have been hanged, for he bore the person of a sinner and a thief—and not of one but of all sinners and thieves. For we are sinners and thieves, and therefore we are worthy of death and eternal damnation. But Christ took all our sins upon himself, and for them he died on the cross. Therefore it was appropriate for

> him to become a thief and, as Isaiah says (53:12), to be "numbered with the thieves." . . . He has and bears all the sins of all men in his body—not in the sense that he has committed them but in the sense that he took these sins, committed by us, upon his own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood.[4]
>
> When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, he sent his Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon him, and said to him: "Be Peter, the denier; Paul, the persecutor, blasphemer and assaulter; David, the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that you pay and make satisfaction for them." Now the Law comes and says: "I find him a sinner, who takes upon himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in him. Therefore let him die on the Cross."[5]
>
> If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on him, then they are still on the world. Again, if Christ himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins. . . . But if he is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them.[6]

In his commentary on Galatians 3:13 here, Luther uses a series of graphic images in the course of his affirmation of substitution and his polemic against the view that Christ's death is a mere moral example. Luther's stance is clear. In the first paragraph above, Christ took the place of us sinners and thereby took our sins upon himself so that they no longer rested upon us. In the eyes of the law, Christ's bearing of our sins means that sin is not reckoned to

4. J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians (1535)* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 277.
5. Ibid., 280.
6. Ibid.

our account. And in the final statement, similarly, Christ's bearing of our sins means that we do not bear them.

We can also consider the rather more prosaic statements of Letham and Barth:

> 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.[7]

> 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.[8]

These definitions contain several of the key phrases associated with substitution. Luther drew the contrast between Christ not becoming a curse on his own account but for us; he takes our sins on his own body. In the definition from Letham, "on our behalf and in our place" is certainly expressing the point, with the further clarification "so that we will not have to bear it ourselves." The phrase "in our place and for us" in Barth's statement conveys the same idea because of Jesus's removal of the accusation from us onto himself.

In other words, what will be argued in this book is that when Christ died bearing our sins or guilt or punishment, he did so *in our place* and *instead of us*. In a vital sense—as Luther put it—when Christ was bearing our sins, that meant that we were not bearing our sins and do not have to do so. Speaking more grammatically, substitution is often expressed in the alternation between the third-person singular "he" (Christ) and the first-person plural "us." As in Letham's definition above, "*Christ himself* willingly submitted to the just penalty which *we* deserved." And in Barth: "In *his* doing

7. R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 133.

8. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 223.

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*." He did something, underwent something, so *we* did not—and never will—have to.

Although these definitions typically understand substitution in terms of substitutionary punishment, the matter of what precisely it was that Christ bore in our stead will not be treated here in the present study.[9] As Finlan has insightfully delineated, there are various types of substitution in the Bible.[10] For the purposes of brevity and clarity, it is also left open here what Christ's substitutionary death in our place entails. A number of elements of the atonement—propitiation, punishment of sin, representation, expiation, for example—that are often taken together may indeed rightly be taken together, but it is important to recognize that *each* of them must be derived from Scripture and not be seen merely as mutually entailing. Substitution is logically distinguishable from related concepts such as penalty, representation, expiation, and propitiation. This is not to say that they cannot all belong together in a full-orbed understanding of the atonement. But it is to say that each must arise out of exegesis and can, indeed should, be the subject of investigation in its own right. They are logically distinct rather than a priori inseparable.

2.1. Substitution and Penalty

First, one can have substitution without that being *penal* substitution, that is, without *punishment* for sins involved.[11] These

9. I have discussed it elsewhere, in my "Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21–4:25," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 147–84.

10. See S. Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), e.g., 178: "*substitution* can be cultic, judicial, or economic, that is, it can be abstract, penal, or monetary." Cf. also the different forms of substitution discussed in Röhser, *Stellvertretung im Neuen Testament*, 48–57.

11. As in the conclusions of, e.g., D. W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids:

are often treated together: what is taken *in our stead* is the penalty for sins. Substitution is not always necessarily that, however. In the case of the Old Testament scapegoat, for instance, one has a clear enough example of substitutionary expiation, that is, where the goat is a substitute for the people, bearing their sins and thereby eliminating those sins. The scapegoat, however, is not clearly bearing the penalty; it is not explicitly a penal substitution. As Leviticus 16 puts it,

> Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. (Lev. 16:21)

The sins, therefore, are put on the head of the goat, but these sins are then carried away rather than punished in the goat. Similarly, Christ's death could in theory be described as a nonpenal substitution: in parallel to Shakespeare's Olivia leading her graces to the grave (and depriving the world of them),[12] Christ might simply have borne *our sins* away to the grave (thus saving the world from them). Whether substitutionary atonement should be described *specifically* in terms of *penal* substitution needs to be argued exegetically rather than being seen merely as a logical corollary of substitution *per se*. In a quite different way again, one Reformed theologian, John McLeod Campbell, offered an account of the atonement centered on Christ's substitutionary *penitence* rather than his bearing the guilt incurred by our sins.[13] It is less evident how this would relate to Christ's death on the cross, however.

Second, conversely, one can have punishment or penalty without substitution. We will see an example later of a view according

Eerdmans, 2012), 93. I am grateful to Daniel P. Bailey for drawing my attention to this book.

12. *Twelfth Night* I.5.530.

13. See discussion in O. Crisp, "Non-Penal Substitution," *IJST* 9 (2007): 415–33.

to which Jesus identifies with us in our condemnation (chap. 1, §1). In this view of the atonement we have Christ sharing in the judgment of God, but this is not in our place in the sense that he bears it and we do not. Rather, on this view, he would bear it *with us* (rather than *instead of us*) and accomplish atonement that way. Because he identifies with us so completely—not just in the incarnation but also in sharing the penalty of sin in death—he thereby represents us to God. Representation itself is not the same as substitution, however.

2.2. Substitution and Representation

Substitution entails the concept of replacement, X taking the place of Y and thereby ousting Y: the place that Y previously occupied is now filled by X. In representation, X in one sense occupies the position of Y, as in substitution. There are differences, however. In representation, X does not thereby oust Y but rather embodies Y. Indeed, it is usually a presupposition of representation that X belongs to group Y, and so the representative is *part* of the body represented. (One can also have plural representatives of a single body, as in the delegation to Gaius of which Philo of Alexandria was a part.) When a British Member of Parliament speaks and votes in the House of Commons, she speaks and votes—in theory at least—representing the members of her constituency, *of which she is one herself*. She is representing a group to which she herself belongs.[14]

14. In a sense one might argue that representation necessarily involves an element of substitution. At least in the example of British MPs, only one out of around 100,000 people in total (around 60,000 voters) is actually present in the parliamentary chamber. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, with members of the US House of Representatives and of the parliament in the Canadian House of Commons. In the UK, that single Member of Parliament is—in one sense—substituting for the 99,999 people who are not present.

It is possible that one can find an even more substitutionary sort of representation. As we will see below, some scholars argue that when Old Testament priests lay one hand on the bull for the sin offering, the death of the bull thereby represents the death of a priest (Lev. 4:4). If this is the case (I leave this open), then this is an