The Atonement: Representative or Substitutionary?

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THE atonement is a central doctrine for Christians, but a hard doctrine upon which to agree. Particular difficulties beset the theory of a substitutionary atonement: some regard this as the keystone of evangelical doctrine, the *sine qua non* of authentic Christian faith and life; others consider it not only repulsive but immoral, a horrid aberration from the mind of Christ. This diversity of belief would be serious at any time. But in our own day it seems to be especially critical. The revival of concern for evangelism has led in some degree to a *rapprochement* between conservatives or fundamentalists on the one hand and liberals or "post-liberals" on the other hand. Billy Graham has served as the rallying-point of united efforts in evangelism, and a number of less conspicuous figures have performed a similar service. But this *rapprochement* can hardly fail to bring into focus points upon which a basic agreement is needed, and of these the substitutionary atonement is one of the most important issues.

This article is based upon the conviction that a union of forces in evangelism need be no mere "marriage of convenience." The writer belives that a fundamental unanimity is possible. What is proposed is a consideration of two theories having marked similarity, with the suggestion that they may be properly regarded as different emphases of the same fundamental truth.

The first theory is that of Vincent Taylor. It is set forth in his three works, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. It deserves close attention. On the basis of a searching study of the scriptural evidence, Taylor maintains that the death of Christ was a sacrifice, not in a general sense, but closely linked with and deriving deep significance from the sacrifices of the religion of Israel. He gives a most adequate answer to a liberal interpretation such as that of Rashdall. However, he is deeply suspicious of the substitutionary theory because of what he regards as its crude, external, legalistic and mechanical nature. He offers instead the conception of a *representative* atonement. To the question, "*In what sense* did Christ die for men?" Taylor answers, "He died as their representative."

With respect to the representative sacrifice, as in other connections, Taylor regards the Old Testament background as of great importance. The fourth Servant Song (Isa. 53) might be selected as one passage that receives close scrutiny. Taylor sees the Servant accomplishing his destiny through suffering. "The Servant's suffering is not only his experience, but the achievement in which his supreme task consists."[1] It is to be especially emphasized that

1. *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, p. 40.

the suffering is representative. There is indeed a substitutionary element; not in the sense that healing comes to the recipients of divine grace through a simple transfer of punishment, but in the sense that the Servant bears the consequences of the sins of others. He is pierced on account of their rebellions and crushed on account of their sins. "Yahweh made to light on him the sins of us all" and "He bore the sins of many." But because of this the attitude of the onlookers, which at first was one of astonishment at his lowliness, becomes one of understanding, and through understanding leads to a recognition and confession of sin. "In this sense, they participate in the Servant's oblation and make it their own, and it is the complete act, including the Servant's offering and the onlookers' response, which constitutes the sacrifice presented to God. This inference is confirmed by the fact that it is only at the end, when both aspects have been described, that the poet declares that 'Yahweh was pleased to justify' His Servant."[2]

Taylor believes that there is an unmistakable connection between Isa. 53 and Jesus' "ransom" saying in Mark 10:45 and Mat. 20:28. Jesus does indeed use the term "Son of Man" which is not found in Isa. 53, but basic to the argument is the opinion that in the mind of Jesus the figure of the Son of Man had taken on the characteristics of the Suffering Servant, as indicated by Mark 8:31 and other passages. The words "for many" which occur at the end of the saying are suggested by the word "many," found three times in Isa. 53:11f (ERV). The phrase "to give himself" is strongly akin to the description of the Suffering Servant. The term "ransom" is not found in Isa. 53, but it is nevertheless an apt word to describe the function of the Servant who by a costly service for the many which they cannot render for themselves effects their deliverance.

Taylor admits a substitutionary element in the "ransom" passage. Both the Greek word *lutron* and the Hebrew words *kopher* and *kaphar* which lie behind it describe something which is counted as an equivalent for purposes of deliverance or redemption. "There is thus a definitely substitutionary idea in the terminology, although, of course, not one that is necessarily mechanical or which demands a theory of vicarious punishment."[3] We note here Taylor's opposition to the idea of a mechanical substitution, by which he means a totally objective process, and one that operates without human participation.

A similar thought is expressed when Taylor writes: "It is difficult, however, to escape the conviction that Jesus regarded His death as in some way an act of requittal."[4] He admits, further: "The idea that no act of requittal is due to a Holy God, or is needed by men, is a modern notion which it would be libel to attribute to the ancient world; and to say that Jesus cannot have spoken of His death in this way is to modernize His Figure and His thought. Jesus is a stranger to the thought-world of the twentieth century."[5] But in spite of the suggestion which such words contain, it must not be

2. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

thought that Jesus had in mind any mechanical or external process. An active spiritual participation, which is essential to all sacrifice, must have been in His thought.

The preposition *anti* in the phrase *anti pollōn* provides evidence of a substitutionary element. "This use of the rarer preposition, instead of what Moulton calls 'the more colourless' *hyper* can hardly be accidental, and its commonest meaning 'instead of' rather than 'on behalf of' is probably required in this passage."[6] Again Taylor warns against any "crudely substitutionary idea" and refers to the sense in which he finds the idea of substitution acceptable, namely an act done for the many which they cannot do for themselves.

Taylor finds the representative aspect strong in the Pauline epistles. It appears as an idea already familiar from primitive Christian preaching, but now attaining a new force and depth. He brings forth as evidence a number of passages, of which the clearest are probably the following:

> The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge that one died for all, *therefore all died* (2 Cor. 5:14).
> Him who knew no sin *he made to be sin on our behalf* (2 Cor. 5:21).
> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, *having become a curse for us* (Gal. 3:13).[7]

Taylor tackles the difficult question which comes to the mind upon reading such passages: "How could the sinless Christ be said to have been 'made sin' or to have become 'a curse' for us?" His answer may be indicated in a quotation:

> It is evident that St. Paul believed that in some way, and in some representative way, Christ acted for men, and what happened to Him was of supreme moment for them. To this belief he attached great, indeed decisive, importance, and he made it one of the foundation principles of his teaching.[8]

To avoid further details, Taylor's theory may be summarized as follows: He believes that Jesus, drawing on Old Testament conceptions, especially those of the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant, and at the same time transforming them, gave a profound interpretation of His own sacrifice as representative and vicarious. The same aspects are presented repeatedly in the witness to Christ found throughout the New Testament. Christ has identified Himself with men, taken upon Himself the consequences of human sin and has presented to God on behalf of men a perfect offering of penitence and submission. The sacrifice is not substitutionary except in the sense that Christ does for men what they cannot do for themselves. Substitution in the sense of a transfer of guilt, an external or mechanical exchange expressive of a legal rather than an ethical and religious relationship, is to be definitely excluded.

Taylor's meticulous care in Biblical study is apparent. His conception of a representative atonement grows out of years of painstaking research, and

6. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
7. The italics in each case are Taylor's.
8. *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, p. 60.

must surely be regarded as well supported by evidence. It is also interesting to note his honesty in admitting evidence of a substitutionary atonement which he obviously finds trouble in working into his conclusions. There is a tension between Taylor the exegete and Taylor the theologian.

Leon Morris in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* covers much the same ground as Taylor. He shows a similar care in his investigation. But his approach is from the opposite direction. He accepts the substitutionary theory readily and gladly, but gives only brief and restrained recognition to the idea of representation.

A short statement of Morris's theory may concentrate upon his treatment of the "ransom" passage. Morris regards the Hebrew *kopher* as the background of the Greek *lutron*, and states: "The noun *kopher* means a ransom price, and upon every occasion on which it is used it can be shown that there is the thought of a payment to be made. In its biblical usage it refers to the sum paid to redeem a forfeited life."[9] He maintains that *lutron* bears the same meaning, quoting a remark of Procksch that: "As translation of *kopher* then, *lutron* always means a substitute-gift." Then he continues: "there is no occurrence of the word (*lutron*) in the LXX without a price being expressed or clearly implied. We can confidently say that, in so far as the New Testament writers were imbued with the LXX outlook, they must have had in their minds some idea of deliverance by payment of price when they used the words of this word group."[10]

Morris agrees with Taylor regarding the sense of *anti*. "The preposition *anti* characteristically has the meaning 'in the place of', 'instead of', whether in the classics or the *koinē*."[11]

Morris likewise parallels Taylor in his opinion of the place of *lutron* in Christ's saying. Both oppose Rashdall's contention that the *lutron* part of the passage cannot be authentic because it does not fit the context. Morris claims: "There seems no particular reason why our Lord should not have directed the attention of the disciples to the aspects of self-abnegation and of service to others which are seen in His death, and then have gone on to indicate also that the supreme service lay elsewhere."[12]

A detailed examination of the usage of the cognates of *lutron* reinforces the above conclusions.

With regard to St. Paul, Morris writes: "He found it necessary to bring in many categories to interpret what was done on Calvary, and it would seem impossible to escape the conclusion that substitution was one of them. The place and nature of the substitution may require careful definition, but that substitution is part of St. Paul's thought seems beyond reasonable doubt."[13]

9. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 58. Morris finds the idea of substitution in Eph. 1:7 (p. 38 ff.), Rom. 3:24 (p. 41 ff.), Col. 1:14 (p. 43). He believes it is implicit in 1 Cor. 1:30 (p. 45 ff.). He regards it is indubitable in Gal. 3:13 (p. 52 ff.).

Morris finds the idea of substitution in other Biblical terms than *lutron*, though none receive so detailed a study as the latter. He relates the idea of substitution to the covenant, to propitiation, to reconciliation and to justification. He appears unsure of an explicit relation with the covenant, and in the case of reconciliation he admits there is no very close connection. But he claims a definitely substitutionary emphasis in justification, and quotes Calvin, James Morison, F. W. Camfield, Karl Barth, H. Maurice Pelton, H. Wheeler Robinson and A. Schlatter in his support. He regards substitution as an objective element in the atonement. "Something happened on Calvary quite objective to men. . . . In the last resort it depends on what God has done, and not upon some effect of that action upon the human heart (which is not to deny that there is such an effect, and that it is important)."[14]

It is clear that Morris does not think of substitution in any merely mechanical or legalistic sense. Christ, as substitute, has become identified with men. "Then let us notice that there is more than one way of understanding substitution, and some ways are more worthy than others. . . . when we speak of substitution in connection with His death, we should bear in mind that He made Himself one with those for whom He suffered."[15]

At the end of the book Morris gives brief attention to the idea of representation. He writes: "there remains the further question of how we are to understand this objective factor, and in particular of whether we are to say that Christ's death was representative only, or that it was also substitutionary. That Christ died as our representative is widely recognized, but most scholars would affirm that there is no need of the substitutionary idea, all that is valuable in it being preserved in the concept of representation. . . . In the light of what has already been adduced it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the idea of substitution must be included in our understanding of the atonement."[16]

In short, Taylor emphasizes representation while giving a cautious and somewhat embarrassed recognition to substitution. Morris emphasizes substitution while taking only brief notice of representation.

But need there be hesitancy or embarrassment in either case? The present contention is that there need not: the two concepts, far from being exclusive, are in fact complementary; each presents a necessary aspect of the whole truth. The issue of representation and substitution hinges upon the problem: to what degree does the believer undergo the experience of Christ and reproduce His work? In so far as the experience and work of the believer are the same or similar, the sacrifice of Christ will be spoken on in terms of representation; in so far as they are different, it will be spoken of in terms of substitution. Representation emphasizes similarity; substitution emphasizes dissimilarity. But neither need be adopted to the exclusion of the other; they are two different aspects of the same relationship; each has its own contri-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

bution to make to the complete picture of Christian truth; indeed, each guards against an aberration that is all too apt to arise when the other holds the field.

Since this claim is liable to arouse suspicion of syncretism it will be well to elaborate somewhat, in an attempt to show that the two theories do belong together. The objections commonly raised to each theory by itself should not be lightly passed over; they do not arise solely from the offence of the cross. Taylor speaks for many when he regards the substitutionary theory as crude, mechanical, legalistic or exclusively objective; and it is of interest that he raises these objections even while setting forth the evidence for substitution. His representative theory is an attempt to overcome the objectionable features he sees in the substitutionary theory. Christ, he believes, by virtue of His perfect humanity and the completeness of his identification with men made possible a vital participation on the part of men. The bonds by which He is united with men are the most intimate that can be imagined. He is the perfect representative. The saving benefits of His work await only the act whereby men make His offering their own.

But once this vital participation is acknowledged the idea of substitution becomes purged of its objectionable features. We may go on to recognize that Christ has done for men what they cannot do for themselves, indeed that He has undergone an experience into the depths of which they need not enter. It is true that, as the believer advances in the life of faith and becomes a mature Christian, he will feel more poignantly both the suffering of Christ and the sin of men; in his witness to Christ he may have to experience persecution and may even become a martyr. But nevertheless there is an experience he does not need to know, a pain which he is not required to endure. That is the bitterness of death which Christ experienced, the extra weight which hung upon His soul, the ultimate sense of desolation that He knew before His physical life had come to a close.

The cry of dereliction from the cross points to the same conclusion. In this expression of anguish, which has so perplexed interpreters, man catches a glimpse of an infinite depth of suffering. The exact nature of the experience is not known, nor does it need to be known. Into it the Christian is not called to enter in any exact or complete sense. However sharp and severe may be the task of discipleship, however much the sense of discouragement may at times close around the Christian, he at least need never believe himself forsaken by God.

This realization throws light upon a problem that has confronted some: How can one explain the fact of Christ's fearful shrinking from the Cross when the martyrs of the faith have often gone to deaths physically just as painful, or perhaps more painful, with songs of praise upon their lips? Surely the answer must be that there was a dimension of pain which He experienced but the martyrs did not. Beyond the physical and mental distress which such a death would bring to anyone lay a spiritual experience of desolation and loneliness that brought it to an ultimate pitch. This believers have

not been called to endure. If it should be said that in the act of contemplating it the Christian enters into it, the reply must be made that even then he does not really know it. This consideration does, however, bring to mind the truth that an experience into which a person enters may still be beyond him, according to the aspect from which it is viewed, and that therefore representation and substitution are not mutually exclusive categories. It is impossible to disentangle the two ideas with exactitude. This, however, is not serious. Regarding them as different aspects of the same reality leaves one free to contemplate either without any self-contradiction.

Morris comes close to this conception when he writes:

"The substitution which results is not the substitution of a casual stranger, but of one who stands in the closest possible relationship with those for whom He died."[17]

There is one further point to be noted from the angle of Christian experience. It has been remarked that one of the advantages of the representative theory is that it guards against a passive conception of faith. It is equally true, however, that one can be misled by a purely active conception. It is possible for activity to become a source of pride, and for discipleship to be regarded as in some sense a personal attainment. The doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice guards against this. The message that Christ suffered, not only for sins, but in the sinner's place, attacks pride in a most subtle form, and drives home with a kind of ultimate intensity the truth that for his salvation the believer is dependent upon a work that is not his own.

It can be readily admitted that the preaching of a substitutionary atonement has been subject to abuse. The cause of the trouble is that the substitutionary idea has in some quarters held the field too exclusively, unaccompanied by other elements of truth. For some the atonement has scarcely been regarded in any other light. The solution lies, therefore, in the maintenance of a proper perspective and proportion that disregards neither the representative aspect nor the substitutionary aspect of our Lord's atoning work.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 279.