

What Happened on Good Friday? Exploring the Meaning of the Cross

Study #4: Substitution

Notes and Scripture Texts

The idea of Jesus' death on the cross as a legal substitution is probably the most common view of the atonement in the Western church. The idea is that Jesus dies in the place of sinful human in order to justify them before God. Jesus takes on the condemnation that human beings deserve through his death on the cross.

The focus of the substitution idea is on the legal aspect of salvation and is similar to the satisfaction theme but here the accent on Jesus enduring the punishment deserved by rebellious and sinful human beings rather than on satisfying the justice of God. In this motif, God is wrathful toward human beings because of their sin and Jesus bears the effects of God's anger. This view is typical of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Protestant Orthodoxy.

Isaiah 53:4-5: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Romans 3:23-25: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement* by his blood, effective through faith." *Propitiation: A sacrifice that turns aside the wrath of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Martin Luther referred to this text of scripture and this view of the atonement as "The Great Exchange."

A more recent approach to the substitution motif is Jesus as Scapegoat. This idea of atonement theory is rooted in the philosophical concept of the Scapegoat. Here Jesus dies as the Scapegoat of humanity thus moving away from the idea that Jesus died in order to act upon God and turning aside the wrath of God. This view asserts that the atonement is non-violent in terms of the intention of God since Jesus is not in this view a sacrifice but a victim. God overcomes our violence by substituting himself for the victim of our typical sacrifices.

Questions for Reflection:

What do you think of the idea of substitution? How do you understand it? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?

Why do you think the substitutionary understanding of Jesus' death has become the most common understanding of the atonement?

How do you respond to the idea that Jesus death is a "sacrifice" to turn away the wrath of God toward us? Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?

What are the implications of the idea that God is love on this view? How do you reconcile God's love with God's justice? Why is this important, or not?

How does the idea of Jesus as a scapegoat sound to you? Do you think it provides a helpful alternative to the traditional view of substitution?

How do you understand the justice of God? How does it relate to the cross? Do you see any difficulties with this idea? What are the implications for your life?

What is particularly significant to you in this study?

What questions do you have?