

Editorial: Articulating, Defending, and Proclaiming Christ our Substitute

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This edition of *SBJT* is devoted to the theme of the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? For at least two reasons. First, there is no more glorious subject to contemplate than the triumphant cross work of our Lord. In fact, if we are thinking biblically and theologically, we must gladly confess that the subject of Christ's cross is at the heart of the entire message of Scripture and, as such, it takes us to the very heart of the gospel (see, e.g., Luke 24:25-27; 1 Cor 1:8-2:5). No apologies ever should be given for time spent on such a topic of immense and critical importance. But, unfortunately, there is a second reason why we are focusing our attention on the theme of the atonement, and it is this: in the evangelical church today we are in danger of downplaying and even distorting the true meaning and significance of the cross.

A number of examples could be given to demonstrate this last observation, but I want to focus on one disconcerting trend that is increasingly occurring in evangelical theology, namely, an effort to reinterpret the cross in non-substitutionary terms. At least since the eleventh century, and particularly since the Reformation, evangelical theology has sought to argue that the Bible's view of the cross, at its heart, is substitutionary. John Stott in his classic work on the cross rightly captures this view when he argues that "substitution is not a 'theory of the atonement.' Nor is it even an additional image to take its place as an option alongside the others. It

is rather the essence of each image and the heart of the atonement itself. None of the images could stand without it" (*The Cross of Christ* [InterVarsity, 1986], 202-03). Stott, in our view, is precisely correct.

No doubt, the best of evangelical theology has always acknowledged that the Scripture is rich in its presentation, interpretation, and understanding of the cross. In order to theologize correctly about the cross, it is absolutely necessary to do justice to the entire biblical presentation of the atonement. One must faithfully unpack all of the biblical language, images, and themes, across the canon, to grasp correctly the "Bible's view of the cross." In fact, when one does this properly, the cross of our Lord is truly presented in all of its depth, breadth, and glory, for in that cross our redemption is achieved; we are reconciled to God; God's wrath is propitiated; the justice of God is satisfied and our justification is achieved; victory over the powers is won, and so on. To adopt a slogan that is often used today: "The NT's interpretation of the cross is not monochrome." This is a true statement indeed.

However, this does not mean (as many today think) that the Bible's diverse presentation of the cross entails divergence or that there is no basic logic or substructure to the Bible's teaching. Rather, when all of the biblical data regarding the cross is investigated and unpacked, none of that biblical language makes sense apart from it being rooted and grounded in substitu-

tion. In other words, at the heart of the diverse way that the Scripture presents the cross, is Christ as our substitute—the glorious Son of God made flesh—dying in our place, paying our penalty due to our sin and rebellion against our triune God, and thus winning the victory over the power of sin, death, and the devil by first and foremost satisfying God and his righteous, just, and holy requirements. In the end, understanding the cross in substitutionary terms—indeed penal substitutionary terms—is not only true to Scripture (which is reason enough to embrace it), but it is also essential in helping us grasp better the glorious gospel of God’s sovereign grace.

But, sadly, this understanding of the cross is being downplayed, caricatured, and even rejected in recent theology—not merely non-evangelical theology where this has always been the case—but now, even within evangelical theology as well. In fact some of the standard objections to penal substitution outside of evangelical theology are now creeping their way into evangelical treatments of the cross. For example, many are now attacking the doctrine as unbiblical because, in their view, substitutionary atonement does not do justice to all of the biblical data. Or, others are saying that substitutionary atonement gives us a merely Western, mechanical, legal view of the cross instead of a more relational view. As many of the authors in this issue of *SBJT* point out, others are even embracing a typical, yet awful caricature of penal substitution, by arguing that a substitutionary view of the cross does not present us with a loving God but a sadistic one who delights in the abuse of his Son—a kind of divine child abuse. All of these criticisms are groundless and usually reflect both a caricature of

substitutionary atonement as well as the impoverishment of the critic’s own theology and understanding of Scripture. But what is truly unfortunate to note is that all of these criticisms, which have been leveled for hundreds of years by opponents of Christianity as well as liberal Christianity, are now being echoed in some form by many self-avowed evangelicals.

In light of these trends, it is necessary to think through again the Bible’s presentation of the cross of our Lord. Obviously, in order to do justice to such a vast and important subject a lot of data needs to be studied afresh. Though this edition of the *SBJT* can only begin to scratch the surface on such an important subject, we hope it will make a contribution to the current discussion. From the articles to the Forum essays, we have assembled a group of scholars who attempt to think through the biblical data in light of historical and contemporary discussions. And it is our goal and prayer that we will think clearly and faithfully about the glorious cross of our Lord in light of the teaching of Scripture so that Christian teachers, preachers, and other witnesses will seek to expound anew with clarity and conviction the glory of divine substitution because, in the words of John Stott, “the better people understand the glory of divine substitution, the easier it will be for them to trust in the Substitute” (*The Cross of Christ*, 203).