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 help-
ing 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 doc-
trine 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 cari-
cature 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 theol-
ogy and understanding of Scripture. But
what is truly unfortunate to note is that all
of these criticisms, which have been lev-
eled for hundreds of years by opponents
of Christianity as well as liberal Christian-
ity, 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 presenta-
tion 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 histori-
cal 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 con-
viction 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).