

The Vicarious Atonement

The word “vicar” is Latin for “substitute,” so when we say “the vicarious atonement” of Christ, we are talking about the substitutionary death of Christ. I have always thought of the sacrificial death of Christ (he died for our benefit) and the substitutionary death of Christ (he died in our place) as the same thing. I had never really thought of the ideas separately until recently brethren have started teaching Jesus’ death was only sacrificial, and not substitutionary (vicarious). I think that calls for us to re-examine the Bible to see if it really does teach our brotherhood’s long held belief that in his death - Jesus was a substitute for us. Just what does God’s word have to say about the idea? Did Jesus receive our punishment for sin or not?

Christ Was Made A Curse For Us

Galatians 3:13a reads “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” According to this verse we should have been cursed due to our own sin, but Jesus took the curse we deserve. He did it “for us,” that is, on our behalf. Isn’t that substitutionary? Shouldn’t that settle this issue?

Should We Reject Scriptural Truth In Order To Help Fight False Doctrine?

One recent article stated that believing in the substitutionary death of Christ “leads us directly into other errors.” First, this is a false claim. Second, it betrays the real reason some gospel preachers have begun rejecting this vital Bible truth about Christ’s death. Which brings us to a very important point: We should never accept or reject a particular doctrine based upon such perceived consequences. Instead we should always evaluate each position based upon - what do the Biblical texts say? That is the only honest, godly way of searching for truth.

Evidently the Bible’s teaching that our sins are transferred to Jesus (vicariously) reminds some of the false Calvinistic idea of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (Christ’s righteousness is transferred to us), but the fact is - they are not the same. And the most important difference between the two is that the Bible does teach the former, but it does not teach the latter.

Letting The Bible Texts Decide This Question

The correct way to determine if our sins were laid upon Jesus (or if that concept is Calvinism instead) should be based upon what the Bible actually says on the topic, not supposed false consequences. With that in mind, why wouldn't the words of Isaiah 53:6b settle this question once and for all? - "the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Is there a verse elsewhere in the Bible that contradicts what Isaiah 53:6b seems to be saying at first glance, so that we must look for an interpretation other than the most obvious? Or is it that we can't accept Isaiah 53:6b at face value simply because Calvinists also teach it that way?

Should We Reject Scriptural Truth Because The Denominations Agree With It?

It should be obvious that we should never reject a doctrine simply because some false church believes it. Should we reject John 3:16's requirement to believe in Jesus in order to be saved, just because most denominations also teach that? John 1:1 - reads "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Should we reject John 1:1's teaching that there is more than one person in the Godhead simply because the Catholics hold the same view? Should we discard the scriptural deity of Christ position (also taught by John 1:1) merely because other churches agree with us on that? Mark 16:16a declares "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Should we reject this truth on baptism because the Oneness Pentecostals believe the same way? To the contrary, we should be honest enough to accept whatever Bible verses actually say on any topic regardless of who believes what.

Jesus Took Our Punishment

Some wonder how it could be fair that Jesus took our punishment. But let's look again at Isaiah 53, this time verse 5. Notice the following phrases which most definitely teach Jesus accepted punishment for our sins, fair or not:

- he was wounded for our transgressions
- he was bruised for our iniquities
- the chastisement of our peace was upon him
- with his stripes we are healed (spiritually, I Peter 2:24)

In one sense it is not "fair" for one man to be put to death for another man's crimes, but that would be true even if you are talking about only a sacrificial death. Hiram Hutto once explained to me that Jesus' death was only fair because God volunteered himself (not another) to die in our place.

Punished Twice For The Same Sins?

Some reason that if Jesus was punished for our sins there would be no way we could be lost for our own sins – else sin would be punished twice. This is essentially the same “Limited Atonement” argument that Calvinists make when they say if Jesus died for all (not just the elect), then that would mean all will be saved (universalism), because how could someone be lost for whom Jesus died? / how could sin be punished twice?

One reply we make against this argument is - Calvinists agree a man can be “chastened” (Hebrews 12:5-11) in this life for his sin, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he won’t also be punished eternally for the same sin. In the same vein, consider also God’s judgment of nations like Assyria and Babylon for their wickedness (Isaiah 10:12, Jeremiah 50:18). This temporal punishment wouldn’t necessarily preclude their possible eventual eternal punishment would it?

In any event, this argument isn’t sound. It is very possible even in a human legal system for one man to accept/endure punishment for a criminal, but then later for that criminal to refuse to accept the substitution and receive the punishment he deserved in the first place. Just because Jesus died to take care of our sins (whether substitutionary or not), that doesn’t rule out the fact that we will be punished for our sins eternally if we are unwilling to accept Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf.

Our Chastisement Was Put Upon Him

Look back at one of those phrases in Isaiah 53:5 – “the chastisement of our peace was upon him.” Think about what that is saying. Chastisement means “punishment.” So God the Father placed our chastisement (punishment) upon Christ so we could have (spiritual) peace with God. In other words, Jesus took the punishment for our sins so we wouldn’t have to. Doesn’t that settle this issue?

Type And Antitype - The Scapegoat

While we are discussing Isaiah 53, consider how the sins of the Israelites were placed on the scapegoat before it was sent out into the wilderness. Leviticus 16:21-22 states “And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.” That passage sounds just like Isaiah 53 and the sacrifice of Jesus, doesn’t it? Compare the appropriate parts of Leviticus 16:21-22 to Isaiah 53:6b “and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” and 11b “for he shall bear their iniquities.” The wording is almost identical isn’t it? In both the scapegoat type and the corresponding reality of Jesus, the people’s sins are placed on the one that then takes away their sin.

What Does The Bible Mean When It Says Jesus “Bore” Our Sins?

I Peter 2:24 says “Who ... bare our sins in his own body on the tree.” Similarly Hebrews 9:28 states “Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.” There has been some debate about what it means that Jesus “bore” our sins. Thankfully Isaiah 53 clears the matter up for us. Verse 12b (“he bare the sin of many”) and 11b (“he shall bear their iniquities”) is defined in 6b as “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” So Jesus bore our sins in the sense our sins were laid on him. Just like when a heavy load is laid on a pack mule, the mule bears or carries the pack. Except as regarding sin, we mean spiritually not physically. The scapegoat of Leviticus 16 affords the same definition for “bearing sin.” Verse 22 states that “the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities” while verse 21 supplies the specifics of that - “all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat.” The goat bearing the sin simply meant the sins were placed on the goat. It is the same with Jesus bearing our sin.

Type And Antitype - Offering Isaac

Genesis 22 relates the story of Abraham offering Isaac. At one point Isaac said to Abraham “Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replied in verse 8 “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.” Isn’t that such an amazingly wonderful statement because it also describes how God himself would eventually provide the ultimate and effectual sacrifice for us? This fits what Louis Berkhof wrote about the vicarious atonement “God might have demanded a personal atonement of the sinner, but the latter would not have been able to render it.” (Summary Of Christian Doctrine, p.90).

At the end of the story, the angel of God stays Abraham’s hand and a ram caught in a thicket is offered up instead. Verse 13 puts it this way - “Abraham ... offered him (the ram) up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.” Now doesn’t “in the stead of” mean “substituting for”? Believers have always taught the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is a type pointing to Jesus’ sacrifice. Surely we’re not going to backtrack now, are we?

For He Hath Made Him To Be Sin For Us

II Corinthians 5:21a says Jesus was “made ... to be sin,” that is, viewed as a sinner by God: not in the sense that he sinned (in any shape, form, or fashion), but in the sense that Jesus was treated like a sinner (on our behalf) so that we wouldn’t have to be. That’s substitutionary, right? Now whose sin did he take on, his own or ours? That’s substitutionary, right? Jesus was made to be sin “for us,” that is, in our place – again, a substitution.

Some say this Greek word (Strong's #266) should be translated "sin offering" here, but BibleStudyTools.com says "hamartia" is in the KJV of the New Testament 174 times and is translated "sin" 172 times, "sinful" 1 time, and "offense" 1 time. Out of 174 uses it is never translated "sin offering." It is certainly true that Jesus was a "sin offering," but that's not what this verse is saying; this verse is saying Jesus was made to be sin.

Caiaphas' Prophecy

An interesting argument for Jesus' death being substitutionary can be made from Caiaphas' prophecy in John 11:47-52. You will remember that Caiaphas advised that Jesus should die for the Jewish nation. Not just for their benefit, but instead of them, in place of them. He was thinking if Jesus caused too much of an uproar, the Romans would come down hard on the Jewish nation and there would be much bloodshed. Caiaphas reasoned it is better that one man die instead of the whole nation. Now Caiaphas meant Jesus should die for the physical salvation of the Jews, but God was prophesying through him and meant the Jews' spiritual salvation. Jesus was to die instead of, in the place of the Jewish nation (and the Gentiles according to verse 52) - their spiritual salvation resulting.

My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?

Spiritual separation from God is the punishment for sin (Isaiah 59:2). That's what happened to Christ on the cross according to Matthew 27:46. Jesus was forsaken by God the Father because our sins were laid on Jesus (Isaiah 53:6b). Recently some brethren have been saying Jesus wasn't forsaken by God on the cross. I think they are saying Jesus was only calling attention to the fact that he was fulfilling Psalms 22. But if Jesus was really fulfilling "My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?," then he was forsaken, right?

One Christian wrote "Now if the Father did actually forsake Jesus on the cross, then this means that it is possible for God to forsake one who has done everything asked of him." But that rational ignores the very point we all agree on → What happened at the cross was not done because of something Jesus did, but because of what we did (our commission of sins).

The truth is when our sins were laid upon Jesus (Isaiah 53:6b), naturally the Father had to break spiritual fellowship with Christ. It isn't that Jesus sinned; it's that God had to treat Jesus like a sinner ("in the stead of" us, Genesis 22:13). Beyond all the physical pain and torture he had to suffer on the cross, I imagine this was the hardest thing Jesus had to endure. It was the first and only time in history he was spiritually separated from his Father.

How could one deny the Father forsook Jesus when Jesus is plainly asking the Father why he did just that? If a man Jack asks a friend John “why did you forsake me?” doesn’t that always means one of three things?: either Jack is being purposely deceptive, Jack is mistaken, or Jack was in fact forsaken. Which was it for Jesus? Yes what Jesus said in Matthew 27:46 is a quote from Psalms 22:1a, but that doesn’t change the fact that Matthew 27:46 is still true, does it?

Propitiation

I John 2:2 says about Jesus “And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” Similarly I John 4:10 reads “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” According to dictionary.com the word “propitiation” means “that by which God is rendered propitious, that is, by which it becomes consistent with his character and government to pardon and bless the sinner. The propitiation does not procure his love or make him loving; it only renders it consistent for him to exercise his love towards sinners.”

Romans 3:24-26 confirms the idea of that definition by saying “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” Jesus dying on the cross allows God to forgive us for our sins while at the same time being consistent with his righteous and just character; meaning he isn’t just “letting us off the hook.” True justice demands a penalty. God provided his Son to take the penalty we deserve, just like God provided the ram in place of Isaac.

Conclusion

You might say we should have been the ones on that cruel Jerusalem cross, but Jesus took our place. Again as Isaiah 53:6b states, “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquities of us all.” On the cross Jesus received the punishment that we deserved for our sins. He “tasted death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9b). Far from encouraging Calvinism, that directly contradicts Calvinism’s most critical tenet – that Jesus died for the elect only.

I don’t plan on giving up any of the divine Christological truths, even if many do:

- virgin birth of Christ
- deity of Christ

- miracles of Christ
- temptation of Christ
- vicarious atonement of Christ
- resurrection of Christ

Jesus provided the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). It is only up to us to accept that gift through humble obedience to his word. On the cross Jesus “became the author (source) of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:9). We have so much to be thankful for in the death of Christ. He did it for us; he suffered what we deserved to suffer; he died in our place!