

The Satisfaction of Christ Studies in the Atonement 5. Its Nature

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

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An inadequate conception of the terrible enormity of sin necessarily results in a faulty view of the Atonement. In reading through scores of books which were written at varying intervals during the last four hundred years, we have been struck by the fact that side by side with the modifying of the immeasurable heinousness of sin there has been a whittling down of the most essential features comprised in the character of Christ's redemptive work. The more lightly sin be regarded, the less will appear the need for such a stupendous undertaking as that which the Son of God entered upon and triumphantly carried through. Sin is an evil of infinite magnitude, for it is committed against an infinite Person, unto whom every creature is under infinite obligations of rendering unceasing and joyful obedience. This is why God's punishment of sin unatoned for will be eternal: necessarily so, for nothing less will fit the case, nothing less will satisfy Divine justice. And this is why God could receive no satisfaction to His broken law save from one that possessed infinite merits. Romans 3:22 defines sin as a "coming short of the glory of God," i.e., His manifestative or declarative glory. Sin is failing to render unto God that to which His high honor is entitled, namely, implicit, perfect, constant homage and service. God's essential blessedness cannot be affected by the creature: were He to so please, He has merely to utter the words and every rebel throughout the entire universe would immediately cease to exist. But His declarative glory can be affected, yea, is so, by our sins. Sin dishonors God, and fallen man is utterly unable to restore His honor, yet this inability so to do is criminal and increases his guilt. Not only does sin dishonor God, but it cannot be remitted by Him and the transgressor pardoned, till every claim of His law has been met. This the creature cannot do. As we showed in our last chapter, none but a mediator who was Divine as well as human, was competent to render full satisfaction unto God. This is what Christ has done: His Atonement has brought back to God's declarative glory that revenue of honor and praise to which He is entitled. Now the life and death of Christ are historical facts which are, practically, universally admitted, but the "word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18, R.V.), i.e., the scriptural explanation of His atoning work is purely a matter of Divine revelation, and is to be received with uncavilling humility and rested upon with peaceful assurance, simply because it is made known to us on the authority of God. Reasoning thereon is utterly vain, and speculating thereabout is profane. Moreover, as we stated in the opening chapter, all attempts to illustrate from supposed analogies in human relations dishonor God and grossly pervert His Truth. The atoning work of Christ is unique. It stands alone in its solitary grandeur. There is nothing in all history which in anywise resembles it. When a preacher attempts to "simplify" the mystery of the three Persons of the Godhead by

some illustration from "nature," he only exhibits his own foolishness, and helps no one. So too every effort to explain the Atonement with what is outside Scripture, is only turning from light to darkness. Divine mysteries cannot be understood by means of those things which come within the range of our physical senses. It has been rightly said that "accuracy of terms clarifies thought," to which we may add, Accuracy of thought is essential to right views of any portion of the Truth, and right views of the Truth are honoring to God. Therefore, no effort should be spared in seeking to attain unto the utmost possible precision of language when seeking to set forth the things of God. Many a reader has obtained only a cloudy view of a subject because the writer confused effects with the nature of the thing he was dealing with. For example, assurance of salvation is one of the fruits of faith (as well as a gift of the Spirit), yet it has often been regarded as an essential element of faith itself. In consequence, because they lacked assurance, some real Christians have been plunged into what Bunyan termed the Slough of Despond, because they imagined they were not saved at all. In like manner, many writers on the Atonement have carelessly jumbled together some of its leading effects and fruits with the nature of it. A pertinent example of what we have just said is seen in the now almost current idea that the Atonement of Christ signifies "at-one-ment," the bringing of God and the sinner together. But that is not the meaning of the term at all, either as used in Scripture or as employed in sound theology. Reconciliation is one of the many effects or fruits of Christ's Atonement, but was not part of the work He did. Many others have failed to distinguish between the Atonement of Christ and the Redemption which is one of its fruits. It is vitally important to distinguish between what Christ did and that which has resulted therefrom. To understand what He did, let us now attempt to define the nature of His Atonement.

1. IT WAS A FEDERAL WORK By the term "federal" we mean that there was an official oneness existing between the Mediator and those for whom He mediated, or in simpler language, that there is a legal union between Christ and His people. "When, in the Old Testament, the elect are spoken of as the party with whom God makes a covenant, they are viewed as in Christ and one with Him. The covenant is not made with them as alone and apart from Christ. This is taught in Galatians 3:16: 'To Abraham and his seed were the promises made,' but this seed 'is Christ.' The elect are here (as also in 1 Cor. 12:12) called 'Christ,' because of the union between Christ and the elect. And in like manner, when Christ, as in Isaiah 42:1-6, is spoken of as the party with whom the Father covenants, the elect are to be viewed as in Him. As united and one with Him, His atoning suffering is looked upon as their atoning suffering: 'I am crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:20)" (Wm. Shedd, 1889). "Christ is not only the Substitute but the Surety of His people. The Gospel is founded on the fact Adam and Christ are covenant heads and representatives of their respective families. Hence they are termed 'the first man' and 'the second man' (1 Cor. 15:47), as if there had been none other but themselves, for the children of each were entirely dependent on their head. In Adam all die; in Christ all are made alive (1 Cor. 15:22). The first all includes every individual of mankind, the last all is explained by the apostle to mean 'they that are Christ's' (1 Cor. 15:23)" (James Haldane, Doctrine of the Atonement). It was as the Head of His elect that God covenanted with Christ, so that, in a very real sense, that covenant was made with them. This it is which explains all those passages that speak of the saints' oneness with Christ, as that, they were "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), "died with Him" (Rom. 6:8), were "buried with Him" as scriptural baptism symbolizes (Rom. 6:4), were "quickened" with Him (Col. 2:12), "raised with Him" (Eph. 2:6), and made to "sit together in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). So they were legally one with Him, and He with them, in all that He did in rendering a full Satisfaction to God. On this vitally important point we cannot do better than give a synopsis of the last section from chapter two of H. Martin's invaluable work: "How are we to formulate and establish the relation subsisting between Christ and His, as Redeemer and redeemed, unless we fall back upon the doctrine of the Covenant? Some relation, it is evident, must be acknowledged as subsisting between Christ and those on whose behalf He dies, else we do not even

come within sight of the idea of a vicarious sacrifice. The possibility of real atonement absolutely postulates and demands a conjuncture between Him who atones and those for whom His atonement is available. This is beyond the need of proof. And as there is an absolute and obvious necessity for some conjuncture or relation, so in searching for the conjunction or relation which actually subsists, our search cannot terminate satisfactorily till we reach and recognize the covenant oneness. The same reason that demands a relation, remains unsatisfied till it meets with this relation." It does not meet the necessities of the case to refer to the union between Christ and His people which is effected in their regeneration by the agency of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of that faith which is His gift. True, this is indispensable before any can enjoy any of the blessings of His purchase. But there must have been a relation between Christ and His people before He ransomed them. Nor are the necessities of the case met by a reference to the Incarnation. True, the Redeemer must take upon Him flesh and blood before He could redeem, yet there must be a bond of union more intimate than that which Christ holds alike to the saved and the unsaved. He took hold of "the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16), not the "seed of Adam"! Nor is it sufficient to say that the relation is that of suretyship and substitution, for the question still calls for answer, What rendered it fit and righteous that the Son of God should suffer for others, the Holy One be made sin? It is to this point the inquiry must be narrowed. Christ was the Surety of His people because He was their Substitute. He acted on their behalf because He stood in their room. The relation of a substitute justifies the suretyship; but what shall justify the substitution? There is the hinge upon which everything turns. We heartily concur with Dr. Martin when he says, "We can obtain no satisfaction on this point, no sufficient answer to this question, and therefore no satisfactory conclusion to our whole line of investigation, till the doctrine of the everlasting covenant-oneness comes into view. That is the grand underlying relation. That is the grand primary conjunction between the Redeemer and the redeemed, which alone bears up and accounts for all else in respect of relation which can be predicated as true concerning them. 'Both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren' (Heb. 2:11). He is substituted for us, because He is one with us — identified with us and we with Him." Promoted by infinite love, Christ, as the God-man, freely accepted the terms of the Everlasting Covenant which had been proposed to Him, and voluntarily assumed all the legal responsibilities of His people. As their Head He came down to this earth, lived, wrought and died as their vicarious Representative. He obeyed and suffered as their Substitute. By His obedience and sufferings He discharged all their obligations. His sufferings remitted the penalty of the law, and His obedience merited infinite blessings for them. Romans 5:12-19 explicitly affirms that the elect of God are, legally, "made righteous" on precisely the same principle by which they were first "made sinners." "Our union with Christ is of the same order, and involves the same class of effects, as our union with Adam. We call it a union both federal and vital. Others may call it what they please, but it will nevertheless remain certain that it is of such a nature as to involve an identity of legal relations and reciprocal obligations and rights" (A. A. Hodge). "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19) — "made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). More than a thousand years ago, Augustine remarked, "Such is the ineffable closeness of this transcendental union, that we hear the voice of the members suffering, when they suffered in their Head, and cried through the Head on the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' And, in like manner, we hear the voice of the Head suffering, when He suffered in His members, and cried to the persecutor on the way to Damascus 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?' (Acts 9:4)." The federal relation of Christ to His people was a real one, upon which the infallible God deemed it just to punish Christ for the sins of His people, and to credit them with His righteousness, and thus completely satisfy all the demands of His law upon them. As the result of that union, Christ was in all things "made like unto his brethren" (Heb. 2:17), being

"numbered (reckoned one) with transgressors" (Isa. 53:12); and they, in turn, are "members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones" (Eph. 5:30). In consequence of this federal union, Christ is also made "a quickening Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45) so that, in due time, each of His people becomes a living and vital member of that spiritual body of which He is the Head (Eph. 1:19-23). The relation between Christ and those who benefit from His Atonement was, therefore, no vague, indefinite, haphazard one, but consisted of an actual covenant oneness, legal identity, vital union. Suretyship presupposes it. Strict substitution demands it. Real imputation proceeds upon it. The penalty Christ endured could not otherwise have been inflicted. They for whom Satisfaction was made do, by inevitable necessity, share its benefits and receive what was purchased for them. This alone meets the objection of the injustice of the Innocent suffering for the guilty, as it alone explains the transfer of Christ's sufferings and merits to the redeemed.

2. IT WAS A SUBSTITUTIONARY WORK The terms "substitutionary" and "vicarious" are often used very loosely. Many who have sought to gain a reputation for orthodoxy and thereby ingratiate themselves into the confidence of God's people have made use of the bare terms, yet intended by them nothing more than that Christ suffered on the behalf of others, for the benefit of others. But that is only a half truth, and therefore close akin to a lie. Vicarious suffering or punishment is more than suffering endured for the good of others. The suffering of martyrs for the good of their cause, of patriots for their country, of philanthropists for mankind, are not "vicarious," for they are not substitutionary. Vicarious suffering is suffering endured not only on behalf of others, but in the stead of others, in the actual place of others. It therefore carries with it the exemption of the party in whose place the suffering is endured. What a substitute does for the person whose place he fills, absolves that person from the need of himself doing or suffering the same thing. Thus, when we affirm that the sufferings of Christ were vicarious" we mean that He substituted Himself in the room of sinners and satisfied the law in their behalf, and that, in such a way, the law can now make no claim whatever upon them. Christ's sufferings were "vicarious" in identically the same way that the death of animals in the Old Testament sacrifices was in lieu of the death of the transgressor offering them. The Scriptures teach that Christ was in a strict and exact sense the Substitute of His people, i.e., that by Divine appointment and of His own free will, He assumed all their liabilities, took their law-place, and bound Himself to do in their stead all that the law demanded, rendering to it that obedience upon which their wellbeing depended, and suffering its penalty which their sins deserved. Christ became their vicarious Sponsor, assuming their obligations and undertaking to satisfy Divine justice on their behalf. So real was His substitution in their place, that what He did and suffered for them precluded all necessity of their meeting the demands of the law in their own persons. Thus, the Satisfaction which Christ made was far more than an expedient for "removing those obstacles" which prevented God from justifying the ungodly: it was that which required Justice to remit the sins of all for whom it was made. The Satisfaction of Christ was infinitely more than a means for "opening a way" whereby the grace of God could flow forth: it was that which necessitated all for whom it was made being vested with all its meritorious efficacy. In becoming the Substitute of His people, in placing Himself under their liabilities, in engaging to discharge all their responsibilities, Christ was, necessarily, "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4), so that He might keep its statutes, fulfill its requirements, and thus "magnify" and render it "honorable" (Isa. 42:21). The Scriptures plainly teach that Christ's obedience was as truly "vicarious" as was His suffering, and that He reconciled the elect to God by the one as well as the other — that is why we insist on using the wider term "the Satisfaction of Christ," for "atonement," strictly speaking, covers only the expiation of our guilt by His vicarious suffering. The active obedience of Christ to the law was required as the meritorious condition upon which the Divine favor and the promised reward of the Covenant might come upon all whose Surety He was. We must never attempt to separate between the active obedience and the passive sufferings of Christ, either when contemplating His mediatorial work, or when considering

the effect of that work upon the covenant-standing of His people. Christ's vicarious obedience is an intrinsic part of that "righteousness" which He wrought in our stead, and which is imputed to us as the ground of our justification. All that Christ did on earth He did as Mediator. He was acting in our stead just as truly when He was obeying God as when He was enduring His wrath. It is in reference to both of these conjointly that He is designated "the Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6). It needs to be pointed out that the "obedience" of Christ is not to be restricted to what He wrought prior to the Cross, nor are His "sufferings" to be limited to what He endured during the crucifixion and immediately preceding it. No, He suffered all through His life, and obeyed throughout His dying. "The whole earth life of Christ, including His birth itself, was one continued self-emptying, even unto death. His birth, and every moment of His life, in the form of a servant, was of the nature of holy sufferings. Every experience of pain during the whole course of His life, and eminently in His death on the cross, was, on His part, a voluntary and meritorious act of obedience. He lived His whole life, from His birth to His death, as our Representative, obeying and suffering in our stead, and for our sakes; and during this whole course, all His suffering was obedience, and all His obedience was suffering. The righteousness which He wrought out for His people consisted precisely in this suffering and obedience. The righteousness of Christ, which is imputed severally to each believer, as the ground of his justification, consists precisely of this suffering and obedience. His earth life as suffering cancels the penalty, and as obedience, fulfills the precepts and secures the promised reward of the law; but the suffering and the obedience were not separated in fact, and are inseparable in principle, and equally necessary to satisfy the law of the covenant and to secure the salvation of the elect" (A.A. Hodge). The law, as a covenant of life, was accompanied by two sanctions. First, the promise of "life" or Divine favor and eternal well-being, conditioned upon perfect obedience: see Leviticus 18:5; Matthew 19:17; Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12. Second, the penalty of "death" suspended on disobedience. Now the object for which Christ became incarnate was "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom. 8:4), and therefore is Christ declared to be "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Rom. 10:4). And this was only made possible by His fulfilling all the law's conditions. Had not Christ vicariously obeyed the law, had He merely suffered its penalty, due our sins, then we should be destitute of any positive righteousness, and would be left just where Adam was before he fell. But the Scriptures emphatically affirm that Christ saved by His obedience as well as by His sufferings: "For as by one man's disobedience, many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19) — Christ's "obedience" is to be interpreted here in the same natural and obvious way as the "disobedience" of Adam. Thus our twofold obligation to God, as creatures and as sinners, was met and discharged by Christ. "As our Representative, He bore in the union of His divine personality our nature impersonally, 'a true body and a reasonable soul,' in order that He might thus be made vicariously under the law, to the end that by His purely vicarious obedience He might 'redeem them that are under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons' (Gal. 4:4,5). This means necessarily (a) that Christ was made under the law, that He did not belong there naturally, but was transferred to that position by an act of divine sovereignty; (b) that He was placed there, not for Himself but in our stead; (c) that He was made under the law for the purpose of securing for us not only the remission of sins, but also the adoption of sons, whereby we become 'heirs of God through Christ' (Gal. 4:7); all of which is conditioned not upon suffering but upon obedience. All that Christ did on earth He did as our Mediator, and all that He did as Mediator, He did in the stead of those for whom He acted as Mediator. Therefore He said (Matthew 3:15), 'for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness,' that is, all that God requires of His people" (A.A. Hodge). In Romans 8:3 (the context should be carefully weighed) we read of "what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh." That which the law was unable to do was justify the ungodly. The reason for this was that the law demands perfect obedience, and this the flesh, because of sin, makes it

impossible for the sinner to render. In view of this, God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Sent Him into the law-place of His people and by His executing the penalty upon Him "condemned sin in the flesh," and by accepting His vicarious obedience the "righteousness of the law" is fulfilled in us. The phrase "the righteousness of the law" is used in the New Testament to express the totality of that which the law demands as the condition of favor. In Adam, before he fell, the righteousness of the law was perfect obedience. In the case of all his descendants, it is perfect obedience plus the suffering of its penalty; hence the impossibility of our achieving a legal righteousness by our own personal agency. Now "the righteousness of the law" is placed in antithesis from "the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 10:5,6). That is to say (see context) the futile attempts of the sinner to satisfy the requirements of the law in his own person, is contrasted from the vicarious satisfaction of Christ which faith apprehends and appropriates. "To them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1). To the same effect our worthless righteousness is contrasted from God's perfect righteousness in Christ: see Romans 3:20-26. Obedience is therefore the essence of righteousness, and that obedience, the obedience of Christ. Therefore we read that He is "made unto us wisdom and righteousness" (1 Cor. 1:30). And therefore Paul declares his desire to "be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:9). The endurance of penalty by Christ demanded that our sins should be remitted; the performing of obedience by Christ demanded that His righteousness be imputed to us and that we should be eternally established in God's favor. In the above passage (Rom. 8:3) we are told that God sent His own Son "in the likeness of sinful [literally "sin's"] flesh." This remarkable expression needs to be carefully investigated, lest we err by overstatement, or come short of its meaning by defective statement. First, it affirms the reality of Christ's humanity. Second, inasmuch as that humanity was united to. Godhead, it must be sinless humanity: generated by the Holy Spirit it was pure and holy. This was secured by the fact that though He took flesh from Adam through the Virgin, He was not in Adam's covenant. Third, its "likeness" or appearance was after the order of "sin's flesh": between Him and sinful men there was no perceptible difference that could be traced: in weariness and exhaustion, sorrow and heaviness, Christ was in all respects "made like unto his brethren." But toil and sorrow, weakness and pain, came not on Him as the inevitable consequence of the Incarnation, but resulted from His coming here as the Surety of His people. Christ was personally exempt from all the consequences of Adam's sin, but officially He was subject to them. Personally, He was a Divine person assuming a sinless humanity, and had He not come here as the Head of God's elect (considered as fallen creatures), He had doubtless appeared in a humanity as glorious as that of unfallen Adam's. But officially He assumed "the likeness of sin's flesh," an expression referring to the effects of which sin was the cause: namely, subject to suffering and mortality and this from the moment of His birth. O infinite stoop! O marvel of condescensions! He bore in His body the weight of imputed sin, a body bearing the sad marks of sin, for "His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men" (Isa. 52:14). There was no perceptible difference between His humanity and ours, not because precisely the same flesh had been transmitted to Him from Adam, but because as our Sin-bearer He voluntarily assumed the burden of imputed guilt, which carried with it abasement and degradation, suffering and death: it was officially assumed, not personally inherited. Christ came in the likeness of sin's flesh "for sin" (Rom. 8:3), i.e., on account of sin: that is why God "sent" Him. "Condemned sin in the flesh": sin is still personified, as in Romans 5, 6, 7: see 5:21; 6:14, etc. — the potentate having men in bondage. God "condemned sin" speaks of sin as a person judged before the highest tribunal and righteously condemned. In consequence of God's judgment, sin has no further claim on those over whom he had tyrannized: they are set free. "Condemned sin in the flesh" means condemned it in Christ's humanity, as the sinless Sin-offering — cf. 2:1; 5:18 — a condemnation

freeing His people from condemnation: 8:1. Christ was "condemned," visited with penal suffering, because He appeared before God only in the guise of our accursed sins. And, this, in order that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us," i.e., as if we personally had done it. Rightly did Mr. J. Inglis point out, "The fact that God sent forth His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, intimates that He entered into the condition of His people, which, with all its evils, is the consequence of sin. If we find Him poor and despised, hungry and thirsty, subject to toil and fatigue, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, not exempt from the fear of death nor from actual mortality, to say nothing of all else that He endured at the hands of Satan and of man; all these are indubitably the consequences of sin, and He could be exposed to them only as He represented sinners" (Waymarks, Vol. 10). A fuller light shines forth from the four Gospels when we perceive that they are not the biography of a private individual, but the history of the Surety of God's people. Christ was the Representative Head of an elect company: from Bethlehem to Calvary He was their vicarious Victim. The appearing of the Son of God on earth was the direct consequence of sin. The Incarnation and the Cross are inseparable; both were a means to an end — the vindication of Divine justice, the expiation of sin, the rendering of meritorious obedience to the law. We cannot survey the meanness of His birth, made lower than the angels; the poverty of His condition, His manual occupation, earning His bread by the sweat of His brow, according to the curse upon His people; His temptation by Satan; His privations, the enduring of hunger and thirst and public execution; these, we say, cannot be contemplated without the firm conviction that they were all included in our guilt and related to our punishment.

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