

Identification and Substitution

by G.W. North

The sermon explores the concepts of substitution and identification in the context of salvation, highlighting the significance of Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion in making us right with God.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:5, Romans 3:23, 2 Corinthians 5:21

Topics: "Substitution", "Identification in Christ"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the profound truth of substitution in the context of Jesus' sacrifice, explaining that Christ died not just for us, but as us, taking on our sins and the punishment we deserved. This act of substitution is rooted in the concept of identification, where Jesus fully identified with humanity's sinfulness while simultaneously embodying divine righteousness. North elaborates that true redemption involves a transfer of sin from the sinner to Christ and a transfer of Christ's righteousness to the sinner, resulting in complete forgiveness and a new life. He highlights that the essence of salvation is found in the unity of sinlessness, righteousness, and holiness, which must coexist in believers as they are transformed by Christ. Ultimately, North calls for a deeper understanding of the mystery of God's love and the comprehensive nature of redemption through Christ's identification with humanity.

Transcript

We must enter into the meaning of this saying - 'Jesus died for me as me'. The truth of substitution may be defined as 'one in place of another'; it has often been preached in such words as 'in my room and stead'. This has come to mean 'one taking the place of another with the purpose of taking the sin of - bearing the punishment of - paying the debt of - dying the death of - another, upon the condition that the other be entirely exonerated, reprieved and set free'. More than that, because of the justifying intention of God in the act, the one reprieved goes out from under all condemnation, entirely forgiven by Him and given a righteousness which not only avails for the present, but also for all the past days of his life. This righteousness is the righteousness of man, for it is the righteousness of the Man Christ Jesus. It is also the righteousness of God made manifest in flesh; it is perfect.

Substitution has come to mean transference also. In the act of redemption the sinner's sin is transferred from him to Jesus Christ, the righteous Man, and this righteous Man's righteousness is transferred to the sinner. It should be noted at this point that the state of sinlessness cannot exist as of itself. God is sinless, but He cannot be sinless unless He is righteous. Sinlessness is a negative state - absence of sin; it can only exist as the result of the positive, powerful state of righteousness. That is why in order to save men

God has to impart righteousness to them. In us it becomes the powerful working principle of new life apart from which it could not be.

Sinlessness, righteousness and holiness must co-exist in us as one as they do in God, or else they cannot exist in us at all. Righteousness precludes sin and produces holiness. In regenerate men sinlessness is the direct result of the powerful working of righteousness producing holiness as its fruit in the life. Sin does not grow on the tree of righteousness, its fruit is holiness. 'Either make the tree good and its fruit good', says Jesus, 'or else make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt'. A good tree cannot bring forth corrupt fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

These truths introduce us to some of the basic powers and workings of redemption, without which it could not be. But Paul informs us of something greater by far, unto which all these are steps on the way. Words like substitution, atonement, justification etc. are technical terms of theology. They are classifications necessary to analytical thought; they must never be accepted as rigid limitations or watertight compartments. For instance substitution must not only be understood as Jesus dying for me instead of me, but also for me as me.

When He hung on the cross, Jesus was not only made sin, He was also made the sinner. He was made murder, adultery, filth, uncleanness, the lie, deceit, pride, betrayal and whatever other manifestation of evil may be named as sin. He was also made and treated as the murderer, the adulterer, the source of filth and uncleanness, the one who both did and was capable of doing all these things. Jesus went to the cross as the sinner, there to be made the sin, the one needing cleansing, forgiving, justifying, saving, reconciling, redeeming. He also went to the cross as God, the one who cleanses, forgives, justifies, saves, reconciles, redeems. More, He went there as cleansing, forgiveness, justification, salvation, reconciliation, redemption. So completely is Christ Jesus everything, and made everything to us.

On this ground of realisation Paul seeks to impart the revelation to us - identification. Substitution has neither justification nor spiritual meaning unless it is part of this. God Himself would not have been true, nor could He have justified us unless upon this ground. In fact there could have been no justification for anyone or anything except upon the basis of identification. All would have been a manipulation of ideas having no substance, and entirely without truth. There could be no true God; in fact nothing. Spiritual identification, as it is now revealed unto men, arose from identity of being in God, and is not, nor could have been, possible apart from it. New Testament salvation is an adaptation and application of God's own being and life and requirements to man and his needs. Its comprehensiveness is astounding; even the beginnings of understanding are overwhelming. God's propositions and provisions to us in Christ are well-nigh incredible.

This is why each one in the New Covenant must be taught of God. To read the writings of those who were so taught is to receive the first faint glimmerings of the seeming broad daylight of understanding in which they lived. Their intention by writing was to bring us all into their own enjoyed state; it is also the purpose of God who inspired them. He wants us to pass into Him in conscious experience of redemption and to live eternally in that state. For this reason God became Man.

We behold the beginnings of this identification in the incarnation when God miraculously identified Himself with man by birth. We further see it at Jordan, as the Lord steps into the place of sinners and identifies Himself with them there by water baptism. There John said, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world'. Jesus said, 'Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness';

and God the Father said, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'. But not until Calvary do we see it in all fullness.

God did a marvellous thing at Calvary, but it was not the final goal; the blood shed there was the most vital factor in the plan of redemption as it was revealed at that point, because it flowed from that identity and unification from which all came and into which it brings (all). Jesus was not a sinner by birth, nor was He a sinner at Jordan, but at Golgotha He was made the sinner. He had to be, or else He had no business with the cross, nor would it have been right for His Father to sacrifice Him there. God had to be just in what He did.

Not for Him the high-handed actions and despotic words of men. In all His words and works He had to be justified before angels; He also has to be seen to be right in the eyes of all devils and principalities and powers. More than that, God has to be seen to be righteous and just and faithful in all He does before the eyes of all His saints. Not that God is judged of men, or that man ought to approach his Lord with this in mind, but so great and gracious is our God that He has even acted with this in mind too. He is absolutely perfect beyond degree. Therefore everything He achieved at Calvary was primarily by identification, and as following logically from that by substitution also. All was accomplished in, and upon, and by, one person, in one act, at one time.

Gethsemane had been the place of final decision. To God, Jesus' sweat there was as precious as His blood on the cross; it is recorded plainly enough, 'his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground'. To His Father that hour of agony sealed the redemptive virtues latent in His blood, so soon to be shed; it justified the whole course they had so far travelled together, and vindicated the actions He intended shortly to take. 'Abba, Father', Jesus cried in repetitive assertion of Sonship; child and Son and man though He was, He felt a babe as the shadow of death loomed over Him, dark and threatening. 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.

What the Father said to Him there no one knows; we only have the record of what Jesus said to His Father. It may be that between the words 'me' and 'nevertheless' the Father said 'it is not possible' or 'no Son, this cup must be drunk to the bottom', and Jesus replied in resignation and agreement, 'nevertheless not my will but thine be done'. On the other hand, perhaps this is the first of the occasions when Jesus called upon His Father and received no answer. We have no means of knowing. Angels came and ministered to Him.

He arose strengthened from His vigil, physically restored, and went obediently to the cross, confident in His God and Father. The Man's last appeals against God's sentence were uttered, He had received and agreed to His final directives. From that moment He was treated as the sinner; the Spirit led Him all the way. Betrayal, apprehension, desertion by man followed in swift succession, but these were only the beginning of sorrows; imprisonment, torture, mockery, beating, blasphemy, denial, judgement all following in their train added to His miseries.

To us who view afar off, all were so wrong, but to Him all was so right. He had accepted the cup and was drinking it. It was self-applied, though given Him from His Father's hand; He blamed nobody. He loved and excused His civil judge and totally forgave those who carried out the sentence. Having taken the sinners' place, He was fully prepared to be made sin. He pleaded no cause, sought no reprieve, asked no mercy, begged no pardon; boldly He approached the awful hour, bearing His cross, accepting the terrible curse. He had consented to it all; He knew His own righteousness would sustain Him; His Father would keep Him

and His God would save Him.

So as the man of sin - the sinner bearing his own sin - the Man bearing the sin of the world - the victim of the curse - He went to the cross. There He hung totally identified with man, as the outcast, the unforgivable, the unjustifiable, the unredeemable, the forsaken. He was the soul needing salvation, humanity needing redemption, personality needing justifying, enmity needing reconciling, nature needing regenerating, death needing life and man needing God. Hopeless, helpless, He became nothing and less than nothing. With awful wonder we are permitted to see His identification with man going far beyond 'being found in fashion as a man', to utter identity with him in his sin. More even than that, going further still beyond the comprehension of the mind, He became the representation of man's nature - sin itself.

Here lies the deepest mystery of everything connected with God's love and man's salvation. At the same time He became as the sinner, and on that same cross where He was so identified with sin, He was the sinless man utterly identified with God and clearly identifiable as righteousness. The wonder of Jesus on the cross was that there He was also the Christ; He did not need to forsake one in order to become the other. He was both; had He not been both He would have ceased to have been either. While still representing the sin-man in extremity of need, He was also the man born of God to destroy that evil man and end that extreme need.

In short, Christ Jesus is made unto us absolutely everything. He was both the man needing to be redeemed and the Redeemer supplying the redemption he needed. Paul saw this great truth as clearly as any man. At what point he was caught up to paradise to receive the heavenly revelation is difficult to decide, but the knowledge gained from insight into this mystery lay behind many, if not all the things he said. With marvellous clarity of vision he says, 'I am (was) crucified with Christ'; with breadth of understanding he writes, 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus through faith in his blood', and further still says, 'in whom we have redemption'.

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