

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Jesus, Our Substitute

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1

The word vicarious is extremely important to our understanding of the atonement of Christ. The late Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said that, in his judgment, the single most important word in all of the Greek New Testament is the minuscule word *huper*. This little word is translated by the English phrase “in behalf of.” Barth was clearly engaging in a bit of hyperbole in making this statement, because many words in the New Testament are arguably as important or even more important than *huper*, but he was simply seeking to call attention to the importance of what is known in theology as the vicarious aspect of the ministry of Jesus.

He made satisfaction for our debt, our enmity with God, and our guilt. He satisfied the ransom demand for our release from captivity to sin. However, there is another significant word that is often used in descriptions of the atonement: substitution. When we look at the biblical depiction of sin as a crime, we see that Jesus acts as the Substitute, taking our place at the bar of God’s justice. For this reason, we sometimes speak of Jesus’ work on the cross as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, which means that when He offered an atonement, it was not to satisfy God’s justice for His own sins, but for the sins of others. He stepped into the role of the Substitute, representing His people. He didn’t lay down His life for Himself; He laid it down for His sheep. He is our ultimate Substitute.

The idea of being the Substitute in offering an atonement to satisfy the demands of God’s law for others was something Christ understood as His mission from the moment He entered this world and took upon Himself a human nature. He came from heaven as the gift of the Father for the express purpose of working out redemption as our Substitute,

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doing for us what we could not possibly do for ourselves. We see this at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, when He initiated His public work by coming to the Jordan River and meeting John the Baptist.

Imagine the scene at the Jordan that day. John was busy baptizing the people in preparation for the coming of the kingdom. Suddenly he looked up and saw Jesus approaching. He spoke the words that later became the lyrics for that great hymn of the church, the Agnus Dei: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ([John 1:29b](#)). He announced that Jesus was the One Who had come to bear the sin of His people. In His person, He would fulfill all of what was symbolized in the Old Testament sacrificial system, by which a lamb was slaughtered and burned on the altar as an offering before God to represent atonement for sin. The lamb was a substitute, so in calling Jesus "the Lamb of God," John was asserting that He, too, would be a Substitute, but One Who would make real atonement.

2

At the center of Jesus' teaching was the assertion that He was doing this not for Himself but for us—to redeem us, to ransom us, to save us.

Jesus came to John and, to John's horror, asked to be baptized. Scripture gives us John's reaction to this request. "John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?'" ([Matthew 3:13](#)). That simple statement must have masked a deep confusion on John's part. He had just announced that Jesus was the Lamb of God, and in order to serve as the perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of His people, the Lamb of God had to be without blemish. He had to be completely sinless. But the ritual of baptism that John was calling all of Israel to undergo in preparation for the coming of the Messiah was a rite that symbolized cleansing from sin. So John said, in essence, "It would be absurd for me to baptize You, because You are the sinless Lamb of God." John then put forth an alternative idea: Jesus should baptize him. This was John's way of acknowledging that he was a sinner who needed cleansing.

Jesus overrode John's protest. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness'" ([Matthew 3:15a](#)). Jesus' choice of words in this statement is interesting. First He said, "Permit it to be so now." The fact that Jesus gave His command to John in these particular words shows that He understood there was some theological difficulty involved. It was as if Jesus was saying, "John, I

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know you don't understand what's happening here, but you can trust Me. Go ahead and baptize Me."

However, Jesus went on to give an explanation as to why John should baptize Him. He said, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." The word fitting here can also be translated as "necessary." In other words, Jesus said it was necessary for Him to be baptized. How was it necessary? John the Baptist had come as a prophet from God. Jesus would say later, "Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" ([Luke 7:28a](#)). Through this prophet, God had given His covenant people a new command: they were to be baptized. We should never think that God stopped expressing His will to His people after He spoke the Tenth Commandment. A multitude of laws was added to the basic Ten Commandments after they were given. The command that His people undergo this cleansing rite to prepare for the breakthrough of the divine kingdom was merely the latest edict from God.

Before He could go to the cross, before He could fulfill the role of the Lamb of God, before He could make Himself an oblation to satisfy the demands of God's justice, Jesus had to submit Himself to every detail of every law God had given to the nation. He had to represent His people before the bar of God's justice in every detail. Since the law now required that all of the people be baptized, Jesus, too, had to be baptized. He had to fulfill every single commandment of God if He was to be sinless. He wasn't asking John to baptize Him because He needed to be cleansed; He wanted to be baptized so that He could be obedient to His Father in every detail.

That's the point Jesus was making here to John, because Jesus' mission was to be the substitute, the vicarious sacrifice offered to God. Jesus understood this and embraced it. From the start of His ministry, He knew He had come to act as a substitute on behalf of His sheep. At the center of His teaching was the assertion that He was doing this not for Himself but for us—to redeem us, to ransom us, to save us.

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