

# The Forgiveness of Sins and the Work of Christ: A Case for Substitutionary Atonement

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*The doctrine of substitutionary atonement has been called into question by many, chief among them Immanuel Kant, who denies there can be justice in the innocent dying for the guilty. When Kant's objection is examined, however, the shortcomings of the Enlightenment assumptions on which it stands are exposed. The forgiveness of sins is seen to have a substitutionary character, as does, therefore, the doctrine of justification by faith. So we see that the credal statement "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" necessarily implies a substitutionary atonement, which invites a reconsideration of the way in which substitutionary atonement is generally treated.*

Substitutionary views of atonement have faced strong criticism throughout the modern era. Recently even evangelicals, long associated with this position, have found themselves in dispute over it.<sup>1</sup> What exactly does it mean that Christ "bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, ed., *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995); Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Steve Chalke, "Cross Purposes," *Christianity* (September 2004): 44–48; Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007); J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007).

2:24)?<sup>2</sup> Or, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21)? Does this include at least an element of exchange, or substitution, in which Jesus takes human sin and offers in its place his perfect righteousness by virtue of his death and resurrection? If so, that raises questions about the justice of a righteous man suffering in the place of guilty sinners.<sup>3</sup>

The widespread rejection of substitutionary atonement in academic theology may be traced in large part to the criticisms made of it by Immanuel Kant. Kant objected to the idea that an innocent third person could suffer the punishment for the sins of guilty persons. His argument proved highly persuasive and remarkably significant. What might at first glance appear to be the elimination of just one possible option among many regarding the nature of atonement has often become one element of a widespread reevaluation of theological commitments, as it was for Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, who first rejected substitutionary atonement when he was in seminary.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I shall make an argument in favor of the view that Christ died as a substitute for sinful human beings. I shall begin by examining Kant’s objection to the doctrine before seeing how those concerns might be countered. Then I shall show that substitution is an inevitable aspect of forgiveness, and so the good news of the justification of sinners is unavoidably a gospel that rests on substitutionary atonement.

### *Meeting Kant’s Objection to Substitutionary Atonement*

In his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Immanuel Kant attempted to present a version of Christianity that could be accepted on the rational principles of the Enlightenment and thereby overcome many of the objections it faced in the light of that movement. The inscrutable supernatural realm is not so much

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> It also provokes concerns because the term “substitution” gained notoriety from theologies that substituted the church for Israel and were used by some to justify the Holocaust. See Didier Pollefeyt, ed., *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners for the Kingdom of God? In Search of an Alternative for the Theology of Substitution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See John R. Franke and Ron Hill, *Barth for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 11.

rejected as left alone as unknown and unknowable. This meant that the miraculous aspects of the biblical revelation were set aside as superstition.<sup>5</sup> Kant then reworked the Christian faith to accent its moral value. This highly innovative project required a substantial rethinking of the doctrine of atonement.

Kant insisted that no person can represent or “take another’s place” (*Stellvertretung*) in matters of personal guilt. He said,

[Moral evil] is no *transmissible* liability which can be made over to another like a financial indebtedness (where it is all one to the creditor whether the debtor himself pays the debt or whether some one else pays it for him); rather is it *the most personal of all debts*, namely a debt of sins, which only the culprit can bear and which no innocent person can assume even though he be magnanimous enough to wish to take it upon himself for the sake of another.<sup>6</sup>

This is not, however, to suggest that sinful human beings simply have to face the punishment for their sins. It is instead to relocate the atoning work from Jesus Christ to the repentant human being.

The coming forth from the corrupted into the good disposition is, in itself (as “the death of the old man,” “crucifying of the flesh”), a sacrifice and an entrance upon a long train of life’s ills. These the new man undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God, that is, merely for the sake of the good, though really they are due as *punishments* to another, namely to the old man (for the old man is indeed morally another).<sup>7</sup>

This does not entirely exclude the work of Christ, as Kant goes on to explain.

And this [new] moral disposition which in all its purity (like unto the purity of the Son of God) the man has made his own—or, (if we personify this idea) this Son of God, Himself—bears as

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Meyer Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1794/1960), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 66. Here and in subsequent quotations we shall retain the translator’s gender-specific language. The reader is invited to amend it to contemporary usage.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 67.

*vicarious substitute* the guilt of sin for him, and indeed for all who believe (practically) in Him; as *savior* He renders satisfaction to supreme justice by His sufferings and death; and as *advocate* He makes it possible for men to hope to appear before their judge as justified. Only it must be remembered that (in this mode of representation) the suffering which the new man, in becoming dead to the *old*, must accept throughout life is pictured as a death endured once for all by the representative of mankind.<sup>8</sup>

So Jesus Christ retains a place in this reconciliation, but it is as the personification of an idea rather than as the irreplaceable divine-human mediator, giving the “idea” priority over the person. Colin Gunton takes Kant to task for this, saying it “translates Christianity into its opposite”<sup>9</sup> by wresting the saving work away from Jesus Christ and giving it instead to human beings. Since Kant employs Christian categories to make this reversal (*vicarious substitute*, *savior*, *advocate*, and so on), Gunton then asks, “Can this be a rational or reasonable way to read the foundational texts [of Christianity]?”<sup>10</sup> All this raises the wider question about whether any such attempt to confine the Christian religion within the procrustean bed of reason can really hope to succeed.

Kant was wrestling with the vital question of how it could be just for the innocent to suffer for the guilty. This is surely the very essence of injustice. Even if someone were willing to do so, how could his or her punishment make any difference to another person, namely, the offender? Kant also asks the question of what it would mean for the dignity of human actions if such a transaction could even be countenanced.<sup>11</sup>

By so doing Kant raises the classic questions about grace and forgiveness. Can it indeed ever be just to forgive someone an offense? Does it not inevitably belittle the pain and damage done by the action that is being forgiven? And will it not, in fact, always be a problem when someone acts graciously, if grace means what Kant says it

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<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich described Kant as the great prophet of human dignity in connection with just this point. See Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 157.

means, “a superior’s decree conferring a good for which the subordinate possesses nothing but the (moral) receptivity” for it?<sup>12</sup>

But the problem with Kant’s position is not merely that he stresses justice over mercy, but that he sees Jesus Christ as an innocent third party. Innocent he is; third party he is not, since he is the incarnate God against whom sinners sin. It was God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). So there is no third party in this picture; there is just the sinner and the sinned-against united in the person of Jesus Christ. Allowing Christ to be treated as an external benefactor in the debtor analogy runs the risk of incorporating an Ebionite Christology that denies his divinity, which is perhaps inevitable in the Enlightenment project.

If we revisit the debtor analogy that Kant offers, and see it in terms of two parties rather than three, the question of substitution takes on an entirely different perspective, enabling us to overcome the moral objection that he very properly levels at the tripartite scheme. When one person forgives another, he or she decides no longer to hold the injury they have suffered against their offender. They surrender their rights to repayment or compensation. So the king who forgives his servant a debt of ten thousand talents (Matt. 18:21–35) chose to accept the loss; it became his bad debt. As such it was a costly act, as forgiveness generally is, since this action substantially depleted his assets. It is, however, only through that gracious generosity that his servant could have been forgiven.

As this example indicates, then, forgiveness is always substitutionary. What was once the debt of the servant is now the bad debt of the king. What was once a word I should not have spoken or an action I should not have taken is now the insult borne or the pain absorbed by somebody else when they forgive me. On each such occasion one person suffers for the wrongdoing of another. As Mennonite scholar Myron S. Augsburger puts it, “True forgiveness means that the innocent one resolves his wrath occasioned by the sin of the guilty one and liberates the guilty person in freedom. Self-substitution is always the cost in forgiveness.”<sup>13</sup> To offer forgiveness is to be willing that something that was owed to me is owed to me no more. What I was entitled to get back, I relinquish, so that the debt of the other is now my loss.

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<sup>12</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 70, footnote.

<sup>13</sup> Myron S. Augsburger, “Justice in Forgiveness,” *The Living Pulpit* (April–June 2007): 5.

Their problem is now my problem, which is an act of substitution. That is the nature of forgiveness.

When we say that on the cross Jesus died for the sins of the world we mean that he bore the cost of forgiving sins. The sins of the whole world were being carried by him, and he took the consequences of those sins. Sin led to death as divine justice demands (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23), but it led to Jesus' death rather than ours as divine mercy desired (Eph. 2:4). Understood in this way the language of debt does not call into question the substitutionary nature of atonement, but instead is seen to require it.

At this point we can see how central substitutionary atonement is to the Christian faith. It is just as vital as the forgiveness of sins. There is, of course, no question about the importance of forgiveness to Christianity; the forgiveness of sins is one of the doctrines of the Nicene Creed: "we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." As such it is held in common by Trinitarian Christians all around the world. This is therefore not a matter of denominationalism or the preferences of certain stripes of churchmanship. Substitutionary atonement, by virtue of its close connection to the forgiveness of sins, demands to be treated as a standard part of Christian doctrine by all Trinitarian Christians.

### *Theological Support for Substitutionary Atonement*

The importance of substitutionary atonement has been stressed by many theologians down the centuries. Rather than trace out its historical trajectory, let us take note of two of special importance: Martin Luther and Karl Barth.

Luther spells out the vicarious character of Christ's work in his commentary on Galatians. When he discusses verse 13 of chapter 3 ("Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'"), he says:

And this, no doubt, all the prophets did foresee in spirit, that Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, blasphemmer &c. that ever was or could be in all the world. For he being made a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, is not now an innocent person and without sins, is not now the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary; but a sinner, which hath and carrieth the sin of Paul, who was a blasphemmer, an oppressor

and a persecutor; of Peter, which denied Christ; of David, which was an adulterer, a murderer, and caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord: and briefly, which hath and beareth all the sins of all men in his body, that he might make satisfaction for them with his own blood.<sup>14</sup>

There is no hesitation to ascribe to Jesus the full burden of the sins of others and to say that he died under the condemnation they deserved. The pastoral implications of Christ's action are further developed when Luther then applies the benefits of this sacrifice of Christ to the believer's life in terms of the "happy exchange." In *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), he writes:

So Christ has all the blessings and the salvation which are the soul's. And so the soul has upon it all the vice and sin which become Christ's own. Here now begins the happy exchange and conflict. Because Christ is God and man who never yet sinned, and his piety is unconquerable, eternal and almighty. So, then, as he makes his own the believing soul's sin through the wedding ring of its faith, and does nothing else than as if he had committed it, just so must sin be swallowed up and drowned.<sup>15</sup>

When a sinner is justified, Jesus receives the sins of the sinner and the sinner receives the righteousness of Christ as the two are united by faith. It is indeed a happy exchange, which both reveals and supplies God's grace.

This aspect of Luther's theology has not been taken up by all of his followers. Since Immanuel Kant many notable Lutheran theologians have found little, if any, space for substitutionary atonement, including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and Dorothee Sölle.<sup>16</sup> However, two important contemporary Lutherans have wished to stress its significance:

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, revised and edited on the basis of the "Middleton" edition by Philip S. Watson (London: James Clarke and Co Ltd, 1953/1956), quoted in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 135.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 226.

<sup>16</sup> Sölle criticized substitutionary accounts of atonement for depersonalizing substitution and abstracting it from the constraints of time, making them what she, like Schleiermacher, calls "magical." Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology After the "Death of God,"* trans. David Lewis (London: SCM, 1967), 65.

Eberhard Jüngel and Wolfhart Pannenberg. In an essay entitled “The Mystery of Substitution,” Jüngel considers Mark 10:45 (“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”) and states that this verse expresses the view that “one person has done or suffered something on behalf of, that is, in place of, other persons.”<sup>17</sup> He then goes on to state: “In the person of Jesus Christ God took our human place.”<sup>18</sup>

Wolfhart Pannenberg sets out his support for substitutionary atonement in his *Systematic Theology*:

In the condemnation and execution of Jesus, God “made him to be sin [for us] who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). In this situation of condemnation and execution, Jesus (whom, through the resurrection, God showed to be innocent) bore death as the consequence of our sin, thereby effecting representation in the concrete form of a change of place between the innocent and the guilty.<sup>19</sup>

Pannenberg sees this as part of the biblical revelation about the atonement, especially in the teaching of the apostle Paul in texts like Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and Romans 8:3 (“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh”).<sup>20</sup> So Jüngel and Pannenberg both affirm vicarious atonement in their different ways.

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<sup>17</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Ideological Essays II*, ed. J. B. Webster and trans. A. Neufeldt-Fest and J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 152, quoted in Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 337–338. Leon Morris affirms that ransom has a substitutionary character. See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, third revised edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Jüngel, *Ideological Essays II*, 155, quoted in Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 338.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991/1994), 427.

<sup>20</sup> Another contemporary Lutheran, Robert Jenson does not want to follow Pannenberg in such explicit support for substitutionary atonement. He agrees that “if Jesus’ death was not justice and yet had to happen, any good it did is necessarily for others.” The fourth of Isaiah’s Servant Songs (Isa. 53), which he regards as “the primal church’s doctrine of atonement,” teaches that “Jesus died for others.” Jenson does not, however, wish to endorse substitutionary satisfaction in terms of the death of one paying the debt of another, which he regards as “difficult indeed.” Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 184–186.



Another major theologian who endorses substitutionary atonement is Karl Barth. Writing after the First World War, this Swiss theologian was rethinking his views on Kant, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl that had been so influential in his theological education, especially under his teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann. Drawing on Luther and Calvin, Barth came to affirm that Christ died as a substitute for sinners.<sup>21</sup> He could answer the question “What has in fact taken place in Jesus Christ?” with the reply, “We will first give the general answer that there has taken place in Him the effective self-substitution [*Selbsteinsatz*; literally, self-insertion] of God for us sinful men.”<sup>22</sup> Barth sees it as a repeated theme of the Gospels, perhaps most clearly evident in the trial of Jesus when Pilate releases Barabbas. “The Jesus who was condemned to be crucified in the place of Barabbas (Mark 15:6–15) stands on the one side, and Barabbas who was pardoned at the expense of Jesus stands on the other; for he was not crucified, nor did he really contribute to his own liberation which came about when sentence was pronounced on that other.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus exchanged his own position as the obedient Son of God for that of this particular disobedient son of Adam. But it was not just for this one man that he did it but for the sinners of the whole world. So Barth says:

It was to fulfil this judgment on sin that the Son of God as man took our place as sinners. He fulfils it—the man in our place—by completing our work in the omnipotence of the divine Son, by treading the way of sinners to its bitter end in death, in destruction, in the limitless anguish of separation from God, by delivering up sinful man and sin in His own person to the non-being which is properly theirs, the non-being, the nothingness to which man has fallen victim as a sinner and towards which he relentlessly hastens.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This situation is complicated by the fact that the German word “*Stellvertreter*” may be translated “representative” or “substitute.” G. W. Bromiley himself notes this ambiguity in his preface (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1953/1956], vii) and generally translates it as “representative.” At times he translates “*für uns*” as “substitute” (see IV/1, 230 of the English edition, 252 of the German edition). This may simply mean “for us” in the sense of “on our behalf,” as our representative, rather than “in our place,” as our substitute. As we will see, however, Barth’s use of the concept of substitution is not dependent on the translation of either of these terms.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 550.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 230.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 253.

The judgment of God in Jesus Christ is thus the judgment of the sin of all in the one who was without sin but who took it upon himself to be the one great sinner and to be judged in the place of all. This is the means by which forgiveness of sins can be offered to the world.

This forgiveness of sins is the very essence of God's grace for Barth; indeed he virtually equates the two. "What does not pass over this sharp ridge of forgiveness of sins, or grace, is not Christian."<sup>25</sup> Since grace is such a central category for Barth, so is the forgiveness of sins. "The way of the Christian is derived from the forgiveness of sins and leads to the resurrection of the body and eternal life."<sup>26</sup> And, "It is always the case that when the Christian looks back, he is looking at the forgiveness of sins. . . . What in retrospect we know about ourselves can always be only that we live by forgiveness."<sup>27</sup>

Barth defines forgiveness as "my sin is not reckoned to me."<sup>28</sup> This clarifies several important aspects of divine forgiveness. Firstly, it means that to forgive is not to excuse. There is no need of extenuating circumstances to which appeal may be made. The sinner is genuinely culpable, but in forgiving us God is not reckoning our sin to us because in Christ God has taken it to himself. Forgiveness does not mean "any mitigation of the severity with which sinful man is rejected by God. Rather it speaks of the fulfillment of that rejection."<sup>29</sup> Secondly, it means that to forgive is not to condone. There is no indication that what was done was all right; it was not. It was a transgression of God's law and a deviation from God's good purposes. "The word 'forgiveness' speaks of a judicial act in which God has maintained His glory in relation to man. But it does not speak of a new purpose or disposition or attitude on the part of God."<sup>30</sup> In forgiving people their sin, God is not holding that sin against them because in Christ God has borne the cost of forgiveness himself. So we may say that in the forgiveness of sin God brings justice (it really was sin) and mercy (but he will not seek recompense) into gracious convergence. It is not so much "forgive and forget" as "forgive and refuse to recall." Forgiveness, then, is

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1949/1959), 152.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 149–150.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 94.

the place where justice and mercy meet in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

But where does this leave the question of representation, seen by many as the chief alternative to substitution?<sup>31</sup> Barth makes it clear that Christ is both the substitute for sinners and their representative. He says that Jesus Christ chose to shoulder the burden of human sin as the representative of the human race. That is not to suggest, however, that Christ should be regarded as someone unconnected with us who is doing something to us from outside, as Sölle fears, but instead that he stands in relation to sinful humanity as the one who bears our sin.

He represents us in that which we truly are. That He represents us in it does not mean that we are not in it, but what we truly are, our being in sin, is taken over by Him, that He is responsible for it in divine power, that it is taken from us with divine authority, and forgiven. But although He takes it over, and is responsible for it and it is forgiven us, it is still our being in sin.<sup>31</sup>

Barth further elaborates on this point in his discussion of the resurrection:

For the fact that God has given Himself in His Son to suffer the divine judgement on us men does not mean that it is not executed on us but that it is executed on us in full earnest and in all its reality—really and definitely because He Himself took our place in it. That Jesus Christ died for us does not mean, therefore, that we do not have to die, but that we have died in and with Him, that as the people we were we have been done away with and destroyed, that we are no longer there and have no more future.<sup>32</sup>

Barth's deployment of the term "judge" as the ruler-judge to be compared with King David or Solomon<sup>33</sup> serves to illuminate his meaning,

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 241.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 295. We notice here that Barth's point is very much in line with P. T. Forsyth's view of Christ's solidary action for us. Indeed, Barth uses the adjective "*solidarisch*" (IV/1, 264, German edition), translated by G. W. Bromiley as the noun "solidarity" (IV/1, 240), to describe the relationship between Christ and sinful humanity.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 217. Jesus is, as Emil Brunner puts it, the "royal judge." Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1927/1934), 464. Forsyth makes a similar point when he says, "Judgement by God is in the Bible a function of

since such a judge is always a representative of the people. The destiny of this one person carries the destiny of them all. The victories or defeats for this ruler-judge are victories or defeats for all his people. He is indeed their champion just as David was for the Israelites when faced with the giant, Goliath. In such a way, Barth is able to explain how an action which we cannot accomplish nor even contribute to ourselves is achieved by Christ, not apart from us, but by standing with us and for us.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Justification of Sinners and Substitutionary Atonement*

Kant continues to press home his objection to substitutionary atonement when he turns to the human side of the problem of reconciliation and discusses justification. He says:

It is quite impossible to see how a reasonable man, who knows himself to merit punishment, can in all seriousness believe that he needs only to credit the news of an atonement rendered for him, and to accept this atonement *utiliter* (as the lawyers say), in order to regard his guilt as annihilated,—indeed, so completely annihilated (to the very root) that good life-conduct, for which he has hitherto not taken the least pains, will in the future be the inevitable consequence of this faith and this acceptance of the proffered favour.<sup>35</sup>

If we continue with Kant's tripartite view of debt forgiveness, we can see that here too he raises a valid objection. How could believing in such an arrangement, were it even permissible, make any difference to the life of a sinner, let alone the dramatic transformation indicated here? It seems incredible that even if we could suspend our disbelief sufficiently to accept it, by doing so sinners would be justified before a holy God. Dorothee Sölle also raises concerns at this point. How can guilt or innocence be imputed to another without impugning moral responsibility? Unless this can be developed in a genuinely personal way, she says, it is insupportable.<sup>36</sup>

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His action as king." P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Latimer House, 1917/1948), 180.

<sup>34</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point, see Justyn Terry, *The Justifying Judgement of God* (Carlyle: Paternoster, 2007), 107–137.

<sup>35</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 76–77. See also Jeannine Michele Graham, *Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John*

Here too, if we regard debt forgiveness as being between two parties rather than three, the connection between Christ's atoning work and the justification of sinners may be seen in a fresh light. The offer of forgiveness itself is not enough to restore a relationship. It has to be accepted before reconciliation can occur. Forgiveness is offered in the hope of restoring a relationship that has been fractured by an offense. It is an act of grace that flows from love, which does not insist on repayment as justice demands. However, unless that forgiveness is received the relationship remains unhealed.

So God may indeed offer the forgiveness of sins because of the work of Christ, but that forgiveness needs to be accepted before it can result in reconciliation with God. It is that restored relationship with God that humanity requires if we are to receive the gift of eternal life that Christ offered in the person of the Holy Spirit. Only God has this eternal life inherently, and if God's creatures are to share it, that can only come about through being united with God, which in turn requires the forgiveness of the sins that separate us from God.

Receiving forgiveness is itself a painful process. It means acknowledging that we were in the wrong. It often also includes acceptance that we cannot put things right. The captain of the *Exxon Valdez* may indeed be very sorry for what happened to his ship, but he could not possibly make amends for all the damage that it did. Both of these elements are common to the painful journey of repentance which leads to reconciliation with God.

Karl Barth sees forgiveness as the central element of justification. In his lecture on "The Forgiveness of Sins," published in *Dogmatics in Outline*, he says to the baptized believer, "You, O man, with your sin belong utterly, as Jesus Christ's property, to the realm of the inconceivable mercy of God, who will not regard us as those who live as they live and act as they act, but says to us, 'You are justified.' For Me you are no longer the sinner, but where you are there stands Another. I look to this Other."<sup>37</sup> Those who repent and are baptized receive the gift of forgiveness and their sin is no longer counted against them. They can now stand in the presence of God as those whose sins are not reckoned to them. They are justified; they are seen as those whom God the Judge regards as "in the right" or "righteous." "Thus I am acquitted and may

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*Macquarrie, and Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 47–48. We note, however, that Sölle does have a place for imputation if construed in a more personal way, like that of Martin Luther.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 151.

be wholly joyful, because the accusations [of sin] cease to come home to me. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is now my righteousness. That is the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>38</sup> This is how righteousness can be imputed to sinners by faith in God’s gracious word (see Romans 4:3).

Barth understands this justification as arising out of the judgment that Jesus endured in his death and the judgment by which he was vindicated at his resurrection from the dead. It is justification in that God himself is revealed as the one who acts justly, not letting sin go unpunished or excusing it but bringing it down to death in the death of Christ. And it is justification, secondly, in that human beings are set free from sin and made right before God because in Jesus Christ their rebellion has culminated in their death. The judgment of Jesus Christ is therefore the justification of God and the justification of humankind. It is in this sense that we may say that both God and humankind are affected by this judgment and both of the covenant partners are restored in their mutual relationship. God is justified in forgiving human sin and sinners are justified by having their sin so forgiven, removing what destroyed communion between God and humankind, thereby bringing about reconciliation.

Pannenberg, himself a student of Barth, also wants to see justification in terms of the forgiveness of sins. He says that the reformers proclaimed “the divine sentence of justification for Christ’s sake as the forgiveness of sins, and which in this way awakens faith.”<sup>39</sup> This forgiveness that we receive as we repent and are thereby justified is based on Christ’s death on the cross.

Faith makes us righteous before God only because, as faith in Christ, it appropriates God’s saving work in Christ, and especially the forgiveness of sins on the basis of his atoning death, just as once Abraham accepted in faith the promise that God had given him (Rom. 4:1–22). This is the righteousness of faith that forms the object of God’s declaring believers righteous, of the “justification.”<sup>40</sup>

That forgiveness is received by faith and expressed in baptism. “We attain to forgiveness of sin through faith,”<sup>41</sup> and it is embraced in bap-

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<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993/1998), 228.

<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:225.

<sup>41</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:81.

tism: “For the forgiveness of sins as an effect of Christ’s atoning death, whose reception by believers is the basis of their righteousness before God (Rom. 3:25) that God confirms by declaring them righteous, was conferred on individuals by baptism according to a general early Christian conviction. Hence baptism has a place when we think about the basis of justification.”<sup>42</sup> In this connection between justification and baptism, Pannenberg affirms the relationship between baptism and the forgiveness of sins which the Nicene Creed proclaims.

By expounding atonement in terms of forgiveness we are able to make clear that the gospel message invites a response: repent, believe, be baptized. It is not enough to have the offer of forgiveness extended to us; until we accept it, we remain alienated from the one whom we have offended, however willing God might be to forgive us. Only if the guilty sinner is willing to accept this forgiveness may reconciliation occur. And this entails recognizing one’s error, believing the offer of forgiveness to be genuine, and being willing to accept it. Only then can the relationship be restored. These are the elements of repentance, which are enacted in the death and resurrection of baptism, that express faith in this gracious and merciful God.

### *Conclusion*

Forgiveness lies at the heart of God’s gracious reconciling work in Christ. He died for the forgiveness of sins, and we respond in faith to that astonishing action through repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The great covenantal promise, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezek. 36:28), is fulfilled through Christ’s costly act of atonement, and humbly received in faith by sinners. The Son of God became incarnate to bear sin to death and rise again for our justification (Rom. 4:25), and we are united with him in his death and resurrection by repentance and faith expressed in baptism (Rom. 6:4). So forgiveness helps us to understand both the saving work of Christ and the need for a human response to that gracious action, and therefore enables us to draw together these objective and subjective aspects of salvation.

Forgiveness is an act of sheer grace that is genuinely good news. It is also a familiar concept to the unchurched in ways that would not be true of terms like “atonement” and “justification.” This is not to minimize the difficulty for someone who is truly converting to Jesus

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<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:232–233.

Christ. God's offer of forgiveness is a gift that needs to be received, which requires a willingness to recognize wrongdoing as sin against God and to believe God's offer of forgiveness as genuine, and a willingness to accept it as such. Only then can the relationship with God be restored. But this is where the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ connects with the daily reality of struggle and failure of human existence and breathes hope into despairing people. Such forgiveness inevitably involves substitution, as we have seen. So if we are to maintain this central aspect of the gospel message we will want to affirm substitutionary atonement.