

BOOK REVIEW

Gathercole, Simon, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). 128 pp. Pbk. USD19.99.

Simon Gathercole, lecturer in New Testament at the University of Cambridge, has contributed to the field of New Testament in both top-tier scholarship and student-oriented introductory works. His most recent book addresses a topic deserving attention. In *Defending Substitution*, Gathercole wades into the theological discussions of atonement theories in Pauline thought. His motivation and purpose for writing a defense of the substitutionary theory is two-fold. First, it is essential for understanding the death of Christ and the gospel. Secondly, one's understanding of the death of Christ has immense pastoral implications. However, his book does not attempt to explicate either of these matters, instead it is focused exclusively on defining and defending substitution theory.

Gathercole wastes no time getting into the topic. In the absence of a fluffy introduction, readers are orientated to terminology. Gathercole begins by positively articulating that substitution is viewing 'Christ's death in our place, instead of us' (p. 15). The view of substitution defended in this book states that Christ 'did something, underwent something, so we did not—and never will—have to' (p. 18). After positively defining substitution, Gathercole narrows his focus by negating potential interpretations. He notes that there can be 'substitution without that being penal substitution...without punishment for sins involved' (p. 18). Referring to the scapegoat in Leviticus 16, Gathercole contends that the imagery of transference does not necessitate a view of divine wrath being satisfied. Gathercole could have elaborated more on how 'substitution does not necessarily entail propitiation' (p. 22). Simply stating it as not 'self-evidently' or 'not directly' (p. 22) propitiation can leave some readers wanting more information on the precise nature of the division.

To further aid his definition, Gathercole deals briefly with substitution as representation. He denies ‘representation’ as sufficient and prefers the language and theological position of ‘replacement’ instead. Gathercole finds that, in replacement, Jesus is both filling the place of people and also ousting them from his position. He apparently means that Jesus is not merely a representation of the people as if they are present in him on the cross. Rather, Jesus replaces in people’s stead. Readers will appreciate the articulated distinctions and the focused nature of the book.

Gathercole defends a position he finds illustrated by the scapegoat, which substitutes and eliminates the contamination of sin but is not necessarily propitiatory. Readers will find that Gathercole is not attempting to address every facet of atonement theories; he instead focuses exclusively on substitution defined as Christ *being in* the place and *instead of* people.

Gathercole next addresses some of the most prevailing criticisms against substitution. A few are worth noting. First, does Christ as a substitute for sinners create a legal fiction? He responds that the charge of legal fiction suffers from presuppositions of too atomistic an understanding of human identity (p. 24). However, given that the legal fiction charge has been such a large debate since the Counter-Reformation period, it is surprising that it is Gathercole’s shortest response. Many readers will likely find the response too dismissive and would like to read a further discussion of it.

The second criticism asks, is the death of Christ instead of sinners an immoral doctrine? Gathercole is more thorough here, indicating that the prevailing critiques are often selective of the biblical data or are caricatures that create false dilemmas. Thirdly, there is a brief discussion of philosophical attacks from someone like Kant. While acknowledging that Kant’s argumentation is intricately complex, Gathercole agrees with other philosophers who find Kant as threatening the very freedom of God and Christ.

As the title suggests, Gathercole next turns to non-substitutionary positions to defend his position. Three popular positions are examined. The first position addressed is championed by Hartmut Gese and The Tübingen School. Gathercole begins here because he finds this position less discussed outside of German literature, thereby doing only a service to English readers and students. The position put forth by Gese states that the plight is that the ‘Israelite’s life is forfeit’, and so death is

required, at least symbolically. The only solution is that a sacrificial creature must die, and those united must die too. The sacrifice does not merely replace or represent others but has become united with those represented. Through this union, the people die with the sacrifice and are then brought to God with the blood on the altar.

The second position is articulated by Morna Hooker. Hooker focuses upon 2 Cor. 5.21 and 8.9, concluding that 'Christ identified with the human condition in order that we might be identified with his' (p. 39). Her position is that the Christ event was and is a sharing of experience and not a substitution.

The third non-substitutionary theory is apocalyptic deliverance. The fundamental principle behind it is that humans are genuinely enslaved to sin and supra-human powers, making the death of Christ necessary to liberate humans. The imagery of apocalyptic warfare is the ruling paradigm.

After explaining each position, Gathercole generously notes the strengths of each position as well as their weaknesses. Gathercole focuses on the fundamental weaknesses of each position that he finds are better explained in substitutionary theory. First, the union with sacrificial creatures does not match the events in Leviticus, specifically, the presence or absence of priests' laying on hands. Gathercole believes that this severely undermines the entire theory of Gese. Secondly, Gathercole does not find Hooker fully accounting for what Christ's death achieves, namely the positive role the cross plays in Paul's theology. Those familiar with Hooker's work would be a bit curious about this conclusion and would wish for more than a single-paragraph evaluation. Thirdly, the apocalyptic warfare language does well to describe the theology in Galatians, but has little to no explanatory credibility in Romans and 1 Thessalonians. Thus, Gathercole does not believe it can function as an overarching paradigm for Paul.

More important than these individual weaknesses is that Gathercole finds a common flaw in all three of the 'best "competitors" of substitutionary' (p. 53) theory: each one omits or downplays individual transgressions. The other positions are deficient in their handling of sin and do not explain the nexus between individual transgressions and Christ's death.

In the next two chapters, Gathercole presents his exegetical case for believing that substitution is the model that best accounts for the biblical data. While many readers would have wished to see more or

other verses examined, Gathercole focuses primarily on two passages—1 Cor. 15.3 and Rom. 5.6-8.

In 1 Cor. 15.3, the focus is Paul's view of Christ dying on behalf of (ὑπέρ) others and being so according to the Scripture. Gathercole contends that the Jewish Paul surely had in mind Isaiah 53. In this famous Old Testament chapter, Gathercole finds that substitutionary theory accurately explains the suffering servant who dies 'in place of the people for their benefit' (p. 69). He presents various aspects to connect the Old Testament passage with the New Testament, beyond 'strong *prima facie* evidence' (p.64). Though emphasizing the use of ὑπέρ, he is careful not to have based the entire theological argument on it.

The second key passage is Rom. 5.6-8. In this chapter, Gathercole offers something different than the standard exegetical presentation. Gathercole emphasizes that Paul's focus is on the death of Christ being for 'people' and not for 'sin' (p. 86). Interestingly, he uses the death of heroes in classical literature as the conceptual background for understanding the death of Christ as being vicarious for others.

The character Gathercole focuses upon is Alcestis, which is taken from the play *Alcestis* by Euripides (c. 438 BCE). Alcestis is a famous character later used by Plato and Plutarch. In Euripides, Alcestis is championed for her willingness to die for (πρό) her husband, Admetus. Even though Gathercole does not comment on the difference between ὑπέρ and πρό, he finds the ancient Greco-Roman literature consistent in its presentation of vicarious death.

The main thrust of the book is to present evidence for viewing 'substitutionary atonement as intrinsic to the biblical presentation of how God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ' (p. 28). More specifically, the position defended is Christ 'bore our sins in our stead so that we will not' (p. 110). Gathercole does a fine job presenting and defending his position. His clear writing and argumentation are worth noting by both proponents and opponents. However, his conclusion is surprising. After defending his position, Gathercole states, 'there is no reason that all three cannot simultaneously inhabit Paul's thought and biblical theology more broadly' (p. 112). This is an interesting suggestion, but not all readers will adopt it. Likewise, it is not clear if the positions are mutually inclusive, especially since Hooker is noted as finding 'substitution to be not only un-Pauline but actually something criticized by Paul' (p. 38).

Although a pleasurable read, a couple of weaknesses of disproportionate weight are worth noting. First, and the weightier one, is the unconvincing nature of ancient hero death as literary background. While the discussion of substitution within the ancient world is intriguing—I too enjoy ancient Greek literature—it is not proven to be a contributing factor for understanding Paul. The linguistic links that Gathercole notes are expected shared lexemes in the context of death on behalf of another. Furthermore, more evidence connecting Paul with the Greco-Roman literary world is necessary. Gathercole builds too much upon *Alcestis* (see pp. 91-97, 103-104, 106, 111) to state simply that it was ‘part of the atmosphere’ (p. 103). Some readers will be unconvinced by the connection, noting that Paul’s educational status is highly debated within Pauline scholarship. Gathercole carefully takes risk in approaching the topic in a new way, but more is needed for its legitimate consideration.

A second critique, which is in some ways a compliment, is that I would have liked to see a more comprehensive index of subjects. Though a short book, Gathercole covers many topics, and it would have been nice for readers, especially students, to have a more substantial subject index that can be useful for research purposes.

Overall, I enjoyed the book and believe that others, convinced or unconvinced by the author’s arguments, will too. Gathercole does not try to overextend his argument. He offers the audience from undergraduates to seminarians a manageable and insightful introductory defense of the substitution theory. Additionally, students looking to study further will benefit from well-chosen footnotes covering a wide and broad spectrum of North American and European scholarship. Considering the length and focused target, Gathercole presents a book worth buying and a model for similar introductory studies.

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