

God and the Cross  
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I want to ponder aloud today about Christ's death and its role in our salvation, what in theological terms is called the Doctrine of the Atonement. The English word itself suggests its deepest meaning: At-one-ment, or Reconciliation. The great theologian Karl Barth placed all this theology under what he called the Doctrine of Reconciliation.

The New Testament language centers around these four words: "Christ died for us." As in Paul's words, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) These are important words to me.

I grew up singing hymns of the cross, and the singing of them underlined the poetry of them. That is, they pointed beyond the words to the depth and breath of God's love and Jesus' love for us. They sang mercy. So I am still moved by hymns like "When I Survey the Wonderous Cross" and its concluding verse:

Were the whole realm of nature mine

That were a present far too small.

Love so amazing so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

But later, when I stopped singing and started to hear people try to explain *how* Jesus' death worked for my salvation, things got more difficult. Old doctrines of the Atonement troubled my mind and put my stomach in a twist.

## I

Today many are questioning certain older understandings of the cross and its role in our salvation and are reaching for new ways to understand it. Their objection goes something like this: I cannot believe in a God, nor love a God, who demanded the violent death of his son in order to forgive and save us.

The most dominate theories of the Atonement argued that for the righteousness and honor of God to be satisfied the death of the one perfect son of God was required. For many, such an understanding of God and the cross is morally abhorrent. Such a God would be acting in a way that good parents at their worst would not. Who can love such a God?

Such thinking says that Jesus absorbed the death penalty we all deserve for our sins. To use the vernacular, Jesus took the hit for us. I've heard preachers use stories like this trying to explain the Atonement. The scene is a classroom. One of the students has broken the rules and the teacher has called for the guilty student to step forward and admit the misdeed. If not, the whole class would be punished.

At that point an innocent young man stepped forward and though innocent took the punishment so that the whole class would be spared.

A better analogy would be this story. A school building caught on fire, the teacher rushed into the burning building to save her students and herself died in the flames.

This is better, but all our stories, concepts, images of how Jesus' death saves fail to capture the deepest meaning of the Cross. They are human vessels, and we are always reaching for better, truer ways to talk about the cross.

## II

The Apostle Paul was the first great theologian to explore the meaning of Christ's death. He used a number of the religious and social analogies of his day to explain the wonder of the cross and God's love.

One image was *Redemption*. Picture a slave auction. Someone steps forward and pays for the freedom of a slave. Another was *Sacrifice*. Jewish ritual used the sacrifice of animals so God would cleanse the people's sins. Christ was the ultimate sacrifice for us and for all the world. Or this one: In Jewish ritual a goat, or scapegoat, was sent into the wilderness to carry our sins away. So Christ bore our sins and bore them away. Or this one "The Mercy Seat." You may have heard the word from Romans "expiation." Literally the word means "*Mercy*

*Seat*”, the place on the ancient altar where our sins are cleansed. Christ is the Mercy Seat for us all. Some of these analogies may have the power to move us, some may not. Lord, give us new metaphors of mercy.

My own favorite concept of Paul’s is in II Corinthians 5:17-20, it’s great theme, *Reconciliation*.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ there is, he is, she is, a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to God’s own self and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God’s own self, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making [the] appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

What better news or higher calling. We are reconciled. *Are*. And now we can become agents of God’s reconciliation in the world.

### III

In Christian history the main ways to think about the cross were based on the logic that Christ’s death was necessary to change God’s mind so that he could

turn and forgive us. Such theories have been called Substitutionary Atonement. Christ died in our place. And some think this is the only way to think about it.

But there has also been another way of understanding the Atonement. This is the Cross as the *Revelation* of God's unconditional and never ending love. This ultimate revealing of God's love changes *us*. Our salvation lies not in a change in God, but in us. God's love made eloquent in suffering is powerful to change our hearts and minds. He died for us, and for all the world.

#### IV

Here are some other considerations. Millions of Christians through the centuries have centered the saving work of God in Christ not in the Cross, but in the Incarnation, God's coming to us in Jesus. It is *life*, his whole life, birth, life, teachings, death, resurrection that saves, not just his death. Among them are the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Franciscans.

And this: it was not just *Jesus'* suffering on the cross but God suffering too. *God was in Christ at the cross too*. The *Abba* of Jesus is a "Crucified God" (Moltmann). At the cross God entered into the most terrible human suffering in order to be with us in everything, even the hell of the cross. This is why the story of the school teacher rushing into the burning classroom to save her students and herself dying is closer to the truth than the story of the school teacher punishing

the innocent student who volunteered to take the punishment in place of the class.

Some theologians are thinking about the cross this way: The Cross is the end of “Sacred Violence”. Sacred Violence is the use of violence to choose scapegoats—whether persons or groups—and kill them in the name of God. Jesus was the ultimate victim of sacred violence and by his death the lie of sacred violence was exposed, so it can never be used again.

And this: The Cross means Forgiveness. Means Mercy. Jesus’ own dying words mark this meaning: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That includes us all, doesn’t it? And now we can become God’s Forgiveness Community to the world.

And this: The cross is the ultimate Self-giving of God, the pouring out of God’s love for us all. God emptied God’s own self for us as Christ poured out his life for us on the cross. And it was pure gift.

In Luke’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread, and blessing it broke it and gave it to his disciples saying: “This is my body given for you.” Given, not required, not demanded, *given*.

Then he said, taking the cup, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” It was the new covenant of grace, the forgiveness of

sins. In the ancient world solemn covenants were sealed with shared blood. This was what Jesus was pointing to with these words, not some magic quality in the blood itself.

So now let's talk about the blood imagery in our hymns. The problem comes when we take it literally. Here's an example. Some old acquaintances of mine in the 1980's made a movie of the life of Christ set in the old Wild West. As you might have imagined Jesus died by lynching, hanging from a tree.

Fundamentalists roared their objection: Hanging would not have saved us. There was no blood. And they quoted Hebrews 9:22; "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins." Literalism can trip us up.

Of course, liberals have their own kind of literalism when it comes to blood imagery. So they seek to remove all the hymns which speak of the blood of Christ. Or change the words. It is *poetry!* It points beyond the words. The Blood of the Lamb imagery is our human poetry pointing to the ineffable, self-emptying love of God poured out for us on the cross. It sings Grace. This is what it is saying: *What we cannot do for ourselves God has done for us.* Christ bore our sins and bore them away. He was broken on a cross, and from his breaking has come our healing. We cannot wash away our sins, nor can we rid the world of its tired and terrible sin, but he is the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." It sings Grace. It sings Mercy.

So perhaps the Atonement is better sung than said, better put to music than put to argument. So may I never stop singing:

Come thou fount of every blessing,  
tune my heart to sing thy grace.

Streams of mercy, never ceasing,  
call for songs of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet,  
sung by flaming tongues above.

Praise the mount [meaning Calvary], I'm fixed upon it  
mount of thy redeeming love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer;  
hither by thy help I've come;  
And I hope by thy good pleasure,  
safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,  
wandering from the fold of God;  
he, to rescue me from danger,  
interposed his precious blood.



O to grace how great a debtor  
daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness like a fetter  
bind my wandering heart to thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,  
prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart, O take and seal it,  
seal it for thy courts above.

The Cross, it is not about punishment, it is about Mercy. Free, flowing  
mercy. Like a "river glorious."

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