

Christ crucified

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

Why is the death of Christ significant? Some of the church is sure it knows the answer, while much of the rest of the church is deeply uncomfortable with the question. The publicized comment by a feminist theologian at the “Re-imagining” conference a few years ago is only one example of the discomfort: “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff . . .”

That statement sparked a lot of reflex outrage, which seemed to confirm that a very sore point had been touched—as if to say, “This is a painful topic, and we don’t appreciate your bringing it up.” Much of the positive response to the “re-imagining” statement bore the mark of relief and recognition: “So I’m not the only one who never got it or bought it.”

The meaning of Christ’s death is hardly a peripheral issue. No image calls Christianity to mind as a cross or crucifix does. Christian faith is incoherent if there is not something special about the death that image represents.

Protestants historically take their stand on the confession that they can be reconciled with God because of the sacrifice of Christ: “We preach Christ, and him crucified.” Roman Catholics point to the same event as the sacramental center of Christian life, with the words from the Gospel of John, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Eastern Orthodox position the significance of the death in relation to resurrection, proclaiming in the Easter liturgy that “Christ has risen from the dead, by death trampling upon death and bringing life to those in the tomb.” The Gospels, the heart of Christian scripture, are in large measure passion narratives. The central Christian liturgical act, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, points insistently to the death. The peak of the Christian year, at Good Friday and Easter, revolves around it.

The pattern is seeded through the forms of every Christian tradition. The hymn “There Is a Green Hill Far Away” contains the familiar line: “He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven, saved by

his precious blood.” The Book of Common Prayer prescribes statements before reception of each element in communion. The content if not the wording is familiar to most Christians. “The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for you . . . Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart by faith, with thanksgiving. The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you . . . Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s blood was shed for you, and be thankful.”

Belief that Christ’s death has fundamentally changed the world seems so integral to the grammar of faith that its absence amounts to a debilitating speech defect. A church that falls silent about the cross has a hole where the gospel ought to be.

But silence, or discreet mumbling, on this subject is far from unusual. This is nowhere so notable as in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In many Protestant congregations this event has become a solemn ritual affirmation of the spiritual equality of the participants, their mutual commitment to one another, and their shared hope for a future society with a just distribution of resources. Even the Roman Catholic Eucharist, once steeped in sacrificial emphasis, can now be encountered in forms that seem primarily celebrations of community, with a moment of silence, as it were, for the untimely demise of our late brother.

In many instances these changes in ritual practice reflect important efforts to recover a liturgical fullness which a narrow focus on sacrifice had distorted. So, for instance, the landmark ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, developed by the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission, treats the meaning of the Lord’s Supper under five headings: thanksgiving, memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, invocation of the Spirit, communion of the faithful, and feast of the future fulfillment of God’s reign. Each denomination can find elements in the list that have been absent or stunted in its own practice. But often such elements have been embraced not so much as a welcome broadening of a particular tradition as a welcome way of changing the subject.

Certainly Christian faith is as unimaginable without Jesus’ life (his actions and teaching) as without his death. No clear notion could be formed of Jesus’s death without a concrete life as the context and presupposition for it. From the early time that *gospel* became the primary Christian scriptural form, the seamless unity of the life and death was clear. Christians err when they give the impression that the only truly important thing about Jesus’ life is its end.

At the same time, modern attempts to construct a view of Jesus that omits any emphasis on the death—focusing instead on a message or practice Jesus taught without reference to his own fate—are implausible as history and often lack distinctive Christian character. John Dominic Crossan's strained reconstruction of the historical Jesus is a case in point, and a highly popular one. It goes to the extreme of insisting the disciples knew virtually nothing of the facts of Jesus's death and stitched together the better part of the Gospels in an inspired burst of scriptural imagination. In other words, the cross is not a crucial event whose meaning in any way constitutes Christian faith. The Christian faith, says Crossan, is not Easter faith. Not based on a resurrection afterwards, it has no need of a cross beforehand. Meaning comes entirely from other parts of Jesus' life: his healings, his social egalitarianism, his disdain for spiritual middlemen. Early Christians drew on this vision to "invent" the story of the cross in the Gospels as one metaphor, as it were, for the message. If that image doesn't work for you, or competes with the real message, drop it. Nothing essential is lost.

Crossan's work fits well with a widespread disinclination to dwell on Jesus's death, either in fact or theory. As fact, represented in tradition, literature and art, many find it a morbid theme. In Australia, a state education department recently banned a passion play—a ruling, an official said, which showed that the state "will not tolerate violence in the schools." Ironical as it might seem after a glimpse of the TV, movies and video games that surround us, Christians can find the crucifix an embarrassing, primitive barbarism. And the theory or doctrine most strongly associated with emphasis on the cross evokes its own uneasiness.

That doctrine, substitutionary atonement, can be summarized this way: We are guilty of sin against God and our neighbors. The continuing sins themselves, the root desires that prompt them, and the guilt we bear for making such brutal response to God's good gifts—all these together separate us from God and are far beyond any human power to mend. Someday we might finally become truly righteous; our wills might finally be remade to trust God with delight; we might even reverse the mortality that followed from sin. Even if that happened, this perfected love, faith and hope would not change the past, nor would they make restitution of anything but what we owed God to begin with. The criminal who becomes a saint can never undo the terrible loss of his victims.

We can conceive a kind of crude recompense that adds something on the other side of the scales, as it were: the reformed offender can now sacrificially treat some

people much better than simple justice would require, as before he treated some much worse. However, it is not possible to do this with God, since we owe everything to God to begin with. Thus a gap, a price, remains to be reckoned with. Christ stands in this gap, pays this price, bearing the punishment we deserve and he does not. In so doing, Christ offers something on our behalf that could never be expected or required, Christ offers the “over and above” gift that clears the slate and brings sinners into reconciled relation with God.

There are many reasons to be uncomfortable with the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and with atonement theology generally. First, few can be unaware that the cross has been the keystone of Christian anti-Semitism. The libel that charges Jews with Jesus’ death draws its virulent strength from the companion assumption that this death was somehow uniquely horrible and uniquely important.

Second, the language of sacrifice to many people is either empty because it is unintelligible, or offensive because it is morally primitive. The first time I visited the Kali temple in Calcutta, I literally stepped in pools of blood from a sacrificed goat. I was shocked, but I saw the irony in that shock. I have attended worship services all my life that talked and sang regularly about blood. I had never walked away with any on my shoes before.

Most people are no more likely to regard Christ as a sin-offering who removes our guilt than they are to consider sacrificing oxen on an altar in the neighborhood playground as a way to keep their children safe. We can hardly imagine God planning the suffering and death of one innocent as the condition of releasing guilty others. And it would be worse if we could do so, for a God about whom this is the truth is a God we could hardly love and worship. A good part of atonement theory today for Christians consists in conjuring up some idea of sacrifice that we can half-believe in long enough to attribute meaning to Christ’s death. Once it has served that transitory purpose, we drop it as swiftly as possible as, at best, a metaphor.

Third, transactional views of Jesus’s death depend upon categories that themselves pose problems. Legal or economic understandings of atonement frame human sin in terms of a debt that must be paid. Feudal terms present sin as an offense against God’s honor that must be satisfied. Such categories explain Jesus’ death, but in such a way as to pose further intractable questions. If the debt is actually paid, in what sense is God merciful? If it is God who in fact pays the debt humans owe, how is justice truly satisfied?

Fourth, an awareness of world religions and mythology has put Jesus' death in an unavoidably comparative context. The Gospels attribute unique significance to the cross. Yet since the rise of modern anthropology we know that tales of dying and rising gods are commonplace. Christian nearsightedness comes from standing so close to just one cross in a forest of others. We are told that these dying and rising gods express symbolic truths about the cycles of nature, the quest for psychic wholeness, the healing of inner wounds. And we are often also told that non-Christian myths convey these truths much more elegantly and nonviolently, neither marred by the crude literalism and moralism of the Christian passion stories nor vexed by fixation on an actual historical event.

Fifth, there is what we might call an internal problem in the biblical understanding of the cross. Someone who wanders into a pew for the duration of Lent may rightly be perplexed by the New Testament's somewhat schizoid outlook on a simple matter: Is the cross a good thing or not? Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus teaches his disciples, to their horror or disbelief, that he must die. Despite his own reluctance, he goes to his execution out of obedience to God—"not my will but thy will be done"—and does not lift a finger to oppose it. Yet the Gospels are equally emphatic that Jesus is innocent, that his arrest and killing are unjust, that those who dispatch him are quite indifferent to truth and treat Jesus as a pawn in larger political or social conflicts, that it is shameful for his friends to betray and abandon him. Jesus says, "The son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21).

In short, Jesus's death saves the world and it ought not to happen. God's will is the same as that of evil men. Are Herod, Pilate and Judas criminals or saints? It is not only the stranger in the pew who may wonder, "Does the Bible have its story straight?"

Sixth, we readily suspect that emphasis on the cross fosters toxic psychological and social effects. In exalting Christ's death, do we not glorify innocent suffering and encourage people to accept it passively "in imitation of Christ"? By making the cross God's recipe for salvation, do we paint God as a violent and merciless despot? Does the church's theology, which has the divine Father punish his innocent child to redeem the world, look uncomfortably like a charter for child abuse? Is the invitation to identify with Christ's death and suffering a kind of therapeutic malpractice, fostering morbid fantasies? The cross has been carried at the head of crusades and

pogroms, even as it was offered to the weak as a model of how they ought to accept their suffering. Perhaps now it should carry a label: this religious image may be harmful to your health.

All these criticisms have strong voice within the churches as well as outside them. It is little wonder that oldline Protestant congregations especially strike very uncertain notes on this subject. Responses have fallen into two main categories: those that defend a revised understanding of Jesus' death as a redemptive sacrifice on our behalf and those that attempt to articulate the significance of the cross without recourse to sacrificial terms at all.

Many who would maintain the substitutionary understanding of Christ's death do not deny that it has been and continues to be subject to abuse. The battered wife sent back to her husband with a pastor's exhortation to bear her cross as Christ did is sadly no figment of imagination.

Yet it is also true that for a supposed charter for oppression and abuse, the theology of the cross has a peculiar history among the poor and the marginalized. The testimony of numberless such persons indicates that they do not see in the cross a mandate for passive suffering of evil. What they see, in the midst of a world that regards them as nobodies, is the most powerful affirmation of their individual worth. That Christ, that God, was willing to suffer and die specifically for them is a message of hope and self-respect that can hardly be measured, and that transforms their lives. That God has become one of the broken and despised ones of history is an unshakable reference point from which to resist the mental colonization that accepts God as belonging to the side of the oppressors.

The liveliness of substitutionary atonement theology in the storefronts and barrios may, as some contend, stem from "false consciousness." Or it may arise because they know what they are talking about, those powerless ones who find the Jesus crucified in their place a source of self-respect that the rulers of this world cannot take away.

Some protest that this affirmation comes at a cost: You cannot receive it unless you first abase yourself as a hopeless and helpless sinner in need of redemption. It is insult added to injury to ask those who are weakest to focus on their own shortcomings in this way. Of course, the oppressed are rarely unaware of their weakness, and if anything they have less means than the advantaged have of

deceiving themselves about their need or their sins. They may be less offended that atonement theology presumes a human situation of bondage and moral need which they know all too well than grateful that the cross meets them precisely at this place, with the extraordinary insistence that nevertheless they are loved, worthy and precious.

Major efforts have been made to rework atonement theology to meet the various criticisms. Jürgen Moltmann is a key example. He has focused on the tendency of substitutionary ideas to set God, as the one who requires an expiatory death, over against Jesus, the one who suffers it. If orthodox Christian teaching is to be believed, Moltmann points out, this account cannot be right. Jesus is God. In fact, in the title of Moltmann's important book, *Jesus is the crucified God*. Whatever the reason for the offering, it is made by God and what is offered is God's own self.

Trinitarian theology, which attempts to explicate the Christian conviction that it is God who suffers and is punished, can only further the confusion at times—now it is the Father who insists on blood and the Son who sheds it. Moltmann's work makes the striking argument that the sacrifice of the cross is not a punishment to appease God's justice, but God's act of identification with humanity and the source of a new hope for the human future. The sacrifice is not directed to God: it takes place within God. There is no difference in will between the Father and the Son; both act out of passion for human redemption. And there is no difference in suffering. Both suffer, only they do so in different dimensions of the same event, and in this way they enter into the depth of human loss most fully.

The incarnate Word suffers what it is to die. The Father suffers what it is like to lose the beloved to death. Everything that makes death more bitter to the one who dies—brutality, injustice, arbitrariness—heightens the terror and suffering of that death to the ones who remain. There is no impassive God who observes and accepts Jesus's death. There is only the God who knows both the agony of losing one's self at the cross and the agony of losing the beloved there. Let those who have seen the pain of two loving spouses, one dying and one living, judge which half of the broken heart is lighter.

For all the breadth of Moltmann's work, many fault him for leaving the language and the machinery of substitutionary theory largely intact. He may wring from them the least toxic results possible; nevertheless, the complaint is made, the premises themselves will continually lend support to abusive notions of self-sacrifice and

surrogate suffering. From this view, one must look to other ways to articulate the meaning of Jesus' death.

And in fact there are a variety of images in the tradition. Some, like patristic ideas of Jesus's death as a ransom to the devil or a clever trap for him, are largely museum pieces for most Christians. But others are much in evidence.

If there is a major alternative to the substitutionary theory in the churches, it appears as an eclectic mix of several elements. One of these elements is the so-called exemplarist view associated with medieval theologian Peter Abelard and many later Protestant liberals. In this understanding, Jesus's death is heroic: it demonstrates perseverance in the right to the supreme limit of a human life. Jesus's death demonstrates God's love to us because it shows the extent to which God is willing to identify with our lot as suffering and mortal humans. It is a kind of shock therapy, appealing to the human conscience in the same way that Gandhi's willingness to suffer sought to awaken his opponents' shame and repentance. The tone is expressed in the line from Isaac Watts's hymn, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

The exemplary view has a somewhat different flavor depending on whether the emphasis falls on Jesus as an example of human faithfulness toward God or on the incarnate God's humble appeal to humanity. But in either case, the death is not a transaction but an inspiration.

Another alternative element is the "Christus Victor" view, prominent in writings from the early church and reemphasized in the 20th century by Gustaf Aulén. Here Jesus's death is seen as a key part of God's victory over the evil powers arrayed against the divine aim. This view is reflected in the Easter hymn which says, "The powers of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed." These powers are often now understood as economic, social and political in nature rather than demonic. Much more than virtuous endurance, Jesus' death is a moment of active resistance to evil. His death is the nobly lost battle that is prelude to final victory in the war, when the resurrection comes and others take up the struggle for justice on Christ's behalf.

This element has a strong affinity for liberation perspectives. Like the activist or guerrilla martyr, Christ's death is an apparent defeat that is in fact the leading edge of a new society in which the powers behind this death will themselves be

overthrown.

In both of the elements just mentioned, Jesus's death acquires its significance by connection with other aspects of Jesus's life that are regarded as fundamentally saving. It may be Jesus's teaching that is most significant, and so the death is the seal of the integrity of that teaching. Or it may be the social project or the struggle against the powers that is the real work of Christ, and so the death draws its meaning as the last measure of devotion to that struggle.

A third approach views the incarnation as a whole as the saving work. It is God's transit of the fullness of human life—from conception and birth to friendship and struggle to suffering and death—that transforms humanity. The incarnate Word breaks a path through human nature, one might say, and thus changes the journey for all others who travel the human road. On this view, Bethlehem is as much the saving event as Calvary. Jesus's death has a special character because here the path has been made through the deepest barrier. It is God's presence in the human condition that saves. Death is notable only as the most unlikely aspect of that condition for God to share, the extreme instance of the general rule of the incarnation.

These three elements each have roots in the Bible and in tradition, and they can be freely combined in various proportions. Such a mixture is often recommended for its explicit nonsubstitutionary character. However, it is also true that all these elements can be readily incorporated by advocates of substitutionary atonement. In other words, these elements have no internal logic that makes them a strict alternative to transactional views. If we affirm them instead of transactional views, it must be because we insist we want only these ideas and no others, not because they themselves exclude such an addition.

The main appeal of "atonement lite" derives from the problematic ideas that have been subtracted. This subtraction does in large measure mute the critiques aimed at transactional views of sacrifice. The drawback to this approach is that it leaves large amounts of scripture and tradition at the heart of Christian faith unappropriated. The language of sacrifice, reconciliation and redemption is avoided or discounted, even while it remains inextricably lodged in Bible, liturgy, sacrament and hymnody.

This approach tends, then, to set up transactional views as "atonement plus," and to lend weight to their claims to be more biblical and more authentically Christian,

since they deny nothing in the other approaches but include positive readings of the central sacrificial texts and images of the tradition.

If there is to be a compelling theology of the cross, one that is a true alternative to views of Christ's death as a sacrificial punishment administered by God, it must be one that does not abandon these texts and this language, but offers a different vision of their meaning. We shall consider such an approach next week.

Read [*Part 2*](#).