

Visible victim: Christ's death to end sacrifice

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

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On every Lenten journey many people stumble over the paradox of the Christian story. Jesus's death saves the world, and it ought not to have happened. It fulfills prophecy, but it was the work of sinners. It is a "good bad thing." The attempt to give the crucifixion a general moral (die to self, be faithful to the end) runs the risk of simply baptizing all bad things, as if with the right approach they too can be good things.

Is there good reason that scripture puts Jesus's death at the heart of the redemptive plot? These days, many object to the notion of Jesus's death as a substitutionary sacrifice, a vicarious assumption of the punishment that humans deserve. In last week's issue, we rehearsed some of the objections to this view, including the concern that it presents a confused image of God (is God really merciful if he demands a sacrifice?) and that it ends up exalting the role of suffering and abuse, both with God and among humans.

Let's think about the problem the other way around. What would Christianity need to be like to avoid all the criticisms that are made about the shocking execution that is at the center of faith? What if, in place of the passion narratives of the Gospels, Christians had instead the following text:

Christ—the living wisdom of God—came down to earth. He visited a great city in the form of a stranger, a swarthy carpenter with a withered leg, in order to call back those who had fallen into ignorance. He taught many things to those who had the inner ears to hear. But those who saw only his outward form did not understand the grace he brought.

He performed many miracles, and the people worshiped him for this reason and made him their king. But still their ignorance was not dispelled, and each house in the city was set against another, and great fires burned there day and night. So Christ prepared his final miracle. One day he called to him Mary, his mother and his dearest disciple. He went into the temple and ate the bread in the holy of holies,

that no person is to touch. They lay together there near the altar throughout the night. While they lay there the earth shook, and many in the city were stricken with a deadly disease and the people were afraid. He sent Mary away, telling her that she must return without fail at the first hour and that whatever she found at that time must be cast outside the gates.

In the morning, when the people came to the temple, seeking to know what evil had been done to bring these troubles upon them, they found nothing but the smallest mustard seed lying near the altar. He had taken the form of a mustard seed, carrying the entirety of divinity within him. All the people were greatly distressed at this. Priests and soldiers, foreigners and natives, members of every tribe, all were seized with awe, in a kind of trance. Heeding Mary, with one spirit they rushed together to form a procession and carried the seed to a stony hill where they threw it in a great hole that opened there. And each person, without exception, threw in stones to cover it.

Miraculously, the seed immediately grew up into a great tree, and Christ himself was in the fruit of that tree, and everyone who ate of this fruit discovered God within themselves and the joy of eternal life. The people returned to the city rejoicing, and health and peace ruled in those walls.

This is a rich symbolic story, full of allegorical possibilities. There is no offensive violence, no punishment or glorified suffering. Instead of a cross of blood, there is a tree of life. How different things might have been if Christians had made such a parable of spiritual self-discovery their text. We would not be embarrassed by charges of victimization in our scriptures. We would have the added bonus that the spiritual value of this story is uncomplicated by worries about what actually happened. Its spiritual value is no less if we regard it as entirely imaginary rather than historical.

Suppose we added just one additional clarification, namely that this text in fact refers to the events of Jesus's execution, to what actually took place as it is described in the Gospels. In that case, the text is a lie about a lynching. If we were then happy to substitute this text for the Gospels, knowing that Jesus' death is perhaps the one thing about which we are historically most certain, it would say something interesting about us—that we like to avert our eyes from the real victims.

The substitute gospel we have just considered is not merely a thought experiment. René Girard has attracted a great deal of attention by arguing that to avert one's eyes from the sight of the real victims is a characteristic human act. He also contends that in light of this central aspect of human life, we can understand the saving character of the cross. That is, the meaning of Jesus' death can be understood only in light of the prototypical "good bad thing" in human culture: scapegoating sacrifice. Girard maintains that central human myths are in fact transcriptions of a consistent kind of violence that he calls the "founding murder." Such murder literally stands at the beginning and in the middle of human society. It makes human community possible.

Girard's account, in brief, is this: social life, particularly in its infancy, is fatally subject to plagues of rivalry and vengeance. Escalating cycles of retaliation are the original social disease. Without finding a way to treat this violence, human society can hardly get started. The ability to break this vicious cycle appears as a kind of miracle. At some point, when feuding threatens to dissolve a community, spontaneous and irrational mob violence erupts against some distinctive person or minority in the group. They are accused of the worst crimes the group can imagine, crimes that by their very enormity might have caused the terrible plight the community now experiences. They are lynched.

The sad good thing that happens as a result of this bad thing is that the scapegoating actually works. In the wake of the murder, communities find that this sudden war of all against one has delivered them from the war of each against all. The sacrifice of one person as a scapegoat discharges the pending acts of retribution. It "clears the air." This benefit seems a startling, even magical result from a simple execution. The sudden peace confirms the desperate charges that the victim had been behind the crisis to begin with. If the scapegoat's death is the solution, the scapegoat must have been the cause. The death has such reconciling effect that it seems the victim must possess supernatural power. So the victim becomes a god, memorialized in myth.

Rituals of sacrifice originated in this way, says Girard. They were tools to fend off social crisis. And in varied forms they are with us still. The prescription is that divisions in the community must be reduced to but one division, the division of all against one common victim or one minority group. Prime candidates are the marginal and the weak, or those isolated by their very prominence. Typically, they will be charged with violating the community's most sacred taboos. The process

does not just accept innocent victims, it prefers them—“outsiders” who are not closely linked to established groups in the society.

This, in a nutshell, is Girard’s account of the origin of religion. It is identical with the beginning of culture itself, for without some such mechanism to head off tit-for-tat violence, human society could not get off the ground. It is the founding “good bad thing”—reconciliation in the blood of the innocent.

No one thought out this process, and its effectiveness depends on a certain blindness to its workings. Myth reflects the scapegoat event but does not describe it. Myth is the product of a collective killing that all the actors found completely justified, entirely necessary and powerfully beneficent. It is the memory of a clean conscience that never registered the presence of a victim at all. The unbroken continuity of consciousness between producers and consumers of the myth from generation to generation ensures the invisibility of the victim as a victim.

So our text about the seed and the flowering tree is an example of what Jesus’ death would look like if it were a true myth in Girard’s sense. If we suspect there is an execution behind this story, we can see many telltale signs: typical marks of the victim (he has a physical deformity, he is a foreigner), indications of social conflict (fire sweeping the city), traces of the accusations (incest, profaning holy things), the unanimity of the mob violence (stoning and burying the “seed”), and the positive benefits of the death. We can easily see how a ritual would evolve from this story—perhaps the annual offering of a sacrificial victim at the foot of the sacred tree. Above all, of course, what is “mythical” is that the killing has disappeared completely, and no issues of persecution, guilt or violence are present in the text at all.

Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and our politics. It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises. Satan can cast out Satan, and is the more powerful for it. It is most virulent where it is most invisible. Victims are called criminals, gods or both. So long as we are in the grip of sin, we do not see our victims as scapegoats. Texts that hide scapegoating foster it. Texts that show it for what it is undermine it.

Jesus’s willingness to face death, specifically death on a cross, suddenly looks anything but arbitrary, and much more like the “wisdom of God” that the New

Testament so surprisingly discovers in the crucifixion. God is willing to die for us, to bear our sin in this particular way, because we desperately need deliverance from the sin of scapegoating. God breaks the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim, and by being a victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. God acts not to affirm the suffering of the innocent victim as the price of peace, but to reverse it.

God is not just feeding a bigger and better victim into this machinery to get a bigger pay off, as the theory of substitutionary atonement might seem to suggest. Jesus's open proclamation of forgiveness (without sacrifice) before his death and the fact of his resurrection after it are the ways that God reveals and rejects what Girard terms the "victimage mechanism."

Note that in the Gospels it is Jesus's accusers who affirm the reconciling value of his death. "It is expedient that one man should die for the sake of the people," says the high priest. And Luke 23:12 contains this curious note after Pilate and Herod had shuttled Jesus between them: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies." Jesus's persecutors intended his death to bring peace; it offers a way to avoid an outbreak of violence between Romans and Israelites, between Jews and other Jews. Jesus's death is intended to be sacrificial business as usual. But God means it to be the opposite.

C. S. Lewis, who knew the mythical heritage of the world better than most, saw this aspect of the crucifixion clearly. In his Christian allegory the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the lion Aslan, the Christ figure, allows himself to be killed so that the evil powers will release those they hold hostage. The idea of this exchange is proposed by the evil powers. The sacrificial process is known to all from the earliest times; it is the law that an innocent one may die on behalf of others and so free them. It is called "deep magic from the dawn of time."

The evil powers love this arrangement and, incidentally, have no intention of keeping their side of the bargain after Aslan is dead. The resurrection comes into this story as an unexpected development, from what Aslan calls "deeper magic from before the dawn of time," something about which the evil powers knew nothing. And when Aslan rises, the ancient stone altar on which the sacrifice was offered cracks and crumbles in pieces, never to be used again. The gospel, then, is not ultimately about the exchange of victims, but about ending the bloodshed.

Enthusiasts for myth, like Joseph Campbell, like to deride “Judeo-Christian religion” for its low symbolic quality and its crude moral literalism. They deplore the Bible’s brutal representations of violence, its fixation on persecution and murder. The biblical tradition, they say, lacks the beauty and imaginative sophistication of great myth. The story of Jesus’ death is a cut-rate version of the sacrifice of the corn king, flattened into something that belongs on a police blotter and not in high spiritual culture.

To Girard, this sort of critique gets things just backwards. Major myths are rooted in sacrificial violence, prescribe it, and shield us from awareness of our complicity in it. That is why they do not show it directly. The Bible, by contrast, makes the violence visible, and therefore makes the victims uncomfortably visible too.

Modern sensitivity to victims, which now makes people uneasy with the Bible, is rooted in the Bible. We would not be able to criticize the Gospels of encouraging victimization if we had not already been converted by them. We would not look for scapegoated victims in every corner of the world if the magnifying glass of the cross had not already helped us see them.

Campbell thinks that only spiritual philistines worry about whether an actual person was literally crucified. The Gospels, however, are of the opinion that what happened to an actual person on Golgotha is a religious concern of the first order.

The workings of mythical sacrifice require that in human society people “know not what they do.” But in the Gospels, the process of sacrifice is laid out in stark clarity. Jesus says these very words from the cross. The scapegoat is revealed as a scapegoat. The point is made dramatically in Luke’s account, when the centurion confesses at the moment of Jesus’ death, “Surely this man was innocent.”

Girard recounts the shock of recognition he experienced in coming to the New Testament after studying violence and the sacred in anthropology and the history of religion. He found in the Gospels all the elements he had come to expect in myths: the crowd coalescing against an individual, the charges of the greatest crimes and impurities. But he was startled to recognize that the reality of what was happening was explicit, not hidden. Here is the same mythic story, but this time told from the point of view of the victim, who is clearly accused unjustly and murdered wrongly. In the Gospels, the scapegoating process is stripped of its sacred mystery, and the collective persecution and abandonment are painfully illustrated so that no one,

including the disciples, can honestly say afterward that they resisted the sacrificial tide.

The resurrection makes Jesus's death a failed sacrifice, but of a new kind. When mythical sacrifice succeeds, peace descends, true memory is erased and the way is smoothed for the next scapegoat. If it fails (because the community is not unanimous or the victim is not sufficiently demonized), it becomes just another killing, stoking the proliferation of violence, and the search intensifies for more and better victims.

But in the case of Jesus's death, something else happens. People do not unanimously close ranks over Jesus's grave (as Jesus's executioners hoped), nor is there a spree of violent revenge on behalf of the crucified leader. Instead, an odd new countercommunity arises, dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice. As Girard sees it, this is the good news, the inexplicable revelation, that is found in the Bible.

The revelatory quality of the New Testament on this point is thoroughly continuous with Hebrew scripture, in which an awareness and rejection of the sacrificial mechanism is already set forth. The averted sacrifice of Isaac; the prophets' condemnation of scapegoating the widow, the weak or the foreigner; the story of Job; the Psalms' obsession with the innocent victim of collective violence; the passion narratives' transparent account of Jesus's death; the confessions of a new community that grew up in solidarity around the risen crucified victim: all these follow a constant thread. They reveal the "victimage" mechanisms as the joint root of religion and society—and they reject those mechanisms. Jesus is the victim who will not stay sacrificed, whose memory is not erased and who forces us to confront the reality of scapegoating.

This is why the case of anti-Semitism is the infallible test for a healthy Christian theory of atonement. One of the crucial things that makes the church a new community is its solidarity not against some sacrificial victim, but in identification with the crucified one.

Christians have always been as inclined as others toward scapegoating, and have too rarely overcome that inclination. Our guilt in this regard is underlined by the fact that the gospel prompted Christians who would resist its revelation to create a new

version of the old sin. Because the dynamic of Jesus's passion has made it impossible to be unconscious of scapegoats or to mystify them in myths, Christian persecutors have put them in plain sight. Jews were scapegoated with the claim that they were the ones who had scapegoated Jesus. The new sin, for which Christians can claim "credit," was to victimize people by accusing them of being victimizers, to make the revelation directed against sacrifice a new rationale for sacrifice. To use the gospel in a "mythological" way, Christians have somehow to distort the very truth it has given them. The moment we point a finger at some "they" as Jesus's killers, we have enacted the sin that the very particularity of the cross meant to overcome. Christians bear a special culpability for this prompt perversion, with less right to claim that we knew not what we did: our sacrificial violence toward Jews proclaimed the very sin it practiced.

We began by noting the tension seeded through the passion story: Jesus's death saves, and it ought not to have happened. The tension is there not because the gospel writers can't get their story straight but because this tension is the heart of the story itself. The language of sacrifice and blood (with all its dangers) tells the truth. To want to purge these elements from the story reflects a naïve confidence that we are in greater danger of being corrupted by the bloody language than we are of falling prey to the sin it describes. The good/bad tension is there first because of the frank description of the sacrificial, scapegoating violence that has existed from the foundation of the world. That violence does save people from more violence. But its victims ought not to be sacrificed. This tension reflects an honest description of our human condition.

Becoming subject to this sin, God takes this tension to a different level. The peace that depends on sacrifice (the "reconciliation" Herod and Pilate aim for in Christ's death) now also registers as something that ought not to happen. The good part of the "old good bad thing," sacrifice, now is seen as part of what is bad in the crucifixion. What is needed is a completely new basis for peace. It is hardly accidental that "Peace" is usually the first word of the risen Christ in his appearances. It is an apt greeting in two ways. If a sacrificial victim were to return with power to those who had persecuted or abandoned him, peace is the opposite of what they would expect. And peace not based on new victims, "not as the world gives," is what is now offered. So in the gospel a new kind of tension is stressed, in which it is the entire complex of sacrificial violence—both the "good" peace it brings and the bad violence it uses—that becomes the bad thing. And it is God's willingness



to suffer the worst this process has to offer to deliver us from it, to deliver us to a new path of peace, that is the good thing.

Christ is wounded for our transgressions. We can hardly deny that Jesus bears our sin of scapegoating, precisely because of its collective and ubiquitous character. Christ died for us. He did so first in the mythic, sacrificial sense that all scapegoated victims do. That we know this is already a sign that he died for us in a second sense—to save us from that very sin. Jesus died in our place, because it is literally true that any one of us, in the right circumstances, can be the scapegoat. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, Christ is a sacrifice to end sacrifice, and he has died once for all. Christ's purpose was not "to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:25-26).

Is Christ's death unique? It is not, since it is crucial to the saving "work" of the cross to recognize that Jesus's death is precisely the same as that of so many other victims. And yet by virtue of this identification it is unique because it is the one of all these deaths that have been happening from the foundation of the world that irreversibly shows us the sin in which we are everywhere enmeshed and in which God has acted on the side of the victims.

It is true that there is a transaction of sorts at the cross. God agrees to be "handed over" to our sacrificial process, to bear our original sin and to carry the burden that no human alone can bear. Any human being can be plausibly scapegoated (we are all sinners) and no human can prevail when the collective community turns against her. Nor is it sufficient for Jesus to simply instruct us about our situation, for we are all too fully enclosed in the scapegoating process to be able to break the spell. It is an extraordinary step even to arrive at the awareness of our own susceptibility expressed by the disciples at the Last Supper, when they piteously ask Jesus, "Is it I, Lord?"

Only one whose innocence truly can be vindicated and whose power could have offered escape can, by suffering this sacrifice, reverse it. The work of the cross is the work of a transcendent God breaking into a cycle we could not change alone. If we limit Jesus's work to that of a human exemplar, the crucifixion becomes more of a prescription for suffering than if we grasp it as the work of the incarnate one, done

once for all. It is a saving act of God, a victory over the powers of this world, a defeat of death.

Early Christian writers spoke of the crucifixion as basically a trick on Satan. The powers have been tricked. By drawing Christ into the usual sacrificial machinery, the powers have been revealed and broken, because all the traditional means of justifying and erasing the sacrificial violence won't stick this time, and their hold will increasingly be broken.

When Christians gather at communion we see this clearly in the unequivocal reminder of Christ's bloody death. When we hear "Do this in remembrance of me," we should hear the implied contrast that comes with emphasis on *this*. Unlike the mythic victims who became sacred models for future sacrifices, Christ is not to be remembered with more scapegoating. *This* is a humble meal and prayer, not a new cross. Christ has offered his very real body and blood so that at the last supper he can set a new pattern and say of bread "this is my body" and of wine "this is my blood."

Following that example, Christians believe this meal of the new community is able to accomplish all the peace that sacrificial violence could, and more. In it, we recall a real sacrifice and celebrate a substitutionary atonement. Here on this table, bread and wine are to be continually substituted for victims—substituted for any, and all, of us.