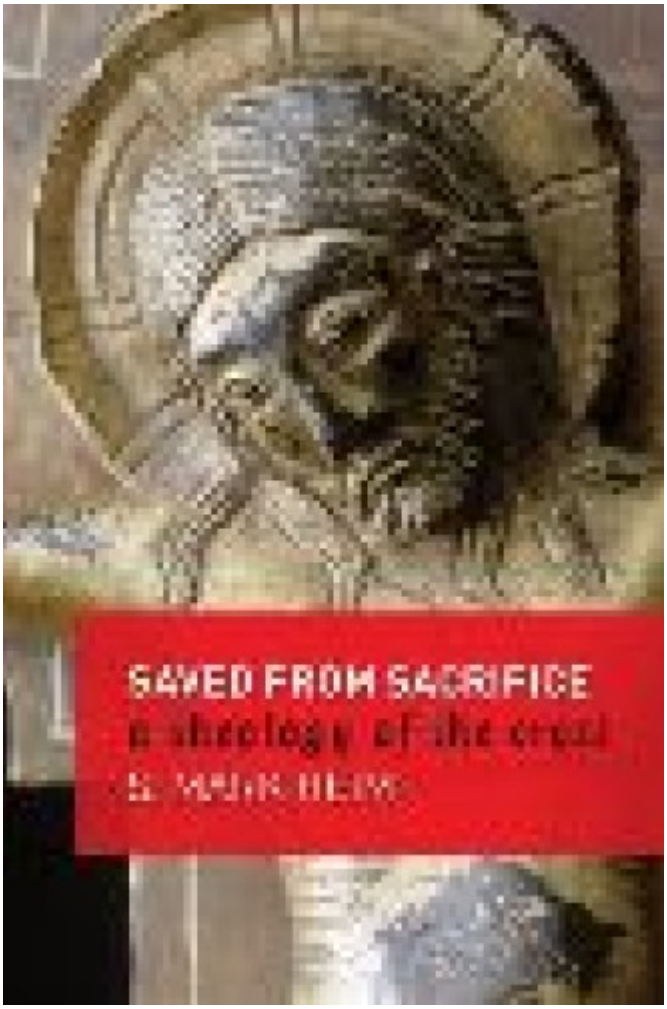
Why the cross?

By William C. Placher in the December 12, 2006 issue

In Review



Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross

S. Mark Heim
Eerdmans

"The central Christian belief," C. S. Lewis once wrote, "is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did

this are another matter. A good many theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work." There are still a good many theories, but theologians today are less in agreement that it is Christ's death that has put us right with God.

Most Christians probably think of a "satisfaction" or "substitution" model of Christ's work as the standard story, even if they don't believe that story themselves. Roughly summarized: our sin leaves us owing God a debt we cannot pay; since we owe God everything, we can never catch up once we have fallen behind. But Christ suffered and died for our sins, doing on our behalf what we could not do for ourselves and thereby accomplishing our salvation.

One scholar who rejects that model is René Girard, who may be the only thinker alive today with a vision as grand as Marx's or Freud's, a theory to explain nearly everything. A practicing Catholic born in France who has spent most of his life teaching literature in the United States, Girard puts the Bible at the center of his thought, and he has therefore attracted the interest of many Christian theologians, especially with regard to how to understand the work of Christ.

In his brilliant new book *Saved from Sacrifice*, S. Mark Heim argues that substitutionary atonement is a bad idea and that Girard offers the basis for a better model.

Heim is far from alone these days in criticizing substitutionary theories. Is it a sadistic God who demands his own Son's death as payment for human sin? Do such theories encourage the idea that violence and punishment are necessary features of justice? How can it be fair to punish an innocent for the sins of the guilty? Is the picture of God the Father demanding his Son's death on a cross a cosmic justification of child abuse, as some feminists charge? The questions are not new. Nearly a thousand years ago, Peter Abelard stated the core issue: "How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, . . . still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world."

One way around the problem is to switch to an entirely different account of how Christ saves us. According to the moral-influence model, Christ shows us how much God loves us, thereby inspiring us to love God in return. According to the *Christus victor* model, Christ defeats Satan and thereby frees us from enslavement to evil

powers. Either way, Christ's death no longer serves as a payment to God. But either way, it is not quite clear why—or whether—Christ had to die in such a horrible way. We will have to discard a lot of theology, and certainly a lot of hymns, if we cannot say something about why it was centrally important that Jesus die on a cross. Heim thinks Girard offers some help.

Girard's grand theory goes roughly like this: Human culture is possible only because human beings learn to imitate each other's desires. We are not born instinctively knowing which foods to eat and which to avoid, or what kind of shelter will best protect us through the winter. We survive because we choose what we want by imitating what others want. As a result, however, everyone wants the same cave for shelter, and everyone prefers the piece of gold to the piece of tin. Since only one person can have what all desire, the imitation of desire that created human culture inevitably leads to competition and hence to violence, and society is at risk of disintegrating into a war of each against all.

What comes to the rescue, according to Girard, is scapegoating. As everyone is fighting everyone else, they suddenly find it easier to gang up on one person or a small group—the scapegoat—and in so doing they create a community with a common purpose and live happily, if not ever after, at least until things fall apart enough for them to need a new scapegoat. Children on the playground unite to pick on the new kid. The city of Thebes decides that it is Oedipus's marriage to his own mother that has caused the plague. Germans suffering through economic and cultural crises blame everything on the Jews. And so on.

Those who persecute the scapegoat, however, would never use the term. They think they are performing a necessary good deed, ridding the city of a curse, solving Germany's problems. They tell stories of villains and evil forces that need to be destroyed rather than stories of scapegoats who have been victimized, and thus they do not tell the truth. Girard finds such false stories in myths and literature all around the world.

But the Bible, he says, is different. It tells the truth that scapegoats are innocent. Abel did not deserve to die; Joseph's brothers should not have ganged up to sell him into slavery; Job really was an upright man. Above all, Jesus was not guilty of anything but was killed anyway by a conspiracy of the powers of his time, who found common cause in his murder: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" (Luke 23:12). Thus the Bible

exposes the practice of scapegoating for the lie that it is. To be sure, people continue to persecute scapegoats—the history of Christian anti-Semitism being one of the worst examples. But anyone who has read the Bible seriously, Girard insists, has seen through the trick. Sooner or later, those who know that blaming scapegoats is a lie will stop doing it, and the world will be transformed into a more just and less violent place.

Other theologians have made use of Girard's theories—Anthony Bartlett, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Raymund Schwager, James Williams and the brilliant James Alison, to name a few. But no one presents it more clearly or more persuasively than Mark Heim, whose reputation as a major theologian this book establishes beyond doubt. Sometimes Heim helps Girard by passing over the less persuasive parts of Girard's argument, like his insistence that sacrificial imagery appears in a positive light in the New Testament only in the book of Hebrews. Moreover, he goes beyond Girard, who sometimes claims that realization of the nature of scapegoating will suffice to transform the world. Heim insists that we also need to create alternative communities of people who can live at peace with each other without having to gang up on victims in order to do it.

It all still sounds too much like gnosticism to me. Our problem, according to Girard and Heim, was that we did not understand something. The solution is to realize the truth and therefore live differently. (Heim is clearer than Girard on the living differently part.) That salvation lies in realizing something was the gnostics' central idea.

I think we are worse off than that. The world would indeed be a better place if we could see the innocence of victims and stop picking on them. (As I write this, Republican strategists are attempting to rescue their party by making last-minute attacks on gay marriage.) But even when we have realized our faults, we still bear the guilt of our past errors. Worse, we cannot stop sinning even when we have seen sin for what it is.

Whatever their faults, substitutionary theories of atonement grasp that Christ cannot just *show* us something; he has to *do* something for us. Somehow he has to get us out of the mess we have gotten ourselves into with our sin—a mess at least partly defined by the fact that our sin has separated us from God. Further, the fact that Christ suffered such a horrible death—the pain, the abandonment and all the rest—was not just bad luck. It was somehow important to what he did to help us.

How can we say such things in a way that recognizes the objections to traditional theories of substitutionary atonement? Few questions are as important to contemporary Christian theology. I cannot imagine the Girardian case being stated any more persuasively than Heim has stated it, and yet I am not persuaded. I finished Heim’s book more convinced than ever that though René Girard might provide some help, he cannot centrally define the answer.