Speaking of the cross

Much of what Christianity has long been saying about the cross of Christ is problematic. So what is to be done about it?

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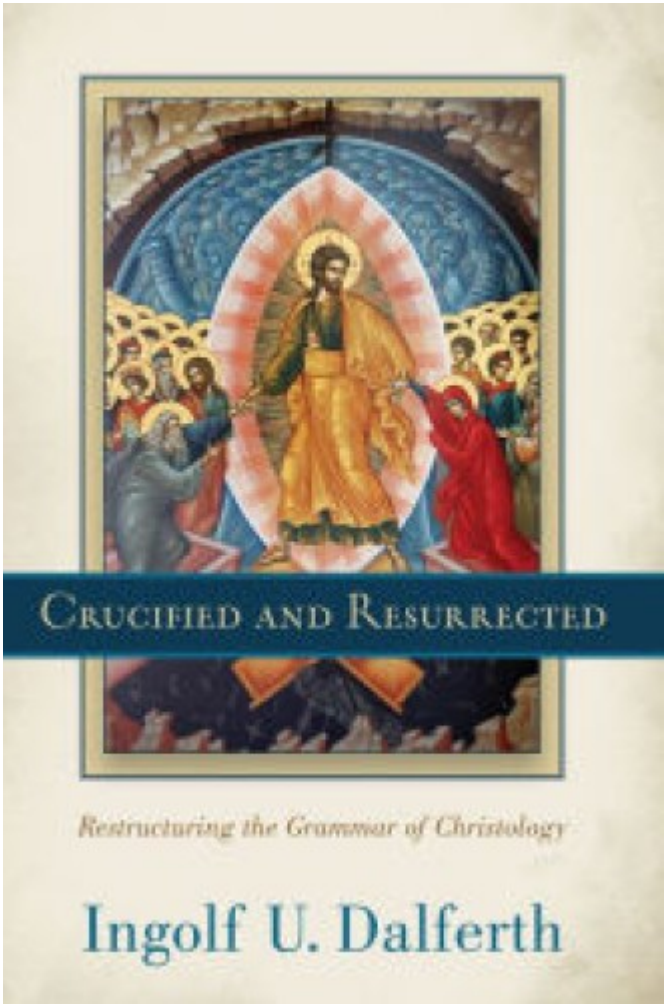
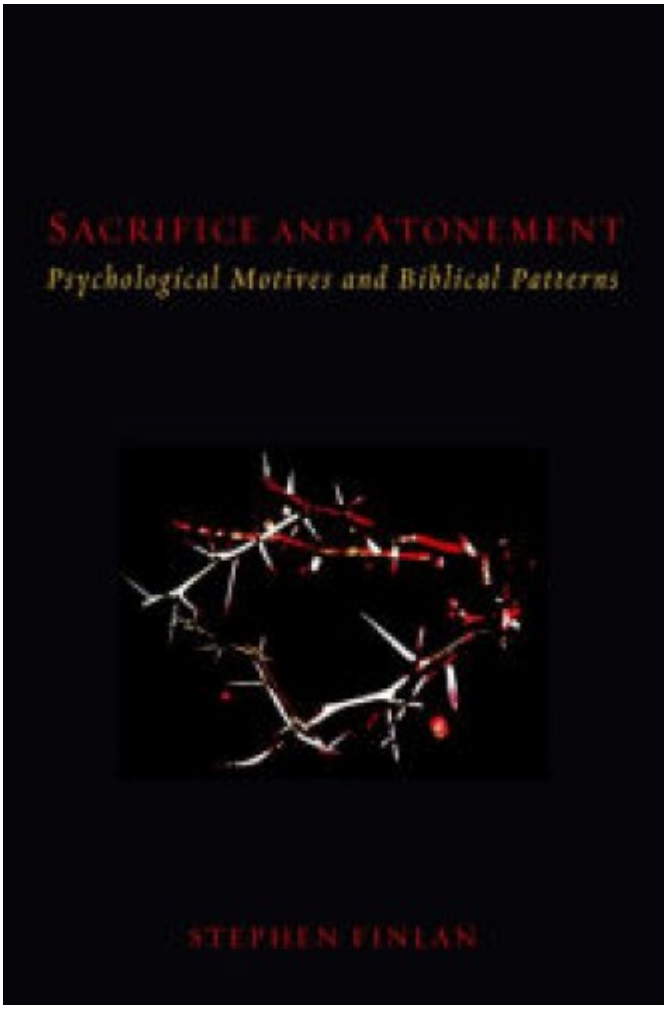
In Review



Crucified and Resurrected

By Ingolf U. Dalferth

Baker Academic



Sacrifice and Atonement

By Stephen Finlan
Fortress

If Christian language is Christian just insofar as it takes its bearings from Jesus Christ, then there is a sense in which everything Christians say is Christology or Christ-talk—even when Christ is not being mentioned. Taken in that ample sense, Christology would embrace the whole gamut of topics that are usually discussed in Christian dogmatics or systematic theology. Such is Ingolf Dalferth's impressive enterprise in *Crucified and Resurrected*. The "grammar" of Christology in his subtitle applies to discourse about God and God's Trinity, to pneumatology and eschatology, and in the last quarter of the book to salvation and in particular the "saving significance" of the cross.

This last, lengthy chapter, “Atoning Sacrifice,” invites comparison with Stephen Finlan’s *Sacrifice and Atonement*. In some ways the two could not be more different. Dalferth writes as a philosophical theologian in a grand, heavyweight Germanic manner. Finlan is primarily a biblical scholar, a teacher, and an American—eclectic, cut-to-the-chase, and at times colloquial. Yet they share a common concern: they concur that the more or less standard way in which Western Christianity has understood and spoken of Christ’s death is very problematic.

Dalferth addresses the problem in the context of his more comprehensive project. The comprehensiveness is not optional; a more restricted approach could not do justice to the subject matter of Christian language, which is a complex, interconnected whole. The “grammatical” rules that govern talk about the Spirit, for example, can be understood only in relation to proper speech about humankind, which itself is bound up with the right way to speak of creation and of God as creator. In turn, this overall regulative coherence registers the fact that all genuinely Christian speech derives from one and the same confessional affirmation: God raised Jesus from the dead.

Not that this originative declaration is a premise from which correctly formulated statements about God’s Trinity, say, or about the identity of Christ can be deduced logically. Theology has an intelligibility and in that sense a logic, yet it is not a *logos*, a philosophy, a theoretical or rational “science.” To suppose otherwise has been Scholasticism’s big mistake. Theologians do well to keep in mind that what is spoken in confessing Christ’s resurrection is divine activity, and that the epistemic counterpart to acts of God is not informative cognition but justifying faith.

But jumping overboard on the other side is a mistake too. If for Dalferth theology is not *logos*, neither is it *mythos*. To insist that faith plays an intrinsic part in properly Christian discourse is not to advocate floundering in a flood of aestheticism, poetic fancy, and narrative imagination. Dalferth does at times privilege image over concept, but the “mythical” mode of thought and speech as such is no more theologically appropriate than “logical” reasoning. Both have been superseded. They belong to a former age, an old world that comes to an end with the eschatological advent of God’s saving presence, which is realized in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and heralded by “the word of the cross.” In other words, theological talk is unique. Christians may perhaps use the same words as everyone else, but the way they use them exemplifies a grammar that is one of a kind.

Insofar as the rules of Christian speech are already latent or implicit in properly formed talk about Christ and the God who raised him, one might expect that "restructuring the grammar of Christology" would entail clarifications and corrections of existing language rather than startling innovations. By and large, Dalferth meets that expectation. Take, for example, the old rule of thumb known as the *communicatio idiomatum*, which is a handy way to make sure that statements about Christ keep within the boundaries set at the Council of Chalcedon. What is it fitting and proper to say about somebody who is truly God, truly a human being, and yet truly one and the same? The traditional rule for discriminating between right and wrong statements remains as valid as ever. What changes is the reason *why* it is valid. For Dalferth, Christians do not say what they do about Christ because he can be described by using borrowed philosophical apparatus to assign precise meanings to particular words like *person* and *nature* that happen to have been used at Chalcedon. Such technical definitions are beside the point, because describing the divine is not what theology does. Theological statements affirm God's self-communication by clarifying that God is understood (if at all) in the way he has made himself understood, namely, in the word that mediates Jesus' resurrection.

Or take God's Trinity. The self-differentiation of God that is implicit in his raising of Jesus leads Dalferth to an account of divine plurality that is recognizably continuous with Western trinitarian theology, while at the same time it obviates a lot of recent hand-wringing about an "immanent" and an "economic" Trinity that may or may not be describing the same thing.

For the most part, then, Dalferth's restructured grammar does not require Christian speakers to speak otherwise than has been their custom. But when it comes to what they say about the cross, his argument takes a somewhat different turn. It has been standard procedure in Christian dogmatics to distinguish between the "person" of Christ (who he is) and his "office" or work (what he does). To the latter belongs the creedal statement that he was crucified "for us" or "for our sake." Dalferth has not much use for the conventional distinction, but he follows the conventional order inasmuch as his book ends with soteriology. The concluding chapter turns on one basic question: How far is it appropriate to conceive the for-us-ness of Christ's death in terms of sacrifice and atonement? The answer turns out to be "not very far."

Finlan's more radical answer would be "not at all." But he shares with Dalferth some basic points of reference from which a conversation could begin. In particular, they agree that:

1. The theological tradition in question begins in the New Testament, on which any critical investigation must therefore be focused.
2. From that standpoint, to all relevant intents and purposes, "sacrifice" and "atonement" coincide. There may be a stratum of Hebrew scripture where not every sacrifice is regarded as an atoning act—a performance that compensates somehow for past wrongdoing—but by New Testament times it was generally held that all kinds of sacrifice are offered to make atonement.
3. The language of sacrifice, so construed, is employed in various ways by various New Testament authors to explain the savingness of the cross. Christ's death saves because it atones, and it atones inasmuch as it is a sacrifice.
4. Such an understanding of how Christ's death benefits others is by no means the only way in which the New Testament speaks of salvation. It did give rise to the main stream of Christian teaching about Christ's death as the "because" of salvation, and that teaching is open to serious objection. Accordingly, what has to be asked is whether, or in what sense, the biblical language of sacrifice and atonement is definitive.

Objections to speaking of Jesus' crucifixion in these terms have usually centered on what such talk says about God. For, among other things, what is evidently being said is that God needs to be pacified, placated, or appeased. Before he can (or before he will) be favorable or save or forgive, a condition must be met: divine honor has to be satisfied, or divine wrath propitiated, or divine justice restored. Meeting this condition, paying the price that was owing, compensating for an otherwise irremediable deficit on the part of some if not all human debtors—such was the purpose and effect of Jesus' atoning, sacrificial death. All of this amounts to saying, as Finlan flatly puts it, that God had to be manipulated, coaxed, bribed somehow into being what Jesus himself said God simply *is*, and paid to do what Jesus told his followers they were to do freely, namely, to love and forgive. Surely God can be expected to do likewise.

This line of argument has been laid out time after time. In itself it seems to be cogent enough—so cogent, in fact, that perhaps the only way to refute it finally is to play the mystery card: Who are we to question that God can be, indeed wants to be, propitiated? Finlan does question it, though, and so does Dalferth, although their questioning takes them in rather different directions.

The difference turns on the fourth point mentioned above—whether Christian talk, here and now, can or should or must mean what Christian talk meant when the New Testament was being written. Finlan's stance is that even if it can, in this case it should not. Where Christ's death is concerned, "New Testament theology is an amalgam of profound revelation with retrogressive sacrificial teachings," and this ore needs to be smelted and refined. Why? *Retrogressive* is the operative word. One of Finlan's aims is to bring developmental psychology to bear on Christian theological discourse. By retrogressive he means selfish, arrested, immature. Children figure out how to cope with parental rage by adopting a strategy of "payment through suffering," and some adults never outgrow it. Finlan finds much the same pattern in the soteriological tradition that runs from the New Testament, especially the letter to Hebrews and (parts of) Paul, through Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, and—he might have added—contemporary praise songs with lyrics like

> . . . on that cross as Jesus died
> The wrath of God was satisfied.

Nowhere in the New Testament is this said in so many words. That is indisputable. Nevertheless, to say it now is arguably to say more concisely what the New Testament does say. Arguably, that is, there has been a valid development in Christian soteriology which preserves and amplifies what has been said from the first.

Finlan would not deny that atonement doctrine has developed. He does deny—and this is his methodological crux—that the canonical status of a biblical writing is a legitimate excuse for canonizing the psychopathology of the writer. The language of sacrifice and atonement, satisfaction and propitiation, appeasement and expiation, whether in the first or the 21st century, is symptomatic of a personal history of parent-child dysfunction. When sacrificial images and metaphors infect Christian thinking, the result is "crazy-making theology" that needs to be diagnosed for what it is and then quarantined. In Finlan's words, "salvation needs to be detached from the crucifixion." God saves in spite of Christ's death, not because of it.

Exactly how God does this is less clear. The brief indications that Finlan provides in *Sacrifice and Atonement*, taken together with previously published work, suggest a migration from West to East: the saving reality is not Christ's cross but his incarnation, in which others participate by theosis, divinization, or incorporation in Christ—themes prominent in Eastern Orthodox theology. If that is a fair assessment, Finlan's theological trajectory appears to take him within hailing distance of Dalferth's position, which uses the language of incorporation to speak about the saving nearness of God (that is, the salvation which is apprehended by faith in the resurrection announcement). Christ saves not by performing some extrinsic "work," but by who he is—a "public person" in whom, by God's Spirit, are included those who are converted by the word of the cross. In similar vein, Finlan observes that an incarnational theology would imply that "it was God's solidarity with humans—the divine Son's thorough sharing of human life—that opened up the way to salvation."

Whether this apparent convergence is more than apparent would depend, of course, on whether being in Christ means for Finlan just what it means for Dalferth. But even if they do mean the same thing, a big difference remains. What Dalferth joins together, Finlan puts asunder. For Finlan, a soteriology of sacrificial atonement and a soteriology of incorporation are independent and separable, and one of them has to go. For Dalferth, in contrast, the atoning sacrifice of the cross is the very thing that makes possible incorporation in the Christ who was crucified and resurrected.

This divergence is especially evident with regard to Hebrews, where most of the New Testament's sacrificial imagery is concentrated. Finlan sees this letter as an attempt—a failed attempt—to solve a problem that should not have come up in the first place: How can the old cultic sacrifices prefigure and shed light on Christ's death by crucifixion, which at the same time not only surpasses these anticipations utterly but in fact puts an end to them? Since for Finlan Christ's death was *not* a sacrifice, the question that vexes Hebrews simply does not arise. Dalferth, on the other hand, adopts the letter in its entirety and transposes it, mounting his own parallel argument to the effect that, in a certain sense, the cross was indeed a sacrifice, although it also abolishes cultic sacrifices altogether.

The "certain sense" in which Christ's death was sacrificial is expounded by means of an argument that is dense and difficult, even by Dalferth's standard. The idea that is common both to sacrificial rites and to Christ's saving death is "incorporation into the holy." That is what salvation consists in. It is one of three sequential components in the symbolic structure of every sacrifice: first a consecration that identifies the

offerer with the offered victim, to which the offerer's identity is symbolically transferred; then the victim's actual death; finally and consequently, the incorporation of the victim-identified offerer within the divinity to which the sacrifice has been offered. What Dalferth finds in the New Testament—specifically in Romans, more than in Hebrews—is a rearrangement of this triad. The identification of the offerer with the offering becomes the inclusive personality of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Instead of humans approaching God, however, God comes to humans by identifying himself with Jesus. And consecration is the culmination rather than the starting point of the reconfigured pattern—the faith that brings a new identity, a share in the person of Christ, and participation in God's saving nearness.

In brief, when the cross is spoken of in the New Testament as sacrificial atonement, what is meant turns out to be not unlike justification *sola fide*. Nothing more is required—certainly not sacrifices, and not some "extension" of God's self-mediation in raising the crucified, which in no way is prolonged by church or ministry or sacraments. Now that Christ has been raised, there is only the word of the cross, faith, and the "reasonable service" or "spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1) of those to whom God has come near.

The dialectical maneuvers by which the atrocity of a violent death morphs into the undeserved gift of divine presence may, in their own context, be convincing. Or they may not. In any case, to work through Dalferth's concluding chapter side by side with Finlan's book is to be confronted with a dilemma: granted that much of what Christianity has long been saying about the cross of Christ is problematic, maybe even "crazy-making," what is to be done about it?

Can the language of sacrifice and atonement be so radically reconfigured as to bear a sense which seems on the face of it to communicate quite a different idea of salvation? Finlan might protest that this sort of intellectual origami yields at best what he calls a halfway concept, a compromising paradoxical restatement that is really on its way to being rejected. But is outright rejection, on the other hand, preferable? Would it be more honest, more reasonable, more grown-up, to cut the knot and expel from Christian language, hymnody, liturgy, catechesis, and homiletics not only the vocabulary but the grammar of sacrifice? Would it be better, in short, simply to renounce the whole notion that the cross saves? Dalferth might protest that theology has no business asking whether Christ's crucifixion was a saving death: that it was is the nonnegotiable assumption from which theological thinking must start. The fact that it is difficult to grasp is no warrant for dropping it.

And what if both horns of the dilemma are unpersuasive? If neither trashing nor transmogrifying atonement-talk puts all the relevant questions to rest, is there any other possibility?