

# An Introduction to the Cross

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“Sinful human beings are redeemed from the guilt, penalty and power of sin only through the sacrificial death once and for all time of their representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the only mediator between them and God.”

To suggest at the outset that a subject defies philosophical probing sounds dangerously anti-intellectual. And yet this is precisely what Paul the apostle (no less) seems to imply about the cross at the start of his Corinthian correspondence:

“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, this hardly means that it is impossible to say *anything* about Jesus’ death on the cross – that would clearly contradict the testimony of both Old and New Testaments. But it does suggest that we should learn to be content with the fact that Jesus’ death will *never* fit neatly into our theological categories or grids. As a result, we should never be surprised by the academic incredulity, if not scorn, which a biblical understanding of the cross inevitably generates. For instance, contrast the disdain of the brilliant atheist philosopher A. J. Ayer...

Of all religions, a strong case can be made against Christianity as the worst, because it rests on the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.<sup>2</sup>

...with Charles Wesley’s poetic and overwhelmed wonder:

’Tis mystery all: th’Immortal dies:  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
’Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.<sup>3</sup>

This cannot be an excuse for disengaging the brain when we come to the cross, however. To do so would be almost as dishonouring to God as pouring scorn on it. For as Luther once said, “If you want to understand the Christian faith, you must understand the wounds of Christ;”<sup>4</sup> and there is *much* to understand! We should, therefore, always approach the cross with a humble and expectant caution. We will never plumb its depths nor can we expect full intellectual satisfaction; but the more we discover, the more will we value what can only be described as the divine genius that lay behind it (and even that seems like a gross understatement!). Indeed, a sure sign of having grasped something of the magnitude of the cross is if it leaves us open-mouthed and lost for words. The aim of this essay, then, is to touch on a number of approaches that people have taken, without providing an exhaustive (or exhausting analysis). It will hopefully spur and guide further study.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:22-24

<sup>2</sup> Article in the Guardian Newspaper, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1979.

<sup>3</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of Charles Wesley’s 1738 hymn *And Can It Be?*

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther – quoted in Vaughan Roberts, *Turning Points* (Authentic, Carlisle, 1999) p102

## 1. WHY THE CROSS?

One of the functions of a worldview (or metanarrative) is to analyze, and hopefully provide solutions to, what has gone wrong in the world. Different worldviews inevitably vary in their analysis, but they all seem agreed on the fact that the world is not as it should or could be.

For the theist, and especially the Christian theist, the fact of a fractured universe raises uncomfortable questions. What should we conclude from it? That God is unable to do anything about it? Or that he doesn't want to? Or that somehow, he has other plans? The Bible's unique answer is the cross. According to Paul in Romans, the cross demonstrates both God's justice and love.<sup>5</sup> These two attributes are essential to God's character, as portrayed in the Bible. So, how does the cross demonstrate these attributes?

### (i) Subjective models

One answer has been the **Exemplarist** or **Moral Influence** model. Commonly associated with the medieval theologian Peter Abelard, it found a more recent champion in the 1915 Bampton Lectures of English philosopher and theologian, Hastings Rashdall. The idea is that God sent Jesus to die on the cross out of love for the world, in order to persuade the world to repent and be reformed. Consequently, this view falls into the category of subjective atonement models: its efficacy lies in the fact that the 'voluntary self-sacrifice of the Son of God moves us to grateful love in response'<sup>6</sup>. Such a response is then held to be sufficiently sweeping as to heal the universe's fractures.

In common with so many atonement models, this is not entirely without merit. It is certainly true that Christ's self-sacrifice *does* move us to respond, as many contemporary gospel preachers know well. In fact, one of the best-loved hymns about the cross (*When I Survey*), culminates on precisely this note:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.<sup>7</sup>

It is also an approach that seems to make some sense for non-Christians. Gandhi, for example, wrote in his autobiography:

I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Bible will not allow such a distinction because to restrict the exemplarist model to being the *only* atonement model is profoundly, and dangerously, flawed. It fails to do justice to the seriousness of human sinfulness (as if that was merely something from which we could be inspired to walk away) and conveniently sidelines the pervasive biblical conviction that God is holy. These are objective realities that cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, it paints a strangely distorted view of God's love for

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:25 & 5:8

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, Leicester, 1986) 217 – *my emphasis*

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Watts, *When I Survey The Wondrous Cross* (1707)

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, New York, 2008) p186

‘true love is purposive in its self-giving; it does not make random or reckless gestures. If you were to jump off the end of a pier and drown, or dash into a burning building and be burnt to death, and if your self-sacrifice had no saving purpose, you would convince me of your folly, not your love. But if I were myself drowning in the sea, or trapped in the burning building, and it was in attempting to rescue me that you lost your life, then I would indeed see love not folly in your action.’<sup>9</sup>

It is, therefore, hard to see such a restricted view of the atonement as anything other than gross emotional blackmail. For the cross to make sense, it must *also* somehow deal with our *objective* predicament as sinful human beings.

(ii) **Objective models: God’s Ransom**

Jesus famously described his mission as a ‘ransom’, a metaphor which strongly suggests a more objective model.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>10</sup>

This verse has consequently been the springboard for the so-called ‘**Ransom/Satisfaction**’ or ‘**Classic**’ models. At stake is the question of how far to extend the imagery: it certainly implies some form of captivity or slavery; but does it also imply there is someone to pay off? In the patristic era, (especially in the work of Origen) it was commonly asserted that sinners were in some way owned by Satan, as the result of the Fall. The only escape was through some form of redemption, or ‘buying back’, of which the cross was the means. Satan is therefore the “cosmic kidnapper”, who will only release humanity when his demand of Jesus is met or satisfied. What he did not realise was that death could not keep its hold on Jesus<sup>11</sup>, with the result that Satan ended up by losing him as well!

Since the Middle Ages, this view has generally fallen out of favour, especially because it implies that God somehow tricked Satan into taking Jesus and that it suggests that Satan is much more powerful than Scripture presents him to be. The implication is that God was in some ways beholden to Satan. While it is certainly true that Satan is a real and malignant force in the world (for which he should never be underestimated), it is not the case that he is on a par with God or able to outwit him. The Bible has no room for such dualism.

Nevertheless, in 1931, the Swedish bishop Gustaf Aulén produced his groundbreaking book, *Christus Victor*. He called for a re-evaluation of the classic patristic model because it takes the reality of cosmic spiritual warfare seriously, which had perhaps been sidelined in the more legal models of Reformation Protestantism (to which we will come below). He argued that subsequent theologians had misread the ransom model and that there is still a place for seeing the cross as ‘**first and foremost a victory over the powers, which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil**’.<sup>12</sup> Sin, death and the devil are genuine threats. This certainly fits with Paul’s breathtaking account of the cross in

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<sup>9</sup> Stott 1986:220

<sup>10</sup> Mark 10:45; this is presumably what Paul alludes to in 1 Timothy 2:5-6

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:24

<sup>12</sup> Gustav Aulén (trans. A. G. Herber) *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Macmillan: New York, 1977), p20

Colossians 2:14-15 and so Aulén provides a helpful reminder if not corrective. Nevertheless, this model does not actually answer *how* and *why* this victory was achieved and so can hardly stand in isolation from other objective models.

Some have suggested that the satisfaction provided by the cross was not so much satanic as moral. God created the universe with an intrinsic moral framework and structure. Because of humanity's sin (which John describes as 'lawlessness'<sup>13</sup>), the penalty for sin is death. Because of God's love for humanity, he did not want anyone to perish.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he had to find a way to satisfy the rigorous, moral demands of the universe, as if God himself needed to submit to them.<sup>15</sup> Jesus' death then satisfied those demands. Again there are merits to this approach – it does deal more seriously with the objective problem we have as sinners, and provides a healthy reminder of the moral framework that exists in the universe. Intriguingly, C S Lewis' explanation for why Aslan had to die in *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*, owes much to this model, as well as to the classic ransom theory.

But its flaw is summed up brilliantly, as ever, by John Stott:

The real reason why disobedience of God's moral laws brings condemnation is not that God is their prisoner, but that he is their creator.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the one who needs satisfaction is not Satan, or some impersonal law but God himself. This means, if we can put it like this, sin is not a problem because of us; it is a problem because of God. He is the one that a sinner rejects – and that is what makes sin both moral *and* personal.

### (iii) Objective models: God's Self-Satisfaction

Establishing the relationship between justice and mercy is a constant challenge for human beings. The remarkable Truth And Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa nobly tried to provide a forum for truth to be exposed without plunging a profoundly damaged nation into a bloodbath. For without the truth, there can never be both forgiveness and reconciliation. However, was it enough simply to admit their crimes and then get off scot-free? The objective reality of what had been done demanded justice *as well* as mercy, surely? For sure, the situation was not as simplistic as that, and the commission did have the power to punish where it saw fit. The reason for pointing to it is that it illustrates both the deep need to reconcile justice with mercy and the inevitable impossibility for human beings to do so with complete success.

This is where the genius of the cross becomes apparent – but also why none of the models discussed so far come close to encapsulating by themselves the objective reality of human sin and divine justice:

- Sinners need something far more powerful than a limp moral influence or a tragic, if noble, example.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 John 3:4

<sup>14</sup> John 3:16

<sup>15</sup> Stott mentions that some have seen an illustration of this in King Darius' predicament in Daniel 6:14-15 (Stott 1986:114)

<sup>16</sup> Stott 1986:117

- There are spiritually malevolent forces at work in the world and they need to be overcome. But this does not remove an individual's responsibility for his or her own life and conduct.
- God's holiness and justice demand sin and evil to be named and punished. It is not enough simply to 'forgive and forget', however much one might wish it otherwise. Try telling that to the victims of others' sin.

It is common at this point, therefore, to sense the tension between justice and mercy within God himself. And while it may be true that a resolution between the two is alluded to as the Old Testament progresses, it is only at the cross that we discover that there is no tension in God *at all*. The cross satisfies both divine justice and divine love. As American theologian A H Strong once wrote, '**God requires satisfaction because he is Holiness; but he makes satisfaction because he is Love**'. More importantly, it coheres precisely with the two-fold divine demonstration of Romans:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to *demonstrate his justice*, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this*: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>18</sup>

In both cases, Paul is clear that the cross has an objective affect, and the key to understanding that is the imagery of sacrifice and blood. The atonement model that takes this most seriously is that of **Penal Substitution** (meaning a punishment taken by a substitute). As I have sought to explain elsewhere, 'the blood' is theological shorthand for the principle of substitution<sup>19</sup>, as presented throughout the entire OT sacrificial system. It symbolizes one death in place of another death. For the sinner, the death of Jesus is a death of punishment, willingly and innocently undergone as the means to forgiveness for the sinner. How else does one explain Paul's extraordinary statement of exchange in 2 Corinthians?

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.<sup>20</sup>

No other model really comes close. But the mistake many make here is to use Penal Substitution as an exclusive atonement model, rather than what seems the more biblical approach, which is to see it as the foundational model for all the others. Out of this great substitution flows the wonders of a Christian's justification, redemption, reconciliation and cleansing. Our objective guilt is wiped clean and thus our lives are turned inside out and changed forever. Furthermore, it is precisely through that wiping out of guilt (together with the death that is sin's inevitable consequence), that Satan is defeated and Christ triumphs as the victor. How, then, can we not '*in view of God's mercy, present [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to the Lord*'?<sup>21</sup> How can we not be

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<sup>17</sup> Romans 3:25-26

<sup>18</sup> Romans 5:6-8

<sup>19</sup> From chapter 8, Mark Meynell, *Cross Examined* (IVP, Leicester, 2005), pp98-101

<sup>20</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>21</sup> Romans 12:1

inspired and moved by Christ's supreme self-sacrifice to take up our own cross and follow him?<sup>22</sup>

A word of caution before some brief personal implications. Penal Substitution has come under increasing attack in recent years, not least because people regard it as describing a merely legal transaction.<sup>23</sup> This is not the place for a thorough going defence<sup>24</sup>, but it is worth making this observation. It is impossible to come to terms with the model without a robust Christology. It is no accident that one of the great explanations of this model came from a book entitled *Cur Deus Homo?* (meaning '*Why did God become a man?*'), by the great mediaeval theologian Anselm. If Jesus is not fully divine and fully human, then it is impossible for him to be the true mediator and substitute. He is relegated to a third-party, innocently and therefore unjustly, dragged in to taking the punishment on behalf of guilty sinners. But the doctrine of penal substitution is profoundly biblical, when, and only when, it is clear that Jesus is no third-party but God himself. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:19,

**God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.**

God is both the one who needs appeasing and the one who appeases. He is the one who must judge but he brings the judgment down on himself, in Christ. He is the one who satisfies his own nature by substitute himself on the cross.

It should be no surprise, then, that there are profound implications for a Christian's lifestyle. Here is the briefest of sketches.

## **2. BECAUSE OF THE CROSS...**

### **(i) ... we can live with God**

God's purpose was to renew and recreate what was ruined by the fall. It is no surprise that there are cosmic implications of the cross. Paul in Romans 8:18-21 and Colossians 1:19-20 gives no space for western individualism for this is a cosmic victory of reconciliation. At the universe's epicenter, however, stands humanity made in God's image, and the wonder is that through the cross, rebels can be reconciled to God (as mentioned above). Rescued sinners can live with a holy God without fear or danger.

### **(ii) ... we can live for God**

God's grace is not cheap and the confidence of forgiveness can never be used as an excuse for high-handed rebellion or independent-mindedness. Instead, we now have a new obligation, an obligation to live for God and not against him (e.g. Romans 8:12). A cross-rescued human being has now undergone a Copernican revolution, so that he or she is no longer the centre of the universe; the rescuing God is. Living for God is the life that we have been saved to live; and it is the best way to live. It is a life of confidence and freedom from fear, because it is based on our divine acceptance and adoption, our

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<sup>22</sup> Mark 8:34-39

<sup>23</sup> This debate is amply surveyed and responded to in Jeffery, Ovey and Sach's *Pierced for our Transgressions*, (IVP, Nottingham, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> See for example J I Packer's brilliant paper, *What did the cross achieve?*, reprinted in *The J I Packer Collection* (IVP, Leicester, 1999), pp94-136.

eternal belonging. Above all, it is a life made possible by Jesus death and his subsequent sending of his Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13-17).

**(iii) ... we can live like God**

With the Spirit living within us, living for God is no longer a matter of pulling up one's socks and trying better. It is a life that is profoundly shaped by the cross in the confidence of being saved by the cross. We should now live with the same attitude as Christ our Lord and Saviour had. That is the final challenge of living the Christian life (Philippians 2:5-11).

The last word should be given to a great (if controversial and unusual) contemporary theologian who goes by the name of Bono. While his articulation of the cross might not suit everybody's style, it cannot be faulted for its understanding of divine grace. And as such, he surely echoes the other great poet of the cross, quoted above, Charles Wesley.

I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep s\*\*t. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity. I love the idea of the Sacrificial Lamb. I love the idea that God says, 'Look, you cretins, there are certain results to the way we are, to selfishness, and there's mortality as part of your very sinful nature, and let's face it, you're not living a very good life, are you? There are consequences to actions.' The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Michka Assayas, *Bono on Bono*, (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2005) p204