

“What’s So Wondrous about the Cross?”

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The Atonement in Word and Song  
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Isaiah 53 & John 10:1-11

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Millions of church goers gather weekly in hundreds of thousands of congregations (huts and homes, chapels and cathedrals) to worship God. In song and prayer, Word and sacrament, they remember and celebrate the faith that was once delivered to the saints and has been handed down to us. This morning (afternoon), as we continue to focus our attention on God’s Word, on the message of the gospel, I want to offer a brief reminder to service planners, church musicians, liturgical artists and pastors—a reminder about some biblical distinctives of the Christian faith that too often get forgotten, taken for granted or (for various reasons) intentionally set aside.

I offer three statements, that may serve as a checklist for our planning and practice of personal and corporate worship.

**First, although it may sound extremely obvious, Christian worship is based on the gospel message and there is no gospel without the person and work of Jesus the Christ.**

**Second, we can’t say that our worship is about Christ unless it includes the bold and scandalous message of the cross.**

**And third, we must understand and proclaim Christ’s work on the cross the way that the Bible presents it—as an atoning sacrifice to make us right with God, a penalty paid on our behalf by a faultless victim to satisfy God’s holy judgement against sin.**

Certainly the first of these needs very little unpacking. We gather not to celebrate the beauty of the liturgy or the superior worth of a lifestyle, not to exalt in faultless choral presentations or the impeccable flow of a pleasing and moving worship set, and not to promote self-help strategies leading to better jobs, happier spouses or smarter children. No! Many of these good things may occur and bring us great personal and corporate joy, but we gather principally to worship the triune God of creation and redemption, to proclaim the glory of God in Christ Jesus.

Listen to the witness of John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Hebrews 1:3—"He [Christ] is the radiance of the glory of God."

Secondly, the cross of Christ: Some say that we can best attract the lost to our services if we remove crosses from our worship spaces and steeples and purge our language of words like "sin" and "guilt" and "blood" and "sacrifice." It was C. S. Lewis who said that we must see Jesus either as a lunatic (well intentioned but deluded about his own identity and purpose), or as a liar (a masterful con-artist and evil deceiver), or as Lord (the God-man who, very specifically, came to live a perfect life, to teach his followers about the Kingdom of God, and to die in our place as a sacrifice for our sin). We cannot embrace his moral and ethical teaching without hearing and believing what he said about his death.

Jesus spoke clearly to his disciples: "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him and he will be raised on the third day" (Matthew 17:22-23).

No, I suggest that a gospel without the cross is a gospel without Christ, and that is not good news. For the Apostles Paul and Peter and John, the gospel of grace was not principally a body of ethical teaching, but a saving message about God, about mankind, about sin, and about a

plan of redemption that found its great event at the cross, its glorious power in the resurrection, and its ultimate hope in the promise of his sure return. “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.”

Finally, we address the various theories of the atonement, the important question of what actually was accomplished at Calvary for our salvation. Granted, the vast majority of the practicing Christians still display the cross as a religious symbol in worship spaces. Most still sing the familiar words, “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died,” and many recite the creed, “. . . born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried.” These are familiar words; but I suggest that many have overlooked or retreated from the Bible’s understanding of what was accomplished for us and for our salvation through Christ’s suffering and death.

### **Theories of the Atonement (for the handout)**

- The **moral example** theory focuses on Christ’s humanity and his total dedication to God.
- The **moral influence** theory emphasizes Christ’s divinity and the extent of God’s love; and minimizes God’s justice and holiness. Sin is a flaw.
- The **governmental theory** emphasizes divine justice and the seriousness of sin. Christ’s death is a deterrent to future sin.
- The “classic” **ransom theory** presents Christ’s death as a price paid to Satan to set sinners free.
- In the **satisfaction theory** God’s holiness and honor must be satisfied by punishing sinners or accepting an appropriate substitute.

The historic theories of the atonement are briefly described in our handout. Each of these teaches us something important about the work of Christ on the cross—a supreme moral example and influence, a symbol of God’s victory over the powers of evil, and a price paid for the release of a people bound in sin and headed for destruction. Of course, if, deep down, we

deny that we have sinned against God, if we think that we are somehow spiritually intact; then we don't need a savior; we need a tune-up or perhaps a spiritual companion. Some of these atonement theories *do* function to inspire us and make us better disciples, but, by themselves, cannot explain how our rebellion against God can be forgiven. I suggest that these theories culminate in and are given force by the biblical idea of Christ's dying on the cross as a penalty for sin, dying in the place of those who had offended God's holy law and were deserving of his wrath.

The **penal-substitutionary view** of the atonement is a refinement of the satisfaction theory. It is a synthesis of the biblical doctrines of God and of man, and it makes sense out of the problem of sin and the need of forgiveness. It relies on and completes the Old Testament's sacrificial system, showing that the death of the spotless victim was not to reform the sinner but to atone for sin, to make things right with God.

Isaiah wrote of the promised Messiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions: he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5, 6).

John the Baptist realized who Jesus was: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

In the words of the Lord himself: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

In John's first epistle, he points to our sovereign God as the initiator of this substitutionary saving sacrifice: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

The hymn writer understood it well:

And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
(Charles Wesley, 1738)

Friends, it is by the blood of Christ that we, the church, are made the people of God. Our worship here on earth is made possible by our Savior's sacrificial death. The heavenly worship of God by beings around the throne even now is made possible because of what was accomplished by the Lord on the cross. To the Lamb, they cry:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God  
and they shall reign on earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

AMEN! Thanks be to God!