

Talk at MB Study Conference – Christology 10/16/09

Slide: How does the Cross Save? Mark D. Baker

: Slide: Part One: What I affirm, What I critique, Why it is important

Slide: **Excerpts from the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith Article Five: Salvation**

Throughout history, God has acted mightily to deliver people from bondage and draw them into a covenant relationship. Through the prophets God prepared the way of salvation until finally God reconciled the world to Himself by the atoning blood of Jesus. As people place their trust in Christ, they are saved by grace through faith, not of their own doing, but as a gift of God. God forgives them, delivers them from sin's bondage, makes them new creatures in Christ, empowers them by the Holy Spirit and seals them for eternal life. . .

Though Jesus entered a world ruled by sin, He chose not to submit to its allure and broke its domination. Through His obedient life, His death on the cross and His glorious resurrection, Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of sin and death, opening the way for all people to follow. Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and join the family of God.

I first read Confession ten years ago.....

I was very impressed – I read article five with great interest and care – it is very well done, broad and deep – language from various biblical images of atonement and different theories of atonement... individual, community, forgiveness, sin, powers, makes very clear not just a matter of changing of legal status—real change happens through the cross and resurrection, connection to ethics/discipleship

Slide: I fully affirm the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith article five on salvation.

Could simply say that, but I wrote a few other sentences – mostly saying in other words things already stated in article five

Slide: I affirm that the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross was necessary for our salvation. Jesus suffered the ultimate consequences of sin so we do not have to. He did for us something we could not do for ourselves.

Slide: I affirm that God worked through Jesus' death and resurrection to reconcile the world to Himself: forgiving, freeing from guilt, liberating from shame, empowering with the Holy Spirit, triumphing over death and the powers of evil.

Slide: I affirm that this calls for and requires response.

Slide: I affirm that God's work through the cross is richer and deeper than any of our explanations of it. Therefore I advocate following the New Testament in using a diversity of images and metaphors to proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection.

This leads to my first point of critique.

Slide: I critique presenting any theory or image of atonement as *the one* explanation of atonement.

Most, but not all, advocates of the penal substitution theory of the atonement present it as the one and only explanation. There are, however, articulations of penal substitution that I affirm both because they recognize the need for other images of atonement and because they avoid problems I see in many common articulations of penal substitution.

Those elements that I critique are:

Slide: *Appeasement*: I do not believe the Bible teaches that God needed to be appeased in order to forgive, that God had to punish Jesus in order to be able to forgive and be in relationship with us. I critique presentations of the atonement that communicate this.

Slide: *Recompense/Payback*: I affirm that God is angered by sin and injustice and God judges and punishes, but I understand God's justice as fundamentally restorative. Therefore I critique explanations of the cross that portray God being obligated to punish as payback to balance the scales of justice.

When explaining the image of penal substitution I think we make a fundamental error if we place ourselves in a courtroom from our time and place (retribution) rather than a "courtroom" in a Hebraic Old Testament setting (rectification and restoration).

Slide: Why have I put so much time and effort into writing and teaching about the atonement?  
Five stories

Slide: Part Two: Ten Ways the Cross Saves

pause

Slide: God's saving work through the cross and resurrection is richer and deeper than any of our explanations of it. To claim one theory of the atonement is the full and complete explanation is limiting. We need more of the cross, not less.

Before looking at *How* the cross saves, it is important to reflect on what it saves us from--sin

Some of the ways the Bible describes sin.

Slide: Sin is missing the mark (Rom. 3:23).

Sin is rebellion against God, infidelity (Hos. 8:1; Jer. 3).

Sin is not living up to one's potential (Prov. 1:24-25, 29-33).

Sin is transgressing the law (Daniel 9:11; I John 3:4).

Sin is idolatry and failing to honor God; it is picking the wrong way, or losing one's way (Jer. 3:21; Rom. 1:21-23).

Sin contaminates; it makes one unclean or impure, and thus separated from the Holy God (Is. 6:5; Lam. 1:9).

Sin is an enslaving force (Rom. 6:12; 7:14).

Since the problem, sin, is broad and deep, the solution must also be broad and deep. Turn now to answer the question how the cross and resurrection save us from sin.

Change slide, but don't read it.

Slide: A longer version of this talk is available online: [www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement](http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement)  
It is titled: "Ten Ways the Cross Saves: Brief Explanations"

**Slide: Jesus suffered, in our place, the ultimate consequences of our sin.**

The wages sin pays is death (Rom. 6:23). Jesus' death was the consequence of an alienation that was not his but ours. His death had a substitutionary character. He suffered in our place to save us from experiencing the ultimate consequence of our sin.

Looking at the cross in terms of the Old Testament we can say that, in our place,

**Slide: Jesus suffered, in our place, the ultimate consequences of our sin.**

Jesus suffered the ultimate exile that should have been ours. The cross and resurrection create the possibility of a return to the Promised Land which for us is the kingdom of God—being indwelt with God's Holy Spirit as part of the people of God.

Number Two

**2-Slide: God raised Jesus from the dead and triumphed over death**

Jesus died, but death did not have the final word (Heb. 2:14-15). In a substitutionary way Jesus did something for us we could not do for ourselves. He took the sin and death of the world on himself, let it do its worst to him, absorbed it on the cross and rose victorious. We are united with him in his triumph over sin and death (Rom. 5 and 6; I Cor. 5:21-22).

**3-Slide: God pays the price and forgives**

If you have been wronged or hurt you have two options. As Tim Keller describes, one option is revenge and retribution, seeking to make the other person suffer and pay. He writes, "Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. . . [W]hen you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads."<sup>1</sup> The other option is to forgive, to not make the person pay. Forgiveness, however, is not free. There is always a cost when a wrong is committed. Keller states "Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer [pay] . . ."<sup>2</sup>

**Slide: God pays the price and forgives**

Someone must bear the cost of our sins.

Through life with Israel God repeatedly suffered, bore the pain and forgave. That history came to a climax at the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Keller, 192.

Advance: Humans did the absolute worst to God. Rather than lashing out with retaliation and making us pay, in an ultimate way Jesus pays the price. He absorbs the pain, violence and shame into himself and forgives.

The depth of the offense at the cross means that God's forgiveness of that offense also penetrates to the very depth of human sin.

Advance: God will forgive the worst we can do. We are freed from the burden of guilt.

Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection God liberates not only from guilt, but also from shame which brings us to our fourth point. Change slide

#### 4-Slide: **Jesus frees us from shame**

Whereas we feel guilt for an act that transgresses a boundary, we feel shame in relation to others for being inferior and not meeting expectations.

Forgiveness or pardon frees us from guilt. What is the remedy for shame? It can include: removing disgrace, offering a new identity, restoring honor and overcoming exclusion through reincorporation. Let's look at how Jesus' life, death and resurrection provide this remedy for shame.

In the gospels we repeatedly observe Jesus liberating people from the shame of being labeled unworthy, unclean or inferior. He embraced and included the excluded; he freed them from shame by honoring them and giving them a new identity.

Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection add to the liberating work already seen in his life.

#### **Slide: Jesus frees us from shame**

Jesus' death adds weight and significance to the new identity he had offered to the shamed.

He was so committed to their inclusion he was willing to die rather than accept the norms and practices of those who did the shaming.

Advance: Through the resurrection God validates Jesus and thus also his actions of loving acceptance.

#### **Slide: Jesus frees us from shame**

Through Jesus' death on the cross God has experienced the shameful exclusion we fear.

Advance: The cross exposes false shame and breaks its power to instill fear (Col. 2:15; Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 2:6).

At the same time, however, there are things for which humans should feel shame. What could be more shameful than crucifying God incarnate?

#### **Slide: Jesus frees us from shame**

God did not respond to humans' shameful acts by shaming or excluding them, but by taking actions to heal the shame they felt and to restore relationships. Love banishes shame.

On the cross and after the resurrection Jesus responded with relationship-restoring acts of love and acceptance.

#### 5-Slide: **Saved by Jesus' blood**

In the Old Testament blood sacrifice had a variety of uses.

One common use of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament was in making and sealing a covenant (Gen. 15; Ex. 24:1-9; Lev. 7:16).

#### Slide: **Saved by Jesus' blood--covenant**

Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, is described as "the blood of the covenant" (Mark 14:24; Heb. 10:29). It can be seen as God's commitment to keep the new covenant established by Jesus Christ (Col. 1:20). Through his sacrificial death, Christ identified fully with human reality but transformed it through a once-and-for-all covenant which enabled the gift of the Holy Spirit and provided the possibility and promise of eternal life, life in all its fullness.

#### Slide: **Saved by Jesus' blood—proclamation vs. explanation**

From Leviticus we know of different types of sacrifices (burnt offering, cereal offering, peace/fellowship offering, sin offering and guilt offering), and we have detailed information on how the sacrifices were to be performed. The text gives some information on what they accomplished, but very little on how they accomplished it.

For instance we know that the sin offering made atonement and the person offering the sacrifice was forgiven (Lev. 4:26; 5:13). From the text we can state that through the sacrifice there is forgiveness and restoration of relationship, but the text says very little about how the sacrifice brings about that restoration. Therefore, as Elmer Martens states,

Slide: (text on same one as above)

"A theology of sacrifice must in large measure be inferred." Elmer Martens, *God's Design*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 52.

We must, therefore, be cautious and humble in using the Old Testament to explain the mechanics of how Jesus' death provided atonement.

There are, however, instances where Leviticus gives us some information on how sacrifices bring atonement. One is the explanation of the scapegoat ritual.

#### Slide: **Scapegoat**

On the Day of Atonement Israel's sin was placed on a goat through laying hands on its head. The scapegoat was then released to "carry on itself all their sins to a remote place" (Lev. 16: 22). Similarly Jesus freed us by bearing our sin (John 1:29; Heb. 9:27-28).

Also it is clearly stated that

**Slide: Saved by Jesus' blood—cleansing and purification**

Sacrificial blood was used to cleanse and purify from sin (Lev. 8-9, 16). Jesus' shed blood cleanses us (Heb. 1:3; 9:12-14; 9:22; 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7). Jesus' blood wipes away the stain of guilt and shame and thus enables restored relationships.

**6-Slide: Justification through Jesus' faithful obedience**

In our sixth point we now move from the temple and sacrificial imagery to the courtroom. But which courtroom? A Western modern courtroom or a Hebraic "courtroom"?

Being declared not guilty is certainly part of what Paul meant to communicate when he wrote of justification, but if like Paul we think of this term in a more Hebraic way it becomes richer and more profound. Time does not allow me to go into any detail on this, just make this one statement:

**Slide: Justification through Jesus' faithful obedience**

Understood from the relational Hebraic perspective the verb "to justify" (*dikaioun*) includes a sense of making straight, of straightening out or restoring relationships that have been twisted or broken. As a metaphor of salvation, to say that someone is justified communicates a sense of inclusion within the people of God and a straightening or rectifying of relations with God and others in the community of faith.

Seventh

**7-Slide: The cross stops the cycle of violence**

In a definitive way the cross broke the cycle of increasing alienation and violence because it absorbed the worst act of violence in the world—the killing of God incarnate.

Advance: The ultimate act of hatred was answered with the ultimate act of forgiving love. Jesus' life and his death on the cross break the cycle and extend the liberating and healing love of God.

8th

**8-Slide: The cross disarms the principalities and powers**

Paul writes of Jesus: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15 TNIV).

The earthly leaders and institutions, as well as the spiritual powers that used them, certainly thought they had won the day when Jesus breathed his last breath. Yet, they had not conquered Jesus. The resurrection was not only a defeat of the powers in the sense that Jesus came back to life, but also a validation for Jesus' way of living. Thus the powers are exposed both as failures and liars.

Today the whole range of powers and forces of evil, from demons and evil spirits through Mammon and enslaving religiosity, to institutions used by the powers, continue to act as if

humans have no choice but to follow and obey. But their claim is a false one. Jesus has triumphed over the powers. The lie of the powers has been exposed by the cross.

**9-Slide: The cross judges**

judgment is essentially speaking the truth about and rectifying a situation.

**Slide: The cross judges**

The cross speaks truth about us and shines a bright light on our sinful ways.

In Jesus the powers and people of his day crucified God incarnate, crucified a fellow human, not just any human, but one who lived authentically as the human we were created to be.

Advance: We too have turned our back on God and rejected God. We too have hurt and lashed out at our fellow humans, and we too have hid, covered up, and hence rejected the human God created us to be. Thus we are all crucifiers and we stand exposed by the judging light of the cross.

How can this judgment be saving good news? Having a wrong exposed is painful, but it is also a step toward living in an alternative way. Even so, this judgment would only be condemnation if not for the fact that the cross is not just an instrument of judgment, but also a place of forgiveness. Our repentance and salvation are rooted in experiencing both.

Finally, the cross reveals

**10-Slide: The cross reveals**

Jesus' life and death on the cross reveal to us what it means to live as an authentic human being created in the image of God. The scandal of God-incarnate hanging on the cross in weakness, nakedness, and humiliation has saving potential for us (I Cor. 1:18-31). It invites us to be the finite and limited humans God created us to be.

It is an invitation to live in freedom from the voices and powers that tell us we must mask our true humanity. God does not promise that if we will live as the true human we were created to be we will not suffer; quite the contrary, Christian existence as authentic loving humans in the midst of evil invites reviling, suffering.

Jesus reveals not only true humanity, but also is the fullest self-revelation we have of God.

**Slide: The cross reveals**

Jesus clearly reveals God's loving commitment to save.

God's love for us was so great that Jesus was willing to die, and God the Father was willing to let his Son die, to provide salvation.

Advance: The cross reveals to us a God who is unrelentingly for us (Rom. 8:31-39). This revelation saves us from living with mistaken concepts of an accusing vindictive God that we must appease (John 3:16-17).

**Slide: Concluding Comments**

The previous ten points with fuller explanation are available online. "Ten Ways the Cross Saves: Brief Explanations" [www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement](http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement)

I would like to end with two comments of self critique and two invitations

An advantage of listing aspects of the saving significance of the cross as I have is that it communicates the breadth and diversity of what God accomplished through the cross and resurrection. A disadvantage is that splitting the work of the cross into a list diminishes the sense of coherence between these various aspects.

Slide: For a unified narrative explanation of the saving significance of the cross look online. “Two Foundational Stories of the Cross: How They Affect Evangelism” [www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement](http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement)

I have worked at developing a unified narrative that serves as a home and foundation for these ten and other aspects of the atonement. I invite you to read it.

Although today I have mentioned a few images or metaphors, I have basically used abstract and propositional language as a way of trying to communicate a lot of information in a short amount of time. I would have been more faithful to the biblical text, and more faithfully followed the NT preachers and writers if I had proclaimed more and explained less and used more images and metaphors.

Slide: For 18 examples of people using stories, drama, scripture, metaphor, film and poetry to proclaim the saving significance of the cross in diverse settings today (including two contributions by Canadian MB's) I invite you to read the book: *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*.

I hope this talk has been of value, but I passionately believe what is most needed today is not more talks like the one I just gave, but Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, tract writers, evangelists and preachers working at developing a variety of imagery that communicates the depth and breadth of the saving significance of the cross and resurrection to people today. I invite you to borrow images from my book *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross* And to join me in seeking to develop new ones.