

## **Embracing a Wider Cross:**

### **There are many life-changing ways to understand Christ's death and resurrection**

By Mark D. Baker

A seminary education generally shapes students gradually: skills develop through observation and practice, information is added piece by piece or story by story, and character is slowly sculpted. There are moments, however, when a single book, discussion, experience or lecture causes immediate and radical change. Reading Gustaf Aulén's book *Christus Victor* provided one of those transformational moments during my seminary education.

Before reading Aulén I had not thought deeply about the meaning and significance of Christ's death. I had little need to – it's meaning was clear and obvious. For many years preceding my seminary studies I had understood and explained to others how Jesus' dying on the cross provided atonement, the possibility of restored relationship with God: through his suffering, Jesus took on the punishment for our sin that God demanded and we deserved.

Aulén, however, advocated a different explanation of the atonement. He emphasized that our salvation comes through Christ's triumph over sin, death and powers of evil. Aulén's book radically changed my theological perspective not because he led me to switch my explanation of the atonement for his, but because reading his book opened up to me the reality that there was more than one way of understanding how the cross and resurrection provide our salvation. Not only that, through Aulén's book I discovered that what I had assumed was the one and only way of explaining the atonement, was in fact relatively new—for the first thousand years of Christianity the Church had not thought of the cross as a payment that appeased God's wrath, but as a victory over the devil.

Reading his book brought me to a totally new place. A door I had not known existed opened before me. Stepping through that door produced new thoughts and convictions that led to further study and eventually led me to write a book with Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*. In the book we argue that the church would do well to follow the example of the biblical writers and first missionaries. Rather than relying on a single explanation of the atonement, they should be open to using a variety of images and metaphors to proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection.

The five stories that follow display some of the problems caused by using just one explanation of the atonement that describes the cross as satisfying God's demand for punishment. They also point to the life-changing potential of imitating scripture and using a full range of atonement images.

A Japanese pastor asked Norman Kraus, a Mennonite missionary, "Why did Jesus have to die?" The pastor immediately clarified that he knew the answer – that Jesus had to die to pay the penalty for sins that God required – but that he did not find that explanation satisfying. Kraus pondered the question over the course of several months. He concluded that the traditional penal satisfaction explanation of the atonement was intelligible in a guilt-based society such as ours, which understood wrongs as an infraction against a legal or moral code. This guilt could be remedied through punishment that would relieve guilt. However, that same explanation would feel foreign and unintelligible in a shame-based society like Japan where both the wrong committed and the remedy are understood and felt in more relational ways. The wrongdoer is ridiculed or removed and hence feels alienation and shame, not guilt. When Kraus set aside the penal satisfaction model and read with new eyes, he found rich biblical material, including

specific references to shame, that allowed him to proclaim to the Japanese how the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides freedom from the burden of shame and restores their relationship with God. By opening up to more than one Biblical explanation to the atonement, we can talk of Jesus bearing our shame and healing our alienation, in an ultimate sense, through the cross and resurrection. This has great evangelistic potential and pastoral significance not only in “shame based” cultures, but also in North America where people can be burdened by both guilt and shame.

A woman grew up in a troubled home in which her relationship with her father was almost exclusively one of fear. That experience made it easy for her to imagine her heavenly Father as a strict disciplinarian as well. Her church’s teaching on the cross exacerbated the problem. She drifted away from the church because, in her words, “Any God that demanded the death of his son in order to forgive is a God I want nothing to do with.” Recently, however, a Mennonite Brethren pastor lent her *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. Reading it was life-giving and transformational. She encountered alternative explanations of the atonement that “blew away her categories.” Her relationship with God has developed into something deep, rich and beautiful.

When I left behind the need to have one theory that captured the full significance of the cross, a wonderful thing happened. I was free to use presentations of the saving significance of the cross and resurrection that I would have previously rejected as being incomplete. The reality is that any image or explanation is incomplete! Which is one of the reasons we find multiple images of atonement in the Bible. For instance, we can look at Jesus’ life and death and ask “What does Jesus’ vulnerably entering into our human situation, his gracious forgiving attitude, his willingness to suffer for the sake of others and his refusal to seek revenge reveal to us about the character of God?” Although that question falls short of communicating a full understanding of the atonement, it could have significant transformational impact for someone like the woman described in the preceding paragraph and contribute to her salvation. The revelatory nature of the cross is part of its saving power.

As a youth, Rick Schmidt had heard the cross explained with a metaphor about a teacher in a one-room school house. A small child from a poor, dysfunctional family had broken a rule. The teacher explained that he had no other option than to punish the child for this transgression, and asked him to come forward. A 10<sup>th</sup> grade boy, filled with compassion, raised his hand and volunteered to receive the boy’s punishment in his place. Rick was drawn to the older boy, wanting to be like him and the one he represented—Jesus. He was not attracted to the teacher or the rules that limited him. The story led him to feel distant from and disappointed about the one the teacher represented—God the Father. This discomfort and doubt turned into a full blown crisis of faith as an adult. The crisis deepened through his work as a volunteer mediator in a victim-offender reconciliation program. He’d read material that used biblical arguments to advocate for what he was doing—practicing restorative justice (e.g. Howard Zehr’s *Changing Lenses*). He wanted to believe this truly was deeply Christian, yet at the heart of his understanding of Christianity was a story of the cross that was about punishment and retributive justice. He felt deep tension between what he was practicing and the view his local church had given him of God’s justice and the cross. Further reading, in particular *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, ended the crisis. Relief came with the discovery that in the Christian Church there are, and have always been, well-developed and articulated alternatives to the notion that the divine hand of retribution must fall on someone. Seeing the cross with new eyes, the dissonance was gone; the cross could now be seen as central to his peacemaking work rather than in tension

with it. He saw how God's saving work modeled and affirmed restorative justice. Rick has since become both more deeply involved in conflict resolution work and more fully committed to his faith and his local church—without many of the doubts and ambivalence of the past.

In the previous issue of *In Touch* (March 2004, pages 6-7) MB Biblical Seminary professor Jon Isaak described an experience while teaching in the Congo. He perceived that students experienced a disconnect between the theology they received from the West and their daily life, including their experiences of the role of evil as an active power. Jon led his students through the same door Gustaf Aulén opened to me, and together they read texts of salvation in new ways. For example, Jon observes, “Colossians 2:15 describes Jesus’ death in ways that are rarely utilized in western theology with its preference for personal forgiveness. Instead, this text describes Jesus’ death as that which ‘disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.’” The cross is central in Christianity and it should not surprise us that once these students saw the connection between the cross and their daily lives they also began to see greater connections between other theological themes and their lived reality.

John Shorack, a missionary with InnerChange in Venezuela, lived with a disconnect as well: a complete disconnect between the cross and its implications for the Church’s ministry in the world. His theological understanding of the atonement presented the cross as a legal transaction that declares us righteous without changing us. In his context, this understanding renders the cross powerless to inspire or instruct and in his words, “leaves the Church with weak converts who experience a measure of joy and relief at receiving forgiveness from their sins.” Reading *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* enabled him to develop a theology of the atonement that is integrally related to his church’s living out the way of the cross in a poor neighborhood. He is now working with Venezuelan Church leaders to exchange their former theory of atonement for images that empower and give them a compelling vision of a life re-orienting relationship with the God who forgave them.

I hope that reading these stories awakens within you the desire to open the door and leave the room that sees penal satisfaction theory as the only explanation of the atonement, so you can begin to explore the variety of ways we can understand and communicate God’s saving work. I can also imagine that the examples leave you with many questions. Of course it might have been easier if I had stayed in the old room – it provided me a clear concise and neatly packaged explanation of how Jesus’ death provided our salvation. But because I left that room I have a much greater sense of awe, wonder and worship when I sing songs about the cross. Today I cannot easily package the saving significance of the cross and resurrection, but I have experienced it more profoundly than I had before that transformational moment in seminary years ago.

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