

## The Saving Significance of the Cross in a Honduran Barrio<sup>1</sup>

Mark D. Baker

In our book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, Joel Green and I encourage readers to view afresh the variety of contextual understandings of the death of Christ in the New Testament and to reconsider how we can faithfully communicate with fresh models the atoning significance of the cross and resurrection for specific contexts today.<sup>2</sup> I have taken up the challenge myself, and developed a number of contextual images of the atonement. In this article, after a general description of one neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, I retell two people's stories to provide a concrete basis for the theological reflection in rest of the article in which I offer an answer to the question of how the cross and resurrection provide salvation in the context of a Honduran barrio.<sup>3</sup> This article presupposes and builds on the biblical and theological work of *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. As you read this article you might picture it as a conversation between the Bible, the insights of our book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* and the context of a Honduran *barrio*.

### The Context: Life in the Barrio

Flor del Campo, with a population of over 15,000, is one of the numerous poor neighborhoods that have sprung up on the hills surrounding Tegucigalpa in the past 25 years. The inhabitants live in a climate of violence and most are trapped in poverty. They dream of living in a simple house instead of a shack. They worry about having enough food to eat. As they encounter others with higher status they experience continual shame and humiliation that crush their sense of dignity and self-worth. Politicians promise solutions, but structures and corrupt practices continue to allow a small number of Hondurans to get richer and richer while most languish in poverty. Inefficient governmental institutions function best at providing jobs for the small number with political connections.

Some in Flor del Campo turn to crime as a way to escape poverty—whether selling drugs, stealing at work, or assaulting people on the street. In Flor del Campo people never leave their houses unattended. If they did, someone might break in or even steal the clothes off the line. Many seek momentary escape through drugs or alcohol. Teens seeking status and security join surrogate families, gangs, only to be forced to prove themselves to other gang members who humiliate them. At night gangs roam the dirt streets of Flor del Campo creating a climate of terror.

What they see and hear in the media and everyday life constantly reminds the people of Flor del Campo how they fail to measure up to society's concept of a successful human: a person of note. Although some accept with fatalistic resignation the subservient role they play out in relation to people of higher status, others in Flor del Campo grasp for symbols of status in order to give the appearance of having achieved higher social standing than they actually have. Some men go hungry so they can save money to buy a pair of Nikes; some mothers buy cosmetics and clothes rather than the school supplies their children need. To avoid admitting they are from Flor del Campo, a number of residents tell people at work or school that they live in La Pradera, a nearby middle-class neighborhood. One woman, who is actually a cleaning lady, lies to neighbors about the nature of her work. She leaves her house each day dressed as if she had an important office job. Others have been so beaten down and stepped upon that

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was published in *Mission Focus Annual Review*, 14 (2006) 59-81.

<sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> An atonement image I have developed for another context is part of a book of atonement images I have edited titled: *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006)

their concern is not to appear to belong to a higher strata, but to simply survive.

Yet in a twisted way many of those who do not attempt to mask the reality of their social status still do not live as authentic humans. Unlike the above examples where people try to appear as something superior to what they really are, cultural norms press the poor to live as less than authentically human. Those of lower status are called *humilde* which literally means humble, and is used to refer to people with little education or economic resources who are commonly peasant farmers or manual laborers. The *humilde* are expected to act with deference and humility when they encounter those of higher status. To live up to the cultural norm of appropriate behavior for a *humilde*, that is to be good in the eyes of society, these people must come close to acting like they are animals--deserving of very little and at the service of those above them.

At the same time, cultural norms of *machismo* and *marianismo* provide all those living in Flor del Campo, even the *humilde*, with ways to rise above others of their economic status and be considered a "real man" or a "good woman." *Machismo* is an exaggerated awareness and assertion of masculinity. *Machismo* includes an emphasis on masculine virility and male superiority and domination over women. Even a very poor man can prove he is a "real man" and demonstrate his superiority over other poor men by drinking more, "conquering" more women, engendering more children, demonstrating control of his household, and responding aggressively to insults against his honor.

*Marianismo* looks to the Virgin Mary as the ideal of a "good woman." *Marianismo* venerates a woman who comes to marriage as a virgin. In contrast to men, married women are to remain "cloistered" at home in the sexual sense. Elvia Alvarado, a Honduran *campesina* (peasant), explains the double standard. "If a woman lives with one man and sleeps with another, it's a terrible scandal. Men kill their wives for sleeping with another man. But *campesino* men are free to sleep with other women."<sup>4</sup> Purity is central to *marianismo*'s portrait of a good woman; being long suffering is also a key trait; being industrious and hard working is praised as well as necessary for survival. A good woman provides her family good meals and keeps her house in order, and in contrast to the macho men, submits and meekly endures her husband's unfaithfulness and often drunken abuse.

A Honduran man's effort to prove he is macho, a real man, is an example of what I earlier described as human efforts to grasp to be more and thus mask one's finiteness or true humanity. In a sense women striving to live up to the ideal of a good woman, do the same. But grasping the status of a good woman, actually requires women to pull back and live as less than the authentic human they are. They suppress their physical and emotional well-being and personal development as they live out the ideals of *marianismo*.

Church is another avenue for the *humilde* to grasp status and mask their sense of inferiority by being "true Christians." If they obey the list of rules and faithfully attend the nightly church services they can rise above others and amount to something in the church. The price of this form of legalism is high. A spirit of judgmental condemnation fills many churches. Church is viewed as family, members call each other brother and sister, but membership in the family is conditional on following the rules, on being "good." There is little room for sharing one's struggles or other forms of transparency. Rather than facing the shaming, accusing looks of others in the church, many who stumble and break a rule simply never return.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elvia Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks From the Heart*, trans. and ed. Medea Benjamin (San Francisco: Food First, 1987) 46.

<sup>5</sup> For a more complete discussion of legalism in the evangelical churches of Flor del Campo see Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1999) 17-33.

People live in fear, not just of their “brothers” and “sisters” in the church, but of God: the supreme father of this family. One man described God as an old man with a stern face, a large beard, and a thick leather strap for whipping people. Although descriptions would vary, most people view God as a distant accusing figure eager to punish any misstep. He loves, but conditionally. There is a God who keeps track of their deeds, handing out blessings to the good, and meting out punishments like sickness to those who fall short of his standards. Many Hondurans, especially evangelicals, interpreted hurricane Mitch, which devastated the country in 1998, as a punishment sent by God.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, Flor del Campo is a difficult place to be authentically human and experience family. At the physical level many have inadequate nutrition, housing, and health care, and this lack prevents them from living to their full human potential. Poverty hinders many from educational development, and a climate of violence creates fear and stymies the full flowering of human relationships. Like Adam and Eve some in Flor del Campo grasp to be more and give the appearance of being something superior to the vulnerable, humans they are. Others attempt to protect their humanity from being discovered by pulling back. Most of the *humilde* in Flor del Campo live out a mix of grasping and pulling back through *machismo*, *marianismo*, religious rules, and other cultural definitions of what it means to be good. But rather than giving them a sense of acceptance and belonging, of being part of a true family, these actions serve to disconnect and alienate them further from God, themselves, and others.

As we state in the last chapter of *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, the nature of the human situation to which the cross address itself is one coordinate for answering the question of its saving significance.<sup>7</sup> We will take a brief interlude in our description of the context and begin to think of this human situation in theological terms.

#### Defining “Human” and “Family”

Everyone living in Flor del Campo is, in a biological sense, *homo sapiens*—a human being. For the sake of this exploration, however, we need to move past this most basic definition of the word. For instance, those who have adequate nutrition, housing, and health care have the potential to live a fuller human experience than those who do not. A ten-year-old girl who was malnourished as an infant, who suffers chronic sickness due to contaminated drinking water, and who sits listlessly in an overcrowded class because she had so little breakfast will have a significantly diminished educational experience in comparison to someone not suffering those limitations. Even so, broadening our definition of being human to the basic components a United Nations study might list does not fully capture what I have described above.

We can be helped by thinking biblically and theologically about the term “authentic humanity.” Adam and Eve lived as authentic human beings when their lives were characterized by peaceful interdependence with creation and each other, when they lived in trust of God, each other, and themselves. In the security of God’s love they accepted their finiteness with its limitations without self-accusation, doubt, and shame. Exactly because they did not try to be God and accepted their vulnerable state as dependent beings they were free to be fully and authentically human.

A day came, however, when they refused to trust God and to accept that their finite state was good. They overreached, grasping for the forbidden fruit in order to be like God, more than human. They rejected what they truly were. This led them to feel shame for what they had rejected: their true humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of their concept of God see Baker, *Religious No More*, 40-46; Stanley Slade, “Popular Spirituality as an Oppressive Reality,” in *New Face of the Church in Latin America*, ed. Guillermo Cook (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994) 135-49.

<sup>7</sup> Green and Baker, 201.

Without prodding, Adam and Eve began covering up and hid themselves from a kind and loving God. Alienated from God, others, and ourselves we have been hiding ever since. In the words of psychologist and theologian Margaret Alter,

Adam and Eve's story illustrates ubiquitous human fear of exposure and humiliation. . . In our minds we have failed to achieve an inner desire to transcend our finite nature; we have overreached and appeared foolish. We have invented an unnecessary obligation to be as God. As a result,<sup>8</sup> we feel the stinging humiliation of not being good enough, of being inferior and out of control.

As we have seen in Flor del Campo, some respond to the ubiquitous fear that Alter describes by grasping to be more and thus mask their finiteness. Others attempt to protect themselves from being discovered by pulling back. In a sense they live as less than human. Many live out a mix of grasping and pulling back. Either way, they cut themselves off from the possibility of living as authentic humans in loving relationship with others.

Just as all the people who live in Flor del Campo are humans, all of them, to varying degrees, are part of a family. In this essay I want to use the word family in an expanded sense, so as to think of "family" as a group of persons relating to each other as authentic humans who embrace their vulnerability and live out honest relations of trust and interdependence. So, when I say "family" I am not necessarily referring to people connected by blood ties, but people who are relating to each other as fully human.

"Authentic Christian community" would be another label we could put on what I am calling family in this essay. I use the term "family" because it is a biblical image, one used by Paul in a discussion of salvation (Gal 4:1-7), but more importantly because it is a term more readily understood and embraced by the people of Flor del Campo. They are more likely to respond to an invitation to join a group of people who relate to each other as true family than to an invitation to join a group people who live as a true community.

In this barrio many people's experience of family, both in the traditional sense of the word and in this expanded, qualitative sense of a place where they can belong, be loved, and feel supported, leaves much to be desired. It is characterized by alienation more than by trust and love. Many long to experience authentic family.

To further clarify our understanding of alienation in Flor del Campo, and to be able to more concretely discuss the saving significance of the cross and resurrection I will introduce you to two people. Alba is a real person and her story is true. Ramon and his story are fictional, but reflect events that have happened in Flor del Campo.

#### Ramon

Ramon grew up in a small village in the southern part of Honduras. He went to school for two years, but did not pass first grade or learn to read. As an adult he farmed the tiny piece of hillside land that he inherited from his parents, but deforestation and his slash-and-burn agricultural methods left his soil depleted and more arid. He had trouble growing enough corn and beans to feed his wife and three children. He began to escape through increased drinking. Feeling impotent to provide for his family and to acquire symbols of status like a watch, a revolver, a horse, or a few head of cattle, he tried to prove he was a "real man" by acting more aggressive towards others in the village: insulting and fighting other men, and pursuing other women. During this time he had three more children, one with his wife, one with

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<sup>8</sup>Margaret G. Alter, *Resurrection Psychology: An Understanding of Human Personality Based on the Life and Teachings of Jesus* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994) 16-17.

a teenage neighbor, and another with a woman his age who already had children.<sup>9</sup> He decided to sell his land and leave after a drought had led to an especially poor harvest and a number of people had told him that the husband of his most recent lover was planning to kill him.

Ramon took his wife and their four children and moved to Tegucigalpa with hopes of getting a job and having a better life. He built a small shack beside his sister-in-law's house in Flor del Campo. He could not find steady work, and he felt even more of a failure than he had in his village. He had trouble adapting to the ways of the city. When he saw people looking at him, or heard his name mentioned at the bar, he imagined they were ridiculing him as an ignorant peasant. He felt especially belittled by his neighbor Jorge who had a good job, and who Ramon thought was too friendly with Ramon's wife. Ramon soon was spending his nights drinking, insulting, fighting, and chasing women, much as he had done in his village.

During the day, however, he roamed Tegucigalpa knocking on rich people's gates meekly asking for work. One time someone offered him a regular job. He said he would take it, but fearful that the person assumed he could read Ramon never returned. After a hard day's work using a machete to cut the lawn of an electrical engineer in a wealthy neighborhood, the engineer asked Ramon how much he should be paid. Ramon responded as *humilde* people usually do. He bowed his head slightly, made no eye contact and softly said, "Usted sabe" (literally "you know" in essence, "who am I to tell you?").

Later that day Ramon was about to enter the bar when he heard Jorge talking about him. Ramon went home and took his brother-in-law's revolver. When Ramon walked into the bar Jorge immediately felt a mix of both shame and anger. People had told him that Ramon had been belittling him in numerous ways. Jorge stood up, emboldened by alcohol, and insulted Ramon who insulted him back and shoved Jorge against the wall. Jorge grabbed a bottle to attack Ramon, but Ramon pulled out the gun, shot him, said a few more words to emphasize who is the real man of the two of them, and left Jorge dying on the floor.

## Alba

Alba grew up in a town near Tegucigalpa. She was the second of fourteen children. Her father inherited a large farm from his parents, but he spent more time drinking than working. He sold the property little by little to support his family and his drinking habit. Eventually the family ended up in the street. A neighbor took pity on them and let them stay rent-free in a house she owned. Alba's mother started working as a maid, and brought home food her employers gave her for the family. If her father, who did not work, caught her mother bringing the food home he would throw it out, accusing her of getting the food by sleeping with other men. Other times he would hit her and take the money she earned so he could go drink. Alba lived in fear of her father. He beat all of them, including her mother, with electrical wires. When he came home in a drunken rage Alba and her brothers and sisters jumped out of bed and ran outside. Alba rushed home from school each day, not because she was eager to be with her family, but to avoid possible punishment. She never asked if she could go to a friend's house to play, but quietly did her chores, and then went to work for food and money at a neighbor's house. Instead of risking saying something wrong and being ridiculed or beaten, Alba learned to say as little as possible. She carried this

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<sup>9</sup> Male *machismo* is a significant cause for disintegrated families in Flor del Campo where more than 25 percent of the homes are headed by single mothers. In some cases the father has been killed by someone defending his honor. In others the father has fled because he killed someone or has gone to the United States to find a job or better wages. Most often, however, men leave one woman and set of children behind and have more children with another woman. It is not uncommon in Flor del Campo for a household to consist of a mother and her children fathered by two or three different men, none of whom now live with her. Many times when a father does live with the family they might prefer that he did not because of his drunkenness and demanding or abusive ways of relating to them.

practice with her to school where she talked much less than the other students, and usually only participated in class if the teacher forced her to.

When she was in third grade a cousin told Alba's mother that she would like to help Alba by letting her live at her house, giving Alba food, clothing, and covering her school expenses. The cousin lied. The cousin "rescued" Alba only to make her a slave. She never paid Alba, did not let her go to school, made her work all day, never let Alba eat with the family, and gave her the leftovers if there were any. Alba used to get up at four in the morning and surreptitiously eat because her cousin punished her whenever she caught her taking food.

Boys began showing interest in Alba when she turned 14, but the way her father treated her mother made it hard for her to believe the boys' talk of love. She ignored or rejected them.

Alba learned how to survive. Her silence and low profile protected her from the beatings and rejection she feared, but over the years she gradually rejected herself. She did not love herself, and could not imagine that anyone else could either. She once tried to kill herself by drinking pesticide, but she did not even get sick.

She eventually did trust a young man enough to want to start a family with him. Her cousin ridiculed her, saying he was poor trash. But Alba ran away from her cousin's home and eventually moved to Tegucigalpa with her husband. As an adult and mother in Flor del Campo Alba joined a church and strove to be a "true Christian" and live up to the expectations of this new family. She went to church every night, followed the rules, and worked hard in various projects to raise money to construct a church building. She did not, however, feel loved or cared for. She sensed she did not measure up because she did not speak in tongues. Someone looked displeased with what she said the first time she shared in a church meeting, so she returned to her childhood practice of remaining quiet.

#### The Saving Significance of the Cross and Resurrection, Part One

What is the saving significance of the cross in the context of Flor del Campo? How can it free people to live as authentic humans and allow them to be part of a group of people who are truly family for them? I lived in Honduras for ten years. I spent a lot of time in Flor del Campo, walking the dirt streets, teaching and preaching in some of the churches, and sitting in people's tiny homes talking about life and the gospel. One question I discussed with people in Flor del Campo was, What is the saving significance of the cross and resurrection for Flor del Campo today? What follows grew out of those conversations.

Paul wrote the Corinthians that he proclaimed Christ crucified (I Cor. 1:23). In a similar way, in Flor del Campo I have observed the importance, not only of talking about what was accomplished on the cross, but also on who was crucified. I have divided my answer to the question of the saving significance of the cross into two sections. The first focuses on the revelatory nature of the cross. What does the Crucified One reveal to us about the character of God and what it means to be truly human? And how that can help people like Ramon and Alba. The second section will explore how God acted through the cross to provide freedom from the powers of alienation and estrangement that have distorted their relationship with God, others, themselves, and creation.

The first section is also divided into two sub-sections. In the first we reflect on how the cross can connect with each person's experience of having their authentic humanity crushed, what I will call being a crucified one. In the second we will reflect on how the cross reveals that each crucified person also engages in hurting themselves and others, what I will call being a crucifier.

#### Crucified Humans

As a *humilde* person Ramon stooped at times and buried his true humanity in acts of deference to those of higher class, but generally he lived a life of macho maneuvering in an effort to present himself as a "real man," superior to others, and thus masking his true humanity. He feared how others might respond

if they discovered the real Ramon, the one beneath the macho mask, a human that, in contrast to his mask, often felt powerless, felt inept and out of place in the city, and worried about what he and his family would eat. When Alba was a child life felt dangerous, and drawing attention to herself seemed to make it even more dangerous. Alba protected herself by pulling back and hiding. Her suicide attempt was the ultimate attempt to hide. She carried to the extreme what life had taught her: the less she expressed herself, the more she stayed curled up in her protective turtle shell, the safer she was. In church she “hid” at times, and in other situations stepped out to try to perform as a “true Christian.” Neither Ramon nor Alba were experiencing true family. They did not live in loving connection with the people around them. Alba and Ramon did not trust others enough to live openly as the humans. There was no space for Alba or Ramon to live truly as human beings. Their authentic humanity, the persons they had been fashioned by a gracious God to be, had been squashed and strangled--crucified.

Although in a biological sense Ramon and Alba are alive, in the face of worries, fears and threatening life situations their fragile true humanity has been hidden and masked to the point of being smothered or crucified. Through the incarnation, cross, and resurrection God invites and enables the crucified human buried within each of us to come to life. In the incarnation God embraces the very human finitude and vulnerability that the people in Flor del Campo try to mask or hide through their attempts to live as “real men,” “good women,” “true Christians,” and to be appropriately “humble.” It is hard to imagine a situation of greater vulnerability than that of a newborn baby or a naked man nailed to a cross. Certainly the manger and the cross are the moments that Jesus’ finite humanness, his vulnerability, are most evident, but his life as a whole reveals to us what it means to live as an authentic human.

It is probable that in Alba’s church experience she did reflect on the human life of Jesus, but mostly to extract certain actions that could be translated into rules one must obey in order to earn the honor of being considered a true Christian. Instead of using Jesus’ life as a means to help construct religious masks that hide one’s true humanity, those in Flor del Campo could more appropriately see in Jesus a man who did not succumb to the pressure to bury his humanity and act as a “real man”, and a “true Christian,” or behave in the ways expected of a *humilde* person. Of course Hondurans cannot actually do what the previous sentence implies because Jesus lived in a different time and place and did not experience Honduran *machismo* or the religious distortions of Christianity present in Flor del Campo. We can be sure, however, that people in Jesus’ culture had similar ways of grasping for superiority and similar pressures to behave according to one’s status. If we mentally flip through the pages of the gospels we can think of a number of examples of some grasping for superiority, such as the rich through publically giving huge offerings, the Pharisees through religiosity, members of the Sanhedrin, the kings, and Pilate through political power. Equally we can observe others stooping to the roles ordained by society: outcast lepers, children, and women, and some, like toll collectors, that mixed grasping and hiding.

Jesus lived as a man free from alienation, and thus in a trusting relationship with God, with others, and with himself--an authentic human. Jesus did not live according to a program. We might say he was unpredictable. Perhaps we could more appropriately say that since he did not enter into games to cover up his humanity and worry about what others thought of him, he was free to respond in honesty and love to those around him. Jesus ate with outcasts--people with whom a pious person should not have associated. He allowed strong feelings to flow--feelings of sadness, compassion and anger. Sometimes he spoke other times he was silent; sometimes he was harsh other times gentle. Attuned to human suffering he healed people, yet he was not driven to heal all. He did not move frantically from town to town with a strategy to reach all of Palestine by year’s end. He seemed relaxed; he took time alone. At times he spoke directly, but more often he told parables and asked questions. We are told he spoke with authority, but it was not an authority based on status or position, rather it arose from his complete trust in God the Father

and thus his freedom to be who he truly was. We cannot be sure but we can imagine that people respected his authority because of the way he looked them in the eye, his tone of voice, and the way he carried himself as a person who was content to be fully himself. In Jesus God affirms our humanity by entering into it so completely, as if to say to those in Flor del Campo, “I have experienced true humanity, with all of its limitations and vulnerability, but also in all of its potential. You can too.”

Of course, when people are fully human and do not hide, on the one hand, and do not attempt to be more than human and wear masks, on the other, they make others around them uncomfortable. They are inconvenient to the rest of us, for they threaten the security of the accepted norms of our lives and the worlds around us. Jesus did this. I will explore this in more detail in the next section. In general way, however, we can say that as an authentic human Jesus did and said things that so upset others they killed him. Jesus was willing to demonstrate total solidarity with us despite the costly consequence of that commitment, his death by crucifixion.

The scandal of God-incarnate hanging on the cross in weakness, nakedness, and humiliation is a moment of salvation for us. It invites us to be a human being, to recognize, embrace, and truthfully represent ourselves in all our fleshly physicality, our emotional complexity, and our frightened vulnerability.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, the resurrection validates the life Jesus led. In a sense through the resurrection God says to us, “this is the life to imitate.” 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, through the resurrection, 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. But the resurrection is a promise that in an ultimate sense Jesus has died for us, in our place, so that we are no longer enslaved to masking and hiding our humanity as a way to protect ourselves. We can freely live as authentic humans without fear. Life, not death, has the final word.

I have stated that at root there is a relational problem of alienation from God, others, and one’s own self. Restored relationships of trust are the solution. As long as Ramon and Alba think of God as a stern demanding figure, however, they will feel alienation not trust, and the Christian family will not feel much different than the homes they grew up in. The cross liberates here as well.

Up to this I point have emphasized the humanity of Jesus. In Jesus God has revealed to us what it means to be truly human, but as God incarnate, Jesus is also the ultimate revelation of God. So, when we point Alba and Ramon to the cross we are not just pointing to the salvation found in God’s taking on the crucified experience they live; we are also pointing to the salvation experienced as the cross exposes the lie of our misconstrued images of God. Instead of a distant accusing figure, all too willing to use his awesome power to punish human error, in Jesus God reveals himself to be accepting and forgiving. In Jesus we see that God’s ultimate solution is not to destroy through awesome power, but to heal and restore by shouldering suffering that is not rightly his. When Ramon and Alba comprehend that the God they meet in Jesus and God the Father are the same God, we can imagine a fearful part of them relaxing and trusting.

### The People of Flor del Campo as Crucifiers

We first reflected on Alba and Ramon identifying with Jesus as ones being oppressed, suffering, facing death. This is because I believe that if Jesus were walking the streets of Flor del Campo this is how he would relate to most people. He would not accuse them of failing to live as authentic humans, but he would invite and empower them to do so. Understanding more profoundly how their humanity is being

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<sup>10</sup> Doug Frank, “Approaches to an Ethic of the *Real*,” unpublished manuscript, 11.

crucified will naturally awaken Ramon's and Alba's awareness of people, forces, and systems that are crucifying them. To experience salvation fully, however, Alba and Ramon will also have to recognize that they themselves are crucifiers: that they crucify others, as well as themselves.

### Jesus' Life and Death

Jesus' life and death were integrally connected. In the context of Jerusalem and the Roman Empire Jesus' death on the cross was not an incomprehensible legal mistake that God had to orchestrate to satisfy the divine need for a death of a sinless person to balance legal ledgers in heaven. Jesus did not die through chance or misfortune. Jesus' life provoked hostility that led to his death. Jesus took the initiative to help others live as the humans God had created them to be. He lifted up many by countering self-crippling, alienating shame with loving acceptance. Out of love he also attempted to pull down those who tried to rise in status by putting others down. Jesus did more than just reach out to individuals. He confronted systems, practices, and beliefs at the heart of the society that stood as barriers to people living fully as humans in true family. For instance, as in Flor del Campo today, in Jesus' time many people drew strict religious boundary lines of separation and exclusion. Jesus challenged this line-drawing through word and deed. He clashed not only with religious leaders, but also with ideas the general population had about God. In contrast to seeing God as a righteous avenger who would bring glory to Israel and punish Israel's oppressors, Jesus revealed a God of incomprehensible graciousness who would include many in the kingdom of God whom others would deem as unworthy.

Certainly religious leaders had reason to see Jesus as a threat, but Jesus' subversive action reached far beyond the religious. As in Honduras today, the society of Jesus' Palestine provided clear status markers<sup>11</sup> that Jesus continually upended by treating with honor and respect those who lacked status. He did this not to raise them to positions of power and privilege, but to subvert the very structure of society that supported and perpetuated such distinctions. In first-century Palestine people gave and accepted gifts within families without concern for reciprocation. Outside of families, however, the norm was balanced reciprocity: the direct exchange of goods of approximately equal value within a relatively narrow period of time. Similarly in Honduras today people keep track of favors given and received and seek to reciprocate, both to do what is proper and to avoid being beholden to someone else. In Jesus' Palestine another barrier to living as authentic humans in loving connection with others was the patronage system: a system of relationships grounded in inequality between the two principals. Patrons had social, economic, and political resources needed by clients; in exchange, clients gave expressions of loyalty and honor useful to the patron. The patronage system is not as strong in Flor del Campo as it is in rural Honduras. It does, however, thrive in the political realm where the more powerful hand out benefits in exchange for the support of those under them. In a general way people in Flor del Campo are still involved in relationships where those in need are controlled by "patrons" to whom they are indebted. The result, in Palestine as in Flor del Campo, is a never-ending circle of obligation, where the giving of "gifts" is part of a cycle of repayment and debt.

Jesus subverted the patronage system and practice of the balanced reciprocity by teaching his followers to give without expectation of return, and stating that among them the greatest would be servants of the least. In general Jesus overturned distinctions based on social status as defined in the larger

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to imply that the two societies measure status in the same way. Also we must remember that status in Jesus' world (and to a lesser extent in Honduras also) was not simply a function of one's relative income or standard of living, but a complex of phenomena—religious purity, family heritage, land ownership, vocation, ethnicity, gender, education, and age. See Joel B. Green, "Good News to Whom? Jesus and the 'Poor' in the Gospel of Luke," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1994) 59-74.

world and challenged people to accept the previously unacceptable as though they were family. This attack on the status quo, however, met resistance.

Residents of Flor del Campo feel trapped by a political and economic system that they experience as having helped the rich get richer even as the poor find it harder and harder just to buy food for their family. Although people in Flor del Campo talk disdainfully of government officials grown wealthy through corruption, they feel powerless to change this situation that hinders their ability to live fully as human beings. The common people of Jesus' day had similar complaints, and some saw armed revolt as the solution. Although Jesus differed in significant ways from these revolutionaries, his proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God and his critique of the rulers of the day provided sufficient political similarities with a revolutionary position that Jesus could be credibly presented as a threat to the Roman social and political order. His encounters with the devil and demons demonstrate that it was not just human rulers that perceived Jesus as a threat.

We may find it easy to praise Jesus' approach to life. Yet we must take very seriously the fact that his approach to life led the powers and people of his day to kill him. In Jesus humans encountered God incarnate, and they rejected and killed him. Apparently the God Jesus proclaimed, whose kingdom Jesus introduced into human history, did not match the kind of God people wanted. The people of his day joined together and killed the human Jesus just as groups have found unity throughout the ages through violence against a common enemy. They rejected Jesus just as throughout history people have been willing to ridicule, ostracize or kill those who challenge the norms of a community's existence. Israel's prophets, we may recall, exercised a destabilizing force among the people, and the lot of the prophets was consistently rejection by the people to whom they were sent. Prophet's are not the only ones who have suffered. Many people have hurt, stolen from, stepped on, and even killed neighbors because they saw it as a way to improve their own lot in life. In Jesus, however, people encountered not just another human, but God's own Son who lived in obedience to his Father and who faithfully represented God's purpose in word and deed. Here people encountered one who lived as a true human as God created us to live. And their response was to kill him. Enraged, they did to Jesus' humanity what they had done each day to their own: they killed it. As Margaret Alter writes: "Righteous rage insisted that . . . Jesus had to die, and he did die. The rage was not God's. It was human: our own. It was fear of losing control over . . . our own worthiness before God, our terrible fear of finitude."<sup>12</sup> In killing Jesus they killed God, their neighbor,<sup>13</sup> and their true selves, and thus graphically displayed their alienation from God, others, and themselves.

This three-faceted crucifixion—of God, others, and self—is repeated daily in Flor del Campo as people chose to think of God as a powerful, distant, and accusing figure instead of a merciful God who bears our pain. Crucifixion is repeated whenever people hurt and step on others, whenever people reject their true selves by grasping to be more than the finite human they are, or whenever they have been worn down to the point of living as less than the human God created them to be. As Gayle Gerber Koontz observes, "We humans sin when we contribute to corruption, distortion or breaches in what are intended to be Christ-like relationships to God, neighbors and the earth—when we foster foundational postures of 'being-alone, being-against, being-above or being below,'...rather than "being-with, being-for, being-together."<sup>14</sup>

### The Cross as Mirror

We need to look at the cross not just in the sense of what *they* did in the first century, but as a mirror

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Alter, "Theological Insights as Therapeutic Interventions," *Radix* 26 (1) 26.

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics*, IV:1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 399.

<sup>14</sup> Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (1989) 172.

enabling our own honest look at how we express the same three-faceted alienation. When Ramon and Alba, together with other Christians, engage in this form of self-examination, they will see the sad truth that they were participating in their own deaths. Alba's attempt to end her own life was in this sense nothing less than a severe expression of the full extent of her self-destructive attitudes. The crucified are also crucifiers.

Evangelists in Flor del Campo often try to arouse people's feelings of guilt and fear, accusingly telling them that they killed Jesus, that they nailed him to the cross. I have sat with people like Alba and Ramon and together looked at the cross as a mirror of our lives and reality, not to scare them or to stir up feelings of guilt, but so that they might experience freedom from their crucifying ways. Of course in actual conversation I might use other words besides "crucifier" to help them recognize their self-alienation! Also, and very importantly, unlike the evangelists who talk about killing Jesus as a point of contact, a beginning, I would be sitting with Alba and Ramon to look at this mirror only after they have already begun to experience God's compassionate love for them as those who are crucified. Only then are they able and ready to experience the message of the cross as a word of judgment as well as of love.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, for Alba and Ramon to look at the cross as a mirror of themselves as crucifiers, and not just as the crucified, will hurt. It will be painful to see how cruelly alienated they have been from themselves, others, and God; and how ensnared they have been by powers and forces, like *machismo*, *marianismo*, religion, and society's imposed roles and status markers, that hinder authentic human life and stand as barriers to living as true family. It will be painful to see that through their own commitments and behaviors they have participated in the human dispositions and actions that nailed Jesus to the cross.

Looking at the cross in this way can bring to light how Alba's withdrawn quietness, self-rejection, and religious striving, and Ramon's macho strutting as well as his stooped acquiescence serve to fuel a cycle of mutual falseness between them and people with whom they relate. Grasping higher or hiding lower have only made the cycle of alienation spin with greater power.

When I sat with groups of people in Flor del Campo and looked at the cross as a way to illuminate our crucifying ways and our enslavement to the powers of death, we observed much more than is evident in Ramon and Alba's stories. We reflected not so much on people like drug dealers and corrupt politicians who are commonly labeled as "bad," but on people, much like those who actually killed Jesus, who would not look on their actions as evil. We talked together of the newly wealthy Honduran who sets up or takes advantage of structures that exploit others; or the faithful church member who self-righteously condemns her neighbor for her sporadic church attendance and tells her she is no longer saved since she cut her hair. We thought about a public health worker who sees the importance of the slow hard work of education, yet who continues, almost in spite of herself, to focus her work on projects that produce quick measurable results that demonstrate the effectiveness of her institution to the donors who support it. We mentioned the man who plots revenge to protect the honor of his family. And we spoke painfully of the woman who listens silently, staring at the dirt floor, as her common-law husband once again accuses her of not really going to the food cooperative meeting, but of seeing other men (even though in reality he is the one sleeping with other women). She is relieved he did not hit her this time. When he leaves to go to the bar she neatly irons his shirt and pants so that he will look sharp the next day, and so she will not feel the shame of people making derogatory comments about a wife who would send a man off with a wrinkled shirt.

These people would not likely interpret their actions as a consequence of alienation from God, themselves, and others, nor would they likely see themselves as formed by and enslaved to principalities and powers. More likely they would see their actions as necessary, normal, and appropriate, perhaps even good. Yet each act leaves them spiraling helplessly downward, trapped in a never-ending cycle of

alienation. The combined effect of these “necessary,” “normal,” and “good” actions is the suffering and violence seen in Flor del Campo today.

We can draw together the two strands of the revelatory significance of the cross by returning to the account of Adam and Eve I used to define authentic humanity. The New Adam Jesus Christ reveals to us a human living without shame or fear as the pre-Fall Adam and Eve had lived. Jesus validates our finite humanness and invites us to live without masks. As God incarnate, on the cross, Jesus Christ reveals to us a God markedly different from the God that people in Flor del Campo live in fear of. In that the cross addresses a key element of our estrangement from God. Yet, as we have seen, Jesus as the New Adam and Jesus as God incarnate was rejected and killed. In this way the cross reveals to us and the people of Flor del Campo how we are children of the post-Fall Adam and Eve and deeply mired in sin. We are alienated from God, ourselves, and others.

At the cross, however, the New Adam does more than reveal and illuminate; he liberates. As Paul states forcefully, through this one man’s righteous act all have the possibility of a new life of right relationship with God and others (Rom. 5:18-21).

### The Saving Significance of the Cross and Resurrection, Part Two

When actually proclaiming an atonement message on the streets of Flor del Campo there is little reason to separate and distinguish between ways the cross’s saving action is revelatory and in what ways God acted objectively through the cross and resurrection to heal the breach between us and God. I have made the distinction to help us better understand both the scandal of the cross, and the depth and breadth of the saving significance of the cross and resurrection in a setting like Flor del Campo. I caution, however, against thinking too strictly in these terms. There are subjective elements in what follows, just as one could argue that there were objective aspects in the previous section.

How did God act to save us? Perhaps the simplest answer is the biblical statement that Jesus died for us; he died for our sins.<sup>15</sup> One way of understanding the meaning of these phrases is to recognize that those who killed Jesus acted out a tragedy we all are involved in. As we observed in the previous section Jesus proclaimed a message of radical graciousness and acceptance, and then lived out that message. Many, however, resisted and rejected the Kingdom of God as lived and proclaimed by Jesus. In response Jesus spoke words and parables of judgment. In doing so, however, he did not retract his message of unconditional love, of invitation to all to join him in table fellowship. He did not say, “you have not done what is necessary to achieve God’s love and acceptance.” Rather out of loving concern he warned them of the consequences to themselves, and others, of their rejecting God’s graciousness and rooting themselves even more firmly in a society of tit-for-tat reciprocity, in a religiosity of status seeking and drawing lines of exclusion and, fundamentally, in a paradigm that mistakenly imagined a God of conditional love. They would suffer, as well as cause others to suffer, the very real punishments of that society and religiosity and live in fear of the “God” they believed in.<sup>16</sup> In his unrelenting gracious effort of love and inclusion, however, Jesus took on himself the fate that he had warned others about. Jesus had not sinned, but he bore the ultimate consequences of our sin, of our lack of trust in God. We can say Jesus died for us both in the sense that his death was directly caused by human sinful action, and because he entered into our situation and shouldered the ultimate consequences of an alienation that was not his but ours. He suffered in our place to save us from suffering the ultimate consequence of our sin.

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<sup>15</sup> For example: Rom 5:6; I Cor 15:3; I Thes 5:10

<sup>16</sup> Raymund Schwager offers an insightful interpretation of Jesus’ parables of judgment that contributed to my understanding of the rejection/judgment dynamic I describe in these two sentences. (*Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* [New York, NY: Crossroad, 1999] 53-69, 195-96.

How does Jesus dying as a result of human sin provide Alba and Ramon freedom from the alienation and enslavement that leads them to crucify God, themselves, and others? That question could be answered in a number of ways. I will explore three images that communicate the answer to this question in a way that matches up well with the Flor del Campo context. God in Jesus Christ provides salvation through the cross by acting as a whirlpool-stopping-rock, by providing forgiveness, and by exposing the fallacy of the supposed dominance of the powers.

### Stopping the Cycle

The people of Flor del Campo are trapped in cycles of anti-human and anti-family attitudes and actions. It is like they are in a huge whirlpool in a raging river, like the ones they have seen when storms transform the small river that twists through the ravine on the edge of their neighborhood into a raging torrent. Since their actions are rooted in alienation they end up kicking and thrashing in a way that makes the whirlpool spin faster and pull them down even deeper. For instance, both Alba's hiding for protection through quiet withdrawal and her religious striving left her less connected with herself, others, and God. To withdraw further or to adopt even stricter and more demanding religious practices only increased her alienation. Ramon's overly humble refusal to say how much he deserves for a day's work does not stop the whirlpool that traps him in oppressive poverty of body and spirit. His fear to stand up with dignity as the true human he is causes the whirlpool to spin faster. The bar room scene with Ramon attempting to hide his fear and insecurity with assertive violence provides the clearest example of this whirlpool dynamic.

One might think that Ramon's killing Jorge ended this macho maneuvering, but one of Jorge's relatives will likely act to defend the family's honor. As long as the men involved continue to live according to the macho definition of honor and true manhood the cycle will continue like a whirlpool in a raging river. The actions of trying to upstage another definitively, or to kill another, do not stop the whirlpool. They always and inescapably make it spin faster because they are part of the same current of alienation and insecurity that started the whirlpool in the first place.

Jesus' life reveals a freedom from this dynamic and his death on the cross breaks the cycle in a way that makes this freedom available to others. As we observed, Jesus confronted patterns, systems, and powers that hindered people from living together as a family of authentic humans. He did not simply promote a new religious option or political faction, nor did he just rearrange definitions of status and privilege. All those actions, although giving an appearance of radical change, would have merely redirected whirlpools, but not stopped them. As Vernard Eller observes, the only effective way to stop a whirlpool is to introduce a fixed point. A whirlpool dissipates quickly when it hits a rock that refuses to whirl.<sup>17</sup>

Ramon's shoving Jorge and Jorge's attacking Ramon with a bottle both caused the whirlpool to spin faster. Either one of them could have acted as a rock and dissipated the whirlpool by ignoring the shove or insult and leaving quietly, just as Jesus did in Gethsemane when he told Peter to put his sword away. That incident happens to line up well with this particular bar room example, but in reality most of Jesus' actions, which promoted life and resisted forces of division and death, can be understood as whirlpool smashing, whether healing a leper, responding to the woman caught in the act of adultery, teaching of the dangers of wealth and money, challenging the patronage system, or eating with those despised by society.

As we observed, Jesus' refusal to spin along in the same direction as others created tension and hostility. This came to a head at the cross when alienated people caught up by the principalities and

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<sup>17</sup> Vernard Eller, *War and Peace from Genesis to Revelation* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald, 1981) 161-63. Eller borrows this image from Søren Kierkegaard and develops it in relation to the cross.

powers attempted to put a stop to Jesus once and for all through bribery, falsehood, humiliation, and a shameful death. Jesus did not violently oppose those forces, but instead acted as a rock against which those forces might batter, absorbing the energy of the whirlpool and stopping it. 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. God did not respond to this lashing out with a vengeful counterblow, but with forgiving love. The ultimate act of hatred was answered with the ultimate act of forgiving love.

Cycles of alienation continue to spin in our world. It seems that they are on display at every turn in Flor del Campo. But because of the cross's decisive whirlpool smashing affect Alba and Ramon, together with their Christian families know that whirlpools of sin are not ultimately the most powerful force and that, enabled by the Spirit of Jesus, they can resist their drag, and stand together as a rock that stops whirlpools.

### Forgiveness

The saving significance of the cross reaches even deeper into life in Flor del Campo. Alba's and Ramon's alienation is not abstract. As crucifers they have concretely hurt others, God, and themselves. They are estranged from God, and this broken relationship with God leads them to live out alienating relationships with others and creation itself. Recognizing their crucifying ways through the illumination of the cross is helpful, but does not in and of itself restore the damaged relationships. Through the cross, however, God also takes the initiative and provides forgiveness, a key to restoring relationships.

At the cross humans acted out our unbelief and alienation. God experienced the worst that humans could do. Jesus suffered a humiliating and painful death, and God the Father suffered the loss of his son through that shameful means of execution. Yet on that cross Jesus said, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). When Jesus forgave those who crucified him, he forgave them not just for the specific act of crucifixion, but more profoundly for the attitudes and behaviors that had led to the cross. He forgave them for their rejection of the gracious God revealed by Jesus and the rejection of the true humanity modeled by Jesus. God, however, provides more than a decree of forgiveness. Through the resurrection Jesus returned to the disciples as a concrete forgiving presence intent, not on scolding, shaming or seeking revenge for their betrayal and desertion, but on reaching out in love and restoring relationships.

Of course God had forgiven before, and Jesus had previously demonstrated a forgiving stance to his disciples and others; But the depth of the offense at the cross means that God's forgiveness of that offense also reaches down to the very depth of human sin--God has and will forgive the worst we can do. The powerful waves of that forgiveness extend to Flor del Campo today forgiving people for the acts of crucifixion repeated daily in Flor del Campo when people reject God, hurt and step on others, and reject their true humanity.

Forgiveness removes a barrier that stands between us and God. It is a step toward renewed relationship that starts with the graciousness of God acted out on the cross and through the resurrected Jesus. When God forgives Ramon, however, this is not an isolated event, an exchange between Ramon and God only. God's forgiveness marks the inclusion of Ramon in the family of God's people, and also calls forth from Ramon acts of forgiveness toward others.

### Disarming the Powers

Paul writes of Jesus, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col 2:15). This affirmation has immediate relevance in Flor del Campo. The earthly leaders, as well as the principalities and powers that used them, certainly thought they had won the

day when Jesus breathed his last breath. Paul is clear, however, that the crucifixion of Jesus has exposed the powers, revealing the delusion of their supposed dominance. It must have seemed ironic in Paul's day, just as it does in Flor del Campo today, but the witness of the New Testament is clear that, in the weakness of the cross the power of God is revealed.<sup>18</sup> Other powers can only be labeled as pseudo-powers. Today in Flor del Campo 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. Therefore, humans can be freed from their influence when they come to recognize and to treat the powers as the mere "things" they are. People in Flor del Campo can resist powers such as: *marianismo*, *machismo*, materialism, the patronage system, and religious and social status markers that divide and separate.<sup>19</sup> Together with other Christians Ramon and Alba can say "no" to the forces that shaped their lives in ways that hindered them from living authentically as family.

As is implied in the previous paragraph the image of the cross disarming the powers could be developed in relation to a number of enslaving powers in the context of Flor del Campo. The text of the second chapter of Colossians lends itself to talking about this theme in relation to the power of religion since Paul's statement of Christ's triumph over the powers comes within a discussion of religion as an enslaving power. The section leads off with principality and powers language in (2:8) and is followed up by a "therefore" (2:16) which then goes on to talk about the sort of thing I have categorized as enslaving religion and to which people in Flor del Campo could easily illustrate with examples from their lives. Religion accuses people in Flor del Campo of not measuring up, just as forces of religion defined Jesus as an outsider worthy of death. Through the cross, however, Jesus exposed the falsity of religion and in essence "erases the record" of misbehavior that religion accuses us of (2:14). Therefore we can understand God as forgiving us of our trespass of misconstruing our relationship to God and allowing religion to define how we establish that relationship (2:13), as well as erasing the legal demands that religion tells us we must comply with to be part of the people of God. God forgives us of even the ultimate trespass of crucifying the Son of God thus undermining the power of religion. How can religion place a legal bond against us for something God has forgiven? The bond imposed by the powers imprisons us in our trespasses making them bigger than they are even to God. God forgives our trespasses and exposes the lie of the power of religion. That is good news for Alba and others like her in Flor del Campo.

I began this section by saying that Jesus Christ died in our place and suffered the ultimate consequences of our sin. We have seen that in doing so on the cross Jesus entered into our unending cycle of violence and alienation and stopped it, not through overcoming it with power, but through absorbing its force. We also observed that Jesus bore the full brunt of our sin, yet responded with forgiveness removing a barrier to our relationship with God. Finally I noted that through the cross and resurrection Jesus exposed the lie of the enslaving powers and removed them from their position of domination. These actions combined with the previously discussed subjective aspects of the cross and resurrection provide the possibility of new life in Flor del Campo: the possibility of living as an authentic human in a true family with others who have experienced the saving power of the cross and resurrection. In reality today Alba is part of a Christian community, or what I have called family in this essay. I will end our discussion by briefly observing how she and a few others in this family have experienced the saving significance of

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<sup>18</sup> Note how in I Corinthians Paul writes of both the cross's perceived foolishness and weakness of the cross (1:18-25), and of its power to save and his specifically noting that had the powers ("rulers of this age") understood this they would not have crucified the Lord (2:8).

<sup>19</sup> I have argued elsewhere on why it is appropriate to include forces like those listed in this sentence within the Pauline concept of principalities and powers (Mark D. Baker, "Responding to the Powers: Learning From Paul and Jesus" [M. A. Thesis, New College for Advanced Christian Studies, Berkeley, 1990]).

the cross and resurrection.

### Family Members under the Cross

Although in certain situations Alba still struggles with her tendency to hide, the cross and the love she has experienced in a family produced by the cross and resurrection have helped her to blossom. Alba loves and has now opened herself to receive love. She shares her ideas in Bible studies, visits others who are hurting and in need. She has had the courage to go against the norms of *marianismo* and work alongside her husband in a shoemaking shop—an all male profession in Honduras.

For Mario, Alba's husband, through an encounter with the resurrected crucified Jesus he experienced forgiveness for past sins and restoration to the family of God. Mario has seen the lie of *machismo* and been freed to leave alcoholism and macho ways. He has become a caring father, a man not ashamed to cry, a man willing to ignore those who taunted him for not being able to supply his family's needs (that is, for not "keeping his wife in her place" when Alba started making shoes). He now participates in church, not out of fear of hell, but as a response to the love he has experienced from God including God's love expressed through others in the church family. Mario and Alba have also deepened their loving connection with each other and have invited neighboring couples to weekly get-togethers in their home where they all talk about their struggles in their families. Mario and Alba share from their experience of seeking to have a marriage characterized by honest vulnerability and mutual support.

Mario and Alba are not alone. Juan, another member of their church family, has spent years working to counter injustices and alleviate poverty through participation in various political movements and organizations, both Christian and secular. For Juan the salvific work of the cross and resurrection has helped expose the lies of both the forces that maintain his people trapped in poverty and the lies of quick-fix solutions administered by people sitting in plush offices. The cross and restoration to the family of God has provided Juan the hope and support necessary to stand against the current and work tirelessly at long term grassroots solutions.

And Arely has experienced the saving significance of the cross through its exposure of the lies of legalistic religion and the exposure of the false god she feared. Arely was quite active in a legalistic church, but as an older teenager she truly became restored to the family of God. She longed to feel like she belonged and was accepted by the other church members and God—the Father of the family. She lived under the burden of keeping all the church's rules, striving to become part of the select group that had leadership positions—the only ones she thought would get to heaven. The judgmental climate of that church was not the family she had hoped for. Through the cross she came to understand that God had taken the initiative to save her. Through the cross and resurrection she experienced God's forgiveness and restoration of the fractured relationship. The cross revealed to her that God was far more interested in loving her than in scaring her into compliance with a strict dress code. Through the love of God and the acceptance of others in God's family Arely experienced a new freedom in a different church. Freed from fear and shame she emerged as a capable leader guiding others to experience God's love.

As these make evident, the salvific significance of the cross and resurrection is not grounded in a divine adjustment of peoples' legal status in record books in heaven. Jesus through the cross and resurrection provides us the possibility of living differently today, and God's presence with us through the Holy Spirit enables us to live out this possibility. This is not, however, something that can be done individually. It is not something that Alba, Mario, Juan, or Arely have done alone. To be brought into restored relationship with God is to be brought into a community, a family, the people of God.

This is not only a theological truth. It is a practical necessity. As the women and men in Flor del Campo who have experienced salvation begin to raise their heads and speak eye to eye with those supposedly superior to them instead of accepting the self-deprecating role assigned them by society, they

will spark conflict and will need the support of a Christian family. The men or women who seek to live without putting on masks that provide the appearance of being more than human will experience insecurity and will need the support of others. Any attempt to live as the humans God intends us to be requires the context of a group of people who are doing the same thing, rather than a single person attempting to do it in a home, church, or work setting where others will respond according to the norms and standards of the day.

The cross and resurrection may have disarmed the principalities and powers, but most people continue to live in submission and slavery to them. It will take the strength and support of a Christian community to live in freedom from the powers; to reject the lies of the media and commercials that tell people that possessing things will bring them status and happiness; to resist the pressure of religion to draw lines of division and to view one's acceptance by God and others as based on following a list of clearly defined rules; to resist being so controlled by the spirit of an institution that one does not do what is best for the neighborhood or city, but what is best for the institution; and to resist the culture's definition of a "true man" or "true woman."

The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ offer the possibility of restored relationship with God, with oneself, and others. They bring people in Flor del Campo into a family of loving support and loving confrontation that enables them to escape the burden of attempting to live up to the destructive ideals of *machismo*, *marianismo*, legalistic religion, and free them from the bondage of playing out the expected role of *humilde* people.

### Conclusion

I invite you to respond to what you have read in two ways. First I invite you to reflect and meditate on how the facets of the saving work of the cross explored in this essay can help you to experience the gospel in a more profound way. Allow God's Spirit to work in areas of your life that have similarities with characteristics we observed in Ramon and Alba's life. How is it that through Jesus' life, the cross and the resurrection God can enable you to live a more authentically human way?

Secondly, I invite you to use not just one explanation of how the cross saves, but to use various images that together more adequately communicate the depth and breadth of the saving significance of the cross. In this article we saw how God worked through Jesus to provide salvation through the means of the cross that acted as a whirlpool stopping rock, that provides forgiveness and that displayed as false the supposed dominance of the principalities and powers. You may use and adapt these images and develop others that relate to your context and experiences. I also invite you to ask God to reveal to you people around you who, like Ramon and Alba, are enslaved by powers of alienation and who need to experience the freedom provided through the cross.

I hope and pray that through reading this and sharing the message of the cross with others, you can experience in a more significant way genuine Christian community—what in this article I have called authentic family.

### Appendix: Reflections on Contextualization

Why did Jesus have to die? Discussion of the atonement typically starts with that question. This essay, however, reflects a different approach. It begins by looking at the reality of a poor Honduran neighborhood and observing how hard it is for people to live authentically human lives and to relate to others in open and loving relationships: as true family. I then asked, what is the saving significance of the cross and resurrection in this situation? The approach is contextual not because it takes a single, predetermined, model of the atonement and translates and adjusts it so that it will be understandable in a different setting. Rather it is contextual because the context itself helps to determine which models and

images are used.

To say that we begin with questions that arise from the social environment and allow those questions to influence how we talk about the atonement does not mean that the context has the final and ultimate word about the meaning of the cross. If that were the case the cross could too easily lose its scandalous character; it would lack any capacity to confront its culture. Rather, we must seek to talk about the atonement in a way that is profoundly shaped by the biblical materials and the history of theological reflection, and at the same time in a way that is shaped in a new context by the symbols and values that characterize this context. To proclaim the saving significance of the cross and resurrection is not, on one extreme, simply to repeat the narrative of the cross as this might be found in the Gospel of Mark or in the theology of Anselm. Nor, on the other extreme, can we proclaim the atonement simply by recounting life-episodes from a particular setting. Proclaiming the saving significance of the cross and resurrection requires that these two narratives be woven together, so that the relevance of the cross and resurrection for human salvation is brought to bear in circumstances where it can be heard and embraced as good news.

Of course discussion that distinguishes too sharply between “text” and “context” is somewhat artificial. It is true that this essay begins with a particular social environment in a Honduran barrio, then inquires into the saving significance of the cross for the problems encountered there. Even so, I know that even the way I have framed the description of the problems is deeply influenced by our interactions with biblical texts and theological resources. My point then is not to privilege context or to pretend that in some “neutral” way we need to analyze the context. Rather I hope that this article communicates the great value in taking a contextual, missional approach to our articulation of the atonement.

I believe that atonement theology must find its ground in the kind of depth and breadth of connection with people’s lives to which this article points. I would argue, in fact, that we are much better off to think of communicating the atonement in a way that is enmeshed in narratives of Jesus’ life and our lives, enmeshed in relationships, enmeshed in experience of Christian community, and talked about in a variety of ways consistent, then, with this form of embodied ministry. The totality of the saving significance of the cross cannot be communicated in one church service; rather, it can be and must be approached from various angles at different times.

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