

More Jesus

Declaring the significance of the cross

Today it is not just foreign missionaries who interact with people who have religious beliefs very different from ours. People speak 100 different languages in the city where I live. In this new proximity to various religions some Christians feel less comfortable affirming that Jesus is the way of salvation. Now, however, is a time we need more Jesus, not less.

For instance, in a multicultural setting we need to use more than just one explanation of how Jesus' death and resurrection provide salvation. We need to follow the example of the preachers and writers in the New Testament who, depending on the context, used different images to proclaim the saving significance of the cross.

The New Testament boldly proclaims salvation through the cross, but offers little explanation of the mechanics of how the cross saves. Theologians, however, have worked at the explanation for centuries. How does the cross save us? For the first thousand years of church history theologians commonly answered the question by explaining that on the cross Jesus entered into the depths of the devil's domain. Then the resurrection displayed that the devil was unable to keep Jesus in his grasp. The cross and resurrection were God's victory over death and the devil.

We can affirm this explanation. It is built on a strong biblical foundation. The main problem is that it does not say enough. We need more. It would be a wonderful explanation of the cross to share with someone who feared death or to proclaim in a cultural setting where people feared evil spirits. But it lacks a point of connection for a person ridden with guilt or carrying a burden of shame.

Rather than trying to squeeze the deep power and broad meaning of the cross into one single explanation we would do well to treat it like a many faceted diamond. Victory over the devil is one facet of God's saving act; other facets will display other realities and provide additional meaning. The New Testament takes this multifaceted approach. It uses multiple images to communicate that Jesus is the one way of salvation.

Recent experiences remind me of the need for a multifaceted gospel. Tuesday I stood in the county jail

waiting for inmates to come to the weekly Bible study I lead. A man in a holding cell called to me and asked me to pray with him. He explained that he had only seven days left in jail, but had just gotten in a fight with another inmate. I prayed for him, and continued talking with him through the crack in the door.

Knowing a guard might come any minute to move him I asked directly, "Do you feel guilty?" He said, "Yes." I asked if he thought God would forgive him. He responded, "I don't know." I began talking to him about the cross, about how it was the worst thing humans could do to God—actually kill God incarnate, kill the Son of God. Had he done anything that bad? How had

God responded at the cross?

I told him that on the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." God would forgive him too. I told the inmate this was a prayer I could not pray for him. He needed to confess and ask God for forgiveness. Just as I asked, "Would you like to pray now?" a guard came and took him away.

Last week a Japanese man told me that gospel presentations that talk about sin and guilt confuse and frustrate him. He does not understand them. So knowing he was from a shame-based culture, I talked about the cross in terms of shame.

We talked about feeling rejected and disgraced because of ways we had fallen short of others' expectations and feeling that same alienation from God.

I then talked about how on the cross Jesus, in our place, bore the shame we deserved and how we can have a restored relationship with God free of shame. He not only understood the words, he drank them in like a thirsty plant.

As you talk with others about the cross and resurrection I invite you to join me in using the full richness of the multifaceted gospel. Today we need more Jesus, not less.

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