

### ***The scandal of the cross (III) – Help, please!***

This article is, in a sense, just revision of ideas from earlier articles, but because those ideas are so different from the perspective that Evangelicals have grown up with, I feel it's important to lay the groundwork again so that we can build on it, in order to search for better ways in which to communicate the gospel to friends and loved ones here and now. If they don't know the Saviour – and don't even realise they need a Saviour – then it's desperately important for us to do all we can to communicate the gospel in a way that they can appreciate.

I hope you think that I'm on at least vaguely the right lines here, but if not, I'm not saying that you're 'wrong', and I do hope and pray that you will do all you can, like me, to communicate the love of God to those around you. So let's see how much common ground we can find...

My view is that the Bible contains many different types of literature from many different cultures, written over hundreds of years, yet it has an amazing consistency. At its heart, the Bible is a narrative, a story – a very powerful story – of the relationship between the God-who-is-relationship, the God who is love, and the people whom God created.

I believe that the very centre of the whole Bible – indeed, the centre of the whole of history – is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The Old Testament looks forward in various prophetic ways to the cross, prefiguring what God was going to do 'at the right time'. The New Testament then tells us about that good news, the gospel, the story of what actually happened at that time.

So the Bible depicts the cross as the centre of a narrative, a story, a true historical story, and this makes it a **timeless and culture-free** way of expressing how God provides the solution to humankind's fundamental problem of rebellion against God – how relationships can be restored, after we have broken those relationships, with God and with fellow humans.

Over the centuries and in different cultures, people have been able to articulate the work of Christ on the cross and have made it real to the people around them – that's how this narrative has been able to feed and nourish billions of people, inspiring them to great acts of love and service.

So hopefully there's nothing too heretical so far, but do you remember where I started this writing journey six months ago? I had just refound the joy of my relationship with this three-in-one God and I was desperate to share it, so I pleaded with all of you to help work out how to communicate it with those around us.

The problem was that I was unhappy about the way we had been trained to communicate God's love, in terms of what theologians call 'penal substitution'; it was difficult to communicate because it was predicated on the idea (the true idea, don't get me wrong!) that God is holy and we are sinners. Unless you start by accepting **that**, then Jesus' death on the cross for you, as a substitute, is meaningless and pointless.

Have **you** managed to find a way to communicate the idea of sin to your friends and family?!

At the time, I thought that the idea of penal substitution was just plain wrong; I have since moderated that view to saying that it really isn't the most helpful way of picturing what God achieved through the cross – not for today's culture, anyway. It's difficult to see how the unjust suffering of God's innocent Son, to satisfy God's need for someone to be punished, can be a solution to anything.

I then discovered that penal substitution is just one of a number of different metaphors that can help us to appreciate how the cross brings a solution to humankind's fundamental problem of relationship breakdown. (I prefer to call it 'relationship breakdown' rather than 'sin' because **everyone** understands what misery can be produced when relationships go wrong.)

So starting with an appreciation of the problem – relationship breakdown – we can then begin to show people how Jesus went about solving relationship problems. It's not in the least threatening to people if we talk to them about how Jesus related to people such as the woman caught in adultery (and her accusers) or the Samaritan woman at the well, and we could easily talk to them (nay, enthuse with them) about the God pictured in the parable of the prodigal son – a story they may well know already.

OK, at some stage, if they are interested (and if they aren't interested, we certainly shouldn't be trying to 'tell them the gospel'!) we're going to have to address the 'Yes, but how does knowing God help?' or 'How can God heal the pain in my heart from the way my ex-husband has treated me?' or 'How can I be forgiven for the awful things I've done in the past?'

But listen, folks! We need to have an answer for the questions **they are asking**, not try to give them the solution to a problem they don't even realise they've got!

Everyone is different (thankfully God knows that!), so a one-size-fits-all 'gospel presentation' is **not** the answer. The answer is to **LISTEN** to people, be with them in their pain and their brokenness, and **then** we'll have the opportunity to share our faith and tell them how the cross **does** have the power, fantastic power, to totally change lives.

But I'm not minimising the work we have to do. Having shaken off the idea that penal substitution is the panacea, we need to think out **how** the cross and resurrection are 'the answer' to any and every situation. Different images or metaphors will help different people at different times, so we need to think more widely about **how** the power of the cross works in people's lives.

Are any of you willing to work with me on this? Can we, together, think out how to help people to see how this beautiful gospel can transform their lives?

I'm certainly not going to stop working on this, but any feedback you have would be very much appreciated. Thanks!

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