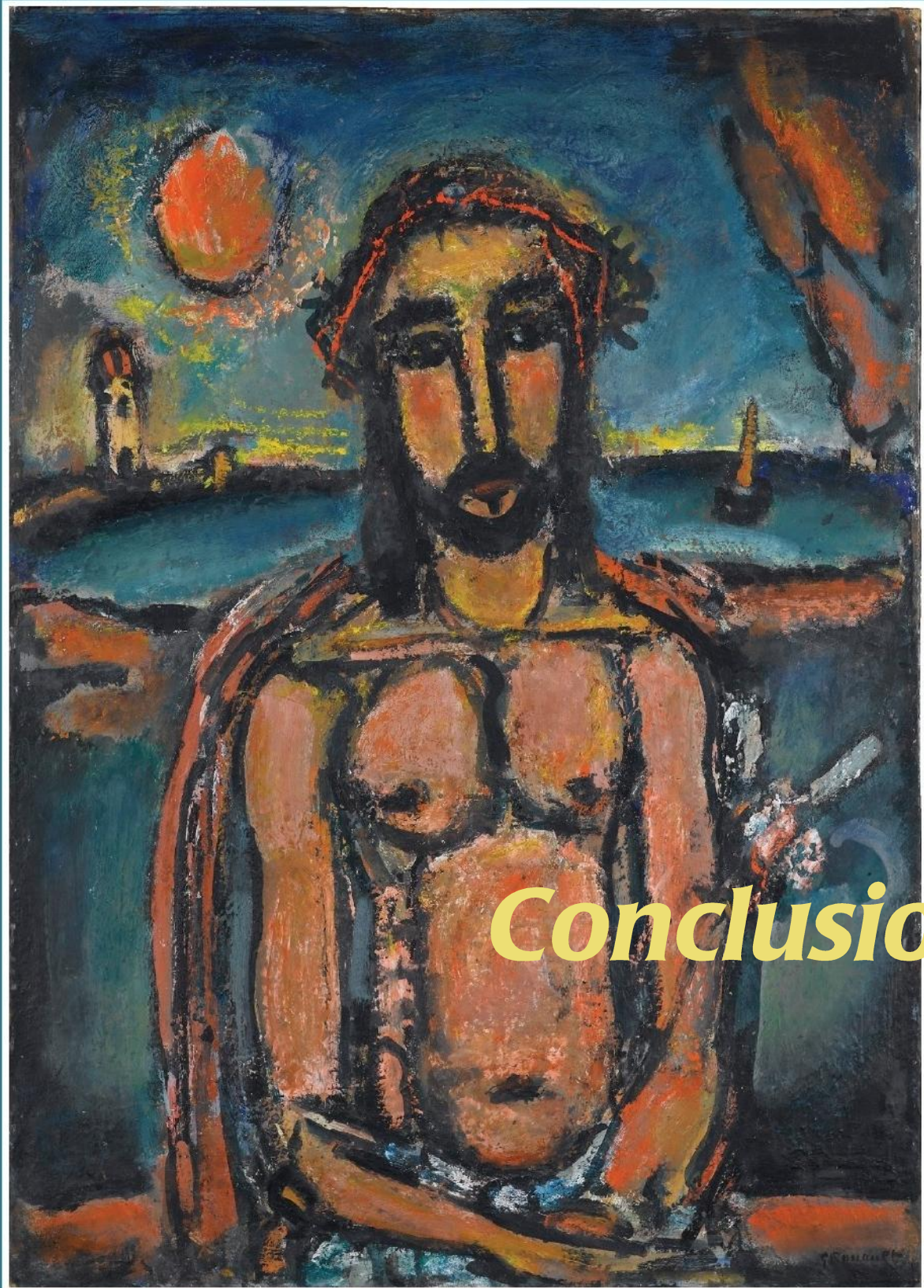


# Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought

VOLUME 1: BACKGROUND



*Conclusion*

# Conclusion

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## CONCLUSION

I would like to end this work as I began it, citing the same passage from my book *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing The Apostle's Story of Redemption*. Once again, I would stress that the observations made here regarding Paul's thought apply to the New Testament as a whole:

For Paul, Jesus' death did not save anyone or reconcile anyone to God; it did not have "redemptive effects." According to his letters, while Paul regarded Jesus' death as sacrificial, he did not teach that it expiated sins, propitiated God, or exhausted God's wrath at sin, or that human sin was judged, taken away or atoned for on the cross. Nor did Paul maintain that Jesus' death liberated humanity from sin, death, the devil, or the power of evil. Paul did not regard Jesus as a corporate or representative figure who summed up or included others, so that what was true of him was thereby true of them as well. Nor did he believe that Jesus had died as humanity's substitute or representative, or in order to make it possible for God to forgive sins while remaining righteous. Jesus' death, for Paul, was not the basis upon which people were justified or their sins forgiven; neither was it some type of cosmic event that put an end to the world as it was and ushered in a new age. Our sinful humanity was not destroyed, put to death, renewed or transformed when Jesus was crucified. In Paul's thought, Jesus did not die for the purpose of setting an example for others to follow; revealing some truth about God, humanity or the world; enabling people to participate in his death and resurrection; or providing them with a means of transfer from this age into the new one. Believers are not saved by trusting in the efficacy of Christ's death for their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

In writing the present two-volume work, my purpose has been both deconstructive and reconstructive. On the one hand, I have argued that all of the interpretations of Jesus' death mentioned in the paragraph just cited and discussed in Chapter 1 of this work are foreign to New Testament thought. As I attempted to demonstrate in Chapters 2–4, neither the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish writings of the second-temple period, nor ancient Greek and Roman literature provide any basis for the premises upon which those interpretations of Jesus' death are based. In Chapters 17 and 18, I also argued that there is no clear trace of any of those interpretations in the works of Christian thinkers prior to the latter half of the second century CE. The first writings in which we begin to find a number of the ideas and presuppositions associated with those interpretations of the New Testament allusions to Jesus' death are Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* and, to a lesser extent, Melito's *Peri Pascha*. All of this means that we must reject those ideas, presuppositions, and

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1. David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), x.

interpretations if we wish to represent faithfully New Testament thought. In essence, this involves rejecting as unbiblical all of the traditional proposals from the time of the church fathers until the present regarding the role that Jesus' death plays in the salvation of human beings.

Although I have articulated repeatedly in this work the salvific significance ascribed to Jesus' death throughout the New Testament writings, I believe it would be helpful to summarize here once more the manner in which those writings relate Jesus' death to human salvation. In the thought of the New Testament as best we can reconstruct that thought, in fulfillment of the promises God had made to his people Israel and the plan he had conceived from before the ages, God had sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to bring into existence a worldwide community composed of both Jews and non-Jews who would be committed to living in accordance with his will for their own well-being. Although God had previously made his will known both by inscribing his law on the hearts and consciences of all human beings and by giving his people Israel the Torah in Moses' day, through Jesus and his ministry, passion, death, and resurrection, God had come to define his will in a new and more complete manner. In fact, Jesus had redefined not only God's will but also God himself. For Jesus, the true God, who is both the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God he called "Father," is a God of unconditional love, mercy, and grace who seeks the well-being of all human beings collectively and indiscriminately, and for that reason calls on all people everywhere to love him in return by seeking that same objective together with him and under his guidance.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus reached out actively to embody and communicate God's unconditional love in ways that set him apart from other leaders, teachers, and prophetic figures. Through all that he said and did during his itinerant ministry, his association with the marginalized, his activity of healing the sick and exorcizing demons, and the other mighty works he performed in God's name, Jesus demonstrated what it meant to love others fully and unconditionally. By his ministry, his teaching, and his preparation of disciples, he sought to lay the foundation for a community of people who would be firmly committed to practicing such love both among themselves and in relation to all those outside of that community.

Jesus' understanding of God's love as unconditional toward all people, including especially those at the margins of society and in greatest need, also led him to denounce and condemn the actions of those who claimed to be serving God and others but in reality pursued their own selfish interests and did harm to others either directly or indirectly, by doing nothing to prevent injustices from being committed or failing to ensure that those in need were assisted and accompanied. In Jesus' mind, one could not love others and seek their well-being without actively identifying, unmasking, and opposing the attitudes, actions, systems, and structures that destroyed true life and brought suffering into the lives of many. The way in which Jesus interpreted

the Mosaic law on the basis of his understanding of God and God's will also led to conflict with many of those who interpreted the law differently. From Jesus' perspective, their interpretation of the law and God's will tended to be oppressive, since it led them to act in ways that ran contrary to the spirit and purpose of the law. In essence, those whose actions and teachings Jesus opposed believed in a God whose "love" was conditional. According to Jesus, they often regarded strict obedience to their interpretations of the law as more important than truly caring for others. This led them to neglect "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). In contrast, Jesus' understanding of God, God's will, and God's law led him to reach out to others in a spirit of solidarity and to seek the well-being of others in ways that fulfilled and surpassed what the law commanded. It was that same spirit of solidarity and concern for others that led Jesus to seek to create around himself an alternative community composed of followers who were committed to relating to God and to others in the way that Jesus himself did, practicing a love that was not only unconditional but involved continually going out to seek and serve those in need.

Eventually, Jesus' efforts to transform the reality around him and to establish the basis for a community of followers who would be dedicated to all that Jesus and the God he called "Father" represented led to an escalation of the conflicts with those in power, so much so that many sought his death. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus then decided to go up to Jerusalem with his followers, even though he knew that there he would be arrested, mistreated, and sentenced to death. Rather than letting others determine how, where, and when they would put him to death, Jesus decided that he would be the one who chose where and when the inevitable would take place in accordance with God's purposes. After lashing out at those buying and selling at the temple and confounding those who sought to entrap him or discredit him in the eyes of the crowds as he taught on the temple grounds, Jesus shared a last meal with his closest disciples. While they were dining, he broke bread and shared a cup of wine with them, telling them as he did so that he was giving up his body and shedding his blood for their benefit and the benefit of others. The fact that he related the pouring out of his blood to a covenant established with his disciples and others implied that, as a result of his death, his followers would relate to God through him on a new basis.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus then went out with several of his disciples after nightfall in order to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he implored God to spare him the suffering and death that awaited him, yet at the same time he put his life in God's hands, telling God that he desired that God's will be done rather than his own. When an armed group sent by the high priests and elders came to arrest Jesus, he offered no resistance and did not attempt to flee. Nor did Jesus seek to be spared from death or defend himself when he came before the high priest and the Jewish council to be judged. Instead, he stood firm and refused to participate in the process against

him by remaining silent, responding only to the question of whether he was the Messiah and God's Son by affirming his identity and his divine authority. The Jewish authorities then sent Jesus to Pilate with the request that Pilate crucify him, and Pilate fulfilled their request.

According to Jesus' disciples, three days after Jesus had been crucified and buried, God raised him up from among the dead in Hades. After the crucified and risen Jesus had shown himself to many of his followers, God exalted Jesus to his right hand in heaven, thereby validating all that Jesus had said and done and declaring him Lord over all. In light of the ministry Jesus had carried out and their experiences of the presence of the risen Jesus, his followers became convinced that he enjoyed a special and unique relationship with God and that he represented and spoke for God as no one else ever had. For them, the alternative God that Jesus had proclaimed was inseparable from Jesus himself, whom God had sent to speak and act in his name as his Son.

At some time after Jesus' resurrection, through Jesus, God poured out his Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers to guide and strengthen them. Following this, Jesus' disciples and subsequently other apostles such as Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Messiah among their fellow Jews, and a good number of Jews responded favorably to their message. Others, however, responded negatively, persecuting, castigating, imprisoning, and even killing Jesus' apostles and followers. As a result, Jesus' apostles and followers went out into other parts of the world to proclaim their message regarding Jesus to their fellow Jews. Although some Jews chose to become part of the alternative communities characterized by their commitment to loving and serving the God proclaimed by Jesus, eventually the message of Jesus' followers found greater acceptance among non-Jews. For a time, some of those communities were composed of both Jews and non-Jews, who lived together with one another in fellowship in spite of their different customs. At some point, however, the non-Jews in many of those communities came to outnumber the Jews considerably. In addition to sharing with others their faith regarding Jesus and the God he proclaimed, Jesus' followers awaited the day in which he would return in power and glory to establish God's reign definitively and put an end to all sin and evil. In broad terms, this is the story that the New Testament tells.

As Jesus' first followers reflected upon his death, what struck them the most was his willingness to give up his life so that the alternative communities he had sought to establish might come into existence, not only in Palestine but elsewhere around the world. In fact, what had led to the emergence of these communities was precisely the message, the vision, the values, and the way of relating to God and others that Jesus had proclaimed in word and deed and for which he had been willing to give up his life. Jesus had preferred to die rather than to put a stop to his activity on behalf of others or retract anything that he had affirmed regarding God and his unconditional love for all people. In the face of death, Jesus had also trusted that God would raise him from the dead and glorify him so that he might continue to be Lord, not

for his own sake, but for the sake of others. Jesus' willingness to die for all that he had said, done, embodied, and represented not only led God to raise and exalt him, but also irrevocably defined his community of followers as a group of people who would be fully committed to living for God and others in the same way that Jesus had. Only those who lived in that way, practicing unconditional love toward all, could rightly call Jesus Lord and form part of his community of followers.

When Jesus' first followers proclaimed that he had died "for them," then, *they had all of these ideas in mind*. Jesus had given up his life rather than attempting to save it so that this alternative community might exist and take the shape he desired, composed of people committed to the same love and righteousness that Jesus himself had displayed in life and death. For the first believers, the supreme symbol of the love of Jesus and the God that he called "Father" was the cross. Jesus had offered up his life to God on their behalf so that through him they and others might experience the new reality he had come to bring. His willingness to endure death in Jerusalem, together with all that followed as a result of that death, had thus made it possible for people from all over the world to find forgiveness, a transformed new life, and salvation in this world and the next by living under his lordship as members of God's covenant people.

By offering up his life to God for others, Jesus was also thought to have been constituted as the unique mediator between God and human beings. His followers regarded him as the one through whom people came to know not only God but also the extent of God's love—a love that was willing to deliver his Son over to death so that the type of community he desired to see might become a reality. In effect, Jesus had also offered up his life to God with the petition that all who would live as his followers under his lordship might be accepted by God as righteous, in spite of the fact that they would inevitably continue to fall into sin in this life and would be far from perfect. God responded favorably to that petition when he raised Jesus, thereby establishing him as the one through whom all could now receive not only divine forgiveness and acceptance, but also the assurance of salvation, both in this life and in the next. This made it possible for them to live differently, without fear; and only when people have lost their fear are they able to love others freely, disregarding any suffering they may have to endure for practicing such love in a world opposed to God's will.

The same ideas led Jesus' first followers to affirm that he had died "for our sins." When they made that affirmation, they meant that to the very end of his life, Jesus had dedicated himself to turning people away from their sinful way of life so that through him they might instead live in the same kind of love he had embodied. In this way, they would be made acceptable to God and receive the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus therefore had also lived and died to reconcile people to God as mediator on their behalf. This was the purpose for which God had sent his Son Jesus: so that by dedicating himself to transforming



the hearts and lives of others, even at the cost of his own life, he might be the one through whom sinners might draw near to God with confidence, knowing that by virtue of their relationship to Jesus as the one who brings them to practice the righteousness God demands and desires for the good of all, God will forgive and accept them fully.

When the first believers spoke of being justified, redeemed, and purified by means of Jesus' blood, they meant that, thanks to Jesus' faithfulness unto death in seeking to bring others into conformity with God's will as it had been redefined through his life and death, they had come to form part of the alternative community he had sought to establish. In this community, as people follow Jesus, they are justified or declared righteous on the basis of the righteous way of life that Jesus brings about in them through that same community and his Spirit. At the same time, they are redeemed from their slavery to sin so as to become God's own treasured possession. As a result of this liberation and the forgiveness of sins that goes along with it, they could have full assurance that they would attain all that God had promised of old. In spite of the fact that believers inevitably continue to fall into sin against their will, God knows that, as long as they continue to follow Jesus in faith, they will become the pure, righteous, and loving people he wants them to be, and therefore he graciously accepts them even now as holy and blameless. By giving up his life or "blood," then, Jesus had attained all of these things for those who would come to live under his lordship as God's beloved and obedient children.

As we have seen throughout the second volume of this work, all of the formulaic allusions to Jesus' suffering, death, blood, and cross go back to these basic ideas. These ideas are not complicated, but are easily and readily understood. For that reason, among Jesus' first followers, it was sufficient to use brief formulas to allude to all of the ideas just mentioned. The simplicity and brevity of these formulas made it possible for Jesus' followers to communicate quickly, effectively, and efficiently all of these ideas with just a few words and to summarize their core beliefs without having to explain them in detail every time they expressed and confessed them. At the same time, however, they were undoubtedly convinced that no words, and especially none of the brief formulas they used, could ever capture or convey fully all that Jesus had done for them, as well as all that God had done for them and continued to do for them through Jesus.

All of these ideas constituted the proclamation of Paul as well. He repeatedly used those formulas in his letters, confident that his readers would understand them without any difficulty. Undoubtedly, Paul also articulated the gospel with his own terminology that differed somewhat from that found elsewhere in the New Testament. Nevertheless, rather than claiming that Jesus' death had salvific "effects" such as those mentioned in the paragraph cited above from my work *Paul on the Cross*, Paul continually spoke of Jesus' death and blood as the *means* by which Jesus had attained salvation, redemption,



forgiveness, and a new life for others. By remaining faithful to the end to the task his Father had given him, Jesus had established a community of people who would enjoy all of God's blessings as they lived under Jesus' lordship, placing themselves together with all that was theirs in his loving hands.

### *Justification by Works or by Faith?*

The most common objection I have encountered to the understanding of God's work in Christ just presented is that it represents a doctrine of justification by works rather than by faith. God declares believers in Christ righteous, not on the basis of the righteousness of Christ imputed or imparted to them, but on the basis of *their own* righteousness. Christ's death no longer constitutes the *grounds* upon which they are justified and forgiven. Rather, the ground upon which God declares believers righteous and forgives them their sins is the new life they live as followers of Christ.

In reality, it is indeed correct to maintain that the understanding of God's work in Christ presented here attributes the justification of believers to the manner in which they live. I would hesitate, however to refer to this as "justification by works," since in New Testament thought, believers in Christ are not declared righteous on account of their works. Instead, God declares them righteous on account of their commitment to living in accordance with God's will as it has been redefined through Jesus and his death. Inevitably, of course, that commitment will manifest itself in the works God desires to see, yet it is not one's "righteous works" in themselves that lead God to declare one righteous, but the love of righteousness and solidarity in one's heart that is the fruit of faith in Christ and manifests itself in righteous works. As in ancient Jewish and biblical thought, God judges people by their works in the sense that those works reveal what is in their heart.<sup>2</sup>

One of the things to be gained through this understanding of the basis upon which God declares people righteous is that it affirms a basic continuity between the early Christian and ancient Jewish understandings of justification. In both cases, the condition upon which people are justified and forgiven is that they sincerely repent of their sins, return to God asking for forgiveness, and recommit themselves to practicing the love, obedience, and righteousness that God commands and desires of all for their own well-being and that of others. This is the teaching, not only of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish faith from ancient times to the present, but of Jesus himself, the apostle Paul, the first followers of Jesus, and all of the New Testament writings.

What, then, constitutes the difference between the early Christian and the ancient Jewish understandings of the way in which people are justified

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2. As we noted in Chapter 7, in second-temple Jewish thought, "when it is said that individuals will be recompensed or judged 'according to their deeds,' this presumes a holistic or unitary view of human works. It is not a deed for deed inspection, but rather one's entire pattern of life is in view, one's 'way'.... It is the standard Jewish expectation that one's outward behavior (one's *works* or *way*) will correspond to, and be a visible manifestation of, inward reality" (Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment according to Deeds*, SNTSMS 105; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 284, 290).

and saved? That difference lay in two distinct ways of understanding God and defining God's will. While of course there was an essential continuity between the Christian and the traditional Jewish understandings of God, there were also important differences. The ancient Jewish faith, just as much as the early Christian faith, proclaimed a God of love, grace, and mercy. In each of these faiths, however, the form which that love, grace, and mercy were said to take was different. According to the traditional Jewish faith, God had manifested his love by electing Israel as his chosen people to be a "light to the nations" and by giving them the Torah, that is, guidance and instruction regarding the way they were to live and the things they were to do for their own good and that of others. The Torah therefore enabled them to live righteously as God desired, specified what was necessary in order for them to be forgiven and received anew by God when they sinned, and contributed to righteousness, justice, peace, well-being, and love in their communities and, to some extent, in the world around them as well. Together with the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures and ancient Jewish writings in general, the Torah was thought to lead to "life" both in this world and the world to come by defining God's will and graciously giving God's people what they needed to live in accordance with that will.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, according to the faith of Jesus' first followers, above anything else that God had done, God's love, mercy, and grace had been manifested in the sending of his Son Jesus Christ into the world in order to bring into existence a community of people who would be committed to loving God and others in the same way that God and Christ loved them and the rest of the world. God was confessed and defined, not only as the God of Israel, but as the God who had sent Jesus, raised him from the dead, and exalted him over all as Lord in order that through him all of the promises that God had made of old might eventually come to fulfillment. In Christ, who as God's Son revealed God in a way that no other human being ever had or could, God had given not merely a series of commandments and precepts but *his own self*. From the perspective of Jesus' first followers, there was nothing that God could ever have done that could equal or surpass God's willingness not only to send his Son into the world but also to hand him over to death, even death on a cross, so that human beings everywhere might attain the life that God desired for all out of love for them. This means that, according to Jesus' first followers, when God sent his Son to carry out a ministry aimed at the good of all and subsequently delivered him over to the death of the cross as a result of the conflict and opposition that the Son's ministry had generated, God had given of his own self in a way that he never had previously.

For believers in Christ, then, it was the love that God had shown in Christ's life and death that defined what love is and the form that human love is to take. From the perspective of the New Testament, however, God's

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3. On this point, see especially Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Classical Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: Comparing Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 189-95.

handing over of his Son to death had not been an end in itself. Rather, in early Christian thought, God could not have brought about the same type of self-giving love in human beings had he held back his Son by intervening to save him from a death that was the consequence of the Son's commitment to establishing a community of people whose love would know no limits or bounds. If God himself had not been willing to endure the ultimate consequences of reaching out to others in love through his Son, he could hardly have ever expected Jesus' followers to be willing to love others under any circumstances, in spite of the high price that they would often have to pay for practicing such love. Rather, when their acts of love for others led to hardships and suffering, they would be justified in holding back whatever they considered most precious, as God had done when he refused to allow his Son to suffer death at the hands of those who opposed him.

These two different understandings of the way in which God manifests his love, mercy, and grace also led to two different understandings of who God is. In the simplest of terms, the God whom Christians proclaimed was a God who had sent and had given over to death his only beloved Son, while the God whom Jews confessed did not have such a beloved Son, and thus had neither sent that Son into the world nor had given him up to death. Similarly, according to early Christian thought, God reveals and defines God's will most fully and definitively by means of Jesus and his death on the cross, whereas in ancient Jewish thought, what defines most fully and definitively God's will is the Torah and the teachings derived from it that are passed down from one generation to another. Believers in Christ also saw the law of Moses in terms that were distinct from Jews who did not regard Jesus as the promised Messiah. According to early Christian belief, that law can only be properly interpreted and understood in the light of Christ and all that he represents. In addition, Jesus' first followers saw the Mosaic law as having a different purpose than it did in Jewish thought: although many of its precepts help to promote equity and justice where they are put into practice, that law was given primarily to point to Christ, who constitutes its fulfillment, and to prepare the way for his coming. God's law also serves to make evident to human beings their sin, revealing how far they are from the type of life God desires for all people for their own good. The awareness of sin that the law brings about prompts people to seek help from God in order that they may be delivered from the pain and suffering which that sin produces in the world, and God gives them this help through Jesus and the Holy Spirit so that they may lead a life in accordance with God's will and on that basis find true life, forgiveness, and salvation.

At the same time, surprising as it may sound, both the early Christian and the ancient Jewish belief systems maintained that people are justified and saved *by faith alone*. In both of those systems, faith is understood as absolute trust and confidence in God. The inevitable consequence of such trust and confidence is a firm commitment to living and acting in conformity with

God's will, since by definition to trust fully in someone is to do whatever that person asks. Anyone who truly trusts in God will strive to understand and do what God desires and commands, while anyone who does not strive to live in accordance with God's will is not truly trusting in God and thus does not truly have faith in God. Thus, in both early Christian and ancient Jewish thought, justification and salvation are by faith alone because faith alone brings about the life of obedience and righteousness that God desires for all out of love for them. When God sees true faith in the hearts of human beings, God declares them righteous, since God knows that such faith will inevitably be manifested in the righteous conduct God wishes to see in all people for their own good and that of others.

Contrary to what has often been affirmed, both Jesus' first followers and the ancient Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah also defined the human plight in the same way. Among both groups it was claimed that human beings are unable to practice solely by their own power the justice and righteousness of God to the extent that God desires. From both a Jewish and a Christian perspective, the problem was not that, due to his perfect righteousness and holiness, God cannot justly forgive sins until those sins have been punished in the way that they deserve. Such an understanding is just as foreign to New Testament thought as it was to Jewish thought in general. In his sovereignty, the God of Scripture is able to forgive sins freely whenever and wherever it suits his loving purposes. In itself, however, such forgiveness does not necessarily lead to the type of life God desires to see for the good of all. According to both early Christian and ancient Jewish thought, God's love does not allow him simply to condone or overlook human sin because of the harm and suffering it causes. God thus demands that human beings practice justice, righteousness, and love for the well-being of all, even though he knows that human beings are incapable of bringing about such a way of life in themselves by their own efforts.

In early Christian thought, therefore, the problem that Christ and his death addressed was not how sinful human beings might be saved from the wrath and punishment of a perfectly righteous God without the justice and righteousness of that God being compromised. Rather, the problem was how human beings might be saved from themselves and from the sinful ways that destroy their life and well-being. From God's perspective, the problem was how to create a people fully committed to living according to his will for the good of all. In New Testament thought, the way in which God acted to address this problem was by sending his Son so that through him he might establish an alternative community throughout the world, a community characterized by the same love manifested in Jesus' life and in his willingness to endure death on a cross so that such a community might become a reality.

Just as both the first believers in Christ and the Jews of antiquity understood the human plight in essentially the same terms, so also did they understand the solution to that plight in the same basic way, in spite of the differences



that resulted from their distinct views regarding Jesus. That solution consisted in God graciously bringing about in believers the justice, righteousness, and love God commands, enabling them to live in accordance with God's will. In ancient Jewish thought, once more it is primarily the Torah that enables those who trust in God to live as God desires, since the Torah not only instructs and guides believers but regenerates their heart and soul as well. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient Jewish writings, one also finds the idea that God himself brings about the justice, righteousness, and love he desires to see in his people. Through the Torah and other means, God transforms the hearts of his people so that they can conform their lives to his loving will.<sup>4</sup> Because of the transformation that takes place in them through their faith, God also graciously forgives believers the sins that they inevitably commit.

In New Testament thought, the means by which God enables believers to live according to his will as it is defined through Jesus is all that God has done in Christ and continues to do through the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Christ's community of followers. On the basis of the righteousness that is thereby brought about in believers, God forgives them their sins, knowing that as long as they look to Christ in faith they will continue to be transformed into the people God wants them to be. This means that both in New Testament thought and in ancient Jewish thought, believers are saved *by God's grace* and not due to any merit of their own. If merits are spoken of, these merits are understood as the fruits of God's gracious activity in the hearts and minds of believers.

Both the New Testament and ancient Judaism also regard repentance as a condition for receiving divine forgiveness. This repentance involves acknowledging, confessing, and renouncing one's sin in order to turn back to God, asking God not only for forgiveness but also for the power and ability necessary to practice the righteousness that God lovingly desires and commands. Once again, however, because of the differences in the way that the two belief systems understood God, the God to whom repentant Jews were called to return was in certain significant ways distinct from the God to whom believers in Christ were said to turn.

According to the New Testament, then, the basis upon which believers are forgiven, justified, and saved is not Christ's death but the new life of righteousness and love that God graciously brings about in them through Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the community of which they form part. While justification is by faith alone, it is because that faith and trust in God and God's Son inevitably take the form of a commitment to living according to God's will. Nevertheless, forgiveness, justification, redemption, and salvation are also said to be brought about through Christ's death because these realities are the result of Christ's dedication to establishing a community of people who

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4. On these ideas in the Hebrew Scriptures and second-temple Jewish writings, see especially Kyle B. Wells, *Grace and Agency in Paul and Second Temple Judaism: Interpreting the Transformation of the Heart* (NovTSup 157; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 25-206.

would live as God desires and his willingness to offer up his life so that such a community might come into existence. Through his death or blood, Christ not only laid the basis for that community and made it possible for people throughout the world to be incorporated into it by faith, but also defined the form which that community would take, that is, a community that reflects the same love seen in Christ's life and death for others. That love moves the members of Christ's community to persist in reaching out continually to those outside of the community so that others may also receive all that God graciously offers to all people through Christ, his beloved Son.

As noted in the Introduction to this work, in recent years, particularly as a result of the murder of six million Jews in the *Shoah* during the Second World War, both Christians and Jews have been concerned about the supersessionism that seems to be present in the New Testament texts, at least in the way that they have traditionally been read. In light of what we have just seen, while there is a great deal of continuity and similarity between the Jewish and Christian understandings of justification and salvation, there are also significant differences. These revolve primarily around the figure of Christ and the understanding of God and God's will associated with Christ. It has always been natural and normal for members of each group to consider their understanding of God and of God's will as more complete and more in accordance with the truth than that of the other. In fact, among Christians themselves, the ways in which God and God's will have been understood have varied widely over the centuries, just as different views of God and God's will can be found within the various strands of Judaism that have existed from antiquity to the present. It must even be acknowledged that many of the views of God found among those who have called themselves Christians actually run *contrary* to the New Testament understanding of God and represent a *denial* of that God.

While the topic of supersessionism is a complex one, in light of what we have seen here, two observations can be made. First, from a Christian perspective today, the God of Jesus Christ must be understood as a God of unconditional love whose commitment to the well-being of all people knows no bounds or limits. That is the message of the cross. Therefore, anyone who is not committed to reaching out to love others in the same spirit cannot rightly claim to be a follower of Christ. For believers in Christ, such a love precludes any kind of claim to be superior to others, as well as any action or attitude that would do others harm or promote passivity in the face of injustice. The only form which that love can take is that of seeking the well-being of others together with one's own with a spirit of respect and solidarity, as Christ did, free from any type of paternalism. As Paul affirms repeatedly, the only thing about which believers can "boast" is the grace, love, and mercy that God has shown them and all people through Christ.

And second, in light of the cross, as Christians dialogue and interact with other Christians and people of other faiths, they must insist that to conceive

of God in any other way than as a God of pure and unconditional love is to adhere to a view of God that is contrary to the most fundamental Christian conviction concerning God. From a Christian perspective, such a conception is non-negotiable. Only those who believe in a God of pure and unconditional love can be committed to loving themselves and others in the same way and call on others to practice the same kind of love for their own sake and for the sake of the world in which we all live together and are responsible for one another.

### *Rethinking God and the Cross of Christ*

One of the things I have repeatedly observed as I have presented to others the understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus' death that I have ascribed to the authors of the New Testament writings in this work is that most Christians have great difficulty accepting it. In many cases, this is because they cannot admit that their interpretations of the New Testament passages that relate salvation to Jesus' death are mistaken, since that would involve acknowledging that many of the beliefs that they have held and taught to others in reality are not in accordance with New Testament thought or even run contrary to it. To accept the arguments I have presented in this work would force them to rethink the content of their faith and the manner in which they have interpreted much of Scripture throughout their life, and the effort or sacrifices required to do so is greater than they can or wish to bear.

In many other cases, however, I have found that the traditional interpretations of Jesus' death have become so deeply embedded in the thought of Christians that, even when in principle they are convinced by the arguments presented in this work, they simply find it impossible to erase those traditional interpretations from their mind in order to interpret Jesus' death differently. When they hear biblical phrases such as "Jesus died for us," "Christ died for our sins," "he gave himself as a ransom for many," "we have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son," and "the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin," try as they might, they cannot help but understand those passages in the sense that Jesus saved us from the punishment that our sins deserved by undergoing that punishment in our stead on the cross. The radical paradigm shift required to grasp the original ideas behind such New Testament phrases is too drastic for many believers to make.

For the same reason, in the churches in which the penal substitution interpretation of Jesus' death that has prevailed in the West since Reformation times is no longer proclaimed, it is extremely rare to hear biblical phrases such as those just cited except when they are found in a reading from Scripture. Because those phrases have almost invariably been understood on the basis of the idea of penal substitution, rather than being heard as allusions to the love of God and of Christ, they instead evoke the image of a God of strict holiness and justice whose wrath at human sin could be appeased only by sending his Son to die on a cross. Rather than being a God of pure and unconditional love,

such a God is concerned primarily that human sin receive its due punishment. Supposedly, his “love” leads him to inflict the punishment we deserved on his Son instead of inflicting it on us, and it is expected that believers be grateful to this God for delivering them from his own wrath.

The primary problem with penal substitution interpretations of Christ’s work can be illustrated by use of an analogy. We may imagine a father who has many sons and daughters, all but one of whom commit some heinous act that deeply offends, hurts, and angers the father. Due to the gravity of that act and the father’s strict sense of justice, as well as a supposed concern for the welfare of his children, he declares that what the children have done merits a severe thrashing as punishment. If at the father’s initiative the one child who is innocent offers to endure that punishment in the place of his brothers and sisters, and the father accepts that offer and proceeds to have a servant administer a brutal thrashing on the innocent son alone, would these other children marvel at the immensity of the love, grace, kindness, and mercy of their father? Would they exclaim in wonder, amazement, and profound gratitude, “Oh, the depth and riches of our father’s love for us! Even though we were the ones who were guilty of the act that so greatly pained our father, moved by his immeasurable goodness and unfathomable mercy, he has exhausted his wrath at our reprehensible behavior by having our innocent brother endure in our place the painful, bloody lashing that we all deserved!”? For anyone to think in such terms would be not only absurd but also revolting and even deeply disturbing. Yet this is precisely how God’s “love” and Christ’s death have been understood: by sending his Son to suffer and die the most cruel of deaths on a cross, God saves us from himself and from his own wrath and justice.

How sad and tragic it is that the expressions that the first believers used to voice their awe and admiration at the immensity of the love of God and Christ have now come to be understood as expressing the exact opposite, communicating the idea of an oppressive, tyrannical God whose righteous wrath can be placated only with the blood of his Son! The misuse of the biblical expressions and New Testament formulas that refer to Christ dying for us and for our sins has made it impossible for them to be used today to articulate the ideas that were originally behind those expressions and formulas—ideas that deeply transformed people’s lives and led to communities whose primary characteristic was the unconditional love of which the New Testament repeatedly speaks. From my perspective, there can be no doubt that the penal substitution interpretation of Christ’s death has done tremendous harm within the church and is largely responsible for the crisis that Christian churches are facing today. What kind of a God is it who must save us from himself and his own wrath? How can any believer be expected to proclaim such a God to others with joy and enthusiasm? Instead, many believers are ashamed to share such a message with others, and rightly so. That message requires that they first announce God’s wrath and judgment at sin and convince others that, unless they believe in Christ, this God will punish them with eternal



condemnation in hell. Belief in the efficacy of Christ's death becomes the condition for attaining salvation. Precisely why God should have established such a condition is by no means clear. Faith in Christ's death seems simply to be an arbitrary requirement that God has for some unknown reason imposed on sinful human beings in order to allow them to escape his wrath. In many cases, people are motivated to confess their faith in Christ out of fear of divine punishment, rather than because they are drawn to God by God's love. It is no wonder that, in the minds of many, the "gospel" being proclaimed today is not heard or perceived as good news. In fact, from the perspective of many people, such an understanding of Christ's work and the gospel is not only unacceptable but nonsensical.

The problems that derive from the traditional penal substitution interpretations of Christ's death continue to plague even those Christians and churches that no longer accept or proclaim those interpretations and even repudiate them. In many Christian circles, it has become common either to avoid mentioning Jesus' death with any frequency or simply to repeat the biblical formulas that allude to Christ's death in passing without ever entering into any discussion as to what those formulas mean. In large part, this is because the understandings of Christ's work that scholars have offered as alternatives to penal substitution interpretations are equally problematic and often even just as nonsensical. One can hardly expect most people today to believe that, through his death and resurrection, Christ has vanquished and rendered powerless the devil and the invisible forces of evil that exist in our world, or that he has effected some mysterious ontological transformation of creation, ushering in a new age "so that the very structure of reality is transformed."<sup>5</sup> Equally problematic is the idea that the sinful human nature common to all people has been done away with definitively through Christ and his death in order to be replaced by a "new humanity" in which all can now share. Besides the fact that such interpretations of Christ's work simply find no place within our modern worldview, they stand in contradiction to all that we see and experience around us, since injustice, oppression, and evil are just as prevalent in our time as they were prior to Christ's coming. Such ideas are incapable of kindling love, hope, and solidarity in human hearts today or effecting the radical transformation of people's lives.

The same observations must be made regarding the participatory soteriology that has become so popular in Pauline scholarship in recent decades. Can one seriously expect people to receive with unbounded joy and enthusiasm the proclamation that through faith in Christ, in some mysterious or inexplicable way, they can now participate or already have participated in Christ's death and resurrection? Are people today really to believe that through faith they actually become "one person" with Christ, so that everything that is true of him is true

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5. Richard B. Hays, "Crucified with Christ: A Synthesis of the Theology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Philippians, and Galatians," in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 1: *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (ed. Jouette Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 239.

of them as well? Such a “gospel” is not only immaterial to the lives of most people but also virtually incomprehensible to many. As we have noted previously, even the proponents of such an interpretation of Paul’s teaching have been forced to admit that in our modern world Paul’s understanding of participation in Christ “is very far from constituting a real option for us” because “it is so strange to us” that it “cannot be appropriated by Christians today.”<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, to affirm that Christ in his life and death has provided an example of love for all to imitate hardly arouses any kind of passionate desire to believe in Christ and follow him today. There are plenty of other admirable human beings, both in the past and in the present, whose lives of sacrificial service and acts of great love can touch and inspire us just as much, if not more so, especially as we come to know those human beings or their story personally and intimately.

From my perspective, the most damaging and damnable idea of all in traditional Christian thought has been that punishment, suffering, and death atone for sins. How can any biblical scholar maintain that it is consonant with biblical thought to affirm that “when people fall into sin and apostasy they arouse the wrath of Yahweh. He proceeds to punish them, and on the completion of the punishment his anger is satisfied and he is reconciled to the people”?<sup>7</sup> How can punishment in itself put things right, truly satisfy divine justice, or reconcile God to people? To speak of punishment in this way is to regard it as an end in itself. What satisfies the God of Scripture is not venting his wrath at sin until it is “exhausted,” as if he became content merely by buffeting sinners with suffering until they have paid sufficiently for their sins or buffeting Christ in their place, but rather seeing sinners sincerely repent of their sins so as to leave behind their sinful life and instead dedicate themselves to living in love and righteousness. Similarly, to claim that people can atone for their sins by suffering or by dying is to affirm that justice is fully served when those who have committed wrongdoings are intentionally made to suffer or put to death. Supposedly, however, this is how Christ saves human beings and satisfies divine justice: not only by enduring punishment, suffering, and death, but by undergoing unspeakable terrors associated with these experiences to an infinitely greater degree than any other human being in the history of humankind. These ideas have done enormous damage not only within Christian circles but in society in general, where people have been led to believe that justice is satisfied merely by inflicting pain and suffering on those who have done wrong or even by having them executed.

As I have argued throughout this work, and especially in Chapters 2–4, the idea that punishment, suffering, and death could atone for sins, obtain divine forgiveness, or appease God’s wrath is entirely foreign to biblical thought.

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6. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 27; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 523.

7. I. Howard Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 121.

According to both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, *the only way in which people can atone for their sins and obtain God's forgiveness is by sincerely repenting of their wrongdoings and recommitting themselves to living in accordance with God's will.* Likewise, the idea that sacrifices make atonement for sins is nowhere to be found in the biblical writings. Instead, those writings affirm that *people who had sinned made atonement for their sins by offering up to God petitions for forgiveness along with sacrificial offerings as a concrete expression of the fact that they had repented of those sins and were committing themselves once more to living in the way God desired and commanded for their own good.* In New Testament thought, Jesus can be said to have made atonement for the sins of others by means of his death or blood only in the sense that he offered up his life to God with the petition that God forgive and receive favorably all those who would live in repentance and obedience to God under his guidance and lordship. God responded favorably to the petition embodied in Jesus' self-offering for others by exalting him to a position of full power and authority so that all that Jesus had sought for others might become a reality through him. The sins of believers are forgiven as they identify themselves as those on whose behalf Jesus offered his life up to God, asking God to forgive, accept, and transform all who would approach God through him. It is therefore *by means of his death that Jesus obtained the forgiveness of sins and new life for all who would come to live in faith under him as their Lord.*

As long as Christians today continue to adhere to the traditional interpretations of the saving significance of Jesus' death that I have criticized throughout this work, the "gospel" that they announce will continue to be distinct from the gospel that we find in the New Testament. For centuries, the failure to grasp properly the salvific significance that the New Testament writings ascribe to Jesus' death has led to what Paul called not only a "different gospel" but a "perverted" gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). Such a "gospel" is incapable of transforming people's lives and impacting the world in the way that the gospel proclaimed by Jesus' first followers originally did. Instead, it leads to apathy, passivity, confusion, dissension, and even violence. As I have insisted above, this perversion of the gospel is largely responsible for the crisis that the Christian faith and the Christian church are facing today.

In contrast, when we have grasped properly the meaning that Jesus' death originally had for his first followers, we rediscover the power of the gospel that they proclaimed with such great conviction and passion. At the core of that gospel was an understanding of God that was radically distinct from rival conceptions of God and divine beings in antiquity. The God of the cross of Christ was a subversive God who called into question the values and beliefs associated with views of God and the divinity that served to promote and uphold unjust and oppressive practices and systems that favored some at the expense of others. At the same time, the pure, unconditional love of that subversive God who "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32) confronted those who heard the message of the gospel with a

way of seeing themselves and the world around them that was unlike anything they had ever known. Once that love had taken hold of their hearts and lives, the only way in which they could respond was by reaching out with that same love to those around them as Jesus had, seeking to bring into the lives of others the same healing and wholeness that they had found in him. Just as Jesus had given up his life so that others might come to form part of a community in which all were committed to the same vision and values that had driven him throughout his ministry to its very end, so also those who became his followers now gladly dedicated their own lives to all that Jesus and his cross had come to represent in their eyes. Like Paul, in comparison with what they had found in Christ, they came to consider all that they had cherished previously as “loss,” “rubbish,” and even “excrement” (Phil. 3:7-11) and became willing to “endure all things” for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:12).

Undoubtedly, of course, the lives and communities of those who heard that gospel and responded to it did not always reflect such love and commitment or conform entirely to the ideals Jesus had embodied. At times, those who had left all to follow Jesus acted contrary to that gospel and were far from being faithful to it. Nevertheless, as I stated at the outset of this work, I am convinced that only by returning to the understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus’ death that is found throughout the writings of the New Testament can we hope to recapture the transforming power of the gospel as it was originally proclaimed.<sup>8</sup> Because none of the traditional interpretations of Jesus’ death that we find from patristic times to the present can be said to reflect New Testament thought accurately, the Gods associated with those interpretations are all in various ways distinct from the God of pure, unconditional love that Jesus’ first followers associated with Jesus and his cross. Only the subversive God of Jesus, Paul, and those who first called Jesus “Lord” is capable of creating and sustaining communities characterized by the same commitment to solidarity, justice, and the well-being of all that Jesus manifested in life and death. To look to the cross as the central symbol of the Christian faith is to identify fully with all that the cross represents: namely, the total dedication of Jesus to the task of making it possible for people everywhere to belong to a community in which they can find forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation with God and one another through him.

It is not enough, however, to leave behind the traditional interpretations of the significance of Jesus’ death in order to return to the understanding of God, Jesus, the gospel, and the cross that we find throughout the pages of the New Testament. Once we have acknowledged that those traditional interpretations constitute “another gospel” that inevitably leads to indifference, a lack of love and unity, and conformity to the values and norms of the world as it is, we must not only abandon those interpretations but also actively and emphatically repudiate them as standing in opposition to the new reality that

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8. This constitutes the main argument of my book *Redeeming the Gospel: The Christian Faith Reconsidered* (SLHT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011); see especially 179-213.



God desires to bring about through Christ. The harmful effects that those interpretations have had both in church and in society over many centuries cannot be undone merely by laying them aside so as to proclaim a message that reproduces more faithfully the New Testament gospel. Because the ideas associated with the traditional interpretations of Jesus' death have become so deeply ingrained in the thought of both Christians and non-Christians, any attempt to proclaim a gospel that no longer reflects those ideas will be unsuccessful unless we clearly and unequivocally distance ourselves from those ideas and denounce them as incompatible with biblical thought. They represent understandings of God that clash head-on with the God we encounter in the New Testament. If the false and pagan "Gods" that prevail in so many Christian churches and circles today are allowed to remain standing alongside the subversive God of Jesus and the cross, they will continue to conceal this God from sight and thus make it impossible for this God to be made known. The No! that we exclaim in relation to the understandings of God associated with the traditional interpretations of Jesus' death must be just as forceful and intense as the Yes! with which we proclaim our adherence to the God of Jesus and Paul and Jesus' first followers. Otherwise, the past and the history that cling to us will continue to suffocate that Yes! and drown it out so that it cannot be heard.

To reclaim the New Testament gospel thus requires that we dedicate ourselves to the arduous task of extirpating from the minds of Christian believers—including especially theologians and biblical scholars—the traditional interpretations of the salvific significance of Jesus' death that have held sway for so long, together with the ideas, presuppositions, and concepts of God upon which they are based. Because the misinterpretations of the allusions and formulas that the New Testament uses to convey the salvific significance of Jesus' death have led to distorted concepts of God and Christ for such a long time, before we can reclaim those allusions and formulas and begin to use them again to communicate what they originally meant for Jesus' first followers, we must carry out both the deconstructive and the reconstructive tasks that I have mentioned above. Only then will we be able to proclaim the New Testament gospel regarding the unconditional love of God in Christ in ways that unleash its power and enable it to impact as it should the lives of those who hear and respond to it.

From my perspective, the only way in which we can respond successfully to the serious challenges and crises that the Christian faith and the Christian church are facing today is by rediscovering the meaning that Jesus' first followers originally ascribed to his death and placing at the center of our lives and our communities the understanding of God that led the powers of his day to have Jesus crucified. If the core belief of the Christian faith is that God's unconditional love for all made God willing to pay whatever price was necessary, including the price of the life of God's beloved Son, in order that the same kind of love might be reproduced and reflected in the lives of all people,

how it is possible for the lives of those who profess that faith to be dominated by anything other than that same love? How can there be apathy, discord, conflict, rivalry, and division among those who claim to be followers of Jesus and the God he proclaimed if they are constantly evaluating their words and actions on the basis of that core belief, continually holding it up as the criterion by which all they say and do is judged and adamantly refusing to allow anything else to take precedence over it? How can any teaching or practice that is not solidly grounded in that core belief and cannot be shown to derive from it be accepted as “Christian”?

Similarly, if the sole purpose of Jesus’ ministry was to reach out to others to bring healing and wholeness into their lives by calling them to put following him above all else, how can any who are not dedicated to reaching out constantly to others with the same purpose be said to have responded faithfully to Jesus’ call? How can any who have truly come to comprehend what motivated Jesus to prefer to die on a cross rather than give in to the demand that he put a halt to his activity on behalf of others not choose to stand, work, and fight for everything that Jesus himself stood, worked, and fought for? Can anyone who does not understand why Paul was gladly willing to endure endless hardships, dangers, persecution, beatings, hunger, thirst, and imprisonment in order to share with others the gospel of the cross of Christ claim to have any inkling of what Paul meant when he alluded to that gospel or the cross in his epistles? Can anyone honestly maintain that they know what the Christian faith is all about if they find it impossible to grasp why so many of the first Christians refused to give in to the command of the Roman authorities that they curse Jesus, deny his lordship, and instead exclaim “Caesar is Lord!,” even though they knew that the price that they would pay was their life?

The God on whose behalf Jesus, Paul, and Jesus’ first followers were willing to suffer and even give up their lives was not a God whose justice made it impossible for him to forgive sins without his Son’s cruel death, a God who had his Son take human flesh so that the divine and human natures might be joined to one another, or a God who sent his Son to suffer and die so that others might be brought to participate in his death or merely be led to see in him an example to be imitated. None of those Gods are the God of Jesus Christ. Rather, the God of Jesus Christ, Paul, and the first believers was the scandalous God of the cross, a God whose unconditional love for all people impelled him to send his Son to lay the basis for communities in which that same love would burn brightly in the hearts and lives of all and set the world ablaze. If such communities are to blossom and thrive today, they must not only reclaim that scandalous God of the cross as their own, but also recapture and rearticulate faithfully the meaning which that cross originally had for all those who first called the crucified and risen Christ “Lord.”