

The Significance of the Cross in the Epistles to the Galatians and Romans: Implications for Contemporary Christians.

Emmanuel Ayeni & Opeyemi T. Oladosu

Abstract

The cross is at the center of the message of Jesus Christ. The Gospels place the cross in the center and it serves as the narrative's intended climax. The Roman soldiers humiliated Jesus Christ before nailing him on the cross. The greatest manifestation of God's love is the death of Christ. The crucifixion, despite being a tool of agony, is the way by which humanity has been reconciled to God. This paper argues how Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans make it clear that God's love is manifest in Christ's blood, which brought sinners both justification and forgiveness. The promise of a place in heaven for the sinner who accepts the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is likewise made on the cross of Jesus.

Key words: Cross. Hanging. Salvation. Ransom. Forgiveness of Sin.

Introduction

The heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the cross. John devotes nine chapters to events surrounding the passion of Christ, from the night of his arrest to his death and resurrection. Matthew devotes one fourth of his Gospel to the last week of Christ's ministry, Mark about one third, and Luke more than one fifth. In fact, "the cross occupies a central place

in the Gospels; it is the intended climax of their narratives.”¹ What is the significance of Jesus Christ death on the cross and of what value is it in the contemporary time?

In his epistles to the Galatians and Romans, Paul dwelt extensively on the subject of the cross and its significance for the believers, both Jews and Gentiles. Justification of the sinner which is achieved by the death of Christ is a major theme in the two epistles. John Stott declares that “the gospel according to Paul in Galatians ... focuses on the cross.”² Martin Luther also calls the justification process described in Rom 3:21-26 “the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.”³

Historical Background and Meaning of the Cross

There is no reference of the crucifixion in the Old Testament, although there is mention of the “hanging,” either as a form of the death penalty or as a further punishment after another form of the death penalty.⁴ Following are the examples of death by hanging; first, it was one of the punishments prescribed by Moses for some crimes (Deut 21:22). Joseph told the chief baker that Pharaoh will hang him in three days (Gen 40:19, 22). The Lord told Moses to hang those who committed harlotry and idolatry at Peor in Moab (Lev 25:4). Esther 7:10 tells us that Haman was hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Seven descendants of Saul were hanged by the Gibeonites for the crime Saul had committed against them which brought

¹ Raoul Dederen, “Christ: His Person and Work,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 173.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 330.

³ Margin of the Luther Bible, quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 218.

⁴ G.Q Reijners, *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature* (Amsterdam: GERARDUS QUIRINUS REIJNERS, 1965), 19.

three years of famine upon Israel (2 Sam 21:6-9). Indeed Deuteronomy 21: 23 says that “he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut 21:23).⁵

Outside of the OT, Herodotus reported that crucifixion was widespread in the time of the Persian Empire; and during the Hasmonean era, under Alexander Janneus (102-76 BC), 800 Pharisees were crucified.⁶ Josephus also described several crucifixions in first-century Palestine. For example, “Varus of Syria (d. 9 BCE) crucified two thousand men after squashing a revolt in Judea.⁷ Even after the time of Christ, crucifixion continued to be employed until Constantine (c. 337) abolished it in honor of Jesus.⁸ In the New Testament times, the Romans employed crucifixion for the punishment of the vilest criminals:

The cross was to all a symbol of the profoundest horror.... Victims were flogged and then forced to walk to the site of their impending death dragging the beam of the cross in which they were to be hung on.... The one to be crucified was also stripped naked of all his clothes to further add to the humiliation. At the designated crucifixion site the victim was nailed through his wrists and ankles to the wooden cross, which they had been forced to drag.⁹

Morna D. Hooker adds that “the frequency with which crucifixion was used as a mode of punishment was partly due to the fact that the victim died a lingering and horribly painful death ... and partly it was due to the fact that nailing a man up

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this paper are from The New King James Version (NKJV) Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

⁶ Donald E. Green, “Folly of the Cross,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15/1 (Spring 2004): 60, accessed 18 September 2015, <http://www.tms.edu/m/tmsj15c.pdf>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹ <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/weekly/Significance-of-the-Cross.pdf>.

naked—whether dead or alive—was the greatest possible indignity to which one could subject him.”¹⁰

This is exactly the kind of humiliation that Jesus Christ was subjected to by the Roman soldiers. And this is what Paul says is the reason for his boasting. In addition, John Stott declares that though there are many symbols of the life and ministry of Jesus which his disciples could have chosen to represent their faith, yet the simple symbol of the cross was chosen “to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his resurrection nor his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his death, his crucifixion.”¹¹ This is to say that at the heart of Christianity is the cross of Jesus Christ. The question that arises from this is: What is in the cross of Jesus that makes it special to Paul and all that have ever lived and will ever live?

The Cross Demonstration God’s Love

The death of Christ is the supreme revelation of the love of God. Though wrath forms the basis for Christ’s atoning sacrifice, it does not mean that the atonement turned the wrath of God into love as found in many pagan religions. For example in pagan Greek thought, “the gods often became angry with human beings, but their anger could be placated and the goodwill of the gods obtained by some propitiatory sacrifice.” But, “even in the Old Testament, the idea of atonement as the propitiating of an angry deity and transmuting his anger into benevolence is not to be found.” Through the Law and the Prophets, God taught Israel by typology that he himself will provide the means of reconciliation (Rom 3:21). For Paul, the atonement made by Christ is only a demonstration of the love that God has for

¹⁰ Morna D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretation of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 7.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 27.

sinners. So, “the cross is not only the measure of the love of Christ but of God himself (Rom 5:8; 8:3, 32).¹²

Ellen White exclaims, “O, the cross, the cross! It is set up that we may know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. Only the cross can measure the length and breadth, the depth and height, of infinite love, the greatness of the Father's sacrifice for lost humanity.”¹³ Douglass Moo supports this statement when he says that through the cross, “Paul stresses that God’s love is active—it is a love that gives to us and takes possession of us.”¹⁴ This great love has been demonstrated that the heart of the sinner might be drawn to God. “For the love of Christ compels us” (2 Cor 5:14) “and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor 5:15). Therefore, “who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:35)

Justification, which means “to declare, accept, and treat as just” is what dominates Paul’s letters to Romans and Galatians.¹⁵ It is a legal term which expresses “a verdict of acquittal and excluding all possibilities of condemnation.¹⁶ By using the term justification for the sinners who accept Christ as their Lord Paul is saying “that the righteous requirement of the law” has been “fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4), and for that reason,

¹² Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 465.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Australasian Union Conference Record*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).

¹⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 305.

¹⁵ Raoul Dederen, “Christ: His Person and Work,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 180. Of the 33 times the words “justification” “justify,” “justified,” “justifies,” or “justifier” occur in the letters of Paul in the New King James Version of the Bible, 29 of them are in Romans and Galatians.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

The Cross Reaffirms the Moral Law

Mario Veloso observes that two great events took place at the cross: First, the termination of the ritual system and second, the reaffirmation of the moral law.¹⁷ He states further that “the cross is the greatest proof that the Ten Commandments could not be abolished or invalidated.”¹⁸ He argues that if God would abolish the law, he would not have fulfilled it before abolishing it. In other words, since Christ died to fulfill the demand of the law, which is death, God will not abrogate that same law after its demand has been satisfied. For that would amount to Christ dying “only to justify sinners in their sinfulness.”¹⁹ Emil Brunner supports this argument: “Since law is the ‘expression of the will of the Lawgiver, of the personal God’ then if it is broken, it cannot and does not heal by itself. Sin has caused a ‘break in the world order,’ a disorder so deep-seated that reparation or restitution is necessary, that is, ‘Atonement.’”²⁰

Ellen White concurs with the idea of the death of Christ reaffirming the unchangeable nature of the law when she says: “Christ died in behalf of man, to elevate the law of Jehovah, but not to lessen it one iota. Could He have done this, Christ need not have died. The cross of Calvary will stand in the judgment and testify to everyone the immutability and changeless character of the law of God, and not a word can be offered for sin in that day.”²¹

¹⁷ Mario Veloso, “The Law of God,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 484.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 459, 485, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 124.

The Significance of the Cross in Romans and Galatians

Commenting on the assertion of Paul in Galatians 6:14 Ellen White observes that “The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity. In Christ glorified they will behold Christ crucified.”²² She also declares, “Remove the cross from the Christian and it is like blotting out the sun which illumines the day, and dropping the moon and the stars out of the firmament of the heavens at night. The cross of Christ brings us nigh to God, reconciling man to God, and God to man.”²³ In the same vein Hans LaRondelle states: “The theme of salvation and the atonement is generally considered as the central truth of the Christian gospel, the way we understand Christ’s work of atonement expresses our view of God’s character and His divine nature as well as of the essence of sin.”²⁴

Jesus himself pointed out to his disciples the significance of his death as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He gave his life as a ransom for many sinners by becoming their substitute. He also reiterated this statement during the Last Supper that his blood is for “the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt 26:28). “When Jesus on this occasion calls the Passover bread ‘His body’ and the Passover wine ‘His blood of the new covenant’ then He replaces Israel’s sacrificial lamb and its blood by His own sacrificial blood as the source of redemption for ‘the many.’”²⁵ Jesus thereby voluntarily

²¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).

²² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).

²³ Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).

²⁴ Hans K. LaRondelle, “Salvation and the Atonement,” *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, 3/1 (1992): 26, accessed 29 September 2015, <http://www.atsjats.org/publication/view/449>.

²⁵ Ibid.

established his death as the foundational act of God's New Covenant. Thus, when sinners by faith accept the atoning death of Christ on their behalf, they are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24).

In Romans and Galatians Paul mentions a number of achievements that the cross of Christ brought to the believer: Through Christ's death we have: (1) Peace with God (Rom 3:25, 26; 5:1, 8:1). (2) Forgiveness of sin (Gal 1:4; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14) (3) Deliverance from sin (Rom 6:18, 22). (4) Hope of eternal life (Rom 5:21; 6:8; 8:11). (5) Salvation (Rom 5:9). (6) New life in Christ (Rom 6:4; Gal 2:20; 5:24). (7) New status with God (Gal 4:7). (8) Reconciliation (Rom 5:10, 11; Gal 3:28). (9) Justification (Rom 3:21-24; 5:18-19; 8:1). (10) Redemption (Gal 3:10-14). Without the cross, none of these blessings would have been made available to humanity.

Implications for Contemporary Christians

Whereas Jesus was crucified on the cross hundreds of years ago, his crucifixion still has implications for humanity today. In the first instance, his death on the cross is substitutionary. Romans 5:8 declares that "Christ died for us." Further, through his death on the cross, humanity can be redeemed and have newness of life. The Bible says, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4).

In addition, it is worthy of note that through Christ's sacrificial death, humanity can move from condemnation to justification (Romans 5:18). Paul, in Galatians says, "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor

uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” (Gal 6:14-15).

Hence, the benefits of the cross of Christ are still significant to humanity. Jesus offered himself on the cross, once and for all humanity. It is through the cross we receive forgiveness of sin; peace with God, newness of life, hope of resurrection.

Summary and Conclusion

The cross, though an instrument of torture, is the means by which humanity has been reconciled to God. From Paul’s epistles to the Galatians and Romans we see that Christ’s blood demonstrates God’s love and brought not only forgiveness but also justification to sinners. The cross of Jesus also guarantees a place in heaven for the sinner who accepts the atoning sacrifice of Christ’s death on the cross. This atonement is an application of the Old Testament sacrificial system which was only pointing to Christ the true Lamb of God. Therefore, according to the epistles of Galatians and Romans, there is no alternative to what Christ’s cross has achieved.

Therefore, it will be appropriate to conclude with the words of Ellen White that, “In the cross all influence centers, and from it all influence goes forth. It is the great center of attraction; for on it Christ gave up His life for the human race. This sacrifice was offered for the purpose of restoring man to his original perfection. Yea, more, it was offered to give him an entire transformation of character, making him more than a conqueror.”²⁶

Sources

Brunner, Emil. *The Mediator*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 459, 485, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 56, 1899*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).

- Dederen, Raoul. "Christ: His Person and Work," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000.
- Green, Donald E. "Folly of the Cross," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 15/1 (Spring 2004): 60, accessed 18 September 2015, <http://www.tms.edu/m/tmsj15c.pdf>.
- Hooker, Morna D. *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretation of the Death of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.
- <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/weekly/Significance-of-the-Cross.pdf>.
- LaRondelle, Hans K. "Salvation and the Atonement," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, 3/1 (1992): 26, accessed 29 September 2015, <http://www.atsjats.org/publication/view/449>.
- Margin of the Luther Bible, quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 305.
- Reijners, G.Q. *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature*. Amsterdam: GERARDUS QUIRINUS REIJNERS, 1965
- Stott, John R. W. *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.
- Veloso, Mario. "The Law of God," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000.
- White, Ellen G. *Our High Calling*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).
- White, Ellen G. *Australasian Union Conference Record*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).
- White, Ellen G. *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM] (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999).
- White, Ellen G. *The Great Controversy*, Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings [CD ROM], Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1999.