



GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

The Meaning(s) of the Cross

What does the Cross of Christ mean and why was it necessary? Many thoughts and theories have been offered over the past two thousand years. We'll explore some here:

The earliest Christian theologians, including the Gospel writers, rooted their understanding of the Cross in the Exodus story of the Passover Lamb. As the Israelites were freed out of Egypt by the blood of a Passover lamb, Christ-followers are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God.

Over time, some equated this ransom with a payment. But to whom? To God? To Satan? Or to death itself? But in light of the Exodus story, the redemption metaphor need only apply to the liberation of those in bondage, without reference to any payment to anyone. The Cross is a work of grace.

At the end of the 11th century, Anselm of Canterbury attempted to explain the Cross (using feudal law) as the way God's "honor," offended by our sin, could be satisfied. Since humans could not repay God for their own sins, much less anyone else's, Anselm wrote that God the Father sent his

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divine Son to restore God's honor through his perfect obedience, including his death on the Cross.

Building off Anselm, John Calvin (early 1500s) emphasized God's need for satisfaction, but now it was his *wrath* that needed to be satisfied. And not merely by obedience, but by *violent punishment*, not unlike "honor killings" in cultures where a son or daughter might be killed for shaming their family. God's righteous indignation in the face of human sin demanded his death. This angry God must be appeased, so Jesus placates the Father by taking our place to get us off the hook.

This theory takes occasional biblical imagery of God's courtroom and ends up making our salvation transactional. Consider, then, the fact that trials and penalties and suffering and imprisonment are so in vogue within religious legalism—something the gospel of Jesus Christ absolutely rejects.

One HUGE error with "penal substitution" concerns the Trinity—a central teaching of our faith. We believe in One co-eternal and indivisible God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—forever in perfect harmony and purpose. The three Persons of the undivided God share one, united divine identity.

One error of penal substitution is in how it presents Father and Son at the Cross. It divides the Trinity, pitting the Father (as infinite justice) against the Son (the sin-bearing victim), from whom God must turn away, severing the One inseparable God.

Penal substitution is a legal term, a forensic model of our relationship to and with God. But the gospel is not about forensic punishment, evening the score or paying our debt. The gospel is about forgiveness, grace, mercy and love, so that God seeks our love, not his satisfaction. God in Christ is not worried about the holiness of his name or reputation—these are set aside on the Cross, when Jesus endured and consumed all hatred, evil, and sin forever.

How? Not by a legal mechanism but through the overflowing love of the Father, whom Jesus came to reveal.

So, the Cross of Christ is not a legal event, but a declaration and covenant of love, by God, who out of his grace, offers us what we can never deserve or earn, rather than demanding a payment.

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