

**THE CROSS:  
CHRIST'S ATONEMENT FOR OUR SINS**

**By**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The fundamental and foundational doctrine of our Christian faith is God's forgiveness of our sins which he freely offers to us in His grace and mercy through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. But, although this forgiveness is freely offered to us, it was very costly to God. It was bought at the price of the sacrificial death of Christ, God's only Son, on a Roman cross. Theologians call this whole process the atonement.

Atonement sounds like a rather technical term, although it makes more sense if we break it into three parts – at-one-ment. That's actually indicative of the origins of the word, which derives from the middle English "at onement", or "in unity". The dictionary definition of 'atonement' is "satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury" or "reconciliation". As we've just seen, in terms of Christian theology, 'atonement' is usually taken to mean the forgiveness of sin and the resultant reconciliation of God and mankind achieved through Christ's death on the cross. Christ has restored us to being 'at one' with God.

So you see, the secular definition and the Christian theological definition of 'atonement' are in harmony. But we do need to think about the issues of 'satisfaction' and 'reparation' – how the atonement 'satisfied' God in relation to our sins. We're going to look at that and other issues surrounding the atonement today.

As I said a moment ago the atonement and the cross are central to Christianity. For this reason, the cross is the most important symbol of Christianity. Every church has the cross prominently displayed near the altar and also frequently attached to the exterior of the church building – as we do here at Holy Trinity Cannes. Yet death on a cross – crucifixion – is probably the most horrible form of death ever invented by man and Christians are the only people ever to have spoken well of it. Certainly, the ancients ridiculed Christians for their belief that God's anointed died in this way – especially the Jews who believed that those who died on a tree or a cross were under God's curse. The fact that Christians have stubbornly refused to discard the cross as a symbol can only mean that they regarded the crucifixion as being of the greatest importance. Why? – because the amazing sacrificial death and glorious resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ are indeed absolutely central to our Christian faith. The importance of the cross is reflected in the importance that Scripture gives to the death of Jesus Christ – an indication of which is given by the fact that the Gospels devote almost 40% of their total material to accounts of the final week of the life of Jesus.

Christianity is Christ, and the crucial fact about Christ is His passion on the cross. Christ's example, teaching and miracles mustn't be neglected, but His atoning death is absolutely crucial. Indeed our English word 'crucial' comes from the Latin *crux* or cross. Christ's death is the basis of every spiritual blessing (Romans 8:31-32) and John tells us that we will sing the praises of the Lamb who was slain throughout eternity (Revelations 5:9-14). Paul stated that in his teaching he would know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).

Yet, to non-Christians the cross is foolishness, an offence and a stumbling block. In the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 23, the cross is a stumbling block to many and again as Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 18 the cross is foolishness to many

but the power of God to us who are being saved. If we are to advance in our Christian faith, we must leap over the stumbling block of the cross and see beyond its apparent foolishness. As P T Forsyth wrote, “You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross”.

In order to do that let's first of all take an overview of the meaning of and the need for the cross, briefly touch on Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, and then start to look at the deeper meaning and significance of the cross.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEED FOR AND THE MEANING OF THE CROSS**

In exploring the need for the cross, we firstly need to look at the pervasiveness of human sin and our inability to deal with it alone and then we need to look at why this sin is so serious from God's point of view.

Our rebellion, our sin – for rebellion against God is a sin – began at the dawn of human history when the first man and woman deliberately rebelled against God by disobeying the one commandment he had given them to obey. As the Roman politician Cicero asserted “Man is a disaster” or as the Puritan Joseph Alleine wrote “O miserable man, what a deformed monster sin has made of you! God made you ‘little lower than the Angels’; sin has made you little better than the devils.” Even though man was made in God's image (Genesis 1:26), man not only had the capacity to sin, but lost no opportunity in exercising it!

Mankind never recovered from their rebellion and God's reaction to it, often referred to as ‘the Fall’. Following the Fall, the intimate relationship between man and God was broken, the orderly relationship between mankind and the rest of creation was broken, and sin was set loose in the world. Scripture teaches us that this sin of the first man and woman was inherited by all their descendants (Romans 5:12-19). As Calvin said “All of us who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin.” Before the Fall, man was able not to sin and die, but after the Fall man could only sin and die. The account of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3 teaches us that God does personally and actively punish sin. I also believe that the effects of the Fall reverberated backwards in time as well as being felt forwards in time following the Fall. In modern terms the Fall was a “tipping point” – a small action which brought about huge consequences.

This release of sin into the world did not take long to produce widespread and serious results. One of Adam's children, Cain, killed his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:8), and the world's first murder was enacted. God's plan for the union of one man with one woman was also broken as polygamy was introduced by Lamech (Genesis 4:19). Vengeance and revenge rather than God's mercy were espoused – also by Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24). Indeed man's evil soon became so great that “every inclination of the thoughts of [their] hearts was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5) and thus God decided to wipe out mankind entirely (Genesis 6:7), apart from a few righteous persons – Noah and his family (Genesis 6:8-9,18). God brought his judgement in the form of a flood, from which only Noah and his family escaped.

This cleansing of mankind through the flood was not effective to eliminate sin. The remainder of the OT ‘testifies’ to the fact that mankind was (and is) utterly unable to recover from the effects of the Fall and to overcome sin by our own efforts. Time and time again, the Israelites sinned and broke their solemn covenant with God. Indeed when the OT ends Israel is still looking for the final consummation of their covenant hopes – when hope would be

fulfilled and promise would become fact. Those hopes were only realised in the incarnation of Christ.

If we're honest we all know that we sin, each and every one of us. For as Jesus said looking lustfully at a woman is equivalent to committing adultery (Matthew 5:28) or just being angry with someone is a sin (Matthew 5:22). As Paul said we have all sinned (Romans 5:12). And we need to remember that God's standard is not that 10% of sin or 1% of sin in our lives is acceptable. God won't accept even the smallest amount of sin. As James said if we break any of the law we break all of it:

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” (James 2:10)

As John said we are just not able to live our lives with out sinning:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8). No sin at all, not even the smallest, tiniest element of it is acceptable to our God.

Given this background I hope you can see the necessity for a radical plan to deal with the sins of mankind. A plan which would not depend on our efforts, but which would be grounded solely in God's loving forgiveness – his grace. But why did that application of grace have to involve the brutal death of God's son – Jesus Christ – on a Roman cross?

Now, sin is a rebellion against God's laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God's moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breach of these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death”. This does not mean that God's laws are mechanical, they are alive in God - a part of his nature - and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable. Although God in His absolute love wanted to forgive us our sins, His wrath at our sin and his absolutely just and righteous nature meant that he couldn't just forget about our sins. He couldn't just sweep them under the carpet as it were. All the aspects of God's nature are absolute and unchangeable. He is absolutely loving BUT sin does arouse His wrath and also he is absolutely just and righteous. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God. Thus, we couldn't just be let off or forgiven by God, either we or someone else had to pay the price of all the sins of mankind.

However, only a man who was completely without sin could pay the price that our sins deserved in our place. Only Jesus, a unique figure, who was wholly God and entirely without sin, BUT also wholly man and thus completely identified with us, could pay the price for these sins in our place. God sent him, and he willingly went, to pay that price on the cross. The cross was always God's ultimate plan for dealing with human sin and rebellion. God in Christ has borne our sins and died our death to set US free from sin and death. The reason for the cross is that you and I, indeed each and every one of us, are all sinners (Romans 3:9-12) and deserved to die for our sins. If you take nothing else away with you from today then please remember this basic summary – it's the essence of our Christian faith. Only God's grace in sending His son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for the sins of all mankind, to justify us, redeem us and reconcile us to God, has enabled us to recover from the alienation from God brought about in the Fall. By this grace, we are fully spiritually regenerated and restored to bearing the image of God (Ephesians 4:23, Colossians 3:10).

Nevertheless, our salvation as Christians is not confined to merely accepting the Grace of God in the salvific death of Christ. No, salvation is a journey, and a part of that journey is increasing our understanding of our God, his nature and what he has done for us. As Paul

said in Philippians 2:12 we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. That doesn't mean that our salvation is *through* works but that we must strenuously work it out to the finish with reverence and singleness of purpose in response to God's grace. So today, I'm asking you to take some more steps on that journey of salvation with me as we look at the Cross and what was done for us there in much greater depth than I think most of you will have plumbed before. At times, some of the concepts may seem a little difficult, but I think if you stick with me to the end, you'll find the effort very worthwhile – these things are the foundation of our faith and are particularly appropriate for Lent.

## **CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION**

I'm sure you're all familiar with the basic facts about the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

As regards Christ's crucifixion, let me just say two things, firstly, that the crucifixion of Jesus is a very well attested historical event and we should completely and unreservedly accept it as such. If you don't accept Jesus as an historic figure you shouldn't accept Julius Caesar either. Secondly, it was not the Jews or Herod or Judas Iscariot or the Romans who were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, but the sins of all mankind – your sins and mine. Indeed as it says in Hebrews, whenever we turn away from Christ we are crucifying him all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Hebrews 6:6). That's a sobering thought isn't it!

As regards Christ's resurrection, this is again a well attested historical fact. The Christian church has never preached the resurrection of Jesus as a spiritual event or a philosophical abstraction, but rather as a physical fact that occurred on a particular day in history nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus in fact made a large number of appearances after his resurrection that are recorded in the Gospels:

- To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11, 18)
- To the women (Matthew 28:9-10)
- To Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- To the ten disciples (Luke 24:36-40; John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the eleven disciples (John 20:24-29)
- To the eleven disciples in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
- To five hundred followers (1 Corinthians 15:6; Matthew 28:16-20)
- To James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- And to the disciples at the Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-8)

These experiences were not visionary – all participants appear to have experienced exactly the same thing! Furthermore, the sudden courage displayed by Peter and the other disciples in proclaiming the “Good News”, can only be explained on the basis that they underwent a real life changing experience the truth of which was absolutely convincing to them. They braved arrest (Acts 5:18), flogging (Acts 5:40) and even death (Acts 7:58). What a transformation from the band of men who had cravenly fled at Jesus' arrest and mostly had not even dared to attend His crucifixion. Only a really significant event could have been so life changing, and what could that event have been other than Jesus' resurrection? I believe it is also significant that Jesus' brothers became followers and believers after the resurrection not having accepted Jesus' ministry at all before that.

I believe that the Gospel accounts, the book of Acts and the fact that the Christian faith rapidly spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first century AD all provide us with convincing evidence of the reality of the resurrection. Why would the Apostles have risked flogging, imprisonment and death – a fate which most of them suffered – for a religion which they knew as eyewitnesses was based on an untruth?

Christ appeared to His followers for a period of 40 days after the crucifixion (Acts 1:3). During this period, he taught them concerning the kingdom of God. Shortly before Pentecost, Jesus, after commanding His followers to remain in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit, ascended from their presence into heaven. This marked the end of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. What the church now looked forward to was the day when "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11). Our knowledge of the life of Jesus is incomplete. We await that day when he will return to share the messianic banquet with His followers (Mark 14:25). This is a day to be longed for by those of us who follow him and love him, so we pray "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

## **THE NECESSITY FOR CHRIST'S DEATH**

We have already looked at an overview of this subject in our introduction, but I now want to look at this issue in more detail.

If we are guilty of sin (which, as we've seen, we all are) and if we are responsible for our sins (which we all are) then we are all guilty before God. Sin estranges us from God and the punishment for sin is death. But, can we think of God as judging and punishing evil? Many Christians today find this idea difficult, but I believe that the short answer to this question is that I believe we not only can but we must! The fact that God is holy is foundational to Scripture (Leviticus 11:44; Joshua 24:19; 1 Samuel 2:2 etc), so is the fact that sin is incompatible with His holiness (Habakuk 1:13; Isaiah 59:1 etc). So, our sins separate us from God. We've also already noted that God did actively punish the sins of Adam and Eve following the Fall.

Closely related to God's holiness is his wrath, which is simply his holy reaction to evil. We absolutely cannot dismiss this concept of God's wrath by saying that the God of wrath belongs to the OT whilst the God of the NT is a God of love. God's love IS displayed in the OT and his wrath certainly IS apparent in the NT, as we shall see in a moment. Also, if the wrath of God were not real it is at least arguable that such a radical salvation plan as Christ's death on the Cross would not have been necessary.

The Bible refers to the wrath of God some 580 times and the actual word "wrath" is used in relation to God no less than 190 times in the NIV translation (more in older translations) of which 29 such uses are in the NT. There is a consistency about God's wrath in scripture, which we do not find in myths about pagan gods. There's nothing capricious about our God. Thus God is said to be angry with sin generally (Job 21:20) and many specific sins such as adultery (Ezekiel 23:25) and violence (Ezekiel 8:17-18), but most of all idolatry (Exodus 32:8-10; Deuteronomy 6:14-15 etc).

The wrath of God is a genuinely Christian idea. It was not imported into Christianity from a pagan environment. Greek philosophy had long since abandoned the idea that a deity could be angry by the time of Christ. The Greeks held that deity was passionless without disturbing

emotions of any sort. Christians held on to the concept of the wrath of God despite criticism from Hellenic philosophers.

C H Dodd has argued that this wrath of God is simply an impersonal process of disaster following sin, a natural consequence of sin. This idea has been widely taken up. However, I must tell you that this view is inconsistent with Scripture. The Bible presents God's wrath as intensely personal, an expression of His nature and an exercise of His sovereignty.

Specifically, punishment of sin is presented as God's direct action in passages such as 'He flashes destruction on the stronghold ...' (Amos 5:9), or

"I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the LORD who strikes the blow." (Ezekiel 7:8-9).

Passages like this are both vivid and frequent and totally inconsistent with impersonal wrath.

Dodd sought to distinguish between the wrath of God as impersonal and the mercy of God as personal, but scripture makes no such distinction. Micah prays 'You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy' (Micah 7:18). Again, such passages are frequent. God may be slow to anger (Exodus 34:6 etc), but slow though he is, his anger is real. Wrath may be God's 'strange work' and 'alien task' as Isaiah put it (Isaiah 28:21), but it clearly **is** his work and we shall not have a correct understanding of our God if we shut our eyes to this fact. I have no doubt that the opposition of Dodd and others to the concept of the wrath of God arises from the outlook of our generation. We simply do not like the idea of God's wrath. But I believe that I have shown that scripture makes it quite clear that this wrath is real and we must therefore reckon with it. Unpalatable though it may be, my sins and your sins are the objects of God's wrath. Fortunately, that wrath is not the last word. As we shall see, Christ has appeased God's wrath with his perfect sacrifice of himself, and we need fear God's wrath no more.

We should also note that God's wrath is not, and could not be, placated or ended by human action. Its removal is entirely due to God himself. Here we should note passages such as Micah 7:18 which we quoted a moment ago and Psalm 85:3

"You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger." (Psalm 85:3)

God's attitude to sin and evil is not passive, indeed, he is vigorously opposed to it, but he is also a merciful God. Wrath and mercy are both characteristics of God.

In the NT, the word most generally used in relation to God's anger (at least outside Revelations) is '*orge*' which is usually used in the sense of the inner nature of a thing and points to the fact that God's wrath is an integral part of his nature. The word 'wrath' in relation to God only occurs four times in the gospels, but it IS there and Paul uses it no less than 15 times in his epistles, whilst John uses it ten times in Revelations. Also, there are passages where the word wrath is not used, but which make it clear that this is the concept in mind. Thus, I do not believe it is possible to take the NT seriously, whilst rejecting the concept of the wrath of God. There are many NT passages which closely and personally associate wrath with God (John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:6 etc). Paul also emphasises divine activity in relation to wrath in passages such as (Romans 1:24-28).

Finally, we must understand that God's anger or wrath bears absolutely no relation whatsoever to human anger – which is a sin. God's wrath is absolutely, pure untainted by personal animosity or vindictiveness, and is mediated by his simultaneous love for the sinner.

Thus, God had to find a means of appeasing his anger at our sins in a manner which was consistent with his holy and righteous nature, or he had to condemn us to death. But, why did that mechanism for taking away our guilt have to involve Christ's death?

Anselm (1033-1109), an Italian philosopher and theologian posed this question as follows: "For what necessity and for what reason did God, since he is omnipotent, take upon himself the humiliation and weakness of human nature in order to bring about its restoration?"

Grotius (1583-1645), the Christian writer who is perhaps more famous as the founder of International Law, argued that Christ's death was the best of several means whereby God could have upheld the moral order of the universe. We have already seen that God couldn't simply forgive us. That would have been completely incompatible with his justice and righteousness. Some Arminians favour Grotius' view, arguing that the death of Jesus was determined by Divine decree on the basis of the use of the verb *dei* of God in a number of gospel texts (e.g. Matthew 16:21; Luke 24:7; John 3:14 etc.) – rather than Christ's death being absolutely necessary. Other modern theologians such as John Murray have argued that God could have decided not to save mankind at all, or he could have done what he did – create humanity, permit the Fall and then save many of them through the death of His son. On the basis of a number of gospel texts Murray concluded "there is stated to be a necessity that can be met by nothing less than the blood of Jesus."

I reject this view as it implies that there are powers higher than God who can move him through "necessity". God is absolutely self determined and always acts out of His sovereign freedom (Psalm 115:3; 135:6) rather than anything external to Himself. Having made the decision to save – which I would argue was in accordance with one aspect of God's nature, His love – God then acted in accordance with the other aspects of His own intrinsic nature, such as His righteousness and justice and His wrath at our sins. In sending His son to be abused and killed God acted in the way that was most in accordance with all aspects of his nature. As Augustine said "this way whereby God deigned to liberate us through the Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ was both good and befitting the divine dignity ...." God acted to save this sinful race in the way he did precisely because of who he is. Christ's sufferings and death are completely congruent with the character of God. As the writer to the Hebrews put it:

"In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Hebrews 2:10).

We shall be looking at the question of precisely HOW Christ's death could be effective to appease God's anger and save us from our sins a little later.

## **WHO DID CHRIST DIE FOR?**

Did Christ die for only a certain portion of mankind, the elect as the Calvinists would have it, or for all humankind? Along with some modern theologians such as Thomas Nettles and Millard Erickson, I believe this question needs to be divided into two parts, firstly whom did Christ intend to provide atonement for through His suffering and death and secondly, who shall receive the application of these benefits.



I believe that Scripture clearly teaches that the intent of the atonement was universal – for all mankind. In the OT the words “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” in Isaiah 53:6, make it clear that Christ’s death was for the sins of everyone. In the NT the familiar words of John 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

again testify to the universal availability of salvation. Moreover, Hebrews 2:9 states that Jesus tasted death for everyone, John 1:29 affirms that Jesus’ sacrifice atones for the sins of us all and 1 John 2:2 states that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Equally convincing is 1 John 4:14 which says that “the Father has sent his Son to be the saviour of the world.” Jesus himself said that he gave life to the world (John 4:42). Thus, I think we can fairly say that Scripture firmly supports the contention that Jesus’ atonement was for all mankind.

Turning now to the application of the atonement, matters are unfortunately less clear, although I do believe that it is clear that application, unlike intention, is limited to certain individuals. According to John 10 Jesus laid down his life for those whom he calls by name (v. 3b), who hear his voice (vv. 3b, 16, 27a), who follow him (v. 27b) – these are the sheep given to the Son by the Father (v. 29a). In Romans 8 and verse 29, it is stated that those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His son. In Ephesians 1:4-5 it is said that God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight and that he predestined us to be adopted as His sons. In 1 Peter 1:1-2 Peter writes to “the elect” who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. These scriptures speak of the predestination of those who are to be saved.

Conversely, other scriptures (for example Luke 12:8; John 3:15-16; John 11:26; Acts 2:21) with their “whoever believes” or “everyone who believes” “may have eternal life” emphasise the individual choice behind salvation.

However, I believe that the Scriptures as a whole make it clear that the application of Christ’s atoning death is not universal.

To whom then does the atonement apply. Is it those who choose freely to come to Christ or those whom God has chosen to come? It is clear that there is a tension in Scripture between human freewill and a Calvinistic view of God’s predestination, although I do believe that the Scriptures (particularly Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; and 2 Timothy 1:9) make it quite clear that any such predestination is not on account of our own merit, holiness or good works. Perhaps the best comprehensible view is that held by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, that God in His omniscience foreknew who would be inclined to respond to His call to faith in His Son (the whoever) and that these persons he predestined – but I must admit that I find this explanation less than totally satisfactory. Indeed, I must admit that I don’t have a completely satisfactory answer to this issue, this tension. But, I don’t believe that all matters relating to God and His kingdom are able to be resolved in purely human logical terms. God’s revelation to us is sufficient but not complete. For now it is enough for us to know that WE have responded to positively to Christ’s atoning death and that we are therefore objects of the application of this death – that is we are saved.

Here I must also emphasise that the doctrine of predestination does not mean that it is useless for us to proclaim the Gospel or to pray for those not yet saved. Even if we were to hold to a completely Calvinistic view of the doctrine of predestination – which as I have already said I do not accept – then it might well be that preachers or ordinary Christians proclaiming the Gospel to those not yet saved or praying on their behalf was God’s means of drawing those people to saving faith in Christ. In any event many scriptures (for example Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 10:1, 14-15; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20) command preaching and prayer as a means of bringing others to Christ.

But, we do need to take action to accept the free pardon offered to us in God’s grace through Christ’s death. We need to appropriate this pardon to ourselves in order for it to be effective in our lives. I always like to illustrate this point with the story of George Wilson. In 1829 George Wilson robbed the US Mail in Philadelphia causing the death of a man in the process. Wilson was arrested, tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. But Wilson had influential friends who persuaded the then President, Andrew Jackson, to give Wilson a presidential pardon. But, when he was told of this Wilson refused to accept the pardon. The authorities didn’t know what to do, how could they carry out a sentence of death on a man who had been pardoned of his crime? The case ended up in the Supreme Court where the majority of the judges decided that the pardon was merely a piece of paper whose value depended on its acceptance by the guilty party. If the pardon was refused it was as if it had never been issued. Thus George Wilson went to the gallows and was executed whilst his pardon lay on the Sheriff’s desk. In the same way, each one of us needs to individually accept the pardon which Christ has obtained for us by his death in order for that pardon to be effective for us. The way we do that is by turning to Christ in faith and acknowledging him as our Lord and master.

At this point, I should perhaps briefly deal with the question of the position of believers in non-Christian faiths. With all due respect to theologians such as Karl Rahner and Clark Pinnock and indeed the Second Vatican Council, I must say that my view is firmly that salvation is only to be found through acceptance of God’s grace through saving faith in Jesus Christ. Here I rather like the NRSV translation of John 3:36: “Whoever believes the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.”

Rahner’s transcendental theology weakens the importance of the cross and Christ’s death and resurrection and marginalizes the biblical demands of repentance, faith and volitional commitment to Christ and thus I completely reject it. In my view, saving grace is not to be found in the world’s non-Christian religions. In God’s goodness, certain elements of truth are to be found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism etc – but not the grace of God given through Christ that redeems the soul. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the work he accomplished on the cross and the Scriptural support for these issues must not be compromised in the name of political correctness or modernity. Nevertheless, having taken a firm stand on this issue, I must say that it is not for me or indeed any of us to judge or condemn non-Christians – that is exclusively God’s province. It’s not for us to say how God will choose to exercise his wrath, or perhaps his grace and mercy, when judging them. What we can say is firstly that the only sure way to salvation is through faith in Christ – that is why we must evangelise – and secondly that any salvation which may be possible for those who do not know Christ is only possible as a result of Christ’s death on the cross.

## HOW DID THE CROSS TAKE AWAY SINS

What I'm going to say now is really important and also quite complex, so please listen carefully.

Christ's death on the cross was an atoning sacrifice for us, in substitution for us he paid the price of our sins; that is he suffered the death penalty that we all deserved. This sacrifice formed the basis of a new covenant with us, redeemed us from the grip of sin and death, justified us before God, propitiated God's wrath at our sins, reconciled us to God and enabled our sanctification. Only Christ the person who was uniquely both completely God and completely man could have achieved this - because as completely God he was without sin (and therefore in a position to pay the price for our sins) and as completely man he was identified with us and thus able to substitute for us.

We've used rather a lot of terms there, some of which like 'propitiate', 'atoning' and 'sanctification' may be a bit unfamiliar to you – but don't worry we're now going to proceed to look at each of these concepts.

### **Atonement through Sacrifice**

Christ's death on the cross did away with sins and secured our salvation because he became a penal substitutionary sacrifice for us. Let's look at that concept from a scriptural perspective. We can trace the idea of animal sacrifice back to the Patriarchs who all established altars of sacrifice to the Lord. Exactly how they understood the concept of sacrifice is not completely clear, but certainly they must have understood the idea of the sacrifice of an animal atoning for sin, as Abraham's near slaying of Isaac, prefigured the substitutionary death of Jesus two thousand years later. The statement that Abraham sacrificed a ram "instead of his son" (Genesis 22:13) affirms the substitutionary nature of animal sacrifice.

I believe that the key to this derives from the Passover in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-30) where each household slayed an unblemished yearling lamb and applied its blood to their doorframe to secure exemption from divine judgement. This atoning sacrifice resulted in the delivery of the Israelites from bondage (Exodus 14). Again, this death of a sacrificial lamb anticipates the death of the Lamb of God – Christ.

The Levitical sacrifices are also relevant. The burnt offering (Leviticus 1:3-17), the fellowship or peace offering (Leviticus 3:1-17), the sin offering (Leviticus 4:1-35) and the guilt offering (Leviticus 5:14-6:7) followed a pattern involving all or most of the following elements:

1. An unblemished animal signifying moral perfection was presented at the door of the sanctuary by the offerers.
2. The offerers placed their hands on the animal's head, signifying identification with the victim and the transfer of sin's penalty to the substitute.
3. The animal was then slain signifying death as the punishment for sin.
4. The priest sprinkled the blood of the victim – signifying its life – on the altar.
5. The offering in part or in whole was burned so that its fragrance would ascend to God as a pleasing aroma.

Scripture clearly indicates that the purpose of these sacrifices was to ‘make atonement’ – a phrase which occurs some 60 times in the OT. In sacrificial contexts atonement meant to propitiate God’s wrath, expiate or extinguish sins and restore fellowship between God and sinners.

The annual Day of Atonement was the most important celebration in the OT. In preparation, the high priest sacrificed a young bull as a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering to atone for his own sins and those of the priesthood. The high priest sprinkled the blood of the bull on the golden lid of the ark – called the atonement cover (Exodus 25:17) – the mercy seat. Then the high priest sacrificed the first male goat as a sin-offering and sprinkled its blood on the atonement cover to expiate the uncleanness of the people (Leviticus 16:15-19) and make atonement for them (Leviticus 23:28). The animals died in the place of the sinners, just as Christ died in our place. The high priest then laid hands on the head of the second goat (the scapegoat) and confessed the sins of all the community transferring them to the scapegoat. The scapegoat was then sent out to die in the wilderness, bearing away the sins of the people.

The Day of Atonement ritual dramatically depicted the holiness of God, the gravity of sin and God’s gracious provision for sin by substitutionary sacrifice.

Thus, even in OT times atonement was brought about not on the basis of good works but on the basis of God’s grace and mercy. However, these OT worshippers only received a temporary remission of their sins – the ritual had to be repeated every year – and their fellowship with God was less than perfect. Of course, this was because the final sacrifice on the cross had not yet been made. If you want to look at a fuller analysis of OT sacrifice and the way it prefigures Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, I suggest you read the notes of my Teaching Day “Jesus: The Lamb of God” which can be downloaded from my website.

Thus, the whole basis of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross as an answer to sin is that of penal substitutionary sacrifice. Christ substituted himself in my place and your place and died the death that we all deserved. As you’ve just seen, this whole concept is thoroughly embedded in OT scripture. Christ’s death and suffering are also visualised in many OT passages such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 52:13-53:12 to name just two of the better known. The latter passage from Isaiah also takes up the theme of substitutionary sacrifice ‘surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows’ (Isaiah 53:4), ‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isaiah 53:6), ‘the punishment that brought us peace was upon him’ (Isaiah 53:5) and Christ is referred to as a guilt offering (Isaiah 53:10).

Jesus himself spoke of his death in these terms ‘the Son of Man did not come to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). Indeed the Greek in the last two words of this quote could be translated as ‘instead of many’ or ‘in the place of many’ – again making the substitutionary theme clear. The theme of substitution is also clear from the accounts of the Lord’s Supper. In Luke 22:19 Jesus took bread and broke it and said ‘This is my body given for you’. Jesus then took the cup of wine and said ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you.’ The theme is even clearer in Matthew’s account where the Greek of Matthew 26:28 which reads “ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Again the Greek might be better translated as ‘in place of many’ or ‘on behalf of many’.

Furthermore, Jesus' sayings imply that his death supplanted the Mosaic covenant sacrifices and inaugurated the new covenant promised by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-33). Jesus implied that his death made an atonement for sins that was perfect and permanent.

One of the reasons why many reject Christianity, or at least find it difficult to come to terms with, is that it means we need not and indeed cannot contribute anything whatsoever to our salvation. Christ's death on the cross as the 'once for all' perfect sacrifice for all humankind leaves no space for any good works or any other action of ours. Christ has done it all, once for all, once and for all. As we said earlier, humanity had proved over and over again totally helpless to save itself by its own efforts. As we've seen in the George Wilson story, the one thing we do need to do is to accept Christ's sacrifice for us and to acknowledge him as our Lord. That, however, is not contributing anything to or for our salvation it is merely an acceptance of it.

Nobody has ever put it better than Augustus Toplady in his great hymn 'Rock of Ages'  
Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to your cross I cling;  
Naked come to you for dress;  
Helpless look to you for grace;  
Foul, I too the fountain fly;  
Wash me saviour or I die.

So, the whole basis of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross as an answer to sin is that of penal substitutionary sacrifice. Christ substituted himself in my place and your place and died the death that we all deserved. I am convinced this is the correct view of the cross as it fits much better with scripture than other theories. However, many different theories of the atonement have subsisted throughout church history and I think it is worthwhile just briefly summarising some of the more important of these so that you won't be led into error should you happen to come across them.

One of the earliest theories was that Christ's death was a delivery of humanity from the clutches of the devil under whose enslaving power we had fallen – thus Christ's death was in effect a ransom paid to the devil. However, Satan was unable to hold onto Christ and he arose from the dead.

In the Middle Ages, the theory that Christ's death satisfied God's wounded honour was popular. Here sin was viewed as a failure to render God his due, namely subjection and obedience.

The theory of exemplarism focuses on Christ as the great teacher and example and asserts that salvation is brought about by the change of attitude these aspects of Christ's nature bring about in humans. In this theory, Christ's death itself accomplished nothing.

Grotius contemplated God as a world ruler who preserves moral government. He argued that Christ's death did maintain the moral order of the universe, but that Christ did not bear the full penalty of human sin and that his death did not propitiate divine wrath.

Karl Barth affirmed that Christ objectively reconciled man to God but he denies any element of propitiation and holds that Christ takes human beings into unity with him. Death will

come to us as punishment for our sins, but our unity with Christ will enable us to partake in his resurrection.

## **THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CROSS**

We're now going to turn away from what happened on the cross to look at what was achieved by it. I like the way Packer puts it: "that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgement for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory." We all have to realise that without the cross we were all going to fall under God's terrible judgement.

This leads us to ask – why did God in Christ take our place and bear our sin? What did he accomplish by his self sacrifice?

The NT offers us three answers to these questions, which can be summarised as 'salvation', 'revelation' and 'conquest'. In other words, God has saved or rescued us, disclosed more of himself to us and overcome evil.

## **SALVATION**

Let's start by looking at salvation.

The blessings which 'such a great salvation' (Hebrews 2:3) have brought us are richly diverse. I'm going to look at them in terms of five images 'propitiation', 'redemption', 'justification', 'reconciliation' and 'covenant' in order to try and give you as complete a view as possible of what our salvation is. After that we'll briefly sum up our view of salvation and then look at something further that arises out of our salvation – 'sanctification'. But please remember that these are just images, they can't completely describe the wonder and mystery of the cross – it's beyond human understanding. Nevertheless these images are useful, they do illustrate and help us to understand what happened on the cross and holding them all together will massively assist our appreciation of our salvation.

### ***Propitiation***

To propitiate somebody means to appease or satisfy his anger. This is in contrast with expiation which is an impersonal term not normally used with reference to a person. Thus to expiate sin is to nullify its effects in an impersonal way. If God is propitiated in respect of our sin, does he then get angry? Well we've already seen that the anger or wrath of God, although totally unlike sinful human anger, is a very real and scriptural concept. But, are we really to believe that Jesus' death propitiated the Father's anger and made him turn away from it?

We should reject primitive concepts of propitiation; they have no place in Christianity. However, that doesn't mean that there is no Biblical concept of propitiation at all. It is when God's wrath is purged of unworthy ideas that the propitiation is also similarly purged. Theologians like C H Dodd and A T Hanson are naturally uncomfortable with propitiation because they are uncomfortable with the idea of the wrath of God. Since Dodd was the editor of the New English Bible it is not surprising that he has eliminated the word 'propitiation' from the NT there, translating the Greek *hilasterion* or *hilasmos* as expiation, or simply

extinguishment. Dr Leon Morris has extensively critiqued Dodd's work and I believe Morris is right in saying that the word refers to the turning away of anger and that 'a propitiation' is thus the correct translation of *hilasterion* and that the noun 'propitiation' is the correct translation of *hilasmos*. The NIV translators seem to agree, since although they render this rather poorly as 'sacrifice of atonement' in the main NIV Bible text (in Romans 3:25) and 'atoning sacrifice' (in 1 John 2:2), the notes in the study section of the NIV Bible make explicit reference to it being a sacrifice of propitiation to satisfy God's wrath.

It is true that the verb 'to propitiate' or the noun 'propitiation' are not found very often in the NT (4 times in the NKJV), but I do believe the concept is significant as it is one of the aspects of the salvation which Christ won for us on the cross. If it were expiation then it is, as we have seen, an impersonal process, but if it were propitiation, it was a highly personal matter. This is clearly significant. Indeed, I would argue that a truly impersonal method of forgiveness has no place in a theistic universe.

Propitiation was necessary because the sins of mankind aroused the wrath of God – and here we must remember that God's anger is completely pure and predictable, never capricious or arbitrary or spiteful or vindictive. In pagan religions, it was humans who offered sacrifices, or otherwise appeased their primitive Gods. But, scripture states that there is nothing whatsoever that we can do to appease God's anger. There is no possibility of bribing or cajoling God to forgive us, for we deserve nothing but his judgement. Nor did Christ by his sacrifice prevail on God to pardon us – no, God himself had taken the initiative in his sheer mercy and grace. God himself presented Jesus Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice (Romans 3:25). It is not that we loved him, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10). God's love is the source of the atonement not the result of it.

The propitiatory sacrifice was God himself (albeit in the person of his Son). In giving his Son, he was, in a sense, giving himself. Thus we can say that God did indeed need to be propitiated, that God himself in his holy love undertook to do the propitiating and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. There is no crudity here to provoke ridicule, only profound holy love that should provoke our worship. However, I do also believe that the concept of expiation is also of relevance. As Dr T Wells put it:

"In Pauline thought, man is alienated from God by sin and God is alienated from man by his wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God can look on man without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated."

### ***Redemption***

Our image of salvation now changes from the religious ritual of propitiation to the market place. For, at its most basic, to 'redeem' means to buy back, whether as a purchase or as a ransom. Thus, this image speaks of our captivity in sin, which made a divine act of rescue necessary. Propitiation focussed on the wrath of God that was placated by the cross, redemption focuses on the plight of sinners from which they were ransomed by the cross. Ransom is certainly an appropriate term here. The Greek words *lytroo* (usually translated 'redeem') and *apolytroosis* (usually translated 'redemption') are derived from the Greek word *lytron*, which was a technical term in the ancient world for the purchase or release of a slave – which was often very costly.

So we have been ransomed by Christ not merely ‘redeemed’ or ‘delivered’ by him, and the price of that ransom was very costly indeed – it was Christ’s passion and death.

In the OT, property, animals, persons and even nations could all be redeemed by the payment of a price. In Judaism, a ‘kinsman redeemer’ had the right, even the duty, to buy back property that had been alienated so that it might remain in a family or tribe. We see this in the role of Boaz with Ruth (in Ruth 3 and 4) and of Jeremiah over land (in Jeremiah 32:6-8). With animals, all firstborn males of all livestock belonged by right to Yahweh, although donkeys and other unclean animals could be redeemed or bought back by the owner (Exodus 13:13; 34:20). Individual Israelites, each had to pay a ransom for their lives at the time of the national census (Exodus 30:12-16). Firstborn sons had belonged to God since the first Passover, and also had to be redeemed by their parents. An impoverished Israelite compelled to sell himself into slavery could also redeem himself or be redeemed by a relative (Leviticus 25:47-55). As regards nations, scripture uses the vocabulary of redemption to describe Yahweh’s release of Israel both from slavery in Egypt (e.g. Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 7:8; 15:15 etc) and from exile in Babylon (e.g. Isaiah 43:1-4; 48:20 etc). In all these cases, redemption involved a costly intervention. As B B Warfield says “... a redemption without a price paid is as anomalous a transaction as a sale without money passing.”

Thus, we can clearly see that the concept of redemption is firmly embedded in OT scripture.

In the NT, the concept is still that those needing redemption are in a bad situation and can be released only by the payment of a price. But, now the plight is moral rather than material, and the price was the atoning death of God’s Son. This is made evident from Jesus’ words in Mark 10:45:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Here the imagery implies that we were held in captivity from which only the payment of a ransom can free us and that the ransom price is the life of the Messiah. Our lives are forfeit; Christ’s life will be sacrificed instead. This clearly implies the concept of substitution – the substitution of Christ for each and every one of us – which I presented earlier as one of the essential aspects of the atonement. The original Greek with its two adjectives *antilytron hyper pollon* (literally ‘a ransom in place of and for the sake of many’) makes this even clearer than the English translation. A similar expression occurs in 1 Timothy 2:5-6 ‘Christ Jesus .... gave himself as a ransom for all men.’

The fact that we are on the correct basis here is shown by the use of similar language by the Jewish historian Josephus when he writes of the visit of the Roman general Crassus to the Temple in Jerusalem in 54-53 BC, when Crassus was intent on plundering the sanctuary. Eleazar who was guardian of the temple treasures gave Crassus a large bar of gold worth 10,000 shekels as *lytron anti panton* or ‘a ransom instead of all’. Thus, the gold bar was a substitute for all the Temple treasure.

What then was the moral bondage from which we could not rescue ourselves and from which Christ has ransomed us? Firstly, this is our transgressions or sins since redemption is made synonymous with the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14), secondly, it is the divine judgement or ‘curse of the law pronounced on lawbreakers’ (Galatians 3:13; 4:5), and thirdly, it is ‘all wickedness’ (Titus 2:14).



More than that we shall eventually be released from *all* the ravages of the Fall – although we have not yet fully experienced this and we will not do so until the second coming of Christ. At that point, the whole groaning creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and be brought to share in the glory of God’s children. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is himself the seal, the guarantee and the first-fruits of our final redemption (Romans 8:18-30; Ephesians 1:14; 4:30).

As we have said, the price of our redemption was Christ’s death. Nothing less could suffice, the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). Christ paid the price of our ransom in the incarnation where he set aside his majesty and took on all the limitations of humanity and on the cross he gave of his life. Because Christ has bought us with his blood – that is with his life – we belong to him and that should motivate us as individual Christians to holiness. As Paul says “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

In fact, in a recapitulation of the Trinity, we could say that we belong to God three times over. Firstly, because he created us, secondly, because he redeemed us, and thirdly, because he, through his spirit, indwells us. Bought by Christ, we have no right to become the slaves of anyone or anything else, we are Christ’s slaves and in His service is true freedom.

### ***Justification***

We now move to an image of salvation derived from the law court. Justification is the opposite of condemnation and both are verdicts of the judge over the accused when he pronounces guilt or innocence. Ages ago in a speech to Job, Bildad posed the crucial question: “How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure.” (Job 25:4). Some scholars have asserted that justification is simply forgiveness, nothing but forgiveness. However, I contend that the concepts are complimentary but not identical. Forgiveness cancels our liability to punishment for sin; but justification bestows on us a righteous standing before God, which goes further than mere forgiveness.

The idea of justification by faith was of course the key biblical idea rediscovered by the sixteenth century church reformers. It is still a key concept today. A group of modern Anglican evangelicals wrote:

“Justification by Faith appears to us, as it does to all evangelicals, to be the heart and hub, the paradigm and essence, of the whole economy of God’s saving grace. Like Atlas, it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of God’s love in Christ towards sinners.”

However, some Christians object to any projection of God as judge and king and not as Father, but the juridical flavour of the justification image is well balanced by other images which I want to present – such as reconciliation. Others have objected to the image as a particular invention of Paul. This latter criticism is not sustainable as the idea of justification before God goes back to Jesus who said that the tax collector who prayed sincerely ‘went home justified before God’ rather than the self righteous Pharisee (Luke 18:14). Indeed the notion goes back to the OT where Isaiah said that God’s righteous and suffering servant ‘will justify many’ because ‘he will bear their iniquities’ (Isaiah 53:11).

The Roman Catholic Church does not teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The council of Trent formulation holds that justification takes place at baptism and that post baptismal sins are not included in the process. The Second Vatican Council and Professor

Hans Kung's writings appear to indicate a modification to this approach, although this has not yet really permeated deeply into the teachings of the Catholic Church generally and Kung's views appear to retain a confusion between justification and sanctification. Nevertheless, I am completely convinced that justification (God declaring us righteous through his Son's death) is instantaneous and complete, admitting no degrees, from the moment we accept Christ into our hearts by faith. This is primarily because our justification is a once and for all judicial act of God declaring us righteous, it does not relate to God infusing righteousness into us or making us experientially holy. However, sanctification (God making us righteous through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit), though begun from the moment we are justified, is gradual and incomplete throughout our life here on earth, as we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ with ever increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is why many of the greatest figures in scripture, such as Abraham and David were beset with weakness and uncleanness.

The Catholic Church is uncomfortable with the concept of total human depravity – caused by the Fall – which lies behind our insistence on the need for a radical salvation and for that to be purely by the grace of God with no contribution from ourselves. They contend that we have freewill, and that therefore we are able to co-operate with grace and so contribute to salvation. However, I insist on holding fast to the clear pronouncements of the NT such as: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no-one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9);

and

“know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16);

and

“he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” (Titus 3:5).

These texts make it clear that we are justified not by works but by grace, not by law but through faith, not by our righteous deeds but God's mercy. Here we do not co-operate with salvation – we can only accept it or reject it. Moreover the faith which justifies us is not a work of ours, our faith would have no value were it not for Christ's sacrifice. The value is not in the faith but in the object of that faith – Christ. Salvation is not by works but into works.

But, if our sanctification is never completed in this life, how can we be justified by a righteous God when we have not yet been made completely righteous? This is a difficult question. Some speak of us ‘putting on Christ's righteousness’, as if it were a cloak that would hide our sinful nature from God – but this is not a clear picture of what is taking place here. It is rather that Christ's righteousness is imputed or credited to us, just as righteousness had been imputed to Abraham – ‘Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.’ (Genesis 15:6). Phineas was another one to whom righteousness was imputed – ‘Phineas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come.’ (Psalm 106:30-31). This presents a problem to most people today because we are firmly of the belief that righteousness is a purely ethical quality. But I believe that from God's viewpoint righteousness is basically a legal concept of ‘right standing’. Clearly, a ‘standing’ can be conferred on someone regardless of his personal qualities and thus I believe that in God's terms Christ's righteousness can be credited or imputed to us.

Also, in order to understand completely the answer to this question we need to take another look at the meaning and grounds of justification. Firstly, the source of our justification is made clear by the expression ‘justified by his grace’ in Romans 3:24 – we are justified by God’s utterly undeserved favour. Since there is no one righteous, not even one, (Romans 3:10), it is equally certain that no one can declare himself righteous in God’s sight – thus self justification is impossible (Romans 3:20). It is God who justifies (Romans 8:33), confers the standing upon us, because only he can, and he does it freely, not because of any works of ours, but because of His grace.

Secondly, the ground of our justification is that we are justified by Christ’s blood, that is to say His life given up for us (Romans 5:9). Justification is not the same as an amnesty, or pardon without reason or principle. Justification is an act of God’s justice. When God justifies sinners he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally (and only legally) righteous, free from any liability for laws broken, because he himself in His Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking. The reasons why we are justified freely by God’s grace are that Christ paid the ransom price and that God presented him as a propitiatory sacrifice. In other words, we are justified by Christ’s blood. Without the atonement, there could be no justification – that’s why I said earlier that if in God’s mercy those who have never heard the gospel might be saved then Christ’s death on the cross is still the means by which they are saved.

Thirdly, the means of our justification is that we are justified through faith. Grace and faith are inextricably interlinked, as faith merely accepts what grace freely offers. So we are not justified *by* faith, we are justified by Christ’s blood and God’s grace – there is no merit as such in faith, it is only the means to enable us to receive that grace and benefit from the blood.

But, we do need to accept the gift of salvation as we saw earlier in the George Wilson story.

Fourthly, we are justified *in* Christ. We are justified *through* Christ’s sacrifice, but also *in* our personal relationship with him. That means that our justification is linked to our union with Christ and all the benefits that brings. As Tom Wright says, “justification is not an individualist’s charter, but God’s declaration that we belong to the covenant community.” This community is called to good works (Titus 2:14; 3:8), so there is no real conflict between Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith, a faith that produces good works, and James’ emphasis on good works that issue from faith (James 2:14-26).

Thus, I hope you will see that justification does not involve God pretending that we have been made righteous. God has declared us legally righteous, conferred the standing of righteousness upon us, because in faith we have accepted the grace of the benefits of Christ’s sacrificial death. Some people dislike this emphasis on God as a God of legality and law, but I believe this is a mistaken view of our God. The whole of the OT is strongly concerned with a legal relationship between God and his chosen people and the laws he gave them to obey, indeed the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible *torah* means ‘law’. Not only does God promulgate strict moral laws, but also the whole universe is based on rules or laws – that is why we humans have been able to develop science. Whether we like it or not, our God is a God of law.

In any event, whatever the exact mechanism, we can be completely confident from scripture that through faith in Christ God *does* consider us to be righteous, and I submit that God's view is the only opinion which matters.

### ***Reconciliation***

Our fourth image of salvation is reconciliation. This reconciliation begins with our reconciliation with God as he has redeemed us and justified us because of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice and continues with our membership of a reconciled community of Christ.

Reconciliation with God is the beginning, it well expresses the at-one-ment of the atonement, in which God and human beings come back together after having been alienated for so long. In fact, the word reconciliation only occurs four times in the NIV translation of the Bible. It is significant that in Romans 5:9-11, which is one of the great passages on reconciliation in the NT, to be reconciled and to be justified are parallels:

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:9-11).

Reconciliation and justification, although both effected by the cross, are not identical. Justification is our legal standing before God as our judge; reconciliation is our personal standing with our Father in His kingdom. When we are justified, we have peace with God, which is reconciliation (Romans 5:1)

Two other NT terms also confirm the fact that we are at peace with God, namely 'adoption' and 'access'. As regards adoption, Jesus himself gave us permission to approach God as Abba, Father and Paul takes this up emphasising the privileges we have in being sons instead of slaves, and therefore God's heirs as well (e.g. Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:26-29; 4:1-7). Access gives us active communion with God, especially in prayer. Twice Paul brings together 'access to God' and 'peace with God' (Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:17-18). The writer to the Hebrews borrows from the Day of Atonement ritual in order to convey the closeness we can now have to God:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Thus reconciliation, peace with God, adoption into His family and access into His presence all bear witness to the same new relationship with him into which God has brought us. Reconciliation also has a horizontal as well as a vertical aspect, for God has reconciled us to one another as well as to him. This is made clear by Ephesians 2:11-22 that focuses particularly on the healing of the breach between Jews and Gentiles. He reminds his gentile Christian leaders that formerly they were both excluded from citizenship in Israel and alienated from God – but that they have now been brought near to God and near to Israel.

Let's now look at how reconciliation has taken place and the respective roles played in it by God, Christ and ourselves. The passage that particularly informs us about these issues is 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

This is probably the most important passage on reconciliation in the whole of the NT. The first truth it makes clear is that God was the author of the reconciliation with mankind. In this passage, everything flows from God – God reconciling, God giving, God appealing, and God making Christ to be sin for us. In William Temple's memorable words “all is of God; the only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed.” Nor should we give the initiative to Christ. He went willingly to the cross, but he was doing the Father's will as he confessed in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39). The reconciliation was entirely born out of the love of God – for He so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (John 3:16).

Whenever the verb ‘to reconcile’ occurs in the NT, either God is the subject (he reconciled us to him) or it is passive (we were reconciled to God). God is never the object. It is never said that Christ reconciled the Father to us. However, the barrier between us and God was not entirely on our side, the enmity was on both sides. The barrier was erected by our rebellion against God and His wrath against us on account of that rebellion. Therefore the ‘peace’ that the evangelists preach (Ephesians 2:17) is that God has turned aside from his enmity towards us because of Christ's sacrifice – and this is preached in order that we might give up our enmity towards God.

Returning to our reconciliation passage, if God is the author of the reconciliation then Christ is the agent of that reconciliation. This is made absolutely clear by the first two verses – 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

These verses tell us absolutely plainly that God took the initiative to reconcile and he did it through Christ. They also make it clear that the reconciliation is universal ‘.. reconciling the world ..’. We also need to note the use of the past tense ‘reconciled’; God has completed this reconciliation once and for all. As P T Forsyth says:

“God was in Christ reconciling, actually reconciling, finishing the work. It was not a tentative preliminary affair ..... Reconciliation was finished in Christ's death. Paul did not preach a gradual reconciliation. He preached what the old divines used to call the finished work ..... He preached something done once for all – a reconciliation which is the base of every soul's reconciling, not an invitation only.”

But what did God do in and through Christ? This can be answered both positively and negatively. In the negative sense, God declined to reckon our transgressions against us (2 Corinthians 5:19b). Of course we deserved to have them counted against us – but if God did

that we would die – ‘If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130:3). So, God in His mercy refused to reckon our sins against us, or require us to bear their penalty. But, God cannot condone sin because of His just and righteous nature, – so what has he done with our sins? The positive thing God did here is made clear by verse 21 of our passage:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

For our sake, God actually made the sinless Christ to be sin, to carry the burden of all of the sins of each and every one of us. God did not reckon our sins to us he reckoned them to Christ. As Martin Luther wrote:

“Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say ‘Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; yet set on me what was yours. You became what you were not, that I might become what I was not.’”

Emil Brunner expressed the same thought quite succinctly: “Justification means this miracle: that Christ takes our place and we take his.”

Returning once again to the text, we are studying, if God is the author of reconciliation and Christ is the agent of reconciliation, we are the ambassadors of the reconciliation. Let’s look at the full text of our passage once again:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

So far, we have just looked at the first part of each of the first two verses, now let’s look at the second part of each verse. Here we see that God has committed us to both the ministry and the message of reconciliation. Moreover, this ministry of reconciliation is itself in two stages. It begins as a proclamation that God was in Christ reconciling and that he made Christ to be sin for us. It continues in the second two verses with an appeal to people to ‘be reconciled to God’ – that is avail yourself of the offered terms of reconciliation with God, or simply ‘receive it’ (Romans 5:11).

We must keep these things distinct. Yes, God completely finished the work of reconciliation at the cross BUT it is still necessary for sinners to repent and believe and so ‘be reconciled to God’. So, if any of you have never received God’s reconciliation by repenting and believing I urge you to do that right now today – your salvation is too important to leave to another day.

Finally, we must also remember that reconciliation has a horizontal dimension to it. Jesus taught that ‘if you are offering your gift at the altar’ he said ‘and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave the gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift’ (Matthew 5:23-24). It is impossible to enter into the reconciliation that Christ died to accomplish and at the same time to nourish grudges against our fellow human beings. That is why we offer one another a sign of peace just before the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer in the service of Holy Communion.

## *Covenant*

Our final image of salvation is covenant. We already touched on this when we looked at Christ's death as the atonement, but now we're going to consider it in a little more detail. On the last night of Jesus's pre-resurrection life, he was in the upper room with the disciples. During the meal, he took bread, gave God thanks, broke the bread and gave it to the disciples with the words 'this is my body'. A little while later he took the cup of wine, gave thanks over it and gave it to them saying 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Corinthians 11:23-25), or perhaps, 'this is my blood of the new covenant' (Mark 14:24). This was, of course, the institution of the Holy Eucharist.

Here Jesus explicitly stated that he was making a new covenant in his blood – which as we have seen, means that he was making a new covenant in his sacrificial death.

God made a number of covenants with mankind. Generally these didn't impose obligations on mankind, but the Sinai covenant was different. The Israelites promised to keep to the terms and conditions of this covenant, as a people, in return for God's blessing on them as a people – but under threat of God's curse if they didn't keep the covenant. This covenant largely defined the Jewish nation and was fundamentally important to their identity. Nevertheless, they manifestly failed to keep its terms and conditions. God forgave them time and time again, but their sin and rebellion continued and eventually God sent the Israelites into exile as a punishment. It was a hopeless situation, yet God was a covenant-keeping God. He said 'I will never break my covenant with you' (Judges 2:1). So what could be done? God promised a radical solution in the form of a completely new covenant through the prophet Jeremiah:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Although this passage is by far the most important OT reference to a new covenant, it is by no means the only one. Ezekiel also looks forward to an everlasting covenant of peace (Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26; 34:25; 37:26) whilst Isaiah says that the Servant will be 'a covenant for the people and a light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6) and that it will be everlasting (Isaiah 55:3; 61:8).

So when Jesus spoke of the new covenant he is linking his death to the forgiveness it will bring to believers and the new covenant to which the OT writers looked forward. We have seen how important the Sinai covenant was to the Israelite nation in the OT, thus to speak of replacing it with something new is an enormous change. Indeed. The cross of Christ IS radical – it transforms everything. The law and the OT sacrifices melt away before God's grace.

The new covenant is not brought about by keeping the law and the law, although it surely fulfilled the purposes of God in its time, was unable to bring salvation (see Galatians 3). That

is the purpose of the new covenant. The covenant with Abraham was different from the Sinai covenant, because it did not involve the keeping of terms and conditions by mankind, and Paul argues strongly that the original Abrahamic covenant is still in full force (again see Galatians 3).

The writer to the Hebrews is especially fond of the idea of Christ's saving work as a covenant. He uses the word covenant 17 times, whilst the rest of the NT has only 16 uses of it. He assures us that the new covenant is a better covenant (Hebrews 7:21-22) and is founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). Paul also argues that the new covenant is superior, because it gives life where the old covenant brought death (2 Corinthians 3:6). Hebrews also makes the point that Christ's sacrifice was necessary for forgiveness of sins committed under the old covenant (Hebrews 9:15).

To see the death of Jesus as a new covenant, then, is to see it as a radical reshaping of religion and our relations with God. It is the offering of the sacrifice of Christ's death that not only establishes the new covenant, but does so by taking away sin. Matthew makes this quite clear:

"This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28).

This being so there was no need for the regulations of the law. The way to God was now seen to be through Christ and through him alone:

"Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

As Paul says this gives us a new freedom. We can approach God boldly in the name of Christ. All else falls away. Nothing else matters.

The image of salvation as covenant also makes it clear why we need to accept Christ's sacrifice in faith, just as Abraham had faith. Without faith, we are not members of the new covenant.

The Eucharist is a constant reminder of the new covenant:

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Lord's death is central. It is by that death alone that our sins are put away and we are brought into the new covenant relationship with God. This is God's final, eternal way. There is no means of improving on this new eternal covenant; our task is to live in a manner befitting that covenant.

## **Conclusions about Salvation**

We have now looked at the concept of salvation in terms of five quite separate images 'propitiation', 'redemption', 'justification', 'reconciliation' and 'covenant'. Each of these highlights a different aspect of our human need. Propitiation underscores the wrath of God upon us, redemption our captivity to sin, justification our guilt, reconciliation our enmity against God and our alienation from him and covenant entering into a new relationship with God. Additionally they all highlight that the saving initiative for our salvation was taken entirely by God in His love. He propitiated His own wrath, redeemed us from our bondage, declared us righteous in His sight, reconciled us to himself, and in the person of his Son announced a new covenant relationship. Finally, all five images plainly teach that God's



saving work was achieved through the blood of Christ in his substitutionary sacrifice. Here Christ's blood is a symbol of his life laid down in a violent death and it is plain in each of the five images that he died in our place as a substitute for us. The death of Jesus was an atoning sacrifice because of which God averted His wrath from us, the ransom price by which we have been redeemed, the condemnation of the innocent that the guilty might be justified as the sinless one was made sin for us.

For those who may still struggle with the notion of Christ dying as a sacrificial substitute for us all, I must make it clear as we come to the end of this part of our day, that this is not an image or theory of the atonement. It is rather the essence and heart of the atonement itself. None of the images we have considered could stand apart from and without this concept.

Although our five images are all different views of salvation and each reveals different aspects of salvation to us, we must never forget that they are just images, pictures chosen to help us understand the one indivisible reality – salvation, a concept so complex and wonderful that some aspects of it will for ever remain beyond human understanding. Yet, we must understand the glory of the divine substitution to the best of our abilities – for the better we understand that substitution, the easier it is for us to trust in the subject – Christ himself. By His sacrifice, Christ has won for us the forgiveness of our sins and the consequent annulling of the sentence of death that previously hung over us and has won for us the gifts of eternal life and spiritual peace with God.

Let us possess our salvation and live in full assurance of it. Because of who Christ is and what he has done, believers may know that they belong to him forever and that they are saved indeed. John emphasises this by using the phrase “we know” eight times in 1 John 5. We also gain such assurance experientially through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Our Christian experience should be one of full assurance, as the writer to the Hebrews said:

“ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” (Hebrews 6:11).

Unlike our salvation itself, our *hope* of salvation admits of different degrees of certainty and may fluctuate in strength. But, we must not be shaken by doubts – which come to us all – rather our faith should be strong and vital. Again as the writer to the Hebrews says ‘Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith’ (Hebrews 10:22). Assured of permanent and unchangeable acceptance with God forever, Christians can live and serve courageously with hearts filled with peace and confidence.

Further, let us be delivered from all feelings of guilt. Guilt derives from firstly actually breaking God's law and secondly judging oneself to be in such violation. Believers may be unduly severe on themselves, perhaps because of a stern upbringing or belonging to a legalistic church. Such Christians need to be reminded that the one who judges justly has declared them ‘not guilty’ because they have had the righteousness of Christ credited or imputed to them. Whilst I certainly don't wish to encourage sin, I firmly assert that we need to celebrate this glorious reality.

Having spoken of what salvation IS, let me just touch briefly on what it IS NOT. Some Christians insist that ALL the benefits won by Christ on the cross are available to us in this life immediately following our conversion. They would claim that all Christians should be rich, never experience sickness etc. To some extent, I have already made it clear that certain benefits of the atonement are in the future and we shall deal with this again in a moment

when we look at sanctification. However, I just wanted to make it absolutely plain and clear that certain aspects of Christ's work are in the future and will not be fully realised until the second coming. Paul makes this quite clear in passages such as Ephesians 1:14. Until Christ comes again we live in a tension between the now and the not-yet in which we taste the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:5), but do not yet come into them fully (1 Corinthians 13:8-12; 1 John 3:2-3). Until this second coming, we shall continue to struggle against Satan and his dark forces and suffer from the effects of them.

So how should we respond to our salvation?

Firstly, we must know that Christ died for us, yes for each one of us. That Christ did indeed give himself for us individually is made quite clear by Paul's writings to the Galatians, for example Galatians 2:20:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20).

Christ's suffering and death was a very individual and personal event. How wonderful it is to think of Christ's death being especially for me – and especially for each one of you.

Secondly, we must recognise that Christ's death on the cross is 'once and for all' and final. Some traditions, such as the Roman Catholics, purport to repeat the historical sacrifice of Christ in the mass and their faithful must continue to make satisfaction to God for post-baptismal sins. Some theologians believe that the atonement continues eternally in heaven. However, in my view scripture unequivocally asserts that Christ's work on the cross is unique, unsurpassable and unrepeatable, as Peter said:

"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit," (1 Peter 3:18) and as the writer to the Hebrews confirms more assertively:

"Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself." (Hebrews 7:27).

We can and should take great comfort in the fact that Christ's sacrifice is wholly effectual and final.

Thirdly, we should allow the cross its transforming work. A Christian truth that we asserted is crucial and central to our faith, must surely change the outlook and actions of those who accept it and hold to it. Objectively the cross has liberated us from the power and consequences of sin, subjectively Christ's example of suffering love should incite believers to adopt a new set of values and pursue a new way of living. The cross should engender a life of humility, stimulate a life of holiness, motivate a life of love and compassion, impel us to be peacemakers, urge us to lives of patient endurance, extend the promise of a life of victory and motivate us to a life unselfishly lived for Christ and his kingdom.

Fourthly, we should embrace Christ as our prophet, priest and king. In his prophetic ministry, Christ continues to make the Father known (John 1:18). Christ speaks to his blood bought people for our spiritual good in His still small voice. Let all Christians look to no other prophet or teacher, to absolutely nothing other than Christ. In His priestly ministry,

Christ represents us in heaven to God and intercedes for us and mediates with God on our behalf (1 Timothy 2:5). As our king Christ sits at God's right hand and all angels, authorities and powers are in submission to him (1 Peter 3:22).

## SANCTIFICATION

Sanctification is the means by which God makes those who have been made holy or righteous legally through justification, holy or righteous in actuality. In other words God declares repentant sinners righteous in justification, but through sanctification he makes them actually, objectively righteous. God who recreates sinners via the new birth (1 Peter 1:3, 23) faithfully renews them into the image of His Son. There are many, frequently conflicting, views about sanctification. The liberals believe it to be a process of personal reformation, Roman Catholics believe it is brought through the sacraments, chiefly baptism and the Eucharist, Wesleyans believe in entire sanctification via a second blessing experience in an instantaneous transforming work of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostals generally believe it is brought about through Holy Spirit baptism, others believe it is brought about by a decisive act of surrender to Christ, whilst yet others believe in it as an objective accomplished fact. Finally, the reformed evangelicals see it as the gradual process of becoming holy. It is this final view that I believe is correct.

The concept of 'holy', which really means 'pure' and 'set apart', lies at the heart of sanctification. In the OT holiness of persons is really the condition of those who are inwardly separated from evil and who conduct themselves uprightly. In the NT, the language for holiness is more diverse. Here the ceremonial aspect of holiness greatly diminishes and the focus is on the moral and ethical. Here holiness is being Christ-like in the midst of a Godless world.

Believers should be set aside for God's possession and declared holy by faith in Christ. In the NT, they are usually referred to as 'saints in Christ Jesus' emphasising that their holy status derives through Christ. However, the God who declares believers righteous demands that they make strides in the practical holiness of life. As Thomas Watson said "It is absurd to imagine that God should justify a people whom he could not glorify." Progressive sanctification is a real objective advance towards spiritual maturity from within the believer. In the OT God demanded that the people of Israel should mirror His holy character. In the NT, the demand is that believers should elevate their actual moral condition to the level of the legal status conferred on them by justification. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ..... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." (1Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7).

Scripture tells us clearly that God's work in producing Christ-likeness in us through the action of His Holy Spirit is gradual and progressive rather than sudden or instantaneous. Peter commanded Christians to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18) and Paul wrote 'Inwardly we are being renewed day by day' (2 Corinthians 4:16) and:

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The writer to the Hebrews expressed the contrast between justification and sanctification in Hebrews 10:14:

“because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:14).

In the OT, the emphasis was on becoming holy like God; in the NT, the emphasis is on becoming holy by becoming like Christ. So Paul wrote:

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” (Romans 8:29).

Antinomians in Paul’s day argued that since Christians have been made right with God why not sin boldly in order that grace might abound. Paul opposed this line of reasoning with a firm “By no means” (Romans 6:2), because Christians have died to the old life of sin and so must allow sin no place in their lives. Also, at conversion believers were united with Christ in his resurrection and thus reckon themselves alive to God and become servants of God and righteousness which leads to holiness (Romans 6:13b, 18b, 19b, 22). As Christians we need to firmly put aside any notion that we can continue to sin just as we did before our conversion. That completely devalues what Christ achieved for us on the cross.

In Colossians 3:5-10 Paul described sanctification as the process of progressively discarding the ‘earthly nature’ or ‘old self’ and the putting on of the ‘new self’ which is being renewed in the image of its Creator. The old nature is the capacity to serve Satan, sin and self whilst the new self is the capacity to serve God and righteousness acquired through new birth. This is not an easy or painless process. Paul emphasises that Christian growth involves struggle, sometimes intense struggle, against indwelling sin. Thus within believers the old nature and the new nature do battle. As Paul wrote:

“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” (Galatians 5:17).

I’m sure we’ve all experienced this and this struggle; this tension between the two natures will persist as long as we live.

The process of sanctification will not be completed in this life, but it will take place – I believe instantaneously – at the second coming. John wrote:

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2).

John tells us that we will then achieve perfect moral purity (1 John 3:3), absence of sins (v.5) and actual objective righteousness (v.7).

Meanwhile Christians advance in sanctification by abiding in Christ (John 15:4, 7), walking in the light of God’s presence (1 John 1:7), holding fast to their Christian calling (Revelations 2:25; 3:11), purifying themselves from sin (1 John 3:3), continuing in Christ’s teaching (John 14:23; 15:7), and submitting to God’s discipline (John 15:2).

In closing on the topic of sanctification, I just want comment briefly on two matters which I think are quite widely believed, but which I consider to be incorrect.

Firstly there is the question of a ‘second blessing experience’. Some Christian writers claim that believers can advance to a higher plane by a sudden, post conversion, ‘second blessing’. In my view, this is not scriptural. Paul explicitly taught that we are baptised into the Holy Spirit at the commencement of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul’s use and indeed

repetition of the word ‘all’ makes it clear that this applies to all Christians even apparently carnal ones – and the Corinthians were certainly that. However, even though there is one spirit baptism at conversion, believers can and should experience many subsequent fillings with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, this is but a part of the process of sanctification and does not indicate that Christians receiving such fillings are of a different kind to other Christians.

Secondly, there are some who hold that sinless perfection is a real possibility within this life and a goal to be attained. As we have already seen the old, carnal nature cannot be entirely defeated in this life and will not be eliminated until the second coming. Accordingly, Christians who set too much store in this idea are headed for disappointment and defeat and risk becoming discouraged. Of course, we should strive to achieve as high a level of sanctification as possible, but keep a realistic attitude and expect struggle and failure. Luther said “You will most certainly never achieve sinless perfection here on earth; otherwise you would have no need of faith and Christ.

How then should we respond to this issue of sanctification?

Firstly, we need to identify God’s part and our own part in the process. Sanctification is primarily a work of God. Paul wrote: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Contrary to the humanist view, we labour in vain to establish holiness by our own efforts. John said that the prospect and possibility of holiness is due to God’s gracious implantation of new life in the believing heart (1 John 3:9; 5:4). However, we must co-operate with the sanctification process and ourselves expend purposeful effort. As Paul wrote:

“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1). The author of Hebrews wrote “make every effort .... To be holy” (Hebrews 12:14). Although God plays the leading role in sanctification, it is a co-operative venture. Augustine wrote “Without God we cannot; without us God will not.” Human effort by itself is futile; inspired and enabled by the Spirit it is fruitful.

Secondly, we need to be filled with the Spirit. That is we need allow God to release the Spirit into our lives. As we have seen, we receive the baptism of the Spirit at conversion. Unfortunately, Christians do not consistently allow the Spirit unhindered freedom to promote holiness in them. We often grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) or put out His fire (1 Thessalonians 5:19) by being preoccupied with self and sin. Let us do our best to offer the Spirit a wide open door to our hearts and permit him to infuse every part of our mind and being. When the Spirit has permission to control our lives, the results will be glorious.

Thirdly, we must imitate Jesus Christ. We have seen that holiness is being like Christ. We become like Christ as we imitate him – his values, goals, words and deeds. He is our example, model and guide. We need to remember His command “Follow me”. Thomas a Kempis wrote:

“Jesus has many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few actually carry His cross. He has many who like consolation; few desire tribulation. Many wish to feast with him; few want to fast with him. All want to rejoice with him; few will endure for him. Many follow Jesus to break bread; few follow to drink His cup of sorrow. Many respond to His miracles; few share the disgrace of His cross. Many love Jesus with this proviso: no adversities.”

## God's discipline

I'm not going to dwell on this issue, but I do feel that any discussion of sanctification would be seriously incomplete without some reference to God's discipline.

Sanctification is not an easy or comfortable process. Indeed, it can be made even more uncomfortable by God's chastening (as older Bible translations would have it) or God's discipline (as modern Bible translations put it). In some ways the word chastening (which means 'correction by punishment') is more accurate, but it is rather an obscure term for Christians today. Many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of God disciplining believing Christians – punishing them in order to correct them – but there is no doubt that the concept is well established in the NT. There are eight references to God's discipline in the NT, but the basis of this discipline is well expressed by the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 12:6: "because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

The purpose of God's discipline is to make us Holy, to advance our sanctification and it is always for our good (Hebrews 12:10). It is unpleasant at the time (Hebrews 12:11), but it eventually produces 'a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it' (Hebrews 12:11). This discipline is absolutely NOT to be confused with the wrath of God against the sins of mankind we discussed earlier. That wrath has been propitiated once and for all by Christ's sacrificial death.

If we never committed sin following our conversion, then there would be no need for God's discipline, but as we have seen, we are not instantly made holy by conversion, but that the growth of our sanctification is rather a gradual process. Thus, we do continue to sin after our conversion: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). But, God is very concerned that we should be holy, as Peter wrote: 'Be holy because I am Holy' (1 Peter 1:16), and in his concern, he disciplines us as necessary in order that we should become holy.

Let us also remember that one day we shall appear before the *bema* or judgement seat of Christ: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10). At this point, I want to make it absolutely clear that this statement by Paul does not in any way contradict the doctrine of salvation by faith we have already examined in some detail and which Paul also teaches in Romans and Galatians. Those of us who have genuinely accepted the free gift our salvation through Christ's sacrifice on the cross are eternally saved. What I AM saying is that there will be a judgement even amongst those who already have Christ's righteousness imputed to them and this judgement will extend amongst those who are not saved (1 Peter 4:17-18) – because our Lord Jesus is Lord over all men and at his name every knee shall bow and confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). This ought to mean not only that we should try and live lives which are as holy as possible, but also that we should deal correctly with each other. As Paul said: "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat." (Romans 14:10).

Of course, if we repent of our sins, then God will be merciful and forgive us these sins – but let us not forget that the word repentance in Hebrew is composed of two words which mean 'to turn around' and 'to feel sorrow'. Consequently real repentance must involve not only

genuinely feeling sorry for our sins but also a genuine turning away from those sins and going in the opposite direction. Of course, we may again fall into the same sin of which we have repented – and can again be forgiven – but God knows our hearts and our intention at the time of original repentance must be genuine and we must exert some real effort to stick to the new path we have promised to follow.

## **FURTHER ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CROSS**

In addition to the massive achievement of the atonement, Christ's sacrifice on the cross also produced at least two other major achievements – Revelation and Conquest. Both of these are quite big topics by themselves, so I'm not going to attempt to deal with them in any detail today, but as we have been pondering the atonement and the cross I do just want to make you aware of them.

### **Revelation**

Although what Christ did on the cross was primarily *for* the world, it was also *speaking* to the world. Just as we show what we are by our actions, so God has shown something of what he is in the death of His son. Through the cross God revealed something of his glory, his justice, his love and his wisdom and power.

According to John's gospel, Jesus referred to his death as a 'glorification' – the event through which he and the Father would be supremely 'glorified' (John 7:39; 12:16; 12:23; 13:31) and Luke in the book of Acts (Acts 3:13) and Peter (1 Peter 1:21) refer to Jesus' death in a similar way. This comes to many people, even many Christians, as a surprise. How can an ignominious death on a cross be a glorification?

In the OT God revealed himself primarily through nature and through his acts in relation to his chosen people. In the NT, the divine splendour was supremely revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus' glory was glimpsed by some of the disciples at the transfiguration, but its full manifestation was revealed at the cross when His time had finally arrived and he went willingly to meet His death. The self humiliation of the Son of God which began in the incarnation, culminated in His death. Yet in that very abasement, he was 'lifted up', not just physically on the cross, but spiritually exalted before the eyes of the world.

So, something of the nature of both the Father and the Son is revealed in the cross. We see a humbling of self and a self giving love. That love is a holy love which made it necessary for the lamb of God to be sacrificed for the sins of the world, for the Good Shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep because (as Caiaphas prophesied (John 11:49-50)) it was better for one man to die for the people than for everyone to perish. The glory which radiates from the cross is a combination of the divine qualities of love, mercy and justice.

Although our fallen world remains full of injustice – and will remain so until the second coming of Christ – the cross shows us that God does and will judge sin. The cross demonstrates and reveals both God's justice in judging sin and his mercy in justifying the sinner. In the cross, God revealed himself as both just and merciful. As P T Forsyth said 'in justifying us [on the cross] he also justified himself [in terms of his own nature].'

It is not only the justice of God that seems incompatible with the prevailing injustices in this world, but also His love. We can explain many things, such as war, poverty etc., as caused

by man himself. But, floods and earthquakes, disease and death – how can these horrors which we are largely powerless to prevent be reconciled with a God of love? Why does God allow them?

I'm afraid I have to tell you that Christianity has no glib answers to these questions – other than the rather unsatisfactory answer (from our viewpoint anyway) that God gave to Job – God is sovereign! However, Christianity does offer much evidence of God's love for us. The best such evidence is the cross.

John expresses this well:

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10).

Although we do not understand the problems of evil, disasters and pain we must not allow these problems to blind us to the revelation of God's love in the cross. God has also demonstrated his love for us by giving us the Holy Spirit, but in my view, all other gifts of God are lesser than his ‘indescribable gift’ of His Son (2 Corinthians 9:15). This Son not only humbled himself by taking on human limitations (possibly with eternal effect), but humbled himself even to a death in which he bore the indescribable weight of the sins of the world and which separated him for the first time from the Father as he became sin for us. Imagine the pain the sinless one suffered as he became sin. To bear that pain for us undeserving beings – that is love. By securing such great blessings for us at the cost of such great suffering, God has given us an unequalled demonstration of His love.

The wisdom of God, of the cross, is foolishness to the wise, but the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18). We need to opt for God's power and wisdom because God has already announced his intention to destroy the wisdom of the wise and frustrate the cleverness of the clever (1 Corinthians 1:19). God has made their wisdom foolish (1 Corinthians 1:20). God did this by decreeing that the world *through its wisdom* should not know him, and then revealed His wisdom in the foolishness of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:21). Saving power is not the wisdom of the world, but God's ‘foolishness’ of the cross. Though crucified in weakness, Christ is God's power, and though apparent foolishness he is God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24).

### **A Summary of God's Revelation**

In the cross, we have seen a revelation of the glory, justice, love, power and wisdom of God. All these are made equally clear to us in the cross. The cross assures us that God is the reality within, behind and beyond the universe.

### **Conquest**

On the cross Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of evil. This is a further achievement of the cross. The cross appeared to be the defeat of goodness by evil, but was actually the defeat of evil by goodness.

Perhaps the most important NT passage proclaiming the victory of Christ is found in Colossians:

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its



regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-15).

Paul here brings together two of the three achievements of the cross namely the forgiveness of our sins – which we have already looked at as part of salvation – and the cosmic overthrow of the principalities and powers. Here I believe it is quite clear that Paul is referring to spiritual rather than earthly powers and authorities (despite the attempt of some authors to argue otherwise), although we must of course recognise that Satan and his demons can use earthly powers and authorities for their ends. The word used by Paul, which is translated ‘disarmed’ by the NIV Bible, really means ‘stripped’. Paul certainly did mean that they were ‘stripped of weapons’ or disarmed, but I think he also meant that they were stripped of dignity or degraded.

The passage also refers to nailing the ‘written code’ to the cross. Here the Greek word translated as ‘written code’ is *cheirographon*, which was usually used to mean a handwritten certificate of indebtedness. Thus, I think that what Paul was saying is that our sins (being our certificate of indebtedness) were nailed to the cross (that is imputed to Christ, because a persons crimes were nailed to his cross) just as Christ’s righteousness was imputed to us.

Christ also overcame the devil by totally resisting his temptations, not only in the desert following the baptism but throughout his life. Tempted to avoid the cross Jesus persevered and “..... he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8). This obedience was an essential part of his saving work: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19). If Jesus had disobeyed, deviating at all from the path laid down by the Father’s will, then the devil would have gained a foothold and the plan of salvation would have been frustrated. But, Jesus obeyed, and the devil was defeated. Provoked by the insults and tortures to which he was subjected, Jesus refused to retaliate even in the smallest degree. By means of his self-giving love, he ‘overcame evil with good (Romans 12:21). He could have used his supernatural powers to escape for no one, neither Pilate nor the Jewish authorities or anyone else, had power or authority over him and he could have escaped – as his mockers challenged him to do! But he declined to resort to worldly power. In his obedience love and meekness, he won a great moral victory over the powers of evil.

The resurrection was the conquest confirmed and announced. We must NOT regard the cross as defeat and the resurrection as victory – rather the cross was the victory won and the resurrection merely proclaimed and confirmed that victory. Death was unable to keep its hold on Christ, because on the cross death was defeated (Acts 2:24). The evil principalities and powers, which, as we just saw, were deprived of their weapons and dignity by the cross, were now in consequence put at Christ’s feet and made subject to him (Ephesians 1:20-23). Of course, we should maintain a strong, indeed unbreakable, link between the crucifixion and the resurrection – as we do in the sacraments of the baptism and the Eucharist. Nevertheless, we must be clear that it is the ‘blood of Jesus’, that is his death on the cross, which propitiated God’s wrath and by which we have been redeemed, justified and reconciled to God. Christ’s death and not his resurrection dealt with our sins. In his death, he conquered death and destroyed the power of him who held the power over death – Satan (Hebrews 2:14). The resurrection merely confirmed Christ’s victory, already won and allowed his righteousness to be imputed to us.

Finally, we look forward to Christ's conquest consummated at the second coming. On that day every knee will bow to him and every tongue confess him Lord – so let's do that now whilst we may still avail ourselves of God's grace.

### **Our Response to Christ's Victory**

So how shall we respond to Christ's victory? Although life spells conflict for Christians, it also spells victory. We should be victorious like the victorious Christ. Jesus promises a right to share his throne to he who overcomes (1 John 2:13; Revelation 3:21).

Yet, the parallel is only partial. By ourselves, we are unable to fight and defeat Satan. Also as we have already seen we are unable to become righteous, to be sanctified, without God's help. The good news is that we don't need to fight because Christ has already done it. Our victory consists in entering into the victory of Christ. However, although the devil has been defeated he has not yet conceded defeat. He has been overthrown, but not yet eliminated. This is why we need to be strong in the Lord's strength and clad in his armour (Ephesians 6:10-17). This is all part of the tension in the Christian life between 'the already' of Christ's victory on the cross and the 'not yet' of awaiting his second coming. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated, but not yet fully consummated. We are no longer slaves, and are already God's sons and daughters, but we have not yet entered 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). This tension between the now and the not yet explains why we are not yet free from such weaknesses of the body as sickness and disease – such things will persist until the second coming.

Consequently, we need to keep a balance between overemphasising the 'not yet' (which would lead us to feel defeated) and overemphasising the 'now' (which might lead to discouragement as some expected benefits are unrealised).

We should also remember that we are no longer under the tyranny of the flesh, that is, we are no longer dominated by our fallen selfish, wicked nature. Freedom from our fallen nature comes through the cross, although this freedom will not be fully realised until our sanctification is complete. Nevertheless, when we believe in Christ our values start to change, we no longer conform to the world's values, but find instead that we are being transformed by our renewed mind and the infusing of the Spirit. As we resist the devil, standing firm in our faith, the devil will flee from us (1 Peter 5:8-9; James 4:7). Clad in the full armour of God we can take our stand against him (Ephesians 6:10-17). We can command the devil to depart in the name of Jesus, for the devil well knows his conqueror.

Next, we should remember that we are no longer under the tyranny of death. The fear of death is practically universal in our generation. But Jesus Christ is able to set free even those who all their lives have been 'held in slavery to their fear of death', because by his own death he has deprived of power him who formerly held the power of death – that is the devil (Hebrews 2:14). That is because on the cross Christ has dealt with our sins, and it is sin that causes death and brings judgement upon us. Paul likens death to a scorpion whose sting has been drawn, and a military conqueror whose power has been broken. So he says: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

What then should our response to death be? Jesus himself has told us:

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26).

Jesus’ promise to us is that those who are alive at the second coming will never die and that those who have died in the meantime will be resurrected.

Finally, we must proclaim the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us all. In this way, God’s kingdom will grow and the kingdom of Satan will diminish. The preaching of the cross is the power of God. It is by preaching the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ that we shall turn people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to the power of God (Acts 26:18). No other message has the same power and force, for the real objective victory won by the Lamb over the powers of evil and darkness when he shed his blood on the cross was and is the most important event in human history.

## **CONCLUSION**

So let’s just take a few moments to summarise the main points we’ve covered today.

We’ve seen that the cross is not only the main symbol of Christianity, but it is an historic reality that is absolutely central in and crucial to Christianity. Christ’s death on the cross may be foolishness and a stumbling block to the world, but to us it is God’s power and wisdom.

On the cross, Christ died as a substitutionary sacrifice for each one of us – for you and for me. On the cross in substitution for us, Christ suffered the penalty that each and every one of us deserved – death. Only Christ the person who was uniquely completely God and completely man could have achieved this. As completely God, he was sinless (and thus able to pay the penalty our sins deserved), and as completely man, he was identified with us, and thus able to substitute for us.

Christ’s sacrifice completely and finally dealt with our sins. It is finished! This sacrifice propitiated God’s righteous anger or wrath, redeemed us from slavery to sin, justified us all before God by imputing Christ’s righteousness to us and so reconciled us to God healing the alienation caused at the Fall. No substitute other than Christ could have intervened to save us and yet satisfied all the aspects of God’s nature.

However, this radical dealing with our sins does not immediately make us holy. Christ’s righteousness imputed to us is only effective in terms of our standing with God and does not make us actually, objectively, holy. But, it does open the way for us to be made holy, in the gradual work of sanctification. This will make us completely holy and Christ like, but not in this life. As Christians, we are called to co-operate fully with God in this work of sanctification, although we are unable to achieve holiness alone without God’s assistance.

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was complete and final and has dealt with all our sins once and for all. We can do nothing, indeed nothing needs to be done or can be done, to improve that sacrifice. It is complete and final. All we have to do is accept this free gift from God by turning to Christ in faith, believing in His death and resurrection and acknowledging him as Lord. But, let us remember the cost of Christ’s sacrifice and fully co-operate in God’s work of sanctification, of making us like Christ. We also need to remember to forgive our brothers as we ourselves have been forgiven.

Let us be assured of our salvation and completely released from any guilt in respect of our sins.

Let us also remember that the cross is a revelation of God's glory, justice, love, power and wisdom and gave rise to his victory over sin and death.

As I said a moment ago, we do need to respond to the magnificent grace offered to us by and through the cross by turning to Christ in faith. I'm sure that most of us here have done that, and can be fully assured of our salvation. But, there may be some who haven't done that, or who are not sure that they have really committed themselves, and yet others who would like just to renew their commitment in response to what they've heard today. So for these people I'd just like to lead us in a simple prayer of commitment which you can say quietly with me in your hearts, or if you don't want to do that I'd just ask you to remain silent for a moment. Father we have heard and learnt many things today about the magnificent sacrifice of your son Jesus Christ on the cross. Father its good to learn more about you, but we know that all we have to do to receive your free gift to us of salvation – eternal life with you – is to accept it by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus and acknowledging him as our Lord and this we gladly do right now. Having received Christ, we repent of our sins and in the coming days and months and years we ask you to infuse us again and again with your Holy Spirit so that we may grow in righteousness and become more and more like your Son. In Jesus' name we pray Amen.