



Roanoke, Virginia

February 19, 2023

“Lift High the Cross: Enough with Formulas”

I Corinthians 1:18-25

George C. Anderson

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. **19** For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? **21** For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. **22** For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, **23** but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Illustrations are not definitions.

I’ll *illustrate*: The negotiation that led to the merger of Disney and Pixar could be described as a Tango routine where it sometimes looks like the partners are in tension and other times like they are in love until the dance ends and both partners take a bow. Does that mean that every merger is to be described as a tango?

The Bible is full of illustrations that should not be taken as definitions. The parables of Jesus are prime examples.

- When Jesus talks about a widow getting justice by continuously banging on the door of a judge in the middle of the night till he helps her, are we then to define prayer as nagging?



- When Jesus tells about a woman throwing a party after finding a lost coin, he is illustrating why he doesn't give up on sinners. He certainly isn't establishing a rule about what to do when you find a quarter in the couch.

An illustration is not a definition.

Yet, sometimes illustrations can be so good that they get treated like definitions. This happens with theologians. Every so often, something is said by a theologian that is so compelling and so widely embraced that it is decided by some that this is the way we are going to talk about that theological thing from now on.

I would say that this is what happened with the doctrine of the Atonement, the doctrine of reconciliation—the saving work of Jesus. This doctrine is about how our flaws and failings are removed as barriers to our being reconciled with God. It is also about the faith and practice of forgiven Christians who, because of God's grace, work to reconcile with each other. And central to the doctrine of Atonement is that our reconciliation comes by grace. It is God's gift... and has to be, because it is not something we can earn.

That it has to be a gift and not something we can earn is what is revealed in the revelation that is Jesus.

Ever since Jesus lived and breathed—
ever since he was killed and was raised—

the central “talking point” for most Christian theologians has been the conviction that God is in Christ reconciling the world to God's self.

This talk is Atonement talk. And it is important talk because, when we are self-aware, we know that we are not in full control when it comes to virtue and vice—when it comes to right and wrong. If we could control ourselves, we would have worked things out a long time ago.

- We certainly would not have leaders who act like children and a war going on in Ukraine.
- Because of an earthquake, we would still have a tragedy in Syria, but the tragedy would not have been compounded because of a prior Civil War because we would have already beaten our swords into plowshares and given up our warring ways.
- We would have already figured out how to lift up and not keep down the poor,
 - and we would have rooted racism out of our hearts and out of social norms.
- We would have not be telling lies to get away with things
 - or telling truths, with the sole intent to hurt others.

We might spend our days demanding equality and calling for justice, but in the most honest moments of the night, we realize that if God were to live by our demands for equality and calls for justice, we wouldn't stand a chance. It is not in our wheelhouse to make ourselves *perfectly acceptable* to ourselves, much less to God... *if* being perfectly acceptable is the only way we can be before God. However,

the *graceful possibilities of being human* before God—



the loving possibilities of *being humane* with each other—
open up to us if it is true that we can know and live by grace.

Over the centuries, theologians have sought to witness to this good news of God's grace and have come up with **illustrations** to help us understand. Many of the ways they have explained were particularly helpful when they were offered, and so the church has remembered them.

There was that illustration of a ransom being paid. Jesus is the ransom that is paid to free us from the captivity of sin. Basically, *Jesus' life for ours*. You find this illustration in Colossians and I Corinthians,¹ and though Reformed theologians do not use it that often, you can find it in the Westminster Confession of Faith.² But, freeze dry this illustration into a definition, then we're saying there was a literal random paid? And to whom? The devil? God?

There is the military illustration. The same epistles of Colossian and I Corinthians rolled this one out.³ It is the one that says we've been defeated by the devil and taken into captivity which is death. But by dying and being raised, Jesus invaded the enemy territory to bring captives home. Eastern Orthodox theologians have used this one a lot. But freeze dry this illustration into a definition, and it means that reconciliation with God is possible only after we die.

There is the Sacrifice illustration. This is the one that makes substitutions at an animal sacrifice. Because animal sacrifice is so common in the Hebrew Scriptures, it makes sense that this would be an illustration you would often find in the New Testament.⁴ Sometimes Jesus is the substitute for the lamb and sometimes he is the substitute for the High Priest. This illustration vividly illustrates the moral harm of the wrongs we do to the world and each other. But when this illustration is freeze dried into a definition, it requires an acceptance of animal sacrifice in order to accept its replacements. And it has been two millennia since we've sacrificed animals in sanctuaries except in extreme situations, as when that snake poked its head out of the sanctuary wall during the middle of a service in the Presbyterian Church in Rockbridge Baths.

And there is the Legal illustration. Paul loves this one.⁵ Sin is a crime against God deserving the death penalty. Jesus takes the sentence on himself, accepting capital punishment so that we can walk free. This illustration vividly portrays Jesus' love for us and the truth that often reconciliation comes at a greater cost to the one who is most wronged. But freeze dry this illustration into a definition, then we might find ourselves justifying the abuse of those who make life easy for the comfortable. I don't think that manipulators and oppressors of the world will be stopped if the solution is that their victims always suffer the consequences of *their* actions.⁶

And then there is the big one: Substitutionary Atonement. Martin Luther and John Calvin were not the first to articulate this explanation of God's saving work in Jesus, but what they said so

¹ Mark 10:45, Romans 3:24, I Cor. 6:20, 7:23, Gal. 3:13, Titus 2:14, I Peter 1:18.

² 8.8

³ Col. 1:13, 2:15, I Cor. 5:24-28.

⁴ Mark 14:22-24, John 1:29, Rom. 3:25, I Cor. 5:7, Hebrews 8-10.

⁵ Rom 5:6-11, 2 Cor. 5:16-21, Col 1:19-20.

⁶ I have been helped in presenting these "illustrations" by Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine*, chapter 13, Westminster/John Knox, 1994 Revised Edition.



perfectly suited their times that substitutionary atonement became a definition that in some Protestant contexts you had to accept or be in danger of being called a heretic.

To understand why this particular way of talking about the cross became so popular, we have to understand what it was like to hear it in the 16th century. Imagine living then. We live in a world that still buys into what Plato said that about the difference between the corrupted real and the perfect ideal. The Medieval Church agreed and then got in the habit of saying that only the ideal is acceptable to a perfect God. Sin is repugnant to God and sinners are not acceptable in God's sight. Priests are telling us that only those "in a state of perfection" are going to make it to heaven.

Martin Luther and John Calvin couldn't change the Platonic worldview of the people of Western Europe... mainly because the two of them shared that worldview to a great extent. But they found a way to talk about the cross so it can be heard again as good news. For God's wrath at our sin to be sated, and so there remains only God's love for us, Jesus takes our sin upon himself and he dies so that we may live. The stench of sin is removed from us and we are made acceptable in God's eyes.

This explanation was so compelling in its day, and so heard as good news, that it became for many Protestants the *only way to talk about salvation*. It got baked into confessions and became a litmus test to determine who understood the Gospel and who did not. There is another Presbyterian denomination represented in this city that demands that you talk about God's saving work in this way if you want to be ordained as an elder or as a minister.

Even though we no longer live in the 16th century, let's hear what this explanation takes seriously.

- Like the others, it takes seriously the moral harm we do to ourselves and to others.
- It takes seriously how our propensity to think
 - too much of ourselves
 - or too little of ourselves
 - gets beyond our own control.
- It takes seriously just how in over our heads we can get with the ways we get sucked into systemic problems, family dysfunction, our own immaturity, social pressures, our being brainwashed by ideologies.
- It takes seriously the idea that justice matters—
 - that such things as ethics, kindness, and forgiveness matters,
 - because what is good is grounded in the reality of the existence of God who is perfectly good.
- It takes seriously what Jews and Christians have sensed all their history,
 - that we are loved by the One who created us,
 - and yet there are things we think and do,
 - or things that we don't do,
 - that are unacceptable because they bring unnecessary harm to ourselves and others.



- And it takes seriously the cost that comes
 - with forgiveness,
 - with healing moral wounds,
 - with making right
 - relationships that are broken.

But we don't live in the 16th century anymore and the formulaic aspect of this doctrine has become increasingly for many a barrier and not a help. To freeze dry this illustration into a definition is to make the transaction of child abuse or infanticide a necessary fix to change how God sees us.

More and more people so reject this articulation of God's saving work that they reject the doctrine of Atonement itself. They reject the cross as a symbol of the faith. Some even reject the Christian faith. Today's Go-To-Atheists like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Neil deGrasse Tyson assume we all take this doctrine literally and then make fun of it to convince people that Christian faith is silly. The very idea of God getting so repulsed by, and getting so worked up over, sin that God can't think straight until he kills someone seems as preposterous as insisting

- that only irritating widows get God's attention,
- or that the only way to respond to finding a lost coin is to throw an expensive party.

For me, it gets down to this. Make of any illustration of the Atonement—any illustration of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—a definition; and the cross becomes a fix rather than a revelation.

I think the cross is a revelation, not a fix. The cross doesn't change reality but reveals it. And because it is a revelation, it is something that we can turn this way and that in order to understand

- how sacrificial love can be the bridge between sinners and God and
- how sacrificial love can be the means by which we can be reconciled with each other.

Before the radio station, "The Mountain," ceased to be, we would run radio advertisements that ended with this tagline: "Second Presbyterian Church; where theology is a conversation, not a conclusion." That tagline says, "Enough with Formulas." We need illustrations in conversation. We need images, and similes and metaphors to communicate what is our truth. We need illustrations to talk of the reality of our sin, God's love, and reconciliation. We don't need formulas that we memorize in order to be saved.

During Lent, we Preaching Pastors are going to offer a Sermon Series on the cross. The entire series is going to be based on our passage where Paul speaks of the crucifixion as a revelation of the truth about God; a revelation that is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, but which speaks

- to a God who loves us



- and hates moral harm,
- a God who has the power to rescue us from our worst selves
 - and reconcile in this life and in the life to come
 - what must be healed if all is to be made well.

Liberated from the need to defend formulas, we are going to look at the cross in all kind of ways; personally, historically, as a revelation of sin that needs forgiveness, as a revelation of love that can be shared. We will explore why the Gospels and why Paul found the crucifixion to be such a critical clue as to essential truth about the good news of reconciliation being God's sacrificial gift to those who cannot work out their sin issues on their own.

Join us in the coming Sundays as we lift the cross as a symbol of hope in our world.

