

## **The Cross: New Religions, New Theologies and the Only Difference in a Pluralistic Society**

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### **Abstract**

Viola Larson points to the trend in religious movements, Christian and otherwise, of viewing Christ's sacrifice as simply an example of suffering for others. The article proceeds to outline the need for the doctrine of atonement and illustrates how this doctrine keeps Christianity orthodox. Larson demonstrates the doctrine of atonement from Scripture and engages several views on atonement from history. Ultimately, Larson contends that without a proper doctrine of the atonement of Christ on the cross, evil is allowed to run rampant in any religion, including Christianity.

Recently, in her address to the 2002 Covenant Conference,<sup>1</sup> Anna Case-Winters, Professor of Theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, suggests that for our atonement, "The incarnation' would be enough!" She also advocates for the theological position of Abelard, the medieval scholastic who held a position of atonement referred to as moral influence or example.<sup>2</sup> That is, the death of Christ on the cross becomes an example of the willingness to suffer for others and for that reason Jesus Christ is followed and loved. Other proponents of this view of the cross and salvation were Socinus, a sixteenth century theologian who also denied the Trinity,<sup>3</sup> and Friedrich Schleiermacher the father of nineteenth century liberal theology. Pelagius is seen as an early anticipation of this view, since he believed humanity capable of living up

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<sup>1</sup> The Covenant Network is an independent group within the Presbyterian Church USA whose members advocate for the ordination of homosexuals and for Progressive Theology.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Case-Winters, "Who Do You Say That I Am? Believing In Jesus Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Address to the 2002 Covenant Conference, November 9, 2002, <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/case-winters.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For information on Socinus see: I. Breward, "Socinus and Socinianism," *New Dictionary of Theology*, The Master Reference Collection, editors Sinclair B. Ferguson, et al, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press 1988) 649.

to God's requirements of holiness.<sup>4</sup> At present, some contemporary theologians are attempting to get rid of the meaning of the cross in far more radical ways. Delores S. Williams, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, in her book, *Sisters in The Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, writes, "People do not have to attach sacred validation to a bloody cross in order to be redeemed or to be Christians."<sup>5</sup> Going further, Carter Heyward, Professor of Theology at Episcopal Divinity School, pictures atonement on the cross as a feature of a violent aspect of patriarchal Christianity. She writes:

The deity we must reject is the one whose power over us is imagined to be his love, the god who morally *can* destroy us. Such a concept of deity is evil—a betrayal itself of our power in mutual relation—in a world being torn to pieces by violence done in the names of gods who demand blood sacrifice. Such god-images feed twisted psychospiritualities that normalize sadistic and masochistic dynamics, rape and intimate violence, abuse of children, relationships of domination and control, violence against people and all creatures, and wars justified as holy.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to these distorted views of the cross and atonement I wish to hold up the orthodox view and show how it is in reality the central difference in a world of diverse religions both old and new. My central theme is that Christ's atonement on the cross is the place where evil is expelled from religious belief; that where the cross is emphasized in its true biblical meaning there is true transformation. I also want to emphasize that all religions, including Christianity, hold within their traditions the seeds of evil. Where the cross loses its meaning there Christianity itself stands in danger of being overcome by the evil within humanity. I will begin by examining the biblical and historical views of atonement. I will look at the potential for evil in religion including Christianity and explain the importance of the cross in addressing the new religions and the new theologies of our time. This entails explaining how Christ's death on the cross is God's answer not only for our

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology: Volume Two*, First HarperCollins paperback edition, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1992) 404.

<sup>5</sup> Delores s. Williams, *Sisters In The Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2001) 201.

<sup>6</sup> Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What it means to be Christian*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1999) 175.

salvation but cuts through the violence of human attempts to connect with God. I will show how both ruthless violence and sloppy sentimentality in religion are answered by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The biblical view of atonement begins in the Old Testament. The sacrifices of the Old Testament are looking forward to the coming of Christ and to the work of Christ on the cross. They are incomplete without Him. We find in the first part of chapter 10 of the book of Hebrews that the Old Testament sacrifices are a “shadow of the good things to come.” The author of Hebrews weaves the verses of Psalms 40:6, 7 into the picture of Jesus’ body as sacrifice.

“Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, ‘Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold I have come (In the scroll of the book it is written of Me) to do Your will, O God.’” (Heb. 10:5-7).<sup>7</sup>

These verses, which seemingly deny the need for sacrifice as a means of salvation, really illustrate the need for the death of Jesus on the cross. F.F. Bruce, writing about these verses, sees the Old Testament sacrifices as requiring the “obedient heart” and Christ offers that “wholehearted obedience.” Quoting J. Denny’s *The Death of Christ*, Bruce writes, “Our author’s contrast is not between sacrifice and obedience, but between the involuntary sacrifice of dumb animals and ‘sacrifice into which obedience enters, the sacrifice of a rational and spiritual being, which is not passive in death, but in dying makes the will of God its own.’”<sup>8</sup> Bruce goes on to explain that while it was the Father’s will for Jesus to die, “it was also His own spontaneous choice.”<sup>9</sup> Elaborating further and once again quoting Denny, he writes:

“It is the atonement which explains the incarnation: the incarnation takes place in order that the sin of the world may be put away by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.” The offering of His body is simply the offering of Himself; if here sanctification and access to God are made available through His body, in verses 19 and 29

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> J. Denny, *The Death of Christ*, (London: 1951), p131, in F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to The Hebrews*, The New International Commentary On The New Testament, reprint, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing 1981) 234.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 235.

they are made available through His blood. Whether our author speaks of His body or His blood, it is His incarnate life that is meant, yielded to God in an obedience which was maintained even to death. So perfect a sacrifice was our Lord's presentation of His life to God that no repetition of it is either necessary or possible: it was offered "once for all."<sup>10</sup>

Bruce and Denny's commentary are important in light of the attacks occurring on the theology of atonement and in the context of religious evil. First, God's desires for Old Testament people are not different than His desires for New Testament people. His desire is that sacrifice be made with a willing heart; the desire to obey God was all-important. In the Old Testament the willing heart was bound-up with the sacrificial animal. However, only Jesus Christ could offer that perfect willing obedience. He made the perfect sacrifice and was the perfect sacrifice. To eliminate Jesus as sacrifice on the cross is also to destroy the theology of the Old Testament. Secondly, Christ's death on the cross was not just the Father's will it was the "spontaneous choice" of Jesus Christ. Atonement theology is infused with the doctrine of the Trinity. To redo or give up the meaning of the atonement tends to eliminate the Trinity.

Thirdly, the understanding that "the atonement explains the incarnation" clarifies the biblical understanding of God's purpose in the incarnation. If a theologian says that for our salvation the incarnation "would be enough," but fails to acknowledge the redemptive purpose of the cross they simply do not understand the biblical view of the incarnation. The biblical statements of the purposes of God concerning the incarnation are very clear. Peter's first sermon emphasizes the purpose and meaning of the incarnation in the death of Christ on the cross. "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." (Acts 2:23) Furthermore, Paul writes to the Colossians:

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:19-20)

The final important note is that the sacrifice is "once for all." This also speaks about the God of the Old Testament, who is of course the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Denny, *Death*, 131. and Bruce, *Hebrews*, 236.

compassionate God of the New Testament. His grace of redemption covers all of the scripture, both old and new. The scripture confirms all of this:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:8-10)

There have been several theories of atonement theology through more than a thousand years of Church history. Thomas Oden in his book *The Word Of Life* points out “four essential types of atonement exegesis.” He names “exemplar [moral Influence], governor, exchange, and victor motifs.” Oden believes that these are all incomplete without each other. He writes, “They are best viewed as complementary tendencies rather than as cohesive schools of thought represented by a single theorist.”<sup>11</sup> Although Oden explains each giving both their usefulness and problems, I want to look at the one connected to Abelard since that is the one which has gained popularity with those wishing to eliminate the atonement as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.<sup>12</sup> First, it is true that the death of Jesus Christ for sinners should cause us to want to follow Him and to live a life of self-giving. That is very biblical. However, most of the theologians attempting to use Abelard’s view wish to eliminate God’s part in this act. That is, they do not believe that it was necessary for God the Father to send His Son to die for our sins. Rather they believe Jesus

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Oden’s two chapters, “The death of Jesus,” and “In Our Place,” in his book *The Word of Life: Systematic theology: Volume Two*, is highly recommended for anyone wishing to understand the atonement. 403. Also for a Reformed view see, Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1937) also, Andrew Purves, “The Ministry of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ: A Reformed View of the Atonement of Christ,” *Theology Matters* (Vol3 No 4. Jul/Aug 1997) and, J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine: Eight Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge to Undergraduates of all Faculties*, reprint, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984.)

<sup>12</sup> One author who sees the idea of atonement leading to violence does reject Abelard ideas. Speaking of Abelard’s position J. Denny Weaver writes, “The result [of removing the devil from the equation], is an atonement motif in which the Father has one of his children – the Son – killed in order to show love to the rest of the Father’s children, namely us sinners.” “Violence in Christian Theology,” *Cross Currents*, at [www.crosscurrents.org/weaver0701c.htm](http://www.crosscurrents.org/weaver0701c.htm). 4.

was killed for political reasons because He was friends of the poor and the outcasts of society. (This is of course, not an either/or situation; He was sent to die for our sins and he undoubtedly was killed partly because of His care for the poor and the outcast. It was not only the sins of the whole world that sent Him to the cross, it was also the particular sins of some Jewish and Roman leaders in Palestine two thousand years ago.) Those who call themselves progressive theologians see Jesus as someone to emulate and one who pictures how God works and moves within a human totally given over to Him. They totally reject the classical view that humanity is fallen and Jesus died for our sins.

Oden points out that, “The tradition of Abelard and Socinus, anticipated by Pelagius, is not a consensual tradition, but a distortion that reappears in heavier or lighter tones periodically.”<sup>13</sup> Abelard, in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, questions how God could forgive humanity for killing his Son if He was not able to forgive them before this event. He also questions the goodness of God if it was true that God demanded the death of His son for the sins of the world. He writes, “Indeed, how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!” Abelard concludes that we are justified, “in that his Son has taken upon himself our nature and persevered therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death”<sup>14</sup> At the instigation of Bernard of Clairvaux the Council of Sens condemned Abelard’s view.

Oden offers nine problems with Abelard’s theory. The first three deal very much with problems in contemporary theology. That Christ was simply a “noble martyr,” and therefore there is no transforming aide for the sinner is the first problem. As an answer to this problem, Oden writes, “Humanity does not need merely to be instructed but to have sins forgiven, not merely enlightened but redeemed from sin, for we are not only ignorant but corrupt, not merely finite but sinners, not merely those who feel guilty but who are guilty.”<sup>15</sup> Oden’s second problem with the exemplar theory is that it often “does not say enough about who the

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<sup>13</sup> Oden, *Word*, 404.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Abelard, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, in *Readings in the History of Christian Theology: From its Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation*, vol.1, editor, William c. Placher, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1988) 150,151.

<sup>15</sup> Oden, *Word*, 406.

teacher was.”<sup>16</sup> This is very much in line with both the milder and more radical contemporary theological views that attempt to change or do away with Christ’s work on the cross. In Anna case-Winters’ speech referred to above, she not only questions orthodox views of the atonement she also attempts to say that there is more to Christ than Jesus thus separating the person of Jesus from Christ.<sup>17</sup> Delores S. Williams, (see above) places the incarnation, first in Mary, then in Jesus then in the Church. As she puts it, “Incarnation in a womanist understanding of it in the Christian testament, can be regarded as a continuum of the manifestation of divine spirit beginning with Mary, becoming an abundance in Jesus and later overflowing into the life of the church.”<sup>18</sup> Carter Heyward, (see above), totally dismisses the incarnation of Jesus Christ writing:

In making Jesus the sole proprietor of the title ‘Christ,’ we Christians not only have heaped violence upon those who are not Christians (Jews, Moslems, pagans, Buddhists, et al.), but also have disempowered ourselves as Daughters, Sons, People, and Friends of the Sacred, bearers together of the same sacred—Christic—power that Jesus experienced in relation to others in the Spirit that drew them together.<sup>19</sup>

Oden’s third problem with the exemplar theory is that its proponents have “too optimistically assumed that the will is not radically bound by sin and that no punishment for sin is required.” He adds that this is often linked to a “humanistic pantheism that views each individual soul as a spark of divinity.”<sup>20</sup> One can note that the above remarks by Heyward falls into this category. This expectation of the human ability to conform to the holiness of God without the gracious work of Christ is one of the areas that lead to the rise of evil in the religious experience of even Christianity. The desire for an encounter with God, without His provision of the door of encounter, means failure and can be disastrous. I have addressed the problem of evil in religion in a book review of *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and The Search For What Saves Us*. The two authors, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, see Jesus death on the cross for our sins as child abuse. I point out in this

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Case-Winters, “Who Do You Say That I Am,” 4.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Wilderness*, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Heyward, *Saving*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Oden, *Word*, 407.

paper the problem of evil inherent in any religion that minimizes the cross:

For some, Islam is an example, God is so transcendent, so other, that he would not become human nor could he enter into our suffering. For others, for example Paganism, God is so “us” or “nature” that to know humanity or nature, even with all its/our corruption is to know deity. For still others such as Zen Buddhism, God is all there is and yet a void or emptiness, entered into only with the loss of self-consciousness. The human propensity to do evil can be nurtured in very human attempts to connect with God by either trying to imitate God’s perfection, integrating the good and evil or seeing such dualities as good and evil as unreal. If God is totally other and does not enter into our world in an act of grace and atonement we are left to overcome evil with our own will. If we are deity then all of our nature is divine, the evil included. If God is that which is all and non-dualistic, in the end evil does not matter.

Humans do not have the ability to live by religious moral codes perfectly. In fact, for some the attempt toward perfection leads to the radicalization of their religious beliefs. That is, in an attempt to obey the laws of their religion as a means of connecting with God, they apply the moral code so stringently to themselves and society that they become authoritarian in nature. For instance, in radical Islam women become non-entities, hidden people, in order to prevent lust and adultery. Radical Islamic men reach for God through the suffering and humiliation of their women. In paganism, since God is seen as creation, the desire to embrace an ethic that honors and cares for nature often leads to nudity and sometimes sex is accepted as religious rite. Every human protection against vulnerability, including clothing, is removed in order to manifest and connect with the divine in humanity.

A God who comes down in love, who suffers for humanity, is lost in this religious maze. The God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ removes the human effort to connect with God as well as any insistence that somehow evil is necessary or unreal. Jesus Christ’s death on the cross speaks to the awful truth of human sin while at the same time providing a way past humanity’s guilt. Individuals are set free to serve God knowing that it is the work of Christ rather than their own righteousness. Indeed, whenever Christianity moves away from the implicit meaning of the cross—



there evil begins to rear its head—whether that means selling indulgences, burning witches at the stake or replacing Jesus as the suffering savior with a Jesus of noble blood as a means of elevating war as the German Christians under Hitler did.<sup>21</sup>

At this point I will look at one example of a new religious group and how their misunderstanding or neglect of Jesus Christ's work on the cross caused irrefutable harm. In their very early beginnings in Sacramento, California, Aggressive Christianity, at first known as Free Love Ministries, began by putting more emphasis on demonology and an aberrant teaching known as "Manifested Sons of God," than on the scriptural teaching of salvation by grace because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. According to Jim and Lila Green, founders of the group, the sins of humanity were in some ways caused by demon possession.<sup>22</sup> They also believed that a group of people more spiritual than the average Christian would arise in the last days to overcome God's enemies and death. This encapsulates the manifested Sons of God teaching. The Greens, of course, forgot that Christ has already done the work of overcoming enemies and death on the cross. We live in the already, not yet time, united to Him, waiting for our complete salvation. (Col. 2:13-15) Both of these teachings, Manifested Sons of God and demon possession, negate the grace of Christ's death on the cross. That is because both teachings use humans and techniques to rid humanity of sin and problems. For Aggressive Christianity righteousness comes by removing demons from bodies and by becoming more spiritual. They believe that any encounter with God happens through a deeper spirituality and knowledge that is arrived at by such religious techniques as praying in tongues for several hours and fasting for excessively long times.

In order to keep new converts to Aggressive Christianity purer and free from demons, they were encouraged to move into the group's commune and to not communicate with their families. Eventually several wives were branded as demon possessed and spiritually dead. They were made to live in a small shed and expected to do heavy labor. Their

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<sup>21</sup> Viola Larson, "A Book Review" on *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and The Search For What Saves Us*, Rita Nakashima Brick and Rebecca Parker, (Beacon Press 2001) at Voices of Orthodox Women, <http://www.vow.org/Documents/Doc0005.aspx?type=1&name=Books%20%20Book%20Reviews>.

<sup>22</sup> For a paper refuting the idea of Christians being demon possessed see, Gunther Juncker, "Doctrines of Demons," at Naming the Grace, [www.naminggrace.org/id60.htm](http://www.naminggrace.org/id60.htm).

husbands were separated from them and encouraged to have nothing to do with them. One small boy was tied to his mother's leg while she worked since it was revealed that he also was demon possessed. Thankfully one of the women walked away and sued the group, which ended their time in Sacramento. This group divorced their concept of Christianity from any real work of grace.<sup>23</sup>

On the one hand, Aggressive Christianity began with strident and harsh concepts and methodologies devoid of the true meaning of the cross. And the outcome led to the abusive destruction of families. On the other hand, a kind of sloppy sentimentality, that divorced Christianity from the orthodox teaching of Christianity, helped to shape a far more violent ideology. Nineteenth century liberal theology in Germany developed a theology that was devoid of many orthodox Christian doctrines. To Friedrich Schleiermacher, (1768-1834) the father of liberal theology, human consciousness or experience led to knowing God. And that knowledge based on experience was intended to lead to an understanding that Christianity was the highest form of religion. The emphasis was on experience and the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity; original sin and the need for a cross were eliminated. Adolf Harnack (1851-1930) insisted that "the whole Jesus' message may be reduced to these two heads—God as the Father, and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with him."<sup>24</sup> Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) who William Placher describes as "the leading theologian of the 'history of religions,' posited a view of religion which insisted that various religions were shaped and held by differing national groups due to their religions dependence on "the intellectual, social, and national conditions among which it exists." He did not invalidate other religions but rather insisted that the various religions and civilizations connected the people to various experiences of God in different ways. Troeltsch saw European culture as a product of a "deorientalized Christianity."<sup>25</sup>

This easy theology, devoid of serious Christology, Atonement, or any other important Christian doctrine was a seedbed ready for the German

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<sup>23</sup> For information on Aggressive Christianity when they existed in Sacramento, see Viola Larson, "Aggressive Christianity Missions Training Corps," at [www.rickcross.com/references/aggressive/aggressive1.html](http://www.rickcross.com/references/aggressive/aggressive1.html). (Paper also on file at Naming the Grace) For an excellent update taken from El Paso Times see, [www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/a14.html](http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/a14.html).

<sup>24</sup> Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity*, in Placher, *Readings*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions," in Placher, *Readings*, 154,155.

Christians to spring from. Arthur C. Cochrane in his book, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*, writes:

The "German Christians," regarded from the standpoint of Christian faith, were a *liberal*, nationalistic sect which, at the initiative of the National Socialist Party, formed a union of various schools and groups. These schools and groups, in spite of all differences, were united in their nationalistic tendencies and *liberal Christianity*.<sup>26</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In an attempt to make love and brotherhood the basic doctrines of a reconstituted Christianity, Liberal theologians and church leaders backed one of the most tyrannical rulers in history. Walking through a door that eliminated the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity and the cross of Jesus Christ, they had no way of comprehending the great evil that was on the other side. They joined forces with what some have seen as the greatest cultic movement in contemporary times. Interestingly enough the views of this liberal Christianity began with attempts to do apologetics with people involved in enlightenment thinking and then with the Romantic Movement. This serves as a warning that in contextualizing the gospel for a different or diverse culture one should proceed with great care. How do we proclaim the good news to the many diverse new and old theologies and religions in such a way that they will hear the message? How do we do this without leaving behind the truth of God's word?

So to push this question of contextualization deeper, how, for instance, does one go about offering the gospel to Delores Williams who believes "People do not have to attach sacred validation to a bloody cross in order to be redeemed or to be Christians." She is not asking the same questions that early Jews and Athenians were asking about God, nor is she seeking the same kind of answers the medieval scholastics were when they formulated their theories about atonement. We might start from her questions or even from her weaknesses. We would surely start from her position as one who is an advocate for the needs of Afro-American women, and as one who is concerned for those who are ancestors of slaves. Williams sees Afro-American women's survival in the present, as well as the survival of those who were slaves, rooted in their strengths. She believes the cross, understood as sacrifice, harms her position. So she needs to see the cross as neither advocating for slavery nor wimpishness on the part of women. Nevertheless she still needs to

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1962), 74.

see the cross as Christ's great sacrifice for sinners. She needs a clear picture of God's holiness, humanity's sin, and God's redeeming love.

Paul the Apostle is an example of a Christian who proclaimed the Gospel contextually. In his preaching in Athens he appealed to his listeners using the words of some of their Greek poets. And he used the many gods they worshipped as an opener to speak of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:22-34) In 1 Corinthians 9 verses 19 through 22 Paul speaks of becoming as a Jew, becoming as a Gentile, (those without law) and becoming weak for the sake of the weak, that he, "may by all means save some." Paul, however, has not denied the Gospel here, he has not compromised the person of Jesus nor found fault with the atonement. Rather, he is avoiding offending their scruples that he might either bring them to Christ or if they are Christians "win them for greater strength."<sup>27</sup> But Paul is strong in his emphasis on the doctrines of the faith and in particular the cross of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians he writes, "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

Jesus Christ, the one who is fully God and human, who died for us, who carries our sin away on Himself, who stands before God the Father for us. This truth is the great offer to the religions and cultures of our day. We must come in a spirit of humbleness and empathy, shedding any of our cultural layers that are contrary to the gospel and harmful to Christ's message. But we cannot compromise the Gospel; we must preach only that good news which is scriptural, the crucified and resurrected Christ. Those in Christ stand before God robed in the righteousness of Christ enjoying and pleasing their Creator because of the death of Christ on the cross. Those in the religious world, including those who call themselves Christians, who deny the cross of Christ, stand without, striving to encounter God, and sometimes accepting a doorway toward evil rather than the One who is the Truth, the Life and the Way. (John 14:6)

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<sup>27</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, revised version, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company 1996) 135-137.