

*Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross:
Contemporary Images of the Atonement*

Mark D. Baker, Editor,
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Proclaiming the Sandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement is a collection of articles, speeches and thoughts on the atonement from an eclectic collection of Christian thinkers, from C.S. Lewis to Brian McLaren. The contributors come from Mennonite, Methodist, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Vineyard, Episcopal, Baptist, Covenant and Anglican traditions. In all, eighteen writers, including the editor, share their thoughts on the atonement. At the end of most chapters, Baker comments on the writers' insights and contribution to the atonement conversation. At the heart of this book is the desire to raise questions about the penal substitution theory's ability to convey adequately the message of the cross, and to argue for a contextualized theology of the atonement. According to the author, the "contributors reveal that Christians should embrace a whole constellation of perspectives on the atonement, all mutually reinforcing, because the language of the atonement must at once be metaphorical, pastoral and salvific."ⁱ As a result, the reader will "learn from these creative examples to proclaim the scandal of the cross in your own context and profit from the theology of the atonement as it applies across the whole spectrum of human experience."ⁱⁱ

The layout of *Proclaiming the Sandal of the Cross* makes the book useful as a secondary systematic theology text or for a course on the atonement. Pastors and others

seeking to engage in the atonement conversation, both with their colleagues and their congregations, would also be an appropriate audience.

Chapter 1, written by Mark Baker, provides an overview of the theology of atonement and the three main streams of atonement thinking – conflict-victory, penal satisfaction and moral influence views. In the second part of this chapter, Mark addresses the critics of his previous co-authored work, *Recovering the Sandal of the Cross*,ⁱⁱⁱ who allege the authors rejected the idea of the substitutionary atonement. Baker provides an FAQ (Frequently asked questions) section designed to waylay judgment at this point. At the end of the chapter, Baker writes, “Seeking change at the popular level is my concern and focus in this book.”^{iv}

Chapter 2 is based upon Susan and Lucy Pevensie’s encounter with Aslan in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.^v We read of the children’s struggle to understand what they had “seen” (since they closed their eyes during the actual killing) as relates to the doctrine of the atonement, and a brief review of Lewis’ thoughts on the subject.

Chapter 3, by Federeica Mathewes-Green, speaks for the resurrection’s victorious message and overcoming the fear of proclaiming the news that Christ is alive.

Chapter 4 engages the reader in a coffeehouse encounter between Chris Friesen and ministerial candidate. The reader is left to consider an alternate image, that of “Substitutionary Absorption.”

Chapter 5 is a sermon by Debbie Blue with a several poignant illustrations that raise the point that it is not “just what the cross saves us from, but what it saves us for.”

Chapter 6 invites the reader to interact in an enacted drama with a junior-high Sunday School class. Dan Witmarsh engages readers in a thought-provoking look at the atonement from the vantage point of the day-to-day people we serve.

Chapter 7, by Rowan Williams, is a sermon that ties into the forgive-forget discussion as it relates to the atonement. This chapter argues for a contemporary reflection on forgiving and being forgiven.

Chapter 8, a parable by the editor, is an engaging story that includes discussion questions at the end. At the heart of the parable is the author's goal of supporting the purpose of his book.

Chapter 9 is a chapel sermon by Richard B. Hays to the students at the Duke Divinity School. He argues that although the Adam-Christ analogy speaks to substitutionary atonement at times, and that what is taught and experienced is far greater than just the forgiveness of sins.

In Chapter 10 Steve Taylor of New Zealand preaches to his congregation prior to the celebration of communion. In his message he declares, "It is time to die. Jesus as representative invites us to die" in stark contrast to Adam, who chose to live his own way. His view of substitution sees Jesus not as a replacement. Rather, He presents himself to humankind as a "corporate representative."

Chapter 11, by Brian McLaren, argues for a view of the cross that is more than an angry God inflicting pain on an innocent party on behalf of the guilty. Instead, he argues for a God who is proclaiming the way sin inflicts pain on the heart of God, thus revealing the pain of God for His creation as a prophetic action.

Chapters 12-14, by Doug Frank, Grace Y. May and Mike McNichols each deal with the subject of shame. Doug touches on our avoidance of shame; Grace upon Christ enduring the shame; and Mike upon the message behind the elements of shame during the passion.

Chapter 15 is a chapel presentation by Ryan Schellenberg sharing the experience of his earthly father's advocacy as a reminder of the Heavenly Father's advocacy of his children, and His interest in their dignity.

Chapter 16 is a poem by Luci Shaw reflecting, and celebrating, Christ's victory, with an introductory note by the editor of the need for new stories, new poems and new songs.

Chapter 17 is a Good Friday message by Gwiyai H. Muzorewa of Zimbabwe. The message demonstrates proclaiming the message of the cross through metaphors, in the

context of a culture where blood sacrifices continue to distort the understanding of hearers.

Chapter 18 is an excerpt from a presentation by Curtis Change to university students. His presentation seeks to deal with the issue of alienation (from God, each other, our own bodies, creation and work) and the response to alienation through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and final reunion.

Chapter 19, by Steve Todd, is from the discipleship course at his church, and portrays Christ as fully absorbing death and its subsequent results--distance, distortion and destruction.

Chapter 20 is a summary by Mark Baker encouraging readers to "go and do likewise," proclaiming the atonement with new images, stories, and metaphors that elevate, rather than downplay or ignore, the cross of Jesus as central to proclamation.

Baker attempts to group the chapters in a logical sequence for the reader. However, my initial attempt to read this book by the fireplace proved futile. Due to the diverse approaches to the subject by the contributors, the book, somewhat understandably, never seems to hit a sustainable stride. For this reason, I found the book best read chapter by chapter, as one would a textbook.

As to the question, "did the book meet its objectives?" I would respond with a qualified "Yes." *Proclaiming the Scandal* encourages the reader to consider fresh approaches to teaching on the topic of the atonement. The book helped me to consider the issues of contextualization as it relates to proclaiming the message of atonement. However, the book failed, in my opinion, to bring "change at the popular level" based on this reading, a review of blog and website discussions and interviews with theology and mission professors from various seminaries.

I would also note that whereas the title is "technically correct," as each contributor shares his or her thoughts on the topic of the atonement, the title may mislead some who are interested in the popular discussion on the implications of σκάνδαλον in 1 Corinthians 1:23. Two such students and one professor eyed the book

with interest as it sat on my desk, then commented, “This is not what I thought it would be” after a cursory look at the contents.

Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross contributes little in the way of adding fresh theological insights to the current atonement conversation popular with the young church leaders. For that, one would want to read Baker’s earlier work.^{vi} However, this book does provide creative examples to stimulate the conversation and encourage revisiting the ones commitment to proclaiming the doctrine of atonement in ways that promote understanding.

ⁱ Back Cover

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Sandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

^{iv} Page 30.

^v C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950, 1978).

^{vi} Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*.