

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 2006

Using Biblical Imagery for the Cross

As we celebrate Holy Week and Easter, I have been thinking about the numerous sets of images the Bible employs to describe the work of Christ on the Cross. There is sacrificial language. There is judicial language. There is military language. There is ransom language. For some reason, the Bible does not make it easy for us by simply employing one image set. Rather, we get this collection of images that do not immediately gel together.

The question I have been asking is what to do with all these sets of images. How should we make use of Biblical imagery when presenting the significance of Christ? It seems like we have a few options:

(1) **Lowest Common Denominator.** One option is to try to ascertain the basic structure of the atonement at the heart of each of these images. Then we can simply present this idea logically without the garnish of images. The potential advantage here is the clarity of presentation. The potential hazard is that something of the richness of Biblical imagery could be lost in the process of boiling down.

(2) **Mix-and-Match.** Another option is to juggle all the Biblical images. A little ransom here, a little sacrifice there, etc. On the one hand, this method has the strength of sticking closer to the text. It respects the mystery of the cross and the multiplicity of images that it requires. On the other hand, it tends to leave hearers with more questions than answers with regard to their salvation. How do all these images point us to the *one* work of Christ?

(3) **Primary and Secondary.** A more bold option is to make a decision to favor one set of images over another. This could be based on the frequency of use, or via a canon-within-a-canon approach, or on the basis of which set of images is the most comprehensive. Some Christian traditions have taken this option, making one set of images dominant, rendering the others as secondary images that cast additional light on the primary image set. The advantage of this approach is that it achieves clarity of

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presentation without sacrificing Biblical imagery. The disadvantage is the necessarily problematic move of favoring one set over another, begging the question of justification: why this one and not the other? Also, one might be tempted to interpret the other sets through the lens of the primary set, and therefore run the risk of silencing the unique contribution of these other themes.

(4) **Construct New Images.** An even more bold option is to take inspiration from these many images and come up with new ones that work better in our context. Judicial and sacrificial language made sense to them. What images make sense to us? The obvious advantage to this approach is that it is more culturally relevant and encourages the creativity of contemporary witness to Jesus Christ. The danger is that the Biblical anchor will be lost, and we may end up talking about something other than the work of Christ.

Any thoughts?

My jury is still out. I would love to hear your thoughts on these options.

Are there any other options I am missing?

Did I describe these options adequately?

Would you lean toward one option over another? Why?

Labels: [Atonement](#), [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 8:27 PM

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At 11:03 PM, April 13, 2006, [ap](#) said...

my own preference is to let the images push against one another in different settings. Joel Green and Mark Baker make the point that these images should change from culture to culture. i think there is a tension is "calling" people to understand God's work for humanity in certain ways, but that we should always use the story which best suits the hearer. for example, i have found that teens feel quite powerless, but not guilty, so i emphasize the freedom aspects of ransom language, and not so much the judicial element of forgiveness.

At 9:37 AM, April 14, 2006, [David Drury](#) said...

This is a great categorization, John. I'll think of this often when I come across cross-symbolism... even in a few hours during our good friday worship gathering.

I would suggest employing three of your four in the following percentages:

#1 used 10% of the time. Lowest Common Denominator thinking is in

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my mind what systematic theology helps us with. Tying together the commonalities helps to give our faith and life a unified sense of cohesion.

#2 used 70% of the time. But I think your Mix-and-Match method should be the meat and potatoes of Christian life and ministry. It is the "safest" and "truest" and therefore hard to argue against. Likewise it necessarily pays attention to the context and story elements of the biblical narrative which brings to clearer light each imagery used for the cross.

#4 used 20% of the time. You might say that any creative preaching or Christian writing is an act of Constructing New Images--otherwise we would just read the Bible and sit down. People need to hear new parables to re-imagine the cross and it's meaning for today. Some of these parallel Christ's own imagery (speaking of the cross as an antidote might bring to mind John 3 and Numbers 21 for some of us) without directly using them.

(#3 used 0% of the time. As a side-note, I think there are too many schismatic paths leading from the Primary and Secondary method, as they emphasize one in detriment to the whole. You might say that this is "omission-heresy": the elevation and systemic communication of one point of scripture so that other parts of scripture are no longer believed and in fact unknowingly contradicted. #1 can lead to #3 without the theologian or denomination knowing it so I think that is why #1 should be limited in it's use as well.)

Like Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the desert... Just look upon it and be healed.

-David

At [9:44 AM, April 15, 2006](#), [nathan sean](#) said...

Thinking of how I take in the imagery of the cross, I would say that I am a fluctuating slave to context jumping between option two and four. For me, the many aspects of a mix-n-match approach just seem to flow with our journeys... sometimes I feel oppressed, sometimes guilt ridden, sometimes I need to see the hope of healing at the cross and often it is the selfless image of surrender that causes me to act in greater obedience (especially when it is hard).

But the mystery and beauty of God draws me to "create" new imagery. Though I do agree that it can be dangerous in a wider or public community, especially with the ease that we could lose any biblical anchor, I find sometimes that in my alone time listening, the image of the cross can take on imagery that goes far beyond my understanding. An image of creativity, an image of revelation, an

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image of history, an image of relationship, etc...

As of late, due in great deal to a class I was lucky to be a part of, the image of the cross has become more than an image of just the Son. But the image now is brushed vividly with beautiful stokes of the Father and the Spirit.

That drastically changes, well...expands, the image of the cross.

At [8:33 PM, April 16, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

One question to which I need an answer before I can feel out your question is whether God could have simply "written off" the sins of the world by divine fiat without any cross. Is there something essential to acceptance going on at the cross? Or do all these turn out to be pictures of reconciliation meant to meet the needs of our understanding?

P.S. I suppose the way I've phrased my own question points in certain directions toward my feeling about yours...

At [12:11 AM, April 24, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

Jesus Christ is Priest, Prophet, and King.

You list several types of language in the Bible to describe the Cross. Sacrificial language goes with His priestly role. Judicial and military apply to His kingly role. Not sure where the ransom language fits in. Maybe it falls under his kingly role too.

That leaves the language for His prophetic role. You forgot to include the transformational language of the Paschal mystery of the Cross. The conversion of sorrow and pain into joy and happiness, and the bridging of man with the transcendental God.

At [12:57 AM, April 24, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

"Not sure where the ransom language fits in. Maybe it falls under his kingly role too"

i think that falls under His servant role.

also... Ken brought up an interesting question "could {God} have simply "written off" the sins of the world by divine fiat without any cross?"

good question. Jesus told people their sins were forgiven and the cross had not happened yet... is that an indicator? but then again, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins..." Is that relevant to the discussion, or rather is it essential to the discussion (of course it is relevant. ha!)

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