Two Ways Across the Gap—And the Message of the Cross
Michael McClymond

Bridging the Gap—The Way Up and the Way Down

- How does one bridge the gap between "Infinite Mind" and "Mortal Man."
- There could be a way up. This would involve an escape from human limitations, finiteness, bodiless, weakness, sickness, and death.
- Story from the early church concerning the *Acoemetae* ("the Sleepless Ones"—"Sleepless" not in Seattle, but in Constantinople)—founded in 425 AD by a monk named Alexander, an order of Greek-speaking Christians who celebrated the divine service without intermission day or night. Their initial effort not to sleep at all. They reasoned that God never sleeps, and the angels in heaven constantly praised God, so why should they sleep?
- These monks in their zeal tried this out—but their zeal could not keep them awake indefinitely. They decided to pray in shifts—and that did work out.
- Some have referred to this attitude as "angelism." If I am truly and utterly committed to God, then I can escape my humanness. Christian Science is not the first group to embrace "angelism."
- One might also call this ***"dehumanization."*** To become God-like I must abandon or transcend my humanness. I must go beyond the body, beyond the needs of the body, beyond human weakness and error. *If I can become perfect, then I can become like God and be with God.*
- But no one who has ever tried this has ever succeeded. One might conclude then that there is no way that the gap between "Infinite Mind" and "Mortal Man" could ever be bridge. But there is a way, and this is the path of ***"humanization."*** This is not referring to our humanization, but to a much more daring and surprising notion—i.e., that of God being humanized. God becoming like us. (See Joan Osbourne's music video, "One of Us.")
- If we replace the ***"dehumanization"*** of human beings with the ***"humanization"*** of God, then everything operates in reverse. Rather than us transcending our humanness, God transcends his eternity to enter into time, and transcends his infinity to take on a limited human form and body.
- According to the New Testament, this ***"humanization"*** is at the center of the story of salvation, and it is summoned up in one verse: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). (The literal translation for "dwelt" would be "tabernacled"—Jesus was God's living Tabernacle.)
- If there is any theologian who claims fully to understand the Incarnation, I believe that they are not being truthful. This is a profound mystery.
- And there is another mystery that is equally profound—and perhaps even more so. Philippians 2: "Although he existed in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).
- What was the extreme limit of this process where God became "humanized"? He was "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." ***The cross is the culminating point in God's self-identification with humanity in our finitude, our weakness, and our mortality.***
- Those who hold to the theology of ***"dehumanization"*** will avoid mention of the cross and may even regard it as something hideous and horrible. (My conversation with the Jewish sculptor, named "John.") The Bible instead regards the death of Christ on the cross—paradoxically—as the moment of Christ's greatest glory.
- In the Gospel of John, Jesus referred to his impending death simply as "the hour" and, as he approached his death, he said that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (Jn. 12:23). The shameful death was—to the eyes of faith—the glorious death of the cross.

The Biblical Teaching on Jesus's Atoning Death

- Few teachings in the Bible are better supported or substantiated than that of the substitutionary death of Christ for the sins of the world.

- As early as Exodus, the Bible speaks of blood being used for purification and sacrifice. Yahweh delivered the Israelites from Egypt by causing all the firstborn of the nation, including Pharaoh's own son, to fall under the shadow of sudden death (Exodus 12). The Jews were instructed in this instance to sprinkle the blood of the young lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their homes, and God promised, "when I see the blood, I will pass over" (Exodus 12:13).
- The Lord instituted the animal sacrifices of the Hebrews and stated: "It is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement" (Lev. 17:11).
- Jesus was called "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).
- His shed blood is our atonement or covering for sin, even for the sins of all mankind (Matthew 26:28; Romans 5:6–8; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:20).
- The Apostle Paul told the elders in Ephesus that God has "purchased the church with his own blood" (Acts 20:28),
- The believer in Christ is saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus's blood and its efficacy for the cleansing of all sin (Romans 3:25).
- John stated that "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7).
- Peter declared that "you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18–19).
- The Epistle to the Hebrews said that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins" (Heb. 9:22).
- Revelation speaks of how Jesus "washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Rev. 1:5).
- ***The idea of blood redemption is like a crimson cord binding all the Bible together.***

Reflections on the Cross

- The cross is "crucial." Did you know that the word "crucial" comes from the Latin work for "cross," which is *crux*? Even today people speak of "getting to the crux of the matter," not realizing that they are referring back to Jesus's death.
- A visit from another planet, coming to investigate earth, would be amazed to see the prominence of the cross in architecture, art work, jewelry, etc. The cross is the fitting symbol of the faith because it denotes the purpose and pinnacle of Christ's mission. Despite all denominational differences, the cross is the one truly universal Christian symbol, through all times and places.
- How unlikely it was that the cross would become a Christian symbol! Both Romans and Jews despised crucifixion and regarded it with horror. John Stott writes: "Whether their background was Roman or Jewish or both, the early enemies of Christianity lost no opportunity to ridicule the claim that God's anointed and man's Savior ended his life on a cross. The idea was crazy."
- Roman authors said that they would not use the words for "cross" or "crucify" in polite company. The Romans—who had invented, or perfected, this method of execution—nonetheless regarded it as too horrible to discuss.
- As Philippians 2 suggests, the path of Jesus' life led him inescapably toward his death on the cross. Jesus was not helplessly blundering through life, following a trajectory that he was opposed to. John Stott writes: "Although he knew he must die, it was not because he was the helpless victim of evil forces arrayed against him or of any inflexible fate decreed for him, but because he freely embraced the purpose of his Father for the salvation of sinners, as it had been revealed in Scripture. … *What dominated his mind was not the living but the giving of his life*."
- Because Christ was fully human, he must have recoiled at the thought of a looming crucifixion. Yet because he was completely submitted to the will of God, he longed to fulfill God's purpose for him and for all of humanity. When taken to the cross, at the same time he went to the cross willingly. Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane clearly shows this.
- ***Why did Christ die?*** In the first Christian sermon ever given, on the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter brought two truths together: "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.

But God raised him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:23-24).

- Peter attributed Jesus' death simultaneously to the plan of God and to the wickedness of men. The cross is *an exposure of human evil*, and at the same time *a revelation of God's purpose.* God intended to overcome the human evil that was exposed on the day that Jesus was crucified.
- Why then did Christ die? We might first say that *he did not die; he was killed.* But we should balance this answer with a seemingly opposite statement: *He was not killed; he died, giving himself up voluntarily to do his Father's will.*
- Pressing deeper, we can say: *Christ died for us*. He undertook this death for our sake, not for his own sake, that through it he might secure for us a grace and blessing of salvation that could be secured in no other way.
- *Christ died for us that he might bring us to God*. The benefit of his death was our reconciliation. Because of his death, he is able to confer on us the blessing of salvation.
- *Christ died for our sins*. Our sins were the obstacle preventing us from receiving the gift that he intended to give us. This barrier had to be removed before the blessing of salvation would be bestowed.
- *Christ died the death due to us*. Scripture says that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Christ not only died for us, but he died in our place, as our representative or substitute.
- Jesus's death on the cross is *an expression of God's holiness or justice*, yet also *an expression of God's love and mercy*. The love that saves us is a "holy love," that is, a love that respects the seriousness and gravity of sin. God does not simply "pretend" that we never sinned. Nor does he deliver us over to the consequences of our own sins—which would cause us to be lost forever.
- John Stott writes: "Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross. For ultimately what sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and other sins, and Christ's resolve in love and mercy to bear their judgment and so put them away….No one can now accuse God of condoning evil and so of moral indifference or injustice. The cross demonstrates with equal vividness both his justice in judging sin and his mercy in justifying the sinner."
- *God in Christ takes upon himself the consequences of our sins. God in Christ became our Sin-Bearer*. This is sometimes referred to as the substitutionary atonement, and this is clearly taught in scripture.
- John Stott: "The concept of substitution may be said to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone."

Consequences of the Cross

- ***Victory Over Sin and Death***. John Stott: "It is impossible to read the New Testament without being impressed by the atmosphere of joyful confidence which pervades it, and which stands out in relief against the rather jejeune religion that often passes for Christianity today. There was no defeatism about the early Christians; they spoke rather of victory…Victory, conquest, triumph, overcoming–this was the vocabulary of those first followers of the risen Lord. For if they spoke of victory, they knew they owed it to the victorious Jesus…[though] the early church was celebrating the victory of a man that their contemporaries had seen slaughtered."
- "[When] this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

- ***Boldness of Believers Before God***. In the New Testament teaching, because of the cross of Christ, we may have great confidence before God. "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22). "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).
- ***Confidence of Full Forgiveness from God***. For which sins did Jesus die? For only some of them? No—scripture states that Jesus died for all sins of all human beings in all times and all places. "He himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). At the time that Jesus died on the cross, he had completed the work that the heavenly Father had appointed him to perform, and so he cried out: "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30).
- Because the salvation of believers is based not on their own moral or spiritual attainments, but on the completed work of Christ, they may be confident that they are no longer under God's condemnation: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).
- ***Reconciliation With Fellow Humanity***. Story of the killing-stone used by the warring tribes in the South Pacific. Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies (Mt. 5:44). Such love for the enemy is only possible because humanity—at war with God—was reconciled to God by Jesus's death.
- John Stott writes: "If our peace-making is to be modeled on our heavenly Father's, however, we will conclude at once that it is quite different from appeasement. For the peace that God secures is never cheap peace, but always costly…We have no right to expect, therefore, that we will be able to engage in [re]conciliation work at no cost to ourselves, whether our involvement in the dispute is as the offending or offended party, or as a third party anxious to help enemies to become friends again."
- ***Patience Endurance Amid Suffering***. Scripture states that Christ himself had to "learn obedience" through suffering: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:8-9). The same pattern is also found in the life of Christ's followers: "We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:3-4).
- ***Growth in Holiness by Daily Taking Up the Cross***. Jesus told his followers that they themselves would need to "take up the cross," and that they would need to do so on a daily basis: "And he was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23).
- The Apostle Paul describes his overall goal in life in this way— "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on" (Phil. 3:10-12).
- Paul embraced the idea that he would have "the fellowship of his sufferings" and that he would be "conformed to his death." In this way the Apostle's teaching matches that of Jesus, in his teaching to "take up the cross."