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**DATES:**

Published: 09 Oct. 2017

**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**Williams, D., 2017, 'Cur crux: is the  
method significant?', *Koers – Bulletin  
for Christian Scholarship* 82(1),  
Available at [https://doi.org/10.19108/  
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# Cur crux: Is the method significant?

## Abstract

*While most recognise the centrality of the cross to Christianity, there is not the same consensus as regards its meaning. Then while it is clear that both the suffering and death of Jesus were instrumental in salvation, why did he die in the horrible way that he did? Crucifixion was the preferred method of execution for political offences by the Romans, and by its horror was intended to deter. Paul understands that the crucified, by being hanged, bears a curse, which is carried by Christ so that people can be blessed in the declaration of justification. The actual suffering and death were due to enforced immobility, a total loss of freedom, and is the ultimate in the process of self-emptying by the son of God in incarnation. As such it is an appropriate penalty for sin which is an abuse of the liberty given to humanity. These three reasons for the cross then relate to the main theories of the atonement which are aspects of a full understanding. Union with Christ in his suffering is then atoning.*

**Keywords:** *Cross, atonement, curse, self-emptying, freedom*

## Opsomming

*Terwyl die kruis algemeen aanvaar word as die hoeksteen van die Christelike geloof, is daar nie dieselfde ooreenstemming wanneer dit kom by die betekenis daarvan nie. Terwyl dit ook duidelik is dat die lyding en sterwe van Jesus onlosmaaklik verbind word met die verlossingsplan, ontstaan die vraag, waarom moes hy so 'n wrede dood sterf? Kruisiging was die gekose metode van straf vir politieke oortredings gedurende die Romeinse oorheersing en primêr bedoel as afskrikmiddel. Paulus redeneer, dat omdat die gekruisigde aan die kruis hang, hy 'n vloek dra wat dan ook op Christus rus waardeur die mensdom deel kan hê aan die vrypraak en regverdigmaking. Die werklike lyding en sterwe aan die kruis was as gevolg van geforseerde inperking van die liggaam en 'n algehele verlies van vryheid. Dit is ook die uiteinde van die proses van self-ontlediging as die seun van God in sy menswording. Dit is dan ook 'n gepaste straf vir sonde wat 'n misbruik is van vryheid wat aan die mensdom toegestaan is. Hierdie drie redes vir die kruis hou dus verband met die vernaamste teorieë oor versoening wat weer aspekte is van 'n groter geheelbeeld. Verbintenis met Christus in sy lyding kan dus gelykgestel word aan versoening.*

**Kernbegrippe:** *Kruis, versoening, vloek, self-ontlediging, vryheid*

In his book *Surprised by joy* (Joy was also the name of his wife), the renowned Cambridge professor C S Lewis describes how he was brought to faith in Christ. In 1966 a Cambridge undergraduate was also overwhelmed by joy and amazement when he realised that on the cross Jesus died for his sins to give forgiveness and eternal life. That student was reading engineering, so it was not really surprising that he wanted to know not just what the cross did, but how it did it. How could the horrible death of a young man two thousand years and thousands of miles away affect him, and us?

The importance of the cross became obvious to him, and indeed has been rightly recognised since the event itself. The four gospels devote a large proportion of their space to the events of the last week of Jesus' earthly life, and within that, to the actual death. Since then, the cross has been recognised as central to Christianity, and indeed is the most common symbol for it. It is found inside and outside places of worship, and paradoxically, the symbol of horror has become an ornament worn by many as an object of beauty.

## 1. Why did Jesus die?

It is a clear Biblical understanding that the death of Christ was a means of forgiveness for sin, fulfilling the system in the Old Testament. That of course cannot be the entire story, for what is the connection between two persons separated by enormous gulfs of space and time? This aspect of relationship to us is fundamental.

When Paul exclaims that Christians are crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20), he sees this union as the source of forgiveness and so of life. The cross of Christ is not just an historical event to look back to, nor even one which continues to have significance, as other historical events continue to leave their effects. The cross is rather something in which Christians positively participate, so that we are crucified, die and then rise with Christ in a very real way. There is an identification with the cross and its meaning. The reason for the specific form of dying then assumes significance for the understanding of salvation.

Although there are several understandings of how the death of Jesus enabled salvation, what must be highlighted is that each of the theories confers prominence onto the death of Jesus. This is hardly surprising as Christianity, like most other faiths, deals with the big quest of human existence, the fact of death and the possibility of survival after it in eternal life. By means of the death of Christ, people are able to escape not so much the experience, but the basic effect of death. Now that may well be an explanation for the death, but does the actual method hold significance? Does it matter that Jesus died in that particularly gruesome way? Human experience abounds with a multiplicity of ways in which human life ends, and an almost countless variety of ways in which it is inflicted upon others. Why this particular one? It must be noted that it was no accident; John is fond of using the picture of being "lifted up", an expression common on the lips of Jesus as he anticipated his death (e.g. Jn 3:14).

Various parties were involved in his death, all being culpable. While the Roman soldiers actually did the physical nailing, Jesus clearly did not hold them culpable as such; "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). They were obeying orders, and yet their boss, the procurator Pilate, washed his hands of the guilt, not of course that it could really remove his responsibility. Far more reasonable was that the responsibility should rest on the Jewish people, as indeed they accepted (Matt 27:25). There are still many who hold the Jews responsible. More than that, however, it was sinful humanity as a whole that killed him; righteousness has always been persecuted, as seen in many Biblical examples. For each group, it was significant for them that the actual method of death was by the cross.

## 2. Execution

The obvious answer to the question of why Jesus was crucified is that he was executed by the Romans, and they chose that he died in that way. Although they did use other methods of execution in different circumstances, such as the beheading of Paul because he was a Roman citizen, crucifixion was common. This was for a very good reason; it has been described as one of the cruellest forms of death that a cruel humanity has ever devised, and this was the reason that the Romans used it. What they wanted was to keep the *pax Romana*, and to do this they needed to discourage any hint of rebellion and unrest. What better way than to demonstrate the result of sedition than to publicly show what the result would be? What then mattered was that the execution, in all its horrors, was seen by as many people as possible. After the unrest that followed the death of Herod the Great, and quelling of it by the Roman general, Varus, the roads of Galilee were lined with some two thousand crosses (Barclay 1961:86); emphatically, they were next to the roads, for that is where the people were.

The actual crucifixion was usually after a scourging, a horrible form of punishment which by itself caused the death of many, and would have exacerbated the pain of the actual cross.

The film made by Mel Gibson, *Passion of the Christ*, goes some way to communicate what Jesus suffered. The film majored on the physical, and it is from this that its impact comes. Mel Gibson was following in a long tradition of concentration on the sufferings of Christ, perhaps at its height in medieval devotion (Aulén 1950:114), manifesting in such phenomena as the *stigmata*. Morris (1978:128) comments that this has bordered on the morbid. However, the physical suffering was only a part of the total experience. Jesus' anguish was also mental, witnessed by the sweating of blood, and spiritual, as he suffered the separation from his Father, again attributable to the sin which caused the need for atonement.

Nevertheless, it is not immediately clear why pain, of whatever kind, enables an atonement. Paul rather points out that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 3:23). "The soul that sins shall die" (Ez 18:4); what matters for atonement is the death of Christ, the shedding of his life-blood, but not his pain. It is significant that none of the evangelists dwell on the suffering (Morris, 1974:326).

More than this, how can it be just for the pain of three hours on the cross to be an adequate and sufficient penalty for the whole world (Letham, 1993:133), even taking the horror of scourging into account? The usual answer is felt to lie in the fact of the divinity of Jesus, in which case the appearance of the suffering of Jesus is barely more than the tip of the iceberg of what he actually went through. However, Lewis (1957:117) also tellingly suggests that no more pain is actually felt by a million than by one; it cannot be quantified. Perhaps this is little comfort in the experience itself, but such questions serve to highlight the difficulty of seeing the pain of Jesus as enabling forgiveness. The Genesis narrative would indicate that in fact the penalty for sin is not so much pain, but death, as Paul explains in Romans 6:23, and expounds elsewhere. He understands the sin of Adam to result in "death through sin" (Rom 5:12).

### 3. Fulfilment

The preaching of the early Church took a very different, but characteristic, view of the death of Jesus. The earliest disciples, as Jews, were steeped in the Old Testament, and saw the death of Jesus in terms of its fulfilment. He had been delivered according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). His death was no accident, but should be seen in terms of the Old Testament.

But in this case, and particularly if it is to be understood in terms of sacrifice, should it not have been a burnt offering? Being burnt would have been a distinct possibility, indeed the medieval church practised it on very many occasions as a means of getting rid of heretics. Again of course the motif of publicity was very much present, but the option of crucifixion was hardly open to them. Fire might well have been appropriate in view of the nature of God; is that the connection with the Spirit, who manifested as fire at Pentecost, and perhaps elsewhere? Or should not the death of Christ have been by stoning, seeing that the offence of Christ was seen as blasphemy? This was indeed attempted on a couple of occasions (Jn 10:31, 8:59). Notably, Stephen was early stoned for his witness to Christ. This could well be appropriate, as the quintessence of sin is the assertion of godliness, insofar as it is the rejection of the authority of God himself. The question of why stoning was appropriate is of course another question.

It is significant that Paul, writing of the cross, speaks of it as a curse (Gal 3:13). This is because a body which was hanged was looked on as cursed (Deut 21:33). There are several Old Testament examples of this practice (Josh 8:29, 10:26-7, 2 Sam 4:12, 21:8f). Displaying the body immediately drew attention to the fact that there had been punishment for a crime; the victim continued to be condemned even after death. Thus Bruce (1982:164) identifies the curse as that on the law-breaker (Deut 27:26). This was already said in Galatians 3:10, where there is a deliberate contrast between those of faith and those who rely on

obedience to law (Cole 1965:95). Hebrews 6:6 speaks of the cross as holding the victim up to contempt, so was an example to be a deterrent. However, Cole (1965:99) points out that the victim was not cursed because of being hanged, but that the hanging was the outward sign of being cursed. In this sense, the hanging was done as publicity, and thus continued as a deterrent. Unlike crucifixion, this hanging was done after death, so it was not done to kill. One exception is that the hanging was done to cause death where the crime was wronging the people by delivering them to foreigners, or of cursing God (Bruce, 1982:165). It is ironic that the Jews did exactly that by giving Jesus up to Pilate; and therefore themselves came under the curse. Of course it does not really indicate why the particular form of hanging is crucifixion. Here Bruce (1982:164) notes that Philo, speaking of Deuteronomy 21:22f, specifically uses "impale", rather than just "hanging" as in the Hebrew and Septuagint, making a specific connection with crucifixion.

Paul's point is, however, not just one of publicity. The curse is not, as we tend to think, a matter of words only, but it had a real effect. Certainly the Old Testament view is that a curse was effective, positively bringing evil. Here a well-known example is in the story of Balaam, where the king Balak was desperate to harm Israel, and hired the prophet to curse them, something he refused to do, again because of the real effect of the action (Num 23:19). Balak sought to weaken Israel by the curse. A New Testament example is Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:21), which again had a real effect. Because a corpse defiles (Num 35:33f, Lev 18:24-7), the hanging was very temporary, and the body was buried on the same day; von Rad (1966:138) looks upon this as having a cultic sense, but one that it would affect the yield of the land.

The words of a curse are then seen as having potency; this is particularly pertinent for the Protestant understanding of salvation, as this is also a matter of words, but now of blessing, in that a person is declared to be righteous in justification. Thus, as Paul is at pains to show, salvation is not by works, but this blessing is by declaration, through faith. In this case, the curse is a matter of condemnation. As crucified, so hanged, Jesus was cursed, and so condemned. It is then this statement of condemnation that was borne for us, so that we could receive the statement of blessing, and so justification and salvation.

Lührmann (1992:61) feels that Galatians 2:19 indicates that the law cursed Christ, perhaps a reminder that Jesus was repeatedly accused of lawbreaking, an accusation which led to their condemnation. It is perhaps significant that Paul does not reflect the fact that Deuteronomy says that the curse was by God. Bruce (1982:165) suggests that this is because the cross was the supreme act of obedience to God; however the curse by God is appropriate as Jesus carried the curse for us in a substitutionary manner. Although we are condemned as lawbreakers, Jesus took that curse for us. Bruce (1982:164) draws a comparison with the hanging of the chiefs of the people after the apostasy of Baal-Peor, so that the wrath of God was averted (Num 25:4); they carried the curse. Justin Martyr records that it was the fact that Jesus was then accursed of God that made him offensive to Trypho the Jew, even though he found him otherwise attractive (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Ch. 89).

It must be asked why a hanged person is cursed. The Deuteronomy passage simply states it, being concerned that the body is quickly buried so that the land not be defiled. This indicates that the burial, or possibly the end of the hanging, stops the curse; this may indicate why the hanging is a curse. Firstly, while being hanged, the body is out of contact with the land, so not in a direct relationship with it. Until it is buried, it has no real interaction with the land; only thereafter is it able to decompose naturally. Secondly, it is held in a position that it would not naturally assume; it should not be simply dependent on being supported. The underlying point in both is that a hanged body is out of the normal set of relationships that even a dead body should have; it is out of harmony with its environment.

In the curse, the harmony of the area, which gives it power, is disrupted. The presence of the body made that place unclean, and so inaccessible. There is real damage in the curse,

a weakening. In contrast, a blessing enhances relationship, because it is a word which results in increased harmony of what is blessed. The blessing that is possible for us because of the cross is harmony with God, and as a result of that, harmony with others. Even though the statement of the curse of Deuteronomy 21 and Galatians 3 is not connected with blood, it is also the shedding of blood that defiles, and so engenders a curse (Num 35:33). This would be because the blood is the means of life, giving harmony in a body, blessing indeed. Of course, John is at pains to record the thrust of the spear into Jesus' side and the emission of blood with water, incidentally one of the clearest indications of the fact that Jesus was really dead.

"Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Heb 9:22). The Biblical recognition that the "life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev 17:14) is a remarkable affirmation of a reality that is greatly appreciated by modern medicine, where analysis of the blood provides diagnosis for many of the ailments that afflict us. More than that, the circulation of the blood is the means by which the elements of the body interact, that interaction which is of the essence of life itself. The sacrifice of Jesus necessarily demands his death, and so it was of importance for the apostle to witness the thrust of the Roman spear and the coming out of blood and water (Jn 19:34). It was the shedding of his blood that Jesus pointed to at the Supper as the means of covenant, the interaction in the Body of Christ. It may just be noted that 1 Peter 1:2 speaks of the "sprinkling" of his blood, referring of course to Old Testament sacrifice (Morris, 1976:321).

The very act of crucifixion, and the horror associated with it, was then a curse, as it damaged the relationship of the crucified with those around. It had a very real, and negative, effect. Likewise the list of curses in Deuteronomy 27 are all connected with actions that disrupt relations, which of course all sin does. The law-breaking of which Jesus was accused is a curse because the point of law is the generation of harmony in society. The ritual of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 is of a goat cut off from its environment, a symbol of the effect of sin; it is then cursed. Christ died out of relation, the source of his strength; the cry from the cross, quoting Psalm 22, graphically highlights this, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Thompson (1974:272) says that the verb translated "curse" comes from *qll*, to make small, which it does to relations. It may be noted here that the more common *'arur* is from the Akkadian "bind". This latter probably has a connotation of magic, but in the case of the cross, the idea is significant for the reason why Jesus died by crucifixion and not in some other way. The curse renders impotence.

The lack of harmony in the body is then the cause of the terrible pain of the cross. However, the presence of pain must draw attention to the cause of that pain. Surely it is not simply caused, even allowed by God? That would render him vindictive in the extreme. Pain, however, is a symptom, an effect, of a lack of harmony, of something that is wrong. An engine that is running well tends to be quiet, but screams in anguish when the mechanism gets out of harmony. A body likewise manifests pain when something is out of harmony. Obviously the state of Jesus' body was far from harmonious, and there was therefore pain. In that sense the penalty for sin was pain, as sin is essentially a disruption to the world. Jesus was experiencing the disharmony that led to his being nailed to the cross.

Jesus experienced the curse, the disruption of relationship, so that we did not have to. It was then representative and substitutionary. Galatians 3:13 emphasises that Jesus did not just become a curse, but a curse for us. For Paul this meant that the Gentiles, who were otherwise outside of the blessing of Abraham, and so effectively cursed, could receive the blessing that comes with covenant, the relationship with God. At the same time, through the covenant, comes the enhancement of blessing, the gift of the Spirit, whose role is to give relation; it is not for nothing that the Spirit has been called *vinculum amoris*, "bond of love" (cf. Williams 2004). Calvin understands the Holy Spirit as relating the risen Christ to the elements in the Lord's Supper, so similarly, he is the one who relates the sinner to the dying Son. It is no accident here that Paul does not just say that the Gentiles can receive

the Spirit, but that “we receive” (Gal 3:14). The blessing is received by Jew and Gentile alike, and moreover the barrier between them is removed in the removal of the curse. The church is one.

#### 4. Removal of power

The Romans used crucifixion as punishment for rebellion, which was the rejection of the authority of Caesar. The issue was of a claim to, and use of, power. By execution, and especially by crucifixion, the rebel was shown that he was impotent, powerless against the might of Rome. These were acts of Rome, the political authority. Although the complaint against Jesus was religious, the Jews made it political (Benoit, 1969:147), because politics has to do with actions and freedoms. Jesus was mocked and crucified as king, and a king is one who can do what he wants, especially at that time. The crucifixion then had to be “official”, not a lynching as had been the latter case with Stephen.

It is that thought of power which might well then give another hint as to why the method of the death of Jesus was crucifixion. Someone has power insofar as he or she has ability to do what is desired, free will, and it is this that enables sin. If we were not in any sense free, we could not sin, for all that we did would be under control. But we are to an extent free, and therefore able to deviate from what is best, what is harmonious, and so can sin. The issue is our liberty. Sin is enabled by, and is an abuse of, our liberty. Suffering naturally follows, showing the need for obedience, the denial of autonomy (Heb 5:8).

It is then appropriate that the way in which Jesus dealt with sin was in a curtailment of liberty. Indeed, the cross killed just by this. Jesus lost the use of his hands, the instruments of doing, the use of his feet, the instruments of going, and could do nothing except wait for death. Being “lifted up” was an aspect of a loss of liberty. It is no accident that lifting up is a metaphor for rebellion, the misuse of liberty (Deut 8:14). Jesus’ wounds, although serious, were not fatal, but his loss of liberty was. In this, it was indeed a curse, as freedom is a blessing. It is significant that the curse on the serpent from inciting the primal sin was loss of freedom, thereafter having to go on its belly (Gen 3:14). Jesus was, as Paul outlines it in Philippians 2, at the end of the process of the increasing loss of liberty which was an essential part of his *kenōsis*, and his humility. In this regard, one of the reasons for the use of crucifixion was to humiliate the victim; Benoit (1969:218) comments that this usually extended to the disposal of the corpse. Ironically, Barabbas was then given his liberty, a custom commemorating the liberation from slavery in Egypt (Benoit, 1969:136). It was of course then enabled by Jesus’ loss of liberty.

The act of crucifixion involved the nailing of Jesus’ hands and feet. Is it accidental, in the light of Genesis 2:16, that a tree was involved in the forgiveness of sin? Bruce (1982:164) notes that the Targum on Numbers 25:4 specifically links it with Deuteronomy 21:23 by explicit reference to the “wood”. It facilitated the restriction of freedom in the cross. There is a bit of doubt about the details here in that some people believe that the nailing was not through the palms of the hands as it is traditionally portrayed, but through the wrists, feeling that the former would be liable to tear out. Some believe that he was rather tied with ropes, although this is contrary to Thomas’ being able to put his finger in the nail holes (Jn 20:25). This could, however, have been done in addition to the nailing, especially if this was done through the palms. However, the important issue is that Jesus was actually fastened to the cross, and his liberty was physically removed. If the essence of the imitation of Jesus in the Christian life is of curtailment of liberty, this indicates that this is not simply a matter of will, but that, initially at least, help is needed. Certainly the desire for autonomy is very strong, and its rejection needs help.

It is of course true that other methods of punishment also involve the curtailment of liberty, such as our generally preferred method of incarceration, but perhaps none centres on

this aspect quite so strongly. In other forms of execution, the loss of liberty of the victim was to prevent escape, but in crucifixion, it is this that actually kills. In fact the cross took place not only outside a prison, but outside the city itself. It may just be noted that it is the organisation of the city that enables much of human freedom. Without this, a person is restricted to the search for a means of survival.

As substitute and representative, Jesus took on himself all the loss of liberty that was the result of sin, so that we could be free, presuming, of course, our free identification with him. Incidentally, there is possible support here for a rejection of the idea of hell as a place of torment, rather understanding annihilation as the result of sin, so the ultimate loss of any liberty. Eternal punishment then lies in exclusion from God, the source of life and freedom (cf. Fudge 1982).

Seeing the key to the cross as the loss of liberty, experienced both in a substitutionary and a representative sense, also clarifies why the atonement was done by Jesus. It is often suggested that it had to be God who died, for otherwise the sacrifice could not be big enough. However, it was God, in his act of creation, who gave a measure of free will to the world, and especially to humanity in his image. Taylor (1972:204) cites the stimulating suggestion of Elphinstone, that on the cross God was atoning for all the pain that he had caused to humanity in creating them! This was of course an act of *kenōsis*, in that he limited his own freedom otherwise the freedom of the creation could not be real. It must just be pointed out here that the self-limitation of freedom, being voluntary, is by no means an inherent diminution of God's omnipotence; in theory at least he could restrict the freedom of the creation at any time. As the thief so rightly said, as the Son of God, Jesus could have come down from the cross. Jesus went to the cross willingly, an act of freedom choosing the loss of freedom. Isaiah 53, often seen as fulfilled in Jesus, refers to the sheep slaughtered without resistance (Is 53:7). He refused the anodyne which would deaden the pain, rather choosing to continue to accept the full experience. He continued freely to limit himself, and ultimately voluntarily gave up the spirit (Lk 23:46), a quotation from Psalm 31:5, a text used at Compline, a service of trust, so of yielding for the night (Benoit, 1969:198). Significantly, his death is described in that way, a final yielding of any independence in the spirit, the life-force, "a willing surrender of life" (Westcott, 1958:278).

This self-limitation in creation had been the start of the longer process of *kenōsis*, described by Paul in Philippians 2. Restriction to a human body, taking the form of a servant, or slave, and then the humility which is what humanity should manifest. In his humanity, he lived in obedience to God, following the path that led to the cross. Obedience is a choice to restrict freedom, and Philippians 2 rightly then sees the cross as following from that. It is then appropriate that the form of death was the ultimate curtailment of liberty.

It was this curtailment of his liberty that then provided atonement for sin, for this sin was a direct result of the liberty that had been given to humanity. The freedom bestowed on humanity that should have been used in free service of God, in the exercise of the dominion over the creation that comes from being created in the image of God, was instead misused in rebellion against the creator.

But in so doing, humanity was obedient to the tempter, and in so doing became slaves of sin, thereby losing freedom. Sin is the cause of disruption, the lessening of the harmony of inter-relation, of which death is the ultimate. For Barth, sin is a breaking of relationship, not an entity or a condition (Sanders, 1998:251); pain is the inevitable side effect of this. Inherent in that loss of relationship is a loss of liberty. Jesus suffered the loss of his freedom, then by union with people bearing the effect of their misuse of liberty in the self-restriction of his own. He bore not only the effect of sin, but its cause. Incidentally, such as König (1986:94) have argued that the suffering of Christ on the cross could not be effective for disease, or otherwise Jesus would have had to have been sick on the cross, which, he says, he was not. However, disease is a loss of liberty, and so also borne by Christ. "Save yourself",

cried those around (Lk 23:35f), an allusion to the healings of Jesus, liberation from disease (Benoit 1969:178).

In that very real action of removing liberty came the atonement for human loss of liberty, and the bestowal of the real. The apostolic preaching rejoiced in the resurrection, the enabling and guarantee of ours, but significantly described as the fact that death could not continue to hold him (Acts 2:24). This means that Jesus carried the effects of liberty, but then in dealing with them, also gave real freedom. In union with the freedom of the creator then came the freedom that God desired. The lifting of hands also implies the empowering that results in victory (Ex 17:11, Mic 5:9). As in the wilderness, salvation came through identification, when Moses lifted up the serpent (Jn 3:14). As Jesus said, "If the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:36), and in the service to God that was intended, came full freedom. As the Book of Common Prayer reminds us, "in his service is perfect freedom". Irenaeus' "recapitulation" (cf. Letham 1993:60) is here an attractive understanding of the means of atonement. "Redemption is due to Christ's holding down the rebellious impulses of the flesh" (Mackintosh 1920:233), meaning that the sinlessness of Jesus is of more significance than that the sacrificial victim had to be perfect. Augustine's insight is that whereas sin naturally followed from freedom, this is actually better than having no freedom as the result is now a redeemed, and free, humanity.

Of course, if the major aspect of the cross is felt to lie in the removal of liberty, it must be asked why it was necessary for there being such horrible pain. I asked this question in an article some years ago (Williams, 2007), in which I concluded that it was connected more with sanctification than with justification. Pain can well have positive results (Rom 5:3, 1 Pet 1:7). It must be pointed out that pain is not an unmitigated evil (e.g. Lewis 1957:17), but that it is a necessary result of free will, which is a great good. Stott (1986:319) gives several pertinent examples of the beneficial results of suffering. While the prophecy of the sufferings of Christ in Isaiah 53 speaks much of the suffering, it says, "with his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:5), not forgiven. Healing is indeed rarely a quick matter, but a process, like sanctification. However, it must be added here that sanctification is itself a matter of self-restriction.

At the heart of Christian ethics is self-negation, the restriction of some things that may well be possible for us, but to be refused if we are to live in accordance with the example of Jesus. The love of Christ constrains us (2 Cor 5:14), where Paul explains that this is because all have died, as Christ died for all. This does not mean asceticism, even if some followers of Jesus, both in the early church, such as the monks, and even recently, as the Amish, recognise that this can well be part of the life of the cross. It must of course be observed that a measure of self-denial is actually beneficial to us. Perhaps in a world where one of the major health challenges is obesity, the value of self-restriction could well be more stressed! There are of course many other aspects, such as in the area of sexuality, where the traditional Christian ethic is seen as excessively restrictive, yet where adherence to it does avoid a lot of the problems that confront many in the modern world. An aspect of imitation of the cross that is definitely out of favour today is that crucifixion was a total commitment. There were no half measures! This follows in the area of our sin, where we very much like to maintain our freedom of choice, and prefer to stop the practice of some sin, but to retain others.

More than simply self-denial, the process of crucifixion and the gradual weakening of the body leading to eventual death reflect the fact that Christian life is also a gradual weakening of the power of self and a voluntary restriction of liberty. Death by crucifixion was not like other forms of execution, immediately effective, but was intended to cause slow loss of vitality, giving death by exhaustion. Indeed, some aspects of life were retained on the initial nailing, but gradually were lost. Jesus was initially free to speak, but this would have got more difficult with the swelling of the tongue which accompanied the process. He could move his head, but this ability would also become difficult. Even the freedom to breathe would gradually be lost, and indeed a likely cause of the final death was asphyxiation.



At the point of death, where he committed his spirit to God, came the final act of freedom, when his work was accomplished; “*tetelestai*: it is finished” (Jn 19:30). In the Christian life therefore, it may be expected that there is a process that is ongoing towards the total denial of personal liberty in imitation of Christ. It follows that this self-restriction, if in imitation of the cross, would be visible. Now Jesus did say that when we fast, it should not be ostentatious (Matt 6:16), for that is looking for praise. However, if done in imitation of Christ it is a witness, and should be visible.

It is common today to see the meaning of the image of God (Gen 1:27) in autonomy and dominion. This however led to sin, and so the loss of the fullness of that image. However, far from the humanity of Christ being expressed in disobedience, it was fulfilled in obedience, and that to the uttermost. Our humanity likewise, redeemed through his, reflects the image of God most fully in willing obedience to God, as the Master showed.

## 5. The cross and theories of atonement

Since the very beginning, Christians have regarded the cross of Jesus as no ordinary death, but that it was the God-given means of atonement with God. This unanimity has not, however, extended to the understanding of why this is, how the cross enacts salvation. It is then noteworthy that the views of the means of atonement as traditionally understood say nothing of the actual means of death. For all of them, what matters is that Jesus died. How he died has not been seen to be significant; even the fact that he was put to death has not been observed as relevant. However, what may be observed here is the connection with the reasons for his death being by a cross.

The teaching that the sufferings of Jesus, and especially his death, are the means of atonement are accepted in most parts of the church. It is commonly held that the death of Jesus was a substitute for the death that our sins deserve (e.g. 1 Pet 2:24, where the author highlights the “tree”), or, similarly, that he died as our representative. However, even though this understanding of the work of Christ has enjoyed such wide acceptance, it has occasioned a considerable amount of criticism (e.g. Letham, 1993:136f). It must then not be overlooked that there are other theories which are persuasively held. Aulén (1950) is well-known for his rejection of it; his belief is that the “classic theory” is the correct one, and represents the understanding of the New Testament, most of the Fathers, and of Luther, but was superseded by the “Latin theory” of penal substitution. Aulén’s view, outlined in his book *Christus Victor*, a development of the recapitulation idea of Irenaeus, is that we unite with the experience of Christ by faith, and so in effect die with him, and then rise in union with his resurrection, thereby receiving eternal life (cf. Eph 1:10, Rom 5, 1 Cor 15:21f). A slight variant of this is the satisfaction idea of Anselm; Jesus lived a perfectly obedient life, satisfying the honour of God, so that he can forgive justly (cf. Barclay 1961:113f). A third view is that Jesus died as an example for us such that we are motivated to reform and therefore become worthy of forgiveness (cf. 1 Pet 2:21). The death of Christ is then an indication of the depth of self-giving that makes an ideal human life. Biblical support can then be attested for each of these three main theories. There have been many other theories, but they can really be reduced to only these three (cf. Milne, 1997:398). It is most likely that it is not so much a matter of choosing between these three ideas, but to see them as complementary aspects of the overall means of atonement. The objections that can be raised against one theory are met by the others (Barclay, 1961:131). I have suggested elsewhere (Williams, 1997:128-32) that the three can be considered as aspects of the total, an assessment reflected by Stott (1986:230), who holds that the three are compatible.

It is hardly surprising that the three main theories of atonement can then also be matched with the reasons for the specific form of death by the cross. Whereas none of them demands any more than that Jesus died, the particular form of that death is appropriate for each.

Then they are seen to be complementary; thus the fact that Jesus bore the curse, and lost his liberty is part of the punishment that he carried as a sacrifice for us.

For the Romans therefore, the example and deterrent value that they sought was found most appropriately in the cross. Would any other form of dying have met their requirements so well? The cross can for them be seen as providing a motivation for living in a way that they approved of. Many people have seen the dying of Jesus as motivating the sort of life acceptable to God, and so enabling his forgiveness. Indeed, the cross is humility in the extreme, an acceptance of care for others. If people lived in such a way, this world would be a wonderful place. The other side of this is also significant, for the sufferings of Jesus can well portray those of people who reject God's offer of a loving forgiveness. Even for those who deny the existence of conscious punishment after death, the dereliction of Jesus in his experience of God-forsakenness should provide a powerful warning.

Likewise for the Jews, immersed in a world of sacrifice, the connection with the cross as a curse is most relevant. It is hardly surprising that in our Bibles, so strongly rooted in the Old Testament and Jewish culture, the cross is predominantly seen in terms of sacrifice. Here it is notable that in the regular sacrifices, the lamb was slain as a result of a declaration selecting it, and so condemning it; a curse indeed. It was this that facilitated the blessing of forgiveness, in the lamb bearing the curse of sin for the worshipper.

Finally, when it is appreciated that the wrongness and disharmony that pervade life is wrong because the gift of liberty has been so abused, the realisation that a life without sin, in full harmony is possible is so refreshing. This, however, must demand the surrender of absolute autonomy for the sake of others, for only in a life lived for them, effectively one of love, can result in harmony between people. The portrayal of salvation by union with Christ as understood in the "Classic theory" of Aulén is significant not just in the death of self in Christ, but in the whole process of *kenōsis* of which death is the culmination. Then the new life received in union with the resurrection of Christ may be appreciated to be one of real freedom, received in union and in allegiance to a new Lord.

## 6. Finally

When looking at the cross as the means of justification, and the appropriateness of that particular method of execution, it may be justly observed that the three aspects of the cross find fulfilment in salvation. While the cross meant the curse of condemnation, salvation means the blessing of justification. While the cross meant the loss of freedom, in Christ is found a Lord whose service is perfect freedom. Then whereas the dying on the cross presents an example of the results of disobedience, so being a deterrent, the results of the cross is a group of the saved, witnessing by their lives the life of obedience that it facilitated, and providing by them an example to a needy world.

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