

## **Who Does God Love? The Love of God, the Cross of Christ and the Church's Mission**

*AGTS Spring Lectureship, Morning Lecture, Wednesday, January 20, 2010*

**Dr. Christopher J. H. Wright**

International Director of the Langham Partnership International, London

---

Thank you, Dr. Klaus, for that warm welcome. It is good to be with you again today. We are thinking about various aspects of God's mission and the Bible—a massive subject, of course. Today I thought it would be worth thinking about the centrality of the cross within the mission of God, and that, of course, speaks to us of the love of God. That is why I have put these three phrases together: the love of God, the cross of Christ and the mission of God's people. I hope that will stimulate our thinking somewhat.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16, that begins with, "God so loved the world..." John's word there is the word *cosmos*, and generally speaking in John's Gospel *cosmos* signifies the world of humanity and rebellion against God. Predominantly John uses the word in that more negative sounding phrase. However, in the more immediate context of its use in John 3, he has already used it in John 1:10 to speak of the world in the sense of God's creation. He talks about the whole *cosmos*—the whole world made by Him—that is, the Word of God as a creating word of God of the world. So, our sense of the word *cosmos*, that total universality of the world in a broader sense, is certainly not alien to John's thinking. The love of God, the self-giving love of God, the love of God the Son, was for the sake of the whole earth—the cosmos,

the whole creation, explicitly, and especially for the world of fallen humanity. *Cosmos* means the world that we are as sinners, as well as the world we live in as humans.

Paul links his understanding of Christ to creation, the Church, the cross, individual believers, and, ultimately the new creation itself. So I read it, "In Christ, all things were created, things in heaven and on earth; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. For God was pleased through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things in earth or things in heaven by making peace through His blood shed on the cross. Once you,"—that is, you Gentiles, because that is very much in the context of what Paul was saying—"you also were alienated from God, but now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death. So you, too, get to be part of this great reconciling work of the blood of Christ."

In that passage we have, as it were, the order of our salvation—creation, Church, redeemed creation, individual believers. This is an order which perhaps runs rather differently from the way we tend, in our evangelical piety and evangelistic work, to

think. We tend to start out with the individual and say,

You've got a sin problem, brother or sister. But I can tell you how to get your sin problems solved and go to heaven when you die. Trust in Jesus, and that's all well. In the meantime, there are a few others of us who have discovered this, and we are the Church. So, you better join us and be a part of the Church for fellowship and growth until you get to heaven when you die. Oh, and we have to live here in this world, I'm afraid, 'cause we haven't got much choice. So, this is the world, and we've got to live in it until we get to heaven when we die.

So, we have this sort of individual Church, creation somewhere out there, and then heaven. Paul actually goes in exactly the opposite order. He begins with creation, the whole of creation that God made in, for, and through Christ. Then he speaks about the Church as God's cosmic purpose of redemption. Then, he speaks about the reconciling, saving work of Christ on the cross, and then, as it were, he says, "By the way, oh, you, you Gentiles, you get to be part of this." So, what we have in this verse, then, it seems to me, is that the cross, the reconciling blood of Christ is central to at least four of these key areas of Paul's theology—that is central to his doctrine of creation, or his cosmology—the whole of what God created was created through Christ and will be redeemed through Christ. The cross is also central to his doctrine of the Church because the Church is the center, the demonstration, the living proof, of the purposes of God in the present and eschatologically as well, as Paul says even more clearly in Ephesians than here in

Colossians. Then, of course, it is central to his doctrine of salvation because we are reconciled; we are forgiven through the blood of Christ shed on the cross. Then, of course, the cross is central to Paul's doctrine of mission because those who are thus reconciled to God include not only Jewish people, the original covenant people of God, but now Paul says, "You also, you Gentiles, you people of all the nations that I am going to, that I am evangelizing."

The barrier is gone. The gospel is to be made known to the nations, as Paul calls it, "the mystery of the gospel." "The Messiah among you, the hope of glory." I think that is a legitimate way of translating that verse. The old English usually reads, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." But in the immediate context and in the parallelism with Ephesians, I think the word "Christ" is significant as the Messiah; that the Messiah is now human among you—you Gentiles. Not just here among us, as Jewish people. That is the hope of glory—glory for you, glory for God, glory for the world because the Messiah has come and is now being shared with all nations.

Of course, behind all of this stands the dynamic love of God. In Colossians and Ephesians, Paul highlights all of this great work of salvation as the work of God's love, God's grace, God's mercy in all of which God is exceedingly rich. Or, as he puts it in Ephesians 2:4, "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive in Christ." So, one could say that the motive of God's cosmic salvation, the whole of creation including ourselves, is the love of God, and the means of God's cosmic salvation is the cross of Christ. That is why I put these two together in my title: The Love of God and the Cross of Christ. Here it is combined in this great ringing summary of

Paul's gospel in Colossians 1:15-23, one of my favorite passages in Paul's writings.

But where did Paul get this from? Well, you say, "From God, of course!" I believe in the inspiration of Scripture and in Paul's apostolic authority, but what was it that was feeding Paul's great over-arching understanding of the love of God and its integral relation to creation, the church as God's people, humanity in general, and history in the specific works of God in redemption? The answer is, of course, that he drew this from the Scriptures. This is Paul engaging in Christ-centered, cross-centered theology of the Old Testament. This, of course, is what the New Testament actually is—the first Old Testament theology!

### **God Loves Everything He Has Made**

What I want us to see is that when we are thinking about the love of God, the significance of the cross, and the meaning of our mission, we must draw from the whole of the Bible and ask the question, "Who or what does God love in Old Testament terms?" The first thing I would want to say is not necessarily the first thing the Old Testament says—but it certainly does say it very clearly—God loves everything that He has made. Psalm 145 is actually one of the most universal Psalms in the Scriptures. I think I counted up something like fourteen times where the Psalm uses the Hebrew word, *kol*, or 'all.' That is just worth remembering. This is a Psalm of tremendous universality. It talks about how God is gracious to all He has made; He is compassionate to all that He has made. He loves all that He has made. I just used a few select quotations from verses 7, 13, 17. I am currently ordained as an Anglican pastor. During Lent, the period before Easter, the

Lenten Collect, the prayer that is read every Sunday during the weeks leading up to Easter, begins in this way: "Almighty and everlasting God who hatest nothing that Thou hast made." This is a wonderful expression, but it always struck me as being rather oddly negative—that God hates nothing He's made. Actually this Psalm is much more positive than that. God loves all that He has made. His compassion is over all things. There is a remarkable universality about the love of God in these matching verses. In fact, if you look, verses 9, 13, and 17 are very similar—quite intentionally. Verse 9—"The Lord is good to all and has compassion on all He has made. Verse 13—"the Lord is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all He has made." Verse 17—"The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving or compassionate toward all He has made." It is a repeated, emphatic declaration.

It is interesting that all of creation is the object of God's love and is illustrated here in relation to three classic definitions of God. For example, in verse 9, the love of God is linked to His redemptive compassion, the exodus. "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in love." This is the exodus text (Exod. 34:6) where God had redeemed His people out of Egypt and explicitly says that it was an act of compassionate love and faithfulness because He is a gracious God. The Psalmist immediately adds to the exodus this statement that He is loving toward "all that He has made." Then second, this universal love of God for creation is linked to His providential care in verse 15, which speaks about all creatures, not just human beings. "The eyes of all look to you and you give them food at the proper time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living creature." So His redemptive,

saving compassion is providential care. Third, it is also linked to His justice and His concern for social compassion in verses 13 and 14: “Your kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all those who are bowed down ... The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.”

The universal love of God for His creation is linked to His redemptive work, to His providential work, and to His social justice and compassionate work. So, in a sense, this is very comprehensive of the love of God. It is not something narrow or partisan or linked only to our souls, or anything like that. This is the love of God which is universal in its extent. Therefore, no wonder the Psalm says, in verse 21, “Let every creature praise his holy name.” So, God loves in this universality of love. This is the kind of place in the Old Testament where I am sure that Jesus drew that sense of the non-discriminate love of God, the profligate love of God that He speaks of on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “If you only love people who love you, what good is that?” If you really want to be like God, you have got to love your enemies, not just those who love you because God loves the wicked as well as the righteous. He says, God makes His rain and His sun to shine upon the righteous and the unrighteous.” Wherever people are, they are experiencing the grace of God in creation simply by being in God’s world and experiencing the kindness of God. This is a very challenging beginning. I think another Old Testament example of it is the story of Jonah. God loves even the people who are the enemies of God’s people. We might come back to that a little bit later.

## **God Loves His Covenant People**

So, God loves everything, but more emphatically, the Old Testament also teaches that God loves His covenant people. I say the word ‘emphatically’ in the sense that it is more common, or we find it more often. The text that I would draw us to there, where the language of love is used quite explicitly, is Deuteronomy 7:7-10:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh King of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him.

This is God speaking to the descendents of Abraham and expressing His love for them as such. He loved them because He loved them in Abraham; His love goes back that far. Of course, there is a paradox here in this chapter because this chapter is framed at either end with God’s demand to act in judgment upon the Canaanites. Israel was to distinguish themselves from the Canaanites and to destroy that culture because of its idolatry, but at the heartbeat of that chapter, calling upon the distinctiveness of God’s people from the Canaanites, is precisely this

heartbeat of God's love. It is one of the paradoxes and challenges of interpreting Deuteronomy. You might ask the question, "Why does God love Israel in the Old Testament?" The Israelites were inclined to ask that question, "Why does God love us?" Maybe it is because we are a great and wonderful people. We have grown a bit now. God said, "Not a bit of it! I didn't love you because you were more powerful than any other people. You are a tadpole of a nation. You aren't a big nation."

Then in Deuteronomy 9, the Israelites were tempted to think that it was because they were more righteous than other nations. So, when they had conquered the Canaanites, God says, "Do not say to yourselves because of the wickedness of the Canaanites and because of our righteousness God has brought us in here." God says, "You are right about the Canaanites but wrong about yourselves because you are a stiff-necked bunch of rebels." So, the love of God for Israel has nothing to do with their numerical superiority or their moral superiority.

So, if you ask, "Why did God love you?" He loved you because He loved you. In fact, it is axiomatic. You can't get behind it. If you dissect verses 7 and 8, it is a most interesting tautology. The Lord did not set His affection on you, that is, did not love you because you were this or because you were that. Why, then? Verse 8, it was because the Lord loved you. He loved you not for this reason, but because, what reason? He *loved* you! In other words, the love of God is axiomatic. You can't go behind it. There is nothing that justifies it.

In fact, it is the loving character of God that is virtually definitive when you get to verse 9. "Now that you know this, know therefore, that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful

God who keeps His covenant of love." This verse is the closest you get to what John says, "God is love." Love is definitive of God. Here is a text in Deuteronomy saying so. God's love here, then, becomes the reason for God's *historical election* (v. 7), the choice of Abraham. He loved you and called Abraham. It is definitive of His *redeeming action* (v. 8)—because God loved you He redeemed you out of the land of slavery and brought you to himself. The love of God is the reason for His *covenant faithfulness* (v. 8b)—He provided for you, He cared for you through this whole experience in the wilderness. So, God's love is in itself unexplained, unjustified in terms of anything Israel had done, but it itself provides the explanation for God's election and God's redemption and God's faithfulness. All of this proves the identity of God in verse 9.

### **God Loves the Foreigners**

So, God loves His people; God loves the world. God loves His covenant people, but third, God loves the foreigners. This is an even tougher lesson and a more surprising one; yet it is stated quite categorically. In Deuteronomy 10:12, God, through Moses, described what He was asking of the people: "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees..." That is it! That is all God wants. Simple as that—just five things: fear Him, walk with His ways, love Him, serve Him, and obey Him. That is all God wants. You see that loving God is in there, but also walking in the ways of God is in there.

It is as if the Israelites are listening and saying to Moses, “Well, that’s great! Moses, we will try to do that, but please tell us what are the ways of the Lord, this Yahweh you are talking about? What is He like?” So Moses breaks out into doxology: “To the Lord your God belong the highest heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.” God owns the universe. “Yeah, well, that’s great, but you haven’t told us yet what it means to walk in the ways of the Lord.”

So we get to verse 17, “The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome.” So, He not only owns the universe—He *rules* the universe. “Yeah, yeah! But what does He do when He is *godding*? What is the way of the Lord, here?” Ahhh ... this God shows no partiality, excepts no bribes—so He is totally incorruptible, and “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens...” (Deut. 10:17-18). You are to imitate God in that way. God loves the alien. It is a most incredible expression of the love of God especially when you read it in the wake of verses 14 and 15. Here is a God who has loved you. Verse 15 says, “Yet the Lord set his affection on your forefathers.” That is God’s electing love for Israel; it is the particularity of God’s love. But in verse 18, we have the universal love of God for aliens and outsiders. Then, God says, not quite so explicitly here, but certainly in Deuteronomy 15 and elsewhere, “You Israelites of all the people on earth, should know this because you know that it was when you were foreigners in Egypt that God loved you.

So, what God did for you in Egypt was just typical of God. He loved you, yes, because

of His promise to Abraham, but also because you were aliens and foreigners in need. You were an oppressed people, and God is the God who loves people like that. God loves people who are in a situation of being aliens, foreigners, strangers, and along the margins—the edges—of society. God loves those people. That is why He loved you when you were in Egypt. That is the challenge of Deuteronomy.

But, of course, the love of God for foreigners should be no surprise if we have been following the story so far. Why did God choose and call Israel in the first place? The answer is, of course, as we well know from Genesis 12:1-3, that the whole purpose and point of God’s election of Israel was for the sake of the blessing all the nations. So, there is a sense in which God’s love for Israel inevitably implies God’s love for the nations, for the foreigners, for the rest of the world. God only loves Israel because of the rest of the world. He has called and chosen them in order to bring blessing to the rest of the world. It is almost as if we could paraphrase John 3:16, “God so loved the world that He chose Abraham for their sake. God so loved the outsiders, the nations, the aliens that He called Israel to be a blessing to them.”

That is why I think the story of Jonah was such a challenge to Israelites who thought they had God wrapped up in their own binderies, who knew perfectly well that God loved them and couldn’t bear the thought that God might love the Ninevites—their enemies, or the Assyrians—who were persecuting them and trying to destroy them. Yet, at the end of the book of Jonah, God says to Jonah, “Are you angry with me because I am showing compassion on the Ninevites?” And Jonah says, “Yes,” and actually quotes Scripture at God. Jonah says,

“God, I knew that was what you were going to do. That is the sort of God you are.” Then he quotes Exodus 34:6. “I knew,” he says, “that you were a God gracious and slow to anger, abounding in love. That is why I ran away; I didn’t want to go and preach to the Ninevites so they could experience your love.” Incredible, isn’t it? Jonah is embarrassed and angry about the love and the grace of God.

Jonah is not on his own, is he? There are evangelical Christians who think that way, too. I was talking yesterday with a friend who spoke about people in a church where he had preached and prayed and been bold enough to pray for Muslims, because he knew that God loves Muslims as much as He loves us. Somebody was very angry about that and came and contested that and complained to the pastor about that. How can it be that God loves Muslims as much as He loves us? He took him to the Scriptures and said, “Here it is.” God loves the world. God loves the foreigner. The love of God is for all and that is the message that we find here in a passage like this. It is challenging but it is there.

This is the mission of God’s love in the Old Testament, the mission of God’s love for the world, the mission of God’s love for Israel, but the mission of God’s love for Israel, precisely because God has a mission to the foreigners, to the aliens, to the rest of the world. So, that leads us then to the New Testament because the whole point is that all of that love leads to a desire to bring such blessings to the nations as will draw them in to the very people of God. I said it leads to the New Testament, but we are not quite going there yet, because what we need to do is to expand a little bit on those points to fulfill on a promise I made to you yesterday to go through some of these expressions that

are now on the screen, to give something of the flavor and scope of God’s redeeming purpose for the nations, the foreigners, the non-Israelite nations of Old Testament times.

In my book, *The Mission of God*, you find that there is a whole chapter devoted to this (Chapter 14). This is really just a summary of one section of that chapter in which I tried to give five phrases to summarize some aspect, or some dimensions of what God promises to the nations. The nations, of course, are portrayed in the Old Testament as merely spectators of what God is doing. What God does to Israel happens in the eyes of all the nations. They are witnesses of the covenant, witnesses of the judgment, but the nations are also the beneficiaries from what God is doing in Israel, because as Psalm 67 prays, “Bless us O God so that all the peoples will praise you, that they are blessed by the God of Abram.” But they also become participants in the story of Israel. It is that participation in the story of Israel, which these five phrases express.

First, they are registered in God’s city. Have you read Psalm 87? You’ve certainly sung it because it became the basis of a Christian hymn. “Glorious things of Thee are spoken, Zion City of our God.” Wonderful hymn. Trouble is that some of our hymns pick a phrase from the Psalm and then leave the rest of the Psalm out. What Psalm 87 actually says is, “Yes, glorious things of You are spoken, Zion City of our God.” But who gets to live in Zion? Who belongs to Zion? Who is Zion for? The Psalm goes on to say, “I will record Rahab there and Babylon among those who know me.” Rahab means Egypt. The Philistines are going to be in Zion? You know, the people in the Gaza Strip? And Tyre, along with Cush? Cush was black Africa. As far as the

Israelites were concerned, that was as far away as you could go southwards—right down toward Sudan, as we would now call it, and western bits of Ethiopia. So, the Philistines, Tyre, the Phoenicians, where Jezebel came from, and Cush—this one and that one was born in Zion. “Indeed, in Zion it would be said, ‘This one and that one were born there and . . . the Lord will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion’” (Ps. 87:5-6). All these foreigners, says the Psalm, are going to be as if they were native born citizens of Zion. When the roll is called up yonder there are going to be some surprises. So, the nations get to be registered in God’s city. Zion is being redefined here.

Second, they will be blessed with God’s salvation. The end of Isaiah 19 is a remarkable chapter because the whole of the first half of the chapter in poetry is a comprehensive judgment on Egypt. It is very typical of the prophets. The whole of Egypt—its government, its politics, its industry, its universities, its culture, its fisheries—is put under God’s judgment. But then, in the remaining part of the chapter, from verse 16 on, it moves into a more indefinite eschatological mood and looks to the distant future and speaks about the salvation and blessing of Egypt. “In that day there will be an altar to Yahweh in the heart of Egypt” (Isa. 19:19). In that way it says that they will know the Lord. Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord? I don’t know Him.” God says they will know the Lord. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, God will send them a Savior and a defender who will rescue them. Excuse me, isn’t this exodus language? Yeah! It is Exodus reloaded with the Egyptians as the oppressed and God sending them a Savior and a defender just like He sent Moses. “And the Lord will strike Egypt with a

plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord and he will respond to their pleas and heal them” (v. 22). This is salvation for Egypt, but then it goes on, “In that day . . . the Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and my handiwork, Assyria, and Israel my inheritance.’” The three are put together! They are not only ascribed as experiencing God’s blessing but of being the agent of God’s blessing. They will be a blessing on the earth. In other words, the Abrahamic blessing is not just something received by the nations, God will bless Egypt because of the promise He made to Abraham; it is like a self-replicating virus that if you get blessed you pass it on. So Egypt is not only the recipient of Abrahamic blessing but the agent of Abrahamic blessing.

Third, they will be accepted in God’s house—Isaiah 56, words of God spoken to the eunuchs and foreigners who thought, quite rightly from the laws of Deuteronomy 23, that they were excluded from God’s people—that they couldn’t belong. The foreigner says it. The eunuch says it. But God says, “No, from now on there is a new reality and to foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve Him, to love Him, to worship Him. In other words, this is not so much a chosen people as a choosing people. These are people who are free to choose to identify themselves with God. To them, says God, “I will bring them to my holy mountain—into Jerusalem, and give them joy in my house of prayer in the temple” (v.7). Not only bring them into the temple but “their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar” (v. 7b). Imagine—unclean foreigners in

Jerusalem, in the temple, sacrificing at the altar. What is the world coming to? Where will it all end? “‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nation,’ says God” (v. 7c). There are words of Isaiah quoted by Jesus in the temple which had become the hotbed of Jewish nationalism. Jesus says, “You don’t even understand what you are here for.” What you are here for was for the sake of the nations but you turned against the nations. So, the foreigner will be accepted in God’s house and they will be called by God’s name.

At the end of Amos, a passage which is quoted at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, God says through Amos, “In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent and repair its broken places and restore its ruins and build it up as it used to be so there will be a redemption and restoration of the house of David so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name” (Amos 9:11-12). I imagine Amos just checking on his inspiration at that point and saying, “Excuse me, Lord. Did I get that right? Did you say *amim*, plural, nations?” At that point in human history there was only one nation that bore the name of Yahweh, the Lord God—that was the nation of Israel. They were the people who bore the name of God. “I know you by name; I put my name upon you,” says God. They are distinct in the Psalms from the nations which do not know My name, says God. Whereas Amos says, “The nations who bear my name.” That is exactly what James quotes when he says, “That’s what the Gentiles are doing under the evangelistic work of Brother Saul, Paul, and Barnabas. The nations are coming to bear the name of God—to have a name badge, which up to that point only Israelites could ever have—the name of the Lord.”

Fourth, that the nations would come to be joined with God’s people. Zechariah 2:10 is one of several places in Zechariah where this is promised. It is a Zion promise, and that is why I think it is important. “‘Shout and be glad, O daughter of Zion, for I am coming and I will live among you,’ declares the Lord.” That is a renewal of the creation promise and of the Leviticus 26 promise, “I will live among you...” Then verse 11, “Many nations will be joined with Yahweh, the Lord, in that day and will become My people. They will be for me for my people.” These words, which had hitherto only ever been said about Israel, are now being said about many people. “And I will live among you (singular, feminine—meaning Zion) and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.” In other words, in this text, Zion is being redefined. It is not Zion plus the nations, but all nations as Zion. The nations are being joined to the Lord; God is now living among them, and the covenantal promise and the dwelling promise, which Zion was the locus of, is now being expanded to include the nations who are being joined to the Lord.

Now that is just a fraction of the places in the Old Testament—in the Prophets and the Psalms and elsewhere—which speak about the blessing of God for all the nations. That is the great scriptural revelation of God’s loving purpose for the nations, which the Apostle Paul saw as now being fulfilled in the Gentile mission. It was the old, old story of Yahweh and His love, but it was now being shared not just with Israelites and ethnic Jews, but with Gentiles in Thessalonica and Philippi, in Europe and Asia, and in the missionary work of Peter and of Thomas, who possibly went to India, and the Ethiopian eunuch who went down to Africa and of others who went northwest toward Mesopotamia and even on toward

Afghanistan and China within a very short period of time.

This is the promise of God to Abraham—the love of God for His world being fulfilled. But the point is, of course, that all that love of God so revealed in the Old Testament led ultimately to the cross—the unavoidable cost to God of God’s mission of love for the world. That may seem very obvious to us as evangelical Christians, but what I am hoping that you see is that when we come to the New Testament and the cross we are finding not just some sudden new idea that God has—like I had better go down and sort this out, so I will just die for them. What we are seeing is something which is prepared for, which is expressed in God’s love through the prophets and the Psalms, which is seen as the outworking of His love for the world, for His people and for the nations which now ultimately leads to the final act of God’s love—the unavoidable cost of God’s mission, the cross of Christ.

We need to make sure that we have a mission-centered theology of the cross. That is to say, we need to understand the cross in relation to all the mission of God—all that God actually accomplished on the cross. That is what I mean by talking about a God mission-centered theology of the cross. But second, we need a cross-centered theology and practice of our mission.

### **Mission-Centered Theology of the Cross**

First, let’s think about how the cross accomplished the mission of God. His final words, at least according to one of the Gospels, John, on the cross were, “It is finished.” It is accomplished. It has been achieved. I’ve done it. What had been accomplished? At least the following things.

One of the problems with so much evangelical theology is that we tend to concentrate on one aspect of it, which is true, essential, and of crucial importance—its relation to our personal salvation—and to reduce, overlook, or underplay some of the other amazing things that the New Testament affirms about what God accomplished at the cross—its scope, its comprehensiveness. This actually shouldn’t surprise us once we have seen the comprehensiveness of God’s love in the Old Testament Scriptures. Here are just five points:

First, it was God’s mission and intention to deal with the guilt of human sin and rebellion from Genesis 3 onward. The Old Testament has shown us that human rebellion and sin must be punished in order for God’s own justice to be vindicated. Wickedness cannot go on eternally being unpunished. There is a reality of the way God has made the universe that brings the necessity of the holiness of God into ultimately destructive contact with the guilt, unholiness, and sin of human beings. So, God’s mission, then, was to deal with the reality of human sin and, at the cross, God did that; but He did it by taking that guilt and that punishment upon himself in the person of His own Son. For the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all, as Isaiah 53:6 said. Christ himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree as Peter says, quoting, effectively, from Isaiah 53. So, the human sin problem is taken by God, is borne by God in the person of His Son Jesus.

Second, of course, it was the mission of God to defeat the powers of evil and all the forces of evil—human, angelic, spiritual, whatever they may be, all those realities who oppress and crush, invade, and spoil human life wherever they come from and

whatever they are. God's intention was to defeat and destroy them. This is where the exodus imagery is most powerful because the exodus was God's deliverance of the Israelites, not deliverance from the guilt of their own sin. I am not saying the Israelites weren't sinners; of course they were—a miserable bunch of rebels God calls them! The Israelites were sinners, but the deliverance of the Israelites was God's victory over their oppressors. The exodus was a delivery of the Israelites from the sin of others—from the Egyptians, from tyranny, from a Pharaoh who claimed to be god and refused to acknowledge the God of Israel. So, on the cross, when it talks in exodus language about the defeat of the powers of evil, it is that sort of imagery that is being used. It was at the cross that God did this. As Paul says in Colossians 2:15, Christ disarmed the powers and authorities, triumphing over them by the cross. The cross is God's victory over all that oppresses and causes human suffering, sin, and evil.

Third, it was God's intention to destroy death, the great invader of human life ever since Genesis chapter 3. Death, which the Old Testament had shown right through from the stories of Genesis through the whole of the Old Testament, is the great enemy of life, health, and *shalom* in God's earth. So, God's mission is to destroy death, and at the cross He did so. As Hebrews puts it, "By Christ's death he destroyed the one who holds the power of death—even the devil." And, as Paul added, brought life and immortality to light.

Fourth, it was also God's intention, not only to solve the problem of Genesis 3, which is our human rebellion and sin, but also to solve the problem of Genesis 11, which is our dividedness, our scatteredness. Remember the Tower of Babel. We live at

strife, enmity, and confusion with one another. God's intention is to destroy that barrier of enmity, the primary one being the enmity between Jew and Gentile, but by implication, to destroy all that produces barriers and distinctions between human beings. At the cross, Christ did that also. "For He himself is our peace," as Paul says in Ephesians 2. He repeats the word *peace* three times in that passage. "Who has made the two (Jew and Gentile) one and has destroyed the barrier . . . to create one new man, (one new humanity out of the two), thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile them both to God through the cross by which He put to death their hostility" (Eph. 2:14-16).

Fifth, it was God's intention to heal and reconcile His whole creation. This is where we began in our opening remarks—the cosmic mission of God to bring about the restoration and healing, to remove the curse, and to bring the whole of creation into unity, oneness, and wholeness under the Lord Jesus Christ. And, at the cross, God did that. As Paul says, "It was the will of God through Christ to reconcile all things whether in heaven or on earth by making peace through his blood shed on the cross." It has been reconciled through Him.

So, you see, *all of these great dimensions are part of God's mission and His redemptive love—God's purpose was that sin should be punished and sinners forgiven; that evil should be defeated and humanity liberated; that death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to life; that enemies should be reconciled to one another and to God; and that creation itself should be restored, redeemed, and reconciled to its Creator. That's the scope of the mission of God. All of that led to the cross of Christ—the unavoidable cost that God paid in*

*himself through His Son to accomplish all of that.* That is why Jesus said, “Not my will but Yours be done.” And, as He taught His disciples to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus himself in Gethsemane prayed that prayer and obeyed it and went ahead to accomplish it.

So, what I am trying to say here is, let’s have all this in mind as we think about the atonement and the work of Christ on the cross. The biblical doctrine of God’s atoning work goes beyond the reality of my personal guilt and individual salvation and the need for personal evangelism. Of course, those are part of it. The fact that Jesus died in my place, bearing my sin as my voluntary substitute is the best good news that any human being could ever hear. And I received it as a child and still rejoice in it. But, I should want others to come into that same expression and to be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on Jesus and by repentance and finding His grace and forgiveness. That, surely, is one of the greatest motivations for personal evangelism. But, there is more in our biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to mission than personal evangelism.

The gospel, according to the Bible as a whole, is good news for the whole creation to whom, according to the ending of Mark’s Gospel, it is actually supposed to be preached. Mark 16:15 Jesus says, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” The proper translation should be “to all creation” because that is certainly the way Paul uses that phrase in Colossians and elsewhere. So, the full biblical context of all that God has accomplished and will finally complete through Christ is what the gospel is. “We preach Christ and Him crucified,” says Paul.

But His crucifixion was for more than merely personal salvation. It was a message of hope for humanity, history, and the whole of creation.

### **Cross-Centered Theology and Practice**

So, we need, then, a “God’s mission-centered theology of the cross,” and we need, finally, a cross-centered theology and practice of our own mission because if the cross was the unavoidable cost of God’s mission—God’s love in action—then it is equally true to say that the cross is the unavoidable center of our mission. It is that which defines the scope of our mission and also the nature of our mission. In other words, the cross is the source of any power or any mission activity that we may choose to do, but it is also what I have just been saying about God’s accomplishment on the cross which defines the scope of our mission. All that we do, as Christian believers, we do in the name of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

I think, myself, that it is a mistake to imagine that our evangelism must be centered on the cross, but somehow our social engagement or our works of compassion and mercy, or our struggle for justice or advocacy for the poor, or concern for the creation, ecologically, has to have some other theological foundation drawn from some other place. The cross is about getting people to heaven when they die, and all the work we do in the workplace must be justified some other way. I think, basically this is a dichotomized and biblically inadequate view. Why is that? Why do I say that? Why do I want to affirm that the cross is central to all that we do in Christian mission? Well, for a very simple reason—that surely in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Jesus Christ, whatever we are

doing, we are confronting the powers of evil. We are confronting the kingdom of Satan with all the dismal effects that that has had on human life, society, culture, history, and indeed, on the earth, the planet on which we live. So, we are going out into the world to proclaim and to demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ, which is what the gospel is according to Jesus and Paul, the gospel of the Kingdom preached in the name of Jesus. In other words, if we are going out to say to the world that God is King, that there is another king than Caesar, to a world which still likes to chant, “We have no king but Caesar . . . and all his successors, including the god of mammon.” If we go out into the world of that kingdom, the kingdom of this world, and proclaim the Kingdom of God in Christ, then we are in direct conflict immediately with the usurped reign of the evil one—with the kingdom of Satan. Now, that, it seems to me, is the unanimous testimony of all Christians who struggle, whether it is a struggle for justice for the poor, the oppressed, needy, hungry, sick, the ignorant, the unevangelized, just as much as those Christians, and it is often the same people, who are struggling to bring the gospel to those who have never heard it before. Whatever they are doing, they are finding that it has to be done with an awareness that we are confronting the reality of sin and evil, and we are challenging the darkness of the world of Satan with the light and the good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through Him.

But by what authority can we do that? With what power and what right are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis can we challenge the chains of Satan in word and in deed? Surely it is only in the cross. Only in the cross, as I have tried to put it in New Testament terms, is there forgiveness of sin, the defeat of the powers

of evil, release from the fear of death, the reconciliation of enemies, and the healing of creation. If the cross is that through which God accomplished the totality of His mission, then the cross must define the scope, the source, and the power of our mission.

And, of course, finally, if that is the case for the cross in terms of mission, it means that I passionately believe that whatever we like to call it—holistic mission, integral mission, or whatever term we use, the cross must be central to all of it. So, I put it in this form in my book. The cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power, there is no other resource, no other name through which we can offer the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole world and Christ crucified and risen. Anything less than that is an inadequate response to the love of God for us and for the world.

All Christian mission flows from the cross and therefore has to be shaped by the cross—and that is the last point. Our discipleship commits us to mission, and mission binds us to the cross. Therefore, there must be a certain degree of “Christ-look-alikeness” about Christian mission. There have to be the marks of the cross in the shape of the cross. Of course, we can’t die for the world as Jesus did. I am not suggesting we, in any sense, replicate the cross in that salvific sense. Nevertheless, the way of the cross is to take up that cross and follow Christ—the way of suffering and sacrifice.

Isn’t it fascinating that in Corinthians Paul takes the very things that the sophisticated, urbane converts to Christianity in Corinth thought were disqualifications for apostleship—namely that this Apostle Paul

was suffering, he was poor, he was working with his hands, he was shipwrecked, he wasn't very impressive, he was probably diseased—the very things that they thought were disqualifications, Paul gloried in. He said that they are the authentic marks of a genuine apostle of the crucified Christ. That is why he claimed that his sufferings were the place where the power of the cross was most vividly seen.

So, if God's mission required God's Son to obey His Father and take up His cross, then similarly, our mission requires us to obey the Son and take up our cross and follow Him. If we are to live like Christ lived, then we have to love as Christ loved. That, I suggest, is something of the wholeness—binding together the love of God, the cross of Christ, and the mission of God's people in the world.