



THE TRUTH OF THE CROSS

R. C. SPROUL

“*The Truth of the Cross* is the best book on the cross I have read. It is a ‘must’ for every church library and a book that I will give away many times to friends. This is so because it is sober (i.e., it contains historically informed reflections on salient biblical texts), sensible (i.e., it is well-argued), simple (i.e., it holds the reader’s attention through grabbing illustrations and even a seventh-grader can get its substance), and spiritual (i.e., it comes from a heart set ablaze by the Spirit).”

—DR. BRUCE K. WALTKE, PROFESSOR  
Reformed Theological Seminary

“The cross stands at the very center of our Christian lives. Still, many Christians are confused about the heart of the gospel, for many deviant views are in the air. R. C. Sproul blows the fog away in this wonderfully clear, theologically profound, and pastorally rich work. Learn afresh or anew what God has accomplished in the cross, so that you will boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ.”

—DR. THOMAS R. SCHREINER, PROFESSOR  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The gospel is a message of good news that something extraordinary has happened. At the heart of that message is that Jesus, God the Son incarnate, has atoned for the sins of all His people, turning away the righteous wrath of God. The gospel is a cross-shaped message. Sadly, in our day, this message is being re-shaped into other forms, and the results are not happy. We can give thanks for this volume by R. C. Sproul, however, because in it he steps into the breach once more to provide a clear, concise, and thoughtful case for the biblical and historic Christian gospel of the cross.”

—DR. R. SCOTT CLARK, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR  
Westminster Seminary California



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*Reformation Trust*

P U B L I S H I N G

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A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES · ORLANDO, FLORIDA

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Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

a division of Ligonier Ministries

400 Technology Park, Lake Mary, FL 32746

www.ligonier.org www.reformationtrust.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover design: Kirk DouPonce, www.DogEaredDesign.com

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, Sisters, Ore.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sproul, R. C. (Robert Charles), 1939-

The truth of the cross / R.C. Sproul.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-56769-087-4

1. Jesus Christ--Crucifixion. I. Title.

BT453.S663 2007

232'.3--dc22

2007015926

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THE NECESSITY OF  
AN ATONEMENT

I'm fascinated by the information that is put out by advertising agencies. It seems that the ad business keeps getting more and more sophisticated as agencies seek to position businesses and products in the marketplace. To that end, billions of dollars are spent every year to create what we call logos—little images, pictures, or symbols that instantly identify a brand or a product and communicate something about it, such as its history, its value, or its significance. I've heard it said that the most recognizable logo in the United

States of America is probably the Golden Arches that you find outside McDonald's restaurants.

The Christian faith also has a universal symbol—the cross. Why the cross? After all, Christianity has many aspects. We see these many facets in the field of systematic theology, which is divided into numerous subsections, such as theology proper, which is the study of God Himself; pneumatology, which is the study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit; ecclesiology, which is the study of the church; soteriology, which is the study of salvation; and so on.

But one of the most important subdivisions of theology is Christology, which is the study of the person and work of Christ. Within that field of study, when we want to get at the aspect that is most crucial, the aspect that we may call the “*crux*” of the matter of Jesus' person and work, we go immediately to the cross. The words *crucial* and *crux* both have their root in the Latin word for “cross,” *crux*, and they have come into the English language with their current meanings because the concept of the cross is at the very center and core of biblical Christianity. In a very real

sense, the cross crystallizes the essence of the ministry of Jesus.

This was the view of the apostle Paul. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul made an astonishing statement about the importance of the cross to the entirety of the Christian faith: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1–2). Paul was a man who had the equivalent of two Ph.D.s in theology by the time he was 21 years of age, a man who wrote with great insight on the whole scope of theology. Nevertheless, he said that the focal point of his teaching, preaching, and ministry among the Corinthians was simply “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

When the apostle made that statement, he obviously was engaged in the literary art of hyperbole. The Greek prefix *hyper* is the source of our word *super*, and it indicates a degree of emphasis. *Hyper* takes a root word and makes it emphatic. In this case, the root word comes from the Greek verb “to throw.” So

hyperbole is literally a “super throwing”; it is a form of emphasis that uses intentional exaggeration. This is a common device in communication. Sometimes, when a child disobeys, a parent may say in exasperation, “I’ve told you ten thousand times not to do that.” The parent doesn’t mean literally ten thousand times, and no one who overhears the parent understands him or her to mean literally ten thousand times. Everybody understands that a statement like that is an exaggeration—an exaggeration born not out of deceitfulness or falsehood, but out of an intent to bring emphasis.

That’s what Paul was doing when he told the Corinthians he had determined to know *nothing* except Christ crucified. Clearly Paul was determined to know all kinds of things besides the person and work of Jesus. He wanted to teach the Corinthians about the deep things of the character and nature of God the Father. He planned to instruct them about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, about Christian ethics, and about many other things that go beyond the immediate scope of Christ’s work on the cross. So why, then, did he say this? The answer is obvious. Paul was say-

ing that in all of his teaching, in all of his preaching, in all of his missionary activity, the central point of importance was the cross. In effect, this teacher was saying to his students, “You might forget other things that I teach you, but don’t *ever* forget the cross, because it was on the cross, through the cross, and by the cross that our Savior performed His work of redemption and gathered His people for eternity.”

In placing this emphasis on the cross, Paul was speaking for all of the New Testament writers. If we could read the New Testament with virgin eyes, as if we were the first generation of people to hear the message, I think it would be clear that the crucifixion was at the very core of the preaching, teaching, and catechizing of the New Testament community—along with, of course, the attending capstone of Christ’s work, His resurrection and subsequent ascension. The significance, the purpose, and the meaning of the cross of Christ are unfolded to us in the New Testament.

If it is true that the cross is of central importance to biblical Christianity, it seems that it is essential for Christians to have some understanding of its meaning

in biblical terms. That would be true in any generation, but it's particularly necessary in this one. I doubt there has been a period in the two thousand years of Christian history when the significance, the centrality, and even the *necessity* of the cross have been more controversial than now. There have been other periods in church history when theologies emerged that regarded the cross of Christ as an unnecessary event, but never before in Christian history has the need for an atonement been as widely challenged as it is today.

People tell me that they are not Christians, not so much because they have never been convinced of the truth claims of Christianity, but because they have never been convinced of the need for what the Bible teaches. How many times have you heard people say, "That may be true, but I personally don't feel the need for Jesus," or "I don't need the church," or "I don't need Christianity"? When people say something like this to me, I try to steer the conversation to the question of the truth of Christianity. I believe that if we can convince people of the truth of the identity of Christ and

the truth of the work He accomplished, it will become instantly apparent to them that they need it.

On one occasion, while I was waiting for my wife, Vesta, in a shopping mall, I noticed a bookstore and I stepped inside. There were counters and counters of books in that store, with the various categories marked prominently: fiction, nonfiction, business, sports, self-improvement, marriage, children's stories, and so on. In the very back of the store was the religion section, and it consisted of only four shelves, making it one of the smallest segments in the store. The material on those racks was not what would be called mainstream, orthodox, classical Christianity. I wondered, "Why does this store sell fiction and self-improvement, but place no premium on the content of biblical truth as part of its program?"

I realized the store wasn't there as a ministry. It was there for business, to make a profit. So I assumed the reason there were no solid Christian books was that there weren't a lot of people asking, "Where can I find a book that will teach me about the depths and

the riches of the atonement of Christ?” Even when we go to a Christian bookstore, we find little evidence that people are seeking in-depth understanding of something as central as the atonement.

I thought about these things, and I came to the conclusion that people are not concerned about an atonement. They are basically convinced they have no need for it. They aren't asking: “How can I be reconciled to God? How can I escape the judgment of God?” If anything has been lost from our culture, it is the idea that human beings are privately, personally, individually, ultimately, inexorably accountable to God for their lives.

If everybody in the world woke up and said, “Someday I have to stand before my Maker and give an account for every word I've ever spoken, every deed I've ever done, every thought I've ever thought, and every task I've failed to do,” several things could happen. They could say, “I'm accountable, but isn't it great that the One to Whom and before Whom I am accountable isn't concerned about the kind of life I lead, because He understands that boys will be

boys and that girls will be girls.” In that case, nothing would change. But if people understood that there is a holy God and that sin is an offense against that holy God, they would break down the doors of our churches and ask, “What must I do to be saved?”

I once went to the hospital with a kidney stone. It wasn't a life-threatening thing—it just seemed like it. I'm one of those people who, when in pain, will do everything in his power to deny that it's there so I won't have to see the doctor, have him probe around, and hear him tell me the bad news. But when I got this kidney stone, within two minutes I was on the telephone calling the doctor. When I got to the hospital, the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. As I waited for the tests to come back, lying flat on my back in pain, I flipped through the television channels and stopped at a religious broadcast, where a preacher was reading the Christmas story. In the course of things, he read the Annunciation: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). I can't tell you how many thousands of times I have read or heard

that phrase, but when I was in that hospital bed with my future uncertain, it hit me like a sledgehammer. I said to myself, “That’s exactly what I need—a Savior.”

My point is this: I felt a need for a Savior because I was hurting. I was fearful, and matters of life and death were central in my attention. But that’s not the way it is under normal circumstances in the day-to-day flow of people’s lives. Our need for salvation is not a paramount concern. Christianity, however, operates on the primary assumption that man is in need of salvation.

The prevailing doctrine of justification today is not justification by faith alone. It’s not even justification by good works or by a combination of faith and works. The prevailing notion of justification in Western culture today is justification by death. It’s assumed that all one has to do to be received into the everlasting arms of God is to die.

In some instances, the prevailing indifference to the cross mutates into outright hostility. I once was asked to deliver a lecture explaining the relationship between the old and new covenants. In the course of delivering this lecture, I referred to Christ’s death as a

substitutionary, vicarious sacrifice for the sins of others. To my surprise, someone in the back of the room yelled out, “That’s primitive and obscene.” I was taken aback for a moment, so I asked, “What did you say?” He said it again with great hostility: “That’s primitive and obscene.” At that point, I had recovered from my surprise, and I told the man I actually liked his choice of adjectives. It is primitive for a blood sacrifice to be made to satisfy the justice of a transcendent and holy God, but sin is a primitive thing that is basic to our human existence, so God chose to communicate His love, mercy, and redemption to us through this primitive work. And the cross is an obscenity, because all of the corporate sin of God’s people was laid on Christ. The cross was the ugliest, most obscene thing in the history of the world. So I thanked the man for his observation. But my point is that the man was extremely hostile to the whole idea of the atonement.

Of course, this widespread doubt about the need for an atonement did not appear overnight. In fact, the atonement has long been the subject of debate within the church.

I have a theologian friend who frequently makes this statement: “In church history, there are basically only three types of theology.” Although there have been many schools with numerous names and various subtle nuances, generically there are only three kinds of theology historically—what we call Augustinianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Pelagianism. In basic terms, Augustinianism holds that salvation rests on God’s grace alone; Semi-Pelagianism teaches that salvation rests on human cooperation with God’s grace; and Pelagianism believes that salvation can be achieved without God’s grace. Virtually every church in history has fallen into one of those three categories.

Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism, in my opinion, represent significant debates within the Christian family, differences of opinion about biblical interpretation and theology among Christians. However, Pelagianism in its various forms is not an intramural issue among Christians, but is at best sub-Christian and at worst anti-Christian. I say that because of Pelagianism’s view of the necessity of the cross.

Just as there are three basic types of theology,

there are three basic views of the atonement with respect to its necessity historically. First, there are those who believe that an atonement is *absolutely unnecessary*. The Pelagians in all their forms fall into this category. Pelagianism, originating in the fourth century; Socinianism, which arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and what we would call liberalism as a distinctive theology today are all essentially non-Christian because at the heart of each is a denial of the atonement of Jesus Christ. These schools of thought, by taking away the reconciling action of Christ from the New Testament, are left with nothing but moralisms. For them, the cross is where Jesus died as a moral example for men. They view Him as an existential hero, as One Who brings inspiration to us by His commitment and devotion to self-sacrifice and to His humanistic concerns. But these moralisms are anything but unique and hardly worthy of allegiance. In Pelagianism, there is no salvation, no Savior, and no atonement because in Pelagianism no such salvation is *necessary*.

Second, there are those who believe an atonement

is only *hypothetically necessary*. This view historically expresses the idea that God could have redeemed us by a host of ways and means, or He could have chosen to overlook human sin. However, He did something dramatic when He committed Himself to a certain course of action. He chose to redeem us by the cross, by an atonement. Once He committed Himself, it became necessary, not *de jure* or *de facto*, but *de pacto*—that is, by virtue of a pact or a covenant that God made by issuing a promise that He would do a particular thing. The promise was gratuitous in that it was not necessary for Him to do it, but He nevertheless made the promise. He was then committed to that course of action. That's what is meant by a hypothetical necessity for an atonement.

The third view, which is the classical, orthodox Christian view, which I am convinced is the biblical view, is that an atonement was not merely hypothetically necessary for man's redemption, but was *absolutely necessary* if any person was ever going to be reconciled to God and redeemed. For this reason, orthodoxy has held for centuries that the cross is an

essential of Christianity, essential in the sense that it is a *sine qua non*, “without which it could not be.” If you take away the cross as an atoning act, you take away Christianity.

The statement that the cross was an absolutely necessary prerequisite for redemption immediately raises the “Why?” question. The answer lies, as it has even since the time of Augustine and Pelagius, with our understanding of the nature of the character of God and the nature of sin. If we are defective in understanding the character of God or understanding the nature of sin, it is inevitable that we will come to the conclusion that an atonement was not necessary. Therefore, we will spend the next few chapters wrestling with these crucial issues.

# IT COULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED ANY OTHER WAY.

In *The Truth of the Cross*, Dr. R. C. Sproul uses Scripture to unfold the meaning of the cross, its significance, and its purpose. God cannot simply overlook sin. In order to be delivered from the wrath to come, the sinner needs a Savior. For this reason, the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on a Roman cross two millennia ago remains relevant today. This faith-building study points us to the core of the biblical message of redemption, revealing that it is the holy God who seeks and saves the lost.



Dr. R. C. SPROUL is the author of more than sixty books and the general editor of *The Reformation Study Bible*. Throughout his forty-plus years of ministry in the academy and the church, Dr. Sproul has committed himself to clearly communicating deep, practical truths from God's Word.



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PUBLISHING

[www.ReformationTrust.com](http://www.ReformationTrust.com)

ISBN 1-56769-087-4



51500



9 781567 690873

RELIGION/Christian Theology/Soteriology