

Pat Conover: Surviving or Living

Sermon for Seekers Church

August 21, 2005

Pat Conover

Surviving or Living

Like [Deborah](#), I want to begin by thanking David for [his sermon concerning the symbol of the cross](#) in the life of Seekers. The cross is an important symbol for me too, but I am going to approach the cross from a different angle than David or Deborah did. I will work with the lectionary scriptures along the way.

I particularly want to thank David for presenting the symbol of the cross as a meeting place for Christians with different theological perspectives, and different faith traditions. However, if we meet at the cross in terms of contending theologies I fear we will often meet to do theological battle. I'm not about to hide my theology as it relates to the cross but I'm not going to begin by showing why I'm right and others are wrong. On the other hand, I do not believe we can settle for agreeing to disagree either within Seekers or in discussions beyond our walls. My main point is that it matters a lot how we frame the conversation.

I think the helpful entry point for beginning a conversation with another Christian about the cross is the question, "Why does the cross matter to you?"

You may get the response, "It doesn't really matter to me." Such a response may be clouded by several versions of, "It is part of my tradition," or, "Jesus died on the cross." Then the first question just needs to be extended a little. Why does it matter to you that the cross is part of your tradition? Why does it matter that Jesus died on the cross?

Maybe you will get some version of the atonement answer. "Jesus died for my sins so I can go to heaven when I die." Then you can ask, "What did Jesus' death on the cross have to do with your sins? That question will stump many people who firmly believe in an atonement theology. Some, however, may give an atonement theology answer. That answer boils down to, "God punished God's self, through Jesus, so that I don't have to pay the price for my sin." More simply said, "God forgives me." When you hear something that sounds like, "God forgives me," then you can forget all about the magical concept of appeasing God through sacrifice, whether through the sacrifice of animals, through sacrificial giving or sacrificial service, or through the cross as God sacrificing for us. When we meet at the love of God, the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, we have a very big tent within which to move around.

Here is how Paul puts this welcome before us in the 12th Chapter of Romans.

My friends, I implore you by God's mercy to offer yourselves to God. Become a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for God's acceptance. Offer your worship with your mind and your heart. Conform no longer to the patterns of the present world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Then you will be able to discern the will of God and to know what

is good, acceptable and perfect.

For Paul, God's mercy, God's love, God's grace, comes first. Sacrifice does not make a deal with God. Paul offers classic [atonement theology](#), but at this point, it becomes clear that what really matters is that God love us before we turn to God, before we find our relationship with God. That is the big tent.

To make this same point another way, we remember that Paul was shaped by the Jewish concept of covenant. The main point of that covenant, as experienced by Jews in that day, was that they had not adequately kept the covenant and they were being punished for their failures. Some, like the Pharisees and the Essenes, focused on trying harder to keep the law and be pure. Some, like the Sadducees, focused on the temple rituals of sacrifice to propitiate God.

To believe that God loves us before we turn to God means that the covenant of God is always available. Sin is not a debt created by our past, present, and future impurities, our failures to understand and keep the law. Sin is the failure to trust God, to fail to turn to God, to fail to look for God, and ultimately to not really trust and love each other and to fail to celebrate the world and lives we have been given.

Let us return to the original question I have asked, "Why does the cross matter to you?" If you ask that question to a liberal, you also may also get the answer, "The cross doesn't mean much to me." Maybe they will add some version of, "That happened long ago and I'm interested in serving God here and now." However, maybe you will get a more thoughtful liberal

answer. I saw it most recently on the memorial markers outside of the village of Santiago Atitlan in Guatemala, memorial markers for a dozen plus boys and men from 9 year old to 57 who were gunned down when they went in peaceful protest to complain against violence by the Army. On each marker was the phrase, "Greater love hath no man than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The Guatemalan martyrs inspire us all and their deaths are interpreted on the markers in the light of the cross. This is a presentation of the liberal Christian point that justice needs to be ultimately based in love, not merely in legalistic fair dealing. I hold this theme close to my heart in several ways, including one of my favorite freedom songs from the days of [my involvement in the Civil Rights movement](#). "Got my hand on the gospel plow, wouldn't give nothing for my journey now, keep your eye on the prize, hold on."

A big danger in the liberal Christian answer is the feeling that God is superfluous. It is such a present danger that it is one of the reasons I avoid naming myself as a liberal Christian. If one is pouring oneself out in good works, if one is staying on call, and particularly if such effort is demanding and sacrificial, then who has time to think about or worry about God or God's acceptance. For hard working liberals the experience of the covenant is immediate and personal and does not require much prayer or contemplation.

Working hard, being dedicated and being well intentioned does not free us from sin, does not free us from hurting others. Furthermore, such dedication lines up easily with pride, with feeling more committed, more sacrificial, more just and more loving, than others. Such feeling produces the alienation and

confusion that defeat justice and love. They thwart our best intentions. This is true particularly when our good works are limited to charity but it is also true when we seek partnership with those we serve, but seek it on our own terms.

A couple of Trish's coworkers praised her for giving up part of her vacation for hard physical labor to get another school building started in Guatemala. That felt strange to her because she approached the experience as a pilgrim rather than as a tourist. That was the context given to us by [Faith At Work](#) for this journey. I also appreciated the opportunity to work, to give something back to the poor of Guatemala that our country has injured so severely going back to a CIA coup that overthrew an elected democratic government and established a military dictatorship. The military government protected the rights of the wealthy and the business interests of people in the United States. Thankfully, the new civilian government is doing much better. My work was not charity. It aspired to partnership, but mostly it was just penance.

I would like to say that I come to the cross as a follower of Jesus, and I hope there is at least a little truth to such a hope. However, I also come to the cross as one who helps to kill God again and again. Fortunately, God is not too affected by such attempted murder. Nevertheless, we are. Repeatedly we turn away from God in the blindness of self-sufficiency, in the blindness of thinking our good work is enough to create justice and peace. The cross challenges liberals to go much deeper than that.

The Exodus lectionary scripture begins a foundational story for the Jewish and Christian traditions. A nomadic tribe had gone down to Egypt because of drought and famine. The Nile

still flowed and produced its abundance of food, the strength of many centuries of Egyptian dynasty. The legend in Genesis is that through Joseph there was an initial welcome. However, Exodus begins with the blunt facts of slavery, grinding brutal slavery. There was no room for the privilege of liberalism and no dream of atonement. Along comes Moses, the man for whom the concept of Messiah is named. As in the Christmas stories, a brutal leader was killing Hebrew boy babies. Salvation begins with a story of women who refused to accept such brutality: a mother, a sister, two midwives and Pharaoh's daughter. The Hebrew women were crafty and risked in hope. Nevertheless, it was Pharaoh's daughter whose heart was touched by God, who broke the command of Pharaoh and opened up an opportunity that she could not foresee. She had pity and that was enough to get things started. God acted through Moses and began a great story of liberation but first God acted through a non-Hebrew, acted in love through a non-Hebrew.

The story of liberation was precious to the Hebrews and they interpreted it in terms of a special covenant between God and themselves. They came to see themselves, based especially on the liberation story that begins with our lectionary scripture for today, as a chosen people. Moreover, they thought that other people were not chosen. It is a powerful thing to recognize that you are chosen by God and loved by God, and that does indeed lead to a deep liberation that is appropriately symbolized by escape from deep oppression.

In this story the mother, the sister, and the midwives were the liberals who were risking for transformation. Nevertheless, they were dependent ultimately on God's surprising action through touching the heart of a powerful oppressor, Pharaoh's daughter.

The cross challenges the liberal to give up a sense of control, a sense of being specially favored, a sense of relying upon privilege, especially the privilege of working for charity, justice, and peace on one's own timetable, within one's own budget. Furthermore, I believe the cross challenges those whose faith revolves around the concept of atonement, who focus on what happens after death rather than on the gracious gifts of life and the world that we know, to turn from the magic of sacrifice as cutting a deal with God, to sacrifice as a response of appreciation and hope. Sacrifice helps us reach beyond what we already know and understand, to reach beyond our personal destiny and self-interest. That is my way of thinking about the big tent created by the cross.

Now I turn to the Matthew scripture. My recent careful study of the Gospel of Mark has made me very aware of the great difference between Matthew and Mark with regard to the disciples of Jesus. Mark tells a story in which the disciples model misunderstanding and betrayal. At the end of the story, Peter betrays Jesus and that is the last that we hear of Peter. I understand Mark as writing for a Gentile Christian audience that was in rebellion against any dominance by the original Jewish Christians in the early church.

Matthew, however, has a positive view of the disciples and makes Peter a hero. The Roman Catholic Church claims this passage as the scriptural grounding for their myth of apostolic succession. Matthew, however, was perhaps even more anti-Jewish than Mark. Matthew focuses on explaining why the Jews did not understand their own laws, their own prophets, their own story. Peter's testimony that Jesus is not merely the Son of Man, a messianic designation, but the Son of God, a

claim at the heart of Trinitarian theology, makes Peter no longer a Jew but the first to understand, transform and become a Christian before there was even the name Christian.

Despite the hostility of Mark and Matthew to the beginnings of Christianity among the Jews, both incorporate powerful Jewish understandings in their conceptions of the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour. These two gospels stand out in this regard, particularly in contrast to the dozens of gospels and other important Christian writings of the first couple of centuries in which the humanity of Jesus gets more and more clouded by Greek understandings of Jesus as God coming to earth sort of masquerading as a person.

Mark and Matthew meet at the cross. Matthew follows Mark's basic story and adds some interpretive material of his own. Matthew adds on a resurrection story whereas the original Mark did not. However, the story of the crucifixion of Jesus is a very rich part of both Gospels, with many themes that I cannot develop in one sermon.

My summary of the existential meeting point of Mark and Matthew at the cross is that the cross is the difference between surviving and living and that no one survives life. Any hope in the face of mystery requires giving oneself to following the best and most compelling lures of life, including giving life away for love and thus personally bonding with what is lasting, what is eternal. That is the cross as a lure that I think all Christians can honor and proclaim.

What is Atonement Theology?

These comments extend my sermon. They are stimulated in part by a question I received, "What is atonement theology?"

Atonement theology is a basic part of classic Christian theology. (I name it as "classic" rather than "orthodox" because I believe a major contemporary response is in keeping with the core nugget of atonement theology while dismissing the mythic structure underlying atonement theology and I do not wish to characterize my comments as non-orthodox. Said alternatively, my comments are an attempt to meet the great majority of Christians today who still hold onto atonement theology in the fundamentalist, Roman Catholic, Anglican and most of main-line Protestant congregations at the core theological and existential truth we all embrace.) The core notion of atonement theology is that Jesus died for our sins, or paid the price for our sins by his wrongful death on the cross, so that we would not have to be subjected to eternal punishment by a just (sometimes wrathful) God.

Atonement theology is the primary theology of Paul and you can find it in other parts of the New Testament as well. Like the 3-story metaphysical universe that underlies the New Testament, I am arguing that the core myth that leads to atonement theology is a distraction from the kerygma (saving truth) that is so precious. I find myself in agreement with Paul and others about the kerygma.

Atonement theology was created to solve a serious theological

problem faced by many of the Jewish groups of Jesus' day, a struggle echoed in today's Judaism with the meaning (affront) of the Holocaust. Said alternatively, Paul saw in Jesus (whom he never met) a liberating (saving) solution to the heart problem he was carrying along with other Jews. This saving word radically changed his life and made him the most successful Christian evangelist of his generation and a powerful initiator of what became Christianity.

That heart problem was doubt about the question, "Does God love me?" That question arose from a difficulty in the Jewish understanding of covenant. The Jews understood their covenant with God as a special relationship with God not granted to other people. They saw themselves as a chosen people, a special people, and the story of scripture they valued was the story of this covenant.

The story begins with Abraham who was called by God and journeyed to what is now present day Israel, plus other territory, and declared that God had given this land to his descendents forever. This declaration did not meet the approval of the then current inhabitants and has led to many centuries of warfare.

Abraham and his family were nomads and when an extended drought and famine came, the Abrahamic tribes moved to Egypt. After awhile they became slaves in Egypt. The second great phase of the covenant story was the rise of Moses and liberation from Egypt. Moses, for whom the concept of Messiah is named, was incredibly important in forming the core theology of Judaism. This theology was based on covenant. (I am also particularly attracted to Moses because he understood this concept of covenant not only in terms of story but also

in the most basic philosophical ways, sharing that the name of God is "I Am.")

Anyhow, Moses gathered the tribes in Egypt by appealing to the memory of the covenant with Abraham and led the tribes out of Egypt to go to the "Promised Land," promised at least in myth to Abraham. However, things did not go well. Once again, the then current inhabitants of the "Promised Land" wanted to keep their land for themselves. The tribes following Moses were rebuffed from moving into the Promised Land and survived as nomads in the wilderness edges between the Promised Land and Babylon.

During this time in the wilderness, the biblical story is that the people were being punished for not keeping the covenant, starting with the worship of idols while Moses was up on the mountain getting the ten commandments and other parts of the foundational law around which the tribes gathered.

(The gathering around law was a fundamental cultural invention that is one of the most precious pillars of contemporary civilization. This fundamental cultural creation largely has come to displace simple family advantage as an organizing principle for society.)

Anyhow, in the Mosaic covenant, the people were supposed to obey the law but they did not obey the law. First, they suffered in the wilderness. Finally, they gathered enough strength to set up the Kingdom of David in the Promised Land. Lastly, mythic promise to Abraham was fulfilled. (To me it is irrelevant whether there really was a person named Abraham who thought that God gave his descendents the Promised Land. The important thing is that centuries of Jews have focused much of

their lives around that promise.)

The Davidic kingdom lasted only two generations. The prophets then interpreted the meaning of the failure of the Kingdom as punishment for disobedience to the law and alienation from the law and from God. God was punishing the people for their disobedience. The kerygma of this prophetic analysis is very valuable but these comments focus on the results of the Jewish people taking this analysis seriously.

After the fall of the Kingdom of David, the Jews were dispersed into various degrees of wandering and bondage over several centuries, beginning with Babylon. Their ability of hold onto the law as their core sense of unity served them well in their dispersed and oppressed circumstances and they sustained a cultural continuity not based on being a nation with land and a king, etc.

During this time of bondage, the insights of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and some other writing claimed the understanding of the universalism of God that was not bounded by land, and held onto the dream that God still loved them and would restore them. This is another powerful bit of Kerygma much treasured by what I consider the best of contemporary Christian understanding as well as the spiritual heart of Judaism in the diaspora.

They came back together in the Promised Land in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Deuteromic code reinterpreted the law and there was a great emphasis on purity in terms of keeping the law and throwing out "foreign" influences, including the forced divorcing of "foreign" wives. However, this far weaker kingdom did not hold either and, once more, the interpretation

was in terms of the failure of the people to keep the law. (We also get the rise of apocalypticism, the mythic transfer of the existential problem of failure to keep the law – sin – into a conflict between heavenly beings and there are kerygmatic nuggets to be mined there as well.)

After Alexander the Great conquered “the world” in the 4th century and greatly promoted Greek culture as universal culture, the Jews were given some semi-autonomy around Jerusalem and in Galilee. With the transition to Roman rule, we finally get to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Once again, the Jewish people had the place they felt they had been promised and a pretend Jewish government under the Herods who were at least nominally Jewish and had some limited authority as Roman puppet kings.

Jewish worship in the temple was heavily focused on animal sacrifice, not unlike other non-Jewish cults of that era. The theme of Jewish sacrifice however, was distinctive in that the people acknowledged they had sinned, that God had a right to be angry with them because of that sin, and that their penance was the animal sacrifice. (Essenes and Pharisees were not so focused on temple worship and instead focused on purity and keeping the law, with the Pharisees becoming the core of the Jewish movement after the genocide of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70c.e., about 35-40 years after the death of Jesus.)

The core existential logic of animal sacrifice is magic. People can change God’s feeling towards them by propitiating God with such sacrifices. It is a psychic deal. I will be good to you God, if you will be good to me. Alternately and more positively stated, “I want you to forgive me God and here is

my animal sacrifice to soften your heart.” The Sadducees and temple priests were busily reinforcing a concept that was at the heart of the economic structure for building and maintaining the temple and the priestly groups. (There was vicious infighting between different priestly groups for control of the economic income from these sacrifices.)

John the Baptist, a radical in several dimensions, promoted baptism as a once and for all forgiveness of sins . This was a direct threat to animal sacrifice and temple worship in Jerusalem. The core idea is that God loves us first, loves us all the time, and all one has to do is repent and turn to God to receive that love. Jesus, as a disciple of John, continued and extended this message, which found great resonance among parts of the Jewish people, especially lower income Jews who had no chance of keeping Kosher, a key part of being separate and pure. Jesus’ proclamation of the love of God as being directly available, his modeling of what it was like to live in such love, his healing and teaching based on such love, was and is the central kerygma, good news, gospel, of Christianity.

Paul as a good Jew was still struggling with the feelings of being alienated from God because of the centuries old sins of the Jewish people and his own personal troubles with keeping the law. It was a deep burden on his heart. He latched onto the idea that the death of Jesus on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice, a sacrifice beyond the power of any human sacrifice, because God was Sacrificing God’s self. This opened Paul to feeling the love of God and it dramatically changed his life. However, instead of simply proclaiming the love of God, as Jesus did, he wrapped the kerygmatic nugget of God’s love in atonement theology. That proved to be powerfully attractive to both Jews and especially to Gentiles. (It freed

Gentiles from the magic of animal sacrifice as well.)

Therefore, to make the long story short, God loves you and we do not need atonement theology as the context of such love. And that brings us back to the cross. Life is precious but love is even more precious, because love is what life is for. When the choice comes between loving and living, choose love. That is the big tent where many kinds of Christians can come together.

The New Testament is much more focused on eschatology that speculated that God would soon end this world, or change it dramatically, with wars and other disasters before taking final control. Then there would be a final judgment in which the lives of everyone would be evaluated and some would go to heaven and others to hell. Curiously, in the Book of Revelation, the "New Jerusalem" is pictured as coming to Earth. Moreover, the New Testament picture is not a picture of disembodied spirits in some heavenly realm but a picture of people in bodies brought back to life by a creative act of God.

The early believers were counting on the end of the world coming soon, as Matthew puts it, within the generation of those alive with Jesus. When that did not happen, there was a theological crisis. That theological crisis has repeated itself time after time down the centuries without stopping some substantial number of Christians from thinking that soon time and life as we know it will end. I understand this focus on eschatology to be driven by the existential agony of oppression and unfairness of everyday life as experienced, in some case a thinly disguised passion for revenge, a theme prominent in the Psalms. You might think of eschatology as a

crying out of the human spirit that oppression and injustice cannot be the last word and that despite all evidence to the contrary God is in control and will act to set things right. Martin Luther King, Jr. Played to this core feeling, but brought it back into the here and now with his repeated use of the language, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again."

When the end of the world did not come, many early Christians, especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries c. e., shifted from a focus on the end of the world to a direct going to heaven when one dies. This was mainly a church of Gentile Christians and instead of a focus on the body, they were moved by Greek dualism (think of Plato and Aristotle) to a negative view of the body (with lots of destructive theological side effects that persist to this day) and a focus of life on the spirit. That view is biblically grounded in the views of Paul who was both Jew and Greek (a Roman Citizen) and in the 4th gospel, in which Jesus the man is seen as the eternal logos (Wisdom) that was with God from before the beginning of time.

From my point of view, the focus on going to heaven is driven by two kinds of existential angst, the crying out that God is in control despite the evidence of injustice and oppression, and a general fear of death. This angst links with the everyday psychological reality that loved ones who die remain alive in our memories prompting a desire and hope to be reunited.

The common theological and existential problem is that a focus on going to heaven draws attention away from our life on earth draws away our thanksgiving and celebration for the gifts of our lives and the world as is. It is hard to feel such

celebration when one is among those who are most oppressed, among those who are treated most unfairly. And Christianity spread fast among the people who were most oppressed.

Pat Conover, August 27, 2005