

Distortions of the Cross

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We are keenly aware of attacks against our faith. Daily, we're barraged with things that demean and deny our beliefs and values.

Q: How good are we at recognizing threats from the inside?

There are many things that call themselves Christian, but are a distortion. They are close, but not quite right.

Q: How effective are we at spotting distortions of Christianity?

Do we catch things like the websites devoted to angels, stories of "near death experiences," or books like "The Da Vinci Code"?

Q: Can we spot our own distortions of the Gospel?

ROMANS IN SUMMARY

Pastor Bruce has been taking us through Romans. The core of Romans is found in three verses. If you understand these three verses, you understand Romans.

- If understand these verses, you understand Christianity.
- If you believe these verses, you probably are a Christian.

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. Romans 3:23-25 NIV

This is the core of Christianity:

1. All humans have sinned and deserve judgment and death.
2. God forgives and justifies us as an act of grace.
3. We receive this gift by faith in Jesus' death.
4. This grace came through Jesus' atoning death.

WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

The last point brings up a very important question. It's a question we mistakenly relegate to theologians, but that we must personally answer.

- Our answer will show if we are distorting the Gospel.

Q: Why did Jesus have to die?

I know, "He died for our sins," but what does that mean? This is not some theoretical side note, minutia for scholars. If you distort the meaning of the cross, you distort Christianity.

- A distorted cross comes from a distorted view of God.

This morning, we are going to briefly look at four different explanations of why Jesus died. In doing so, we will be looking for our own distortions of the cross and, hence, of God.

MORAL-INFLUENCE EXPLANATION

- Jesus died as an example of real love.

First, it's a demonstration of God's love for us. As such, it motivates us to love God and obey Him.

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19 NIV

Secondly, His death is an example of how we are to love others. As humans, we are self-centered and even when we serve others, it's frequently with mixed motives.

- Jesus' death was a completely selfless act.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus preached a message of sacrificial love, but also he demonstrated it by giving the ultimate sacrifice. As His followers, Jesus calls us to do the same.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:12-13 NIV

Distortion: Ignores the contamination and condemnation of sin. We need more than good teachings and an example – history is filled with those.

- We need forgiveness and a new heart.

RANSOM EXPLANATION

- Jesus' death was a ransom to set us free.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45 NIV

But who was the ransom paid to? According to this theory, Satan is at war with God and when Adam sinned, all humans came under Satan's power. And so God paid a ransom to Satan to free us.

Distortion: Makes God and Satan to be equal. It makes it look like they are locked in mortal combat. Good verses evil.

- In reality, Satan is like an ant verses a bulldozer.
- God does not need to pay off Satan.

GOVERNMENTAL EXPLANATION

- God must punish sin for our benefit.

God is not like a lender who can forgive a debt, but rather He is like a government official who must provide justice for the governed, or sin and its suffering run rampant.

Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the LORD detests them both. Proverbs 17:15 NIV

Our sin requires punishment as a deterrent to further sin. Jesus chose to bear that punishment, so that now his death demonstrates the destructiveness and costliness of sin.

Distortion: Sin is a crime against God before it is crime against humanity. This explanation minimizes God's glory and makes us the center.

- Rebellion again our Creator would deserve punishment even if it didn't hurt anyone else.

SUBSTITUTION EXPLANATION

- Jesus died to take our punishment so God could forgive us and still be just.

This says that we have all sinned and the penalty for sin is death. The reason that sin carries this penalty is that sin is rebellion against our Creator and an affront to His glory.

If God were to ignore sin, He would be saying that sin and evil are not really bad. Jesus died to pay this penalty on our behalf, so God could forgive us and still be just.

God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. ...[H]e did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Romans 3:25-26 NIV

Sound familiar? Bruce preached this a couple of weeks ago.

Distortion: God is not a "bad guy" that Jesus is protecting us from. This explanation makes it sound like God is angry and Jesus is defending us.

I once heard Jesus' death explained by saying we're like a piece of glass on an anvil and God is bring a hammer down to smash us, but Jesus is a metal pot that jumps in the way to save us.

- This makes me think "Jesus is cool! But God's kind of scary."
- Too many people feel this way; they love Jesus but are scared of God.

BALANCING ATONEMENT

That's it. Those are all the options I have. All the other explanations I've heard are even bigger distortions:

- Jesus never existed.
- Jesus' crucifixion was an accident, another pointless death.
- Jesus was just a good man who died a martyr for a good cause.

But those four answers to the question “Why did Jesus die?” all distort the Gospel. So what’s the answer?

Q: What is the biggest cause the most distortion of the Gospel?

A: Imbalance.

Show me any Christian cult, and I will show you truth distorted by imbalance. Truth is found in balance.

The man who fears God will avoid all extremes. Ecclesiastes 7:18 NIV

Truth can be found and distortions avoided by balancing each of these four ideas. A balanced view understands that Jesus’ death:

- Demonstrates God’s love for us and how we are to love others.
- Overwhelmed the hold of Satan and defeated the power of sin.
- Underscores the seriousness of sin.
- Satisfies the just demands of a righteous God.

DISTORTED CROSS, DISTORTED GOD

I said that a distorted view of the cross comes from a distorted view of God. Think through those four explanations:

- Moral-Influence: Jesus died as an example
- Ransom: Jesus died to set us free
- Governmental: God punishes sin for our best interest
- Substitution: Jesus died to take our punishment

Q: Do you find yourself overemphasizing one of them?

1. Overemphasizing the Moral-Influence explanation can indicate that we minimize God’s justice.

God is love, but He is also just and holy. He isn’t a dotting grandfather, but righteous judge. Sin is horrible, filthy stuff; it takes more than a good example to cleanse us.

2. Overemphasizing the Ransom explanation can indicate that we underestimate God.

Don’t overestimate Satan; he is not God’s mortal enemy. Satan only exists by God’s permission, so that we can have an avenue to express our freewill.

3. Overemphasizing the Governmental explanation can indicate that we are exaggerating man’s importance.

It is true that sin is deadly and brings us suffering. But sin is a crime of rebellion against our Creator God before it is crime against humanity.

4. Overemphasizing the Substitution explanation can indicate that we live in fear of God.

God is just, but the reason He didn’t punish us is His great love. Never forget that Jesus is God. God said “I love them, so I will take the punishment.”