

# Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord

*By Herb Hoefler*

## Outline:

Difficulties with the Western Approach

    Guilt-based vs. Shame-based

    Confusion over the Proclamation

Proclaiming to People's Questions

    Beginning with the Ascension

    Beginning with the Need for Help

    Beginning with the Living Lord

    Beginning with Sanctification

Alternative Approaches

    Approach of Other Traditions

    Approach of the Gospel of John

    Approach of the Classical Idea of the Atonement

Appendix: Testimony of a Caste Hindu Convert

Over the centuries, Western missions have made huge investments of people and funds in outreach to the great societies of Islam, Hinduism, and China. However, there has been very little response to the Gospel. We need to ask why.

We know that Christ is the answer to the human need, both in time and in eternity. Yet, we have been unable to communicate that fact to most of the world. The failure is not in the message, for the Word "will accomplish that for which it is sent." (Is 55:11) The failure is not with the Holy Spirit, for He will work faith where the Word is communicated. (Rom 10:14) The failure is with us. We have not communicated. The Gospel has not been heard. We have often spoken a message that was of no interest to the hearers. We have answered questions they were not asking.

## **Difficulties with the Western Approach**

Guilt-based vs. Shame-based

The usual message of our Western mission approach has been: "Receive the forgiveness of sin won for you by Christ and have the gift of eternal life." It is indeed a biblical, Gospel message. Millions of people around the world have responded to this call, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and received Christ into their lives. However, it is very interesting to discern the question they have found answered in Christ. Often it is not the one our Gospel message was addressing. It is not the question the vast majority of Asia and Africa are asking.

Often the distinction has been made between a guilt-based society and a shame-based society. In the guilt-based society, individuals have internalized a set of moral standards, and they feel personal guilt if they fail to live up to those standards. In the shame-based society, individuals are very aware of the judgment of their social peers and authorities. If they violate these people's expectations, they feel great shame. The motivation to moral living, therefore, is the approval and acceptance of their community.

In a guilt-based society, one might feel motivated to live by certain moral standards purely on the basis of his/her conscience.

In the shame-based society, it is the fear of social discovery and disapproval that motivates conformance. God is not involved. In fact, there is more definite hope of reprieve in a guilt-based society, for God might be persuaded or appeased. However, when the “collective conscience” of the society has been violated, boycott and excommunication are sure, with all the shame that goes with that. The society must rigorously guard and enforce the norms by which it survives and functions.

Eternal consequences of sin pale in comparison with the immediate, life-transforming consequences in the shame-based society.

The Western evangelistic appeal has been based on the values of a guilt-based society. People are warned that God has set the absolute standards, and we know them in our individual hearts. When we violate these standards, our conscience itself informs us that we deserve God’s eternal judgment and punishment (cf. Rom 2:15-16). Because of our moral failures, we do not deserve eternal life. However, Jesus Christ took the punishment on the cross that we deserved, and so we are set free and receive eternal life as God’s gracious gift because of Christ. This Gospel proclamation addresses one’s fear of God and His judgment, but leaves unaddressed the crisis of lifelong shame and exclusion that one would face in a shame-based society.

Westerners are familiar with this understanding of the Gospel as relief for the troubled conscience and assurance of eternal life. It answers the questions of a guilt-ridden heart. We are sure of our salvation totally because of grace. We see God is ultimately loving and compassionate and forgiving. However, this proclamation says little to the major crisis of soul to be faced in a shame-based society.

### **Confusion over the Proclamation**

Two years ago I was approached at a conference by a high caste Indian “Jesu bhakta” (believer in Jesus). She expressed consternation that she had just learned a couple of weeks earlier that she was not a Christian. Some American Christians had told her that anyone who does not believe that Jesus’ blood paid the price for our sins, is not a Christian.

She said that this explanation of the atonement made no sense to her and she didn’t believe it as part of her faith in Jesus. I had to give her a quick lesson in the history of theology, demonstrating that there have been many explanations of the atonement both in Scripture and in subsequent Christian history. As we shall discuss at the end of this article, this “substitutionary atonement” theory was propagated by St. Anselm in the 11th century and has become dominant in Western theology. It was never dominant in the Eastern church.

For several reasons, this Western presentation of the Gospel can be quite confusing to non-believers. For one thing, they ask the question “Why can’t God just forgive if He is so loving?” The usual reply is that God also is just, and so it is only on the cross that His justice is satisfied. Yet, for an outsider, this understanding of God’s character makes him even less virtuous than we are. We forgive people without exacting the last ounce of justice due us, but God can’t?

In Asian societies, we have the ethical principle of non-violence. The Western Gospel proclamation often portrays a very violent –even blood-thirsty – God, sacrificing His own Son. We say there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. Of course, we know that this imagery of the atonement is drawn from the Old Testament system of temple sacrifice. However, for outsiders, this proclamation portrays a God Who seems less than virtuous.

A third question about God's character in this understanding of the Gospel is about the freedom of God. If, by definition, God is the Totally Free One, then He should be free to do what is totally good. He should be totally free to forgive.

Next, there is the question of guilt. What if I don't feel guilty? What if my conscience does not accuse me about something as being morally wrong? What if my conscience is blunted or misinformed? Then I feel no need for the forgiveness that is being proclaimed and proffered.

Fifthly, this Gospel proclamation assumes that I care what God thinks about my actions. What if I don't have a concept of a personal God? What if I don't have a personal relationship with God? Then I don't feel guilty about offending Him. What if I don't see God as One laying out rules for me to follow? Then I don't worry about disobeying them.

Then, what if I don't look for moral standards within myself or in God, but in my community? Then I don't have a sense of guilt from my conscience or a sense of offense from my relationship with God. I don't feel the need for God's forgiveness, and I don't fear eternal punishment. What I really do fear and feel concerned about (the judgment of my community upon me), this proclamation of the Gospel does not address.

Finally, the Gospel appeal made by Western missions tends to assume that my focus is on eternal life. However, many societies comfortably leave the question of life after death as a mystery. People in these societies are much more focused on present realities and struggles: with the spirit world, with community expectations, with personal failures, with issues of poverty and health, etc.

### **Proclaiming to People's Questions**

#### **Beginning with the Ascension**

If we are to address our Gospel proclamation to the questions that people actually are asking, what would those questions be? The questions, as mentioned already above, have to do with life now. In tribal African societies, the question is if there is a power that can control the powerful, capricious spirit world. When I was in China, I was impressed that the question was if Christianity can produce a better person and a better society. In India, the spiritual quest is for a truly spiritual character. Each of these questions has a proper, biblical Gospel answer.

What is striking is that each answer to such issues of present living draws upon the fact of Jesus as Ascended Lord. So much of Western theology has been centered on Jesus' crucifixion. We focus on the atoning sacrifice of His suffering and death. This focus answers the question of guilt. When we add to this proclamation the fact of Jesus' resurrection, we add the assurance of eternal life. However, Jesus' Ascension addresses a whole different set of questions and desires.

Western theology has focused on Good Friday as the center of the salvation event. In fact, Easter and the Ascension are quite secondary, even unnecessary in this paradigm of atonement. Easter simply makes public what had already taken place, and in the Ascension Jesus simply returns to the Father with the task accomplished. One can imagine a scenario in which Jesus would simply have disappeared from the cross once His death had paid the price for sin, for the other two events simply are not essential to the atonement event.

Eastern Orthodox theology, in contrast, has focused on Easter as the central event. They find in Jesus' resurrection the inauguration of a whole new cosmic order. This is the good news that they proclaim, and it certainly is a true and biblical proclamation, rooted in the ancient church fathers. It also is much more comprehensive and dynamic than a concept of the atonement that basically stops with Good Friday, as we shall see later.

The third event in God's saving work in Christ, the Ascension, often is treated as a sidelight in Western and Eastern theologies. However, for those dealing with current issues of life, it is this third element of the salvation event that has the most meaning and relevance. It is Jesus the Ascended Lord over all creation that is the good news their heart yearns to hear. It is from the Ascension that they proceed best to grasping the implications of the Resurrection and the Crucifixion.

#### Beginning with the Need for Help

In the great religions of the world, there is a great emphasis on living a moral life. For Hindus, following the laws of "dharma" ensure that one will have a more pure soul and a better reincarnation. For Buddhists, there is the challenge that everyone has the Buddha nature and anyone can attain buddhahood if s/he would just follow the moral rigors of the eight-fold path. For Muslims, following the laws of Allah give hope that Allah will be merciful in the Final Judgment and one will be allowed into heaven. The expectation is not only that one will rigidly observe certain regulations. One is expected to do so with a devout and willing heart. In all these religions, one must strive to have a totally pure heart. Only then can one make spiritual progress or gain God's eternal approval.

This is the spiritual quest of the adherents of these religions. When they think of religion, they think of leading such a pure, spiritual life. In Western theology, we have categorized such thinking as "works righteousness." They think they can make themselves righteous. They need to receive the righteousness that Christ has won for us on the cross and offers to us as a free gift.

However, such a response to this religious thinking misses the point. They are not seeking free salvation. They are seeking spiritual help. The atheistic Chinese also are seeking help to become the noble man of Confucianism and the egalitarian society of Communism. Our goal may well be to bring them to the gift of free salvation, but the way there would best be the path these people are already on.

On my last trip to India in Jan-Feb. 2004, I discussed with a high caste "Jesu bhakta." He related the spiritual turmoil he had as a youth. He had taken his Hindu religion very seriously, and he was striving mightily to be the spiritual, moral person that was the call of his faith.

Yet, he kept on failing, and he became very despondent. Two events brought him to accept the Christian faith. One was an encounter with Indian missionaries who cared deeply for him and who sacrificially gave their lives for the poor and needy. He saw in them the spiritual character he was seeking. Secondly, he became convinced of the spiritual authority of the Bible.

It is significant what part of the Bible convinced him of its inspiration. It was the part that spoke to his inner most heart and quest: Romans 7:14-25. In these words of St. Paul, he heard the agony of his own soul: "The good that I want to do I don't do, and the evil I don't want to do I do." With St. Paul, he called out, "Who can save me from this body of death?"

This was not a shout of agony over guilt but of agony over frustration. In his shame-based upbringing, he could not achieve spiritually what was expected of him in his community, and in his own soul. He needed a living Lord to lead and guide his life. He found in Jesus, as St. Paul did, the Master he needed. Even now, the fact of Jesus' death and resurrection are not as vital to his faith as the fact of his personal relationship with the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus. As this person himself has put it: "It is true He died for me, but it is a fact that He lives with me."

#### Beginning with the Living Lord

This individual told a story about a conference he was at. A university lecturer had been brought in to speak to a group of "Jesu bhaktas" (followers of Jesus still living in their Hindu communities). Instead of addressing the issues these believers face, he spoke for one and a half hours about the Jesus' resurrection, attempting to prove from history that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Squatting on his haunches through all this was an elderly villager. When the professor finished his lecture, the man responded, "I've been listening to you for all this time proving that Jesus rose from the dead. The fact is I spoke with Him a long time just this morning. I didn't need to listen to all of this to know that He's alive." For this man, it was the experienced fact of the ascended Lord that was the centerpiece of his faith and life, not some convictions about theology or about history.

A further example of this focus on Jesus as living Lord is the frequent fact of visions among converts in Asia and Africa. Every missionary can tell you stories of this phenomenon as the critical event in bringing one to faith. It was not acceptance of some Gospel message that brought them to faith, but a personal encounter with Jesus in a vision or a miracle. Through this living encounter with the ascended Lord, they came to know of His atoning death and saving resurrection.

Such visions come not only in distant lands but in Western lands as well. I am convinced that God uses this approach wherever and whenever He finds people open to it. Such personal encounters are the prime avenue of conversion for sincere spiritual seekers. We had a Hindu student in our university who had rejected the Gospel in all his religion classes.

But while sitting in a large auditorium in one Humanities class he said he suddenly heard Jesus call to him and tell him to follow. At that, he felt he had no choice but to convert.

People on this spiritual quest also respond profoundly to the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. "Now the Lord is the Spirit." (II Cor. 3:17) As they seek Jesus' transforming power and Presence in their lives, they call upon the Holy Spirit. Jesus is present to guide and uphold and renew their lives, through the Holy Spirit. They pray in the Holy Spirit to Jesus. They expect the Spirit's power in their struggles and illnesses and efforts. They are not surprised when God speaks to them directly in dreams and visions. Jesus is a living and active Lord, and He comes to His people in response to their prayers. Often He comes very directly and very powerfully.

When I was in northern India this year among some congregations of new believers, they spoke of the many visions and miracles they were experiencing. I asked the lead pastor why so many people were joining his congregations, and I expected that he would say it was because people had seen so many spectacular events occurring among the believers.

However, he said, "People see how much peace believers have in their hearts in spite of all their difficulties of life." It is not just the living Lord as the miracle worker that they experience and desire. It is the living Lord Who personally and graciously and faithfully walks with them along life's way, with all its ups and downs.

The personal character of the Gospel in Western proclamation is that "Jesus died for you." The focus is on the crucifixion. The personal character of the Gospel in the examples I've given above is found instead in the Ascension: "Jesus came to me."

#### Beginning with Sanctification

I'm reminded of the refrain of the Gospel Song "Because He lives:"

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.  
Because He lives, all fear is gone.  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living just because He lives."

This is the Gospel faith and experience of Christians in these societies. Now the question comes if we are willing to make this aspect of the full Gospel message the center of our evangelistic proclamation.

Converts indicate that the good news of the living, active Jesus is the Gospel that speaks to their heart. Can we challenge non-believers to acceptance of this same good news?

What we would be doing is starting with sanctification rather than justification. Typically, in Western theology we have begun with justification, God's gracious declaration of His forgiveness. We have said, then, that we accept this gracious gift and respond with a life of sanctification, a life of grateful service to our Lord in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

However, when the quest of people's heart is sanctification rather than justification, might we begin with that part of the good news? Might we say: "You feel overwhelmed by life. You know you are not living up to the standards of your religion and your society

and your heart. You feel helpless and frustrated. You wonder how you and your society can become all that you desire. Where is the help for your life?"

The answer, of course, is the living Lord Jesus. "Because He lives," there is hope and direction and help. You can call to Jesus, and He will respond. He will give you a peace and a strength of spirit that you have never known before. You will be transformed in the core of your heart. You will find the strength and guidance to be all that you want to be, in the power of His Spirit. You need not fear. He is with you, and He is in charge. He is Lord of all.

That is the good news so many seeking hearts are yearning to hear. That is the powerful Word that will not return void, for it will be received with eagerness. This is the Gospel message that we have not usually communicated. It is the message that many converts heard, even directly from the Lord, and they responded with their lives in grateful and courageous service. Might we finally listen to their witness and follow their lead in our Gospel witness?

Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists expect that their religion will be challenging and life-fulfilling. They don't want to just mouth some formula about abstruse doctrines. They want a faith that will enable them to be all that they feel God means them to be in their daily life. Perhaps they have a lot to teach us as well.

### **Alternative Approaches**

#### Approach of Other Traditions

The saving act of God in Christ is much more than Good Friday. It is the Fall, the history of Israel, the prophets, the Messianic expectations, the Incarnation, Jesus' teaching and life and miracles, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost. It is cosmic, eternal, "once-for-all event.

It is a diamond with many facets, all of which are true and necessary and illuminating. In biblical terms, it is a "mystery," for "who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom 11:33-36, 16:25, Eph. 1:9-10, 6:19, Col. 1:26-27, 2:2-3, 4:3, Rev. 10:7)

Many different attempts have been made to develop facets of this eternal mystery. All of them have biblical roots and theological depth: the ransom theory, reconciliation, substitution, new Adam/new creation, example, deception theory, sacrifice, moral inspiration, recapitulation (restoration of creation), revelation of love/forgiveness, etc. Each of them illuminates only part of the mystery.

The theological criticism of the standard Western approach, as we have seen, is that it is static and juridical and centered almost completely on the crucifixion. Other approaches are far more comprehensive, historical, and dynamic. For example, in Eastern orthodox theology, as we have seen the focus is on Easter. Good Friday is a path to get to Easter and its salvific implications. Easter brings in a whole new reality of divine regeneration of humanity, cosmic transformation, universal restoration, and the inauguration of the Age of Church and its sacraments.

The Pentecostal traditions have brought a focus on the event of Pentecost, and emphasized the inauguration of the Age of the Spirit. This view is closely related to the emphasis on the Ascension, as it is the ascended Lord Who sends the Spirit and Who

“is the Spirit” in action. (II Cor. 3:17) Once again, this approach is much more dynamic, personal, and historical than the usual Western approach, as believers are caught up in the regenerating, renewing, and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. The rapid spread of Pentecostal churches around the world in the last century, also among adherents to the major religions, testifies that they are presenting the Gospel in a way that answers people’s needs and desires.

Our focus on the Ascension follows this theme of God’s saving activity as cosmic in scope and a living, personal reality. Clearly, this approach incorporates the crucifixion and its centrality in God’s saving work. However, it also moves beyond that seminal event of the cross to its implications in all of living history through the fact of the Ascension.

#### Approach of the Gospel of John

We see this emphasis on the living Christ in John’s gospel. It was the last one written. Seemingly, John wrote his account of Jesus’ life a couple of generations after Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote theirs. John’s interest was not so much the actual events of Jesus’ life, but their on-going meaning and implications.

Therefore, in John’s gospel we have a much different emphasis. He is writing for those who live now with the Ascended Lord. As John concludes his gospel, he summarizes that it was his intention to help his hearers and all future generations know this Jesus so that they may “have life in His Name.” (20:31)

Throughout John’s gospel, he presents the themes of “light” and “life.” Sometimes John calls it “eternal life,” but his message from the Lord is that it is real life, life “in all its fullness” (10:10). This is the real life that “walks in the light of life.” (8:12, 11:9-10) It begins now and comes to total fulfillment when we see Him face to face:

- 1:4-5, 9 – Jesus is the true life and light
- 3:19-21 – we are called to come to the light
- 3:36 – if you believe you, have eternal life (also 5:24, 11:25- 26, 17:3)
- 5:26 – real life is in Jesus
- 5:40 – come to Jesus to have life
- 6:32-35, 50-51 – Jesus is the “bread of life”
- 6:51 – Jesus gives Himself for the life of the world
- 6:53-58 – If we eat and drink of the bread of life, we will never hunger or thirst and we will have real life (also 7:37)
- 6:63 – Jesus’ words are spirit and life
- 11:25 – Jesus is life (also 14:6)
- 12:25 – we must lose our life to gain it
- 12:35-36 – Jesus calls us to “become sons of light”
- 14:18-19 – “I will come to you.... and you will have life.
- 17:13 – eternal life is to know Jesus

These themes speak to the faith and experience of converts from these other religions. They have found “life in His Name.” They have found real life and real light from their relationship with the living Lord. The focus is not so much on what Jesus did but on what He is. He lives “in them” (17:23). They live with Him even now as the original disciples lived and learned and were trained and sent:

1:14, 16 – Jesus came and gives blessing upon blessing.  
4:13 – Through Jesus we drink of living water.  
10:27 – Jesus’ sheep hear their Shepherd’s voice.  
14:12 – Through Jesus’ Spirit, we will do greater things than He.  
15:5 – When we remain in Jesus, we will bear much fruit.  
16:12-15 – The Spirit will come to guide us into all truth.  
20:21 – “As the Father sent me, I am sending you.”

John describes/predicts what these converts experience and value: the personal relationship with the living Lord. Clearly, what they emphasize as central to their Christian faith is central to God’s message to His Church in the Fourth Gospel. They may indeed help all of us to focus on this dynamic, historical relationship that we too might have real life in His Name and bear much fruit.

#### Approach of the Classical Idea of the Atonement

One of the things these converts can help us do is expand and deepen our Western understanding of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. These converts are reacting to one portrayal of God’s work of salvation in Jesus. This interpretation of the crucifixion became dominant in the West through the writings of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1034-1109 A.D.). It has never been the dominant motif in the theology of the Eastern Orthodox church, nor was it dominant in the first millennium of church history.

Many scholars have traced the history of the doctrine of the atonement, beginning with the variety of themes in the New Testament. The theme that was most common in the millennium prior to Anselm was the theme of Jesus conquering evil. In his classic study of the topic in *Christus Victor* (1931), Gustav Aulen calls this theme the “classic idea” of the atonement because of its roots in the Scriptures and in the early church fathers. His argument is that Martin Luther attempted to revive this understanding of God’s work in Christ, over against the Anselmian understanding, which Aulen calls the “Latin idea” or the “satisfaction theory” of the atonement.

Aulen traces the origins of Anselm’s view to the Medieval practice of penance. “Its root idea is that man must make an offering or payment to satisfy God’s justice; this is the idea that is used to explain the work of Christ.” (*Christus Victor*, Macmillan Co., N.Y. 1966, p. 82) The offering for sin had to be sinless, but it had to be performed by man for man’s sin. The solution, according to Anselm, was that God could come Himself and make that satisfactory, sinless offering as man in Jesus. “The relation of man to God is treated by Anselm as essentially a legal relation, for his whole effort is to prove that the atoning work is in accordance with justice.” (p. 90)

In contrast, the classic description of God’s saving work is much more dynamic and personal. God is not simply a judging figure that must be satisfied. He is the active conqueror of evil through Christ. Jesus’ death is the culminating event in God’s long conflict with Satan, and now God triumphs over the devil through Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension. The focus is not solely on Good Friday, but also on Easter and Ascension Day.

This approach places the climactic events of Jesus’ life into a cosmic and eternal context. The battle between God and Satan began before the creation of the world and will culminate at the end of time: Mt. 25:41, II Pet. 2:4, Jude 6,9, Rev. 20. With the

creation of the world, the battle occurs immediately in the Garden in Gen. 3, and God promises that He will “crush” the Evil One (cf. Rom. 16:20). The battle is reflected throughout the history of Israel from battling the sorcerers and military of Egypt to the Satanic temptations of Saul and David to the cosmic warnings and Messianic prophecies of the prophets and the trials of Job and the psalmists in the Wisdom Literature.

The battle intensifies as God makes His direct invasion of the realm of Satan, “the Prince of this world” (Jn. 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, I Jn. 5:19, II Cor. 4:4), in the birth of Jesus. Satan immediately tries to thwart the attack through the jealous King Herod, but God enables the Holy Family’s escape (Mt. 2). As soon as Jesus begins His ministry, we have the record of another frontal battle in Jesus’ Temptations. Jesus is victorious, but Scripture ominously records that the cosmic battle will continue (Lk 4:13). Jesus makes bluntly clear what is happening in this battle for the salvation of the world when He describes His purpose as “someone stronger (who) attacks and overpowers” the “fully armed, strong man” by the “finger of God” (Lk 11:17-22, see I Jn 4:4).

The battle culminates in Jesus’ suffering and death, with His seeming defeat on the cross. However, the fact of His eternal victory is announced in His glorious Resurrection and perpetuated in His triumphant Ascension back to the right hand of the Father: “His incomparably great power...which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand... far above all rule and authority... not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet...” (Eph. 1:19-23, see also 2:4-7, 3:9-11, 4:8, Col 3:1). Now the seeming defeat of the cross is revealed actually as Jesus’ final triumph, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15, see II Cor. 2:14, Rev. 5:5, Jn. 16:11).

From now on, Jesus is addressed not only as Rabbi and Messiah (Christ) and Savior. He is addressed primarily as Lord. Early church martyrs would rather die than address Caesar by this title won by the Son for all eternity, when “every tongue (will) confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:9-11). He is the Lamb Who has been victorious and will “overcome those who make war against Him... because He is the Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14, 3:18-21).

In His triumphant resurrection, Jesus even descended into hell and exerted that all “angels, authorities and powers (are) in submission to Him” (I Peter 3:18-21). Because of that, Jesus’ followers also are victorious. The battle against Satan continues, as Satan has been unleashed (Rev. 20) and seeks to “devour” the souls of humankind once again (I Peter 5:8). But the comfort and assurance of God’s People is that the battle has been won, and because of Christ they too have “overcome the evil one” (I Jn. 2:13, see 5:4-5, Lk. 10:17-19, Eph. 6:1-17, Rev. 2-3).

Clearly a presentation of the Gospel in terms of this classic view of the atonement is much more dynamic and provocative than the cold, juridical transaction portrayed in the substitutionary view. The view places us today in the cosmic and universal saving work of God. The view of Jesus as the triumphant Lord, rather than merely the suffering Savior, inspires faith and hope, whether for a tribal person struggling with fear of spirits or a social activist struggling for justice or a pious person struggling with pangs of conscience.

For the Muslim also, this view places the saving work of God in Christ in a much broader and more comprehensible perspective. The Muslim can resonate with the concept of God in battle ("jihad") against evil. However, when we focus immediately on Jesus' suffering and death we are brought into immediate conflict with the teachings of the Qur'an about the crucifixion. In the context of divine "jihad," the crucifixion can make much more sense.

This view of the atonement speaks much more clearly, then, to the felt needs and spiritual quest of people in all the major religions of the world. It avoids many of the moral and aesthetic obstacles that the Anselmian view has raised in their sentimentalities. Instead, we have a triumphant, caring, living Lord Who came and Who comes. He has demonstrated and effected His power over evil and over the Evil One, at the cost of His own life. He is present even now in that care and power. He is to be trusted and followed with joy.

Such an understanding of the work of Christ in past history brings a continuity with His work for us in current history. This saving work of Christ answers the searchings of their soul that their current religious life has raised and left unanswered. The Lord Who triumphed is the One Who continues to triumph, and He invites all to the Life and Light that is available only in Him, both now and for all eternity.

--Herbert Hoefler  
June 1, 2004

Appendix:

As an illustration of the issues involved, I share with you an e-mail that I received from a high caste Hindu "Jesu Bhakta" when I shared with him the draft of this article:

Dear Herb,

But I can summarise my current thoughts on the matter. For me, the language and terminology of the cross and Christ's death on the cross and justification does not seem to have a personal application. I.e., I do not have a deep sense of gratitude towards Him for having died for me on the cross (I don't understand why He had to do that, was this something God orchestrated to demonstrate to the Jews the concept of grace? Since the sacrificial system was endemic to the Jewish tradition, did he choose to use this as a symbol?

To me, the relationship with Christ is more as my personal Lord, God, Guru, however you wish to call Him. I can relate to Him as the Living God and this I experience via the presence of the very real Holy Spirit whom He has given me ("God has poured out His love into my heart through the Holy Spirit whom He has given me"). It is the living, resurrected, ascended Christ that I can relate to.

I have asked many Christians recently why I cannot have a relationship with God in the way that Abraham, David, Moses, Isaiah, etc did, by faith. There was no sacrifice on the cross then. I have not heard any clear answer, the only answer is that that was the covenant God had then, now it is through faith in the sacrifice of Christ.

I do not doubt that Christ is the incarnate God. But I think the crux of all Christianity is that the incarnation was for the purpose of redemption. And it is this latter point that has been a stumbling block for me. It seems to me that Christians focus more on the sacrifice on the Cross than on the living, resurrected Christ.

Christians around me like to suggest that I am a struggling Christian, a baby Christian who hasn't grown. I am considered a heretic, as someone who is "way out there" etc, just because I cannot relate to their terminology and obsession with the crucifixion. Often, I tend to believe their assessment about me and then end up in bouts of self-flagellation and despair. My initial drawing to Christ was to a personal Lord, God and Guru. For many years I did not have much understanding of nor exposure to the Gospel messages that are thrust upon new believers.

I do believe I am forgiven by God when I come to Him in genuine repentance (as in "Against thee, thee only have I sinned"), I come back vindicated by Him when I go to Him with a repentant and contrite heart. "The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite spirit."

I am to die to myself daily and let Him rule in me. (It is my ego that is the biggest enemy that stands between me & God.) One can indulge in all kinds of talk about what happened at the cross and what it means to them, to me what seems important is coming to Him as a pauper in spirit, that is the point at which God meets man. And then in continuing to live for Him.

Many Christians have urged me to see the much hyped "Passion of Christ" movie, especially since I have struggled with issues of the Cross and the blood of Christ. I have not bothered. I do not need to have the message of crucifixion force-fed into me.

The other thing I have had trouble with is the one-shot nature of what happened at the Cross. Christians like to say things like, "all my sins were forgiven in the one act at the Cross". Then I have to wonder why we continue to sin. The very fact that I continue to sin means that I need to continue to come to God in utmost repentance. For me to say that there is no more sin in me because I believe Christ died once and for all on the cross for my sins would be a lie. I know the baseness/sinfulness of my heart and I know I continue to sin daily. And I know that I need to come to Him daily.

I believe Christ is my personal Lord, God and Saviour. But where He fits into the picture, in God's forgiveness of me, I do not understand. Christians indulge in a lot of talk about how God cannot see us apart from our sinfulness but for the sacrifice of Christ. This concept I just cannot relate to very easily. Maybe it is more a symbolic concept that I do not need to get so hung up on? There is far greater focus among Christians on the justification than on the ongoing process of sanctification. And this leads to the danger of cheap grace, which I have seen a lot of. After all, what use is justification if it is not followed by sanctification?

I read your paper and notice that other caste Hindu converts like me have had similar struggles with the matter of justification, and, like me, consider Jesus as their personal, living God. So this must be something peculiar to us Hindus.

For this reason, I much more enjoy the 4 Gospels, which seem to be a narrative of Christ's life on earth. I particularly favor the Gospel of John whose focus is on Christ's

relationship to God and also our relationship to Christ/God. I find it hard to relate to the writings of Paul and the book of Hebrews, which seem to be heavily steeped in the language of atonement, redemption, justification, sacrifice at the Cross, etc. It feels like reading a legal document.

I have really enjoyed your paper. You are the first one I have seen to have correctly assessed what distinguishes the Hindu convert's thinking from the stereotypical Western Christian's thinking. Your paper very nicely sums up what I have not been able to give expression to.