

TAKING ON THE CROSS

**Reimagining the Meaning
of Jesus's Life and Death**

**FOREWORD BY RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK
EDITORS F. TIMOTHY MOORE, AMY L. MEARS,
JOHN BALLENGER, BEN SANDERS III,
GRAHAM B. WALKER, JR.**

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Foreword

Rita Nakashima Brock

This book discusses crucial questions for Christians regarding what we believe about Jesus and salvation and how such beliefs affect real people's lives. It could not be more crucial in this historic moment. What does being a Christian mean as we stumble our way out of the worst global pandemic in a century, face the rise of white Christian supremacist fascism, accept the failure of the longest war in US history, and suffer the countless, unrelenting disasters of climate change denial? Christian communities will find in these essays a source for meaningful, life-giving conversations about faith and the living of faith.

The book's questions about Jesus and the cross are crucial for all Christians to consider. What is the relationship of the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus to his execution at the hands of the Roman Empire? Did he have to die in this way? Who is responsible for Jesus' torture and murder? Did Jesus choose to be crucified in order to save others, and was his death an unalloyed good? The answers by the authors are not just about an imperial killing two millennia ago but also about our own lives and how we live in the world today in all its anguish and beauty.

The book has two defining premises. First, the meaning of the crucifixion has been varied and often contested theologically, liturgically, and politically. The essays unpack this premise in biblical and historical texts as well as in contemporary understandings in feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies. They invite us to return to familiar texts with new ways to understand them. Second, Christians need new understandings of the death of Jesus that strengthen our communities and our struggle to help life flourish. For the living of faith, what we believe must inspire us to work for economic and environmental justice, for decolonized and indigenous theologies, and for equity for women and LGBTQI+ people, as well as for an end to white supremacy, mass incarceration, climate change, and war.

The essays invite us to think about Jesus and the cross as well as the God we worship. Does God will everything that happens, including inflicting extreme violence to end violence? Are trauma and suffering required to make sinners worthy of divine love? Is humanity created in the image of God or born hopelessly sinful? Must people be sacrificed to save the elect? Do we honor the oppressed by sanctifying their suffering as an echo of the crucifixion? Is individual salvation adequate for overcoming systemic oppression and injustice? How and what should we teach children about the crucifixion?

By interrogating the atonement and offering rich, nuanced alternatives, the authors give readers resources for liberative, life-affirming meanings of faith as we seek to enact our hopes for this new, deeply troubled era. The book provides fresh ways

to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ and the embodiment of our human divinity, who reveals that nothing can separate us from the love of God—neither the principalities and powers of imperial violence nor our own moral failures.

The authors are diverse in age, gender, race, culture, professional context, and social and geographic location. Their diversity of perspectives is a gift of the past half century of new scholarship and writing produced by women, minoritized people, LGBTQI+ people, and white allies who have come of age in an era of desegregated education and greater access to graduate education for women and minoritized people. As the first Asian American woman to earn a doctorate in theology in 1988, I received my graduate education from 1972–1987 without exposure to such work in my classes. Instead, I found life-giving perspectives in a few unassigned books by feminist, womanist, and liberation theologians and biblical scholars and in conversations and friendships with others who were struggling to complete graduate degrees without having our lives and voices erased by our education.

I have been grateful to read essays so deeply informed by the now vast body of diverse work available to us. In fact, as historian Peter Brown demonstrates in *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, such cultural, social, and racial intersectionality has characterized Christian churches from their inception in the political crossroads of Palestine, where Europe, Africa, and Asia met. A millennium and a half after Christianity emerged, Western European colonization and its institutions created the illusion that Christians had to believe the atonement and its purveyors.

This book is essential reading. It examines the Christian past through the lens of diversity and contestation and reclaims the value of such differences for our own thinking and for the healing of our lives. It offers Christians today a fresh understanding of the resources of the past and new voices for the future of theology. Those who accept the invitation to engage the book's questions will find new meanings of the cross that honor our diversities and inspire our struggle to move toward an earth-loving, justice-oriented, and healing faith.

Rita Nakashima Brock is the Senior Vice-President and the Director of Shay Moral Injury Center with Volunteers of America in Alexandria, Virginia. Rita and Rebecca Ann Parker in their book Proverbs of Ashes (Beacon, 2001) shifted the critique of substitutionary atonement from solely an intellectual pursuit to a testament of how it affects real people. In Saving Paradise (Beacon, 2008), they charted the history of how the Western Church exchanged resurrection and love of this world for crucifixion, substitutionary atonement, and the power of empire.

Introduction

Amy L. Mears and John Ballenger

The conversations are happening in hotel corridors during Alliance of Baptists' Annual Gatherings; they continue during meals and at breaks and over late-night drinks. They occur when worship-planning committees and church staffs labor to grow useful, authentic, integrity-filled worship experiences for congregations during the Lenten season. They are prompted by required readings for seminary students and by questions from confused ten-year-olds and by senior adults who recognize that they can no longer swallow whole the theology that has been handed down to them. These conversations center on the question, "What shall we do with the cross?" and the time is at hand when, as a collective, we approach them together in ways that are broad and deep, systematic and unexpected.

This topic is, literally, "the crux of the matter." How individuals and small groups and congregations and denominations address theories of atonement determines much of their faith practice: What does the crucifixion of Jesus have to do with our faith statements? How is Jesus—living, crucified, risen—a model for our lives? What is the role of the Sacred in Jesus' life, suffering, and death, and in yours and mine? Our task is made richer and more complex by the Alliance of Baptists' intention to become forthrightly anti-racist in our understanding, our viewpoints, our statements, and our documents. The most influential voices in Western Christianity, those of Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin, developed theories of atonement from privileged positions—God as feudal lord whose honor must be protected, God as law-and-order judge who must punish sin one way or another. We desire to hear voices from many backgrounds in order for all of us to learn from each other. How shall we center voices other than white, Western European ones in this particular conversation? Complications to our theological approaches are intensified by our experiences with the global pandemic of COVID-19. Religious thinking that worked in centuries and millennia past is no longer adequate for us.

This volume is one result of the eagerness, the frustration, the adventure, and the hesitation inherent in our conversations about the cross. It is the hope of the writers and editors that it will be viewed as a trade book rather than an academic treatise. It is intentionally envisioned and drafted to be a helpful resource for individuals, for group study, or for congregational engagement rather than for the classroom. If it sparks disagreements, excellent! If it prompts awkward silences, success! If it causes an individual to look to the horizon and think, "I thought I was the only one who wondered about this," then we have approached our goals for the book.

Below you will find three parts. The first contains biblical and theological discussions about the history and application of theories of atonement. Graham Walker

and Tim Moore set the table for our conversation by reviewing a variety of atonement theories and the Christian Testament passages from which they springboard. Anna Bowden and Beth Ritter-Conn examine scripture stories and images and offer clear and engaged reinterpretations for our consideration. Anthony Neal looks at what the cross means in light of the history of lynching in the United States and how Black people are now redirecting white secular American Christianity to recognize this connection. Malkhaz Songulashvili has found that Chechen Muslims, as an oppressed people, connect to the suffering of Jesus in ways that we might find surprising—especially in the significance of Holy Friday liturgy. Amós López Rubio and Kyndra Frazier consider theologies of atonement in ways that do not begin with white, Western European writings, thus opening the door to much broader, more deeply nuanced ways of understanding the life and death of Jesus. Paul Hayes offers the work of René Girard as a theological and psychological approach to considering the importance of the atoning power of God.

The second part, section 1, contains resources for churches who are at work trying to bring their actual beliefs into alignment with their liturgy: readings, responses, hymns, anthems, prayers. Amy Mears, Russ Dean, Deb Conrad, and John Ballenger offer chapters that will be of special interest to those planning and leading worship for progressive Baptist congregations. Section 2 of part 2 includes work in areas of faith formation for age groups and affinity groups as well as specific implications for race and gender. The work of Anita Peebles, Laura Mayo, Aretha Flucker, and Tim Moore offers assistance to those who are teaching children and adults how to consider the cross and who are constructing catechetical help for those exploring the life of Jesus as a Way of Love.

Part 3 engages the topics of pastoral care and ministries of peace and justice, and the chapters are broad-ranging, from Michelle Nickens's help for those providing care in situations of domestic abuse to Nancy Hastings Sehested's memoir about life as a female pastor in the South and as a pastoral caregiver for people who are incarcerated. Kadia Edwards provides insight on the importance of storytelling in the work of liberation. Greg Jarrell, Marc Boswell, and Elijah Zehyoue locate the impact of atonement theologies on specific sectors of the global community and explore the importance of advocacy and activism on behalf of those who suffer. Rodney Sadler explores how the doctrine of salvation by grace provided white people a sense of absolution for heinous oppression like slavery and Jim Crow. Sadler declares that we are not allowed to divorce our practice from our belief.

Taking on the Cross: Reimagining the Meaning of Jesus' Life and Death is a collaborative effort by adventuresome and forward-thinking Baptists to continue the work of constructing ways of faith and practice that are courageous and compassionate. This is not only an intellectual exercise. Our understanding of the life and death of Jesus provides the infrastructure for all of our work. The engagement of our congregations

in the lives of their communities is reflective of our understanding of the work of Jesus. The ways that we act and live as pastoral and ministerial people with those in our care are related to our theological understanding. The ways that churches practice their liturgical life and govern themselves demonstrate the community's convictions about the cross. The circumstances of Jesus' death cast a very long shadow on our interactions with one another and with all of creation. Taking on the cross is not only an intellectual exercise.

Once we no longer adhere to the idea of substitutionary atonement, the infrastructure of the faith many of us inherited crumbles. Some people decide that there is now nothing else to talk about in their faith life; if their understanding of atonement is faulty, there is nothing left. Once we dispense with a "salvation system" that doesn't fit, it's tempting to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Older teenagers and young adults often discover themselves bereft of faith when the classical atonement theories crash for them. Their faith becomes untethered. One compassionate response to a declaration of atheism is, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Because I think I probably don't believe in that God either." It is important for those of us who are uncomfortable with the traditional way to find new grounding so that we can pass it along to our children, our parents, our families, our churches, and our communities. Substitutionary atonement is in the groundwater of every Christian church and institution. The safety found in a community with which to talk and think and pray and worship assists us in walking through doubt and belief, conviction and cynicism, toward a more grounded way of being Jesus-followers in the world.

And so we begin with our own small circle in hopes of joining a broader conversation happening within the larger Christian Church, locally and globally, and of coming to the table not empty-handed but bearing the freight of nuanced conversation among ourselves. The purpose of this volume is to encourage us to boldness as followers of Jesus. If leaving behind some of what we have been taught opens a way for more intimacy with the Holy, more connection with this good earth, and more kindness toward one another, why would we hesitate? Take heart and engage with the writers of these chapters. Disagree with energy and good listening skills. Find new conversation partners and companions on the journey. It is our hope that the ensuing exercises in understanding and practicing our faith will make our Alliance of Baptists a more just, more peace-seeking, more loving member of the body of the Christ.