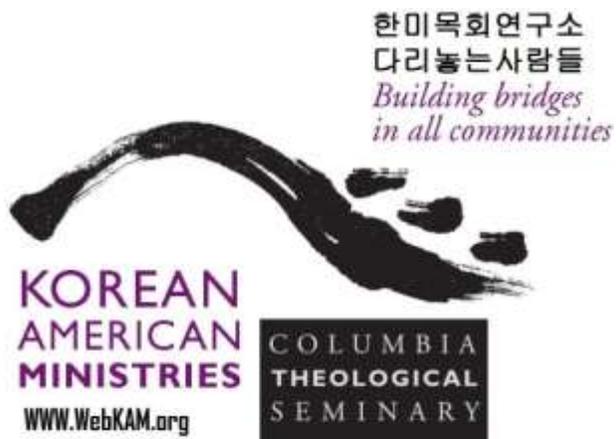


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## Imagine What Christ Has Done for Us

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Paul's work with CICW includes planning for the Calvin Symposium on Worship, organizing and leading regional training events, developing resources for the CICW website, and networking with church and college campus worship leaders locally and nationally.

To aid our understanding of Christ's atonement, the scriptures offer us *images*. These images are not comprehensive or exclusive. They break down when pressed too far and they limit our vision if isolated from each other. But collectively, they help us comprehend our salvation; they awaken our imagination and illumine the many features of Christ's atonement. In worship we can make use of biblical images of the atonement to enrich and balance our experience of the service of confession. Biblical images help us find vivid, concrete language for confessing sins and help us focus and refresh our words of assurance.

One stirring image of the atonement in scripture is *Christus Victor*, the King triumphant over his foes. This is a warlike image, celebrating Jesus, who through his death and resurrection "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them..." (Colossians 2:15). *Christus Victor* is a reminder of the reality and power of evil forces in our world, the principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12). These forces are spiritual, such as hopelessness or bitterness and are often structural and institutional, such as discrimination or privilege. In their presence we feel powerless, defeated and dismayed.

There are many ways to use this image in confession and assurance. Consider the words we might pray: "Almighty God, in our battle against sin we are often defeated... We are feeble in our efforts to confront racism in our hearts and community... We confess that spirits of accusation and condemnation pervade our church..." What is more, in assurance we can declare boldly, "Sin has met defeat!" Though we do not experience the fullness of Christ's decisive victory, we do acknowledge that it has begun. Along with our words of assurance we might add,

“Listen to these words of victory...” or “Know that the battle belongs to the Lord and be at peace.”

A second image common to scripture is *ransom*: Jesus gave “his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45); “we were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 16:20). This image brings to mind the efforts of an abolitionist. Jesus by the great worth of his life and cost of his sacrifice sets us free from captivity to sin and slavery to the devil.

It is easy to imagine creative and concrete possibilities for confession and assurance. We might pray, “Master, we confess that sin imprisons us... We are enslaved to habits of selfishness and wastefulness... We are addicted to pornography, abuse alcohol, and ensnared by online gaming...” In assurance we announce our freedom in Jesus Christ: If the son has set you free, you are free indeed! (Acts 13:39). In introduction we might say, “God assures us of our freedom with words from...” or “With the price of his blood, Christ has removed our chains.”

Perhaps the most familiar image of the atonement in worship is *penal satisfaction*, the substitution of Christ’s innocence and righteousness for our guilt and corruption. But it’s not often, perhaps because of its familiarity, that our imaginations take us to a courtroom setting. This image emphasizes that we, as sinners, are law-breakers and guilty of punishment. We worship idols, dishonor God’s name, neglect the Sabbath, kill our neighbors with our thoughts and words, etc. Guilty, we deserve the wrath of God.

When composing a prayer of confession, we can make great use of courtroom imagery. For example, we could pray, “Righteous Judge, we confess that we have disobeyed your law and offended your honor... We stand guilty in your presence, unloving, ungrateful, and intending in our hearts to disregard your law.... We are, however, certain of our pardon and sure of our goodness in Jesus Christ. Following our confession we may confidently declare, “Hear God’s words of pardon... In Jesus Christ our guilt and punishment is taken away...”

A fourth image of the atonement we use regularly in worship is *sacrifice*, an image taken from religious rituals. This is, perhaps, the most foreign image to our daily experience. It’s difficult to imagine how blood, even that of Jesus, saves us. One thing is for sure, however. Christ’s blood *does* save us. This is evident in scripture: God put forward Jesus as “a sacrifice of atonement by his blood” (Romans 3:25). “We have redemption through his blood” (Ephesians

1:7). One way to regard this image biblically is to focus on the blood's cleansing power. Like a bleach solution, sacrificial blood removes the stain of sin. It wipes away our dirty deeds and sets us apart for holy service.

This imagery especially helps us conceive of sin not as an abstract idea, but as a spiritual reality with tangible consequences. In confession we might pray, "Holy God, we cannot wash away the guilt on our hands nor the filth in our minds... Our consciences constantly accuse, our sins pollute our every deed... We are assured of our holiness, however, in Christ's blood. God has set us apart for pure and holy service. We may, therefore, introduce our words of assurance saying, "Listen to words of the cleansing power of Christ's blood" or "We are purified and set apart by the blood of Christ."

One concluding image we may consider in worship calls to mind pictures of obedience school: Christ as *moral example*. Christ is our model and teacher for holy living; in him we learn true obedience, selflessness in service, humility, and compassion (Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Peter 2:21). In balance with other images, this image witnesses to the saving influence of Christ's life and the reality that Christ's atonement is not merely abstract but practical.

When we pray our corporate confessions we might admit our failures to follow: "Great Shepherd, we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turn to our own way (Isaiah 53:6)... We conform to our peers, obey our ungodly desires, and ignore your will and work around us... The image of Christ's *moral example*, in turn, offers us great news in Jesus: God has not abandoned us, but has given us a guide in Jesus Christ! We may offer, then, words of assurance that emphasize the grace and promise of Christ's example. For instance we might say, Our Good Shepherd promises to search for us, find us and lead us... God has shown us what is good and undertakes the responsibility to lead us by his Spirit..."

All of these images help us grasp the totality of our salvation, enabling us to realize the reality of our sin and comprehend the magnitude of Christ's work. Our services of confession and assurance are prime opportunities to experience these realities in prayer and song. As we reflect on these images, I believe that we will find great joy and renewal in our planning and lead our congregations in deeper worship of our savior.