PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEATH OF JESUS

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SUMMARY:

This article explores the richness and diversity of Paul’s understanding of the death of Jesus. An examination of the interpretative tools available to Paul from his own Jewish tradition and from the Greco-Roman environment leads to the conclusion that they were radically recast so that scandal of the cross could be articulated in a meaningful manner. The article examines the problems and challenges associated with Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for sins seeking to disentangle Paul from later theories of the atonement and interpreting this language within its own context. The eschatological dimensions of Paul’s thought are then examined providing the matrix in which Paul and his communities could understand their own suffering as a participation in the sufferings of Christ.

Introduction:

Jesus’ brutal death was seen by his contemporaries to be either absolute foolishness or a scandal (1 Cor 1:18). Käsemann aptly describes the way in which Jesus’ cross was in fact first felt to be “a dark riddle,” a conundrum that eventually became the foundation stone of his theology. What looked like abandonment and defeat was paradoxically the most profound moment of God’s loving and vulnerable faithfulness to humanity.

Dealing with the richness and diversity

It is beyond dispute that Paul and the deuto-Pauline letters use an immensely wide range of metaphors and images in referring to the death of Jesus. Some of the lenses through which the death of Jesus is seen are that of atonement (1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:4; Rom 3:25; 4:25; 8:3), reconciliation (Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:18-19; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20,22), justification (Gal 2:16; 3:24; 5:4; 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 3:20,24; 4:25), sanctification (1 Cor 1:2,30; 6:11; 1 Thess 5:23 Rom 6:22) or salvation (Rom 5:9; 10:9-13; Phil 2:12; 1 Thess 2:16; 5:9; 1 Cor 1:18; 15:2; 2 Cor 6:2; Eph 2:8). Other dimensions are also found in the letters such as the possibility that has been opened up to become children of God (Rom 8:19-23; Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:15), being transformed (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21), or glorified (Rom 8:19,30 1 Cor 2:7).

The fact that so many threads have been woven into this rich tapestry within the letters has prompted a number of questions for interpreters of Paul. Is there a discernable development in his thought? Is it appropriate or helpful to rank themes such as justification or reconciliation against one another? What would be the criteria used to engage in such an exercise? Another significant line of research is that of the exploration of the relationship of these metaphors to one another. That there is some measure of coherence is suggested by a number of considerations. The first is that this rich tapestry finds its unity in its consistent application to the person of Jesus. The second is that much of the language speaks of positive transformation of the relationship between God and humanity by means of Jesus’ death. The third is that the metaphors are themselves combined in a number of texts such as Rom 3:21-26 where justification, redemption and atonement are used, or 2 Cor 5:14-62 where the sacrificial death of Jesus reconciles, justifies, and forgives. In the light of this phenomenon the suggestion of Green and Baker that Paul utilizes constellations of images is well justified.

A number of interpreters of Paul have suggested that a more unified and cohesive methodology is required in order to explore Paul’s understanding of the death of Jesus and its consequences. This has led to attempts to articulate the meta-narrative that underlies and unifies the rich diversity encountered in the letters. Wright argues that Paul is best understood within the context of the hopes and expectations of 2nd Temple Judaism. The death of Jesus is interpreted in the context of God’s loving faithfulness to the covenant to Abraham, and this is further aligned with contemporary Judaism’s messianic expectations and hopes for a new age instituted by the Messiah. For his part Gorman strongly argues that the underlying narrative is itself cruciform in shape. For Paul to know nothing
except Jesus crucified (1 Cor 2:2) is to tell the story of how God’s self-revelation is found in the crucified one who gives a new understanding and focus to faith, hope, love and power.

The search for the background and origins of Paul’s proclamation

a) Old Testament

Paul’s claim in 1 Cor 15:3 that Jesus died for our sins according to the scriptures provides sufficient justification to examine the Old Testament with a view to the possible resources it could provide to explain Jesus’ death within the broad patterns of belief of 2nd Temple Judaism. Rich interpretative tools could be drawn upon such as the sacrificial cult, and the concept of the suffering of the righteous in its various manifestations - be it the persecution and rejection of prophets, or the mysterious figure of the suffering servant of Isa 52-53. The developing martyr tradition as evidenced in 2 and 4 Macc, and the apocalyptic expectations of vindication through suffering have all been suggested as possible ways in which Paul’s theology and proclamation was influenced by his tradition.

b) Greco-Roman context

In his seminal work on the atonement Hengel emphasized the need to look beyond Old Testament traditions to understand Paul’s thought and examined the ways in which Greeks and Romans could have understood the Christian proclamation of Jesus’ death. Paul’s non-Jewish contemporaries could draw on the apotheosis of the dying hero to understand Jesus’ death and subsequent exaltation. Other traditions that were readily accessible were those of heroes being honoured for having died for their city or friends, or voluntary deaths for spiritual ends such as the law or truth. Death as an atoning sacrifice was a concept also found among Greeks and Romans. Seeley has proposed that both the martyr literature of 2 and 4 Maccabees, and Paul’s proclamation of Jesus’ death, have been shaped by the concept of the noble death with its leading motifs of obedience, combat metaphors, overcoming physical vulnerability and the ancillary use of sacrificial language.

Paul’s understanding of his own suffering, and that of his communities, has been examined in the light of parallels found in Hellenistic moralists such as Epictetus and Seneca. Paul catalogues his afflictions in Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10 and there are similarities in the ways in which Epictetus Diss. 3.12.10; 4.8.31, Seneca Ep. Mor. 13:1-3; and Dio Chrysostom Diss 3.3 speak of hardship as a test of character.

c) Fracture

While 2nd Temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman world had ways and means of coming to terms with suffering and death the crucifixion of Jesus remained a scandal, and an affront to their ideas of nobility and religion. Hengel observed: “this was not the death of a hero from ancient times, suffused in the glow of religion, but that of a Jewish craftsman of the most recent past, executed as a criminal, with whom the whole present and future salvation of all men was linked.” This underscores that it was not only the manner of Jesus’ death but the extravagant claims that were made about its significance that set Paul on a collision course with his contemporaries. More recently Harrisville has done well to emphasize the manner in which Paul is both indebted to the various interpretative models that were available while noting the necessary fracture that occurred. The scandal of the cross created a discontinuity between the New Testament writers and their religious environment – be that Jewish or Hellenistic. He speaks of Paul using a dialectic of continuity and contrast as a consequence of his encounter with the crucified Messiah.

Jesus death as a sacrifice addressing the problem of a wounded and sinful humanity

Within Paul’s letters the language of sacrifice is utilised in reference to Jesus’ death in a number of ways: as a sacrifice of atonement (Rom 3:25), as a sin offering (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21), Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7), first fruits (1 Cor 15:20,23), and as establishing a new covenant in his blood (1 Cor 11:25-26).

The use of sacrificial language is both challenging and disturbing for contemporary readers. It conjures up images of an angry vengeful God who could only be placated by the death of his Son. This
would have been equally shocking and disturbing for Paul’s contemporaries because human sacrifice was not demanded or condoned by Judaism, the imperial cult of Rome, or Greco-Roman religions. Some modern interpreters ask whether sacrificial language should continue to be used in speaking of the death of Jesus since it runs the risk of establishing and legitimating a model for abusive behaviour, or glorifying suffering in an inappropriate manner. These are genuine concerns, and they pose challenges regarding the interpretation and continued use of this element in Paul’s thought. However, nothing is surer than that Paul used the metaphor of sacrifice as a means of speaking of God’s love, and as a paradigm for self-giving and loving service (Phil 2:1-5), where the other was respected because they are a brother or sister for whom Christ died (1 Cor 8:11; Rom 14:15).

After the death and resurrection of Jesus early Christians such as Paul looked for language to communicate to their contemporaries the deeper meaning of these events. How could this scandalous death be part of God’s saving plan? Given that there was no way to gloss over the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion as a shameful and violent death the task that confronted them was that of unpacking what they had come to see as the positive consequences for humanity that flowed from it. It is precisely here that the language of sacrifice and atonement makes its contribution.

The language of sacrifice so powerfully present in the letters of Paul finds its origin not so much in his creativity, considerable as it was, as in the early tradition he received where Jesus is spoken of as having died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 5:10; Rom 5:6; 2 Cor 5:14). From the beginnings of the Christian movement there was a deep conviction that Jesus’ death addressed the most critical issue of all, namely, that of addressing the problem of sin and its consequences. The hidden wisdom of the cross was that this offensive and shameful death was healing the wounds of sin and enabling humanity to be in a renewed covenantal relationship with God. Embedded early in the Christian tradition that Paul had received was that the cup that Jesus shared in his final meal with his disciples was to be remembered as “a new covenant in my blood”(1 Cor 11:25).

The letters of Paul do not focus at length on Jesus’ experience of suffering, though it is presumed and becomes the paradigm for life in community (Phil 2:6-8). The brutality and shame of the crucifixion is clearly recognized though apart from 1 Thess 2:14-15 there is little attention paid to who is deemed to be responsible for his execution. The reason for this lies in the fact that the death of Jesus is understood both theologically and christologically. It is primarily an act of love on the part of both God and Jesus. God’s generosity is seen in that he does not withhold his own Son (Rom 8:32), and Paul speaks of Jesus death as a sign of his self-giving love (Gal 2:20), taking on our human condition and becoming poor even though he was rich (2 Cor 8:9). These statements beautifully highlight that the death of Jesus is to be understood in the context of God’s loving and hidden purpose.

At the heart of Paul’s narrative of God’s saving history is the perception of the desperate plight of humanity - a humanity that is sundered from itself and God, enslaved to sin and largely powerless to become what it was created to be. Created in God’s image humanity has lost it way and both Jews and Gentiles live in a world of wounded and broken relationships. It is this plight of humanity that the death of Jesus so powerfully addresses. Both Jews and Gentiles have sinned but now have the opportunity to begin again. This new beginning comes through the gracious gift of redemption that God offers in the atoning and sacrificial death of Jesus (Rom 3:21-26).

a) The sacrificial system in the Old Testament

Sacrifice was a normal part of the ritual life of Judaism, with its locus of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, and for the Greco-Roman world with its many deities and cults. The procedures and rituals of the sacrificial system of the post-exilic community of Israel were clearly outlined in Leviticus 1-7. What is much less clear is determining how the various kinds of sacrifices were understood to function and this is further complicated by the fact that the notions of atonement, communion and self-gift were not mutually exclusive and could be combined. The origins and justification for the system remain obscure. As Tuckett observes “Judaism provided no explicit rationale for sacrifice: it was simply a God-given way of dealing with sin.” Sacrifices were not understood to function in some mechanical fashion that somehow by-passed or minimised the sovereignty of God. It was not as though God was coerced into forgiveness simply because a sacrifice had been offered. The critiques of sacrifices in the Old Testament clearly indicate that if they were offered without the appropriate attitude of sincere repentance they were neither acceptable or effective (Joel 2:12-14; Jer 6:20; Isa 1:10-20; 58:3-8; Amos 5:21-23; Micah 6:6-9; Ps 51:17; Prov 21:3).
Not all sacrifices were for sin, nor were they the only means used to address the problem of sin. Sacrifices could be burnt offerings, peace offerings, purification offerings, or offerings for the purpose of reparation. During the exile other ways of dealing with sin had to be developed such as penitential prayer, repentance and acts of mercy. This was largely due to the fact that there was no access to the Temple and to the altar of sacrifice. This would continue to be an issue for the diaspora communities, and subsequently for rabbinic Judaism in its development after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

b) Disentangling Paul from subsequent models of atonement

How Paul understood Jesus’ death as atoning has been the subject of intense study and examination over the centuries. It is both helpful and necessary to disentangle Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ death from the theories of atonement that have developed within the Christian tradition over the centuries such as Christus Victor (Irenaeus), satisfaction (Anselm), moral influence (Abelard) and penal substitution (Hodge). Paul’s use of the language of atonement needs to be appreciated within its own interpretative context, namely that of 2nd Temple Judaism, and that of the Greco-Roman world of the first century. That Judaism was not completely clear as to how sacrifices achieved their aim gave Paul a creative space in which he could place the death of Jesus and interpret it as salvific, redeeming and atoning. It was not a matter of denying that there were other means by which atonement could be attained as much as claiming that Jesus’ death was the means by which God had unexpectedly and graciously achieved it for a fallen humanity.

Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ death as atoning comes clearly into relief in Rom 5:21-26 where Jesus is referred as a hilastērion that God has put forward in Jesus’ blood. Three alternatives have been proposed for the translation of hilastērion: propitiation (appeasing God’s wrath), expiation (obliterating sin), and the mercy seat (kapporeth) that resided in the Holy of Holies (Lev 16:2,13-15).

Debate has generally focussed on whether hilastērion should be interpreted as propitiary or expiatory. One of the weaknesses in proposing that God is being propitiated (appeased) is that it is God who is the subject who puts Jesus forward. Proponents of the propitiatory effect of Jesus’ death explain it in terms of it vindicating God’s righteousness and satisfying God’s wrath. Expiation is seen by others to be the intended meaning because what is at issue is God’s removal, through Christ, of the sinfulness that is blocking the relationship. Cousar acknowledges that one of the difficulties in interpreting Rom 3:25 is that both propitiation and expiation are in view with propitiation being a secondary result rather than a primary cause. Such a distinction is helpful since it points the interpreter towards the possibility that in speaking of Jesus as hilastērion Paul’s intention may be to allow the term to resonate on all three levels - to see Jesus appeasing God’s wrath, removing sin, and that Jesus as the mercy seat, is the locus of this saving activity.

In Rom 8:3 and 2 Cor 5:21 Jesus’ death is interpreted as a “sin offering” using the customary terminology found in the LXX translation of rituals for the expiation of sin (cf. Lev 9:2; 14:31; Ps 39:7). In both these texts it is clear that the death of Jesus is interpreted as part of God’s plan since God sends Jesus to deal with sin so that humanity might be brought into right relationship with God. That Paul sees Jesus’ death as God’s way of dealing with sin is clear, determining with precision in what ways Jesus’ death contributes to this saving activity of God continues to be the subject of debate. Brondos has argued vigorously against any presentation of Paul’s appreciation of the death of Jesus having any effects in itself. In presenting this line of thought he is not suggesting that Jesus’ death is not salvific and redemptive, rather that care needs to be taken to avoid the risk of dislodging the death of Jesus from the larger narrative of his life, death and resurrection as though redemption was only won on the cross. While Brondos’ point that caution needs to be taken is well made most interpreters of Paul would disagree with the conclusion that Paul sees the death of Jesus as ineffective it itself. Part of the difficulty in interpreting these dense passages is that Paul is content to claim that Jesus is a sin-offering rather than argue how that might be. Given that the Judaism that formed Paul’s understanding of sacrifice did not articulate how sacrifices were efficacious it is not surprising that neither does Paul.

As a sin-offering and an atoning sacrifice Jesus’ death has elements of representation and substitution. Given that Paul will claim that “Jesus died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14) it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the death of Jesus is in some sense to be appreciated both as
substitute and representative. On one hand Jesus substitutes for humanity before God and God’s justice, on the other hand Jesus substitutes for God in the face of human sin. Because the substitution is working in both directions Cousar agrees with Hooker’s suggestion that the language of interchange provides a more adequate means describing Paul’s thought.24

c) The problem posed by the language of divine wrath.

Divine wrath in the face of sin is an element of Paul’s thought and it is often proves to be problematic since it looks as though it negates any language Paul might use to speak of the death of Jesus as an act of love on the part of God.25 The concept of the wrath of God is for Paul a way of articulating God’s attitude to sin and it is used apocalyptically. 1 Thess 1:10 speaks of Jesus as freeing us from “the wrath that is coming.” At its heart is the understanding that God is at work to bring about not only judgment, but a reversal of the plight of humanity due to sin. It is true that in Rom 1:18 God’s wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness, and that God’s righteous judgment will be revealed on the day of wrath (Rom 2:5). Two dimensions need to be appreciated here, first, that God’s wrath is not so much a feeling as much as God’s response to sin and a commitment to remove it, and second, that this is manifested by leaving humanity to its own devices as a consequence of its unfaithfulness. If Paul had no more to say on the matter God’s wrath could be understood primarily negatively. However, this commitment of God to remove sin will find its expression not in anger, but an immensely generous act of love. It is in the midst of the powerlessness of humanity to free itself from the clutches of the power of sin that God acts, not as judge but as saviour. In Rom 8:32 God does not withhold his own Son, but gives him up for us all and God’s intervention is a sign of grace because “while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”(Rom 5:8)

Paul and the eschatological significance of the death of Jesus

It has been long recognised that Paul interprets the death and resurrection of Jesus within the context of 2nd Temple expectations for the denouement of human history expected to accompany the advent of the Messiah. Now the day of the Lord familiar in prophetic and contemporary Jewish apocalyptic literature is identified as the day of Jesus’ return to judge the living and the dead (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Thess 5:2, Rom 2:5,16). The Pauline communities are consistently urged to be prepared and blameless as they wait for the Lord’s return (1Thess 3:13; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:8; Phil 1:10).

The death of Jesus necessitated a radical reconfiguring of traditional expectations of the Messiah, their hopes for God’s intervention, and the timeline for the longed-for culmination of history.26 In the eyes of his contemporaries the death of Jesus was seen as anything but the vindication of his messianic claims. His brutal death provided ample proof that Rome’s imperial power had once again been exercised, and that anyone who followed such a deluded fool could expect a similar response if Rome’s power was in any way challenged or opposed. It is precisely in the face of these claims that Paul makes a counter claim of his own – that Jesus’ death and resurrection manifests God wisdom and power (1 Cor 1:24). Paul recognizes that the outworking of God’s saving plan is a mystery and a paradox that he defines as the hidden wisdom of the cross. It is a mystery long kept secret (Rom 16:25), and Christians who live in this time on whom the end of the ages have come (1 Cor 10:11) are now able to finally appreciate God’s wise plan which God had decreed before the ages (1 Cor 2:6 cf. Eph 3:9, Col 1:26).

Jesus’ death is understood as the means of obtaining freedom from sin and this present evil age (Gal 1:4) as the world continues to groan in the process of bringing the new creation to birth (Rom 8:18-25). What had been lost by the Old Adam has now been regained in Jesus the new Adam (Rom 5:14-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22). For Christians caught between the death and resurrection of Jesus, and living in the hope in his ultimate return there are battles to be fought and challenges to be faced. In 2 Thess 3:3 the community is encouraged to face the onslaught that comes from the evil one. Even Paul’s own ministry is dogged by this opposition (1 Thess 2:18; 2 Cor 2:11), and his understanding of the mysterious and undefined ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2 Cor 12:7) is that it is a messenger of Satan.

Despite the opposition that Paul and his communities experienced there is an underlying sense of hope as the new creation painfully comes to birth. Paul urges his communities to see the gift of the
Spirit is already a guarantee and a sign that God’s plan will be accomplished (2 Cor 5:5). Texts such as the hymn of Phil 2:6-11 profess that ultimately every knee in heaven, earth or under the earth will bend acknowledging Jesus’ lordship. At that time Jesus will hand over the kingdom to the Father having destroyed every ruler, authority and power (1 Cor 15:24 cf. Eph 6:12; Col 2:10).

The relationship between the cross and what has been inaugurated by means of the resurrection is one that has been debated. Käsemann has strongly argued that the relationship is not that they are simply links in a chain. While there are texts that might lead to the understanding of the risen Christ being the ground of salvation (Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 6:14; II Cor 4:14; I Thess 1:10) he contends that the interpreter or Paul needs to beware of falling into the trap of emptying the cross its power, and thereby its central place in Paul’s theology. The cross is not only the signature of the one who is risen, as Käsemann suggests, it marks the life of all those who believe in him. Christians are baptised into the death of Jesus (Rom 6:3) and 1 Cor 11:26 makes it clear that the eucharist celebrates the new covenant inaugurated in his blood, and proclaims his death until he comes. Christians are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6:1-11). The resurrection vindicates Jesus but the cross is never emptied of its power in the thought of Paul. It is on the cross that the gift is given, and faith is always based on the one who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).

**Paul’s participation in the death of Christ.**

How did Paul understand his own apostolic experience and its relationship to the death and resurrection of Jesus? That the death of Jesus was the content of Paul’s preaching is evident in 1 Cor 1:23 and 2:2. Proclaiming the message of the cross was inherently dangerous for Paul, his co-workers and his communities (Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10). Paul understood that the sufferings experienced were a direct consequence of his proclamation of the crucified one.

The work of Harrisville has highlighted that while there are material parallels with contemporary Stoic and Cynic texts addressing how to confront suffering nobly Paul goes well beyond their motivation of looking for the adulation of others. Enduring suffering was not simply a testimony to the endurance of the believer, and the transcendence of the human spirit in the face of the vicissitudes and perils of apostolic life. This does not mean, however, that Paul’s audience were not intended to see his endurance in suffering as a sign of his authenticity as a teacher, guide and apostle. On the contrary, they proclaimed to the world the power of the cross, and were meant to provide a model for the communities to follow as they confronted the inevitable opposition and suspicion that accompanied the proclamation of the crucified Jesus.

The connection between the cross as content of proclamation and point of participation is made patently clear in Gal 6:14: “may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Paul talks about being crucified to the world and Phil 3:8 helps to articulate something of the meaning of this confronting phrase when he speaks of being prepared to undergo of the loss of all things if only he can gain Christ. His life has been radically changed, so much so that he not only identifies with the message he proclaims, but he becomes a part of the saving story that continues to flow into the world by means of the death of Jesus.

A physical sign of this is that he carries the marks of Christ on his body (Gal 6:17). They are a powerful testimony to the authenticity of his mission, message and integrity as an apostle. It is not a misguided and inappropriate attempt to emulate Jesus in his death, but a considered and passionate appropriation of Jesus’ own motivation, that is, putting his own life at risk so that others can live: “death is at work in us but life in you” (2 Cor 4:12). The life of Christ alluded to here is as liberating as it is cruciform. His experience of suffering for the sake of the Gospel is spoken of as the sufferings of Christ (2 Cor 1:5) and is interpreted as a means by which he shares in these sufferings becoming like him in his death (Phil 3:10).

It is important to note that Paul distinguishes between the marks of Christ that he carried as a consequence of preaching the Gospel and having to live with the ‘thorn in the flesh’ referred to in 2 Cor 12:8-9. Paul attests to the fact that he did not seek suffering and that he actively pleaded on multiple occasions that the thorn be removed because he experienced it as an obstacle to his mission of proclaiming the message of Jesus. The precise nature of the ailment, disability or condition will
continue to be shrouded in mystery but the challenge that Paul confronted is clear - that of coming to terms with the paradox of God’s power being made evident in the midst of Paul’s weakness and limitation rather than despite it. That the thorn in the flesh is described as a messenger of Satan also indicates that Paul’s apostolic sufferings are interpreted in an eschatological context, that is, as part of the larger tableau of the struggles that will continue till the Lord’s return. In the meantime there is a treasure to be carried in earthenware vessels that enables Paul and his communities to endure in the midst of opposition and persecution (2 Cor 4:7-11).

Christian participation in the death of Christ

Baptism: immersion in the death of Jesus

Baptism immerses the Christian into the death of Jesus Rom 6:3 where the old self “was crucified with him” (Rom 6:6). The self-sacrificing act of obedience to God shown in Jesus’ own humility becomes the paradigm for the life and ethics of the believing community.31 In Phil 2:3-8 the community is called to regard others as better than themselves, and to look to the interests of others by having the same mind as Christ who became obedient to the point of death.

Having been clothed in Christ (Gal 3:27) the believer is invited into a new creation that is characterised by radically changed relationships where conventional divisions of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, woman and man are now to be recast. Conventions such as circumcision are now deemed to be irrelevant in the context of a new creation (Gal 6:15). Within the community everyone is now challenged to see everyone else as a brother or sister for whom Christ died (1 Cor 8:11). The consequences of this new vision of the other are far reaching, and this calls the community to a love and service that is cruciform. Now if one member suffers, all members suffer together with it, if one member is honoured all rejoice together with them (1 Cor 12:26; 2 Cor 7:3). Building on the model of Jesus who became poor so that we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9) communities are called to look beyond themselves and reach out to other communities in need (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:25-28).

The letters of Paul attest to the difficulties confronted by these fledgling communities as they struggled to leave the old creation with its attitudes and behaviours behind. Attitudes that were acceptable in a world of honour and shame had to be replaced by ones in which the only acceptable competition was that of outdoing one another in showing honour (Rom 12:10). It is always instructive to bear in mind that the context for Paul’s excursus on love in 1 Cor 13 was that of a Corinthian community that was divided. The proclamation that love bears, believes, hopes and endures all things (1Cor 13:7) was needed precisely because the community was still enmeshed in the old creation, and that the ritual of baptism needed to be further actualised within the community. The process of crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:24) was still far from complete.

Suffering with Christ

The community is invited to live within the profound tension that while the death of Jesus is reconciling the world and humanity (Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:18-19), the world is still anything but reconciled. Christians must live in a world divided, in a world where the powers of sin and death are still at work and where Christians will necessarily be caught up in that struggle of bringing the new creation to birth. Just as Paul suffers for the sake of the Gospel the communities must come to terms with the fact that rejection, suffering, misunderstanding and persecution may all be consequences of their faith in the crucified one. They have the privilege of not only believing but suffering for him as well (Phil 1:29). As Christ died for our sins and now the Christian will suffer for him. The suffering they experience is understood as part of the process of creation now coming to birth, the revelation of God’s hidden wisdom of the cross, and the revealing of the children of God (Rom 8:22). Cousar sums up Romans 8 well in highlighting how the chapter lays out the pattern of suffering for the people of God, namely, suffering with Christ (Rom 8:17), identifying with suffering humanity (Rom 8:17-27), and living in a place of vulnerability and martyrdom (Rom 8:35-36).32

Called to hope, suffer and endure
The breaking of the bread in community proclaims the death of Jesus till he comes. There is a new covenant now and the community are formed in and by it (1 Cor 11:25). Gathering to break the bread calls the community to live a life of love in the context of a broken world that will reject them as it rejected Jesus. Cousar\(^3\) rightly points out the death of Jesus proclaimed in the eucharistic celebration characterizes the community, setting it apart as a distinctive people, and continues to shape its memory. The proclamation of Jesus’ death until he comes also provides necessary hope to endure in the present while projecting the community towards the future. In this context the Spirit plays a critical role as a pledge of God’s faithfulness to the covenant and a source of encouragement (2 Cor 5:5). When the community is called to rejoice in its hope and be patient in its suffering (Rom 12:12) there is no glorifying of suffering in itself but an honest recognition of the means by which Christians can best live in that meantime between the death of Jesus and the culmination of history at his return.

“ Therein lie the radical experience and perspective of Paul: making a connection between faith and death, between believing and dying. Corresponding to the obedient faithfulness of Christ, which was expressed in death, the believer’s faith – the cornerstone of the believer’s experience – is, from the beginning to end, a liberating, life-giving “death”, a response to God that Paul calls “ the obedience of faith”(Rom. 1:5;16:26).”\(^3\)

\(^3\) Tom Wright, Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision (SPCK 2009), 74-75, 78-79 see also John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995),115-118.
\(^6\) David Seeley, The Noble Death (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990)
\(^7\) Hengel, The Atonement, 31.
\(^9\) Harrisville, Fracture, 106.
\(^10\) Charles B. Cousar, “Paul and the death of Jesus” Interpretation (1998): 38, Green and Baker, Recovering the scandal of the cross, 172-183 explore the work of Kathleen Darby Ray and other feminist theologians in their critique of the contribution of traditional atonement language as sanctioning domestic violence.
16 Ibid., 49.
18 Green and Baker, *Recovering the scandal of the cross*, 116-152 provide an accessible and helpful history and assessment of these theories. See also Brondos, *Paul on the cross*, 1-10 and Cousar, *A theology of the cross*, 82-87.
21 Cousar, *A theology of the cross*, 64.
23 Brondos, *Paul on the cross*, viii-xii
26 Harrisville, *Fracture*, describes this as “the warping of the apocalyptic perspective to the finality and universality of a historical event, fractures the entire framework.” 80.
28 Ibid., 56.
32 Cousar, *A theology of the cross*, 174
33 Cousar, *A theology of the cross*, 135

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