

The Mystery of the Atonement

I came back from my theology class eager to chat with my colleague about the delightful new things I was learning. He burst my bubble by pointing out that my discoveries were the stuff of common knowledge he'd learned years before.

It is evident that we don't all learn the same things at the same time or in the same ways. In fact, we don't all make the same sense of the things that we do learn in common. And that's part of the fun. Our different levels of knowledge and ways of processing what we know give us opportunities to engage, struggle with, encourage, and teach each other!

This issue of *Circuit Rider* is not mostly about you the pastor. Rather, we pray the content will prove to be a catalyst for your work of teaching, preaching, and spiritual leadership. We trust you will find useful "tools" as you connect and pray with the people you serve.

You may find in these pages nuanced insights that give a fresh angle of vision for encountering the mystery of the Atonement. No doubt you will judge parts of what you read to be conventional and broadly known. It is also likely that one or more of the contributors will bump up against a conviction that you hold dear, and you will debate with them as you test, ratify, or retool your own thinking.

You might be dubious about spending much time in the rarefied realm of theological inquiry about the Atonement. But you know that people are searching for truth, meaning, and a deeper more coherent understanding of the significance of the Christian faith. Surely the "why and therefores" that are to be grasped from the horrific death of God's own son are critical elements for that discovery. And just as surely, pastors play a unique and important teaching role in guiding people in their search.

Dr. Joel Green, a gifted United Methodist scholar, teacher answered our invitation to draw together articles on this theme. He has done an outstanding job of using this limited space to provide a wealth of material.

The understanding of the Atonement most familiar in North America is probably the penal substitutionary theory (*see p. 28.*) Most of our contributors add a distinction, amplification, or less familiar way of comprehending the event. We prayerfully hope you will find in their work food for your journey and resources for your ministry.



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