

MEFC Community Group Study Guide

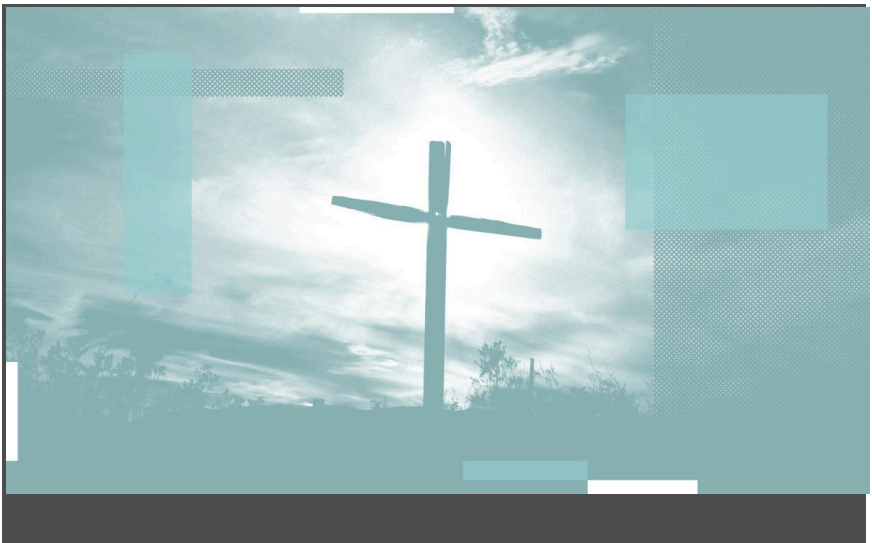
For the week of April 20th-26th

Dear MEFC Family,

This week, we have the privilege to reflect on and discuss a meditation on the meaning of Christ's cross. Written by Pastor John Biegel, a friend who pastors an EFCA congregation just outside of Washington D.C., this article ties together the suffering of Good Friday and the glory of Easter Sunday through three lenses of the crucifixion. Take some time this week to look back on the events of Holy Week on your own, with your family, or alongside your community group as you read through this thought-provoking message on the multifaceted cross-work of Christ.

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Dave



The Cross as Altar, Pulpit and Throne

What did the cross achieve? So asks J. I. Packer in his seminal reflection on the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a question that is well worth our reflection, especially as we approach Good Friday.

Like Christmas and Easter, Good Friday (or in the case of the church I pastor, [Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church](#) (EFCA), Maundy Thursday) can sometimes be a challenge for the pastor. Our preaching can begin to feel, well, *redundant*. Of course, I don't mean the Word of God is stripped of its power, or that preaching the same things to the same people from the same texts is without benefit.

Still, we should labor to think of ways to impress the riches and beauty of the gospel on our hearers in fresh, affecting ways. We “love to hear the old, old story,” but sometimes we need to sing the same words with a different melody, reintroducing its wonders.

One way that I have thought about reflecting on and preaching the word of the cross with such a different melody is to view it through the lens of Christ's three-fold office of Prophet, Priest and King. This framework of the three-fold office is a biblical and theological grid that Christians have used for centuries to understand the work of Jesus as the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5).

At the center of that mediatorial work is the death of the Mediator. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, *who gave himself as a ransom for all.*” The heart of the necessary mediation between God and humanity is the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we may be unintentionally accustomed to truncate the significance of the cross. If we're not careful, we may adopt a quasi-modalistic view of Christ and His offices—thinking that Christ fulfills the roles of Prophet, Priest and King successively in the stages of His life. In His ministry, He is the Prophet teaching and proclaiming; on the cross, He is the Priest offering and sacrificing; and in His resurrection and exaltation, He is the King reigning and ruling. With such an understanding, preaching the cross becomes almost exclusively about Christ's work as our Great High Priest. And while that is no doubt a glorious truth, it is not the only truth about what the cross achieved.

Just as God is not at one point Father, then another point Son and yet another Holy Spirit, so the Lord Jesus is not merely at one point Prophet, then at another Priest and at yet another King. He carries out these offices in the entirety of His ministry, both in His humiliation and His exaltation—that is, before, during, and after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. That means that on the cross, Christ is carrying out His roles of Prophet, Priest and King.

I. Christ is our priest, and the cross is His altar

Christ is our great High Priest, and the cross is the altar on which He gives himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Heb 10:11), “securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12), offering His own blood to take away sins, (Heb 10:12), to “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14), and to perfect for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14). When we preach Christ is the once-for-all, full-sufficient atoning sacrifice for sins, the One whose blood cleanses us from guilt and whose death bears the wrath of God in our stead, we are preaching Christ as our Priest and the cross as His altar.

As Leo the Great (c. 400-461) once wrote, “What sacrifice was ever more hallowed than that which the true High Priest placed upon the altar of the cross by the [offering] of His own flesh?”

But if Christ is also our Prophet and our King, then the cross is not merely His *altar*, it is also His *pulpit* and His *throne*. It is these two images that I want to focus on, considering we may be less prone to consider them in thinking of the glorious achievements of the cross. It is my hope that these reflections will deepen and enrich our understanding and appreciation for what the cross has achieved.

II. Christ is our prophet, and the cross is His pulpit

We may be accustomed to think of Jesus's teaching surrounding all that He "began to do and teach" prior to His crucifixion (Acts 1:1-2). Or perhaps we also think of Jesus's prophetic ministry as extending to all He continued to do and teach by His Spirit after His ascension as we see through Acts and beyond. But do we consider the crucifixion as a focal point of Jesus's work as Prophet?

Jesus did not cease to be our great Prophet when He was crucified. He did not leave behind His prophetic mantle to take up His priestly robe. In fact, the cross was a climactic moment in His prophetic ministry. The cross was His pulpit, the crucifixion His greatest sermon.

First, Jesus's teaching ministry did not stop when He was lifted up to die. We could look at the so-called "seven words" from the cross, the [last sayings of Jesus](#) before His death as an example of His ongoing prophetic role. Note especially His quotation of Psalm 22 in the cry of dereliction—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" From the cross, amidst His agony and anguish, He was teaching that Psalm 22 was coming to fulfillment in Him, which meant both suffering and ultimate vindication.

But the cross was not only the place from which Christ our Prophet preached with His words. The crucifixion of the Son of God was itself divine revelation, a living sermon where God revealed the identity of His Son, the heinous wickedness and cost of sin and the depth of His love for sinners.

a.) The cross as the revelation of Jesus's identity

The cross is a revelation of the identity of Jesus as God's Son. Perhaps we think primarily of the resurrection as the key point at which Jesus is revealed as God's Son (cf. Rom 1:4; Rom 4:25). While the resurrection does indeed do this, Jesus's true identity as the Son of God is revealed and recognized even on the cross. In Mark's Gospel, the final confession of Jesus's identity is found not in the mouth of a disciple but on the lips of the Roman centurion who oversaw His crucifixion, and who, when he "saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

b.) The cross as the revelation of the wickedness and cost of sin

The cross is also a revelation of the wicked depths of sin and the terrible cost of its just penalty. The author of Hebrews reminds us that while "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins," the sacrifices stipulated in God's Law were not therefore meaningless (Heb 10:4). Rather "in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year" (Heb 10:3). This is not only a reminder of sin's existence and guilt, but a reminder of how wicked and destructive sin truly is.

If it was necessary for God the Son to humble Himself to the point of death on cross to satisfy the justice of God's law and free us from sin, if our justification could be achieved in no other way, what must that mean about the perfect holiness of God's law and justice? What must it mean about the incredible wickedness of our sin (cf. Gal 2:21)?

c.) The cross as the revelation of the love of God for sinners

More than that, the cross is also the revelation of the incalculable love of God for sinners. Augustine is supposed to have said that “the cross was a pulpit in which Christ preached his love to the world.” Whether the great theologian said it or not, it certainly reflects the teaching of Scripture.

When the apostles want us to consider the love of God, what do they bring forward as “exhibit A”? It is not what we might expect, or what we might pick—perhaps Jesus washing the disciples' feet or calling the children to Himself or His compassion on the harassed and helpless (all of which are wonderful and true expressions of the Lord's character). But it is not the many examples of love from His earthly ministry that are primary—it is the cross.

- “God so *loved* the world *that he gave his only Son*” (John 3:16).
- “Greater *love* has no one than this, that someone *lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13).
- “God shows his *love* for us in that while we were still sinners, *Christ died for us*” (Rom 5:6).
- “I live by faith in the Son of God who *loved* me and *gave himself for me*” (Gal 2:20).
- “By this we know *love*, that *he laid down his life for us*” (1 John 3:16).
- “In this is *love*, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and *sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:10).

When we meditate on and preach Christ crucified, we must remember not only what the cross accomplishes, but what the cross *reveals*. “Christ was our Prophet on the cross,” write Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, “preaching by His wounds and blood.”

III. Christ is our king, and the cross is His throne

We may be accustomed to think of Jesus's reign as King principally in terms of His resurrection, ascension and exaltation. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, He is seated at the right hand of God, now reigning and ruling over all creation and building His Church as the royal proclamation of His grace is published throughout the world. Or perhaps we might extend our thinking of Jesus's kingship back into His earthly ministry, beginning with the wise men who came seeking to worship Him "who was born King of the Jews" (Matt 2:2), and continuing as Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God had come near in Him, demonstrating His kingly authority in His power of sickness, demons and death.

But if there is a place where we are not prone to think of Jesus as King, it is the cross. His exalted and victorious reign is reserved, in our minds at least, for the resurrection and after.

Yet the way that the Gospels present it, the crucifixion is not a temporary, if planned interruption in Christ's reign as King. The crucifixion was not only Jesus's condemnation, it was also His coronation. The cross was not an obstacle to His victorious reign—it's how He conquers and reigns.

The Gospel of Mark is especially worth considering on this point.

In Mark 8, the disciples, led by Peter, confess their belief that Jesus is Christ—the promised King. It is at this point that Jesus begins to teach the disciples that He, the King, must "suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). A few chapters later, Jesus reminds them that His reign as King will not look like the Gentile rulers, for "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

When He enters Jerusalem, He does in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, “Behold, your king is coming to you...humble and mounted on a donkey,” receiving royal acclamation: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” (Mark 11:9-10). It seemed that He was entering the city for His coronation and enthronement as God’s King and Messiah—something that His opponents could not allow to stand; so they hatched a plot to put Him to death.

So rather than a coronation, this announcement of His royal identity earns Him a crucifixion. And yet, this crucifixion is *like* a coronation—He is crowned with a crown of thorns; they hail Him as “the King of the Jews” and kneel before Him in homage; and they dress Him with an imperial purple robe—all done in mockery but cements the truth—this is, indeed, the King.

It is not an accident that Jesus is only directly referred to as a King six times in Mark’s Gospel, all clustered in chapter 15 around the crucifixion. The discussion between Pilate and the Jews about the fate of Jesus centers around the accusation that Jesus has made Himself out to be a king.

Pilate wrote better than He knew when He wrote the *titulus* nailed to the cross “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26). The Roman soldiers did better than they knew when they crowned Jesus with a crown of thorns. The Jewish leaders spoke better than they knew when they mockingly called him “the Christ, the King of Israel.” What each of them had done in derision, we now see as God’s revelation. They had intended to mock Jesus, but in crucifying Him they had acclaimed, crowned and enthroned Him as King.

Just as Psalm 2 promised, God says, “I have set his King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps 2:6). But rather than taking His seat upon a throne, He is lifted up on a cross—and yet it is the cross that is His throne—the place from which His kingly reign will be established.

The flow of Mark’s Gospel up to Jerusalem and ultimately to Golgotha is presented as if it is a coronation—because, paradoxically, it is.

The cross was the throne by which Christ the King conquered Satan, sin and death on our behalf. It was “through death” that He would “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb 2:14-15). It is through the cross that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:15). And this triumphant reign is not simply established after the shame of the cross—it is mysteriously established on and by means of the cross.

As John Calvin eloquently put it, “There is no tribunal so magnificent, no throne so stately, no show of triumph so distinguished, no chariot so elevated, as the gibbet on which Christ has subdued death and the devil.”⁵

Reflecting on the cross as pulpit, altar and throne

Viewing the cross-work of Christ through the lens of the three-fold office of Prophet, Priest and King has the effect of expanding our understanding of and preaching of the cross. We all lean towards aspects of the work of Christ.

For example, I am accustomed to think of Christ’s suffering principally in priestly terms of atonement. It would seem that the great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge did the same thing—his *Systematic Theology* devotes a mere two pages to Christ’s prophetic office and 13 to his kingship, compared to a whopping 131 regarding Christ’s priestly work. Achieving a more biblical balance, one that properly reflects the expansive scope of Christ’s work, requires intentionality.

As you prepare to meditate on and perhaps, if you're a pastor, preach on the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ this Passion Week, consider what your own predisposition might be. Are these aspects of Christ's cross that you have overlooked? Are you like me, accustomed to think of the cross primarily in terms of Christ's priestly work? Perhaps you, or those whom you serve, would benefit from reflecting on the cross not only in terms of Christ's priesthood, but also through the lens of Christ's prophetic and kingly roles.



John Biegel

John Biegel serves as the lead pastor at Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church in Annandale, Virginia. He previously served as an associate pastor at Riverstone Church (EFCA) from 2013–2022. He also serves on the EFCA Board of Ministerial Standing. John and his wife, Michelle, live in northern Virginia with their three elementary-age children.