
Speakers explored how the cross of Christ and God’s love come together to save humanity and how we can embody that good news in cities, overseas and in our Middle American churches.

Rosedale faculty member Reuben Sairs opened the symposium by discussing atonement and current critiques of penal substitution, considered by some to be “the doctrinal explanation that ate all the other explanations for breakfast.”

It is not, said Sairs, “merely a tidal wave of ignorance and poor taste that made penal substitution a dominant, though never exclusive, model or metaphor.” The idea of Jesus as a sacrifice is a key element in penal substitution and in Scripture. While eliminating crude and “less carefully formulated statements about penal substitution is a timely call,” eliminating the doctrine itself “is not going to work.”

Sairs asked whether this effort to get rid of one of the central understandings of the atonement signals “a fairly significant shift in soteriology.” In this new approach, why does Jesus die? “This leads, as I see it, to a different take on the Christian faith than most evangelicals will be able to own.”

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RBC faculty member Reuben Sairs led a round-table discussion exploring atonement theology. “There are different ideas as to why penal substitutionary atonement finds itself under attack today. I don’t think we should take offense. I think we should answer kindly, as best we can.”

Conrad Showalter, pastor of Siloam Fellowship in Goshen, Ind., addressed pastoral issues surrounding salvation in a “churched community” with “the full range of the spectrum of the descendants of Anabaptism.”

In this environment, it is not unusual to see people “go through a pattern or ritual of faith but never meet Jesus,” he said. Another problem he sees is the tendency of young people who’ve grown up Amish to see salvation as “a result of ‘turning my life around’ and joining church.” Showalter stressed the need to “work pastorally to hold salvation and obedience together.”

Another challenge, he said, is “how to maintain the unity of the Spirit when political perspectives differ.” When people, left and right, “are reading Scripture out of political party loyalty” the church suffers “from confusion of political perspective and spiritual perspective.” Showalter said he is committed “to preach the Word of God no matter who, or what political party, is offended by its truth.”

On Friday evening Lawrence Chiles, bishop of Koinonia Fellowship of Churches, spoke on urban ministry, which he defined as “a place where theology meets reality.” Salvation, he said, “involves the redemption of the whole man.”

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“Salvation does not resonate with millennials,” said Miller. Although we need to present the Bible as truth and focus on Christ crucified, we must first win a hearing with this generation. We can create child-friendly churches, use technology rather than criticize it, relate and dress authentically, act on behalf of the poor, and “convince rather than attack.”

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Asked how he can believe in Jesus’ call to nonviolence, yet accept a violent solution for the forgiveness of sins, Sairs replied that he agrees with the premise that God does not act violently. “Violence is something that happens in this world, between humans. God doesn’t act that way.” God can judge the world and can punish, yet it is not violent “because of who God is.”

Troy Miller, youth leader at Stony Brook Mennonite Church in York, Pa., spoke about reaching millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000). Most of them believe in God, he said, and almost all of those who do “feel accepted by Him.” They are not particularly troubled by guilt.

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Lawrence Chiles, bishop of Koinonia Fellowship of Churches, said urban ministry is “not feeling sorry for people. It’s serving people as Jesus would.”
The idea that “Jesus is only interested in coming into your heart” is a weak perspective. “Jesus is also interested in saving my mind,” he said. “If we told people in the inner city, ‘All you have to do is accept Jesus into your heart,’ we’d have a disaster on our hands.”

Mennonites want to do mission, he explained. But what happens if outreach works and we’re face to face with people who don’t look like us? What do we do with them? Urban ministry, said Chiles, is “a call to be stretched.”

Urban ministry is “not feeling sorry for people. It’s serving people as Jesus would.” The face of urban ministry is changing, too, as the “world has come to our cities,” he said. Chiles noted that “many of the new converts in the city identify with authentic Anabaptist theology.” They might not be able to articulate it, “but they’re Anabaptist in their lives.”

Timothy Gakunju, a Kenyan who pastors New Beginnings Fellowship in Cincinnati, used the story of Philip and the Ethiopian as a focal point for how to think about salvation in the African context. “Everyone needs to hear the message of salvation,” he said. The Ethiopian was a man of rank, but he needed Jesus, too. In Africa, power is so important, but powerful people still need Jesus. In addition, he said the average person in Africa is “a very religious person, but religion cannot save anybody.” Still, we can use that religious mindset as “a point of contact” for presenting the Gospel.

We need to tell people who Jesus is, what he taught and what he did. And like Philip with the Ethiopian, “we cannot do evangelism unless we rely on the Holy Spirit.”

Dan Ziegler, president of RBC, closed the symposium with a discussion of the Gospel. For much of his life, he believed that the message of salvation was primarily about getting to heaven. Now he thinks of it as “the good news of the Kingdom.”

Salvation by grace through faith is at the heart of the message, he said. “As an evangelical Anabaptist I want to affirm conversion as a starting point.” But “the reason Jesus came to earth was to establish his Kingdom.”

Our job, said Ziegler, is to live out Kingdom principles here on earth. The Sermon on the Mount is not a yardstick for a future age, but “a Kingdom manifesto” for how we’re to live our lives. “Discipleship becomes the defining factor of Christian experience.”

This approach stands in contrast with much of American evangelicalism, a tradition influenced by American individualism, he said. Ziegler closed with an invitation: “Brothers and sisters, if you believe this definition of the Gospel, then we have work to do together.”

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**Timothy Gakunju, Kenyan pastor of New Beginnings Fellowship in Cincinnati**, encouraged his listeners to use the religious mindset of “the average African person” as a stepping stone for presenting the Gospel.

**Troy Miller**, youth leader at Stony Brook Mennonite Church in York, Pa., suggested ways to win a hearing with millennials: act on behalf of the poor, take care of the environment, and build authentic relationships.
Dan Ziegler: The reason Jesus came to earth was to establish his Kingdom. . . In this understanding of the gospel, we are offered citizenship through his death and resurrection in this Kingdom that exists right now. For those of us willing to give our lives to him, eternity has already begun here on earth, and our job is to live out Kingdom principles. . . As citizens of this Kingdom, we are expected not just to be moral people waiting for heaven to come someday, but we are called upon to live our lives here on earth by Heaven’s standards, working to establish a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. A Kingdom outpost, if you will, in which we serve at the pleasure of our King as his ambassadors until he returns to take us with him to our homeland. From this perspective, discipleship, that is, the act of conforming our lives to the image of Jesus and his Kingdom, becomes the defining factor of the Christian experience.

Conrad Showalter: I believe that much of the church in our nation suffers from confusion of political perspective and spiritual perspective. What do I mean? Many people, left and right, are reading Scripture out of political party loyalty rather than out of Kingdom of Heaven commitment. When they do so, political labels begin to override the priority of straightforward adherence to the Word of God. . . Certainly, one of the challenges that we face pastorally in a politically polarized environment is how to maintain the unity of the spirit when political perspectives differ. At the heart of this is the question of salvation. Does salvation come through political action? Will it come through “taking back our nation,” re-establishing Christianity as the foundation of the nation? Will it come through achieving a greater social justice? I believe if we follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, that will most certainly have political implications. I also believe that salvation will not come primarily through political power, whether right or left.

Lawrence Chiles: Lawrence helped us picture the changing face of the city with a donut illustration. The hole in the donut is the urban center of the city; the inside edge, just surrounding the hole, represents the suburbs; the middle of the donut itself is rural; and the outer edge of the donut represents the exurbs. “All of these groups find their resources in the city,” said Chiles. “Sixty percent get their checks from the city.”

Chiles challenged his listeners to think differently about the city. “The inner city has people who are strongly committed to Christ. The city has a high volume of global missionary activity,” in part, he explained, because so many people groups are coming from all around the world to America’s cities. “We’re having fun discipling people who can hardly speak English.”

They come, he said, with a religious fervor for whatever God they are serving. And when they come to faith in Christ, they hope to survive, not just to go to heaven. They really believe “that God is going to take care of them.” Churches can think intentionally about becoming missional and about networking with urban fellowships. The needs in the city are great, and “the world is still looking to the church for answers,” Chiles said. “Sooner or later, God is going to call all of us into some form of urban ministry.”

Reuben Sairs: There are different ideas as to why penal substitutionary atonement finds itself under attack today. I don’t think we should take offense, I think we should answer kindly, as best we can. I simply ask the questions to those who want to dispense with the idea of penal substitution. Does this effort to eliminate what has been seen as not the only, but certainly one of the central understandings of the atonement, really amount to replacing a weak and unfortunate doctrine that slipped through the cracks of generations of critical scholarship, OR, does it in fact signal a fairly significant shift in soteriology?

In this sense, some of the more radical nonviolent atonement writing is a relief to me. It is intentionally seeking to recast the Christian faith in other terms. It is only content with rebuilding from the ground up. I’m not getting on that bus, but I respect it more than departing and former evangelicals eliminating penal substitution without being clear about where this leads.

Timothy Gakunju: During the question and answer period, Timothy was asked to comment on miracles happening in Africa more often than they seem to happen here. Timothy acknowledged that “a lot of supernatural things are taking place in Africa.” The African person, he said, “is very receptive to the supernatural.” And in America, “we have services.” In Africa, the level of expectation is different because the circumstances and needs are different. Ben Shirk asked Timothy to comment on the cultural opinion of the church – how do people who are outside the church in Africa view the church? “In Kenya,” said Timothy, “They have a positive view of the church.” There is great respect for the church in the community. “The church is seen as a place of hope, of restoration,” he said.

Troy Miller: The central theme of the gospel is Christ crucified. If we divert from the central theme in order to win people, who are we building the church for? There’s a difference, though, in how we edify the body of Christ and how we reach out. In edifying the body . . . we stand firm on Christ crucified. In our relationship to non-Christians [and in particular, to millennials], we can’t start there.