

1-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Barton, John (2015) "At the Foot of the Cross, in the Middle of the World: Reflections on Cruciform Mission," *Leaven*: Vol. 23: Iss. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol23/iss3/3>

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At the Foot of the Cross, in the Middle of the World

Reflections on Cruciform Mission

John Barton

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4.7–12)

Several years ago, when working at Rochester College, I had the privilege of interacting with holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel when he accepted our invitation to come and speak at a college event. As we worked out the details of his visit, he specifically requested that there not be a Christian cross on display during his presentation. The request was not a statement of opposition to our Christian community or our faith; his presentation reflected only positive collaboration and mutual respect. Wiesel's request, however, was deeply personal. Events in Nazi Germany that claimed the lives of his family members and shattered his young life were often framed by images of the cross. Especially for Hitler's victims, the meaning of the cross was often indistinguishable from the realities of the swastika. The effects of such realities affected Wiesel more than sixty years later.

But Wiesel's request was not merely visceral or reflective of his childhood experiences. The request also reflected his mature theological understandings of life and Jewish faith: "For the Jew, all truth must spring from life, never from death. To us, crucifixion represents not a step forward but a step backward."¹

We honored Wiesel's request. It felt like the Christian thing to do in the moment.

Concerns about the meaning of the cross are not limited to those outside of Christian faith. Christian feminism, for example, often includes serious reservations about whether the symbolism of the cross is appropriate for Christian theology. The very idea of cruciformity, it is claimed, is dangerous especially considering the ease and frequency with which the message is coopted and used by people in power to oppress those without power. Tragically, the historical examples are so familiar that they become cliché: crosses burning behind robed Klansmen, crosses hanging around the neck of pedophile priests, crosses displayed on the shields of medieval crusaders (the word *crusade* itself means "marked with the cross"), etc. The cross too often and too easily becomes a tool of abuse, a sign of worldly power over others. *In hoc signo vinces*.

Unfortunately, they aren't the only ways that cruciformity is misplaced. Sometimes rather than being a tool for abusive power, the cross becomes an incentive for withdrawal and self-protection. If outsiders assessed the faith of many churches across the country today based on the books we read, the content of sermons and communion thoughts, and many of the songs sung during Sunday worship, they could reasonably conclude that the teaching of the cross is primarily about rescuing individuals from the world and its destruction. Church life

1. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Summit Books, 1976), 76.

becomes primarily about pulling back from the world and maintaining high walls of protection; mission becomes primarily about convincing others to take cover behind the same walls; scripture becomes primarily a manual preparing one for heaven. (I remember when our toddler son came home from Sunday School excited about the new acronym he had learned: The B-I-B-L-E, Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth!). In short, theologies of withdrawal makes the content of faith and worship preoccupied with what God will provide in the afterlife and the world-to-come to the neglect of what God is doing in *this* life and *this* world.

This article will pursue a corrective theology of the cross and cruciform mission. I will explore how the concept of *cruciformity*—living cross-shaped lives—challenges both the theologies of triumph and the theologies of withdrawal. I will briefly reflect on three characteristics of cruciform mission that emerge “at the foot of the cross, in the middle of the world.”

Characteristic #1: Cruciformity is contextual.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1.14a).

Cruciform mission is always incarnational, always contextual. Said another way, “being in the middle of the world” means being in the middle of specific worlds, specific contexts. Cruciformity is not a set of abstract universal principles that are applied or impressed onto different situations. We should not imagine a cross-shaped cookie cutter that we imprint or impose onto different contexts as much as an organic calling that is formed by and embodied in specific locations and situations. That is easy to say, but what does it mean? It is a point that is better *described* than *analyzed* which highlights the importance of the examples that I share below. But to tease the point to the surface, let me briefly consider the ideas of meaning and context.

I was a missionary in Uganda for several years. One day I was in a remote village and came across a young Ugandan boy who was wearing a faded yellow T-shirt that read: “I had my birthday party at McDonald’s in Exton, Pennsylvania.” It is common to see American T-shirts in those kinds of settings. Used clothes in the U.S. often get bundled and shipped to open-air markets all over the world where they are purchased and given new life by new owners. Because of this, we often saw shirts with messages that were familiar to us but which were foreign—sometimes hilariously so—in their new context. But this particular shirt was especially interesting to me because I was born and raised near Exton, Pennsylvania, and had been to that specific McDonald’s. The young Ugandan boy didn’t fully understand why I was so excited or why I wanted to take my picture with him, but he didn’t seem to mind the extra attention from the strange visitor.

Beyond the humor of the situation, it causes me to consider the complex layers of meaning and context. Of course, such examples are funny to Americans because we can imagine the original context of the shirt; but now the shirt’s message appears in a foreign context and the original meaning is lost. But then I also think of the multiple contexts of meaning even for this shirt. Let me illustrate.

It is not hard for me to picture the boy, let’s say, who originally wore that T-shirt from McDonald’s. I imagine a typical kid growing up in a Pennsylvania suburb, probably sometime in the early ’80s (based on the style and condition of the shirt that I observed). I can imagine a small group of the boy’s friends eating Happy Meals at a birthday party, stepping on ketchup packets, climbing through kid-sized hamster tubes, and losing their socks among the brightly-colored plastic balls. The shirt itself was probably only worn a few times before being forgotten in the bottom of a drawer. Eventually it was pulled out and discarded or donated at which time it started to make its journey across the ocean to East Africa. It is not hard to imagine that the suburban kid eventually went to college, became a professional of some sort, and is now raising a family in suburban America and taking his kids to birthday parties at Chuck E. Cheese’s. Can you imagine it?

But now imagine the context of the Ugandan boy who now wears the shirt in its second incarnation. Based on what we repeatedly experienced, let me offer the following likely scenario: He is an orphan, one of about a dozen kids in a village homestead who has been tossed back and forth between uncles and older cousins. He has no opportunity for school, little hope for a different future, and he will likely live in the same area for the rest of his life. And now this boy has one shirt—a yellow shirt that contains some words that he does not understand. He will wear the shirt every day until it falls apart. It is a hand-me-down from an unknown kid in a privileged world, a world that is so far away it is almost beyond the scope of his imagination.

Considered in this way, the shirt's deeper message extends far beyond a surface reading of its words, beyond the suburban birthday party that originally defined it. The shirt now reflects the struggle and sense of hopelessness, marginalization, and abandonment often experienced in postcolonial Africa, a reality complexly related to the privileged world of the shirt's original context. But we also need to reconsider what is its original context. My imagination can carry me in the other direction as well, to a time before the little kid in Exton got the shirt with his Happy Meal. Where did the shirt come from? Did another child in a factory in Asia help make the shirt? What was life like for her? How did the manufacturing of that shirt play into the narrative of her life? How do the market demands in the U.S. for such shirts shape some of the harsh realities of people and children in other locations?

In short, context and meaning is complex. At the very least, this should cause us to acknowledge that there are multiple contexts behind all cultural symbols and deep messages that go far beyond the surface words and pictures. And here's the point: Cruciformity isn't a T-shirt message that you simply take off here and put on there, or a universally manufactured directive that you can put in a pamphlet or a lesson plan to distribute and apply uniformly, in cookie-cutter fashion, into all contexts. Contexts themselves inform and determine the meaning of cross-shaped living, what cruciformity looks like in real worlds. Said another way, cruciformity will look as different in different locations as the terrain and the people and customs do. This is illustrated well by the statement I once heard attributed to an Indian Christian and directed to Western missionaries: "Don't bring the gospel to us as a tree, bring it as a seed and plant it in our soil; let it grow and blossom in forms that are true for our contexts."

Characteristic #2: Cruciformity is upside-down.

"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1.25).

Cruciformity is counterintuitive; it kicks against common sense. Cruciform living and mission reminds us that our normal and natural ways of thinking and living are often backwards, in need of revision.

Scripture regularly attests to the counterintuitive nature of cruciform living. The call of cruciformity goes against normal, natural, self-protecting, common-sense ways of acting. Cross-shaped living challenges all forms of triumphalism which put a high premium on winning; it undermines attempts to gain the upper hand over competitors, to establish superiority for ourselves or our faith, to be impressive at all costs, to remove all doubt. The cross challenges such "natural" (or better, "fallen") inclinations. This is why the disciples of Jesus had such a hard time embracing his cruciform ministry. They wanted Jesus to lead a triumph over Rome, to defeat all enemies and remove all doubts. Instead, Jesus emptied himself, prepared to die, prayed for his accusers, and called his followers to pick up their own crosses. The Apostle Paul expounds on the upside-down nature of cruciformity when he says we live "as though sentenced to death" so that "we are fools for the sake of Christ" and "when reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly" (1 Cor 4.9–13).

What kind of kingdom is this? It is a counterintuitive kingdom, a kingdom shaped by the cross which is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks." Acknowledging the concerns of feminist theologies, this should not be understood as a doormat theology. Jesus is not calling disciples to sit by passively and let the world steamroll them. But it does at least mean that when we need to act defiantly, even subversively, that we do so not with a posture of triumphalism, anger, or revenge, but with wisdom and a radical posture of love for the sake of others, even enemies.

The radical nature of this point has been illustrated to me during my involvement in interfaith and especially Christian/Muslim interactions. Muslim friends and colleagues have taught me a lot about Islam and even more about myself and my faith. Not too many years ago, I was co-teaching a class with a Muslim colleague and we were discussing the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. My colleague stated that Muslims cannot accept the message of the cross because Islamic teaching cannot accept the notion that God would allow a prophet to be subjected to that kind of weakness, humiliation, and shame. Of course, Christian theology takes the idea even farther by proposing that, in Jesus, God was taking the shame and humiliation

onto himself. There is much to explore here, but for this presentation it highlights one key point: *The very thing that some theologies cannot accept is that which is considered of “first importance” in the Christian faith (1 Cor 15).* That is not a statement of triumph; it is a commitment to humble service.

Characteristic #3: Cruciformity is life-affirming.

“We are . . . always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies... So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor 4.8–12).

This point I will make briefly and in respectful contrast with Elie Wiesel’s point about the crucifixion. For Christian theology, the deep logic of cruciform suffering shows that as the brokenness and pain of the world is embraced, life is finally made possible. The cross announces good news, anticipates resurrection, delivers an ultimate *YES!* to the world.

Of course, as people who still live in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the full realization of the cross’s good news is still anticipated. And so we wait patiently and serve radically and confidently, guided by hope, by the assurance of a promised future. The posture of Christian hope is illustrated well by the character Sonny in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* when he says, “In India, we say that ‘everything will be alright in the end.’ So if it’s not alright, then it’s not yet the end.”

What does this kind of cruciformity look like? This is best answered by pointing and saying, “There it is!” In other words, cruciformity is better *described* than *analyzed*. I will conclude, therefore, by providing two examples, from very different contexts, of the kind of cruciformity I have been describing.

Illustration #1: Uganda, East Africa

The 10th parallel, where it stretches across Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands, represents the border between Muslim majorities to the north and Christian majorities to the south. In places like Nigeria and Sudan the line is often characterized by tension and violence. In equatorial Uganda (just below the 10th parallel), Christianity has traditionally had the upper hand in terms of numbers and power, but Islam is growing and many feel threatened by it. There is a lot of money pouring into countries like Uganda from the Middle East to build mosques, support schools, and promote the growth of Islamic communities.

In such atmospheres, communities that feel like they are losing ground often seek ways to protect and advance their identity and power. The result is a kind of real-life RISK game where religious communities compete for influence, real estate, and souls. Sometimes the competition becomes violent and involves guns and bombs, but more often in places like Uganda, it takes more subtle forms.

A few years ago the Christian-led organization Kibo Group (www.kibogroup.org) was helping facilitate a project in the Ugandan village of Bulyabwita to help address the challenges of poverty. Bulyabwita has a Christian majority but also a sizable Muslim population. As the Kibo Group worked in the village, the residents were given the opportunity to choose an income-generating project. Previously, nearby villages chose goat or chicken projects and were successfully raising these animals as a source of food and income. But when the residents of Bulyabwita met to choose their project, the tensions and competitions between the Christian majority and Muslim minority surfaced.

A few Christian leaders saw this as an opportunity not only to address hunger and poverty, but also to score some points in the Christian/Muslim game of RISK. They proposed a pig project that would naturally leave out the Muslims who will not eat pork or raise pigs. This was a way to increase the wealth and stability of Christian residents in contrast to their Muslim neighbors. After all, it was reasoned, wouldn’t the Christian-led Kibo group want to contribute to the strengthening of the Christian communities over and against the threat of Islamic growth and expansion? Shouldn’t the Muslims get *their* projects from their Middle Eastern sponsors? The debates and the issues led to increasing levels of tension, anger, and resentment in the village. Finally, at one of the tense meetings in which village leaders and elders were pontificating about the issues, a small older Christian woman seated on a mat on the ground raised her hand and made a comment that turned the conversation upside down with one simple statement: “I think Jesus wants our Muslim neighbors to be able to feed their children too.”

The tide of the conversation changed and goats were chosen. Now power struggles have been sidelined and poverty is being addressed. Furthermore, Bulyabwita has become a model of peaceful collaboration between Christians and Muslims in a part of the world where that is desperately needed. Previously estranged neighbors now visit each other and interact in positive ways; Christians are learning more about their Muslim neighbors' lives and faith, and many Muslims are asking the same about the lives and faith of the Christians. And cruciform witness is revived.

Illustration #2: Oklahoma, United States

A very different example of contextualized cruciformity is reflected in the story of my good friends, Greg and Jill Taylor, and their experiences at a congregation in Oklahoma. The Taylors were teammates of mine in Uganda and know firsthand the contexts like the ones reflected in the first illustration above. But when they moved back to the States, they left the receptive mission fields of East Africa and entered the challenges of suburban congregational life in the United States. Greg became a minister at a congregation that had wonderful and faithful people but that also had a large amount of debt and was experiencing dwindling numbers. In fact, in the decade before the Taylors arrived, the congregation's membership decreased from 1500 to 600. They came into a situation in which people were asking: *Can we stop the bleeding? Can we reverse the trends?*

Greg and Jill felt called to this ministry and this congregation but Greg was also transparent about what he thought he could offer. In his own words: "I am not a gifted evangelist or a celebrity preacher, but I think I can help pastor this group into deeper and newer kinds of faithfulness." And despite continuing decline—at one point, Greg chuckled and said that since they arrived, the congregation has "grown from 600 to 250!"—growth, even revival, has happened in significant ways.

Members left for unsurprising and sometimes understandable reasons. Some left because of secular drift; some transferred to new community churches or other congregations that seemed more exciting or had bigger programs; some left because the Taylors and the church were committed to issues of justice and service that challenged comfort levels. For example, they made their building available to various community groups including a sizable Hmong population. This caused tensions with some members as well as new levels of wear and tear on the facility that was now being used throughout the week. Sundays consisted of the members huddling together in the front corner of an otherwise empty and cavernous auditorium. Soon after that, they decided to move worship into the fellowship hall.

And then there were the financial realities. A fraction of the former membership was now shouldering the cost of those facilities and the good ministry commitments that were made in a different era. The weight was tremendous. Nearly every aspect of community life was dominated by concerns over money and budget. Congregational life was imprisoned by concerns over the "nickels and noses" of budget and membership. The issues were tense and specific. For example, the decision about whether to meet on a snowy day when the roads were dangerous was wrapped up in the reality that cancelling services would mean forfeiting a Sunday's contribution which could result in defaulting on a mortgage payment or not being able to pay missionaries. Greg told me of one night, when after months of struggle, hand-wringing and tension, one of the elders finally said, "We just can't do this anymore."

That statement was not a cry of defeat, but a move toward liberation. With the Taylors' lead, this group started to reimagine their mission and their context in cruciform ways. In my humble opinion, the results have been remarkable.

The difficulties didn't vanish! In fact, in some ways, they increased. The process of faithful downsizing has been, in Greg's words, gut-wrenching. It continued to involve hard budget and personnel decisions, tense conversations, and disappointed and sometimes angry members. For the Taylors and other leaders, it also included personal insecurities and second-guessing. Greg illustrated this in a very specific way. The once-booming youth group had dwindled to almost nothing. He told me about the day right before they moved to the fellowship hall when Jill had to leave the auditorium in tears as she looked at their own teenage kids sitting alone in a section that used to be filled with friends. *Is this right? Are we doing the right thing? Should we*

get back on the treadmill and try to do whatever we can to prop up “nickels and noses”? Or should we just leave and go attach ourselves to something more “successful”?

And yet, I know Greg and Jill very well. They are not defined by their insecurities. They are not defensive or cynical. They do not judge those who left. They are not resentful of others’ success. They just plug along faithfully and joyfully, acknowledging their shortcomings and defeats, owning their insecurities, clinging to the hope (the *YES!*) of cruciformity.

And the community of God at Garnett Road has grown in profound ways. The church has now sold its building and paid off all debts. A mortgage-burning ceremony was full of praise and laughter. They are now dreaming of the new things they can do and, in fact, they are now able to do more as a churchless church than when the membership and weekly giving was much higher. Of course, liberation comes with continued questions and struggles. They are in an Abraham moment, leaving what they know and launching into the unknown empowered only by trust. Greg and Jill themselves had to downsize their own home, move into another neighborhood, change some of their personal expectations. But by doing so, they are also free of debt and experiencing new possibilities and freedoms. In addition, they have seen their kids and the few other teens grow and embrace the mission of the congregation and mature beyond what happens in many consumerist-driven youth ministries.

In the midst of all of this, they have a group of 200+ people that are fully invested. There are no pew warmers in the congregation. They have worked through conflict and disappointment, served, cried, fought, fasted, and worshipped together. They are experiencing God’s power in ways that haven’t been felt in many years.

And the Taylors will be the first to deflect credit. The story that Greg likes to tell is that of a small group of faithful women who, through all of this turmoil and change, have consistently prayed and fasted for the church. At one point, several memorized the passage of scripture quoted at the start of this article. They embodied the words and the promise they represent, the hope of cruciformity.

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