

New Calvinism As It Relates to Salvation

Comments by Jerry Collins and Dave DeWitt

Perspective

We are writing from the perspective of those who disagree with the ideas of the movement often labeled “New Calvinism.” The label is not important, and it may vary from place-to-place, but understanding how these people think and what they teach about salvation is crucial. It is our belief that this movement is:

1. Limiting the accomplishment of the death of Christ on the cross, by saying the cross is an insufficient payment for sin
2. Denying the Biblical concept of salvation by grace through faith alone
3. Rejecting the work of evangelism which brought so many to Christ
4. Denying our freedom in Christ, bringing believers into bondage

Some of the leaders in this New Calvinist movement include John Piper, John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, Matt Chandler, Kevin DeYoung, Wayne Grudem, and Tim Keller. All leaders in the Gospel Coalition are in the New Calvinist movement. In this article, we will focus on the comments of John Piper and John MacArthur. This is not an attempt to attack the character of these men, nor is it a challenge of their relationship with God or their other teachings. But we do feel they are seriously in error about the concepts and implications of their doctrine of salvation.

Definition

New Calvinism is a movement that embraces the historical doctrines of Calvinism, while seeking to engage those doctrines in present-day culture. The purpose of this paper is to review the New Calvinism teaching on salvation and sanctification, which from their perspective is all about obtaining, maintaining, and developing a faith which may or may not get us to heaven.

- It is **Calvinism** in that it understands sovereignty (TULIP) in terms that eliminate real free will. They believe God gives us faith and God gives us obedience. It’s all from God.
- It is **new** in that it defines salvation in terms of sanctification (similar to Roman Catholicism). In other words, the maintenance of your salvation is your actual sanctification.

This is one of the most deceptive teachings because it comes, as Paul warned, *from among your own selves* (Acts 20:30). Most believers who listen to their sermons and read their books come away saying something like, “That sounds right to me, except maybe it’s a little too churchy, but all pastors are churchy.” The deception is two-fold:

1. They use familiar words (like salvation, faith, justification, repentance, and holiness) but with different meanings.
2. They play off our knowledge that real faith results in obedience. We all understand that faith results in works (James 2:18). We should not give assurance of salvation to someone living in intentional unrepentant sin. But that is not all the New Calvinists are saying. They are connecting the works to faith as a basis of salvation itself, not just an evidence for it. For the New Calvinist, salvation is not by faith alone.

[We shall use the word “salvation” here to include going to heaven.]

There are five points in Calvinism (TULIP). Here are five points of New Calvinism (ULSER).

1. **Un-saving Faith.** We may have a relationship with God by faith alone but not get to heaven by faith alone. John Piper says, “There are other conditions for attaining heaven.”
2. **Lordship Salvation.** Salvation, in the sense of going to heaven, requires that we make Christ Lord of our lives. John MacArthur says, “True faith is manifest only in obedience.”

3. **Sovereignty Only.** Faith and obedience are completely a work of the sovereignty of God, not free will choice. John Piper says, “Self-willed faith does not bring about the new birth. Just the opposite. The new birth brings about faith.”
4. **Evidence in Church Authority.** Evidence that we are going to heaven is when we place ourselves under the authority of a local church. John MacArthur says, “That unified gathering—not just the invisible worldwide church, but the local, visible congregation—is at the heart of Christianity.” “Not joining the church is saying I don’t want to be under authority, I want to avoid spiritual accountability.”
5. **Re-Salvation.** We are not once-for-all saved, we are sinners who need to keep coming to the cross and preaching the gospel to ourselves. John Piper says, “believers need to be saved.”

1. Un-Saving Faith. New Calvinists claim: We may have a relationship with God by faith alone, but we cannot get to heaven by faith alone.

In the Foreword to Thomas Schreiner’s book “Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), John Piper wrote:

...right with God by faith alone, not attain heaven by faith alone. There are other conditions for attaining heaven, but no others for entering a right relationship to God. In fact, one must already be in a right relationship with God by faith alone in order to meet the other conditions.... Such faith always ‘works by love’ and produces the ‘obedience of faith.’ And that obedience—imperfect as it is ‘til the day we die—is not the ‘basis of justification, but...a necessary evidence and fruit of justification.’ [The italics is Piper quoting Schreiner.]

Notice, Piper sees justification as a result of faith alone, but justification doesn’t get us to heaven without the “obedience of faith,” which is necessarily connected to faith. Piper stresses the difference between “faith alone,” which he sees as free and in contrast to that, and “attaining heaven,” which is not free.

The following is John MacArthur’s answer to a girl asking how she can have assurance of her salvation. Notice he never asked her if she has received Christ by faith.

The way you know that you are saved is by your desire. ‘Do you desire to know God?’ [She says, ‘yes.’] ‘Do you desire that He would know you and love you?’ [She says, ‘yes.’] ‘Do you desire to love him? Do you desire to honor him?’ [She says, ‘yes.’] ‘Do you desire to obey his word?’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHivtfyUmMc>).

Consider a tool with a handle and a blade, such as a kitchen knife, as an example of their position. The handle (faith) of the knife (salvation) is inseparably connected to the blade (works). If there is no blade (works), then there is no knife (salvation).

OUR ANSWER: In the Bible, justification by faith alone declares the believer right before God because his sins are wiped away, hence it results in his going to heaven. Paul deals with this specifically in Romans 3 and 5:

- Romans 3:20, *by the works of the Law no flesh will be **justified** in His sight.*
- Romans 3:24, *being **justified as a gift** by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*
- Romans 3:28, *For we maintain that a man is **justified by faith** apart from works of the Law.*
- Romans 5:1, *Therefore, having been **justified by faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...*

- Romans 5:9, *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*

Our salvation is also described as being *born again* into God’s family (John 1:12; 3:3, 7; Romans 8:16; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; 1 John 3:1-2). One who is born cannot be unborn. He is expected to live in accordance with his birth, but if he does not, it does not mean he was never born. Shawn Lazar in a June 13, 2017, blog gave this excellent example:

Piper is saying, ‘Becoming a member of the gym is absolutely free. But if you’re really a member, you’ll necessarily pay \$50/month. And if you aren’t paying \$50/month, then you aren’t really a member. But don’t misunderstand me—the gym is free! It doesn’t cost anything to join! So, how will you be paying, Visa or MasterCard?’ According to Piper’s gospel, you gotta’ pay to join the ‘free’ gym. By contrast, and still using the gym analogy, the Free Grace position is simple: ‘Becoming a member of the gym is absolutely free. Period. Save your money to help out your neighbors.’

2. Lordship Salvation. New Calvinists claim: Repentance that results in going to heaven means making Christ Lord of your life, as opposed to “easy-believism.”

- John MacArthur writes: “Scripture teaches that behavior is an important test of faith. Obedience is evidence that one’s faith is real (1 John 2:3). On the other hand, the person who remains utterly unwilling to obey Christ does not evidence true faith (1 John 2:4)” [churchmouse.com].
- John MacArthur says, “repentance that leads to salvation is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead. . . . It is a command to recognize one’s lawlessness and hate it, to turn one’s back on it and flee to Christ, embracing Him with wholehearted devotion” [“The Gospel According to Jesus,” 1988, Pt.17].
- MacArthur goes on to say, “True faith is manifest only in obedience” [MacArthur, 1988, Pt. 18].

Since for MacArthur “True faith is manifest only in obedience,” it is the same as that of John Piper. The example of the kitchen knife as salvation would apply. For MacArthur, repentance, a “decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness,” leads to faith (the handle of the knife), which is inseparably connected to obedience (the blade of the knife). Without the blade (obedience), there is no knife (salvation). For MacArthur, obedience/works/lordship is not just an evidence of salvation, it is part of salvation itself.

OUR ANSWER: In the Bible, salvation is by faith alone.

- *For by grace you have been saved through faith* (Ephesians 2:8).
- *The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe* (Romans 3:22). [Believe and faith are the same Greek word.]
- *To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness* (Romans 4:5).

To link salvation to sanctification is to parallel the Roman Catholic view of salvation. In 1989, in response to MacArthur’s position on lordship salvation, Zane Hodges wrote “Absolutely Free!” He stated in his introduction:

Lordship teaching reserves to itself the right to strip professing Christians of their claims to faith and to consign such people to the ranks of the lost. . . . the marvelous truth of justification by faith, apart from works, recedes into shadows not unlike those which darkened the days before the

Reformation. What replaces this doctrine is a kind of faith/works synthesis which differs only insignificantly from official Roman Catholic dogma” (Hodges, 1989, pp. 19-20).

3. Sovereignty Only. New Calvinists claim: Faith and obedience are completely a work of the sovereignty of God, not of human free will.

This from John Piper, commenting on free will, defined as self-determination (desiringgod.org):

- I don't think such a thing exists anywhere in the universe except in the will of God. Only God has free will in the sense of ultimate self-determination. ...And without the gift of God to cause us to repent and believe, none of us would be saved.... Self-willed faith does not bring about the new birth. Just the opposite. The new birth brings about faith. Faith is, therefore, not the result of human self-determination but of the new birth... We do not have ultimate self-determination, but we will all give an account to God for our choices.

OUR ANSWER: We agree that God is completely sovereign. But it is also true that man has free will. Piper would say that both are true and beyond our capacity to fully understand. The difference is, Piper's idea of free will is never connected to "self-determination." If free will does not allow me to determine things, then in what sense does it exist at all? If my choices do not affect my destiny, then in what sense are they choices? When it comes to salvation, Piper does not think it comes by faith, since that would mean our choice has something to do with our destiny. Piper says, "Just the opposite. The new birth brings about faith." Piper believes that God, apart from any faith on my part, gives me new birth, and that new birth gives me faith. So, faith is not something we do at all. But in the Bible, believing sounds like something we do, and it begins, not follows, a new birth.

- *But as many as received Him to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name* (John 1:12)
- *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life* (John 3:14-15)
- *Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16)
- *He who hears my word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life* (John 5:24)

But remember the knife illustration. The blade (works) are connected to the handle (faith). New Calvinists believe that since faith is not of us but only of God, so too are our works. Anyone claiming to do anything as a decision of the will (like study their Bible, pray, or be disciplined by a more mature believer) is robbing glory from God because only God does any of those things.

4. Evidence Is in Church Authority. New Calvinists claim: The evidence that we are going to heaven is being under the authority of a local church.

New Calvinists believe that salvation is communal, not individual. They believe God has an institutional commitment to the local church, as He did with Israel. According to New Calvinists, salvation should never be separated from membership in a local church.

Here are some quotes from John MacArthur on the church:

- "You are joined to the Lord; you are one with everybody else who's joined to the Lord. Why do you resist? Why do you resist becoming a part of the local assembly of the faithful believers? ...It's a spiritual issue, don't make it anything else. It's a spiritual issue, a fellowship issue, an authority issue, a ministry issue, evangelism issue...it's huge.... Not joining the church is saying I don't want to be under authority, I want to avoid spiritual accountability.... See it for what it is if you resist it, because that's what it really is" [gvt.org January 7, 2013, John MacArthur on the Importance of Church Membership].

- “There was a time when coming to Christ meant coming to His church. As far back as the New Testament, salvation brought you into union with the visible, gathered Body of Christ (cf. Acts 2:47). Becoming a Christian meant entering into fellowship with the people of God. But the idea of believers living independently of the church is totally foreign to the New Testament. The Holy Spirit addressed almost every epistle to a local church.” (gyt.org *Friday, January 11, 2013*, *The Local Church and Why It Matters*, by John MacArthur).
- “That unified gathering—not just the invisible worldwide church, but the local, visible congregation—is at the heart of Christianity. The church is the only institution the Lord established and promised to bless” [gyt.org, *Friday, January 11, 2013*, “*The Local Church and Why It Matters*,” by John MacArthur].
- “Active involvement in and submission to a local church body is crucial if we’re going to live up to God’s plan and pattern for the church. As we’ve already seen, the idea of Christians floating free between multiple congregations and never committing to one church body is *completely* foreign to the New Testament. That kind of untethered independence cuts you off from the authority the Lord established through His church” [gty.org/resources/Blog/ B130121 copyright © 2013 Grace to You, “*Membership in Submission*” by John MacArthur].

OUR ANSWER:

The reason New Calvinists get a following is because when believers look at the local church, they see a lot of professing believers living like the world. The New Calvinists’ answer is to change salvation to include “lordship” or “works of faith.” MacArthur says the problem is “easy-believeism.” That attacks the message of salvation by grace through faith alone, which has reached thousands for Christ over the years, proclaimed by men like D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. It opposes the faith-based salvation message of groups like Campus Crusade for Christ, Navigators, Young Life, Youth for Christ, and many evangelical missions and churches.

MacArthur’s claims about the “local church” have no biblical support whatsoever. The real problem is that MacArthur has replaced Christianity with Church-i-anity. He says, “the local, visible congregation—is at the heart of Christianity.” Really? One would think the heart of Christianity would be associated with, say, the cross, the empty tomb, or the Bible. But no, for MacArthur it’s “the local visible congregation.” In the Bible, the church is believers in Jesus Christ. Period. Every reference to the church is a plurality of believers. *The church which is His body* (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:24). God’s commitment to the church is always, and only, individual. God had an institutional commitment to Israel, not to the church. **None** of the New Testament books were written to “local churches” because there was no such thing as a “local church.” The term never occurs in the Bible. The churches of, say, Ephesus, Corinth, Galatia, and Judea are the believers in those cities or larger geographic regions. None of them are what MacArthur calls a “local church body.” A church in someone’s home was believers who gathered together in that home, it wasn’t “an institution the Lord established.” The word for church [ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*)] means “called out ones,” not “assembly.” The New Testament has a common word for “assembly,” it’s the word [συνάγωγη (*sunagoge*)] for “synagogue.” Assembling, like helping the poor, evangelism, discipleship, prayer, etc., is one of the many things the church is to do, but the church is not defined by its assembly.

A prison guard recently said, “I go to an institution, but I have never been institutionalized.” This is the best way to understand our local institutional churches. They are a cultural phenomenon that we have created. It is okay to go to those institutions, but don’t be institutionalized by them. But that institutionalization is exactly what the New Calvinists insist on, and it’s connected with the ongoing development of our salvation. Also, never be part of just one institution, something MacArthur insists on. The

Jonestown Massacre of 1978, where members drank poisoned Kool-Aid, could have been prevented if those people had belonged to just one more organization.

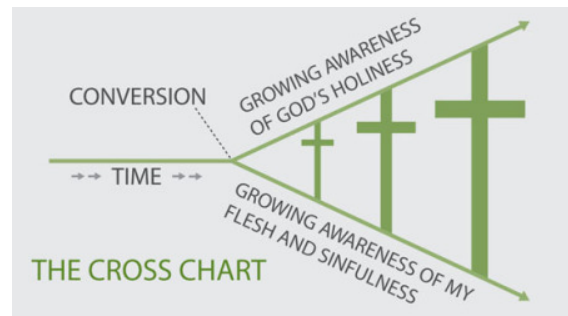
Hebrews 10:25 says we should not be *forsaking our own assembling together*. That means believers should assemble together, not set up a stained-glass command post and stamp ‘THUS SAITH THE LORD’ on it, creating some sort of authoritative 501(c)3. MacArthur says the leaders have “the authority which the Lord established through His church.” That means we have to choose whether to place ourselves under the authority of the Bible or local church elders. What if we understand from the Bible that the elders are wrong? Is being under the authority of the Bible what MacArthur says is the “untethered independence [which] cuts you off from the authority the Lord established through His church?” Paul warned the Galatians about those who *want to distort the gospel of Christ* (Galatians 1:7). The distortion Paul referred to was adding something to faith for salvation. In Paul’s case, it was the Jewish believers adding the Mosaic Law. In MacArthur’s case, it’s adding lordship and church membership to take away *our liberty which we have in Christ, in order to bring us into bondage* (Galatians 2:4).

5. Re-Salvation. New Calvinists claim: We are sinners who need to keep coming to the cross and preaching the gospel to ourselves.

Paul Dohse understands New Calvinism well when he writes: “The institutional church goes hand-in-glove with the idea that it supplies a place for re-salvation” [Paul’s Passing Thoughts, “Escaping Church and Its Culture of Death,” Paul M. Dohse, Sr., August 19, 2015).

New Calvinists see the death of Jesus on the cross like Old Testament Jews saw animal sacrifices—as an atonement (a covering), not a propitiation (a satisfaction). For them, faith in the accomplishments of the cross does not completely satisfy the wrath of God.

They believe that daily, but certainly on Sunday, we should keep coming to the cross, preaching the salvation gospel to ourselves. As we do, we continually keep seeing ourselves as more and more sinful and God’s character as more and more holy. So, we continually preach the gospel to ourselves as a means of developing our salvation. This is embodied in the New Calvinist statement, “We are only sinners saved by grace.” The cross looms larger, through an awareness



of our perpetual sinful state. This is coupled with a growing sense of God’s righteous holiness, by which we become sanctified/saved. It’s the combination of continual weeping over our sin and rebellion, while simultaneously rejoicing in the Savior’s love and forgiveness, that sanctifies/saves. Corporate worship in an institutional local church is designed to promote this idea of cross-centered worship.

Paul Dohse opposes New Calvinism as a doctrine of re-salvation. He writes:

This isn’t a technique for boosting our spiritual growth; this is a means of re-salvation because we are still technically lost and under law. ‘Under grace’ merely qualifies us for perpetual re-salvation.... [For New Calvinists] the Bible addresses the only two people groups that exist in the world: the lost and the saved. Mainline evangelical Paul Washer [a voice for New Calvinism] states it this way: ‘At conversion, a person begins to see God and himself as never before. This greater revelation of God’s holiness and righteousness leads to a greater revelation of self, which, in return, results in a repentance or brokenness over sin. Nevertheless, the believer is not left in despair, for he is also afforded a greater revelation of the grace of God in the face of Christ, which leads to joy unspeakable. This cycle simply repeats itself throughout the Christian life.’

(Paul's Passing Thoughts, "Escaping Church and Its Culture of Death," Paul M. Dohse, Sr., August 19, 2015).

New Calvinist Jerry Bridges has written several books on the subject and popularized the phrase "Preaching the Gospel to ourselves every day." He states, "the typical evangelical paradigm is that the gospel is for unbelievers and the duties of discipleship are for believers. But the gospel is for believers also, and we must pursue holiness, or any other aspect of discipleship, in the atmosphere of the gospel" ("The Discipline of Grace," p. 46). Preaching the gospel to yourself "means that you continually face up to your own sinfulness and then flee to Jesus through faith in His shed blood and righteous life." Bridges says, "this is the gospel by which we are saved, and it is the gospel by which we must live every day of our Christian lives" (Ibid, p. 60).

New Calvinist John Piper says, "We are asking the question, How does the gospel save believers? not, How does the gospel get people to be believers? ... Believers need to be saved. The gospel is the instrument of God's power to save us. And we need to know how the gospel saves us believers so that we make proper use of it" (John Piper: Part 2 of a series titled, "How Does the Gospel Save Believers?").

OUR ANSWER: The Bible never presents salvation as something that needs to be repeated, maintained, or developed. Many people like the comments of men like MacArthur and Piper because they realize faith should result in a changed life. But after salvation, we are sinners who need to confess our sin (1 John 1:8-10), not believers who need "re-salvation." That idea keeps us from maturity. Maturity is obtained by struggling with our temptations (James 1:14-15), wrestling with our sin nature (Romans 7:14-25), confessing our sin (1 John 1:8-10), and moving on (Hebrews 6:1). We are to keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and keep on having our senses trained to discern good and evil, not keep on being saved. To continually be re-saved prevents maturity.

*For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, **not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God** (Hebrews 5:13-6:1).*

Bridges is telling us that we need to keep going back to the gospel, if we are to progress in holiness. Yet the author of Hebrews says the exact opposite—that it was reciting foundational truths that kept them babes in Christ. Actually, the argument of the author of Hebrews is for the need to go beyond foundational truth in order to mature. This idea of preaching the gospel to ourselves every day focuses only on cross. Proponents of this thinking, like Bridges, want us to follow Christ in death but not in His resurrection. A cross-focused and death-focused gospel is a focus on condemnation, judgment, and death. We are also resurrected with Christ (Romans 6:4-5). One who is born again has a new birth, which is both death and resurrection (1 Peter 1:3). We are to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:12-14), not continually go back to the cross. We are not told to focus on our justification by contemplating our sinfulness and scrutinizing the death of Jesus as a means of our sanctification/salvation.

The complete gospel sees the cross as a finished work (justification) and entirely separate from the process of spiritual growth (sanctification). As a result, we are now free to personally aggressively pursue fruit in sanctification because our justification is a settled issue. Progress in the Christian life is not accomplished by continually gazing at the cross but by peering into an empty tomb. The cross was God's plan to pay for our sin. The empty tomb was God's means to empower us to new life. *Therefore, if any man is in Christ he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Contrary to Bridges' thinking and that of New Calvinism, exclusively focusing on the

cross, contemplating our sin and the death of Jesus, is an obstacle to spiritual growth and maturity. *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1). We go back to the cross of Jesus and His resurrection with thanksgiving that we are no longer under condemnation for our sin.

Conclusion

The basic flaw in New Calvinism's view of salvation is calling it, and thinking of it as, an atonement rather than a Passover. The word "atonement" [כִּפּוּר (*kippur*)] means "to cover." The atonement is about the Israelites dealing with (covering) their sins, **after** the Passover delivered them from Egypt. The atonement is like our dealing with our sin (1 Corinthians 15:34) or one another's sin (1 Peter 4:8), **after** salvation (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). Calling salvation an atonement means that it is somehow not final, in and of itself. New Calvinism emphasizes a progressive justification. Salvation needs to be maintained through the authority of the church to ensure its continual covering.

New Calvinism teaches that this continual covering is needed because we are still under law and its condemnation. They maintain that we have been given an imputed righteousness from Jesus who fulfilled/fulfills the law in our stead as we partake in the "means of grace." Partaking in the "means of grace" is prescribed through the teaching and authority of the church. The imputed righteousness of Jesus is called a "forensic righteousness" which provides a legally declared covering. John Piper has said several times that "Christians still need to be saved." MacArthur continually refers to salvation as a "process" and "atonement" (i.e., a covering for condemning sin, not an ending of sin).

Dr. John Walvoord in his book "Jesus Christ Our Lord" wrote,

"In the Old Testament, atonement means 'to cover,' that is, to put sin out of sight. It is not found in the New Testament except in a mistranslation of Romans 5:11 where it should be translated "reconciliation." (p. 154).

Christ's death, as a substitution, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption, was a *once for all* action (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; Romans 6:10). Atonement was not. The Bible never calls Christ's payment for sin an atonement. Remember, animal sacrifices were a substitutionary atonement, but they were not *once for all*. They did not pay for sin. The cross was a payment for sin that made the new birth possible. We are literally God's offspring born of the spirit and no longer under condemnation of the law. We are born again unto newness of life with a righteousness of our own as a new state of being (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Day of Atonement was not just a memorial, it actually accomplished something—it covered the sins of the nation for another year. It was an ongoing covering that needed to be repeated. The annual Passover celebration did not accomplish anything. It was just a memorial of what had already been accomplished, once for all time. The Passover did not provide a covering for sin. It was about being passed over for judgment (Exodus 12:12). The blood of the lamb allowed people to escape the wrath of God. Dying on the Passover, rather than the Day of atonement, Jesus identified Himself as the One who paid for our sins, allowing God to *pass over* us for judgment (John 5:24; Romans 5:8-21; 1 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:24; 3:18; Revelation 20:15). **The cross did not just cover our sin. It paid for it.** So, it's better to say what the apostles said, *Christ is our Passover* (1 Corinthians 5:7) ...*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29, 36).