



## Why the Cross?

Serious students have never doubted that the cross is crucial to Christianity. The Gospels all lead up to it and find their climax there. The book of Acts tells how the first preachers proclaimed what God had done in the cross of Christ, while the Epistles with greater or less emphasis bring out the meaning of this great act of atonement.

Indeed, so central is the cross to Christianity that this fact has made its mark on our language. Whenever we say "The crucial point is this..." or "The crux of the matter is that...", we are saying in effect "Just as the cross is central to Christianity, so is this point central to my argument", for crux is the Latin word for "cross" and "crucial" is derived from it.

The centrality of the cross to the Christian faith becomes obvious when we look at the structure of the New Testament writings. For example, take the four Gospels. They have well been described as "*passion narratives with extended introductions*". They are not biographies. In each one, the death and resurrection of Jesus take up such a disproportionate amount of space that it is quite clear that the author has no intention of giving an account of the life of our Lord. Everything is arranged to lead up to the climax of the cross. They are "Gospels", accounts of the good news of what God has done in Christ to bring about our salvation. The way the Gospels are put together shows that that means the cross.

In the modern world this is not always understood as clearly as it might be. Today it is not uncommon to be told that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, in Jesus' ethical teaching generally, in the idea of liberation, in "peace on earth", in brotherly love, in newness of life, or the like. I do not wish to denigrate such ideas. Christianity is a profound religion and its teaching has many aspects. But if we are to be true to the New Testament we must see the cross as at the very heart of it all. Why?

**Sinners:** Logically we must start with the fact of sin. This is the basic human problem because it is sin that separates us from God (Isa 59:2). People today often think that our problems are due to a lack of education, or wealth or resources or the like. The Bible says it is due to sin (1 Kings 8:46; Rom 3:23).

This point should not be taken as obvious. In the ancient world generally people did not see themselves as sinners; that was a conviction of the biblical writers. And in the moderns world it is not uncommon to find people who hold that deep down all people are good. How they do it in the face of the wars, crime, cruelty, selfishness, child abuse and violence is hard to understand.

However, what we must never forget is that sin has more serious consequences than earthly disorder. The Bible speaks often of "*the wrath of God*" (Rom 1:18, etc), and we should not forget that Jesus spoke often of hell (Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5, etc). Judgment is both a present reality (John 3:19) and a future certainty (Rom 2:12). We are people, and in due course must give account of our ourselves to God (Rom 14:12). We cannot dismiss the evil we do as the result of the way we are made, as our fate rather than our fault. That is not what the Bible says, and in our more honest moments it is not what we say either. In the case of any specific sin that we commit, we know that we need not have done it. It is our fault, and that is our problem when we stand before God.

**The love of God:** But the Bible reveals the astounding fact that in the face of our sin God keeps loving us. He keeps loving because He is love (1 John 4:8, 16); it is His nature to love. In love He brings about the salvation of sinners (John 3:16; Rom 5:8). We should be clear about this.

Sometimes people set the Father and the Son almost in opposition. They see the Father as a rather stern judge, who sentences sinners to hell. Into this picture comes a loving Son who intervenes to save them. But any view of the atonement that does not see it as coming from the Father's love is wrong.

It is also unbiblical to understand the Father's forgiveness as operating apart from the cross. Modern sentimentalists often think of the Father as a kindly person who does not take sin seriously. "He will forgive; that is what love means" is the thought. But this is to overlook the strong moral demand that runs right through Scripture. The God who demands righteousness from his people is himself righteous, and he does not forgive sin in a way that might be understood to mean that sin does not matter much. God forgives sin by the way of the cross. The New Testament writers constantly hold out the cross as the way of forgiveness; they know no other way.

Great picture words: To bring out what the death of Christ has done, the New Testament writers use some great words, the exact significance of which we may miss since we do not share their thought world. Redemption is a case in point. Originally redemption referred to the release of prisoners of war. A ransom price was paid and the prisoners were set free. The word came to be used for the release of slaves (again by payment of a price) and at any rate among the Jews for release from a sentence of death, again by the payment of a price (see Ex 21:28-30). Sinners are slaves to sin (John 8:34); they are under sentence of death (Rom 6:23). This way of looking at the cross sees it as liberty. It tells us that our salvation came at a cost and that now we are free, free with the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Propitiation means the turning away of anger, usually by the offering of a gift. The Bible is very clear that God's wrath is exercised towards all evil (Ps 7:11; Col. 3:6) — sinners face a dismal future. But Christ's death has turned away God's wrath and freed sinners from a dreadful fate (Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). These days people don't like the idea of the wrath of God; thus most modern translations have something like "expiation" or "atoning sacrifice" (neither of which involves a dealing with wrath). But this is not the meaning of the Greek words; KJV correctly renders propitiation, and whether we retain that translation or use another we must safeguard the truth that the wrath of God, that terrible wrath which is exercised towards all evil, is no longer exercised towards those in Christ.

Reconciliation is a homely word for making up after a quarrel. This is brought about by taking away the cause of the quarrel; unless this is done there may be an uneasy truce, but there can be no real reconciliation. In the hostility between God and sinners (Rom 5:10) the root cause, sin, was put away by the death of Christ and thus the way was clear for reconciliation.

A word that mattered very much to first-century Jews was covenant, for they saw themselves exclusively as the covenant people of God. Unfortunately the people persistently broke this covenant by their sin, and in time God through his prophet Jeremiah promised a new covenant, a covenant that would be inward (for God would write his law on their hearts) and which would have as its basis the divine forgiveness (Jer 31:31-34).

The covenant was at the heart of Israelite religion, for it meant that the people with whom God had made the covenant were his own people; they stood in a relationship to him such as no other people did. When Jesus spoke of his blood as inaugurating the new covenant (Luke 22:20), he was saying in effect that a whole new way of approach to God would be opened up by the death he was about to die. He was saying that not physical Israel, but the church, was the true covenant people of God.

Justification was a legal concept. We see its meaning in the instruction that in the settlement of legal disputes the judges are to "justify" those in the right and "condemn" the wicked (Deut 25:1). Paul makes extensive use of this imagery. He sees sinners as facing condemnation when they stand before God. But he also sees God as taking action in the person of his Son whereby all legal claims on those sinners who are in Christ are fully met by his death. There is no further claim. They go free.

Sacrifice was a term that had a universal appeal in the first century. Right through the known world, people stood by their altars in solemn awe before a religious ritual that saw animals slaughtered in their stead. They watched as the offering went up in the fires of the altars to the gods they worshipped. For Christians, such sacrifices could never put away sins (Heb 10:4), but they formed a vivid picture of what Jesus did when he offered himself as a sacrifice (Eph 5:2). Sometimes they thought of a particular sacrifice such as the Passover (1Cor 5:7), or the ceremonies on the Day of Atonement (the letter to the Hebrews uses this symbolism). But mostly they leave it quite general. The sacrifices could not effect atonement themselves, but they pointed to the death of Christ which could.

There are other ways of looking at the cross. I am not trying to give a complete list, but simply to bring out the point that the first Christians saw the cross as many-sided. In more recent times there has been a tendency to view it from one standpoint only; I cannot but see this as mistaken. The human predicament is complex, and God's saving act that deals with that predicament is correspondingly complex. But, view the human predicament as you will, it was in the cross that the New Testament Christians saw deliverance.

Christ our substitute: One of the most important strands in the New Testament's teaching about the cross is the fact that Christ in some way stood in our place and became our substitute. This is strongly denied by some scholars, and it cannot be said to be a widely popular view in modern times. But consider the evidence for it. Substitution took place already when Jesus accepted John's baptism, a baptism that numbered him with sinners (Matt 3:15) and pointed forward to the death he would die for them. Most agree that the Gospels see Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 who stood in the place of others. Jesus himself said that he would be "*a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45), where the word for (anti) means "in the place of"; it is a substitutionary word.

Substitutionary thinking is clearly in Paul's mind as well. He speaks of Jesus as having been made "*a curse*" for us (Gal 3:13) and tells us that "*he who knew no sin God made sin for us*" (2 Cor 5:21). He says, "*one died for all; therefore all died*" (2 Cor 5:14). More could be said, but these passages surely demonstrate that one strand of New Testament teaching insists that Christ took our place when he died for us.

No other way: Was the cross necessary? Was there no other way of salvation? It is shallow thinking to maintain that we can live good enough lives. Indeed the heroes of the moderns world scream a protest against the idea that we are basically good. And it is not much better to interpret the meaning of the cross in terms of its effect on us (in our own strength, our response is pathetic). Nor can we take refuge in the idea that the cross defeats evil or gives us power over evil, for that amounts to saying that in the last resort might is right. In the end, we are forced to say that evil is a reality and that if it's to be overthrown the right must be vindicated.

The deepest thinkers among mankind have always thought that real forgiveness is possible only when due regard is paid to the moral law. C.A. Dinsmore examined such diverse writings as those of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Tennyson, and others and came to the conclusion that it is an axiom in life and in religious thought that there is no reconciliation without satisfaction. Should we not see this as something God has implanted deep down in the human heart? Faced with a revolting crime, even the most careless among us are apt to say, "that deserves to be punished!"

While the New Testament writers do not say this in quite the same way as we do, they do emphasise the moral law and they insist that Christ has brought about salvation in accordance with what is right. Christ stood in our place and endured what we should have endured. If sinners are to be saved, the fact of that broken law must be taken into consideration. It is the witness of the New Testament that Christ saves us in a way that does take that law into consideration. And there is never the slightest indication that anything else other than Christ's atoning work can deal with the problem of the evil that is so much part of the human situation.

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