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## THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS



Do you know the painting by Holman Hunt, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, titled *The Shadow of Death*? It depicts the inside of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Stripped to the waist, Jesus stands by a wooden trestle on which he has put down his saw. He lifts his eyes toward heaven, and the look on his face is one of either pain or ecstasy or both. He also stretches, raising both arms above his head. As he does so, the evening sunlight streaming through the open door casts a dark shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind him, where his tool-rack looks like a horizontal bar on which his hands have been crucified. The tools themselves remind us of the fateful hammer and nails.

In the left foreground a woman kneels among the wood chippings, her hands resting on the chest in which the rich gifts of the Magi are kept. We cannot see her face because she has averted it. But we know that she is Mary. She looks startled (or so it seems) at her son's crosslike shadow on the wall.

The Pre-Raphaelites have a reputation for sentimentality. Yet they were serious and sincere artists, and Holman Hunt himself was determined, as he put it, to "do battle with the frivolous art of the day," its superficial treatment of trite themes. So he spent 1870-1873 in the Holy Land, and painted *The Shadow of Death* in Jerusalem, as he sat on the roof of his house.<sup>1</sup> Though the idea is historically fictitious, it is also theologically true. From Jesus' youth, indeed even from his birth, the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. His death was central to his mission. Moreover, the church has always recognized this.

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<sup>1</sup>See Julian Treuherz, *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings from the Manchester City Art Gallery* (London: Lund Humphries, 1980), where *The Shadow of Death* hangs.

Imagine a stranger visiting St Paul's Cathedral in London. Having been brought up in a non-Christian culture, he knows next to nothing about Christianity. Yet he is more than a tourist; he is personally interested and eager to learn.

Walking along Fleet Street, he is impressed by the grandeur of the building's proportions and marvels that Sir Christopher Wren could have conceived such an edifice after the Great Fire of London in 1666. As his eyes attempt to take it in, he cannot help noticing the huge golden cross that dominates the dome.

He enters the cathedral and stands at its central point, under the dome. Trying to grasp the size and shape of the building, he becomes aware that its ground plan, consisting of nave and transepts, is cruciform. He walks around and observes that each side chapel contains what looks to him like a table, on which, prominently displayed, stands a cross. He goes downstairs into the crypt to see the tombs of famous men such as Sir Christopher Wren himself, Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington: a cross is engraved or embossed on each.

Returning upstairs, he decides to remain for the service which is about to begin. The man beside him is wearing a little cross on his lapel, while the lady on his other side has one on her necklaces. His eye now rests on the colorful, stained-glass east window. Though he cannot make out the details from where he is sitting, he cannot fail to notice that it contains a cross.

Suddenly, the congregation stands up. The choir and clergy enter, preceded by somebody carrying a processional cross. They are singing a hymn. The visitor looks down at the service paper to read its opening words:

We sing the praise of him who died,  
Of him who died upon the cross;  
The sinner's hope let men deride,  
For this we count the world but loss.

From what follows he comes to realize that he is witnessing a Holy Communion service, and that this focuses on the death of Jesus. For when the people around him go forward to the Communion rail to receive bread and wine, the minister speaks to them of the body and blood of Christ. The service ends with another hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
Save in the cross of Christ my God;

All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Although the congregation now disperses, a family stays behind. They have brought their child to be baptized. Joining them at the font, the visitor sees the minister first pour water over the child and then trace a cross on its forehead, saying, "I sign you with the cross, to show that you must not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified."

The stranger leaves the cathedral impressed but puzzled. The repeated insistence by word and symbol on the centrality of the cross has been striking. Yet questions have arisen in his mind. Some of the language used seemed exaggerated. Do Christians really for the sake of the cross "count the world but loss," and "boast" in it alone, and "sacrifice" everything for it? Can the Christian faith be accurately summed up as "the faith of Christ crucified?" What are the grounds, he asks himself, for this concentration on the cross of Christ?

#### THE SIGN AND SYMBOL OF THE CROSS

Every religion and ideology has its visual symbol, which illustrates a significant feature of its history or beliefs. The lotus flower, for example, although it was used by the ancient Chinese, Egyptians and Indians, is now particularly associated with Buddhism. Because of its wheel shape it is thought to depict either the cycle of birth and death or the emergence of beauty and harmony out of the muddy waters of chaos. Sometimes the Buddha is portrayed as enthroned in a fully open lotus flower.

Ancient Judaism avoided visual signs and symbols, for fear of infringing the second commandment, which prohibits the manufacture of images. But modern Judaism has adopted the so-called Shield or Star of David, a hexagram formed by combining two equilateral triangles. It speaks of God's covenant with David that his throne would be established forever and that the Messiah would be descended from him. Islam, the other monotheistic faith that arose in the Middle East, is symbolized by a crescent, at least in West Asia. Originally depicting a phase of the moon, it was already the symbol of sovereignty in Byzantium before the Muslim conquest.

The secular ideologies of this century also have their universally recognizable signs. The Marxist hammer and sickle, adopted in 1917 by the Soviet government from a nineteenth-century Belgian painting, represent industry and agriculture; and they are crossed to signify the union of workers and peasants, of factory and field. The swastika, on the other hand, has been traced back some six thousand

years. The arms of its cross are bent clockwise to symbolize either the movement of the sun across the sky, or the cycle of the four seasons, or the process of creativity and prosperity (*svasti* being a Sanskrit word for “well-being”). At the beginning of this century, however, it was adopted by some German groups as a symbol of the Aryan race. Then Hitler took it over, and it became the sinister sign of Nazi racial bigotry.

Christianity, then, is no exception in having a visual symbol. The cross was not its earliest, however. Because of the wild accusations that were leveled against Christians, and the persecution to which they were exposed, they “had to be very circumspect and to avoid flaunting their religion. Thus the cross, now the universal symbol of Christianity, was at first avoided, not only for its direct association with Christ, but for its shameful association with the execution of a common criminal also.”<sup>2</sup> So on the walls and ceilings of the catacombs (underground burial places outside Rome, where the persecuted Christians probably hid), the earliest Christian motifs seem to have been either noncommittal paintings of a peacock (supposed to symbolize immortality), a dove, the athlete’s victory palm or, in particular, a fish. Only the initiated would know, and nobody else could guess, that *ichthys* (“fish”) was an acronym for *Iesus Christos Theou Huios Soter* (“Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”). But it did not remain the Christian sign, doubtless because the association between Jesus and a fish was purely acronymic (a fortuitous arrangement of letters) and had no visual significance.

Somewhat later, probably during the second century, the persecuted Christians seem to have preferred to paint biblical themes like Noah’s ark, Abraham killing the ram instead of Isaac, Daniel in the lions’ den, his three friends in the fiery furnace, Jonah being disgorged by the fish, some baptisms, a shepherd carrying a lamb, the healing of the paralytic, and the raising of Lazarus. All these were symbolic of Christ’s redemption, while not being in themselves incriminating, since only the instructed would have been able to interpret their meaning. In addition, the Chi-Rho monogram (the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*) was a popular cryptogram, often in the form of a cross, and sometimes with a lamb standing before it, or with a dove.

A universally acceptable Christian emblem would obviously need to speak of Jesus Christ, but there was a wide range of possibilities. Christians might have

<sup>2</sup>Michael Gough, *The Origins of Christian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 18. See also J. H. Miller, “Cross” and “Crucifix,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 4:473-49; Geoffrey Barraclough, ed., *The Christian World: A Social and Cultural History of Christianity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981); and Cyril Pocknee, *The Cross and Crucifix in Christian Worship and Devotion* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1962).

chosen the crib or manger in which the baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter’s bench at which he worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the boat from which he taught the crowds in Galilee, or the apron he wore when washing the apostles’ feet, which would have spoken of his spirit of humble service. Then there was the stone which, having been rolled from the mouth of Joseph’s tomb, would have proclaimed his resurrection. Other possibilities were the throne, symbol of divine sovereignty, which John in his vision of heaven saw that Jesus was sharing, or the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the Day of Pentecost. Any of these seven symbols would have been suitable as a pointer to some aspect of the ministry of the Lord. But instead the chosen symbol came to be a simple cross. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his resurrection nor his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his death, his crucifixion. The crucifix (that is, a cross to which a figure of Christ is attached) does not appear to have been used before the sixth century.

It seems certain that, at least from the second century onward, Christians not only drew, painted and engraved the cross as a pictorial symbol of their faith but also made the sign of the cross on themselves or others. One of the first witnesses to this practice was Tertullian, the North African lawyer-theologian who flourished about A.D. 200. He wrote:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [the cross].<sup>3</sup>

Hippolytus, the scholar-presbyter of Rome, is a particularly interesting witness, because he is known to have been “an avowed reactionary who in his own generation stood for the past rather than the future.” His famous treatise *The Apostolic Tradition* (c. A.D. 215) “claims explicitly to be recording only the forms and models of rites *already* traditional and customs *already* long-established, and to be written in deliberate protest against innovations.”<sup>4</sup> When he describes certain “church observances,” therefore, we may be sure that they were already being practiced a gen-

<sup>3</sup>Tertullian *De Corona*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, trans. S. Thelwall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory Dix, ed., *The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (London: SPCK, 1937), p. xi.

eration or more previously. He mentions that the sign of the cross was used by the bishop when anointing the candidate's forehead at confirmation, and he recommends it in private prayer: "imitate him (Christ) always, by signing thy forehead sincerely: for this is the sign of his passion." It is also, he adds, a protection against evil: "When tempted, always reverently seal thy forehead with the sign of the cross. For this sign of the passion is displayed and made manifest against the devil if thou makest it in faith, not in order that thou mayest be seen of men, but by thy knowledge putting it forth as a shield."<sup>5</sup>

There is no need for us to dismiss this habit as superstitious. In origin at least, the sign of the cross was intended to identify and indeed sanctify each act as belonging to Christ.

In the middle of the third century, when another North African, Cyprian, was bishop of Carthage, a terrible persecution was unleashed by the Emperor Decius (A.D. 250-251) during which thousands of Christians died rather than offer sacrifice to his name. Anxious to strengthen the morale of his people, and to encourage them to accept martyrdom rather than compromise their Christian faith, Cyprian reminded them of the ceremony of the cross: "Let us take also for protection of our head the helmet of salvation . . . that our brow may be fortified, so as to keep safe the sign of God."<sup>6</sup> As for the faithful who endured prison and risked death, Cyprian praised them in these terms: "Your brows, hallowed by God's seal . . . reserved themselves for the crown which the Lord would give."<sup>7</sup>

Richard Hooker, the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian and Master of the Temple in London, applauded the fact that the early church fathers, in spite of heathen scorn at the sufferings of Christ, "chose rather the sign of the cross [that is, in baptism] than any other outward mark, whereby the world might most easily discern always what they were."<sup>8</sup> He was aware of the forthright objections of the Puritans. "Crossing and such like pieces of Popery," they were saying, "which the church of God in the Apostles' time never knew," ought not to be used, for human inventions ought not to be added to divine institutions, and there was always the danger of superstitious misuse. As King Hezekiah destroyed the brazen serpent, so crossing should be abandoned. But Hooker stood his ground. In "matters indifferent," which

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>6</sup>Cyprian *Ad Thibaritano* 9, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, trans. Ernest Wallis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>7</sup>Cyprian *De Lapsis* 2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, trans. Ernest Wallis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>8</sup>Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593-97), 5.65.20, "Of the Cross in Baptism," in *The Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. John Keble, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845).

were not incompatible with Scripture, Christians were free. Besides, the sign of the cross had a positive usefulness: it is "for us an admonition . . . to glory in the service of Jesus Christ, and not to hang down our heads as men ashamed thereof, although it procure us reproach and obloquy at the hands of this wretched world."<sup>9</sup>

It was Constantine, the first emperor to profess to be a Christian, who gave added impetus to the use of the cross symbol. For (according to Eusebius), on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge, which brought him supremacy in the West (A.D. 312-313), he saw a cross of light in the sky, along with the words *in hoc signo vinces* ("conquer by this sign"). He immediately adopted it as his emblem and had it emblazoned on the standards of his army.

Whatever we may think of Constantine and of the development of post-Constantinian "Christendom," at least the church has faithfully preserved the cross as its central symbol. In some ecclesiastical traditions the candidate for baptism is still marked with this sign, and the relatives of a Christian who after death is buried rather than cremated are likely to have a cross erected over the person's grave. Thus from Christian birth to Christian death, as we might put it, the church seeks to identify and protect us with a cross.

The Christians' choice of a cross as the symbol of their faith is more surprising when we remember the horror with which crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world. We can understand why Paul's "message of the cross" was to many of his listeners "foolishness," even "madness" (1 Cor 1:18, 23). How could any sane person worship as a god a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution? This combination of death, crime and shame put him beyond the pale of respect, let alone of worship.<sup>10</sup>

Crucifixion seems to have been invented by "barbarians" on the edge of the known world and taken over from them by both Greeks and Romans. It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other nonpersons. The Jews were therefore outraged when the Roman general Varus crucified two thousand of their compatriots in 4 B.C., and when during the siege of Jerusalem the general Titus crucified so many fugitives from the

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 5.65.6.

<sup>10</sup>See especially Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), pp. 1-10. The original title was *Mors torpissima crucis*, "the utterly vile death of the cross," an expression first used by Origen.



city that neither “space . . . for the crosses, nor crosses for the bodies” could be found.<sup>11</sup>

Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, except in extreme cases of treason. Cicero in one of his speeches condemned it as *crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium*, “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.”<sup>12</sup> A little later he declared: “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill him is almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—What? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”<sup>13</sup> Cicero was even more explicit in his successful defense in 63 B.C. of the elderly senator Gaius Rabirius who had been charged with murder: “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things [that is, the procedures of crucifixion] or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”<sup>14</sup>

If the Romans regarded crucifixion with horror, so did the Jews, though for a different reason. They made no distinction between a “tree” and a “cross,” and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore automatically applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut 21:23). They could not bring themselves to believe that God’s Messiah would die under his curse, strung up on a tree. As Trypho the Jew put it to Justin the Christian apologist, who engaged him in dialogue: “I am exceedingly incredulous on this point.”<sup>15</sup>

So then, whether their background was Roman or Jewish or both, the early enemies of Christianity lost no opportunity to ridicule the claim that God’s anointed and man’s Savior ended his life on a cross. The idea was crazy. This is well illustrated by a graffito from the second century, discovered on the Palatine Hill in Rome, on the wall of a house considered by some scholars to have been used as a school for imperial pages. It is the first surviving picture of the crucifixion, and is a caricature. A crude drawing depicts, stretched on a cross, a man with the head of a donkey. To the left stands another man, with one arm raised in worship. Un-

<sup>11</sup>See the accounts given by Josephus in *Antiquities* 17.10.10 and *Jewish War* 5.11.1.

<sup>12</sup>Cicero *Against Verres*, in *The Verrine Orations*, trans. L. H. G. Greenwood (London: Heinemann, 1928-1935), 2.5.64, par. 165.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.5.66, par. 170.

<sup>14</sup>Cicero *In Defense of Rabirius*, in *The Speeches of Cicero*, trans. H. G. Hodge (London: Heinemann, 1927), 5.16, p. 467.

<sup>15</sup>Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho a Jew*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), chap. 89.

evenly scribbled underneath are the words ALEXAMENOS CEBETE (that is, *se-bete*) THEON, “Alexamenos worships God.” The cartoon is now in the Kircherian Museum in Rome. Whatever the origin of the accusation of donkey-worship (which was attributed to both Jews and Christians), it was the concept of worshipping a crucified man which was being held up to derision.

One detects the same note of scorn in Lucian of Samosata, the second-century pagan satirist. In *The Passing of Peregrinus* (a fictitious Christian convert whom he portrays as a charlatan) he lampoons Christians as “worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws.”<sup>16</sup>

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS

The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favor of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself. It was out of loyalty to him that his followers clung so doggedly to this sign. What evidence is there, then, that the cross stood at the center of Jesus’ own perspective?

Our only glimpse into the developing mind of the boy Jesus has been given to us in the story of how at the age of twelve he was taken to Jerusalem at Passover and then left behind by mistake. When his parents found him in the temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions,” they scolded him. They had been anxiously searching for him, they said. “Why were you searching for me?” he responded with innocent astonishment. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:41-50). Luke tells the story with a tantalizing economy of detail. We must therefore be careful not to read into it more than the narrative itself warrants. This much we may affirm, however: that already at the age of twelve Jesus was both speaking of God as “my Father” and also feeling an inward compulsion to occupy himself with his Father’s affairs. He knew he had a mission. His Father had sent him into the world for a purpose. This mission he must perform; this purpose he must fulfill. What these were emerges gradually in the narrative of the Gospels.

The Evangelists hint that Jesus’ baptism and temptation were both occasions on which he committed himself to go God’s way rather than the devil’s, the way of suffering and death rather than of popularity and acclaim. Yet Mark (who is followed in this by Matthew and Luke) pinpoints a later event when Jesus began to

<sup>16</sup>Lucian *The Passing of Peregrinus*, trans. A. M. Harman, in *The Works of Lucian* (London: Heinemann, 1936), 5:15.

teach this clearly. It was the watershed in his public ministry. Having withdrawn with his apostles to the northern district around Caesarea Philippi in the foothills of Mount Hermon, he put to them the direct question of who they thought he was. When Peter blurted out that he was God's Messiah, immediately Jesus "warned them not to tell anyone about him" (Mk 8:29-30). This injunction was consistent with his previous instructions about keeping the so-called Messianic secret. Yet now something new took place: Jesus

then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. (Mk 8:31-32)

"Plainly" translates *parresia*, meaning "with freedom of speech" or "openly." There was to be no secret about this. The fact of his Messiahship had been secret, because its character had been misunderstood. The popular Messianic expectation was of a revolutionary political leader. John tells us that at the peak of Jesus' Galilean popularity, after feeding the five thousand, the crowds had "intended to come and make him king by force" (Jn 6:15). Now that the apostles had clearly recognized and confessed his identity, however, he could explain the nature of his Messiahship and do so openly. Peter rebuked him, horrified by the fate he had predicted for himself. But Jesus rebuked Peter in strong language. The same apostle who in confessing Jesus' divine Messiahship had received a revelation from the Father (Mt 16:17), had been deceived by the devil to deny the necessity of the cross. "Out of my sight, Satan!" Jesus said, with a vehemence which must have astonished his hearers. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."<sup>17</sup>

This incident is usually referred to as the first "prediction of the Passion." There had been passing allusions before (e.g., Mk 2:19-20); but this was quite unambiguous. The second was made a little later, as Jesus was passing through Galilee incognito. He said to the Twelve:

The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise. (Mk 9:31)

Mark says that the disciples did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him. Matthew adds that they were "filled with grief" (Mk 9:30-32; cf. Mt 17:22-23). This was probably the time when, according to Luke, Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). He was determined to fulfill what had been written of him.

<sup>17</sup>Mk 8:31—9:1; cf. Mt 16:21-28; Lk 9:18-27.

Jesus made his third "prediction of the Passion" when they were heading for the Holy City. Mark introduces it with a graphic description of the awe which the Lord's resolution inspired in them:

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

Luke adds his comment that "everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled" (Mk 10:32-34; cf. Mt 20:17-19; Lk 18:31-34).

This threefold repetition of the Passion prediction adds a note of solemnity to Mark's narrative. It is in this way that he deliberately prepares his readers, as Jesus deliberately prepared the Twelve, for the terrible events that were to take place. Putting the three predictions together, the most impressive emphasis is neither that Jesus would be betrayed, rejected and condemned by his own people and their leaders, nor that they would hand him over to the Gentiles who would first mock and then kill him, nor that after three days he would rise from death. It is not even that each time Jesus designates himself "Son of Man" (the heavenly figure whom Daniel saw in his vision, coming in the clouds of heaven, being given authority, glory and sovereign power, and receiving the worship of the nations) and yet paradoxically states that as Son of Man he will suffer and die, thus with daring originality combining the two Old Testament Messianic figures, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and the reigning Son of Man of Daniel 7. More impressive still is the determination he both expressed and exemplified. He *must* suffer and be rejected and die, he said. Everything written of him in Scripture *must* be fulfilled. So he set his face toward Jerusalem and went ahead of the Twelve on the road. He instantly recognized Peter's negative comment as Satanic and therefore instantly repudiated it.

Although these three predictions form an obvious trio because of their similar structure and wording, the Gospels record at least eight more occasions on which Jesus alluded to his death. Coming down from the mountain where he had been transfigured, he warned that he would suffer at the hands of his enemies just as John the Baptist had done (Mt 17:9-13; Mk 9:9-13; cf. Lk 9:44), and in response to the outrageously selfish request of James and John for the best seats in the king-

dom, he said that he himself had come to serve, not to be served, and “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:35-45; Mt 20:20-28). The remaining six allusions were all made during the last week of his life, as the crisis drew near. He saw his death as the culmination of centuries of Jewish rejection of God’s message, and foretold that God’s judgment would bring Jewish national privilege to an end (Mk 12:1-12; cf. Mt 21:33-46; Lk 20:9-19). Then on the Tuesday, mentioning the Passover, he said he was going to be “handed over to be crucified”; in the Bethany home he described the pouring of perfume over his head as preparing him for burial; in the upper room he insisted that the Son of Man would go just as it was written about him, and gave them bread and wine as emblems of his body and blood, thus foreshadowing his death and requesting its commemoration. Finally, in the Garden of Gethsemane he refused to be defended by men or angels, since “how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”<sup>18</sup> Thus the Synoptic Evangelists bear a common witness to the fact that Jesus both clearly foresaw and repeatedly foretold his coming death.

John omits these precise predictions. Yet he bears witness to the same phenomenon by his seven references to Jesus’ “hour” (usually *hora* but once *kairos*, “time”). It was the hour of his destiny, when he would leave the world and return to the Father. Moreover, his hour was in the Father’s control, so that at first it was “not yet,” though in the end he could confidently say “the hour has come.”

When Jesus said to his mother at the Cana wedding after the wine had run out, and to his brothers when they wanted him to go to Jerusalem and advertise himself publicly, “My time has not yet come,” the surface meaning was plain. But John intended his readers to detect the deeper meaning, even though Jesus’ mother and brothers did not (Jn 2:4; 7:8). John continues to share this secret with his readers and uses it to explain why Jesus’ apparently blasphemous statements did not lead to his arrest. “They tried to seize him,” he comments, “but no-one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come.”<sup>19</sup> Only when Jesus reaches Jerusalem for the last time does John make the reference explicit. When some Greeks asked to see him, he first said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” and then, after speaking plainly of his death, he went on: “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (Jn 12:20-28). Then twice in

<sup>18</sup>For the Passover saying see Mt 26:2; for the “burial” references Mk 14:3-9; cf. Mt 26:6-13; for the woe on Judas, Mk 14:10ff.; cf. Mt. 26:14ff. and Lk 22:22; for the institution of the supper, Mk 14:22-25; cf. Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26; and for the arrest, Mt. 26:47-56; cf. Mk 14:43-50; Lk 22:47-53; Jn 18:1-11.

<sup>19</sup>Jn 7:25-44, esp. v. 30; and Jn 8:12-27, esp. v. 20.

the upper room he made final references to the time having come for him to leave the world and to be glorified (Jn 13:1; 17:1).

However uncertain we may feel about the earlier allusions to his “hour” or “time,” we can be in no doubt about the last three. For Jesus specifically called his “hour” the time of his “glorification,” which (as we will see later) began with his death, and added that he could not ask to be delivered from it because this was the reason he had come into the world. Indeed, the paradox John records can hardly have been accidental, that the hour for which he had come into the world was the hour in which he left it. Mark makes matters yet more explicit by identifying his “hour” with his “cup” (Jn 12:27; 13:1; Mk 14:35, 41; cf. Mt 26:18).

From this evidence supplied by the Gospel writers, what are we justified in saying about Jesus’ perspective on his own death? Beyond question he knew that it was going to happen—not in the sense that all of us know we will have to die one day, but in the sense that he would meet a violent, premature, yet purposive death. More than that, he gives three intertwining reasons for its inevitability.

First, he knew he would die because of the hostility of the Jewish national leaders. It appears that this was aroused quite early during the public ministry. His attitude to the law in general, and to the sabbath in particular, incensed them. When he insisted on healing a man with a shriveled hand in a synagogue on a sabbath day, Mark tells us that “the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (Mk 3:6). Jesus must have been aware of this. He was also very familiar with the Old Testament record of the persecution of the faithful prophets.<sup>20</sup> Although he knew himself to be more than a prophet, he also knew he was not less and that therefore he could expect similar treatment. He was a threat to the leaders’ position and prejudices. According to Luke, after his reading and exposition of Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue, in which he seemed to be teaching a divine preference for the Gentiles, “all the people in the synagogue were furious. . . . They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” Luke adds that “he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Lk 4:16-30). But it was a narrow escape. Jesus knew that sooner or later they would get him.

Second, he knew he would die because that is what was written of the Messiah in the Scriptures: “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him” (Mk 14:21). Indeed, when referring to the Old Testament prophetic witness, he tended

<sup>20</sup>Joachim Jeremias develops this argument in *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1966), see esp. p. 41.



to couple the death and resurrection, the sufferings and glory, of the Messiah. For the Scriptures taught both. And the Lord was still insisting on this after he had risen. He said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:25-27; cf. Lk 24:44-47).

One would dearly love to have been present at this exposition of "Christ in all the Scriptures." For the actual number of his recognizable quotations from the Old Testament, in relation to the cross and resurrection, is not large. He predicted the falling away of the apostles by quoting from Zechariah that when the shepherd was struck the sheep would be scattered (Zech 13:7; Mt 26:31; Mk 14:27). He concluded his parable of the tenants with a telling reference to the stone which, though rejected by the builders, subsequently became the building's capstone or cornerstone.<sup>21</sup> And while hanging on the cross, three of his so-called seven words were direct quotations from Scripture: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" being Psalm 22:1, "I thirst" coming from Psalm 69:21, and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" from Psalm 31:5. These three psalms all describe the deep anguish of an innocent victim who is suffering both physically and mentally at the hands of his enemies, but who at the same time maintains his trust in his God. Although of course they were written to express the distress of the psalmist himself, yet Jesus had evidently come to see himself and his own sufferings as their ultimate fulfillment.

It is, however, from Isaiah 53 that Jesus seems to have derived the clearest forecast not only of his sufferings but also of his subsequent glory. For there the servant of Yahweh is first presented as "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Is 53:3), on whom the Lord laid our sins, so that "he was pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Is 53:5-6), and then, at the end of both chapters 52 and 53, is "raised and lifted up and highly exalted" (Is 52:13) and receives "a portion among the great" (Is 53:12), as a result of which he will "sprinkle many nations" (Is 52:15) and "justify many" (Is 53:11). The only straight quotation which is recorded from Jesus' lips is from verse 12, "he was numbered with the transgressors." "I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me," he said (Lk 22:37). Nevertheless, when he declared that he "must suffer many things" and had "not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 8:31; 10:45), although these are not direct quotations from

<sup>21</sup>Ps 118:22; Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10-11; Lk 20:17. Cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7.

Isaiah 53, yet their combination of suffering, service and death for the salvation of others points straight in that direction. Moreover Paul, Peter, Matthew, Luke and John—the major contributors to the New Testament—together allude to at least eight of the chapter's twelve verses. What was the origin of their confident, detailed application of Isaiah 53 to Jesus? They must have derived it from his own lips. It was from this chapter more than from any other that he learned that the vocation of the Messiah was to suffer and die for human sin and so be glorified.

The opposition of the hierarchy and the predictions of Scripture, however, do not in themselves explain the inevitability of Jesus' death. The third and most important reason why he knew he would die was because of his own deliberate choice. He was determined to fulfill what was written of the Messiah, however painful it would be. This was neither fatalism nor a martyr complex. It was quite simply that he believed Old Testament Scripture to be his Father's revelation and that he was totally resolved to do his Father's will and finish his Father's work. Besides, his suffering and death would not be purposeless. He had come "to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). It was for the salvation of sinners that he would die, giving his life as a ransom to set them free (Mk 10:45). So he set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem. Nothing would deter or deflect him. Hence the reiterated "must" when he spoke of his death. The Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected. Everything that was written about him *must* be fulfilled. He refused to appeal for angels to rescue him because then the Scriptures would not be fulfilled which said that it *must* happen in this way. Was it not *necessary* for the Christ to suffer before entering his glory?<sup>22</sup> He felt under constraint, even under compulsion: "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am [RSV "constrained," literally "hemmed in"] until it is completed!" (Lk 12:50).

So then, although he knew he must die, it was not because he was the helpless victim either of evil forces arrayed against him or of any inflexible fate decreed for him, but because he freely embraced the purpose of his Father for the salvation of sinners, as it had been revealed in Scripture.

This was the perspective of Jesus on his death. Despite the great importance of his teaching, his example, and his works of compassion and power, none of these was central to his mission. What dominated his mind was not the living but the giving of his life. This final self-sacrifice was his "hour" for which he had come into the world. And the four Evangelists, who bear witness to him in the Gospels, show that they understand this by the disproportionate amount of space which they give

<sup>22</sup>Mk 8:31; Lk 24:44; Mt 26:54; Lk 24:26.



to the story of his last few days on earth, his death and resurrection. It occupies between a third and a quarter of the three Synoptic Gospels, while John's Gospel has justly been described as having two parts, "the book of the signs" and "the book of the Passion," since John spends an almost equal amount of time on each.

### THE APOSTLES' EMPHASIS

It is often asserted that in the book of Acts the apostles' emphasis was on the resurrection rather than the death of Jesus, and that in any case they gave no doctrinal explanation of his death. Neither of these arguments is sustained by the evidence. I am not of course wanting to claim that the apostles' sermons express a full doctrine of the atonement as it is later found in their letters. Luke's historical sense enables him to record what they said at the time, not what they might have said if they had been preaching several years later. Yet the seeds of the developed doctrine are there. Luke weaves his story around the two apostles Peter and Paul and supplies five sample evangelistic sermons from each, in shorter or longer summaries. Thus we have Peter's sermons from the Day of Pentecost and in the Temple precincts, brief abstracts of what he said during his two trials by the Sanhedrin, and a fairly full account of his message to the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his household.<sup>23</sup> Then, when Luke is recounting the missionary exploits of his hero Paul, he contrasts his address to Jews in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch with that to pagans in the open air at Lystra; contrasts two more in the second missionary journey, namely to Thessalonian Jews and Athenian philosophers; and summarizes his teaching to the Jewish leaders in Rome.<sup>24</sup> In each sermon the approach is different. To Jews Paul spoke of the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but to Gentiles of the God of creation, who made the heavens, the earth and the sea and everything in them. Nevertheless, there was a core to the proclamation of both apostles, which might be reconstructed as follows:

Jesus was a man who was accredited by God through miracles and anointed by the Spirit to do good and to heal. Despite this, he was crucified through the agency of wicked men, though also by God's purpose according to the Scriptures that the Messiah must suffer. Then God reversed the human verdict on Jesus by raising him from the dead, also according to the Scriptures, and as attested by the apostolic eyewitnesses. Next God exalted him to the place of supreme honor as Lord and Savior. He now possesses full authority both to save those who repent, believe and are baptized

<sup>23</sup>Acts 2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43.

<sup>24</sup>Acts 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:2-3, 22-31; 28:23-31.

in his name, bestowing on them the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, and to judge those who reject him.

Several important points emerge from this gospel core.

First, although the apostles attributed the death of Jesus to human wickedness, they declared that it was also due to a divine purpose (e.g., Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:28). Moreover, what God had foreknown, he had foretold. So the apostles repeatedly emphasized that the death and resurrection of Jesus happened "according to the Scriptures." Paul's own later summary of the gospel also stressed this: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, . . . that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). Only sometimes are actual biblical quotations recorded. Many more unrecorded ones must have been used, as when in the Thessalonian synagogue Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3). It seems likely that these were—or at least included—the Scriptures which Jesus used, and therefore the doctrine which they expressed.

Second, although a full-scale atonement doctrine is missing, the apostolic preaching of the cross was not undocctrinal. Not only did they proclaim that Christ died according to the Scriptures, and so according to God's saving purpose, but they called the cross on which he died a "tree." Luke is careful to record this fact of both the leading apostles, Peter and Paul. Peter twice used the expression that the people "killed him by hanging him on a tree," to the Jewish Sanhedrin and to the Gentile Cornelius. Similarly, Paul told the synagogue congregation in Pisidian Antioch that when the people and their rulers in Jerusalem "had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree" (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29).

Now they were under no necessity to use this language. Peter also spoke of Jesus' "crucifixion," and Paul of his "sufferings" and "execution" (Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10; 17:3; 13:28). So why their references to the "tree" and to his having been "hanged" on it? The only possible explanation is to be found in Deuteronomy 21:22-23, where instructions were given for the body of a man, who had been executed for a capital offense by hanging, to be buried before nightfall, "because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." The apostles were quite familiar with this legislation and with its implication that Jesus died under the divine curse. Yet instead of hushing it up, they deliberately drew people's attention to it. So evidently they were not embarrassed by it. They did not think of Jesus as in any sense deserving to be accursed by God. They must, therefore, have at least begun to understand that it was our curse which he was bearing. Certainly both apostles stated this plainly in their later letters. Paul in Galatians, probably written very soon after

his visit to Pisidian Antioch, wrote that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal 3:13). And Peter wrote: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24). If then Peter and Paul in their letters plainly saw the cross of Jesus in sin-bearing or curse-bearing terms, and both linked this fact with the verses in Deuteronomy about being hanged on a tree, is it not reasonable to suppose that already in their Acts speeches, in which they called the cross a tree, they had glimpsed the same truth? In this case there is more doctrinal teaching about the cross in the early sermons of the apostles than they are often credited with.

Third, we need to consider how the apostles presented the resurrection. Although they emphasized it, it would be an exaggeration to call their message an exclusively resurrection gospel. For in the nature of the case the resurrection cannot stand by itself. Since it is a resurrection from death, its significance is determined by the nature of this death. Indeed, the reason for emphasizing the resurrection may be rather to emphasize something about the death which it cancels and conquers. This proves to be the case. At its simplest their message was: “you killed him, God raised him, and we are witnesses.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the resurrection was the divine reversal of the human verdict. But it was more than this. By the resurrection God “glorified” and “exalted” the Jesus who had died (Acts 3:13; 2:33). Promoting him to the place of supreme honor at his right hand, in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 and on account of the achievement of his death, God made the crucified and risen Jesus “both Lord and Christ,” both “Prince and Savior,” with authority to save sinners by bestowing on them repentance, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this comprehensive salvation is specifically said to be due to his powerful “Name” (the sum total of his person, death and resurrection), in which people must believe and into which they must be baptized, since there is “no other name under heaven given to men” by which they must be saved.<sup>27</sup>

When we turn from the apostles’ early sermons recorded in the Acts to the more mature utterances of their letters, the prominent place they give to the cross is even more marked. True, some of the shortest letters do not mention it (such as Paul’s to Philemon, Jude’s, and John’s second and third), and it is not altogether surprising that James’s largely ethical homily does not refer to it. Yet the three major letter-writers of the New Testament—Paul, Peter and John—are unanimous in witnessing to its centrality, as are also the letter to the Hebrews and the Revelation.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Acts 2:23-24; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39-40; 13:28-30.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Acts 2:33-36; 3:26; 5:31-32; 10:43; 13:38-39.

<sup>27</sup>Acts 2:38; 3:16; 4:10, 12; cf. Lk 24:46-47.

We begin with Paul. He found no anomaly in defining his gospel as “the message of the cross,” his ministry as “we preach Christ crucified,” baptism as initiation “into his death” and the Lord’s Supper as a proclamation of the Lord’s death. He boldly declared that, though the cross seemed either foolishness or a “stumbling block” to the self-confident, it was in fact the very essence of God’s wisdom and power (1 Cor 1:18-25; Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 11:26). So convinced was he of this that he had deliberately resolved, he told the Corinthians, to renounce worldly wisdom and instead to know nothing among them “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:1-2). When later in the same letter he wished to remind them of his gospel, which he had himself received and had handed on to them, which had become the foundation on which they were standing and the good news by which they were being saved, what was “of first importance” (he said) was “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared” (1 Cor 15:1-5). And when a few years later he developed this outline into the full gospel manifesto that is his letter to the Romans, his emphasis is even more strongly on the cross. For having proved all humankind sinful and guilty before God, he explains that God’s righteous way of putting the unrighteous right with himself operates “through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,” whom “God presented as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Rom 3:21-25). Consequently, we are “justified by his blood” and “reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:9-10). Without Christ’s sacrificial death for us salvation would have been impossible. No wonder Paul boasted in nothing except the cross (Gal 6:14).

The apostle Peter’s testimony is equally clear. He begins his first letter with the startling statement that his readers have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ. And a few verses later, he reminds them that the price of their redemption from their former empty way of life has not been “perishable things such as silver or gold,” but rather “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet 1:18-19). Although the remaining references in his letter to the death of Jesus relate it to the unjust sufferings of Christians (“glory through suffering” being the principle for them as for him), Peter nevertheless takes the opportunity to give some profound instruction about the Savior’s death. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” and “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet 2:24; 3:18), in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53. Because in the context Peter is emphasizing the cross as our example, it is all the more striking that he should at the same time write of Christ our sin-bearer and substitute.

John's emphasis in his letters was on the incarnation. Because he was combating an early heresy that tried to sever Christ from Jesus, the divine Son from the human being, he insisted that Jesus was "the Christ come in the flesh" and that anyone who denied this was the antichrist (e.g., 1 Jn 2:22; 4:1-3; 2 Jn 7). Nevertheless, he saw the incarnation as being a view to the atonement. For God's unique love was seen not so much in the coming as in the dying of his Son, whom he "sent . . . as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" and whose "blood . . . purifies us from every sin."<sup>28</sup>

The letter to the Hebrews, which is more a theological tract than a letter, was written to Jewish Christians who, under the pressure of persecution, were being tempted to renounce Christ and relapse into Judaism. The author's tactic was to demonstrate the supremacy of Jesus Christ, not only as Son over the angels and as Prophet over Moses, but in particular as Priest over the now obsolete Levitical priesthood. For the sacrificial ministry of Jesus, our "great high priest" (Heb 4:14), is incomparably superior to theirs. He had no sins of his own for which to make sacrifice; the blood he shed was not of goats and calves but his own; he had no need to offer the same sacrifices repeatedly, which could never take away sins, because he made "one sacrifice for sins for ever"; and he has thus obtained an "eternal redemption" and established an "eternal covenant" which contains the promise, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (see esp. Heb 8—10).

Still more striking than all this, however, is the portrait of Jesus in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation. He is introduced to us in its first chapter as "the first-born from the dead" (Rev 1:5) and "the Living One," who was dead but now is alive forever and who holds the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18). An appropriate doxology is added: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, . . . to him be glory and power for ever and ever!" (Rev 1:5-6).

John's most common designation of Jesus, consonant with the symbolic imagery of the Revelation, is simply "the Lamb." The reason for this title, which is applied to him twenty-eight times throughout the book, has little to do with the meekness of his character (although once his qualities as both Lion and Lamb are deliberately contrasted [Rev 5:5-6]); it is rather because he has been slain as a sacrificial victim and by his blood has set his people free. In order to grasp the broad perspective from which John views the influence of the Lamb, it may be helpful to divide it into four spheres—salvation, history, worship and eternity.

<sup>28</sup>1 Jn 3:16; 4:9, 14; 4:10; cf. 1 Jn 2:1-2, 7.

The redeemed people of God (that "great multitude that no-one could count"), who are drawn from every nation and language and stand before God's throne, specifically attribute their salvation to God and the Lamb. They cry with a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." By a very dramatic figure of speech the robes they are wearing are said to have been "washed . . . and made white in the blood of the Lamb." In other words, they owe their righteous standing before God entirely to the cross of Christ, through which their sins have been forgiven and their defilement cleansed. Their salvation through Christ is also secure, for not only are their names written in the Lamb's book of life, but the Lamb's name is written on their foreheads.<sup>29</sup>

In John's vision, however, the Lamb is more than the Savior of a countless multitude; he is depicted also as the Lord of all history. To begin with, he is seen "standing in the center of the throne," that is, sharing in the sovereign rule of Almighty God. More than that, the occupant of the throne is holding in his right hand a seven-sealed scroll, which is generally identified as the book of history. At first John "wept and wept" because no one in the universe could open the scroll, or even look inside it. But then at last the Lamb is said to be worthy. He takes the scroll, breaks the seals one by one, and thus (it seems) unfolds history chapter by chapter. It is significant that what has qualified him to assume this role is his cross, for this is the key to history and the redemptive process it inaugurated. Despite their sufferings from war, famine, plague, persecution and other catastrophes, God's people can yet overcome the devil "by the blood of the Lamb" and are assured that the final victory will be his and theirs, since the Lamb proves to be "Lord of lords and King of kings."<sup>30</sup>

It is not surprising to learn that the Author of salvation and the Lord of history is also the object of heaven's worship. In chapter 5 we listen as one choir after another is brought in to swell the praise of the Lamb. First, when he had taken the scroll, "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders" (probably representing the whole creation on the one hand and the whole church of both Testaments on the other) "fell down before the Lamb . . . and sang a new song:

You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open the seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased men for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

<sup>29</sup>Rev 7:9-14, 16-17; 13:8; 21:27; 14:1ff.

<sup>30</sup>Rev 5:1-6; 22:1, 3; 12:11; 17:14.



Next, John heard the voice of a hundred million angels, or more, who constituted the outer circle of those surrounding the throne. They too said with a loud voice:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!

Then finally he “heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them”—universal creation—singing:

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honor and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!

To this the four living creatures responded with their “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped (Rev 5:8-9, 11-14).

Jesus the Lamb does more than occupy the center of the stage today in salvation, history and worship; in addition, he will have a central place when history ends and the curtain rises on eternity. On the day of judgment those who have rejected him will try to escape from him. They will call to the mountains and rocks to engulf them: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” For those who have trusted and followed him, however, that day will be like a wedding day and a wedding feast. For the final union of Christ with his people is depicted in terms of the Lamb’s marriage to his bride. Changing the metaphor, the new Jerusalem will descend from heaven. It will have no temple in it, “because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple”; nor will it need either sun or moon, “for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”<sup>31</sup>

One cannot fail to notice, or to be impressed by, the seer’s repeated and uninhibited coupling of “God and the Lamb.” The person he places on an equal level with God is the Savior who died for sinners. He depicts him as mediating God’s salvation, sharing God’s throne, receiving God’s worship (the worship due to him) and diffusing God’s light. And his worthiness, which qualifies him for these unique privileges, is due to the fact that he was slain and by his death procured our salvation. If (as may be) the book of life is said in Revelation 13:8 to belong to “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world,” then John is telling us nothing less than that from an eternity of the past to an eternity of the future the center of

<sup>31</sup>Rev 6:15-17; 19:6-7; 21:9-10, 22-23.

the stage is occupied by the Lamb of God who was slain.

#### PERSISTENCE DESPITE OPPOSITION

This survey leaves us in no doubt that the principal contributors to the New Testament believed in the centrality of the cross of Christ and believed that their conviction was derived from the mind of the Master himself. The early postapostolic church, therefore, had a firm double base—in the teaching of Christ and his apostles—for making a cross the sign and symbol of Christianity. Church tradition proved in this to be a faithful reflection of Scripture.

Moreover, we must not overlook their remarkable tenacity. They knew that those who had crucified the Son of God had subjected him to “public disgrace” and that in order to endure the cross Jesus had had to humble himself to it and to “scorn its shame” (Heb 6:6; Phil 2:8; Heb 12:2). Nevertheless, what was shameful, even odious, to the critics of Christ was in the eyes of his followers most glorious. They had learned that the servant was not greater than the master and that for them as for him suffering was the means to glory. More than that, suffering was glory, and whenever they were “insulted because of the name of Christ,” then “the Spirit of glory” rested upon them.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the enemies of the gospel neither did nor do share this perspective. There is no greater cleavage between faith and unbelief than in their respective attitudes to the cross. Where faith sees glory, unbelief sees only disgrace. What was foolishness to Greeks, and continues to be to modern intellectuals who trust in their own wisdom, is nevertheless the wisdom of God. And what remains a stumbling block to those who trust in their own righteousness, like the Jews of the first century, proves to be the saving power of God (1 Cor 1:18-25).

One of the saddest features of Islam is that it rejects the cross, declaring it inappropriate that a major prophet of God should come to such an ignominious end. The Qu’ran sees no need for the sin-bearing death of a Savior. At least five times it declares categorically that “no soul shall bear another’s burden.” Indeed, “if a laden soul cries out for help, not even a near relation shall share its burden.” Why is this? It is because “each man shall reap the fruits of his own deeds,” even though Allah is merciful and forgives those who repent and do good. Denying the need for the cross, the Qu’ran goes on to deny the fact. The Jews “uttered a monstrous falsehood” when they declared “we have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah,” for “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him,

<sup>32</sup>Lk 24:26; Jn 12:23-24; 1 Pet 1:11; 4:13; 5:1, 10; 4:14.

but they thought they did."<sup>33</sup> Although Muslim theologians have interpreted this statement in different ways, the commonly held belief is that God cast a spell over the enemies of Jesus in order to rescue him, and that either Judas Iscariot<sup>34</sup> or Simon of Cyrene was substituted for him at the last moment. In the nineteenth century the Ahmadiya sect of Islam borrowed from different liberal Christian writers the notion that Jesus only swooned on the cross and revived in the tomb, adding that he subsequently traveled to India to teach and died there; they claim to be the guardians of his tomb in Kashmir.

But Christian messengers of the good news cannot be silent about the cross. Here is the testimony of the American missionary Samuel M. Zwemer (1867-1952), who labored in Arabia, edited *The Muslim World* for forty years, and is sometimes called "The apostle to Islam":

The missionary among Moslems (to whom the Cross of Christ is a stumbling-block and the atonement foolishness) is driven daily to deeper meditation on this mystery of redemption, and to a stronger conviction that here is the very heart of our message and our mission. . . .

If the Cross of Christ is anything to the mind, it is surely everything—the most profound reality and the sublimest mystery. One comes to realize that literally all the wealth and glory of the gospel centres here. The Cross is the pivot as well as the centre of New Testament thought. It is the exclusive mark of the Christian faith, the symbol of Christianity and its cynosure.

The more unbelievers deny its crucial character, the more do believers find in it the key to the mysteries of sin and suffering. We rediscover the apostolic emphasis on the Cross when we read the gospel with Moslems. We find that, although the offence of the Cross remains, its magnetic power is irresistible.<sup>35</sup>

*Irresistible* is the very word an Iranian student used when telling me of his conversion to Christ. Brought up to read the Qu'ran, say his prayers and lead a good life, he nevertheless knew that he was separated from God by his sins. When Christian friends brought him to church and encouraged him to read the Bible, he learned that Jesus Christ had died for his forgiveness. "For me the offer was irre-

<sup>33</sup>Quotations are from the translation of the Qu'ran by N. J. Dawood, 3rd rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1958) The five rejections of the possibility of "substitution" are on pp. 114 (53.38), 176 (25.18), 230 (17.15), 274 (39.7) and 429 (6.164).

<sup>34</sup>The spurious Gospel of Barnabas, written in Italian in the fourteenth or fifteenth century by a Christian convert to Islam, contains parts of the Qu'ran as well as of the four canonical Gospels. It tells the fantastic tale that, when Judas came with the soldiers to arrest Jesus, he withdrew into a house. There angels rescued him through a window, while Judas "was so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus" that everybody was deceived, and Judas was crucified in Jesus' place.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Glory of the Cross* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1928), p. 6.

sistible and heaven-sent," he said, and he cried to God to have mercy on him through Christ. Almost immediately "the burden of my past life was lifted. I felt as if a huge weight . . . had gone. With the relief and sense of lightness came incredible joy. At last it had happened. I was free of my past. *I knew* that God had forgiven me, and I felt clean. I wanted to shout, and tell everybody." It was through the cross that the character of God came clearly into focus for him and that he found Islam's missing dimension, "the intimate fatherhood of God and the deep assurance of sins forgiven."

Muslims are not by any means the only people, however, who repudiate the gospel of the cross. Hindus also, though they can accept its historicity, reject its saving significance. Gandhi, for example, the founder of modern India, who while working in South Africa as a young lawyer was attracted to Christianity, yet wrote of himself while there in 1894:

I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.<sup>36</sup>

Turning to the West, perhaps the most scornful rejection of the cross has come from the pen of the German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche (died 1900). Near the beginning of *The Anti-Christ* (1895) he defined the good as "the will to power," the bad as "all that proceeds from weakness," and happiness as "the feeling that power *increases*," while "what is more harmful than any vice" is "active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity." Admiring Darwin's emphasis on the survival of the fittest, he despised all forms of weakness, and in their place dreamed of the emergence of a "superman" and a "daring ruler race." To him *depravity* meant "decadence," and nothing was more decadent than Christianity which "has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted." Being "the religion of *pity*," it "preserves what is ripe for destruction" and so "thwarts the law of evolution."<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche reserved his bitterest invective for "the Christian conception of God" as "God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit," and for the Christian Messiah whom he dismissed contemptuously as "God on the Cross."<sup>38</sup>

If Nietzsche rejected Christianity for its "weakness," others have done so for its supposedly "barbaric" teachings. Professor Sir Alfred Ayer, for example, the Ox-

<sup>36</sup>Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography* (1948; reprint, London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 113.

<sup>37</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (1895; reprint, London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 115-18.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 128, 168.

ford philosopher who is well known for his antipathy to Christianity, wrote in a newspaper article that, among religions of historical importance, there was quite a strong case for considering Christianity the worst. Why so? Because it rests “on the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.”<sup>39</sup>

How is it that Christians can face such ridicule without shifting their ground? Why do we “cling to the old rugged cross” (in the words of a rather sentimental, popular hymn) and insist on its centrality, refusing to let it be pushed to the circumference of our message? Why must we proclaim the scandalous, and glory in the shameful? The answer lies in the single word *integrity*. Christian integrity consists partly in a resolve to unmask the caricatures, but mostly in personal loyalty to Jesus, in whose mind the saving cross was central. Indeed, readers who have come without bias to the Scriptures all seem to have come to the same conclusion. Here is a sample from this century.

P. T. Forsyth, the English Congregationalist, wrote in *The Cruciality of the Cross* (1909):

Christ is to us just what his cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there. . . . Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross.<sup>40</sup>

And the following year (1910) in *The Work of Christ* he wrote:

On this interpretation of the work of Christ [that is, the Pauline doctrine of reconciliation] the whole Church rests. If you move faith from that centre, you have driven the nail into the Church's coffin. The Church is then doomed to death, and it is only a matter of time when she shall expire.<sup>41</sup>

Next, Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian whose book *The Mediator* was first published in German in 1927 subtitled *A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, defended his conviction with these words:

In Christianity faith in the Mediator is not something optional, not something about which, in the last resort, it is possible to hold different opinions, if we are only united on the “main point.” For faith in the Mediator—in the event which took place once for all, a revealed atonement—is the Christian religion itself; it is the “main point”; it is not something alongside of the centre; it is the substance and kernel, not the husk. This is so true that we may even say: in distinction from all other forms of re-

<sup>39</sup>The *Guardian*, August 30, 1979.

<sup>40</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), pp. 44-45.

<sup>41</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), p. 53.

ligion, the Christian religion is faith in the one Mediator. . . . And there is no other possibility of being a Christian than through faith in that which took place once for all, revelation and atonement through the Mediator.<sup>42</sup>

Later Brunner applauds Luther's description of Christian theology as a *theologia crucis* and goes on:

The Cross is the sign of the Christian faith, of the Christian Church, of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. . . . The whole struggle of the Reformation for the *sola fide*, the *soli deo gloria*, was simply the struggle for the right interpretation of the Cross. He who understands the Cross aright—this is the opinion of the Reformers—understands the Bible, he understands Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Again,

the believing recognition of this uniqueness, faith in the Mediator, is the *sign* of the Christian faith. Whoever considers this statement to be a sign of exaggeration, intolerance, harshness, non-historical thought, and the like, has not yet heard the message of Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

My final quotation comes from the Anglican scholar Bishop Stephen Neill:

In the Christian theology of history, the death of Christ is the central point of history; here all the roads of the past converge; hence all the roads of the future diverges.<sup>45</sup>

The verdict of scholars has understandably percolated through into popular Christian devotion. Allowances should be made for Christians who at Christ's cross have found their pride broken, their guilt expunged, their love kindled, their hope restored and their character transformed, if they go on to indulge in a little harmless hyperbole. Perceiving the cross to be the center of history and theology, they naturally perceive it also to be the center of all reality. So they see it everywhere, and have always done so. I give two examples, one ancient and the other modern.

Justin Martyr, the second-century Christian apologist, confessed that wherever he looked, he saw the cross. Neither the sea is crossed nor the earth is ploughed without it, he writes, referring to a ship's mast and yard, and to a plough's blade and yoke. Diggers and mechanics do not work without cross-shaped tools, allud-

<sup>42</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (1927; reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 40.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>45</sup>From the chapter titled “Jesus and History,” in *Truth of God Incarnate*, ed. E. M. B. Green (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), p. 80.



ing presumably to a spade and its handle. Moreover, "the human form differs from that of the irrational animals in nothing else than in its being erect and having the arms extended." And if the torso and arms of the human form proclaim the cross, so do the nose and eyebrows of the human face.<sup>46</sup> Fanciful? Yes, entirely, and yet I find myself willing to forgive any such fancies which glorify the cross.

My modern example is the most eloquent description I know of the universality of the cross. It is Malcolm Muggeridge unconsciously updating Justin Martyr. Brought up in a Socialist home, and familiar with Socialist Sunday schools and their "sort of agnosticism sweetened by hymns," he became uneasy about "this whole concept of a Jesus of good causes." Then:

I would catch a glimpse of a cross—not necessarily a crucifix; maybe two pieces of wood accidentally nailed together, on a telegraph pole, for instance—and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however admirable they might be. . . .

It was, I know, an obsessive interest. . . . I might fasten bits of wood together myself, or doodle it. This symbol, which was considered to be derisory in my home, was yet also the focus of inconceivable hopes and desires. . . .

As I remember this, a sense of my own failure lies leadenly upon me. I should have worn it over my heart; carried it, a precious standard, never to be wrested out of my hands; even though I fell, still borne aloft. It should have been my cult, my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can't say I didn't know. I knew from the beginning, and turned away.<sup>47</sup>

Later, however, he turned back, as each of us must who has ever glimpsed the reality of Christ crucified. For the only authentic Jesus is the Jesus who died on the cross.

But why did he die? Who was responsible for his death? That is the question to which we turn in the next chapter.

<sup>46</sup>Justin Martyr *First Apology* 60, "Symbols of the Cross," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>47</sup>Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (London: Collins, 1969), pp. 24-25.