

IS CHRISTIANITY ABOUT A CROSS?

To touch this day with words is impossible, hopelessly inadequate. Truly, I apologize. *Not* to touch this day with efforts to comprehend is also unthinkable. I can only do the best I can, knowing it doesn't matter. Jesus is the One who will accomplish it, no matter what my words imply. Paul once commented to the Corinthians that he had decided to know nothing among them "*except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"

One still sees beautiful gold and silver crosses of exquisite design worn by many people. The cross, indeed, appears in endless forms throughout Western design and architecture, and one doesn't have to go to church to see crosses everywhere. On the other hand, it is difficult, though not impossible, to go to most churches and *not* see a cross. Even at this church, we have overcome our Puritan resistance to symbols enough to have 14 crosses up here in the chancel area (not counting my stole). Down where you sit there are 72, one on the end of each pew. There are 144 more on the hymnals we use, and another 15 in the foyer. We are surrounded by 245 crosses, not counting the ones many of you are wearing.

It is as if we think we cannot be reminded too often. It is as if we feel there is some power in the symbol itself. Without thinking, or maybe even without believing, the residue of the centuries clings to us and we sense rather than think that the Cross may be useful for warding off evil, or as a talisman or amulet of power. Even many macho, red-blooded athletes make the sign of the Cross before engaging in the contest. But ask one of them, "What is the significance of the Cross? Why do you make this sign before entering the challenge? Do you hope to die like the One this emblem represents?" What would they reply?

I know what some of you have replied when asked about the Cross. Some of you claim to have no interest in "that side" of Christianity. Some of you claim great interest but continued confusion on the subject. Some of you tell me deep and powerful concepts, if I can entice you to get past the memorized phrases and pat language. It seems to me that the Cross has become an awkward subject in many churches today. Some congregations are so busy honoring it that they resent any questions probing

its meaning. Others are so busy finding new truth that they neglect or forget the Cross altogether. It's enough to prompt a modern Christian to inquire: Is Christianity still about a Cross? And I mean a real one, however long ago - one made of wood, with blood running down it.

It has been said that Jesus died to save us - that Jesus died on a Cross to save us from sin. It has been said that Jesus paid the price for our transgressions - that the guilt was ours. It is implied and often said that because of our sins, and if justice is to be served, we deserve and even require a sentence of death - but that Jesus died in our place, taking upon Himself the punishment that we deserve. In this way, He stands in for us, sacrificing Himself for us, freeing us for another chance, or maybe many chances. It is said that on God's ledgers, we owe a debt we cannot possibly pay. And that Jesus, infinitely righteous Himself, has worth and value enough to pay that debt on our behalf. And that the Cross is both the proof and the collateral for that transaction - proof that Jesus chose and chooses to pay that price for us.

It seems to me there are many among us who do not understand these phrases. We may have a strong emotional reaction to some of them, but their content still eludes us. I know some people - and I do sincerely hope that I am one of them - who would die for Jesus any time He asked them to. On that level, it doesn't matter very much whether you or I or anybody else *understands exactly how to explain* what He did for us. I don't think that Peter was anywhere near as good a theologian as Paul, but either one of them would have died for Jesus any time He asked - and both of them proved it.

The Christian Faith is more than mentality, and most of us don't "think" our way into loyalty or devotion. But we are also called to be messengers, evangelists (*euangelos* = bringing good news). So the heart forces us to train the mind. Our loyalty to the Christ calls us toward as much understanding as we can find, so that we may share it, bear witness, show gratitude. I didn't say Peter was a bad theologian, just that he wasn't as good as Paul. To be fair, Peter didn't grow up speaking Greek and Hebrew, studying the Scriptures, or going to rabbinical school. Neither did most of us. But we can still ask: Does Christianity have anything to do with a Cross? Do we understand anything about it in our own minds? And can we discuss or explain any of it when we are talking with others?

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I know some people - and I am one of them - who know all the familiar phrases and usual explanations about Jesus dying for us, and yet I still cannot make any sense out of it the way it's usually explained. Not to boast (it was my own hunger that drove me to it, "humble country pastor" that I always wanted to be, started out to be, and still am in many ways), but I have read with passion and eagerness Bultmann, Tillich, the Niebuhr brothers, and Barth; Ferre, Brunner, Baille, Knox, and Pannenberg; Aulen and Fox and even Luther, Calvin, Augustine, and Paul (and many others who literally are not worth mentioning), trying to understand the *intellectual* significance of the Cross.

How does the execution of a criminal in Jerusalem in A.D. 33 - on the other side of the globe, and a language and culture apart from us - have anything to do with a friend of mine who got a girl pregnant but he doesn't love her and feels terribly guilty about it; with the girl who doesn't feel at all guilty about it but who is nevertheless broken-hearted; or with the coming baby, who is what we call "innocent," yet that innocence isn't going to change one whit the kind of world he or she is about to be born into?

This executed criminal from that far-off Cross is going to save all three of these people, if they will allow it - if they will receive it and accept it. But how?

Now, some people can walk off right here, realizing the whole thing is preposterous. I no longer have that choice. I truly believe (with more certainty than the fact that I'm standing here) that Jesus really is going to save those three people. I keep seeing it happen. I have watched His power at work for many years now. I don't ever expect to understand it all, but if I'm going to worship the Lord God with all my mind, I have to keep asking: What the Heaven is going on here? How is it that the Cross (and what happened there) keeps reaching us? What is He doing? What can I say to somebody who gets burned by the sin that rules here, inside and out, so that maybe they can find Him faster and cooperate with Him sooner?

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I will tell you some things I don't believe. And then I will tell you some things I do believe, but with barely any chance to explain why. Then you can drop it or pursue it as you like.

(1) I do not believe that God “wanted” Jesus to die. I think God would have been far more pleased if we had crowned Jesus our King and let Him lead us into peace and love.

(2) I do not believe that Jesus died to appease God’s anger toward us.

(3) I do not believe that God killed Jesus. It seems clear to me from the record that we did the killing. It was humans who killed Jesus - not God.

(4) The altar sacrifice analogy doesn’t work for me, unless I explain it in a very different and convoluted way that would take hours. Though the analogy is used by Paul and featured in the book of Hebrews, using it is extremely treacherous for those of us who did not grow up in a culture and religion where animal sacrifices are a daily part of temple worship.

I know that these things “I do not believe” are being told and taught in most of the churches of Christendom the world over: It was all the preordained will of God. Jesus was born to die. Judas had no choice but to betray Him. No other outcome was possible. God was in the background, choreographing it all, needing - requiring - the death of his Son to keep from destroying us. Justice demands it. We are helpless “onlookers” - spectators of this, the greatest drama in all history. And it was the *act* of sacrifice - the blood and the death - that is itself the “saving power.”

I do not believe any of this. It makes no sense. Somebody tried to explain it from a world long ago, but I find no faith in it. I find only superstition. It is justice, not love, that rules this scenario - no matter how much love motivates the sacrifice. And it is an ancient world - which believed that sacrifices to the gods were absolutely necessary to survival - that still instructs this kind of concept and belief: we tried for centuries to find a sacrifice good enough to get God on our side, but no number of animals, however perfect, were good enough ... until finally God helped us to find the perfect sacrifice - God’s own Son. Very impressive, if you grew up accepting the necessity of altar sacrifices to appease the gods. But I did not. More importantly, I grew up *not* believing it *because* this same Son of God revealed that God was not like this - was not, never had been, and never would be.

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Judaism was born, so to speak, in the incredible experience of Abraham discovering that God does not like human sacrifice. His son Isaac was spared, and never again were Jewish people to offer their children to God as altar sacrifices. Abraham got it. Abraham understood. The world moved into a whole new dimension of religion ... and then mostly went right back to the same old ways, concepts, and errors. Abraham got it, but God couldn't get it? Is that what we still believe?! God could not understand? God stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but still thinks the sacrifice of his own Son is not only necessary, but some kind of supreme blessing to mankind? If you think I'm being sarcastic, let me suggest that you have never heard a more pure sarcasm, nor one more filled with sorrow and anger.

God does not like - and will no longer accept or permit - human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; Leviticus 18:21; 20:3), yet God doesn't mind sacrificing his own Son in order to save us from his own wrath? If that's the mechanism of salvation - the explanation, the truth - I will happily insist on staying lost, and damned too, if that's the deal. Of course, the only reason I can pretend to be so brave is because, for other reasons, I trust Jesus more than any sacrifice you can name.

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What I do believe:

(1) I believe that Jesus was the Highest Earth Agent of the Creator Of All That Is. The titles are *much* too low but, at the very least, Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son (as we say) of God. He came in due season, as the Scriptures promised, to take over the leadership of Israel - God's chosen people - that they might truly become a light to all nations. Jesus, by incredible genius of strategy and planning, built a strong spiritual movement, and He came, in fulfillment of the prophecies, to declare Himself the True King of Israel on Palm Sunday in A.D. 33 (or so).

(2) I believe that Jesus came in spiritual power, appealing to people's true and inward religious belief and faith in God, rather than basing His mission on traditional outward political, military, or ecclesiastical power. This baffled both His friends and His enemies. But His bid for power, for leadership - to be acclaimed the Rightful King of Israel (the Messiah) - was genuine, authentic, and, in the end, crystal clear.

(3) It is a fact (not just my belief) that Jesus' identity, power, and authority were rejected by Israel. And yet, because of the superior planning and strategy of Jesus, His death could not be accomplished in secret, or later denied, or ever swept under the rug. He was perceived to be such a dire threat that He was murdered in cold blood by the most religious and moral people the world has ever bred, under the auspices of two of the most justice-oriented systems of government the world has ever known. But in the end - despite the setting and the context; despite the teachings and the ministry and the healings and the miracles; despite the prophecies and the popularity of the movement of John the Baptist and then of Jesus Himself - in the end, not even one friend, not one single, solitary human being, stood with Him against the lies, the evil, the torture, and the death that was decreed. That's the real Cross - made of wood, with blood running down it.

I know people who are not moved by that. But I am. That touches me more than anything else in this life ever has. That hurts worse than any personal toothache, or failure, or shame. It is more devastating than disease, or poverty. It is more difficult to bear than any anger or fear or loneliness or loss that I have ever known. And while your pain and trials may be greater than my own, you would be foolish to conclude that I have had a soft or easy life. I'm simply saying that it wouldn't matter to me if it happened two *million* years ago - not when it gets that clear.

If God was ever to send any agent, at any time, to any place on earth with a chance for a fair hearing, a fair shake, and maybe even an eager welcome, Jesus got and took that chance when He came to Israel in the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Israel had been talking of, studying about, dreaming of, and hoping, praying, and begging for Messiah to come for almost a thousand years. You would think there might have been a better reception. But Jesus was left to die. And more than that, He was brutally killed, against all the rules, *despite* all the rules ... against and despite all of the hopes and promises and faith we have ever claimed - as individuals, as a people, as a race, or as a religion.

(4) The result was not that God changed his mind about love or grace or anything else. Every time *we* learn anything, we think *God* is getting smarter. But God has never cared very much about our religious mumbo-jumbo; he has cared only about the heart, the motives, the intentions by which we desire and long to know and please him. But after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus (and I have never been able to think about one without the other) - after the Cross - people started

changing. People started believing that the heart and mind of God were finally revealed, and that the heart and mind of God were not at all like what we had supposed. In other words, people started waking up - finding their own hearts and minds changing, because their minds were now changed about the heart of God.

It probably started with Peter, and the rooster's crows. I suspect maybe Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus tumbled next. In any case, one at a time, from that day to this, people have learned the story, confronted that Cross, and something has twisted inside them beyond all repair: There is no help for us here. The unthinkable has happened. The unimaginable has occurred. There is no place on earth left to turn - not if we are so frightened and tortured and twisted that we will murder the Son of God who has come to help us.

We are beyond human repair. Left to our own devices, we will never get to any level of development worthy of eternal life, nor will we be able to endure it if it is offered. We are not good enough, and our systems and methods are not good enough - and they are never going to get good enough, not as long as we do it our way. *Nothing saved Him*. Our justice didn't save Him. Our court system didn't save Him. Our religious teachings didn't save Him. Our compassion didn't save Him. Our gratitude for His healing and preaching didn't save Him. Our most enlightened self-interest didn't save Him. Even our friendship and loyalty and love didn't save Him. It's OVER. All the pretenses are gone. That Cross has unmasked us forever. The denial and the excuses are laid bare. Furthermore, if that is the outcome for someone like Jesus, what chance is there for any of us? We keep thinking that if we just improve, we'll be okay. How improved do you have to get?! If Jesus isn't safe here, what about us? Our only hope is to hide in the dark and pray that God is blind, and that the society around us will not notice us.

(5) Jesus took away our pretense and denial. The estrangement, mistrust, and fear - the anger between us and God - there is no more pretending they don't exist. There is that Cross. I might like to imagine or wonder or fantasize that it is different now, or that we are different now. But I know it's a charade. There is still that Cross. How do we hide from its light? God is not the enemy. Never has been. God has always tried to help, and we have always refused it. That's what the Cross reveals.

Millions of humans have suffered and died throughout history. That's part of the tragedy, part of the way of sin and death that we live under. Millions of humans have suffered, but only One has been able to make it clear that it is because we are estranged from God, and because we do not trust God. Only One has been able to make it clear that God goes on loving us, all the way - and that it was even God who was behind His coming.

(6) The Cross wasn't the end, it just tore away the murk and fog - the mendacity. The people who have seen the Cross, from that day to this, have quit on this world - totally, flat-out, all-the-way quit. They know there's no hope here: If that's the way it is, if that's the way we are, then there's no hope for meaning, or truth, or love, or joy - not for us. Even if we thought we loved Him and hated to see Him die - but still wouldn't lift a finger to save Him because we were too afraid - that still means there's no hope. The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is no longer relevant. He's dead, and He will go on dying here forever ... unless a New Kingdom comes.

Only then, in the true and honest despair of the Cross - having suffered the loss of all human hope and promise - only then do we see for the first time a LIGHT that we could never see before. And it is so huge and beautiful that it's very hard to comprehend how we could not have seen it before. The Risen One begins to appear. So help me, I think His Spirit has always been here, trying to appear to us, but through all the denial and baloney and posturing and pretense, we couldn't see or hear or admit the presence. Now, with everything gone and no excuses or justifications to cloud the vision or throw dust in the air, we start to hear and see: a Kingdom not of this world; our own lives bought with a price; ourselves loved and forgiven beyond the deepest darkness we could ever have imagined ... in but not of the world ... Lord Christ, my life is yours.

I have no better words than Paul, the reformed religious murderer: *"Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."* (Galatians 6:14) As far as Paul is concerned, if the world kills Christ, it is the world that has died. Paul has lost all hope in it. And, as he has been saying over and over, he has lost all hope in the righteousness that comes from our laws and efforts to be good or bring improvement. And he has also been crucified to the world, which means he doesn't try to win its favor anymore, nor will he be surprised if the world turns

on him. If it turned on Jesus, it will turn on anyone. There is nothing Paul wants here anymore - only the chance to follow the crucified One into His True Kingdom, into a whole new reality.

From the outside, the confusion is great because utter despair and darkness turn so quickly to pure light and joy. The Cross is so grim, it destroys all hope. Yet in that very destruction, it reveals true HOPE at an entirely new magnitude. That makes perfect sense to an insider, to one going through it. But someone trying to understand from the outside can only suspect some form of delusion or madness. How can we rejoice in the loss of all hope, or in the awareness that everything we counted on or lived for is a mirage? We rejoice because when we see the mirage for what it is and stop trusting it altogether, then for the first time we see the True King and His Kingdom, in surpassing beauty so wondrous that all other longings seem like mere smoke that has blown away.

Did Jesus die for us? Of course He did: He refused to run from all our anger and stupidity and efforts to control and silence Him. And apart from His death, we could never have understood the magnitude or the depth of God's love - or our own refusal to receive it. And yes, I take it personally, more personally than anything else that has ever happened to me. But I wish we would get the phraseology straight. I don't mean that nobody has said it right; it's just that we don't hear it like they meant it. Jesus did not die *for* our sins - that is, to make up for them, or to cover them, or to pay some debt so we wouldn't have to. Who started the rumor that God cannot forgive unless you pay him off? Jesus died *because* of our SIN. He died *because* of our anger and fear and pride ... *because* of our aloneness and alienation ... *because* His quality and manner of life so terrified us that we killed Him. Why did Cain kill Abel? And Jesus takes away none of the discipline, struggle, and challenge of growth and learning and changing that are necessary for us - as anybody who has ever tried to *follow Him* finds out in a big hurry. Jesus did not die *for* our sins; He died *because* of our sin - because of our alienation from God.

Did His death take away our sin - our alienation and separation from God, our animosity and hatred toward God? I cannot speak for you, but I find it hard, even impossible, to see that Cross and keep my anger and animosity toward God. (Unless, of course, I think it was God who killed Him, which I do not.) Paul keeps saying "it reconciles" - it brings peace between us and God. It gives us a very different awareness of the

mind and heart and purposes of God. Especially, it changes our total awareness of how much God cares - and how personally he cares, and how consistently, and for all people in all generations. Is Paul correct in this? It has been my experience thus far.

A lot of words. Too many words. The Cross breaks our pride (*hubris*), once we truly see it. It destroys our independence, our isolationism. We turn our hearts and lives back toward God. Before the Cross, we could go our own way if we chose to, and the highest aim in life was to have things our own way, even if we consciously asked God to help us *get* our own way. But our way can never work - it can never get us what we want, where we want to go, or closer to who we want to be. There is that Cross, proving it. The world is wrong - wrong enough to kill the Son of God. It is the blind leading the blind.

Not everybody who sees the Cross realizes its message at first. But more and more of us do. We need God. Those who know this also need each other. So we head for home, like all prodigals do when they awaken. We turn will and life and heart and mind and soul toward God, as Jesus did - as Jesus showed *us* how to do. And that doesn't mean we do it for ourselves but in a different way. It means we let God help us - all the way, and every step of the WAY. *That* is how the Cross saves us. Not magic, not ritual, not superstition - conversion. Life in a new direction ... for a new reason ... by a higher TRUTH.

Is Christianity still about a Cross? Or, as people ask me from time to time, "Why do they call Good Friday 'good'?" What is the best thing that ever happened on our planet? What has done more good for more people than any other single thing? Well, we need Easter, and Pentecost too, for the full answer. But we cannot get to any of it except by way of the Cross. The Cross tears away the blinders ... and opens the WAY.

PRAYER

Well, Lord, You told us quite some time ago, but from the beginning: if we want to follow You, we have to take up our own crosses - our own deaths - in order to do so. We have never really understood that. We have never *wanted* to understand that. We have spent nearly zero time trying to understand that. We have filled our lives full of every kind of activity imaginable, trying to keep from understanding that. But we have wanted to follow You - and we do want to follow You. We love You, and You stand for all the true and beautiful and whole things in LIFE that draw us, and lift us, and haunt us ... that fill us with a HOPE and a PEACE to make our experience here worth going through. Your life was about a Cross. Make our lives about a Cross. Gather us around *Your* Cross. These things we pray together in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.