

## **The Heart of Christianity: The Cross**

### **Prologue:**

\*There are many shorthand ways of talking about “the heart of Christianity”

\*It is about loving God and loving what God loves

\*It is about transformation: of ourselves and the world

\*And so forth

\*Today, I will do so by talking about the central Christian symbol: the cross.

**I. As Payment for Sin:** the most common understanding for almost 1000 years

\*Semi-technical designations: the substitutionary or satisfaction understanding of Jesus’s death: he died in our place to satisfy the debt we owe to God

\*Goes with common Christianity’s emphasis on sin and forgiveness as the central dynamic in the Christian life

\*Central to evangelical Christianity. From *Christianity Today*, the most thoughtful evangelical magazine in the States: “No Substitute for the Substitute.” Most recently, “Jesus fully satisfied God for me” (Sept. 2013, p. 37).

\*Many of us, Catholic as well as Protestant, grew up with it. Good Friday memories:

“O Sacred Head Now Wounded”: Mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain

“Ah Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended”: Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. ‘Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee. I crucified thee.

“Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”

\*Shapes the meaning of “atonement” and “sacrifice” for many Christians who are not evangelicals. Both are important words – but neither is intrinsically about payment.

\*For many Christians, it’s “the default position,” shaping how we hear language about Jesus’s death.

### **II. Problems With the Payment Understanding: Historical and Theological**

**1. Historically, It Is Not Central in the First 1000 Years of Christianity.** In the NT, it is at most a minor metaphor, and some scholars say it’s not there at all.

\*First systematically articulated by Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo* (1098). His purpose: to provide a *rational* argument for the *necessity* of the incarnation and death of Jesus.

\*He used a model drawn from his cultural setting: the relationship between a medieval lord and his subjects. When a subject disobeyed the lord, could he forgive if he wanted to? No. For that would suggest that disobedience didn’t matter very much. Instead, payment, satisfaction, must be made so that the lord’s honor and order are maintained. Anselm then applied this model to our relationship with God. God cannot simply forgive; sin must be paid for. But only somebody who was sinless could pay the price of other people’s sins. Hence the necessity of Jesus, the God-man, perfect and without sin.

## **2. Theological Problems**

- \*Makes Jesus's death part of God's plan of salvation – indeed, God's will
- \*Emphasizes God's wrath and that it must be satisfied. But is that what God is like?
- \*Makes Jesus's life less important than this death, and thus obscures his message and what he was passionate about. Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ"
- \*Makes believing in Jesus more important than following him ("vampire Christians")
- \*Makes Easter irrelevant. That is, there is no intrinsic connection between Jesus's death and resurrection. What matters most is his death.

## **III. The Alternative to the Payment Understanding: The Twofold Meaning of Cross and Resurrection, Good Friday and Easter**

### **1. The Cross as Execution by "The Powers," the Authorities**

- \*Jesus didn't just die. He was killed, and in a particular way: crucifixion was an imperial form of execution reserved for those who defied imperial authority.
  - \*Why did they kill him? Because they were doing God's will, even if they didn't know that???? No. But because his message about "the kingdom of God" *on earth* challenged the way the domination system had put the world together. This is the political meaning of Good Friday: it is the domination system's "No" to Jesus and what he was passionate about. This also gives a political meaning to Easter: Easter is God's "No" to the powers that killed Jesus and God's "Yes" to Jesus and his passion for the kingdom of God.
- \*One of Paul's shorthand summaries of the gospel of Jesus: "Christ *crucified*." In that world, a cross was always a Roman cross.

### **2. As Archetype of Personal Transformation**

- \*Dying and rising as a cross-cultural archetype of radical transformation. Joseph Campbell: The Hero with a Thousand Faces goes to the land of the dead and returns
- \*The gospels: following Jesus is about following him on the path of dying and rising
- \*Paul: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2); dying and rising as the foundation of Christian identity (Rom 6)
- \*John: being born again, born of the Spirit
- \*Dying to an old identity (conferred by "this world") and being born into a new identity centered "in Christ," "in the Spirit," "in God."
- \*Dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being – a way of life marked by compassion, freedom and courage, and gratitude.

**Conclusion: The Central Christian Symbol of Cross and Resurrection** is about the twofold transformation at the center of the Christian life: personal and political. The cross is not about Jesus "doing it for us" so that we can be forgiven, but an invitation to participate in the path and passion we see in Jesus. *It is not about substitution, but about participation. Not substitutionary atonement, but participatory atonement. It is about how we become one with God and with God's passion for a transformed world.*