

THE CRUCIFIXION



Part 1:
Why did Jesus die?

INTRODUCTIONS

- Introduce yourselves around the table.
- What brings you to this study?
- How would you explain to someone that "Jesus died on the cross for our sins?"



"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

1 Corinthians 1:18



“The world’s religions have certain traits in common, but until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man...”



“The early Christian preaching announced the entrance of God upon the stage of history in the person of an itinerant Jewish teacher who had been ingloriously pinned up alongside two of society’s castoffs to die horribly, rejected and condemned by religious and secular authorities alike...”



“...discarded onto the garbage heap of humanity, scornfully forsaken by both elites and common folk, leaving behind only a discredited, demoralized handful of scruffy disciples who had no status whatsoever in the eyes of anyone. The peculiarity of this beginning for a world-transforming faith is not sufficiently acknowledged.”

- Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*



THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

- a form of government-sponsored torture and execution
- as irreligious a symbol as people in the first century could imagine
- not a decoration, but an object of shame and scandal
- And yet even secular people recognize it



HOW DO 21ST CENTURY PEOPLE VIEW THE CROSS?

- Cross as symbol of individual salvation
- Cross as example of sacrifice on behalf of others
- Cross as symbol of religious association
- Cross as symbol of personal challenges
- No longer "scandalous" in a post- Christendom age



A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

- Gnosticism
- The Early Church Fathers
- The Medieval Period
- The Reformation
- Atonement theories



GNOSTICISM

- “Gnosis” = secret knowledge
- Close cousin of Platonism
- Three characteristics:
 - An emphasis on spiritual knowledge
 - A hierarchy of spiritual accomplishment
 - A devaluation of physical/material life



THE APPEAL OF GNOSTICISM

- No clear distinction between God and Humanity or Humanity and Creation
- Jesus is a son of God, but all of us God's children, too
- Downplays the cross because of its material nature. We don't need all that blood, just a spiritual guru who can help us live a better life.



“Modern day gnosticism is the natural religion of Americans, including American Christians... Feel-good religion and spiritual pills to elevate our consciousness and enhance our sense of comfort with our presumably “real” selves— these are American specialties of long standing.”

Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*



RESULTS OF GNOSTICISM

- Gnosticism was a problem for the early church as well (John 6:66; I Corinthians 13)
- "Drawing back" from the teaching of the church
- Detaching spirituality from religion
- Rejection of connection between flesh and spirit (sexuality, death, conduct)
- Focus on our capacity for being redeemed
- Crucifixion is thus unnecessary



GNOSTIC GOSPELS

- Late (2nd century +) writings - Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas, etc.
- No Passion narratives
- Enlightenment of the mind enables the avoidance of suffering



"A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a cross."

- Richard Niebhur's description of gnostic Protestant liberalism



THE DOCTRINAL LENS: A HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

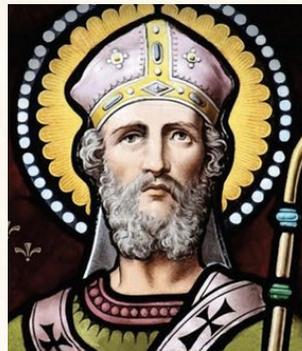
EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

- Two assumptions about the cross:
 - God in Christ won a great victory over the powers of evil
 - Jesus' death was somehow in our place
- No systematic theology of the cross



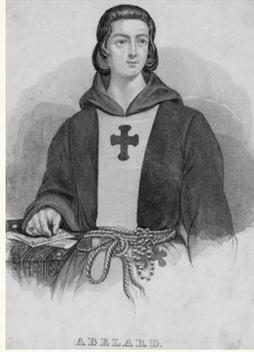
ANSELM

- 1033-1109AD
- "Satisfaction" Theory
- God's honor has been impugned by human sin and must be satisfied
- Reflect medieval code of honor



ABELARD

- 1079-1142 AD
- "Moral Example" theory
- The cross shows how much God loves us and thereby gives us strong reasons to love God and one another in return



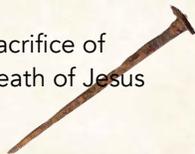
THE REFORMATION

- Martin Luther, 1517
- John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli
- Response to Roman Catholicism
- Emphasis on doctrine, particularly theories of atonement
- Most influential on modern thought



KEY DOCTRINAL QUESTIONS OF THE REFORMATION

- A rejection of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory and insistence that Christian soul went to heaven immediately at death.
- The pacification of divine wrath through the death of Jesus
- Objection to the mass (the continual sacrifice of Jesus) and insistence on once-for-all death of Jesus



"In general terms the Reformers and their successors were thus trying to give biblical answers to medieval questions. They were wrestling with the questions of how the angry God of the late medieval period might be pacified, both here (through the Mass?) and hereafter (in purgatory?)."

N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*



RESULTS OF THE REFORMATION LENS

- A truncated view of the cross
- An emphasis on a heaven-hell framework rather than new creation/resurrection
- Platonist emphasis on heaven as true "home"
- Transactional theology - God's wrath poured out against his son rather than sinful humanity



19TH CENTURY

- Post-Enlightenment Epicureanism posited a great gulf between heaven and earth
- The idea of "going home to heaven" had taken root in Protestant theology
- Detachment from biblical cosmology, including a detached spirituality and escapist eschatology
- Focus on individual rather than Kingdom



EFFECTS ON VIEW OF THE CROSS

- The prevalence of “penal substitutionary atonement” in Protestant theology
- Main question: “How can my sins be forgiven so I can go to heaven when I die?”
- Separated Cross and Kingdom, soteriology and theodicy
- Assumption that cross has nothing to do with social and political evil



MODERN EVANGELICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE “GOSPEL”

- All humans sinned, causing God to be angry and to want to kill them, to burn them forever in “hell.”
- Jesus somehow got in the way and took the punishment instead (it helped that he was innocent and that he was God’s son, too).
- We are now in the clear after all, heading for heaven (provided that we believe it).



BUT IS THIS REALLY THE GOSPEL?

- Reversal of John 3:16 - “God so *hated* the world that he *killed* his only son...” How is this “love?”
- God as angry despot rather than generous Creator and loving Father - more in line with paganism
- Why is this “good news?”
- How does it fit the larger narrative of creation?
- What is the role of the church?



A THREE-LAYERED MISTAKE

- **A Platonized eschatology** - substituting "souls going to heaven" for the promised new creation
- **A moralized anthropology** - substituting a qualifying examination of moral performance for the biblical notion of human vocation
- **A paganized soteriology** - substituting the idea of "God killing Jesus to satisfy his wrath" for the actual mission of the Creator God as revealed in the Scriptures



RESULTS OF THIS "GOSPEL: FALSE DICHOTOMIES

- Focus on individual eternal destiny vs. image bearing vocation (Gen. 1:26-27)
- Focus on heaven vs. "on earth as it is in heaven"
- Focus on "faith" as a transaction vs. "faithfulness" as a vocation
- Focus on "spiritual" vs. "material"
- Focus on "sin management" vs. "good news"



THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL

"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the scriptures*..."

I Corinthians 15:3-4



THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WITNESS OF THE CROSS

- When Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, something happened as a result of which the world is a different place.
- When people are caught up in the meaning of the cross, they become part of this difference.



UNDERSTANDING THE CROSS

- For the full understanding of the cross and why it is "good news," we need to examine the whole Bible
- There we discover that the cross is part of God's action on behalf of his *beloved* Creation and the people he loves and created in his image
- We also discover God's "plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in [Christ]; things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10)



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

- Why did Jesus die and, in particular, why did he die in this way?
 - Historical reasons
 - Theological reasons
- What does his death mean in the context of the whole story of the Bible?
- What did it mean for the first Christians and what does it mean for us? For the whole Creation?



COURSE OUTLINE

3/15 - A Scandalous Death: The Crucifixion in Historical Context

3/22 - Crucifixion, Sin & Evil: The Crux of the Problem

3/29 - "In Accordance with the Scriptures:" The Old Testament and the Gospels

4/5 - "I Am Crucified with Christ:" The Apostle Paul and the Victory of the Cross

4/12 - Proclaiming Christ Crucified: Living the Way of the Cross



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What lenses have been part of forming your understanding of the cross to this point?
- Where do you notice gnosticism at work in your world?
- What learning did you glean from the history of interpretation about the cross?