

Why the Cross?

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'... he did this to demonstrate his justice'

A strange way to start a religion!

Moses died at the age of 120 years. The Bible tells us that his strength was undiminished and that he had successfully brought his people to the borders of the Promised Land.

Buddha died at the age of eighty in peaceful serenity. Right to the end he was surrounded by a great host of devotees who had been won to his philosophy. Confucius died at the age of seventy-two. He had had setbacks in his early life, but eventually returned to his home town of Lu with a company of noble disciples who would continue his work.

Muhammad died at the age of sixty-two; having thoroughly enjoyed the last years of his life as the political ruler of a united Arabia; he passed away, so we are told, in his harem at Mecca in the arms of his favourite wife.

You will sometimes hear people say that the origin of all religions is basically the same. They are the creation of men of great intellect and spirituality who, as a result of their personal reflection, discover some universal religious truth and then spend their lives teaching that truth to others. Eventually the genius of such religious pioneers is recognised and they succeed in generating a community of committed followers. As far as Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam are concerned, there is obviously a considerable element of truth in that analysis. All these religions were founded by people who died in ripe old age, having spent their lives teaching their ideas. When the pioneers of these faiths died, it was amid vast popular acclaim and with the future of their movements guaranteed.

In the whole spectrum of world religions only one is radically different in its origins from this pattern: Christianity. Jesus died at the age of only thirty-three, after a teaching ministry of three years at the most. He was ostracised by his own society; betrayed and denied by his own small circle of supporters; mocked by his opponents; and forsaken, so it seemed, even by God himself. He suffered one of the most ignominious and agonising forms of public execution ever devised by human imagination. The founder of Christianity did not die in ripe old age, after a lifetime of teaching, amid wide popular acclaim. His death was premature, tragic, lonely, on a cross.

The big puzzle is how on earth did a man who ended his life amid such shame and ridicule become the founder of the most influential world religion of all? The wonder of this anomaly is obscured for us because, coming 2000 years after, we are used to thinking of the cross as a specifically religious symbol. It has even become an item of jewellery to wear around our necks or an icon to adorn our church buildings. In Jesus' own day it was anything but religious or beautiful. On the contrary, it was repulsive and offensive. The great Roman orator, Cicero, said that the very word 'cross' should not even enter the thoughts or ears of a Roman citizen, so disgusting were its connotations. Yet the early Christians not only admitted that their founder had died in this contemptible manner, they boasted about it. 'May I never glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ', said the apostle Paul. 'We preach Christ crucified ... though it is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, to us Christians it displays the power and wisdom of God'.

What possible significance could that bizarre and shocking death have assumed for them, that it turned the cross from being an unmentionable infamy to a badge of honour? How is it that a symbol of criminal execution has come to adorn Christian buildings and even Christian people? In short, why did Jesus die? That, quite literally, is the crucial question.

‘He died that we might be forgiven’?

Most of us who have grown up in a Christian environment can attempt some kind of answer. We know that, according to the Bible, it has something to do with forgiveness. As the children’s hymn puts it:

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.

But for the vast majority of us that is about as far as our understanding goes. Asked to explain more precisely how the death of a man two millennia ago could possibly have any relevance to the forgiveness of our sins, we are baffled.

Quite often, people try to interpret the death of Jesus as if its purpose were to persuade us to be better people. The story of Jesus’ self sacrifice, they suggest, exercises a positive moral influence on us by setting us a wonderful example of goodness. When we see Christ on the cross, we are so moved by his love that we feel conscience-stricken about our own acts of selfishness and we determine to live better lives in future as a result.

Of course, there is an element of truth in this way of looking at it. The story of the crucifixion is immensely emotive. Who can fail to be challenged by its dramatic presentation of innocence betrayed and murdered? But when you examine the matter more carefully you quickly realise there are a lot of logical flaws in this understanding of how the cross affects us.

Just a good example?

For a start, if it is nothing more than a strategy of persuasion, it savours of a particularly vicious form of moral blackmail. Do we really believe that God, faced with a morally rebellious world, would try to manipulate us with emotional levers? Why, it reduces the cross to the level of an IRA hunger strike. A histrionic gesture designed to embarrass those who have to watch it so much that they are shamed into changing their attitude.

It also fails to make sense of two things the Bible repeatedly says about the cross.

First, it insists the cross was an absolutely unique event that marked the beginning of a whole new era in the relationship between God and Man. But many people have died in ways that set a good example. There is nothing special about heroic self-sacrifice. If that’s all the cross represents then the Bible is grossly exaggerating its significance.

Second, it doesn’t really explain what the Bible means when it says Jesus chose to die because he loved us.

Think of it this way: imagine a boy and a girl, walking along a river bank, in love. The boy says to the girl. ‘I love you and to show how much I love you, I’m going to jump into this river and drown.’ Don’t you think the girl might be a little perplexed by such a gesture? ‘He

loves me? ... and he dies for me?? I don't quite see the connection. If he really loved me surely he would stay around for me. It doesn't make sense, it's irrational.'

You see, in order to be a demonstration of love, death must benefit the loved one in some logically compelling way. For instance, suppose the girl were in the water, drowning, and the boy said, 'I love you. I will dive in to save you,' only to die tragically in the rescue attempt. Now that would make sense. Then we could see the logical connection between his giving his life and his love. But unless there is some such clear benefit coming to that girl as a result of his dying, it is nonsense to talk about it as a proof of his love. There is nothing loving about committing suicide!

It is the same with Jesus. Many people cannot understand the cross because in the terms of my illustration, they imagine that Jesus walking along hand in hand with them on the river bank. 'Everything's OK because God loves me and isn't it wonderful?', they think to themselves. But the Bible says the true picture is very different from that. Actually we are in the water, perishing, and desperately need to be 'saved'. It is precisely because Christ came to achieve that rescue that we can speak of his death being 'loving'.

To put it another way, the problem with thinking of Jesus' death as a simply a moral influence or example is that such effects are totally subjective. It suggests that the purpose of the cross was to change our attitude to our sins, and so move us to some kind of self-reform. What the Bible actually says, however, is totally opposite to that. The Bible insists that the cross makes a difference, not just to how we feel about our sin, but to how God feels about it. The cross is not primarily a strategy designed to influence us subjectively; rather it is a means of rescuing us objectively.

A key Bible passage

One passage that spells this out particularly clearly is Romans 3:20–26:

No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known ... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement ... He did this to demonstrate his justice ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

The mistake many people make is to think that it is easy for God to forgive sins. It isn't; and the reason is tied up with a word that comes several times in these verses: righteousness.

As far as we are concerned, offering forgiveness to others is something we know we ought to do. We do plenty of things wrong ourselves, so a refusal to forgive people who sinned against us would be terrible hypocrisy. For God, however, the situation is quite different. First of all, he is morally perfect; that means that sin is a thousand times more offensive to him than it is to us because he is much more sensitive to it. Secondly, and even more importantly, God is the ultimate ground of all moral values in this universe.

Take love, for instance. Everybody agrees that love is better than hatred, but why is that so? Where does that moral value come from?

is it just an emotional preference – do we simply like the feeling of being loved and so label it ‘good’?

is it just a social convention that we have all accepted – did our early experience at our mother’s knee teach us to regard love as ‘good’?

is it a social instinct bred into us by our evolutionary origins – do we value love because the mutual aid that love encourages improves the survival chances of our species?

All these theories of the origins of moral norms have been argued, but according to the Bible they are, at best, only part of the truth. According to the Bible, love is good ultimately because ‘God is love’. That is the true root of such all such moral judgements. God’s character, his ‘righteousness’, guarantees the absolute validity of moral values in our world.

One corollary of this is that God has to treat wickedness with the seriousness it deserves. If we overlook an evil act, maybe it does not matter too much. But if he overlooks an evil act, it is as good as saying that morality does not matter in the universe after all. The divine righteousness would be impugned by such an oversight. God would be open to the charge of moral negligence.

That is an accusation which God cannot allow to pass unchallenged. His moral consistency must be unimpeachable. He must act justly always – or the very idea of righteousness loses its meaning.

And that, you see, is why forgiveness is difficult for him. To put simply, forgiveness is difficult for God because it is not easily distinguishable from moral indifference. How do you tell the difference between a God who forgives sin and one who couldn’t care less about sin?

If goodness is to mean something in this universe, it is absolutely necessary that God’s righteousness should be beyond dispute. In Paul’s words, his justice needs to be ‘demonstrated’. God must in some way dissociate himself personally from evil in the world. He must make a clear stand against it. If he does not, then all moral standards and values are themselves called into question. But how is he to do that?

The old way of demonstrating God’s righteousness

One very obvious way for God to make such a moral stand would be to assume the role of a judge. He could promulgate a law defining his moral standards. He could, as it were, translate his own moral character into the imperative, turning it into a list of commandments for his creatures to obey. Then he could exact penalties from anyone who broke those laws.

According to the Bible, this is precisely what God did in the days of Moses. Under the terms of the old covenant, in the Old Testament, he gave a group of people Ten Commandments and warned them that those who did not keep them would be punished.

The trouble with that particular demonstration of God’s righteousness, however, was that it resulted in the universal condemnation of the world. The law succeeded in highlighting the moral plight of the human race, but as far as making us right with God is concerned it was an abysmal failure. As Paul puts it: ‘No one can be declared righteous in God’s sight’ that way. All the law can do is make us ‘conscious of our sin.’

Is there an alternative? Is it possible for God’s moral character to be asserted in some other way? Is it possible that instead of condemning human beings, his justice could

actually acquit human beings? On the face of it that seems quite impossible, because we are guilty. How could God ever treat us as anything other than what we are? Yet Paul's astonishing news is that such an alternative has actually become available.

The good news!

'But now,' he says. Those words mark a momentous line that divides world history. Something tremendous has happened; and as a result it is possible for God to be fully righteous and true to his own moral character, and yet at the same time to pardon sinful human beings. He can be 'just and the one who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus', because now 'there is a righteousness from God apart from law'.

By the phrase 'apart from law' Paul means that in this new demonstration of his righteousness God does not assume the role of legislator and judge as he did under the old covenant. What does he do instead? That's where Jesus and the cross come in.

'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement ... he did this to demonstrate his justice.'

Here is Paul's answer to that crucial question with which we began: why did Jesus die? Perhaps a story will make it easier.

Forgiveness is never cheap

John and Peter were lovers. They had been living together for some years. Everything seemed perfect. But then along came Ivan, a blond, blue-eyed, muscle-bound Russian boy. Peter became infatuated with him, and so one day, quite suddenly, he walked out and left his partner John. Six months passed. Six months in which John spent a good deal of time weeping inconsolably. But, eventually, he pulled himself together. He decided that he was better off living alone and tried his best to put Peter out of his mind. Then, as suddenly as he had departed, there he was again – on the doorstep. Things hadn't worked out with Ivan. He discovered his Russian bombshell had a sadistic streak and a wandering eye. The infatuation had passed. He wanted to say sorry to John. He wanted to come back.

Now, the question I want you to ask yourself is this: what is John going to do?

It's possible, isn't it, that his love for Peter has died – murdered by the cruel stab in the back of Peter's desertion. Perhaps he now he just feels emotionally numb. If so his reaction to Peter's appeal is going to be one of total indifference. 'Sure! Come in and collect your stuff if you want. To be honest I couldn't care less about you or anybody else now! I just want to be alone.'

Another possibility is that John is still fuming with inner rage, his pride scalded by his partner's infidelity. If that is the situation he might well lose his temper and justly so. 'How dare you come back to me!' he shouts. 'Get out! Go to Hell! I never want to set eyes on you again!'

But what if John's love for Peter is still burning in his heart? What if he has long dreamed of their reconciliation? How will he react then? He can't feign indifference – for he cares deeply. He can't pretend he isn't angry, because he is and has every right to be! Yet, he can't tell Peter to get lost either, because he desperately wants him to stay. So what does he do?

I suggest he has to say something like this: 'I love you. I want you back. But you have to realise how much you have angered and hurt me by what you have done.'

If there is to be any chance of their relationship being reconstructed, John must find the inner resources to absorb the injury that Peter has inflicted on him. His love must be large enough to overcome his indignation, to swallow his rage, to accept his pain.

The cost of reconciliation

This is not a perfect illustration, but according to Paul something like it is happening on the cross. We have deserted God, as Peter had deserted John. We have angered him. We have hurt him. As a result, he could have turned the cold shoulder of indifference toward us. He could, with perfect justice, have vented his wrath and told us to go to Hell! But, here is the good news that spells hope for the world – his divine heart yearns for reconciliation. So he says to us: ‘I love you. I want you back. But you have to realise how much you have angered and hurt me by what you have done.’

Do we realise that? Do we want to see it spelt out in graphic drama? Then look at the cross – see there his divine agony. See the heart of God ravaged by the sin of the world. No one can accuse God of moral indifference now. No-one can say he doesn’t care passionately about righteousness. Look at the cross – that’s how much he cares!

‘He did this to demonstrate his justice.’ The cross is not a theatrical gesture intended to blackmail us into changing our ways. It is the place where God, like John in my story, absorbed the pain and anger we had caused him. It is the place where God found the inner resources he needed to forgive us. It is the place where he proved his love was large enough to overcome his indignation, to swallow his rage, to accept his pain.

Paul was a Jew, so he knew that divine forgiveness could never be cheap. He had been taught from infancy that the only way sinful people could maintain a relationship with God was through sacrifice. Every year the priest in the Temple confessed the sins of the people over the head of an animal, killed it and sprinkled its blood on the altar. It was called the Day of Atonement – for every Jew the blood of that animal was a symbol of the costliness of their forgiveness. They looked at the blood and trusted God’s promise that it meant they were forgiven. But many of them realised that such ritual had to be a pointer to something more. There was no way the death of a dumb animal could really buy the pardon of a human being – such an idea was patently ridiculous. If sinners are to go free there has to be a more profound and more satisfying vindication of the divine justice than a dead sheep could provide! And in the cross, that deeper and more satisfying vindication has at last been provided.

‘God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.’ It is not the blood of a lamb but his blood which is the true focus of saving faith. ‘He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities,’ predicts the inspired prophet Isaiah. ‘We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’

A travesty of justice?

I’ve sometimes heard the objection that interpreting the cross this way as an act of vicarious atonement is monstrously unfair. It suggests that God was willing for an innocent man to suffer to appease his own need for judicial satisfaction. What kind of ‘demonstration of justice’ is that? On the contrary, it’s an outrageous miscarriage of justice!

But such an objection misses a vital point. Of course God could not make a scapegoat of some guiltless third party. But Jesus wasn’t a third party. The Bible insists he was, in some

utterly mysterious way, God in the flesh. As a result there are not three parties involved in the interpersonal transaction of the cross, but only two – God and us. God is not punishing somebody else for our sins – he is punishing himself ! He is absorbing the consequences of our sins within himself.

That's why it had to be Jesus who did it. Only the Son of God could demonstrate the divine justice on the cross in a way that satisfied the divine justice. Only he could take the cup and say: 'This is my blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sin'. That's why Paul can say a little later in Romans 'God demonstrates his love to us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). The person who is showing the love must be the person who is making the sacrifice. So clearly, God and Christ are one in Paul's mind.

As he puts it in II Corinthians 5:

'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'

By 'in Christ' Paul implies that Christ was not only the means which God used, but the place where God chose to locate himself.

A remedy for Christians who feel guilty

Most of us are troubled one way or another by guilt. In some cases it's false guilt – a psychological burden that has been foisted on us by others who wished to proclaim their own self-righteousness by denigrating us. In other cases it's real guilt – we have been morally irresponsible and our conscience rightly condemns us. Perhaps we went to church to try to find an answer to our guilt, but sadly all they did was to wave the rule-book under our nose. Perversely, they used the Bible not to relieve our feelings of guilt but to make them worse! There can surely be no worse crime than to send away those who desperately need the gospel with only the law.

Listen – if you are a Christian believer, then the Bible insists you have been declared righteous by God himself – not because you have obeyed the rule-book, nobody has done that – no-one will ever be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law. No, you have been 'justified freely, by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus'. You have been 'justified through faith in his blood'.

Away then with guilt-ridden anxieties. 'Since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God' (Romans 5:1). Notice that present tense – not will have, not may have – but 'have' ; then live in the enjoyment of that restored relationship. Christ suffered to obtain it for you. By continuing to wallow in feelings of guilt you are implying he didn't suffer enough!

A challenge to those on a spiritual quest

Maybe there is someone reading this who has not yet reached the point of Christian commitment. You are interested in the Christian faith perhaps, otherwise why would you be reading this article? But, if you're honest you couldn't call yourself a believer. There are after all so many other faiths in the world.

Well, it is not my intention to browbeat you like some tub-thumping TV evangelist. But, having read this far, can you at least understand now why we Christians say we love Jesus? It's not the brainwashing of our parental upbringing that has made us believers. It's not the fear of Hell. It's not the psychological manipulation of a clever preacher. We love

Jesus because he loved us. We have come to realise, as did Paul, 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

There was I, like wayward Peter, on the doorstep; and he welcomed me back, in spite of all the pain and anger I had caused him. He absorbed it all within his own body and mind and soul on that first Good Friday. He paid the price of my sins. How can anyone understand that, and not love him for it?

Of course those other great world faiths have their truth. But Moses did not die on the cross for my sins. Buddha didn't; Confucius didn't; Mohammed didn't – prophets they may have been, but saviours they are not! Their followers may reverence them, but they cannot possibly love and worship them as we Christians love and worship 'Christ crucified'.

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