

Men's Bible Study

Matthew 22:42 "What do you think of the Christ/Messiah? Whose son is he?"

"On a spring morning in about the year 33* AD., three men were executed by the Roman authorities in Judea."¹ At the request of the Hebrew temple hierarchy, the governor Pontius Pilate hanged the three publicly outside the western gate of the ancient city of Jerusalem. Two of the three, of whom the world has little memory, were terrorists. The third we profess to be the divine agent of the only true God – the Lord of the Hebrew covenant. It is what we profess that magnifies this execution. This event and its climactic finality at sunrise on the first day of the next week shook all of human history as its accompanying earthquake (at the time of the death of Jesus) and its Sunday morning aftershock (at the moment of resurrection) shook ancient Jerusalem.²

To the Romans the death of Jesus of Nazareth was but one execution among thousands deemed necessary to bring former autonomous peoples into submissive unity to the new world order. Jesus is condemned and hanged as "*King of the Jews*."³ This of course met with strong resistance from the temple rulers. Caesar's authority was not the issue for the religious priests and learned teachers who were assembled under Joseph Caiaphas. For them the issue was theological rather than political. This man claimed to be the Son of God.⁴ The defining of orthodoxy and the issue of what and who Jesus was became the reason for their zeal. The priests could embrace a foreign monarch but not God as defined in Jesus. They found it easy to cry, "*We have no king but Caesar*,"⁵ but could not embrace the truth that the God of their ancestors was revealing himself in this Jesus of Nazareth. To do so would call for the reorientation of all of their theological convictions. They were able to comprehend that Jesus was a threat to the temple system and to the religion of Israel, as they had known it.⁶ The issue for them was a crisis of doctrine and, in that, a crisis of life meaning and established order.

The death of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha was a meeting place of theology's conflict with world politic. For believers the revelation of God in Jesus is the culmination of all Israeli covenant and goals. In Christ the followers define the ancient Hebrew descendants of Abraham and the prophets and interprets their message.⁷ In the crucifixion is found the final act of incarnation and ultimate revelation and fulfillment of Divine redemption. **Therefore any teaching, which purports to be Christian theology, must be an explanation and proclamation of the great God-event. The cross of Jesus defines all that truly is Christian!** If God is to be known he must be understood in the dying and rising of Jesus. The core of all we call Christian thought must be brought both to ponder that historic moment and to harmonize with that moment – not simply as a historical event but for the content and meaning of the Divine revelation – for doctrine and creed.

What is absolutely true is: the atoning act of God in the death of Jesus is the defining standard of Christlikeness. All other discussions and focuses have the illusion of relevancy but are secondary at best. Any proclamation that would conform men to the Divine heart must be brought to the person and the meaning of the Christ who went bound to the cross. If we are to be transformed into the image and mind of Christ we must meet that Christ in his most defining act and revelation. Here is to be found his

¹ P. 1, E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Picture of Jesus*, The Penguin Press, 1993 * dated edited

² Matthew 27:54; 28:2 [All references are taken from the Revised Standard Version Bible, 2nd edition 1971]

³ John 19:9-21

⁴ John 19:7

⁵ John 19:15

⁶ John 11:48

⁷ Matthew 5:17

mission and purpose. At the core Christian preaching and teaching can be none other than the proclamation of the Person of the cross. *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*⁸

Many of the discussions taking place about Jesus and his will for us - The real core of a discussion of the holy life is to be found in the cross and the Christ-event and in the nature of Christ's challenge to all of his disciples when he said, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny (renounce) himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."*⁹ As believers we hold truth and life is to be found, comprehended, and defined in the God who by his incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth, on the eve of the Passover in 33 A.D, met mankind in revelation and transformation into a holy people. It is this crucified, forsaken blasphemer who is the Lord of the apostolic proclamation – *He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*¹⁰ The truth of sanctification is not to be found separate from him, even if that separation is so subtle as to be truth about Christ instead of the truth of Christ. When one finds the Christ who is our liberator he finds the Christ who died to the Father in Gethsemane and for us at Golgotha. He is holy and defines holiness by calling us to the same standard: ***And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.***¹¹

We live in an hour when the church in America is in a constant quest for newness. In the marketplace of religion, all causes are measured on the basis of "usefulness." This places a theology of the crucified at the risk of being redefined into a program or a church method. In our hour of church pragmatism, truth is defined by results - we must be aware of the following dangers:

1. **The loss of the scandal of the cross.** The cross is in danger of becoming a sentimentalized piece of memorabilia for the moving of a congregation or the symbol of desirability in a devotional book. The radical scandalous execution of the Lord of glory is often lost in the sweetness of Christ's love for us.
2. **The challenge of Post-Modern mentality.** Because ultimate truth has been internalized and made subjective to the one who holds it, the theology of the cross may become an individual's position rather than the absolute that it is in the New Testament. Post-Modernism promotes inclusion, which is incompatible with the radical call to absolute surrender. The cross proclaims one way as the only way and tolerates no other.
3. **The challenge of assimilation.** The call to self-surrender and the crucifixion of self was commonplace. Here I will remind us of Martin Luther's presentation of the Heidelberg Disputations in May of 1518. Dr. Luther's position was that all theologies other than the cross are to be summed up under the label "theologies of glory."¹² **The theologies seeking glory are actually to be seen as anti-Christ** and not as alternative approaches to Christianity. Though I do not embrace in this paper all of Luther's positions, in his theology of the cross I will stand with him that the cross defines Christian orthodoxy. True Christlikeness calls us from self-glory to the God of the cross. Man seeks and finds himself in everything, and this is the essence of sin. Self-promotion and career building are not compatible with self-renunciation. The crucified God in Jesus is the God with whom we have to do. Through the

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:2

⁹ Luke 9:23-24, (renounce) is the author's word

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 1:30

¹¹ Hebrew 10:10

¹² Luther and His Times, E. G> Schwiebert, Ph. D.; Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis Mo. 1950

march of the 20th century and the growth of denominationalism, a spirit of self-promotion and self-development grew among all Christian groups, including those who, while continuing to profess a deeper work of grace, moved away from the crucified life and into a life of achievement. Theories of self-promotion and personal glory war against the traditional concept of self-surrender. Paul warned in his hour that a substitute gospel and a secondary Christ was being preached that was in fact an enemy of the cross of Christ because those who proclaimed it had made a god of their appetite.¹³ In the name of Church growth we adopt methods and messages that are incompatible with being identified with the forsaken Lord.

4. **The challenge of accommodation.** Step by step planning for the advancement of the institutional church produces Christian ministries that have at their heart the need to create a world of happy living. The word happy in such a framework is used as a substitute of equal worth to the word *blessed*, which it is not. A true theology of the cross cannot be made attractive but is desirable - it transforms and does not conform. The cross is God addressing man with a revelation of his righteousness. It cannot be reduced to a comfortable message. A non-offensive theology of the cross is a challenge if not a paradox.
5. **The challenge of business realities.** The church must survive and prosper – this is a tension.
6. **The challenge of a sinless society.** We live in an hour when everything is permitted, and the church finds its ultimate sin in offending another. As a result evil has been redefined. The worst evil is that which may embarrass. We see ourselves as victims rather than as sinners, and we discuss our heritage as at the source of inconsistencies rather than original sin.
7. **The challenge of Universalism.** The cross becomes adjusted to the corporate goals of the business of religion. The cross must not be softened and made palatable.
8. **Dates:**

7/6 BC	The Birth of Jesus	Matthew/Luke
33 AD	The Atonement	John 12-20
33AD	The Ascension	Acts 1
33 AD	Matthias Chosen by Lot	<u>Acts 1:12</u>
33 AD	The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost	<u>Acts 2</u>
33 AD	Peter Heals and Preaches	<u>Acts 3</u>
33 AD	Peter and John Arrested and Released;	<u>Acts 4</u>
34 AD	Barnabas & Believers Share All	<u>Acts 4:32</u>
34 AD	Deaths of Ananias and Sapphira	<u>Acts 5</u>
34 AD	Apostles Preach and Heal	<u>Acts 5:11</u>
34 AD	Stephen's Speech, Stoning and Death	<u>Acts 6, 7</u>
34 AD	Saul of Tarsus Persecutes the Church	<u>Acts 8</u>
34 AD	Philip in Samaria	<u>Acts 8:3</u>
34 AD	Simon the Sorcerer	<u>Acts 8:9</u>
34 AD	Philip and the Ethiopian	<u>Acts 8:26</u>
34 AD	Saul/Paul's Conversion	<u>Acts 9</u>

¹³ Phil. 3:19