

Why The Cross?

Introduction

The central event of the Christian faith is also, in many ways, the strangest. Jesus died on the cross. Christians celebrate the fact that our leader, our Lord and our God was executed in public. As a starting point for a new religious movement, this has to be among the worst.

An outsider, discovering the Christian faith for the first time, sees many things that make sense: teaching people to be good, to love one another – that is what you expect of a religion. A founder who goes around teaching people makes sense; miracles of healing, whether you believe them or not, also fit the expected story of a wise founder with special abilities. All the key points in the story resonate with what we would expect, how we might go about setting up a new religion – right up to the last week with betrayal, trial and death. The cross does not fit our expectations of how the story should go; it demands to be understood, to be explained.

Christian teaching gives us the answer, in part. We know why Jesus died on the cross: to open the way of salvation for us. At least, we understand something of what this means – it is a mystery, about which we grasp just a tiny part. But we want to understand it better, to explore the wonder of what God has done for us in Jesus.

We want to understand how Jesus' death brings about our salvation, and why it needed to be a cross – if Jesus had to die, why not some other death? People have been trying to understand the 'how' from the earliest days of the Church, and they have come up with many different ideas and perspectives on the subject. But here, we are going to look briefly at a few obvious points which can be made about the second part – why it needed to be a cross.

Details

A Death

We can start with the most obvious point: Jesus had to die so that He could rise again. The message of the resurrection was vital to the life and teaching of the early Church, and a resurrection is not possible without death. If Jesus was to go ahead of us and become the firstborn of all creation, then He had to die.

A Public Death

For the early Church to be able to proclaim that Jesus has been raised from the dead, it was necessary not only that He die, but that He die in public. At Pentecost, for the message of His resurrection to have its full impact, the hearers needed to know

that Jesus had died – and for this news to have credibility, it was necessary that Jesus died in public, the death witnessed and certified by competent people.

Many people in the centuries since have raised the idea: maybe Jesus did not die on the cross. But nobody suggested this at the time because everybody knew Jesus had died – because it was a public execution, carried out by the Romans. And the one thing the Romans knew how to do, and do well, was to put someone to death

Rejected by the Authorities

Jesus' death was a total and final rejection of Jesus by the authorities, both secular and religious. This is important because the followers of Jesus had to know where they stand in relationship to the authorities: they had to know that you cannot follow Jesus and also be liked by the people with power.

It is simple common sense that how you relate to the people with power is vitally important: whatever you want to do, it is much easier if the people in power are on your side – or, at the very least, if they are not against you. The temptation of persuading the people in power to support you, and of modifying what you say and do in order to get their support, is a very real one, and is often seen not as a temptation but as a rational strategy.

Much later, after the state had embraced Christianity and Christian leaders had become powerful figures themselves, after they had become people who were used to negotiating with civic leaders, Christian missionaries would often adopt the obvious strategy of seeking to convert the person in power, on the basis that the population would then follow their example. But the early Church chose the opposite approach – not top down, but bottom up.

The early Christians tried to convert the people in power when they got the chance. But they did not do it as a way to convert the population: they did it because God loves everyone, even the rich and powerful.

Jesus was quite clear that you cannot build God's Kingdom by the effective exercise of power: it can only be done by sacrificial love; you build the Kingdom by serving people and setting them free, not by controlling them.

If the New Testament contained any hint that the authorities had been coming round to Jesus' way of thinking, then future generations of Christians would have picked up on this: they would have argued that Jesus started the process of persuading the authorities, and we are continuing His work, completing the partnership; it would seem possible that we can build God's Kingdom by using the power of the civic or religious establishment. But the New Testament says otherwise.

Jesus died on the cross through a partnership of the civic and religious authorities: they were both convinced that Jesus' message had to be silenced and His movement had to be stopped. They understood clearly that the Kingdom He proclaimed challenged their power, undermined their claimed legitimacy and would one day, if allowed to continue, destroy them.

The Church is not called to fight the authorities: we have to submit to them and obey them as far as we can; but we have to recognise that they are not our primary

allegiance, and when they are in conflict with the Kingdom of God, we, like Jesus, must obey God rather than men, and bear the consequences.

Punished by the Authorities

On the cross, Jesus did not only die: He suffered. An unjust, premature death is bad at any time and in any way, but this death was far worse – deliberately drawn out and as painful and humiliating as possible

People provide all kinds of theological reason why Jesus had to suffer, but there is a very simple, practical reason why Jesus had to suffer – why His death had to be a dreadful punishment. Jesus had to die a horrible death because He is our example.

Building the Kingdom puts us on a collision course with those who have a vested interest in the current system; loving our enemies puts us in conflict with those who want us to hate our enemies; loving and empowering the poor sets us against those who have a vested interest in keeping the poor powerless and downtrodden.

So God's people will always be working against the vested interests of those who have power and status here and now. There will inevitably be conflict, but how far should we take this conflict?

The traditional Christian teaching, from the perspective of a church rooted in Christendom, is that believers are called to obey the authorities, and pray for them, and if those in power are in error, we must trust God to move their hearts and minds to do His will. But, while we can see these points being taught in the New Testament, this does not describe the teaching or practice of Jesus or the early Church.

The New Testament is quite clear that, when the authorities set themselves against the Kingdom of God, Christians must engage in civic disobedience. How far should we go? Again, the answer is very clear: all the way. If they threaten to lock you up, you obey God. If they threaten to kill you, you obey God. Whatever they threaten you with, you obey God, because that is the example Jesus gave us, and we are simply called to follow Him.

Across the world today, as it was yesterday, and as it has been the case for the past two thousand years, Christians are suffering for the sake of following Jesus. They are loving their enemies and doing good to everyone they can, and choosing to suffer rather than give up following their Lord. They may die, but they triumph by the blood of the lamb, the word of their testimony and they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

We can see in Jesus' suffering the price of our salvation, but this is unique to Jesus – none of us will be asked to die for the sins of the world. When we look at the cross much more is happening than just our salvation being accomplished, wonderful though that is. The cross speaks for us, but it also speaks to us.

Jesus' death on the cross was both public and painful, because His followers have to know that this may be the price of following Him. But we also have to know that their Heavenly Father can take that suffering and death, and somehow use them in the building of His Kingdom, that in Jesus death is not defeat but is transformed into victory, and that after death comes resurrection and life without end.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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Last updated: 14:45 on 14 May 2019, revision: 0.9
Location: /home/paul/C/SF/main/SF_Why_Cross.odt