

Understanding the Meaning of the Cross

Why did Jesus have to die on a cross?

Most of us who grew up in the church come to this question with a widespread pre-understanding. Jesus died on a cross for the sins of the world. His death was central to God's plan of salvation. Jesus' death was necessary. Jesus had to die to atone for our sins.

For many Christians today atonement has come to be identified with a particular theological concept called "Substitutionary Atonement". In order for God to forgive sins a substitutionary sacrifice must be offered. An ordinary human being could not be the sacrifice because that person is a sinner and would be dying only for their own sins. The sacrifice must be a perfect human being. Only Jesus was perfect, spotless, and without blemish. Only Christ's substitutionary death makes our forgiveness possible.

This concept of Substitutionary Atonement was not fully developed until the writings of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1087. The Doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement came to the forefront during the Protestant Reformation and is widely accepted by many Christians today.

However, seeing Jesus' death primarily within the framework of Substitutionary Atonement is not totally faithful to the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul does use sacrificial imagery, yet this is but one of the many images he uses to speak of the meaning of Jesus' death on a cross.

In my studies the dominant image Paul uses is that the cross is the revelation of the path of personal transformation. We are transformed by dying and rising with Christ. Each of us are to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Several modern day scholars call this concept "Participatory Atonement".

For Paul, Christ crucified and risen revealed the way to life "in Christ". Here it functions as a metaphor for the path of personal transformation. It involves an internal death and resurrection. It means dying to an old identity and way of life and rising to a new identity and new way of life.

This understanding emphasizes atonement through participation. We participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus and thereby enter into a new life in Christ. Participatory Atonement does not mean that Jesus died for us so therefore we don't need to. Instead, it means we are to die and rise with Christ. It is a metaphor for a process of radical internal change.

This was actually Paul's own experience. He summed it up in a single sentence in his letter to the Galatians. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me." (2:19-20) Whereas Jesus' crucifixion was literal, Paul's was metaphorical and this metaphorical meaning...its more than literal meaning...is clear. Paul had experienced an internal crucifixion and a new Paul had been born.

Paul uses the language of Participatory Atonement, not just for himself but for all who would live their life in Christ. In his letter to the Romans he writes about dying and rising with Christ as the meaning of baptism. "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (6:3-4) The result of Participatory Atonement is personal transformation and renewal. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect." (12:2). Personal transformation through Participatory Atonement includes a transformed way of seeing the world and a renewal in the ability to discern the will of God.

For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus was salvific - it had saving significance. For Paul the cross was our salvation. In Christianity today the most common understanding of salvation is that it is something that happens to us after we die. But, for Paul, salvation was about life before death. "Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. (2 Cor. 5:15)

Dying and rising with Christ through Participatory Atonement was for Paul a matter of personal transformation. It was a metaphorical dying to an old way and rising to a new way of life in Christ. And, this transformation for believers happens now, in this life, so that each of us will be instrumental in bringing about the "way" of Jesus on earth and right now.

