

What Happened on Good Friday? Exploring the Meaning of the Cross

Study #5: Revolution

Notes and Scripture Texts

The final theme we will examine in our study on the meaning of the cross is the idea of Jesus' death as revolution. In addition to revolution, this theme also picks up the idea of Jesus as a teacher and his life as a moral example. Some of these notions appear in the earliest teaching on the atonement and see further thought and development in the medieval church, in the Reformation, as well as in the present day. They are particularly significant because they point to the ongoing responsibility of human beings in response to the death of Jesus.

The first expression of this idea of Jesus life and death as revolution (though this name is not used) appears in the atonement motif of Jesus as the great teacher in the writings of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. This idea draws on the ancient Greek idea that the basic human problem is ignorance. The assumption being that if we know the right thing to do we will do the right thing. The difficulty is we do not know the right way to live. Jesus comes to teach the right way to live; he is the light of the world.

John 1:1-5: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

A second development of what we are here describing as the theme of revolution occurs in the work of Peter Abelard in the medieval church. In critical response to the satisfaction theory of the atonement, this view maintains that Jesus died as a moral example and influence. In this way, he is a perfect demonstration of God's love and this can and does change the hearts and minds of the human beings, turning them to God and changing their conduct toward each other. This brings about moral and spiritual revolution.

Abelard was particularly concerned to change the dominant perception of God by those of his time as offended, harsh, angry, and judgmental. Instead, Abelard sought to depict God as loving with the cross as a manifestation of the lengths God will go to demonstrate care and concern for humanity.

John 3:16-17: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

A more recent development of this theme of Christ as revolutionary occurs in the so-called theologies of liberation. This approach maintains that Jesus was a radical teacher whose death on the cross launched a social revolution to transform the world and bring about the Kingdom of God through the spirit-enabled work of his disciples. This theme has recently been explored in the work of New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*. This social revolution is rooted in the radical welcome the church is called to demonstrate following the example of Jesus.

Romans 5:10a: "For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." Therefore, Romans 15:7: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Questions for Reflection:

What do you think of the idea of revolution? How do you understand it? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?

Do you see the connections between the idea of Jesus as a great teacher and moral example and social revolution?

What do you think of the idea that Jesus' death is a moral example that the church and the world are to follow. What does this mean in actuality?

Do you think the death of Jesus on the cross changes your life and the life of the world? Why or why not? If so, what examples can you see?

What are our responsibilities as individuals and as a church in the light of Good Friday? What are we doing well? How might we need to change?

What is particularly significant to you in this study?

What questions do you have?