

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

2 Cor 5:19

The fifth in a series of seven sermon for the season of Lent

Luther’s claim: “The cross alone is our theology,” is simply an axiom based on the what the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:2: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Why did God have to do it this way? After all, he could have done any number of things. He could have said, “Be done with sin and death.” But this is what he did. And we have asked ourselves why. This is the basic question.

Of course, there’s the other extreme. Some say, “Sin and death are no longer problems; we’ll take care of it.” We face those two extremes.

There are different ways in the New Testament that this is looked at. It is sorted out by people sometimes as three ways or even twenty ways. Let us look at five ways:

1. Sacrifice, where one life is given for the other. It is similar to redeeming or buying somebody their freedom. But to whom is the price paid? And why is a life demanded? There’s something brutal and terrible about that. What kind of a God is that?
2. Victory – about Jesus who is more powerful than Satan, but that ends up as a kind of charade. Of course God is more powerful, and he knows how it’s going to come out, so that doesn’t really explain it.
3. Christ is the example. Of course God loves us, but by doing what he did he gives us an example and calls upon us to follow. It is supposedly then a carrying out of 1 John 4:19: “We love because he first loved us.” And we know that that is not true. Once we are given this great gift, we say: “Now I can do whatever I like.” There’s no way in which we are required to live “the life of the cross,” whatever that might be, because he did.
4. Reconciliation – a big word about some kind of dispute between two people. That is expanded by some to include the whole cosmos so that reconciliation, making it right again, is that we are in God and God is in us. But in this way of understanding

the cross, the distance between God and us disappears. Yes, God reconciles with us, but are we implying there is something we are compelled to do to reconcile with him? This is not the case.

5. He is our representative. Think of Bonhoeffer's book, *The Man for Others*. Jesus represents us. The trouble is that this has been used by all kinds of people to say that the problem is in God. God has to be like me if I'm black, or white, or female – otherwise he can't represent me. The whole thing is turned on its head when God must be like each individual. The particularity of salvation is that he became a certain one at the certain place in a certain way at a certain time. He became truly one in our history.

What do we do with all of these metaphors for what happens on the cross? Some suggest this is like a kaleidoscope. You can shake it and get a pattern, then shake it again and get another pattern. Isn't that "interesting"? Ho, hum.

We remember that language and our ideas are all limited, and we all know this. As Dillistone said, finally all we can do is play great music like Bach's *Passion according to Saint Matthew*, or Negro spirituals, and they can help us get a sense of what this whole passion, death, and resurrection is all about.

We do have in the Creed: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again." But as to how and why, and the meaning of it, that has not been nailed down.

And now it's not possible for us to say, "So what?" We're not like robots in science fiction with no sense of mercy and forgiveness and the meaning of forgiveness. That's a purely human part of us; that's what God has put into us. We can't just leave it and say: The meaning of the cross is a hodge-podge, a kaleidoscope, a collage, a wax nose. We ask ourselves: What does it all mean?

Each of the four Gospels is, as we know, structured like a tadpole (Ernst Lohmeyer). There is the head and a long tail. The head, the major part of each Gospel, is about his passion and death. And then there's a long tail leading up to it. The passion, death, and resurrection is the main thing.

It comes down to the question of authority. How do you decide anything? What is the starting point? There's always a starting point for everything we think and do. We may not always be conscious of it. There's always the question behind the

question. The axiom behind all the axioms. The meta-questions. The meta-meta. That which is behind all of it. For Christians it is always the cross. There are 5 things which come out as we look at this.

1. This is not a theology *about* the cross. But a theology *of* the cross. There's a real danger that we'll say here's a theology *about* the cross. This is the way we're supposed to think about it. This is the way I will be convinced. So it is *about* the cross. It's a theory, a doctrine, or a teaching. But it is not basically that. It is a theology *of* the cross.

2. He did not die *instead* of us but *ahead* of us. The difficulty with saying that he died *instead* of us is that it's something out there, an abstraction which we think about and we can be convinced about. What it's really about is that he has died *ahead* of us and has taken care of sin and death *ahead* of us.

3. The hiddenness of God. We, as human beings, are continually pounding the gates of heaven and saying: "How can you be an all-powerful and all-loving God, and yet there's evil?" We want to sort that out. Therefore we are trying to break the hiddenness, the mask that God has. God has this mask because he wants to turn us to the one way he wants to be known. He wants to be known through the cross. That is why we do not say Jesus is God, but rather God is Jesus. To paraphrase Luther, or what Luther would have said: Everything about God outside of Jesus is of the devil.¹ This is who God is: The One who has done what he has done through the cross and resurrection for you and me in his Son.

4. The cross is not understood or measured by another system or theory. That's the difficulty Christians have struggled with throughout church history and that we have been talking about. The cross is its own system. We do not judge the cross; the cross judges us. It is unique. No metaphor is adequate. The cross is that which makes the difference.

5. In the eyes of the world, this is foolishness. It is totally senseless. It is counter-intuitive. It is against all of our thinking. We are reminded of Paul's words in 1 Cor 1:22-24:

"Jews seek miracles; Greeks seek wisdom; we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews

¹ Smalcald Articles 3/8/10; Tappert 313.

and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

This foolishness is summed up in the two great scandals:

- 1) The scandal of particularity. The infinite creator God truly became a specific one of us in a certain time [between 4 BC and 30 AD], place [Palestine], and way [by a certain mother]. He was probably about 5' 7" with dark hair and eyes, and he died on the cross. This particularity, this scandal, is basic and mind-blowing. How could this be that the creator of all became a particular person? As Paul writes in I Cor 1:27-29: “God chose what is foolish to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”
- 2) The scandal of holiness becoming sin. This is the far greater scandal, the one that we cannot even begin to comprehend because our minds, reason, and hearts are caught in sin. The Holy One, the One who is truly holy, which we cannot begin to understand, became one of us, taking on sin, death, and conquering the power of the Devil.

Because the cross is the key to Scripture, we have a way of seeing all of Scripture, as it says in the famous directive by Luther -- which shows and drives forth Christ. All of Scripture says, “God was in Christ through the cross and resurrection, saving you and me.”

That’s what he is doing.

To sum it all up: It’s not the “why” of it; it’s the “that” of it. The that of it which is that in the cross everything changed for you and me, for history, for all of creation. It’s the key to everything. Amen