The Death of Christ: Historical and Contemporaneous

by W. Stanford Reid

Dr. Stanford Reid, who has been for many years one of our Editorial Correspondents, is Professor of History in the University of Guelph, Ontario. A number of Christians, he finds, speak in a rather facile way of Christ's death and resurrection as the confirmation of the New Testament view of history without considering the actual significance of His redemptive act for a Christian understanding of history. He endeavours in this paper to remedy this deficiency, and in doing so he points to the remedy for others also.

ONE of the great intellectual rivalries of the latter part of the twentieth century is that which exists between the "historical" and the "contemporaneous." In practically every sphere of human endeavour, in politics, in social reform, in education and in religion the same conflict appears. The "contemporaries" constantly seek to produce that which is new and different while denigrating the old and the historical as out of date, irrelevant and frequently corrupt. One only has to listen to the new generation of university students who constantly reject everything prior to 1950 as belonging to another world, to realize how basic is this attitude. The modern "revolutionaries" believe that all that exists should be destroyed, for it has come out of a long-dead past. History is by definition not contemporary and has nothing to offer the "sick men" of the present generation.

To settle this conflict between the historical and the contemporaneous, some, on the other hand, believe that life should be lived as it was in the past. A traditional pattern of existence has, therefore, become part and parcel of certain societies' social, religious and political structures. The Mennonites might perhaps be regarded as following this method of dealing with the problem, but many others also have sought by the same means to avoid the conflict. Down through the ages men who have found themselves out of step with their own age have often attempted to revert to what they have felt was man's condition in some long gone idyllic age.

Others have sought to deal with the problem more theoretically. Idealist philosophers such as R. G. Collingwood, for instance, have felt that we should try to make historical events become contemporaneous by thinking ourselves back into them, in order that we might bring the historical down to our own times for analysis and understanding. In the field of theology much the same

type of thinking has become common in certain circles. *Gleichzeitigkeit* (contemporaneity) has become particularly popular in some German theologies. The historical truthfulness of the Gospels really does not matter for we can "demythologize" them in order to bring about a contemporary divine human encounter. As long as Christ is our contemporary and performs his saving work now, that is all that matters. To be of any value history must become current event.

In all of this Christianity is involved by its very nature. It speaks of certain historical events stretching back to creation and asserts that they actually happened. It is not, however, merely some antiquarian creed that simply worships the past without relating it to the present. Rather, it emphasizes that those events which it claims took place in the past, in history, have the greatest importance and significance for the present and for the future even into eternity. In this way it presents the view that history is all of a piece, with the result that one may never separate the past radically from the present or the future.

The key to this thinking is the central fact of the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament message is that for the redemption and reconciliation of sinners to the sovereign God, Christ died at a specific point in history. Furthermore, his death redeems not only those who lived at the time of that historical event, but also all those "chosen in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1: 4 f., John 6: 37ff.). This includes his elect whether of ancient times, today or of the year 2073. By so doing it raises the whole question of the relationship of the past to the present, of the historical to the contemporaneous, which in turn involves us in the problem of the nature of history itself.

Some have attempted to relate Christ's death and resurrection to the Christian view of history by insisting that they vindicated his claims to be the divine redeemer and so showed that the biblical teaching concerning history is correct. While this may be readily granted, it would seem that Christ's death and resurrection, as the apex or climax of history, have more to say about history than to substantiate the biblical interpretation of it. Christ's statements at the Last Supper, taken in connection with what followed immediately afterwards, throw light upon a number of facets of history which the Christian must see and understand if he is to grasp the biblical view of history and of its contemporary importance.

I. THE REVELATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Although both the Old and New Testaments touch on this problem to a certain extent, the key to the biblical understanding

of it would seem to be found in the institution of the Lord's Supper. In it Christ brings the whole matter to a head by pointing out that the Supper's fundamental character is commemorative. His command was to eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of him "for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you show forth the death of the Lord, until he comes" (1 Cor. 11: 26). Thus the Lord's Supper is primarily for the purpose of reminding his people that he had died for them.

The Lord's Supper is a memorial to an historical event. It does not turn one's mind back to a theory of any kind, nor to general principles of truth and justice in the universe, nor even to a somewhat sentimental appreciation of one who left a universal message of good will. Furthermore, it does not recall some pleasant or inspiring religious myth. It brings those partaking of it face to face with the fact that some two thousand years ago an historical personage called Jesus the Christ, lived and on Calvary's Cross, by the joint action of the Jewish and Roman authorities, had his body broken and his blood shed.

This event is not, however, merely a happening some two thousand years ago. It is not just in the "dead" past. It is not simply a curious fact that may be interesting but really possesses no value for contemporary man. Christ left word that his death was to be brought continually to the mind of the church down to the end of time. Moreover, he insisted that his death must be understood as redemptive in character and that all those who would share in its benefits must believe in it as redemptive for them personally (John 17: 20, 21). This faith they show by eating and drinking the symbols of his body and blood and in so doing receive the blessing of his presence (1 Cor. 10: 16, 17). In this way Christ's death becomes "contemporaneous" with and to the believers.

The matter, however, does not rest there. Christ's death was followed by his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father (Rom. 1: 4). Those who remember his death in the partaking of the Lord's Supper, therefore, trust themselves to him as the one who was dead, but is now alive forever more. Because of this he is their one hope in this life and in the next (Rev. 1: 18), tying history tightly to the present and the future. That is why Christ commanded his church to remember his death "until he comes." In this we encounter directly the core of the Christian view of history and its contemporary relevance.

II. THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF CHRIST'S DEATH

Christ's death was an historical event in that it took place in past time. As we seek to understand it in this category and under the light of what he has revealed concerning it, we are able to obtain

some comprehension of historical events as a whole. Or to put it another way, it gives us some leading in our attempts to interpret historical events so that we may grasp their significance not only for the day of their happening, but even for those who live in 1973 or who will live in the years to come.

The first thing that strikes us as we read the New Testament is that Christ's death was not something that suddenly came "out of the nowhere into the here." It was not an absolutely isolated or chance happening. It was part of an historical sequence. The Bible clearly indicates that Christ's death was the culmination of a long history going back to the beginning of things. Such was the theme of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. The Jews and proselytes should not be surprised, he said, since this which they now saw and heard had resulted from Christ's death and resurrection, which in turn was the culmination of a long historical process. Yet this process was not something that had evolved by natural law or happened by chance, but was the outcome of God's plan and purpose. Just as God sent Joseph into Egypt in order to save the family of Jacob (Gen. 45: 5), so God sent his Son to redeem his elect.

Yet, although Christ's death was part of the historical sequence, it was also unique. Christ died on Calvary once and that was enough. His death has not been repeated, nor is it repeatable in history. This is the theme of Hebrews 9: 13-10: 14. Christ will never die again for sinners. He did so almost two thousand years ago and that event is passed and gone forever. It is an event that is now a long way behind us, and which we can never bring back nor re-enact. All that we can look for is his return in glory.

While this is true, nevertheless his death can be recalled in the memory of both the individual and the church. One might even say that it is the memory of the church that brings it to the memory of the individual, for it is in the preaching of the Gospel and the Lord's Supper that his crucifixion and its meaning is made clear to the individual. His death is not re-enacted but is re-called to the mind. Yet it is not merely re-called to mind as some unrelated or chance happening, but as part of God's saving action in history. Because of this, its true significance becomes apparent only to those who remember it in faith and who look for Christ's return in glory (Heb. 9: 28). It means something only to those who know Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

It is this involvement of faith that has preserved the memory of Christ's crucifixion, for unless Christians down through the ages had constantly celebrated the Lord's Supper as a memorial it might simply have become another Roman execution of a Jewish rebel. Of such numerous events the historian simply has no memory.

Consequently, the desire to remember and comprehend the meaning of Christ's death is not a matter of idle curiosity, of mere antiquarian interest, or even of a desire for historical verification. The Christian seeks to grasp the point of Christ's death two thousand years ago in order to understand himself and the world in which he lives today. A true appreciation of Christ's death is fundamental to an understanding of our present world in all its turmoil and conflict, which the Christian sees as resulting from both the acceptance and rejection of the Gospel.

At the same time, we must also bear in mind that the Christian comes to this historical-contemporaneous view of Christ's death only by the action of the Holy Spirit. All the historical analysis in the world will not produce anything more than a "surface" understanding, for it deals only with the phenomena that are visible. To see the crucified Christ as Saviour and Lord today requires a knowledge that goes much deeper and is of a different kind. Judas participated in the Lord's Supper, but he did not understand its meaning and so committed suicide. Peter was also present and eventually saw what it manifested, with the result that, despite his earlier denial of Christ, he became the leading apostle. The difference was in the fact that Peter comprehended it because of the work of the Spirit while to Judas's rationalism the whole thing was foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1: 2). Thus the faith and understanding necessary to see the meaning of Christ's death comes through the Spirit's regenerating action alone.

At this point, no doubt, someone will object that what we have said so far is all very true concerning Christ's death and its commemoration in the Lord's Supper, but the same criteria cannot be applied to any other events. Christ's death was unique and we really only remember it because of our Christian faith. Since it is pivotal and unique in history we cannot possibly draw analogies or derive from it explanations for *ordinary* historical events. Consequently to attempt to use this event and its memorial for the purpose of understanding other historical happenings is illegitimate.

While in one sense this is correct, in another it is not. Since Christ's death and resurrection were historical events they come under what one might call historical categories. Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and others, by attempting to shift them into spheres of "God's time" or make them "myths" would really destroy their character as historical. To one who believes the New Testament to be historically reliable this point of view can never be acceptable. Although special elements such as divine miracle entered into the events, they were still events in history and part of history. Whether God acts directly through miracle or indirectly through providence is really just a matter of method, and does not alter the historicity

of the events, themselves. The underlying unity of God's plan still remains in history, enabling one to interpret less well-known and understood events by those that are better known and better understood As Christ in the Lord's Supper has made quite clear the historical significance of his death and resurrection it would seem that they can guide us in our understanding and interpretation of other events for which we have no revealed meaning. Because of his story's unity we may think analogically of events in "secular" history.

III. THE CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

Following this train of thought, we see that the first thing to which Christ's death, portrayed in the Lord's Supper, points, is that every historical event is part of a sequence or complex of events. No historical event ever stands in isolation from the rest of history, but is part of the whole which is ultimately the plan and purpose of God. The historian's responsibility, therefore, is to attempt to see and understand the place of an event or a sequence of events in its proper context. This means that ultimately the Christian seeks to see all past happenings in their broadest possible connections, i.e. in the light of God's purpose, although he must admit that he can never do this fully in his present spatio-temporal existence. He must content himself, therefore, with an interpretation that gives the clearest and most comprehensive explanation that the evidence warrants.

The historian's knowledge is only ever partial, because he can never ascertain all the facts, nor can he determine absolutely all their relationships. He frames his hypotheses which he then tests with the concrete facts that he has discovered, but he may never say that he has reached the ultimate and final answer. Other hypotheses always remain as possibilities and further facts may always be discovered that shed new light. The disciples in the upper room were unable to comprehend what was taking place at the time, and even afterwards they came to only a partial comprehension. Even today, after much study and debate, we still have only a relatively limited understanding of the nature and the accomplishment of Christ's redeeming and reconciling work.

Another reason for the historian's inability to gain more than a partial understanding of any single event or series of events, is that he does not know in detail the plan and purpose of God, nor does he see how each specific event fits into the whole. He can obtain knowledge of the immediate context of the events he is studying, but is never able to grasp their ultimate meaning, unless of course, he should have divine revelation on the subject. Even then, however, his understanding would remain incomplete since his comprehension of the eternal always remains limited by his own space-time conditioned experience.

A third reason for the historian's failure to understand and interpret any historical event or complex of them is what Christ himself described as "slowness of heart to believe." The disciples did not grasp the meaning of his death because they were myopic spiritually. The non-Christian historian does not see truly in any ultimate sense, because he has no conception of looking at history from the divine perspective. The Christian on the other hand, while he seeks to understand history from "the Christian viewpoint," can comprehend it, because of the dimness of his own spiritual insight, only very vaguely. Truly even the most spiritual still sees but "through a glass darkly." This was the thing that seemed to have a most depressing effect upon Christ at the Last Supper.

Nevertheless as one reads on in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian writings one sees the difference between the "actors' " understanding of the event and the "observers' " interpretation. The latter, whether the apostles in their later reflections, the apostle Paul or subsequent historians looking at it in a larger context, have been able to gain an understanding denied to those actually present at the time in the upper room. The meaning of the event and its implications as set forth in the Reformation, for instance, probably brought out its significance more fully than realized in the thinking of even the original apostles. Likewise the contemporary Christian may well see the world-wide impact and implications of the Gospel's universality more clearly than any first-century Christian could possibly imagine.

The Christian historian therefore, while seeking to see every historical event in its widest possible context, must always recognize that he is never able to obtain more than a partial comprehension of its true place in the historical process. He never knows the whole of the sequence of which it is a part.

Christ's death and resurrection not only indicate that every historical event is part of a sequence, but also because of its sequential character that it is non-repeatable. The historian cannot, like the chemist or the biologist, re-enact an event a number of times in order to examine it from every possible angle. Nor should he expect all events to repeat themselves in an ever recurring cycle. Christ's death points to the fact that God is working out a plan for history, and that the plan is moving towards a future goal, so that each event takes place in a new and different context. While an event or series of events may seem to be a repetition of some that have occurred before, in fact the resemblances are not exact, for each event standing in the divine plan is in a different situation, i.e. in a different place in the sequence. Apparent parallels between events may exist, but every one is, in fact, unique.

Because of this singularity of events, repetition is neither possible nor desirable. Yet despite the declaration of Hebrews 9: 11 ff. concerning the once-and-for-allness of Christ's death, the Roman Catholic Church has sought to repeat it in the celebration of the Mass. By this means it seeks to make the efficacy of Christ's death "contemporary" with the faithful, bringing life to them through the present and perpetual sacrifice of the altar. But even if this were possible, it would involve certain difficulties and embarrassments. For instance, one must always remember that it was not the apostles, but the Jews and Romans, who crucified Christ. This places the celebrating priest in the invidious position of acting, not in the apostolic succession, but in that of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Romans. Furthermore, for true repetition, the recipients of the sacrament should be in the same state of mind—and ignorance—as that of the apostles in the upper room. Such a re-enactment is, therefore, simply impossible, since the believer knows that Christ has risen from the dead, a fact that the apostles did not anticipate.

The origin of this concept of contemporaneity lies in the Middle Ages when men had only a dim understanding of the historical. Although some writers such as the Venerable Bede were more historically oriented in their outlook, most writers seem to have thought in "contemporary" terms. They had little appreciation of the relationship of the past to the present. They saw the past in terms of their own times, and so believed that an historical event, to have any influence on the present, must be transferred to the present. Christ's death had to be repeated at every instant of the present to make it effective. Only with the revival of classical studies and the coming of the Reformation did a truer appreciation of the nature of history and its effects upon the present began to dawn.

At this point a third dimension of the Christian view of history appears. Christ's death, as we have seen, was the climax of a sequence of events which we know as redemptive history or as the history of Israel, and because of this fact it was unique, thus indicating two characteristics of history. Yet his death was also the subject of Old Testament prophecy, and the fulfillment of the Old Testament law of atonement and purification. Does this mean that all historical events are predetermined? Are there laws of history?

In answer to these questions, one might say that Christ's atoning work in history indicates that there are moral laws. For one thing, man's reconciliation to God requires atonement as Christ repeated constantly and finally demonstrated historically (Heb. 9: 11). Furthermore, the society that rejects God's moral requirements and ignores his offer of reconciliation, but goes its own way in injustice, immorality and oppression, will face ultimate dissolution. This

would seem to be not only the message of an Amos (chaps. 4; 6), but also the implication of Christ's weeping over Jerusalem. Some forms of psychological laws may also play their part in history, as man reacts in certain ways to a specific set of circumstances. Yet never does the Bible speak as though history resulted from the deterministic action of mechanical laws.

While history is the working out of God's sovereign plan and purpose, it consists in the decisions and actions of man himself. Although it was foreordained that Judas would betray Christ, his action resulted not from some law, but from his own evil heart and mind. It was his decision, as Christ demonstrated at the Last Supper (Matt. 26: 14f., 21f.). This is also Peter's contention in Acts 2: 23 where he points out that although Christ's death was part of the plan of God, the Jewish authorities themselves, having made the decision to kill him, were responsible for his crucifixion. Two forces thus enter into history: God's overruling sovereign will and man's own decision of which he is the author. God's purpose is fulfilled by man's action, but how the two are related is the mystery of God's sovereignty over history. For this reason we may use the term "historical law" in only the most general sense.

This in turn poses a further question. How can we say that one historical event "causes" another to form a sequence? We may not think of historical "cause and effect" in the same way as "cause and effect" in the physical sciences, i.e. by means of law. Rather we must see that one event causes another by the interpretation placed upon it by those who know of it. A good example is the change of direction of the two disciples who went to Emmaus. The road from Jerusalem was the way of defeat and despair, for their hopes had collapsed with the crucifixion; the road back was the way of hope and victory. The difference arose from the fact that they had changed their interpretation of Christ's death. It now had a completely different meaning for them and consequently caused a very different reaction. Yet, while this may be true of the time immediately following the event, how can it be said of that event two thousand years later? How may we believe that Christ's death around A.D. 30 has influenced and even helped to form the history of the subsequent nineteen hundred years? We can understand that his death and resurrection meant much to his immediate followers, but it is somewhat more difficult to explain and assess its significance today.

One way in which a past event helps to shape the present is by what it actually has been and has done. When Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, he knew that a body of believers would, as a result of his sacrifice, come into being and exist until his return. His prayer in John 17 he based on this certainty. This presaged the creation and continued existence of the Church which, as "the

pillar and ground of the truth", has down through the ages preached the Gospel and witnessed to Christ in many other ways. By the creation of the church, therefore, his redeeming act has helped to form and mould society for two millennia. This one might say of many past events.

IV. THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF HISTORY

Christ knew that the Church would continue to exist as the Church, only as it remembered his death and resurrection. At this point memory enters into the picture. Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as a memorial to his death until he returns. His death is to be remembered both individually and collectively, but not repeated. Since as an historical event it was unique, it cannot be re-enacted but only called to mind, its meaning believed and embraced. In this it is representative of all other historical facts. Each one is unique and can only be recalled. Such recall, however, forms the basis of the present, indeed of ourselves, for the present always arises out of the past.

Yet while we speak of recall, we must recognize, as pointed out above, that we do not know all the facts, all their relationships or their ultimate meanings. Therefore, we cannot know history exhaustively. Nevertheless it would seem that we can know something of it. Even the New Testament does not tell us all that happened in the upper room or at Calvary. In the Lord's Supper Christ did not ask that everything he had said or done be remembered. Rather the important thing was to recall the central fact of his mission: his atoning death. Without that, all accounts concerning him amount to nothing, for the whole point of his work is then lost (John 20: 30, 31). In much the same way, while we cannot come to a complete understanding of any other historical event or sequence of events, we still can recall, through research and investigation, enough facts in order to gain at least an outline or a picture of what happened in the past.

Historical investigation is not, however, just a matter of attempting to recall a certain number of facts. (Would that many undergraduates would realize this!) The problem of interpreting the facts requires a more subtle and imaginative approach. Some would hold that to answer the question "Why?" deals with the matter of interpretation. This is undoubtedly part of the work of interpretation, but is it all? To many historians the answer is No. They seek to understand the event or events in the widest possible context, tracing not only the causes, but also the long-term as well as the short-term results. Others would go even farther maintaining that the historian must attempt to enter into the minds of the participants, to understand their attitudes, their reactions and their thoughts. With all these objectives of interpretation the Christian can agree,

but he believes that man can interpret human history truly only as he looks at it in the light of eternity. All other grounds and modes of interpretation are ultimately erroneous.

This is not to say, of course, that any historian, Christian or not, is able by historical research or philosophical analysis, or even by faith, to see and understand any historical event as God sees and understands it, i.e. exhaustively. Indeed if one took most modern philosophies of history seriously, one would doubt whether it is possible for the historian to know anything truly about anything in the past. Whether one turns to an idealist such as Benedetto Croce or a positivist such as J. B. Bury one comes up against the difficulty that their concepts of reality tend to dissolve history into a collection of random happenings in the past that man attempts to explain merely on the basis of his own experience and desires. To the Christian, however, history is knowable and understandable to a certain extent in the present because the Christian view of history, that came to its fullest expression in the Lord's Supper, is true.

But when we say this, exactly what do we mean? We mean, first of all, that, as Christ implied in all that he said at the Last Supper, and as the apostles constantly repeated afterwards, God is sovereign over history. He has determined its purpose and plan which he will accomplish by his power and providence. No man may know the plan in detail and so apply it to historical events. Christ's statement that neither man on earth, nor the angels in heaven, nor he himself in his incarnate state knew the day or the hour of the end of history would bear out this contention (Matt. 24: 36; Mark 13: 32). Nevertheless history is a unity and is moving on to God's predetermined goal. While this concept has at times been adopted by those making no Christian profession, only those who really hold to the Christian faith have any legitimate right to speak in these terms. Only when one has this faith can he legitimately look back over history from his own position in time in the light of eternity.

Furthermore, only on this basis could Christ command his disciples to remember his death. Only because history is a coherent unity, could they remember anything from the past that would have meaning for the present. And, only because of this coherence could the Holy Spirit bring them to a vital remembrance in order that they might put their trust in his sacrificial death on their behalf. Because of the nature of history, Christ was able to call upon, not only his apostles, but also those who down through the ages would believe on him, to remember his death which underlies their very existence as Christians. They recall *in faith* what makes them Christians today. Christ's death in history thus becomes contemporaneous through remembrance.

In this respect, however, Christ's death is not unique. Because, as it demonstrates, man lives in a coherent universe in which history is part of the present and indeed of the future, man must realize that the past does underlie and enter into the present. There is, in truth, no possibility of telling where the past stops and the present begins. It is a continuous stream in the working out of the divine purpose. As Christ's commandment to remember him pointed to this continuity between past and present, so all historical investigation does the same.

For this reason the Christian must say that the present can be understood only through the past, for they are all of a piece. We cannot make an absolute separation between the historical and the contemporaneous, for what God has joined together man cannot put asunder. To understand our present condition and situation, therefore, we must look to the past to see and understand that from which we have come. This was exactly what Christ sought to point out to the apostles in his institution of the Lord's Supper. In constantly showing forth his death, it brings that past unique event into the present in order that by faith the Christian may appropriate him once again as "the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world," who has wrought redemption and victory for his people. In this way Christ's death becomes contemporaneous to us, and in so doing it shows that all historical events of which we possess evidence can become contemporaneous also.

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