

# Proclaiming Christ Crucified: Some Reflections on the Use and Abuse of the Gospels

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One of the major areas of contemporary theological interest is biblical hermeneutics, that is the question of how Christians should responsibly interpret and use the Bible within the modern world. Particularly within evangelical circles there has been a growing appreciation of the fact that a simple insistence upon the authority of scripture – *sola scriptura* – cannot by itself resolve any problems unless it is also accompanied by recognized and agreed principles of interpretation; otherwise, people can ‘prove anything’ from the Bible. Evangelical Christianity has indeed always had certain principles and traditions of interpretation, but their significance has perhaps not always been acknowledged or critically reflected upon as much as they deserve. What I wish to do in this paper is to study two centrally important passages of scripture and explore some of the hermeneutical issues they raise, in the course of which I will give special attention to some of the hermeneutical assumptions embodied in customary evangelical handling of this material.<sup>1</sup>

The material to be considered is the portrayal of the crucifixion in the gospels. This has the advantage of being one of the best known portions of scripture and also one of the most centrally important, for it is the cross that stands at the heart of evangelical Christianity. A further advantage of considering the crucifixion is that the historicity of the episode is not in question. The sort of fundamental problems with regard to miracles and the activity of God within history that tend to bedevil discussions of the resurrection hardly arise here. The crucifixion should therefore be an excellent subject on which to focus basic hermeneutical questions about the interpretation and use of scripture.

## Introduction to the Crucifixion Narratives

A quick look at the four gospels shows that they all agree on all the basic facts with regard to the crucifixion; and although there is probably nothing in the gospels that has not been questioned by someone at sometime, there is no good reason to doubt that all these points of unanimous agreement can be accepted as genuine historical facts:

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1 I would like to express my gratitude and indebtedness to my friends in DEWTHO, whose discussions have provided the inspiration for this paper.

1 *Day*: Jesus was crucified on a Friday, the day before the sabbath (Matt. 27:62, Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:54, Jn. 19:14, 31).

2 *Place*: Jesus was crucified at 'the Skull' (in Hebrew, Golgotha), just outside Jerusalem (Matt. 27:33, Mk. 15:22, Lk. 23:33, Jn. 19:17).

3 *Cause of Execution*: Jesus was put to death as a criminal on the official charge of being, or claiming to be, 'The King of the Jews', a charge which was affixed to his cross (Matt. 27:37, Mk. 15:26, Lk. 23:38, Jn. 19:19).

4 *Time of Death*: Jesus died sometime in the late afternoon, between 3 pm and sunset (Matt. 27:46, 50, 57, Mk. 15:34, 37, 42, Lk. 23:44, 46, 54, Jn. 19:30-34).

5 *Circumstances of Burial*: Jesus' body was granted by Pilate to Joseph of Arimathea at the latter's request. The body was then put in wrappings and laid in a tomb that evening (Matt. 27:57-61, Mk. 15:42-7, Lk. 23:50-6, Jn. 19:38-42).

In addition to these basic facts, all four gospels also agree on a number of points of detail, which are in a sense incidental but which were clearly remembered as part of the historical tradition:

6 Two other men were crucified at the same time, one on either side of Jesus (Matt. 27:38, Mk. 15:27, Lk. 23:33, Jn. 19:18).

7 Jesus' garments were divided among the attendant Roman soldiers (Matt. 27:35, Mk. 15:24, Lk. 23:34, Jn. 19:24).

8 Jesus was at some stage given wine vinegar to drink (Matt. 27:48, Mk. 15:36, Lk. 23:36, Jn. 19:29).

Finally, one may note that all four gospels share a similar restraint with regard to the physical sufferings of Jesus and the horror of crucifixion as a spectacle – unlike many subsequent devotional writers, who have used their imagination to develop and emphasize precisely this aspect of the death of Jesus.

Beyond this basic agreement, however, the gospels differ in their portrayal of the crucifixion. This has, of course, always been recognized. It is the *extent* of the differences and the *significance* that should be attached to them that leads to a parting of the ways. The traditional approach of Christians, following the precedent and principles laid down by St. Augustine,<sup>1</sup> has been (i) to minimize the differences between the gospel accounts, and (ii) to assume that such differences as there are are not incompatible with, but rather complementary to, each other. Indeed, in many ways the crucifixion narratives afford a classic example of the plausibility of such an approach, because many of the varying details can, with a little imagination, be combined into an harmonious whole. On the one hand, simple differences of detail can be made complementary to each other; thus, the various sayings of Jesus (1 in Matthew and Mark, 3 in Luke, and 3

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1 Brevard Childs (*The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*, SCM, London, 1984, pp 143-56) gives an important brief survey of traditional and modern approaches to the problem posed by the presence of four gospels within the canon of the New Testament.

in John) can be combined and arranged in sequence, the 'seven words from the cross'. On the other hand, apparent contradictions can be easily harmonized; thus, Jesus initially carried his own cross (Jn. 19:17), but subsequently, because of his already weakened condition, Simon of Cyrene carried it for him (Matt. 27:32, Mk. 15:21, Lk. 23:26); initially both of the crucified thieves mocked Jesus (Matt. 27:44, Mk. 15:32), but subsequently one of them, impressed by Jesus' attitude and words, turned to him in faith (Lk. 23:39-43).

This sort of approach has in fact been abandoned, for a variety of reasons, by the mainstream consensus of modern biblical scholars, and abandoned to such an extent that it is generally viewed with suspicion and hostility. Instead, there is a general tendency to maximize the difference between the gospels and to assume the incompatibility of the respective accounts. Nonetheless, it should be recognized that a harmonizing approach is a natural and instinctive approach to the text for many a reader, and also represents a natural defensive move to any claim that the differences between the gospels show them to be unreliable or contradictory in such a way as to impugn their authority for the Christian believer. This latter is an important reason why a significant degree of harmonization has continued to prevail in much evangelical writing (as will be seen below). The issues that are raised, therefore, should in no way be taken for granted or assumed to be obvious. The present paper is an attempt to clarify some of the issues and to present the paradox that although a consistently harmonizing approach appears to set much store by the literal truthfulness of the gospel text, and is therefore adopted from the best of motives, it is in fact in many ways questionable in principle and also potentially restricting in practice. The argument will be based upon a study of the crucifixion as it is presented in Mark and Luke, and will be limited (more or less) to those two gospels. Mainly this is to try to keep the article reasonably short, although the argument would undoubtedly be enhanced by a study of Matthew and John as well. It is, however, only necessary to study two gospels to establish the point at issue, which the reader can then apply elsewhere accordingly.

### **Mark's Account of the Crucifixion**

A careful reading of Mark's account of the crucifixion suggests that the central emphasis of the narrative is the *utter desolation* of Jesus. This is conveyed primarily by the words Jesus cries out, but their force is best appreciated when they are set in context.

First, everyone who speaks to, or about, Jesus speaks with nothing but antipathy, mockery and misunderstanding. Initially, three different groups of people speak: the passers-by 'blaspheme' Jesus (Mk. 15:29-30), the chief priests and scribes speak mockingly to each other (15:31-32a), and those crucified with Jesus abuse him (15:32b). Later, those who hear Jesus cry out entirely misunderstand the meaning of his cry, thus heightening his isolation; and the act of giving him something to drink is not an act of mercy but is simply to keep him alive a little longer (and so prolong his agony) in the hope of being treated to a miraculous display (15:36).

Secondly, those who might be expected to be present and sympathetic, that is Jesus' disciples, are nowhere to be seen. His friends have deserted him. When last mentioned they were fleeing for their lives (14:50), and the mysterious young man in the garden was even prepared to leave his one basic item of clothing behind in his urgent haste to get away (14:52). Peter has denied Jesus with an oath and a curse (14:71) and nothing more is heard of him. Admittedly, some women are present as Jesus is crucified, but they are looking on 'from afar off' (15:40), and so provide no support for Jesus. Even the centurion, who recognizes Jesus' true significance as he dies, is not standing beside Jesus but 'over against' him (15:39).<sup>1</sup> The isolation of Jesus from human companionship and support is complete.

What, then, of God, the one whom Jesus addressed as 'Abba, Father' (14:36), the one who could surely be depended upon when all others failed? Even he has abandoned Jesus. The only words that Jesus utters are a cry of anguish, not to 'Father' but to a God who has abandoned him (15:34). This is further emphasized by the darkness that covers the land (15:33). Darkness is naturally sinister and fearful, and a strange supernatural darkness in the middle of the day could readily suggest divine anger or absence. If, moreover, the well-informed reader is meant to be reminded of Amos 8:9-12, such an interpretation is confirmed, for the darkness at noon in that Old Testament context is explicitly connected with divine judgment and withdrawal.

Finally, it should be noted that Jesus himself does not speak from the cross in any normal tone of voice. The words of Ps. 22:1 which Jesus utters are a cry of pain, and so it is precisely with a loud cry that the words leave Jesus' lips, and it is another loud cry that he utters just before he dies (15:34, 37). Both cries are naturally suggestive of the deep anguish and agony of the abandoned Jesus.

Beside this central concern of Mark's narrative, certain other emphases also emerge if one pays attention to the details of Mark's wording. First, it is likely that the careful reader of the gospel should see special significance in the fact that both those groups whose mockery of Jesus is spelt out connect the idea of Jesus saving himself with his coming down from the cross (15:30, 31b-32a). For earlier in the gospel, in the context of his central pronouncement about his mission and the meaning of salvation, Jesus has made clear that salvation only comes through taking up the cross and losing one's life (8:34-35). Thus it is ironic that the mockers miss the central point that it is only by Jesus' remaining on the cross and not coming down that salvation, for himself or anyone else, can be gained. They, like Peter earlier, cannot understand things in the way that God understands them (8:33).

Following on from this, it appears that Mark is developing more generally the paradoxical theme of seeing and believing in Jesus, especially

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1 The precise significance of the Greek *ex enantias* is debatable, but the fact that it is used instead of the usual words for 'near' (*eggus*, *plesion*) makes not unlikely the sort of meaning suggested here.

in relation to Jesus as king/messiah. Earlier, Pilate twice refers to Jesus as king in the presence of the crowds (15:9, 12), but although the crowds see Jesus they do not recognize him as king, but rather call for him to be killed (15:13-14). The Roman soldiers call Jesus king, but intend it only as mockery (15:16-20). Then the words 'The King of the Jews' are fixed to the cross publicly for all to see (15:26). The crucial words are on the lips of the chief priests who mockingly demand that 'the Christ, the king of Israel should come down now from the cross, *that we may see and believe.*' They assume that if they see something, then they will believe. The irony is that the truth about Jesus, that he is king, is publicly displayed before their very eyes, and yet they do not believe. Later on, they still hope to see something, that is that Jesus should be miraculously taken down from the cross by Elijah if he is not able to come down by himself (15:36). Only one person, the centurion, does recognize Jesus for who he is, and indeed this is because he sees (15:39a) – but what he sees is nothing spectacular or miraculous such as the others had hoped for. He sees simply 'that he died thus', ie, in utter desolation. *This* is the only sort of seeing that leads to faith. Jesus has been portrayed consistently as a suffering king, but no one has taken this seriously. Rather, people have ignored, mocked, and looked for something else. The centurion sees the suffering king at the final moment of anguish in death, yet he believes.

Thus Mark may be subtly indicating that simply to view the person of Jesus and the truth about him does not lead to faith. The assumption that to see a miraculous display would lead to faith is likewise mistaken. In both cases people's preconceptions about what the king ought to be like make them blind. Only the centurion who takes with utter seriousness the apparent contradiction before his eyes – a king/messiah who dies in desolation – sees truly and so believes.

One final irony is to do with Jesus and the temple. Accusations with regard to the temple were made at the trial (14:58), and are mockingly repeated at the crucifixion by the passers-by (15:29) – let the one who would perform the great feat of replacing the temple perform the simple feat of saving his own life. But the truth emerges when Jesus dies, for then the curtain of the temple is torn in two. The precise significance of this has been much debated. It has often been suggested (presumably in the light of Hebrews 10:19) to symbolize a new kind of access into the presence of God. This would mean that the fundamental presupposition of temple theology, viz. that the temple is the unique meeting-place between God and man, is in principle retained, the difference now being the extent of access available. But in the light of the preceding mocking reference to Jesus destroying the temple, it is perhaps more likely that the tearing of the temple curtain symbolizes precisely what the mockers denied, that is, it symbolizes the destruction of the temple as a whole – the curtain is torn right through ('from top to bottom', 15:38) not so that people can come in but because God is coming out – he is leaving the temple and has finished with it. Henceforth the unique meeting-place between God and man is no longer the temple but rather Jesus, the crucified king.

In summary, then, the predominant concern of Mark's narrative is the utter and unrelieved forsakenness of Jesus. Paradoxically, it is only one who dies thus who is the true meeting-place between God and man, and who can be recognized as the Christ, the Son of God (15:39, cf. 1:1).<sup>1</sup> Interwoven with this is a strong and painful irony which for the careful reader further draws out the implications of Jesus's death. Such is the crucifixion of Jesus according to Mark.

Before leaving Mark it is important finally to appreciate that this forbidding and uncomfortable portrayal of Jesus at his crucifixion is consistent with the portrayal of Jesus elsewhere in the same gospel. Throughout, Jesus is a lonely and awesome figure. Perhaps this is most notable in the image of Jesus striding out alone, ahead of his awe-struck followers (10:32). More generally, the constant reaction to Jesus is fear (*phobos*, 4:41, 5:15, 9:32, 10:32), astonishment (*thambos*, 1:27, 10:24, 32), and amazement (*ekplessomai*, 1:22, 6:2, 7:37, 10:26, 11:18). Even his family think he is mad (3:21),<sup>2</sup> and Jesus' response to their anxieties is hardly reassuring (3:31-35). The truth about Jesus is far from clear – his disciples are constantly uncomprehending (6:52, 8:14-21, 9:32), Jesus speaks publicly in a riddling sort of way that may even increase incomprehension (4:11-12), and when his significance does become at all clear it is something that should be kept quiet (1:25, 3:12, 8:30, 9:9). Even the disciples, who are committed to Jesus and have things specially explained to them in a way that is not possible for outsiders (4:11-12, 34), may themselves sometimes be unbelieving in exactly the same way as outsiders with hardened hearts and eyes that do not see (8:17-18). It would be consistent with all this if the original intended ending of the gospel was at 16:8. The point would then be that the resurrection, though real (16:6), does not in itself remove the mystery surrounding Jesus or the possibility of misunderstanding him. For, in the light of all that has preceded, it becomes clear that a true understanding or seeing of Jesus is possible only for those who themselves embrace the way of humility, suffering and death – without that, any seeing of Jesus would be a seeing that fails to see.

### Luke's Account of the Crucifixion

If we turn now to consider Luke's account of the crucifixion, a very different picture emerges. Here again the basic tone is set by what Jesus says – four distinct sayings in all. First, on the way to crucifixion, Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem, showing concern for them and warning them of their own impending doom (23:28-31). Secondly, Jesus shows love for his

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- 1 The reference to 'Son of God' in 1:1 is textually uncertain. If, however, the words are a gloss then they are an appropriate and perceptive gloss, which constitutes a valuable addition to the textual tradition.
  - 2 The precise meaning of the Greek phrase translated here by 'family' is uncertain, and a possible alternative rendering is 'friends'. Either way, the basic point remains that it was people close to Jesus who thought thus.

enemies by praying that his executioners may be forgiven; in his compassion for them he knows that they are acting in ignorance (23:34a).<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, Jesus speaks words of mercy and assurance to the penitent thief (23:43). Lastly, Jesus uses some ancient words of trust in God (Ps 31:5) to commit himself into his Father's hands at death (23:46). Two aspects of these sayings may particularly be noted. On the one hand, both the times Jesus speaks to God in prayer (the second and fourth sayings) he prefaces his words with his customary address of trust and obedience, 'Father'. On the other hand, each time Jesus speaks, he *speaks* (and does not shout). What he says is presumably to be understood as being said in a manner appropriate to the content, ie, with quiet assurance and authority. Luke does indeed mention that Jesus gave a loud cry (23:46a), but the content of the cry is not recorded and so it plays no significant role.<sup>2</sup>

A second notable feature of Luke's portrayal is the emphasis that Jesus is innocent of any crime, because he is a truly good and righteous man. This point is made three times by Pilate (23:4, 14-15, 22), once by the penitent thief (23:41b), and finally by the centurion (23:47). It is perhaps also made by Jesus himself (in a characteristically indirect way) in his words to the women of Jerusalem (23:31), where the point of the proverb appears to be, 'if this happens to the innocent (ie, Jesus, who is not deserving of such a fate, like green wood which is full of life and not ready for being cut down and burnt), then what will happen to the guilty (ie, the sinful inhabitants of Jerusalem, who are like dry wood which is ready to be cut down and burnt)?'.

Given such a consistent emphasis in the narrative, what is its likely significance?<sup>3</sup> Luke's aim is probably to show both how Jesus embodies and

- 1 The words of 23:34a are textually uncertain. They are, however, totally in keeping with Luke's portrayal of Jesus. If they are a later addition, then, like 'Son of God' in Mk. 1:1, they should be appreciated as a valuable enhancement of the tradition.
- 2 I am assuming that Jesus' words in 23:46b are to be understood as a separate utterance from the cry in 23:46a, although this has been denied. The basis for the assumption is the fact that it is a common idiom of NT Greek in general, and Luke in particular, to say 'he did X and he did Y' by 'having done [aorist participle] X, he did [aorist indicative] Y' - which is the grammatical form of 23:46. Cf. eg, Lk. 4:17, 20, 29, 30 for four examples of this idiom within one story.
- 3 The common explanation of this is in terms of Luke's supposed apologetic purpose of commending the political innocence of Christianity to a suspicious Roman Empire, just as Mark's emphasis on suffering is generally explained in terms of the pastoral needs of persecuted Christians in Rome. While such proposals are not unlikely and can help the reader imagine a particularly appropriate context for each work, it should be remembered that they are at best *partial* explanations which do not grasp the theological nettle of explaining what the text actually *means*. At worst, such an approach leads to an 'explaining away' of the text, similar to that of the person who refuses to engage with the content of someone else's argument on the grounds that he knows the motives that have caused him to say it.

fulfils the kind of righteousness that is acceptable to God, and how in Jesus goodness overcomes evil. Luke is deeply aware of how faithfulness to God can produce human opposition and hatred (cf. Ac. 3:14, 4:27, 7:52), and has already indicated that the real issue in the passion of Jesus is a struggle against Satan and the powers of evil (Lk. 22:3, 31, 53). How are the powers of evil overcome? By a positive goodness which trusts unswervingly in God, repays hatred with love, and is a channel for the mighty power of God to flow through.

This understanding of the death of Jesus is especially indicated by the response of the centurion (23:47), who not only proclaims that Jesus is innocent/righteous but also at the same time *glorifies God*. A human response of glorifying God is often mentioned by Luke (2:20, 5:25, 26, 7:16, 13:13, 17:15, 18:43), and it is always a response to a demonstration of the saving and healing power of God. The centurion, therefore, is responding to a demonstration of saving divine power in Jesus on the cross, which consists presumably (since this is what the narrative emphasizes) in Jesus' unswerving compassion towards man and trust towards God in the face of injustice, suffering, hatred and death. Thus are Satan and the powers of evil overcome.

A third notable emphasis in Luke's narrative is the connection which is made between salvation and Jesus as king/messiah. Three times Jesus is mocked, and each mocking is virtually identical in content. The rulers (23:35), and the condemned criminal (23:39) explicitly link Jesus being the Christ/Messiah with his being able to save himself, while the soldiers (23:37) link his being the king of the Jews with his being able to save himself.<sup>1</sup> As in Mark, there is heavy irony here, the words being the words of those who have eyes but cannot see. For although Luke seems to imply that even the charge 'This is the King of the Jews' was attached to the cross in mockery (23:38 – the implication lies in the word 'also' after the mockery of the previous verse), it is precisely this point, that Jesus is king, that is seen by the penitent thief (23:42).<sup>2</sup> And as he recognizes Jesus as king, so he is saved (23:43). In this portrayal, the words 'salvation' and 'kingship' are seen to have a new meaning. Jesus' kingship means the supremacy of his compassion towards man and trust towards God even in the face of injustice, suffering and death, for through these both sin and death are overcome (23:43). Salvation means recognizing this Jesus as king and looking to him even in the midst of suffering and death.

In short, Luke portrays the crucifixion as a predominantly tranquil scene dominated by the quiet authority and compassion of the suffering

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1 'Christ' and 'King of the Jews' are presumably identical in meaning, the latter phrase, which avoids the specifically Jewish word, being more appropriate on the lips of Roman soldiers.

2 This essential point is unaffected by the textual uncertainty whether Jesus will come *into* his kingdom (ie, future glory?) or *in* his kingdom (ie, second coming?).



Jesus. The unfailing goodness of Jesus is stressed, and this true king of the Jews is thus able to give salvation to the lost and overcome death.

As with Mark, it is important to see how Luke's portrayal of the crucifixion is consistent with his portrayal of Jesus elsewhere. In particular, Jesus' encounter with the penitent thief, which is so central to the crucifixion, is similar to two other stories of encounter that are peculiar to Luke, the prostitute who anointed Jesus (7:36-50),<sup>1</sup> and Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Each story presents a typical outcast – a prostitute, a tax collector, a criminal – who quite simply responds to the person of Jesus. There is no preaching or explicit challenge in any of the stories, but each person makes a genuine response to Jesus which results each time in an assurance of salvation (7:50, 19:9, 23:43). In particular, the assurance given to the penitent thief that *today* he would be with Jesus in Paradise reminds the reader of the similar assurance given to Zacchaeus (19:5, 9).

A similar note is sounded in some of the parables peculiar to Luke, especially the prodigal son (15:11-32) and the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14). In each of these parables an attitude of humility and honesty to God is shown (15:18, 18:13-14), similar to that which in the narratives is shown towards Jesus. Humility and openness on the one side, goodness and compassion on the other side – these are the consistent features of God's salvation in Jesus as depicted in Luke. Indeed Luke's general portrayal of Jesus is well expressed in Charles Wesley's famous line, 'Jesus, thou art all compassion . . . .'

### Comparison of the Two Crucifixion Accounts

If now we set these two crucifixion accounts side by side and compare them, what emerges? Two strikingly different pictures, different both in general tenor and in detail. In Mark, Jesus is an anguished figure, abandoned by both man and God, speaking only in loud cries. There is absolutely nothing to relieve the agony except perhaps the centurion's words, by which time Jesus is already dead. In Luke, Jesus is a compassionate figure, forgiving man, trusting God, and peaceful throughout. The nature of the difference may be well expressed by an artistic analogy. Mark's portrayal is like Grünewald's famous crucifixion in the Isenheim altarpiece – a stark, agonizing, disturbing picture. Luke's portrayal is like any of the crucifixion scenes of Fra Angelico – always peaceful, dignified, moving.

Given two such different pictures, it is worth comparing points of similarity and difference in some detail.

### Similarities

These are mainly the points of basic historical outline, as set out in the

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1 There has naturally been extensive debate about the relationship of this story to that in Mk. 14:3-9, Matt. 26:6-13, Jn. 12:1-8. For present purposes what matters is that the story as it stands is peculiar to Luke.

introductory section. Otherwise, the major similarity is the strongly ironical portrayal of the mockery of Jesus, which both Mark and Luke use to highlight the significance of Jesus' death, even though each writer nuances this somewhat differently. Beyond this, there are certain details common to both Mark and Luke – the darkness at noon, the cry before death, the tearing of the temple curtain, the witness of a centurion, and women looking on from far off. However, as will be seen below, it is likely that these various details were interpreted differently by the two evangelists.

### Differences

In Mark, Jesus' recorded words have only to do with being forsaken. In Luke, Jesus' words are all words of compassion and trust. Whereas Jesus' words in Mark show him to be forsaken by God, Jesus' words in Luke show not the slightest hint of any rupture in the relationship of love and trust between Father and Son.

In Mark, Jesus only speaks in cries. In Luke, Jesus speaks normally. Given the difference in content, in both Mark and Luke there is a consistency between what Jesus says and the way he says it. Luke does indeed allow for a loud cry before Jesus dies (23:46), but this corresponds to the loud cry before death similarly mentioned by Mark (15:37) and so cannot be the cry of dereliction. Because the cry does not enhance the general tenor of Luke's portrayal, it plays a lesser role there than in Mark where it represents a significant furthering of the anguish and pain of Jesus.

In Mark, the significance of Jesus' death is conveyed by the tearing of the temple curtain which accompanies his death. In Luke, the tearing of the temple curtain is recorded *before* Jesus' death (23:45), and in a manner less emphatic and dramatic than in Mark.<sup>1</sup> Luke apparently presents the tearing of the curtain simply as one of two amazing portents that accompanied Jesus' death (the other being the darkness at noon, specified as 'the sun failing' (23:44-45a), perhaps a portent of the day of the Lord, cf. Joel 2:31, Ac. 2:20). No earlier mention of the temple is made in either the mockery at the cross or at the trial as they are presented by Luke. Apparently, therefore, Luke did not see the death of Jesus as effectively abolishing and replacing the temple, in the way that Mark seems to, for subsequently Luke can still regard the temple positively as an appropriate place for worship (Lk. 24:53, Ac. 3:1 etc.). In any case, however Luke understood the tearing of the curtain, it is presumably the story of the penitent thief, and not the tearing of the curtain, that for him is the primary key to the meaning of Jesus' death.

In Mark, the centurion's reaction to Jesus' death is the recognition of Jesus as son of God – the emphasis is on Jesus in all his suffering as truly related to God. In Luke, the centurion praises God and recognizes Jesus as righteous – the point is a joyful recognition of God overcoming evil through the unflinching goodness of Jesus.

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1 In Mark, the curtain is 'torn in two from top to bottom', while in Luke it is simply torn 'in the middle'.

In Mark, Jesus is only spoken to with abuse. In Luke, there is abuse but also the penitent thief speaks with faith.

In Mark, the passers-by (ie those other than the religious leaders or the soldiers) are hostile to Jesus (15:29). In Luke, the crowd (again, those other than the religious leaders or the soldiers) is not actively hostile but simply looks on (23:35), and at the end is deeply moved (23:48, cf. 23:27).

In Mark, Jesus' disciples are absent, and only women are present, 'afar off' (15:40). In Luke, the onlookers are still 'afar off' but now they include 'all those known to Jesus' (23:49), which presumably includes his disciples. That this is significant is likely since Jesus' words that the disciples would be scattered (Mk. 14:27) have no place in Luke, who, by contrast, has Jesus' words to the disciples, 'You are those who have continued with me in my trials' (22:28), words of reassurance to Peter (22:31-32), and no reference to the disciples fleeing in Gethsemane. In Luke, Jesus is not only not abandoned by God but also he is not abandoned by man.

Just as the portrayal of the crucifixion in each gospel needs to be understood in relation to the portrayal of Jesus in each gospel as a whole, so too the comparison of the two crucifixion accounts needs to be related to a comparison between the gospels as a whole, although at present only a few brief indications can be given.

In Gethsemane, for example, Mark portrays Jesus as going to prayer in great pain and anguish (14:33-34), while Luke's corresponding narrative makes no reference to any disturbance of Jesus' serenity (22:40-41).<sup>1</sup> Where Mark dramatically portrays Jesus as falling to the ground to pray (14:35), Luke simply portrays him as kneeling (22:41). Later, Luke twice shows Jesus' compassionate concern for others in incidents unparalleled in Mark; he heals the severed ear of the high priest's slave (22:51b), and he looks at faithless Peter (22:61).

Earlier, one of the key statements in Mark about the meaning of Jesus' death is 'For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (10:45). In Luke the corresponding passage reads simply, 'I am in the midst of you as one who serves' (22:27). The centrality of suffering and death for a true understanding of Jesus is conveyed in Mark by the pivotal significance within the gospel of the episode of Caesarea Philippi (8:27-9:1). In Luke, this episode appears simply as one among many others (9:18-27), and its impact is softened because Peter's

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1 This may be qualified to some extent by the textually uncertain 22:43-4. Even here, however, the central word, *agonia*, does not simply have the same meaning as the English word 'agony'. The basic meaning of the word is 'contest' or 'struggle' and this is the appropriate sense in context, where the point is the intensity of Jesus' wrestling in prayer (presumably to defeat Satan and the powers of evil) rather than any mental anguish as such.

misunderstanding and Jesus' rebuke are omitted and the call to discipleship is generalized.<sup>1</sup>

### Customary Evangelical Interpretation of the Crucifixion

It will be appropriate now to turn to consider the portrayal and interpretation of the crucifixion in two recent books by evangelical writers. Because the writers, John Stott and Michael Green, are widely recognized as leading figures within contemporary evangelical Anglicanism, their books may reasonably be regarded as representative of a contemporary evangelical outlook.

First, John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*.<sup>2</sup> Much of the book is a fine exposition of scripture, and it is only certain aspects that are questionable. In his discussion of the gospel material Stott gives central place to the cry of dereliction (Mk. 15:34) which he expounds at some length (pp 79-82). He then continues,

'Almost immediately after the cry of dereliction, Jesus uttered three more words or sentences in quick succession. First, 'I am thirsty', his great spiritual sufferings having taken their toll of him physically. Secondly, he called out, again (according to Matthew and Mark) in a loud voice, 'It is finished.' And thirdly the tranquil, voluntary, confident self-commendation, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,' as he breathed his last breath. The middle cry, the loud shout of victory, is in the Gospel text the single word *tetelestai*. . . At once the curtain of the Temple, which for centuries had symbolized the alienation of sinners from God, was torn in two from top to bottom, in order to demonstrate that the sin-barrier had been thrown down by God, and the way into his presence opened.'

This is a classic example of traditional harmonization whereby elements from all four gospels are combined without the slightest sense of incongruity. It raises basic hermeneutical issues. First, the controlling assumption is that the different gospel accounts can and should be combined, and the resulting sequence regarded as an historical sequence. Or, to put it another way, it is assumed that every detail of what each gospel says about the crucifixion is straightforwardly historical and so can be taken in isolation from its gospel context and put together with other details in an imagined historical reconstruction. Yet we have already seen that the dif-

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1 I appreciate that a possible criticism of my general thesis is that it depends upon an intensive study of two short passages which may find meaning where none was intended, combined with a partial and selective reading of the gospels elsewhere. But while I certainly accept that I may have to some extent 'over-interpreted' the two crucifixion accounts, and also that any thorough study of the portrayal of Jesus in Mark or Luke would produce a richer and more differentiated picture than the relatively straightforward one I have drawn, I do not believe that further study in either area will significantly blur the main outlines of my portrayal or show it to be untrue to the text.

2 IVP, Leicester, 1986.

ferences between the crucifixion accounts of Mark and Luke are part of a consistent difference of presentation within each gospel as a whole. Moreover, the differences are hardly the sort of differences that would arise if each evangelist had merely made a different selection from the same range of historical data, for the whole ethos of each account is profoundly different. This is in essence a basic point of historical method, that a historian must first assess his sources in terms of their special interests and tendencies; and if he discovers that the material has been influenced by concerns that are not straightforwardly historical, then he must make appropriate allowance for this when drawing historical conclusions from the material.

Secondly, the understanding of the crucifixion that emerges is not in fact that of any one of the evangelists, certainly not that of either Mark or Luke. Although much is made of the cry of dereliction that Mark records, we have already seen that for Mark the crucifixion is a desolation that is total and is not mitigated by either 'a loud shout of victory' or a 'tranquil, voluntary, confident self-commendation'. On the contrary, it is clear that both such elements, if introduced into Mark's narrative, would significantly change it. Stott's account of the crucifixion is entirely composed of biblical elements, but as it stands it is an imaginative construct whose claim to being biblical is in fact debatable.

The other book to be considered is Michael Green's *The Empty Cross of Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> Again, this is a helpful work with whose main thesis I have no argument. But for present purposes two points are particularly significant. First, when considering the evidence from the gospels as to why Jesus had to die, Green simply presents an amalgam of points abstracted from all four gospels. Thus the death of Jesus was, among other things, inevitable, voluntary, an identification with sinners, a sacrifice, a ransom, a victory, total darkness, and total vindication (pp 32-41). In all this, no consideration is given as to how the death of Jesus is understood in any one gospel. The distinctive portrayal of each evangelist is apparently less significant than an amalgam portrayal.

Secondly, Green apparently assumes that all the various aspects of the death of Jesus that he lists are compatible with, and complementary to, each other. Presumably because he wishes to be eirenic in an area that is liable to sharp controversy, he simply lists his points and does not attempt to develop their deeper implications or interrelationships. He comments that 'although each evangelist contributes his unique perspective, the overall picture is clear, and abundantly substantiated' (p 41). That there might be a genuine tension between the evangelists is nowhere hinted at. Indeed, it is interesting to see how the difference of portrayal between Mark and Luke is subtly blurred. When discussing Jesus in Mark, Green says, 'That victory is completed through the cross and resurrection, where he suffers *with dignity*, where in dying he *wins over* his executioners, and where he is raised

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1 H & S, London 1984.

in power to go before his disciples into the Gentile mission' [my italics] (p 43). The words that I have put in italics are those aspects of the crucifixion that are not Marcan at all, but rather are characteristic of Luke.<sup>1</sup> Then, when discussing Luke, Green allows the common thesis that Luke 'gives no explicit doctrine of the atonement', but then utilizes Acts 20:28 to make the point that 'His shed blood constitutes a ransom' [my italics] (p 44), thereby interpreting Luke with a theological category that is not Lucan at all but Marcan (as already noted, 'ransom' is strikingly absent from the Lucan parallel to Mk. 10:45).

### **A Critique of the Assumptions Underlying Harmonization**

In these two books that we have briefly looked at it is clear that certain basic hermeneutical assumptions are being made, even though they are never explicitly spelt out. Both writers stand, to a greater or lesser extent, within the classic tradition of Augustine which tends to minimize the differences between the gospels and assume that such differences as there are should be regarded as straightforwardly complementary. The fundamental assumptions underlying this approach are twofold. First, there is the conviction of faith as to the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the gospels. As a Christian theologian I have no quarrel with this. Secondly, there is the assumption that the narrative statements of the gospels can always, unless there is clear evidence to the contrary,<sup>2</sup> be equated with, or translated into, statements of historical fact. It is this second assumption, which imposes important restrictions on how the truth of the gospels (the first assumption) is to be understood, that I wish to question.

It is, of course, fundamental to the Christian faith that it is rooted in history. What makes Christianity distinctive is precisely its focus upon Jesus of Nazareth, the man of Galilee, as the key to understanding and knowing God. Without Jesus, or without a reliable knowledge of him, the Christian faith would lose its distinctive content. As a general principle, that is unexceptionable. Problems arise, however, when one tries to pinpoint the precise extent of this rootedness in history, especially if one

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- 1 This is not to say that elements within Mark's narrative are not open to be read in this way. For example, Jesus' rejection of wine (15:23) and silence under abuse (15:32) could not unreasonably be described as dignified. The point is simply that it is Luke's portrayal (and John's) rather than Mark's that readily suggests 'dignified' as an appropriate description for the behaviour of Jesus.
  - 2 The parables are the classic example of narrative which is recognized as non-historical, because parables are imaginative stories designed to make a point (or points). But where no such clear literary genre can be appealed to, evangelical writers are generally reluctant to allow the presence of imaginative, non-historical material; everything must be assumed to be historical unless there is clear evidence to the contrary (and such clear evidence is often hard to come by).

attempts to claim more than that the gospels are *substantially* (a usefully imprecise but still meaningful term) rooted in history. In principle, it is usually only this substantial historicity that is argued for, as in the admirable recent study by R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus*<sup>1</sup> (eg, p 15). In practice, however, there is a clear tendency, as illustrated above, to claim, or at least presume, more than this. The basic reason for this appears to be an apologetic concern, as is well illustrated in John Wenham's *Easter Enigma*.<sup>2</sup> Wenham sets out to harmonize the resurrection stories explicitly against a background of scholars judging the stories to be 'a jumble of contradicting statements' which 'cannot all be true' (p 10). The motive – to uphold the truth of the gospel text – is admirable. But the crucial question is whether the defence has not too readily accepted the terms on which the criticism of the gospels was made, which itself begged the question, and so has fought on the wrong ground.

The basic point at issue, I would suggest, is the status of each of the four canonical gospels as a true and authoritative (divinely inspired) interpretation of Jesus. If anything has emerged clearly from modern study of the gospels, it is the recognition that none of the evangelists presents a straightforward historical account of Jesus, but that each presents a distinctive portrait in which the historical material is selected, moulded, developed and interpreted by the evangelist so as to present those particular aspects of the significance of Jesus that he wishes to convey. Thus, to put it crudely, each gospel consists *both* of certain sayings and doings of the historical Jesus *and* of the interpretation that has been put upon these by the evangelist.<sup>3</sup> Although it is perfectly possible and legitimate for the historian to distinguish between these two, and to try to separate the former from the latter, this is hardly a way of reading the text that should be normative generally within the Christian churches that seek to live by this material as the word of God. If a doctrine of the authority of scripture is to be meaningful, it must be primarily the gospels as we have them, and not some historical (and usually debatable) reconstruction that goes behind the text, that is authoritative for the community of faith. This means that to regard each gospel as inspired and authoritative entails according inspired and authoritative status to each gospel's interpretation of Jesus.

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1 H & S, London 1986.

2 Paternoster, Exeter 1984.

3 As it stands, this of course simplifies what in reality was probably a complex process of transmission and interpretation by the early Church. But I do not think that that need affect the present argument since (i) the same positive assessment can be made of the whole process as of the evangelist, and (ii) the evangelist was the arbiter and interpreter of the process and represents the level at which the tradition was recognized as authoritative by the whole Church.

Yet it is just this which is called in question by harmonization.<sup>1</sup> One of the basic principles of traditional harmonization is well enunciated in a passing statement by John Wenham: 'It would *contradict nothing explicitly said* by Luke if we were to infer that the preparation of the spices and ointments to which he refers [23:56, in the context of Friday evening] did in fact take place after their purchase on Saturday evening; *it would simply negate an impression*' [my italics] (p 68). Thus one who wished to harmonize the crucifixion narratives could argue that because Mark does not explicitly say that Jesus did not utter the word *tetelestai* in his final cry and then entrust himself to his Father (even though he gives the impression that Jesus' agony was unrelieved), and Luke does not explicitly say that Jesus did not utter a cry of dereliction (even though he gives the impression that the harmony between Jesus and his Father was unbroken), it is therefore legitimate (because it contradicts nothing explicitly said) to combine the two accounts in the way that Stott does. The questionable nature of this kind of argument becomes apparent if, in Wenham's quotation, we replace 'impression' with 'interpretation'. For in both crucifixion narratives that we have considered it is clear that the impression of Jesus that is conveyed, whether as anguished and forsaken or as calm and trusting, is in fact integral to the whole theological interpretation of the crucifixion by each evangelist. To negate the impression means to deny the interpretation. And yet, as argued above, it is precisely as interpretations of Jesus that the gospels are authoritative for the Church. An harmonizing approach which makes a composite picture normative and authoritative implicitly denies that both Mark and Luke (and Matthew and John) have truly interpreted the event, for it qualifies the account of each and offers an interpretation that in fact is to be found in neither. By contrast, an approach which takes both Mark and Luke seriously sees both as true and authoritative interpretations; each, however, does not exhaust the meaning of the crucifixion, and so another interpretation is also possible. Thus both interpretations are affirmed and held in creative tension with each other.

Having said all this, however, I would not in fact wish to deny *any* place to traditional harmonization in a Christian use of the gospels. This is because the gospels have an authoritative status as scripture for the Christian, which causes them constantly to be read, meditated upon,

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1 I am not here thinking of harmonization in the sense of the historian's customary practice of trying to piece together differing accounts of the same event, something which is always legitimate in principle. In the hands of the historian this is essentially an heuristic approach, ie, you try it out and see if the result is convincing, and if it is not you abandon it. Traditional biblical harmonization differs from this in that (i) it tends to assume that differing accounts *must* fit together (ie, the approach is procrustean rather than heuristic), and (ii) it discounts the significance of the moral and theological concerns which have influenced each evangelist's portrayal, on the assumption that these never need (rather than sometimes may and sometimes may not) be in conflict with a concern for historical accuracy.



expounded and applied. This naturally gives rise to imaginative and devotional reflections that may be of great value and yet have limited relation to the intended meaning of the evangelist. Christian commentary over the last 2,000 years is full of such material, and it would be arrogant and parochial to deny its value. It is still perfectly reasonable (though rather unfashionable) to adopt the venerable tradition of devotional meditation on the 'seven words from the cross', as in the fine recent work of Richard Holloway, *The Killing*.<sup>1</sup> What is vital, however, is that the practitioner should be aware of what he is doing, so that he does not claim his exposition to be 'what the text really means', but recognizes it rather as a free association of appropriate devotional applications whose value is determined by general theological and pastoral considerations.

It is a failure to make this sort of distinction that unfortunately mars John Wenham's *Easter Enigma*, a work in the classic tradition of harmonization. Despite the author's apparent intentions to reconstruct history, the book is not a work of history (though some of its suggestions may be historically tenable) because it ignores basic principles of historical method. Nor is it a work of theology, for it does not explore the meaning of Easter. Rather, it is an excellent example of imaginative devotion constructing scenes which may be helpful to many readers. As history its value is limited, but as devotion its value is considerable, though I fear that this is not quite what the author intended.

### Implications for Understanding the Gospels

What implications does the above critique of harmonization have for an evangelical understanding of the gospels? First, the understanding of the relationship between historicity and truth must be modified. It must be conceded that the evangelists present pictures of the crucifixion which are indeed in agreement on the basic historical facts but which otherwise are incompatible at a strictly historical level. From a strictly historical point of view I do not think it is possible with any confidence to say more about the crucifixion than was said at the outset of this paper. Given the nature and extent of the differences between Mark and Luke, differences which are added to yet further when Matthew and John are taken into account,<sup>2</sup> we

1 *The Killing: Meditations on the Death of Christ*, DLT, London 1984.

2 Matthew's account is basically similar to Mark's, though with the important addition of the episode in 27:51b-53, which represents Matthew's interpretation of the cross as both 'earth-shaking' and 'life-giving'.

Most distinctive is John's account which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to note the interesting point that it is only John's account which makes a specific claim to eyewitness testimony (19:35). It is also John's account which, alone of all the gospels, has a large number of details peculiar to it which are all historically realistic (ie, independently attested as authentic contemporary practice) – the condemned man carrying his own cross (19:17), the exact term *titulus* for the charge affixed to the cross (19:20), the *titulus* in three languages

[footnote continued overleaf]

simply cannot know what happened on the historical level on that Friday beyond the basic outline of events. Of course, few of the traditional harmonizations are impossible, and some (though hardly all) may be historically valid.<sup>1</sup> The point is simply that no historical reconstruction can command respect if it does not take seriously the distinctive nature of the gospels as historical sources. For to a greater or lesser extent each of the evangelists has constructed a scene which, to recall our earlier analogy, is the literary equivalent of artistic interpretations such as those of Grünewald or Fra Angelico. The historical facts are presented by means of a profound interpretative reflection in which strictly historical concerns are of less significance than the creation of a scene into which the evangelist puts those words, characters and actions that convey the true significance of the profound mystery of the cross as he understands it.

The argument that there is 'unhistorical' material of this nature in the gospels is hardly novel, and yet it has been largely resisted by evangelicals as somehow subversive of the authority of scripture. Perhaps this is partly because the argument has often used implicitly pejorative language, such as 'fabrication' or 'invention', to refer to such material, and so has not unnaturally provoked denial rather than recognition that the basic point at issue was valid but expressed poorly or tendentiously. In addition to this difficulty with language, there are perhaps three further reasons why this argument might be resisted.

First, there is the problem of distinguishing what is historical from what is not historical. Since both look the same and there are no clear criteria to distinguish them, there may be a fear that one could be left in a quagmire of uncertainty with regard to everything in the gospels. If you concede in one place then you may have to concede everywhere. But such an 'all or nothing' approach, though initially plausible, is in fact unrealistic. As already emphasized, the historicity of the crucifixion is not in question, and the substantial historicity of the gospels can, and should, be maintained. From the historical point of view one must simply do what one does with any other historical text that one judges to be substantially historically

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(19:20), the squad on execution duty consisting of four soldiers (19:23, cf. Ac. 12:4), the practice of breaking legs to hasten death (19:31-3), and, arguably, the flow of blood and water from the recently dead body of Jesus (19:34). Moreover, John's account is entirely lacking in supernatural phenomena such as occur in the synoptics – the darkness at noon and the tearing of the temple curtain – the sort of elements that (rightly or wrongly) are often taken as indicative of legendary development. If one simply compared the crucifixion accounts of John and Mark on their own, one would draw the conclusion that John's account looks to be the more historically accurate, while Mark's represents a profound theological moulding and interpretation, probably of later date!

1 It is Matthew's extra episode in 27:51b-53 that most clearly resists any credible historical harmonization with the other gospel accounts.

accurate – accept its account as historical unless there is good reason to do otherwise. As long as the overall assessment of the historical value of the document is correct, one will always be more right than wrong in treating its account as historically accurate, even though on any given instance one may have to allow a degree of historical uncertainty.

Secondly, some might argue that any historical uncertainty would mean uncertainty about the truth and reliability of the gospels. It is hard to emphasize sufficiently, however, how important it is not to beg the question of the relationship of truth to historicity and impose anachronistic criteria of truth on the biblical text. On the one hand, one has to beware of a certain tendency, that naturally arises in a culture where science is exalted, to denigrate theology as a significant category of reality and truth; ie, the assessment of a story, in whole or in part, as theological may carry the implication that the story is not really, that is as an objective matter of fact, true. Such reductionism should have no place in Christian thinking. On the other hand, it is ironic that in our modern world, which has seen such a flowering of fiction (in the technical literary sense of creative, imaginative and meaningful writing of a non-historical kind, not in the popular pejorative sense of untruth), and in which fiction (both on the page and on the screen) is widely regarded as the most effective contemporary means of communicating moral and religious values, some should refuse to recognize the presence of such fictional tendencies, to a greater or lesser extent, within scripture. Our neat modern categories of 'history' and 'fiction' had not in fact been formulated in the world of the evangelists, who move freely and easily between the two.

This leads to the third problem, that is the lack of an appropriate category with which to designate the content of the gospels. The not uncommon suggestion that they should be classified as theology *rather than* history, as though theology were somehow incompatible with history, should rightly be rejected as both confused and confusing. But how then should one classify the gospels? In modern terms they bear some resemblance to historical fiction of the serious, well-researched kind, where known history is reconstructed and retold imaginatively, or to the documentary drama, where known historical events are dramatized to make them more interesting and accessible to a non-specialist public. In both cases it becomes extremely difficult to draw a line between what is, and is not, 'historical', for a new entity has been created in which the relationship between truth and historical accuracy is more often than not a difficult matter of *judgment* rather than a simple matter of fact. The weakness of the analogy is simply that while historical fiction and documentary dramas may have a moral and religious dimension, that dimension is usually of secondary importance, whereas in the gospels the moral and religious concern is predominant to such an extent that in any assessment of their truth the judgment must be as much moral and religious as historical.<sup>1</sup>

1 This point becomes particularly clear in any assessment of the portrayal of Jesus in the apocryphal gospels.

Perhaps in the end one can do no better than classify the gospels as gospels, and allow the understanding of what that means to be drawn inductively from the careful study of their contents. It may well be that 'gospel truth' is still the profoundest kind of truth there is.

The second major conclusion to be drawn from the above discussion concerns the theological use of the gospels. First and foremost are the implications for understanding the cross of Christ. It is customary in evangelical theology, as for example in John Stott's book, to argue that while there are many different facets to the meaning of the cross, there is nonetheless one basic understanding which undergirds or overarches all others, that is substitutionary atonement. As Stott puts it, 'We strongly reject, therefore, every explanation of the death of Christ which does not have at its centre the principle of "satisfaction through substitution", indeed divine self-satisfaction through the divine self substitution' (p 159). This understanding comes primarily through a combination of certain gospel texts, especially the cry of dereliction in Mark, with certain passages in Paul.

The point that I wish to make, however, is that while such an interpretation may to some extent be true to Mark's portrayal of the cross, it is *not* true to Luke's interpretation. To this extent the common thesis that Luke 'gives no explicit doctrine of the atonement' is indeed well-founded. The story of the penitent thief which appears to be at the heart of Luke's portrayal does not show Jesus doing anything different from what he had always done during his ministry. As far as can be deduced from Luke's portrayal, the difference that the cross makes is fourfold. First it shows how trust in God and compassion towards man can be maintained to the very end, even through injustice, suffering and death. Secondly, it shows how through this trust and compassion the powers of evil are overcome. Thirdly, it shows how this suffering trust and compassion constitutes the essence of Jesus' kingship/messiahship. Fourthly, it shows how this trust and compassion overcome both sin and death for the believer (so esp. 23:43). The strong emphasis in Acts upon the resurrection and vindication of Jesus, rather than his death as such, would tend to corroborate such a reading of the gospel. In terms of well-known doctrines of the cross, Luke's portrayal looks something like a mixture of Aulen's *Christus Victor* thesis, which sees the cross as a victory over sin, death and the devil, and Abelard's 'moral influence' thesis, which stresses the moving and transforming effects of Christ's supreme demonstration of how life under God should be lived.

What Stott's argument for *one* supremely normative understanding of the death of Christ does in effect is to impose a hermeneutic of evangelical theology upon scripture in such a way as to silence at least one of the (divinely-inspired) evangelists, that is, Luke. To argue that Luke does not in fact have a distinctive understanding of the death of Christ must ultimately resort to special pleading, and make the text of Luke conform to a predetermined norm rather than genuinely speak for itself. Even if some

material in Luke might fit with a theory of substitutionary atonement (eg, 22:20, though this is textually uncertain),<sup>1</sup> his portrayal taken as a whole does not. There is, I suggest, a real conflict between the authority of scripture and a hermeneutic of an evangelical doctrine of the atonement as outlined by Stott. If Luke is given due weight as an inspired and authoritative interpreter of Christ in his own right, then what must be abandoned is not substitutionary atonement as such, for that may still be a valid reading of the familiar texts, but rather the insistence that this is ultimately the only true interpretation of the cross. If the canonical gospels are all given their full authority, the conclusion that will follow is that there is no one definitive understanding of the cross of Christ. Rather it is constitutive of a biblically-based Christian theology that the meaning of the cross is so rich and so profound that no one understanding can do it full justice.

This argument for the validity of markedly different interpretations of the cross may seem to some to be sacrificing the theological unity of the New Testament, and abandoning the principle that one should not 'so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another'. But the principle that is often now applied to Church unity, that unity does not mean uniformity, applies equally to scripture. Mark's portrayal and interpretation of the cross may stand in some tension with Luke's both at the historical level and at an abstract dogmatic level, but that need not entail any ultimate lack of unity or contradiction between them. For it is constitutive of theological truth, ie, the Christian understanding of God and the world, that it is in essence complex and paradoxical and can only be truly grasped within the context of the Church's living in faith and obedience. It may not be possible to produce any one formal doctrine of the cross that can at the same time embrace and do justice to both Mark and Luke (and other New Testament witnesses). But within the context of the life of the Church, where the attempt is made to live in conformity to the word of God in scripture, it can and should be proclaimed that the witness of both Mark and Luke are true – the cross brings life in both ways and both patterns of faith can exist side by side. The relationship between these two patterns of faith should be mutual affirmation and a creative tension, in which each is open to hear from the other a scriptural witness to Christ and his death that may not be immediately congenial but which is nonetheless true and points to dimensions of reality to which otherwise one might remain closed.

In conclusion, the aim of this article has been rather ambitiously to try to point towards some general principles about the use of the gospels on the basis of a study of two short passages. The thesis of the article is that customary evangelical use of the gospels, particularly with reference to the all-important death of Christ, has in fact been less than truly biblical; it is all too easy to use the rhetoric of being 'biblical', while in reality adopting a partial and selective reading of scripture in which the ultimate, and often

1 The verse perhaps represents an assimilation of Luke's distinctive account of the Last Supper to what became the generally-held version of that event.

unacknowledged, authority is the theological emphasis of a particular Christian tradition. The argument may appear subversive of certain cherished aspects of evangelical theology and biblical interpretation; but I hope that the criterion by which it will be judged will not be whether it is true to evangelical tradition but whether it is true to scripture.

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