

## THE CROSS OF CHRIST

### 2 Why did Christ die?

Why did Christ die? Who was responsible for his death?

Many people see no problem in these questions and therefore have no difficulty in answering them. The facts seem to them as plain as day. Jesus did not 'die', they say; he was killed, publicly executed as a felon. The doctrines he taught were felt to be dangerous, even subversive. The Jewish leaders were incensed by his disrespectful attitude to the law and by his provocative claims, while the Romans heard that he was proclaiming himself King of the Jews, and so challenging the authority of Caesar. To both groups Jesus appeared to be a revolutionary thinker and preacher, and some considered him a revolutionary activist as well. So profoundly did he disturb the status quo that they determined to do away with him. In fact, they entered into an unholy alliance with one another in order to do so. In the Jewish court a theological charge was brought against him, blasphemy. In the Roman court the charge was political, sedition. But whether his offence was seen to be primarily against God or against Caesar, the outcome was the same. He was perceived as a threat to law and order, which could not be tolerated. So he was liquidated. Why did he die? Ostensibly he died as a law-breaker, but in reality as the victim of small minds, and as a martyr to his own greatness.

One of the fascinating features of the Gospel writers' accounts of the trial of Jesus is this blending of the legal and moral factors. They all

indicate that in both Jewish and Roman courts a certain legal procedure was followed. The prisoner was arrested, charged and cross-examined, and witnesses were called. The judge then reached his verdict and pronounced the sentence. Yet the evangelists also make it clear that the prisoner was not guilty of the charges laid, that the witnesses were false, and that the sentence of death was a gross miscarriage of justice. Further, the reason for this was the presence of personal, moral factors which influenced the course of the law. Caiaphas the Jewish high priest and Pilate the Roman procurator were not just officers of church and state, fulfilling their official roles; they were fallen and fallible human beings, swayed by the dark passions which rule us all. For our motives are always mixed. We may succeed in preserving a modicum of rectitude in the performance of our public duty, but behind this façade lurk violent and sinful emotions, which are always threatening to erupt. These secret sins the evangelists expose, as they tell their story of the arrest, custody, trial, sentence and execution of Jesus. It is one of the purposes of their narrative, for the material of the Gospels was used in the moral instruction of converts.

#### **The Roman soldiers and Pilate**

Those immediately responsible for the death of Jesus were of course the Roman soldiers who carried out the sentence. The actual process of crucifying him is not, however, described by any of the four evangelists.

If we had to rely exclusively on the Gospels, we would not have known what happened. But other contemporary documents tell us what a crucifixion was like. The prisoner would first be publicly humiliated by being stripped naked. He was then laid on his back on the ground, while his hands were either nailed or roped to the horizontal wooden beam (the

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patibulum), and his feet to the vertical pole. The cross was then hoisted to an upright position and dropped into a socket which had been dug for it in the ground. Usually a peg or rudimentary seat was provided to take some of the weight of the victim's body and prevent it from being torn loose. But there he would hang, helplessly exposed to intense physical pain, public ridicule, daytime heat and night-time cold. The torture would last several days.

None of this is described by the Gospel writers. Piecing together what they do tell us, it seems that, according to known Roman custom, Jesus began by carrying his own cross to the place of execution. Presumably, however, he stumbled under its weight. For a man named Simon, from Cyrene in North Africa, who was at that moment coming into the city from the country, was stopped and forced to carry the cross for Jesus. When they arrived at 'the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull)', Jesus was offered some wine mixed with myrrh, which was a merciful gesture intended to dull the worst pain. But, although according to Matthew he tasted it, he refused to drink it. Next, all four evangelists write simply: 'and they crucified him'.<sup>4</sup> That is all. They have previously described in some detail how the soldiers mocked him in the Praetorium (the governor's residence): they dressed him in a purple robe, placed a crown of thorns on his head and a sceptre of reed in his right hand, blindfolded him, spat on him, slapped him in the face and struck him on the head, at the same time challenging him to identify who was hitting him. They also knelt down before him in mock homage. But the evangelists give no details of the crucifixion; they make no reference at all to hammer or nails or pain, or even blood.

All we are told is 'they crucified him'. That is, the soldiers carried out their gruesome task. There is no evidence that they enjoyed it, no suggestion that they were cruel or sadistical. They were just obeying

orders. It was their job. They did what they had to do. And all the while, Luke tells us, Jesus kept praying out loud, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (23:34).

Although the Gospel writers seem to be implying that no particular blame attached to the Roman soldiers for crucifying Jesus (and they add that later the centurion in charge of them believed, or at least semi-believed), the case is quite different with the Roman procurator who ordered the crucifixion. 'Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus . . . they crucified him' (John 19:16–18). Pilate was culpable. In fact, his guilt is written into our Christian creed, which declares that Jesus was 'crucified under Pontius Pilate'.

Pilate is known to have been appointed procurator (*i.e.* Roman governor) of the border province of Judea by the Emperor Tiberius, and to have served for 10 years from about AD 26 to 36. He acquired a reputation as an able administrator, with a typically Roman sense of fair play. But he was hated by the Jews because he was contemptuous of them. They did not forget his provocative act, at the beginning of his period of office, of exhibiting the Roman standards in Jerusalem itself. Josephus describes another of his follies, namely that he misappropriated some Temple money to build an aqueduct.<sup>5</sup> Many think that it was in the ensuing riot that he had mixed the blood of certain Galileans with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1). These are only samples of his hot temper, violence and cruelty. According to Philo, King Agrippa I described him in a letter to the Emperor Caligula as 'a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate'.<sup>6</sup> His overriding aim was to maintain law and order, to keep those troublesome Jews firmly under control, and, if necessary for these ends, to be ruthless in the suppression of any riot or threat of one.

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The portrait of Pontius Pilate in the Gospels tallies well with this external evidence. When the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to him with the words 'We have found this man subverting our nation', and added that 'he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king' (Luke 23:2), Pilate could not fail to take notice. As his investigation proceeded, the evangelists emphasize two important points.

First, Pilate was convinced of Jesus' innocence. He was obviously impressed by the prisoner's noble bearing, self-control and political harmlessness. So three times he declared publicly that he could find no ground for charging him. The first was soon after daybreak on the Friday morning when the Sanhedrin referred the case to him. Pilate listened to them, asked Jesus a few questions, and after this preliminary hearing announced, 'I find no basis for a charge against this man.'<sup>1</sup>

The second occasion was when Jesus came back from being examined by Herod. Pilate said to the priests and people: 'You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us: as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.'<sup>2</sup> At this the crowd shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' But Pilate responded for the third time: 'Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty.'<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the procurator's personal conviction about the innocence of Jesus was confirmed by the message his wife sent him: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him' (Matt. 27:19).

Pilate's repeated insistence on the innocence of Jesus is the essential background to the second point about him which the evangelists emphasize, namely his ingenious attempts to avoid having to come

down clearly on one side or the other. He wanted to avoid sentencing Jesus (since he believed he was innocent) and at the same time avoid exonerating him (since the Jewish leaders believed he was guilty). How could he contrive to reconcile these irreconcilables? We watch him wriggling, as he attempts to release Jesus and pacify the Jews, i.e. be just and unjust simultaneously. He tried four evasions.

First, on hearing that Jesus was a Galilean, and therefore under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod for trial, hoping to transfer to him the responsibility of decision. But Herod sent Jesus back unsentenced (Luke 23:5-12).

Secondly, he tried half-measures: 'I will have him punished (*i.e.* scourged) and then release him' (Luke 23:16, 22). He hoped the crowd might be satisfied by something less than the supreme penalty, and their blood-lust sated by the sight of his lacerated back. It was despicable. For if Jesus was innocent, he should have been immediately released, not flogged first.

Thirdly, he tried to do the right thing (release Jesus) for the wrong reason (because the crowd chose him for release). Remembering the procurator's established custom to grant a Passover amnesty to some prisoner, he hoped the people would select Jesus for this favour. Then he could release him as an act of clemency instead of as an act of justice. It was an astute idea, but inherently shameful, and the people thwarted it by demanding instead that the procurator's pardon be granted to a notorious criminal and murderer, Barabbas.

Fourthly, he tried to protest his innocence. He took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying 'I am innocent of this man's blood' (Matt. 27:24). And then, before his hands were dry, he handed Jesus over to be crucified. How could he bring himself to incur this great guilt immediately after proclaiming his innocence?

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It is easy to condemn Pilate and overlook our own equally devious behaviour. Anxious to avoid the pain of a whole-hearted commitment to Christ, we too search for convenient subterfuges. We either leave the decision to somebody else, or opt for a half-hearted compromise, or seek to honour Jesus for the wrong reason (*e.g.* as teacher instead of as Lord), or even make a public affirmation of loyalty while at the same time denying him in our hearts.

Three tell-tale expressions in Luke's narrative illumine what in the end Pilate did: 'their shouts prevailed', 'Pilate decided to grant their demand', and he 'surrendered Jesus to their will' (Luke 23:23–25). *Their* shouts, *their* demand, *their* will: to these Pilate weakly capitulated. He was 'wanting to release Jesus' (Luke 23:20), but he was also 'wanting to satisfy the crowd' (Mark 15:15). The crowd won. Why? Because they said to him: 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar' (John 19:12). This clinched it. The choice was between honour and ambition, between principle and expediency. He had already been in trouble with Tiberius Caesar on two or three previous occasions. he could not afford another.

Sure, Jesus was innocent. Sure, justice demanded his release. But how could he champion innocence and justice if thereby he denied the will of the people, flouted the nation's leaders, and above all provoked an uprising, thereby forfeiting the imperial favour? His conscience was drowned by the loud voices of rationalization. He compromised because he was a coward.

### **The Jewish people and their priests**

Although we cannot exonerate Pilate, we can certainly acknowledge that he was on the horns of a difficult dilemma, and that it was the Jewish

leaders who impaled him there. For it was they who committed Jesus to him for trial, who accused him of subversive claims and teaching, and who stirred up the crowd to demand his crucifixion. Therefore, as Jesus himself said to Pilate, 'the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin' (John 19:11). Perhaps, since he used the singular, he was referring to the high priest Caiaphas, but the whole Sanhedrin was implicated. Indeed, so were the people, as Peter boldly said to them soon after Pentecost: 'Men of Israel, . . . you handed him (Jesus) over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life . . .' (Acts 3:12–15). The very same crowds, it seems, who had given Jesus a tumultuous welcome into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, were within five days screaming for his blood. Yet their leaders were even more to blame for inciting them.

Jesus had upset the Jewish establishment from the outset of his public ministry. To begin with, he was an irregular. Though he posed as a Rabbi, he had not entered by the correct door or climbed up by the right ladder. He had no credentials, no proper authorization. Next, he had courted controversy by his provocative behaviour, fraternizing with disreputable people, feasting instead of fasting, and profaning the sabbath by healing people on it. Not content with disregarding the traditions of the elders, he had actually rejected them wholesale, and criticized the Pharisees for exalting tradition above Scripture. They cared more for regulations than for persons, he had said, more for ceremonial cleansing than for moral purity, more for laws than for love. He had even denounced them as 'hypocrites', called them 'blind leaders of the blind', and likened them to 'whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean' (Matt. 23:27).

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These were intolerable accusations. Worse still, he was undermining their authority. And at the same time he was making outrageous claims to be lord of the sabbath, to know God uniquely as his Father, even to be equal with God. It was blasphemy. Yes, that's what it was, blasphemy.

So they were full of self-righteous indignation over Jesus. His doctrine was heretical. His behaviour was an affront to the sacred law. He was leading the people astray. And there were rumours that he was encouraging disloyalty to Caesar. So his ministry must be stopped before he did any further damage. They had good political, theological and ethical reasons for demanding that he be arrested, put on trial and silenced. Moreover when they had him in court, and put him on oath to testify, even then he made blasphemous claims for himself. They heard him with their own ears. No more witnesses were necessary. He was a self-confessed blasphemer. He deserved to die. It was absolutely clear. He was guilty. Their hands were clean.

And yet, and yet, there were flaws in the Jewish leaders' case. Leaving aside the fundamental question whether Jesus' claims were true or false, there was the matter of motivation. What was the fundamental reason for the priests' hostility to Jesus? Was it entirely that they were concerned for political stability, doctrinal truth and moral purity? Pilate did not think so. He was not taken in by their rationalizations, especially their pretence of loyalty to the Emperor. As H. B. Swete put it, 'he detected under their disguise the vulgar vice of envy'.<sup>[2]</sup> In Matthew's words, 'he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him'.<sup>[10]</sup> There is no reason to question Pilate's assessment. He was a shrewd judge of human character. Besides, the evangelists appear, by recording his judgment, to endorse it.

Envy! Envy is the reverse side of a coin called vanity. Nobody is ever envious of others who is not first proud of himself. And the Jewish

leaders were proud, racially, nationally, religiously and morally proud. They were proud of their nation's long history of a special relationship with God, proud of their own leadership role in this nation, and above all proud of their authority. Their contest with Jesus was essentially an authority struggle. For he challenged their authority, while at the same time possessing himself an authority which they manifestly lacked. When they came to him with their probing questions, 'By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you authority to do this?' (Mark 11:28), they thought they had nailed him. But instead they found themselves nailed by his counter-question: 'John's baptism – was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!' (v. 30). They were trapped. They could not answer 'from heaven' or he would want to know why they did not believe him. Nor could they answer 'from men', because they feared the people who were convinced that John was a true prophet. So they gave no reply. Their prevarication was a symptom of their insincerity. If they could not face the challenge of John's authority, they certainly could not face the challenge of Christ's. He claimed authority to teach about God, to drive out demons, to forgive sins, to judge the world. In all this he was utterly unlike them, for the only authority they knew was an appeal to other authorities. Besides, there was a self-evident genuineness about his authority. It was real, effortless, transparent, from God.

So they felt threatened by Jesus. He undermined their prestige, their hold over the people, their own self-confidence and self-respect, while leaving his intact. They were 'envious' of him, and therefore determined to get rid of him. It is significant that Matthew recounts two jealous plots to eliminate Jesus, the first by Herod the Great at the beginning of his life, and the other by the priests at its end. Both felt their authority under threat. So both sought to 'destroy' Jesus.<sup>[11]</sup> However outwardly respectable the priests' political and theological arguments may have

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appeared, it was envy which led them to 'hand over' Jesus to Pilate to be destroyed (Mark 15:1, 10).

The same evil passion influences our own contemporary attitudes to Jesus. He is still, as C. S. Lewis called him, 'a transcendental interferer'.<sup>[1]</sup> We resent his intrusions into our privacy, his demand for our homage, his expectation of our obedience. Why can't he mind his own business, we ask petulantly, and leave us alone? To which he instantly replies that we are his business and that he will never leave us alone. So we too perceive him as a threatening rival, who disturbs our peace, upsets our *status quo*, undermines our authority and diminishes our self-respect. We too want to get rid of him.

### Judas Iscariot the traitor

Having seen how Jesus was handed over by the priests to Pilate, and by Pilate to the soldiers, we now have to consider how in the first place he was handed over to the priests by Judas. This 'handing over' is specifically termed a 'betrayal'. Indeed, Maundy Thursday will always be remembered as 'the night on which he was betrayed' (1 Cor. 11:23), and Judas as 'he who betrayed him'. This accusing epitaph is already attached to his name when it is first mentioned in the Gospels among the Twelve. All three Synoptic evangelists put him at the bottom of their list of the apostles.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is not unusual to hear people expressing sympathy for Judas. They feel he was given an unfair deal in his lifetime and has had an unfair press ever since. 'After all,' they say, 'if Jesus had to die, somebody had to betray him. So why blame Judas? He was but the tool of providence, the victim of predestination.' Well, the biblical narrative certainly indicates that Jesus foreknew the identity of his betrayer<sup>[3]</sup> and referred to him as

'doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled'.<sup>[4]</sup> It is also true that Judas did what he did only after Satan first 'prompted' him and then actually 'entered into him'.<sup>[5]</sup>

Nevertheless, none of this exonerates Judas. He must be held responsible for what he did, having no doubt plotted it for some time previously. The fact that his betrayal was foretold in the Scriptures does not mean that he was not a free agent, any more than the Old Testament predictions of the death of Jesus mean that he did not die voluntarily. So Luke referred later to his 'wickedness' (Acts 1:18). However strong the Satanic influences upon him were, there must have been a time when he opened himself to them. Jesus seems clearly to have regarded him as responsible for his actions, for even at the last minute in the upper room he made a final appeal to him by dipping a piece of bread in the dish and giving it to him (John 13:25-30). But Judas rejected Jesus' appeal, and his betrayal has always seemed the more odious because it was a flagrant breach of hospitality. In this it fulfilled another Scripture which said: 'Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me' (Ps. 41:9). Judas' ultimate cynicism was to choose to betray his Master with a kiss, using this sign of friendship as a means to destroy it. So Jesus affirmed his guilt, saying, 'Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born' (Mark 14:21). Not only did Jesus thus condemn him, but he came in the end to condemn himself. He acknowledged his crime in betraying innocent blood, returned the money for which he had sold Jesus, and committed suicide. Doubtless he was seized more with remorse than repentance, but at least he confessed his guilt.

The motive for Judas' crime has long occupied the curiosity and ingenuity of students. Some have been convinced that he was a Jewish

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zealot,<sup>[17]</sup> had joined Jesus and his followers in the belief that theirs was a national liberation movement, and finally betrayed him either out of political disillusion or as a ploy to force Jesus' hand and compel him to fight. Those who attempt a reconstruction of this kind think they find confirmatory evidence in his name 'Iscariot', although everybody admits that it is obscure. It is generally taken to indicate his origin as a 'man of Kerioth', a town in the southern territory of Judah which is mentioned in Joshua 15:25. But those who think Judas was a zealot suggest that 'Iscariot' is linked to the word *sikarios*, an assassin (from the Latin *sica* and Greek *sikarion*, a 'dagger'). Josephus refers to the *sikarioi*.<sup>[18]</sup>

Fired with a fanatical Jewish nationalism, they were determined to recover their country's independence from the colonial domination of Rome, and to this end did not shrink from assassinating their political enemies, whom they despised as collaborators. They are referred to once in the New Testament, namely when the Roman commander who had rescued Paul from being lynched in Jerusalem told him he had thought he was 'the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists (*sikarioi*) out into the desert some time ago' (Acts 21:38).

Other commentators consider the basis for this reconstruction too flimsy, and attribute the defection of Judas to a moral fault rather than a political motivation, namely the greed which the fourth evangelist mentions. He tells us that Judas was the 'treasurer' (as we would say) of the apostolic band, having been entrusted with the common purse. The occasion of John's comment was the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany. She brought an alabaster jar containing very expensive perfume ('pure nard' according to Mark and John), which she proceeded to pour over him as he was reclining at table, until the house was filled with the fragrant scent. It was a gesture of lavish, almost reckless devotion, which Jesus himself later called a 'beautiful thing'. But some present (of whom

Judas was the spokesman) reacted in a totally different way. Watching her with incredulity, they 'snorted' (literally) with self-righteous indignation. 'What a waste!' they said. 'What wicked extravagance! The perfume could have been sold for more than a year's wages, and the money given to the poor.' But their comment was sick and insincere, as John goes on to say. Judas 'did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it'. Indeed, having witnessed and denounced what he saw as Mary's irresponsible wastefulness, he seems to have gone straight to the priests to recoup some of the loss. 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' he asked them. No doubt they then began to bargain, and in the end agreed on thirty silver coins, the ransom price of a common slave. The evangelists with their sense of high drama deliberately contrast Mary and Judas, her uncalculating generosity and his coldly calculated bargain. What other dark passions were seething in his heart we can only guess, but John insists that it was monetary greed which finally overwhelmed him. Incensed by the waste of a year's wages, he went and sold Jesus for barely a third of that amount.<sup>[19]</sup>

It is not for nothing that Jesus tells us to 'beware of all covetousness', or that Paul declares the love of money to be 'a root of all kinds of evil'.<sup>[20]</sup> For in pursuit of material gain human beings have descended to deep depravity. Magistrates have perverted justice for bribes, like the judges of Israel of whom Amos said: 'They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals' (2:6). Politicians have used their power to give contracts to the highest bidder, and spies have sunk low enough to sell their country's secrets to the enemy. Businessmen have entered into shady transactions, jeopardizing the prosperity of others in order to get a better deal. Even supposedly spiritual teachers have been known to turn

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religion into a commercial enterprise, and some are still doing it today, so that a candidate for the pastorate is warned not to be 'a lover of money'.<sup>[21]</sup> The language of all such people is the same as that of Judas: 'what are you willing to give me, and I will hand him over to you?' For 'everybody has his price', the cynic asserts, from the hired assassin, who is prepared to bargain over somebody's life, to the petty official who delays the issue of a permit or passport until his bribe has been paid. Judas was not exceptional. Jesus had said that it is impossible to serve God and money. Judas chose money. Many others have done the same.

### **Their sins and ours**

We have looked at the three individuals – Pilate, Caiaphas and Judas – on whom the evangelists fasten the major blame for the crucifixion of Jesus, and at those associated with them, whether priests or people or soldiers. Of each person or group the same verb is used, *paradidōmi*, to 'hand over' or 'betray'. Jesus had predicted that he would be 'betrayed into the hands of men' or 'handed over to be crucified'.<sup>[22]</sup> And the evangelists tell their story in such a way as to show how his prediction came true. First, Judas 'handed him over' to the priests (out of greed). Next, the priests 'handed him over' to Pilate (out of envy). Then Pilate 'handed him over' to the soldiers (out of cowardice), and they crucified him.<sup>[23]</sup>

Our instinctive reaction to this accumulated evil is to echo Pilate's astonished question, when the crowd howled for his blood: 'Why? What crime has he committed?' (Matt. 27:23). But Pilate received no rational answer. The hysterical crowd only shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' But why?

Why? What has my Lord done?

What makes this rage and spite?  
He made the lame to run  
And gave the blind their sight.  
Sweet injuries!  
Yet they at these  
Themselves displease,  
And 'gainst him rise.

It is natural to make excuses for them, for we see ourselves in them and we would like to be able to excuse ourselves. Indeed, there were some mitigating circumstances. As Jesus himself said in praying for the forgiveness of the soldiers who were crucifying him, 'they do not know what they are doing'. Similarly, Peter said to a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem, 'I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.' Paul added that, if 'the rulers of this age' had understood, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory'.<sup>[24]</sup> Yet they knew enough to be culpable, to accept the fact of their guilt and to be condemned for their actions. Were they not claiming full responsibility when they cried out, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'<sup>[25]</sup> Peter was quite outspoken on the Day of Pentecost: 'Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ.' Moreover, far from disagreeing with his verdict, his hearers were 'cut to the heart' and asked what they should do to make amends (Acts 2:36–37). Stephen was even more direct in his speech to the Sanhedrin which led to his martyrdom. Calling the Council 'stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears', he accused them of resisting the Holy Spirit just like their ancestors. For their ancestors had persecuted the prophets and killed those who predicted the Messiah's coming, and now they had betrayed and murdered the Messiah himself (Acts 7:51–52). Paul was later to use similar language in writing to the Thessalonians about contemporary Jewish opposition to



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the gospel: they 'killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out'. Because they were trying to keep the Gentiles from salvation, God's judgment would fall upon them (1 Thess. 2:14–16).

This blaming of the Jewish people for the crucifixion of Jesus is extremely unfashionable today. Indeed, if it is used as a justification for slandering and persecuting the Jews (as it has been in the past), or for anti-Semitism, it is absolutely indefensible. The way to avoid anti-Semitic prejudice, however, is not to pretend that the Jews were innocent, but, having admitted their guilt, to add that others shared in it. This was how the apostles saw it. Herod and Pilate, Gentiles and Jews, they said, had together 'conspired' against Jesus (Acts 4:27). More important still, we ourselves are also guilty. If we were in their place, we would have done what they did. Indeed, we *have* done it. For whenever we turn away from Christ, we 'are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace' (Heb. 6:6). We too sacrifice Jesus to our greed like Judas, to our envy like the priests, to our ambition like Pilate. 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' the old negro spiritual asks. And we must answer, 'Yes, we were there.' Not as spectators only but as participants, guilty participants, plotting, scheming, betraying, bargaining, and handing him over to be crucified. We may try to wash our hands of responsibility like Pilate. But our attempt will be as futile as his. For there is blood on our hands. Before we can begin to see the cross as something done *for* us (leading us to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done *by* us (leading us to repentance). Indeed, 'only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross', wrote Canon Peter Green, 'may claim his share in its grace'.<sup>24</sup>

Horatius Bonar (1808–89), who has been called 'the prince of Scottish hymn-writers', expressed it well:

'Twas I that shed the sacred blood;  
I nailed him to the tree;  
I crucified the Christ of God;  
I joined the mockery.

Of all that shouting multitude  
I feel that I am one;  
And in that din of voices rude  
I recognize my own.

Around the cross the throng I see,  
Mocking the Sufferer's groan;  
Yet still my voice it seems to be,  
As if I mocked alone.

The answer which we have so far given to the question 'Why did Christ die?' has sought to reflect the way in which the Gospel writers tell their story. They point to the chain of responsibility (from Judas to the priests, from the priests to Pilate, from Pilate to the soldiers), and they at least hint that the greed, envy and fear which prompted their behaviour also prompt ours. Yet this is not the complete account which the evangelists give. I have omitted one further and vital piece of evidence which they supply. It is this: that although Jesus was brought to his death by human sins, he did not die as a martyr. On the contrary, he went to the cross voluntarily, even deliberately. From the beginning of his public ministry he consecrated himself to this destiny.

In his baptism he identified himself with sinners (as he was to do fully on the cross), and in his temptation he refused to be deflected from the way of the cross. He repeatedly predicted his sufferings and death, as we saw in the last chapter, and steadfastly set himself to go to Jerusalem to die there. His constant use of the word 'must' in relation to his death expressed not some external compulsion, but his own internal resolve to

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fulfil what had been written of him. 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,' he said. Then, dropping the metaphor, 'I lay down my life . . . No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10:11, 17–18).

Moreover, when the apostles took up in their letters the voluntary nature of the dying of Jesus, they several times used the very verb (*paradidōmi*) which the evangelists used of his being 'handed over' to death by others. Thus Paul could write 'the Son of God . . . loved me and gave (*paradontos*) himself for me'.<sup>22</sup> It was perhaps a conscious echo of Isaiah 53:12, which says that 'he poured out (*LXX paredothē*) his life unto death'. Paul also used the same verb when he looked behind the voluntary self-surrender of the Son to the Father's surrender of him. For example, 'he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up (*paredōken*) for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?'<sup>23</sup> Octavius Winslow summed it up in a neat statement: 'Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy; – but the Father, for love!'<sup>24</sup>

It is essential to keep together these two complementary ways of looking at the cross. On the human level, Judas gave him up to the priests, who gave him up to Pilate, who gave him up to the soldiers, who crucified

him. But on the divine level, the Father gave him up, and he gave himself up, to die for us. As we face the cross, then, we can say to ourselves both 'I did it, my sins sent him there' and 'he did it, his love took him there'. The apostle Peter brought the two truths together in his remarkable statement on the Day of Pentecost, both that 'this man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge' and that 'you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross'.<sup>25</sup> Peter thus attributed Jesus' death simultaneously to the plan of God and to the wickedness of men. For the cross which, as we have particularly considered in this chapter, is an exposure of human evil, is at the same time a revelation of the divine purpose to overcome the human evil thus exposed.

I come back at the end of this chapter to the question with which I began it: why did Jesus Christ die? My first answer was that he did not die; he was killed. Now, however, I have to balance this answer with its opposite. He was not killed; he died, giving himself up voluntarily to do his Father's will.

In order to discern what the Father's will was, we have to go over the same events again, this time looking below the surface.