

STUDY 2:

The meaning(s) of Easter

“if we have any assurance of salvation, it is because of Christ’s Atonement; if any joy, it flows from Christ’s work on the cross....Apart from Christ’s atoning work, we should be forever guilty, ashamed, and condemned before God.”

Mark Dever, “Nothing but the blood”,
Christianity Today (May 2006)

Introduction:

We have seen how the Gospel stories grew out of each other and how the writers of each of the Gospels intended that their particular story had especial relevance to their readers.

So the Gospel writers presented a particular ‘meaning’ for their Easter message. Mark intended, as the earliest of the writers for instance, to enthuse the newly committed members of the Jesus movement to go out and spread the message to those they knew. They were filled with the ‘freshness’ of the story.

The writer of John’s Gospel on the other hand, was writing for people separated by almost sixty years from the events described. His intention was to try and ‘convince’ his readers of the reality of the things those who had read Mark took for granted—because they could still verify much of what had been written.

Whatever their intention, the Gospel writers in the end had to allow the stories they had written to speak for themselves, and those who read their words developed their own understandings of what they meant.

Today, we will ask ourselves, “What does Easter mean to me?” and then try and understand why it is we believe in that particular way.

We will also try to understand how the accepted “theology” Of Easter developed, and how relevant it is to the modern world.

TASK ONE. -

Mark Devers is an evangelical theologian and writer who is well known and respected in the USA.

Christianity Today is a well known and respected evangelical publication with a widespread readership across the world.

In this article he is expressing what he sees as the central most important meaning of the Easter story—what is it?

TASK TWO -

In the space below write out a statement of your Easter faith—what is it, Easter means to you? How does what you believe compare to some of the others in the study?

The development of 'Easter'

The obvious question to all those who became followers of Jesus was *Why did it happen? Why did Jesus's life end this way?*

If we read again Dever's words there is a clear answer to that question. He writes further in the article

This is what I hold out to my young son as the hope of his life; that Jesus, God's perfect, righteous son, died in his place for his sins. Jesus took all of the punishment; Jesus received all the wrath as he hung on the cross, so that people like Chad and his sinful daddy could be completely forgiven.

I am sure all of us would be familiar with these sorts of words—they represent what has become the familiar meaning of Easter for most Christians.

We are all sinners—So that God can forgive sin—a sacrifice must be offered.

TASK THREE-

Clearly in this understanding, the sacrifice of an ordinary person is not enough. Why? Why does God have to provide Jesus to die on our behalf?

An ordinary human being cannot be the sacrifice, for they would be a sinner simply dying for their own sins! Therefore the sacrifice has to be a perfect human being. So God presents his own perfect, sinless human son to act on our behalf.

This is 'official' meaning for Easter is known as

SUBSTITUTIONERY ATONEMENT.

God sent Jesus to die for our sins.

TASK FOUR-

What does the word 'atonement' mean to you? Do you understand the central meaning of Easter in this way? How do we know it is the central meaning for most?



The Image.

This deeply stirring painting by the Spanish painter Goya evokes so many emotions in Christians. It reflects so much of the traditional meaning of Easter visually.

TASK FIVE-

What feelings does this picture evoke in you as you look at it? How does it convey the idea of 'sacrifice' and 'atonement'?

Other Meanings

So then we see that Jesus' death as 'atonement' has been the 'official' meaning—yet it was not until the 11th Century and the writings of St. Anselm that Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for our sins became 'doctrine'.

*A person who does not render God this honor due Him, takes from God what is His and dishonors God, and this is to commit sin. Now, as long as he does not repay what he has plundered, he remains at fault. Neither is it enough merely to return what was taken away, but on account of the insult committed, he must give back more than he took away. For example, one who harms the health of another does not do enough if he restores his health, unless he makes some compensation for the injury of pain he has inflicted. Similarly, for one who violates the honor of some person, it does not suffice to render honor, if he does not make restitution of something pleasing to the person dishonored, in proportion to the injury of dishonor that has been inflicted. This also must be given attention: when someone pays back what he unjustly pilfered, he must give what could not be demanded of him if he had not defrauded the other person. Thus, therefore, everyone who sins must pay to God the honor he has taken away, and this is satisfaction, which every sinner must make to God. (Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*)*

Certainly, the idea of sacrifice was there from the beginning, but it was only one of a number of images related to the death of Jesus.

Reading the Gospels, and then the various Epistles in the New Testament and the works of other non-biblical Christian writers indicate that there were at least five 'meanings' applied to Easter during the life of the first Christians.

Rejected by powers/vindicated by God.

Jesus execution was his rejection by the powers in charge at that time. The dominant power system killed him because he was a threat.

The resurrection of Jesus is God's 'vindication' that Jesus was indeed the one who acted for God at that time for the betterment of the world.

TASK SIX—how does this meaning sit with you? Can you think of evidence to support it?

Defeating the powers

This meaning is an extension of the first in that the Easter story does not only signify the fact that the 'powers' sought to overcome God's work in the world through Jesus.

More, the meaning is that in the resurrection the 'powers' are actually overcome and defeated. God's power triumphs!

For those who were followers of Jesus this meant that there was nothing to fear. Whatever evil the world had to throw at them, the power of God was great enough to overcome it and defeat it completely!

TASK SEVEN—how does this meaning sit with you? Can you think of evidence to support it?

Revealing the future way.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are seen as a revelation of the 'new life' through his relationship with God.

We die to our old lives and are reborn to a new and more powerful 'spiritual' life

TASK EIGHT—how does this meaning sit with you? Can you think of evidence to support it?

in Christ.

Revealing the real depth of the Love of God.

The death of Jesus and his final overcoming of death reveal the true measure of God's love for humanity.

Here the story is not just the execution of a prophet, or the rejection of Jesus by the powers, but first and foremost God's willing giving up of the precious gift of Jesus as his only son.

God's love for creation is so overwhelming and immense that he will give anything to display that love to humanity.

TASK NINE—how does this meaning sit with you? Can you think of evidence to support it?

Each of these 'meanings' can be shown to have been important to parts of the Jesus movement at the beginning, and indeed on and off for many hundreds of years.

Then, the sense of personal meaning for Easter began to change to become accepted 'theology' & 'doctrine'.

***TASK TEN**—what do you understand as the difference between ‘meaning’, ‘doctrine’, and ‘theology’. How do they develop and differ? Does it matter?*

Organisation & Bureaucracy!

As the Jesus movement grew and spread throughout Roman Empire, it was inevitable that changes were made to the fledgling faith of those first believers.

It was time to get organised!

By the mid second century CE the Jesus Movement had begun to organise into regional church fellowships with clear structures and charismatic leaders. When this happened the ‘meanings’ of Easter held by the earliest followers of Jesus were formalised and philosophised into doctrinal statements, theological arguments and various creeds.

One of the major controversies of the earliest Church for instance would be over the date of Easter.

The Western Church in Rome and the Eastern Church argued about having Easter at the same time as the Jewish Passover—in the end it was decided to celebrate Easter at the same time as the nearest New Moon to the Northern hemisphere winter solstice—a ‘pagan’ festival!!

The meaning of Easter became closely protected by the Church and it would only be the ‘accepted’ meaning that would be communicated to the faithful.

Next time we will look at some of the thinking about Easter that has developed in the last hundred years or so.

This is the period when the Church authorities have lost their control over ‘doctrine’ and ‘orthodoxy’. Today, we are free to think as we like and develop our understandings according to our own lights.

IS THIS A GOOD THING??