Name: Victoria A. Seetaram
Alliance Theological Seminary - Fall 2022
Course: TH 602 - Systematic Theology II
Professor: Dr. Louis DeCaro Jr.

The Last Words of Jesus and Significance for the Church Today

Introduction

Since the 16th century, the seven last phrases of Jesus, as he hung on the cross, started to popularly be called the Seven Last Words from the Cross. Compiled from the four canonical gospels, these are the last expressions attributed to Jesus during his crucifixion. Much diverse theological analysis across church history, tradition, and denominations have been written on these phrases.[1] Traditionally, these phrases have been aggregated into seven words or themes[2]: (1) Forgiveness, (2) Salvation, (3) Relationship, (4) Abandonment, (5) Distress, (6) Triumph, and (7) Reunion.

Reflecting on these traditional themes, this paper will attempt to provide a roadmap for church leadership to bring a correlation between the seven last phrases of Jesus as he hung on the cross with meaning and entrustment for the church today. In his book, *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson writes,"

> The gospel not only cut across all racial, social, economic, and educational barriers, but also spans centuries of time. A message which does not become obsolete, it is the church's sacred trust today. In an age in which most ideas and systems of thought, as well as techniques and commodities, are of a throwaway variety, the church has an infallible and enduring resource.[3]

The church can display the same confidence in the gospel that Christ had dying on the cross, for it is still the same gospel, time has not eroded its effectiveness. The message and ministry of the church are unique. For in our world today there is little hope.[4] Although not a complete instruction manual, this paper will conclude that those words are significant not just for

---

1 J.L. Houlden, *Jesus: The Complete Guide*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 627.
2 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 426.
3 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) 1065.
4 Ibid., 1067.

the moment when the Lord Jesus cried them out, but for the body of Christ to exercise her faith and communion with Jesus today.

The Last Words of Jesus in the Canonic Gospels

Although seven words cannot be found in any one account of Jesus' crucifixion, the harmony of the four canonical gospels is used to amalgamate these sayings and themes. Three of the sayings appear only in the gospel of Luke and three only in the gospel of John. One other saying appears both in Matthew's and Mark's gospels and another is only directly quoted in John but alluded to in Matthew and Mark."[5] In these words of Jesus, the church can find practical implications of personal faith as well as active interpersonal faith.

Themes and Meaning for the Church

The Word of Forgiveness

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. (Luke 23:34, NIV)

This verse could be considered the most straightforward in interpretation. Jesus' prayer is for the Father to forgive those involved in his crucifixion, the Roman soldiers, the Sanhedrin, and the masses who were acting in ignorance. Jesus came to bring reconciliation and because of the sin of all of humanity, he was on that cross. Yet, even in the darkest moments of excruciating pain, the Lord Jesus chose forgiveness and continued to pray for the people who were causing him such pain.

Lewis encourages the church to become an agent of forgiveness. He writes, "Living daily, in the assurance of what Christ did for us we are free to value his kingdom above all else.

---

5 J.L. Houlden, 627.

So, we can enjoy life as agents of forgiving love."[6] This does not mean that Christians deny reality and call evil good, but in remembrance of the cleansing of Christ's blood, we can join in the same prayer asking the Father to forgive them, for they know not what they do. Lewis concludes "When Christians, living under the cross become agents of forgiving love, our families and churches will become more and communities of the forgiven – they will be forgiving communities."[7]

Questions for church reflection can include: Are we producing forgiving communities filled with grace and mercy? Do our pastors and elders embody a leadership centered on the forgiveness that Jesus prays for?

The Word of Salvation

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43, NIV)

Not only did Jesus forgive those who crucified him, but he also offered salvation to those crucified with him. As recorded in Luke's gospel, two men were crucified at the same time as Jesus, one on his left side and one on his right side. One scoffed at him, challenging that if Jesus was the Messiah that he could save them and himself, the other understood the uniqueness of Christ, acknowledged Jesus as Lord, and asked Jesus to remember him when he enters the Kingdom. Even at the end of his life, no matter what his past, or what his sin, this simple act of confession that Jesus is Lord is what Jesus responded that today he would be with him in paradise.

By saying that he and the other man were suffering justly for the crimes they committed and by asking if he feared God, it shows that this man understood guilt before God and the

---

6 Gordon Russell Lewis, et al., *Integrative Theology, Volume Two: Our Primary Need Christ's Atoning Provisions*, (Chicago: Academie Books, 1990), 423.

7 Ibid., 424.

consequences of sin. He knew that salvation only through Christ alone would provide the justification needed before God. This man could not make amends, do good deeds, join a church, or even be baptized. He was in a helpless position where all he could do was acknowledge the Lord and receive this gift of love that is salvation. In God the Almighty, Bloesch writes, "Our task as believers is to take up the cross and follow Christ in order to make known to others the boundlessness of his love."[8] Erickson writes, "the practical implication of our understanding of the doctrine of perseverance, is that believers can rest secure in the assurance that their salvation is permanent; nothing can separate them for the love of God."[9]

Questions for church reflection can include: Do we require more than Jesus did for salvation? Does our theology for salvation include the thief of the cross?

The Word of Relationship

> When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26–27, NIV)

These seemingly simple statements from Jesus held so much power, respect, love, and direction. Even in his last hours, as his mother, siblings, and followers grieve and mourn his impending death, Jesus tenderly provides for them. He establishes a relationship with his widowed grieving mother and his beloved friend John. In that time and culture, unless a widow had a son to take her into his home, she could have been out on the streets. Jesus bestows the honor and responsibility on John by entrusting Mary into his care and John takes Mary to live with him and his family.

---

8 Donald G. Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 165.
9 Millard J. Erickson, 996.

Bloesch writes, “We are driven to serve our neighbor, through the paradox of love of the cross, the love that is demanding, sacrificial, and also unconditional, going out to all people, irrespective of their moral or social status.”[10] Jesus calls his followers to care for one another, to support one another in our pain and our grief, to comfort one another, and to sacrificially enter relationship with one another.

Questions for church reflection can include: Do our relationships in the body of believers stop after a Sunday morning service? Do we sacrifice our comfort and our home to help others who would be deemed marginalized or insignificant? Do we consider the care of others an honor or a burden?

The Word of Abandonment

> About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Matthew 27:46, NIV)
>
> And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Mark 15:34, NIV)

Of all the last words, this phrase is the most difficult for the believer to comprehend and interpret. This is a quote from Psalm 22:1 and the only saying which appears in more than one gospel. In both accounts, the words spoken by Jesus have been transliterated from Aramaic into Greek.[11] There are numerous interpretations of the meaning or significance of these words.

Some believe that the Father was not abandoning the Son, but rather the Son abandoning himself to the Father. Other interpretations hold that the moment when the Son took the sin of the world on his shoulders, for the first time there was emotional and social abandonment because the Father had to turn his face away. Many believe that this is what 2 Corinthians 5

10 Ibid., 164.
11 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 426.

refers to when it said that God through Christ was reconciling the world to himself, and God made him who knew no sin for us that we might become righteousness. For this to occur, the Father had to abandon or forsake the Son to place our punishment upon him. "God can pardon only when the penalty is finished paid."[12] Some Hebrew scholars suggest that Jesus quoted Psalm 22 to show the fulfillment of prophecy. Yet, other theologians understand this truly human, emotion-filled cry of one who felt forsaken. "Put to death by his foes, very largely deserted by his friends, he may have also felt deserted by God."[13]

"Although the gospel writers transliterate Jesus's words as lama sabachthani, the word sabachthani is not found in early Jewish texts, rather the phrase in Psalm 22 is lama azavtani (למה עזבתני) meaning "to sacrifice, slaughter", in which case the word may have been chosen to emphasize the connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and the Passover sacrifice."[14] Ladd and Hagner write "Unless Christ suffered a penalty and judgment of God, in the stead of the sinner",[15] then the sinner would have to have paid the awful penalty. They go on to write that "it is not God who is appeased, nor is it the wrath assuage; on the contrary, sin is atoned for".[16] Regardless of which interpretation is the most correct, it is true that Christ felt and experienced the abandonment of the Father so that his followers will never have to. During his ministry, Jesus emphasized that he would never leave nor forsake the believer and after his resurrection, he emphasized that he was leaving the Holy Spirit with the church.

---

12 Henry Theissen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 231.
13 W. T. Connor, *The Cross in the New Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), 34.
14 Zev Garber, *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), 79.
15 George Ladd, et al., *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 427.
16 Ibid., 429.

Questions for church reflection can include: Do we abandon those who have walked away from the faith? Does the church create space for those who doubt or who feel abandoned? Is there room for strong emotion and for those who cry out to God with an ugly cry?

The Word of Distress

> After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished,
>
> that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. (John 19:28, KJV)

Only directly recorded in the gospel of John, all four gospels make mention of Jesus being offered sour wine or vinegar. In Luke, we read that as the soldiers mocked Jesus, they offered him sour wine. In Mark and Matthew, a sponge was soaked in the wine and lifted to Jesus on a reed. This both fulfills the scriptures and shows the humanity of Christ. The hours spent in the sun, coupled with his pain, would have caused physical dehydration and it is out of this deep physical exhaustion that Jesus declares his thirst. Jesus understands human pain and longing and at that moment, Jesus speaks of his thirst out of a natural human need for relief.

Declaring his thirst is a fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, testifying that Jesus is the Messiah. It is because Jesus thirsted on the cross that he can quench the deepest longings of our souls. Though on the cross, his thirst was on a physical level, throughout his ministry Jesus speaks of thirst on the soul or divine level, expressing His longing for us to come to know and love Him. In John 4, Jesus offers not just physical water but living water and eternal life to the Samaritan woman who had been rejected and marginalized. Because of her belief, many others came to believe and follow Jesus.

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” The Hebrew word for righteousness, tzedakah (צְדָקָה) carries a deep

meaning of religious obligation or family charity. It is setting the scales right in justice and fairness. A thirst for righteousness is a pursuit to set out for a right relationship with God through Christ Jesus, it is a pursuit to see to be Christ-like and walk in holiness, it is a thirst for the things of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Questions for church reflection can include: Once we come to Christ, are we content, or do we continue to grow in sanctification and Christlikeness as we pursue righteousness? Do we offer true living water to those who want to know Jesus or is it just behavior modification? Are we thirsty?

The Word of Triumph

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."

With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30, NIV)

Though only directly quoted in John's gospel, both the gospels of Matthew and Mark report that Jesus cried out loudly and gave up his spirit or ghost. Jesus came to this earth to fulfill a mission, and at the end of his earthly life, the mission was completed, and the mission was finished. Not only was his physical suffering now over, but the way of salvation was also now made complete through Jesus and there was no longer a need for animal sacrifice since Christ was the ultimate sacrifice. Thiessen writes about this satisfaction, "Since holiness is gods fundamental attribute, it is only reasonable that he should be given some satisfaction to remove the outrageous sin. The death of Christ supplies his satisfaction,"[17] satisfying the justice of God. The long-awaited Messiah had come, and the promised salvation prophecy was fulfilled.

Jesus' death on the cross also accomplished victory over the adversary. Ladd writes, "Another end achieved by the death of Christ is triumph over the cosmic powers." He writes that

17 Henry Theissen, 237.

humanity is bondage to evil in the spiritual world. "One of the purposes of the mission of Christ is to destroy every rule in every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."[18] Christ came to liberate from any hold or control that sin or the enemy has over humanity. Because of Christ's death, the resurrection can now take place. Lewis writes, "Christ did not come to take away our God-given individuality", only our sin. "We can embrace and esteem all that we are by creation– our intelligence, conscience, femininity, or masculinity, family, life, creativity, a need for a relationship with others and God. Christ paid the ransom to set us free from the power of all varieties of sin."[19]

Questions for church reflection can include: Do we preach as it is finished and live out of a place of triumph? Do we fully believe that it is finished, and our debt is paid in full, or do we all around with the heaviness of sin weighing on us? Do we set our burdens at the foot of the cross or do we try and pick them back up again?

The Word of Reunion

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Having said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46, NRSV)

Jesus' words are reflective of Psalm 31 which says, "Into your hand, I commend my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God." The dictionary defines commend as "entrust (something to someone); give (to someone to take care of) spirit". This phrase is theologically interpreted as the proclamation of Jesus joining God the Father in Heaven.[20]

At the end of his earthly ministry, the Son is finally reunited with the Father. There is a restoration of relationship and closeness, there is full reconciliation in this reunion. Family

18 George Ladd, et al., 434.
19 Gordon Lewis, 423.
20 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 426.

reunions can be wonderful, but they can also be messy, as is the same in the body of Christ and as is written in Colossians, "as member of one body we are called to peace." Lewis writes, "because God made peace by the cross, those who live under the cross should be powerfully moved to be peacemakers."[21] The peace that God achieved was not cheap but costly; the cost was Jesus' life. The church is called to become an "agent of reconciliation." Thiessen writes, "due to reconciliation, God sends temporal, blessings upon the unsaved and extends opportunity to [humanity], to repent, and will deliver heaven and earth from the results of the fall."[22] One day the church will also be reunited with the Father and Son, but until then the church is called to live as the embodiment of the Prince of Peace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for church reflection can include: What would it look like for the church to be an agent of reconciliation? Are we pursuing lives of peacemakers in the body of Christ? In sharing the gospel, do we carry the posture of the Prince of Peace in our message and delivery?

Conclusion

Without Christ's death on the cross and resurrection, there is no gospel. In his book Evangelical Theology, Bird writes that the gospel needs to be the theological center of the Church because it is the gospel that brings us to Christ. He is.[23] The traditional words of Jesus on the cross and the themes expressed in this paper, although not perfect, have profound meaning and significance to the walk of the Christian and the kingdom work of the church. Even at the end of his life and in his darkest hour, Jesus was still teaching a better way to live and love. Whether it was in his tender and thoughtful care for his mother, in his humanity for physical

21 Gordon Lewis, 425.
22 Henry Theissen, 237.
23 Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013) 807.

thirst, or his declaration of victory over the finished work, Jesus confirmed that he was the true Messiah that would offer reconciliation for all.

The themes of Forgiveness, Salvation, Relationship, Abandonment, Distress, Triumph, and Reunion are timeless. Jesus left heaven, came to earth, took human form, suffered, died, and trusted that he would rise from the grave all so that we could have reconciliation and relationship with the one true God. May the church follow, learn from, and exemplify Jesus' surrender, sacrifice, and love.

Bibliography

Bird, Michael F. *Evangelical Theology, A Biblical and Systematic Introduction.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Bloesch, Donald G. *God, the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia in 4 Vol*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.

Conner, W. T. *The Cross in the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1954.

Daniel, Orville E. *A Harmony of the Four Gospels: The New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004.

Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

Garber, Zev. *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011.

Houlden, J. L. *Jesus: The Complete Guide*. London, England: Continuum, 2005.

Ladd, George Eldon, and Donald Alfred Hagner. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Lewis, Gordon Russell, and Bruce A. Demarest. *Integrative Theology, Volume Two: Our Primary Need Christ's Atoning Provisions*. Chicago, IL: Academie Books, 1990.

Radcliffe, Timothy. *Seven Last Words*. London, England: Burns & Oates, 2005.

Thiessen, Henry Clarence. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979.