

# Christ's Last Words from the Cross

BY ARTHUR BOERS

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**A**s a pastor I have had a number of experiences with people who were dying and with those close to them. In this richly rewarding work a significant challenge was to help people think through their last words to each other. Where possible, I encouraged folks to part on a note of blessing. Final messages count—quite a lot.

The Gospel writers were aware of this when they each gave their own versions of Jesus speaking from the cross. Gradually, these various accounts were drawn into “seven last words” devotionals. (Biblically, seven is often a holy number: days in a week, seven-day festivals and weddings, golden lampstands in Revelation, petitions in the Lord's Prayer.) The gathered Seven Last Words approach was first developed by a Jesuit Priest in seventeenth century Peru but eventually was embraced by nineteenth century British Protestants and has since become a mainstay of Good Friday services. This theme continues to inspire many choral works, following the earlier famous ones by Franz Joseph Haydn, Charles Gounod, César Frank, and Théodore Dubois.

In some ways, constructing a coherent plot that none of the Gospel writers intended was an artificial move; it resembles the bringing together of nativity stories that sometimes puts the shepherds and the Magi in the

same place at the same time. (In such harmonization genres we might include the observance of the Stations of the Cross.) Nevertheless this Seven Words practice has proven rich for Christians these last centuries. Proof of its on-going fruitfulness includes the rich array of books that continue to be published using the motif.

While the five volumes reviewed here come from a number of theological perspectives (Methodist, Roman Catholic, Anabaptist/Anglican), there are striking similarities and overlaps among them. All clearly indicate that these final words are vitally important and all agree on the order of their pronunciations: "Father, forgive them"; "Today you will be with me in Paradise"; "Woman, here is your son..."; "My God, my God..."; "I thirst"; "It is finished"; and "Into your hands...."

More than that, most show that a comprehensive summary of Christian faith can be derived from and based on these seven short sayings. We encounter not only predictable Good Friday themes of forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, and atonement but also theologies of incarnation, mission, and hospitality. Several books draw explicit Trinitarian implications from the accounts, showing how the events of that day exhibit the close collaboration of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Seven Last Words of Christ, like the Lord's Prayer, ably condense into one set of short passages the essentials of our faith.



The most unusual, but least satisfying, volume is *Echoes from Calvary: Meditations on Franz Joseph Haydn's THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 244 pp., \$26.95). The editor, Richard Young, is a violist in the Vermeer String Quartet, which has often performed Joseph Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, inviting articulate preachers (from the famous to the not-so-famous) to reflect for up to two minutes each on Christ's final words in between the various musical movements. One can imagine that this creative project drew many intrigued listeners to performances. The book includes reflections from such noteworthies as Martin Marty, Raymond Brown, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Peter Gomes, as well as homily excerpts from works of Martin Luther King and Billy Graham. The volume is accompanied by two compact discs—one with samples of the meditations and another with musical excerpts of Haydn's haunting piece. I found the CDs uneven and incomplete.

The book has several strengths. There is an impressive theological range, with entries from conservative evangelicals to mainline liberals, as well as theological mavericks; a rabbi and a Mormon even offer reflections. There are contributions by Latino and African American voices. A number of the short pieces reflect on contemporary social justice issues. Young notes that the meditations fall into three categories: the "intellectually (theologically)

stimulating,” the “spiritually uplifting and prayerful,” and “those that have contemporary relevance and challenge our modern-day values” (p. 22).

Part of the problem is the two-minute limit to the pieces. While the reason for such a guideline is understandable, the result is that many orations have almost a clichéd feel; there is only time to repeat well-worn ideas. And the other problematic aspect is that since there are so many different orators, there is never a sense of a narrative arc, of the contributions building on one another. The reader is left with an unsatisfying episodic impression.



I have long been a fan of William Willimon and thus was thrilled to explore his take on Jesus’ final words in *Thank God It’s Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006, 104 pp., \$15.00).

This book is full of critiques of American culture and American versions of Christianity. Early on, Willimon asserts that the U.S. is “one of the most violent cultures ever” (p. x). He has tough analyses about over-reaction to September 11 and, more than once, he specifically criticizes George W. Bush. Then he goes on to disparage various sacred cows, including the promotion of “family values” (a refrain for Hauerwas too), the celebration of “happy church,” and the transformation of Christian worship into consumerism. He dislikes Mel Gibson’s take on the Passion. Willimon dismisses the scholar who considers the crucifixion divine “child abuse” as an “alleged theologian.” All of this is fitting for him because he believes Christian faith to be deeply countercultural, even and especially in a country that so often professes to be Christian. Willimon wants us to have a sense of the shocking disruption that the words of Jesus bring into the lives of his hearers.

As usual, Willimon weaves together trenchant theological reflections with his experiences as a bishop, a pastor, an academic dean, and a reflective Christian in American society. While many of his stories certainly pack a punch—Willimon is known for witty anecdotes—some left me perplexed. I did not get the relevance of some of the stories and occasionally felt as if he was just trying to get a laugh. The latter factor contributed to an occasional feeling of flippancy, a feeling only heightened by the book’s title.

Willimon is engaging and always worth reading, but this volume is not his strongest work, nor is it the best selection reviewed here.



With Stanley Hauerwas’s *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004, 108 pp., \$15.00) we move into substantial theological reflection on the Last Words. To be sure there

was theological exploration in the previous volumes, but Hauerwas raises such considerations to whole new levels. This is all the more noteworthy as the book grew out of his Good Friday homilies at a church, rather than graduate-level lectures.

The remarkable and evocative title comes from a poem by John F. Deane, a contemporary Irish writer. The meditations are evocatively amplified by wood block line drawings by Rick Beerhorst, in themselves easily worth the price of the book. In some ways this is an unfamiliar Hauerwas. We do not find here his usual biting humor and prophetic polemics. Rather, he writes with deep reverence and tries to overcome the sentimentality that we too often encounter on Good Friday.

Hauerwas strives to keep the focus off of us and on the work of the Triune God. He criticizes atonement theories that make it “really very simple: Jesus had to die because we needed and need to be forgiven.” The problem is that “such a focus shifts attention from Jesus to us” (p. 27). Good Friday observances then can become a form of narcissism.

This book captures an essential aspect of Good Friday: the otherness of God as revealed in that perplexing, mysterious event. Hauerwas wrestles with uncertainty in the best tradition of Biblical lament. This is a book worth reading and re-reading, at least once every year. It, along with the next two reviewed, is among my favorites.



Peter Storey, a former Methodist bishop in South Africa and currently a professor emeritus of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, also has written a small but brilliant book on the Seven Words. His reflections in *Listening to Golgotha: Jesus' Words from the Cross* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2004, 93 pp., \$12.00) – the book is so short that it could be considered a pamphlet –

are derived from his preaching at the Duke University Chapel. The volume is movingly illustrated with charcoal illustrations by Jan L. Richardson.

Much of what Storey writes is informed by almost forty years of ministry during the South African apartheid era. (As bishop, his responsibility included Soweto.)

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**Hauerwas keeps the focus on the work of the Triune God. He criticizes atonement theories that make it “really very simple: Jesus had to die because we needed and need to be forgiven,” because this “shifts attention from Jesus to us.” Good Friday observances then become a form of narcissism.**

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Across South Africa's cruel political landscape of that period, Holy Week was always a strengthening time for the hurting victims of apartheid. The poor and oppressed and the people of faith trying to offer resistance seemed to know instinctively that in that pain-drenched narrative, their own struggles would be embraced and given meaning by the sorrow of God. (p. 10)

Storey gives a particularly insightful reading of Good Friday as having numerous social justice implications. Both his words and experiences easily make this book the most prophetic of all those considered here.

Storey writes with a clarity that communicates dense theological ideas in concepts that we can readily comprehend.

When we allow Calvary's forgiving stream to permeate all the way to the primal places of our failure, it heals us.... It makes the difference in otherwise defeated lives. Ordinary people touched by the power of the Cross can become extraordinary in their capacity to love and forgive. (pp. 19-20)

This is a short book. But its spare style speaks volumes.



Richard John Neuhaus's *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000, 272 pp., \$15.95) is not only the longest in this collection, it is by far the most substantial. If I only had time to read one book on the Seven Words, this is the one that I would choose. Neuhaus was the author of many books and founder of *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. He was originally a Lutheran pastor, but then converted to Catholicism and became a priest.

This book is in a league all its own – the most comprehensive I know of on the Seven Last Words. Like several others considered here, this one grew from preaching the three-hour Good Friday service for a congregation. They must have been long sermons.

Neuhaus does the best and most thorough job of summarizing Christian faith through the Seven Words. He is particularly adept at explaining Roman Catholic theology. There are discourses here on the paschal mystery, veneration of the cross, and "offering it up" devotional practices. His chapter on Mary – in connection with the words of Jesus to his mother – is so brilliant that I shall consult it whenever need clarification on how Catholics understand her role. But there is plenty of other theological substance as well, with reflections on sacrifice, theodicy, forgiveness, redemption, dereliction, faith, and atonement. His chapter on "I thirst" is a comprehensive exploration of the meaning and motivation of mission.

Neuhaus writes with a magisterial, occasionally almost pompous, style that will not appeal to all readers. As you engage him, you know that here is

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a man who has absorbed great swathes of theological history and integrated them with extensive knowledge of art, literature, politics, and history. Even if you do not agree with all his conclusions, you will learn a lot.

For me the most astonishing chapter had to do with the penitent thief. Neuhaus sees this as a way of entering questions of salvation, judgment, and hell. Just to be sure that we do not mistake any of his convictions for sentimental namby-pambyism, he quotes H. Richard Niebuhr's complaint of those who believe that "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Nonetheless, Neuhaus himself advocates a near universalism. He contends with conviction that not only does God desire that all will be saved, it is possible that finally this will be the case.

More than any of the other authors considered here, Neuhaus carefully and probingly explores the rich implications of the Seven Last Words. The statements at the end of the life of Jesus still have the promise to lead us to eternal life today.

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