

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Revelation		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	30		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB

“Blood sacrifice,” as Paul Wells points out, “is repugnant to modern man and has long been the object of scorn on the part of critics of Christianity. Sometimes the immoderate language used to describe the cross has provoked this. H. G. Wells’ mockery of William Cowper’s hymn, *There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins*, in his novel *Tono Bungay*, is a case in point.”¹ The same mentality is displayed by Steve Allen, the former TV personality of middle of the last century, who declared that the whole notion of a God requiring a blood sacrifice is one that has long been eradicated from most people’s thinking.² The Apostle Paul knew that this very mentality characterized the people of his day as well. Lloyd-Jones wrote: “We are as bad as we have ever been, more educated, but not more moral. We know much that our forefathers did not, but we still do not know how not to sin, and how to live a clean, a wholesome, pure and a chaste life. Here we are in the same old human predicament. And do you know the message of this gospel? Do you know why Paul gloried in it? It is because he had come to see that God had got a plan for this miserable, wretched, failing sinful world. And it is a plan that he had planned before the very foundation of the world itself. I know of nothing so wonderful in the whole world today. That is why I do not preach topical sermons, I have something to tell you that is worth listening to! What good are my comments upon the news, or upon politics? Everything goes round in the same old miserable way. I am here to tell you something that only this gospel can tell you. That the Almighty and Everlasting God is concerned about this, it is *his* world and he is going to put it right, and he is putting it right in his own way. He is concerned about our deliverance and about our redemption. God has a plan and a purpose: *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*. But you did not know what you were doing. You did not realize that this was a part of God’s great and eternal plan and purpose of salvation and of redemption. The cross, you see, is the centre of God’s plan. It is the heart of God’s way of saving the world. That is why, as we have seen, the Apostle put it again in 1 Corinthians 1: *But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called . . . Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God*. Here it is in its essence, this cross of Christ. That is why I want to put it to you like this. That the Apostle gloried in the cross, and every true Christian glories in it, because it is the greatest display and exposition of the character of the everlasting God. That is what you see when you survey the cross. You do not see that glorious person alone; you look again and see that it is not only the Son that is involved in this cross. The Father is involved, he is there. Have you ever seen him there? Is there anything higher or more wonderful than to see something of the glory of the everlasting God? It is on the cross on Calvary’s hill that you see the most wonderful and amazing display of this glory that the world has ever known.”³ *Mortem turpissima crucis* is a Latin expression that comes from the early church father Origen and his commentary on Matthew (27:22ff).⁴ The phrase *mortem* (from which we get words like *mortuary*) *turpissima* (our word *turpitude* is derived from this) *crucis* (you can easily recognize this as the source for the English *crucify*) means “the utterly

vile, disgusting, shameful death of the cross.” Martin Luther spoke often of the *theologia crucis* (the theology of the cross). Indeed this was to Luther descriptive of his understanding of the nature of God’s revelation and, therefore, of theology as a whole. The great reformer argued that God has chosen to reveal Himself in the weakness and scandal of the cross. Human reason, on the other hand, finds this offensive and would rather go about proclaiming a *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory).⁵ In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, the Apostle Paul writes that in the eyes of “those who are perishing” the gospel (“the message of the cross”) is “foolishness.” The message of a crucified Christ is a “stumbling block” for the Jews and utter “folly”⁶ to the Greeks (1:23). We need to recognize that the early Church had to deal with their culture and society in preaching the gospel. Think about it. The One whom Christians claim as their God was put to death on a cross – a dead god? Isn’t that a blatant contradiction? And if that were not enough, he had been justly condemned as a criminal to suffer the worst form of death imaginable! The very heart of the Gospel, which Paul called “the word of the cross,” ran, as Hengel has noted, “counter not only to Roman political thinking, but to the whole ethos of religion in ancient times and in particular to the ideas of God held by educated people.”⁷ In other words, the church at the time had to resist the cultural conditioning of that society. The shameful death of Jesus on the cross could not be altered. The offensive “word of the cross” *had to be* proclaimed. The gospel cannot be detached from this and be interpreted independently. Separated from the particular death that Jesus suffered, the gospel becomes vague and incomprehensible. We must not make the cross of Christ void (1 Corinthians 1:17).

- I. ***PAUL’S RESOLVE (1 Corinthians 2:2).*** “I resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The Apostle is not saying that he was disinterested in everything else – he is, however, declaring that the scope and centrality of his message revolved around two things.
 - A. ***The Subject Matter Generally: Jesus Christ.*** Paul in his epistles takes up a large number of issues, but the *focus* around which everything else depended was ***Jesus Christ***. Paul’s only design in going to Corinth was to preach Christ; and Christ not as a teacher, or as an example, or as a perfect man, or as a new starting point in the religious consciousness in mankind – but Jesus Christ the Redeemer, the Saviour of sinners. As Charles Hodge puts it, “Christ as a propitiation was the burden of Paul’s preaching.”⁸
 - B. ***The Subject Matter Particularly: Christ Crucified.*** This “word of the cross” Paul readily acknowledges was the one doctrine he magnified. Notice how he deliberately accents this message in spite of the fact that it was highly offensive to the very people he was trying to evangelize. To the offense which the Jews took at the word of the cross (it was a weak doctrine), Paul declares that “Christ crucified is the power of God,” and to the offense which the Greeks took (it was a foolish doctrine), he declares, “Christ crucified *is* the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24).
- II. ***PAUL’S PREACHING (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).*** We have in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 a clear example of a statement of purpose. Paul explains that his preaching was intentionally not patterned after the popular orators of the day. He did not seek to win followers with eloquence. And he most certainly did not seek to make his message “culturally relevant” by adapting it to the popular tastes of the times! The reason (which is also the effect of his action) is given in verse 5: “so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

CONCLUSION: Douglas Kelly, one of my former professors, rightly stresses that, “we must remind ourselves of why a holy and loving God must punish sin. Almighty God is under no constraints from any power outside himself, for his own character provides the security of the very structure of the

universe which he created. Part of his strength is that he cannot deny himself. Paul writes: *If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself* (2 Timothy 2:13). For God to go against his own character, to deny himself, would mean the total destruction of the universe, and we would not be here to discuss it! Sin constitutes a contradiction against God's own character, and – to speak imaginatively – if he did not deal with it, it would seek to eat him off his throne, and thereby bring all else into utter destruction (of course, infinitely impossible!). It is God's righteous strength that he should punish sin, not an injustice nor a weakness. "In the apposite words of T. F. Torrance: 'If God did not oppose sin, there would be no really objective and ultimate difference between sin and righteousness. Thus the divine opposition to sin is a factor in the qualification of humanity as sinful before God, and especially as guilty before him . . . Yet that [i.e., holding back his full opposition to sin] was in the very mercy of God, as the cross showed, for the cross reveals that God withheld his final resistance to sin until in Christ, he was ready to do the deed which would also save us from his wrath.' That is to say, God's holy consistency with himself requires that he should at all times (and throughout an endless eternity) act in accordance with his pure character. His holiness requires the punishment of sin, but at the same time his heart is full of the most tender love for sinners. To bring them back into his immediate favor action must be taken in accordance with who God always is. He cannot deny himself in saving sinners, for that would be the end of all. Indeed, Christ thought so highly of the Father's honor that he gave up everything for the Father to be honored in the salvation of the Church. His people are called, and through the Holy Spirit enabled, to share in his attitude of devout submission to the thrice holy God. The sacred transaction among Father, Son and Spirit in Gethsemane and Calvary, once grasped by the believer, in no sense presents a God who is harsh, nor is it the merely external imposition of standards outside of who God most essentially is, or in any sense alien to the sacred image in which we were made to live and function. On the contrary, Jesus' attitude to the Father in Gethsemane and on Calvary demonstrates the ineffable beauty that reigns within the Trinitarian relations. Jesus' self-offering to the Father as our great High Priest displays the absolute relational beauty of the infinite tenderness of the love of God."⁹

"Why does the New Testament lay so much stress on the *blood* of Christ? Even granting that His death is really the ground and basis of God's forgiveness of the believer, why not leave it at that? May it not be that the emphasis on the blood is merely the outward form of the revelation, inherited from Judaism? Some of us cannot help feeling a certain repulsion from this talk about blood. Are we not free to accept the essential truth, while rejecting the form which offends us? Would there be any real loss if the Gospel were presented without any mention of blood, substituting for it *death* or even *sacrifice*? As the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat, so Jesus Christ was *a propitiation, through faith, by his blood*. It was by His life poured out in death and offered to God that He became a propitiation for our sins. There is something there which would be missed if we substituted *death* for *blood*. *The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin*. The Life poured out in death, and applied to us; even as blood was sprinkled on the leper in the ritual of cleansing (Lev. xiv). The blood here is the sacrificial death *applied to us*. If it be true that His sacrificial death cleanses us, it is through *the blood* (with the Old Testament background which the Word of God provides) that the thought of the *application to us* of what He did *for us* is conveyed. *They have washed their robes* (i.e., their character as seen by God), *and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* (Rev. vii 14). This is exactly the form of expression which gives most offence to some people. Yet here, too, we have a vital spiritual truth expressed by the imagery. What Christ did on Calvary 1900 years ago can be applied to me here and now, and can take away all the defilement of sin, and make me white in God's sight. How could the saints be said to wash their robes in the *death* of the Lamb? We grant that the words are metaphorical, spiritual. We admit, too, that they have a history going back into the sacrifices of Judaism. But if the doctrine to which they belong is true, then He Who revealed the doctrine chose the imagery in which to express it, and we cannot afford to do without it."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ P. Wells, *Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of The Atonement* (Christian Focus, 2006), p. 121.

² cf. his *Steve Allen on The Bible, Religion, & Morality* (Prometheus Books, 1990), p. 95.

³ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Crossway, 1986), p. 70.

⁴ As cited by Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Fortress, 1977), p. 1.

⁵ This was Luther's term for the theology of the medieval scholastics. God was discussed in terms of His glorious attributes rather than in terms of Christ's cross. God was chiefly discussed philosophically. Luther is actually drawing a sharp contrast between these two types of theology. "That person," Luther declared, "does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as if it were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." As cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1966), p. 23.

⁶ *Mōria* is the source for our English word "moron." It means that someone lacks knowledge and discernment and is, in fact, not capable of learning. The word was used in reference to people who were mentally deranged. Cf. *The New Dictionary of New Testament Theology* III, ed. C. Brown (Zondervan, 1978), p. 1023ff.

⁷ Hengel, op. cit., p. 5.

⁸ C. Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 30.

⁹ D. F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology* II (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 364.

¹⁰ H. E. Guillebaud, *Why The Cross?* (IVP, 1936), p. 140.