

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	103		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

A few years ago a group of eminent historians published a two-volume work entitled *What if: Imagine What Might Have Been*. One of the chapters written by C. M. N. Eise, a professor of religion at Yale University, focuses on Pontius Pilate Spares Jesus: Christianity without the Crucifixion. In it the author weaves a narrative that has Pilate releasing Jesus and having him escorted back to Galilee where Jesus ends up living to be a feeble old man. The picture he paints of Jesus bears no resemblance to the one we find in the Gospel record: “Jesus is ninety-seven years old, and very frail. He can barely see now: he who once healed the blind. Cataracts. He can barely walk: he who once made the lame dance. His hearing is still fine, though. The Word incarnate, as John calls him, can hear just fine. He suffers from arthritis, and his mind is somewhere else most of the time. On some days he doesn’t even recognize his favorite disciple, John, who is nearly as old as he is, but still attends to his needs. Jesus’ disciples think that his mind is in heaven most of the day and night. He suffers terribly from a hernia that can’t be repaired, and from constant indigestion, and a bladder he can no longer control. His hands and feet are so numb sometimes that he can’t feel them at all. He looks as old as he feels too: thin, white hair, wrinkled, nearly transparent skin, spots all over his body, blue veins snaking all over too. No teeth left with which to chew.”¹ And so Jesus dies of old age and receives a humble, discreet burial, as he had requested many times. What becomes of the Gospel if there is no cross or resurrection? Oh, his disciples claim that he was resurrected three days after this burial and so the news of his victory over the grave form the central message of the fledgling church. But what is missing is the centrality of the death of Jesus on the cross. *Mortem turpissima crucis* is a Latin expression that comes from the early church father Origen and his commentary on Matthew (27:22ff).² 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).³

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”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶
 - B. ***The Subject Matter Particularly: Christ Crucified.*** The “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.” In Galatians 2:20 the Apostle likewise underscores the critical nature of the cross. The cross has changed everything. Paul has changed. He has died to the law and with Christ in order that he might live for God. Note the individuality of Paul’s language. Christ’s atoning love is highlighted by the Apostle as it relates specifically to him. Christ loved *him* and gave (*paradontos*, cf. with 1:4) himself for Paul. J. R. W. Stott has pointed out how this is a conscious echo of Isaiah 53:12, which says that Christ poured out (in the LXX this is *paredothē*) his life unto death. Elsewhere Paul declares that God “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up (*paradōken*) for us all” (Romans 8:32; cf. 4:25). I like the way Lloyd-Jones has put this: “[Christ] did not wait until Paul was converted before he loved him. He loved him as he was, a blasphemer and persecutor and injurious. He loved him even when Saul of Tarsus was there blaspheming his holy name, ridiculing his claim that he was the Son of God, and the Lord of Glory, ridiculing this idea that he is here to teach us and to die for us and to save us, pouring his blasphemous scorn upon him. While Paul was doing that, he was dying for Paul. And he was doing the same for you and for me. You who have reviled him and blasphemed him and hated him and regarded all this preaching of the cross as an offence, he did it for you.”⁷ Christ *gave* Himself: And He did so on the cross; not as an example that we should seek to imitate; not in order to move us to repentance per se (the moral influence theory of the atonement), but first and foremost He gave Himself as an atoning sacrifice to satisfy the justice of a Holy God – Lord help us to believe this! Listen carefully to the words of John Owen and put yourself in the situation he is describing. “. . . that I stood before the judgment seat of God, charged with my original apostasy from him, and with all the sins of my life, multiplied above the hairs of my head, and being ready to perish, to have the sentence pronounced against me; then Christ came and stood in my place, putting the sinner aside, and undertaking to answer this matter: *Let the poor sinner stand aside a while. Come, enter into rest; abide here in the cleft of the*

*rock; I will undertake thy cause, and plead it out at God's judgment seat. In this undertaking God spared him not; as if God should say, If you will stand in the place of the sinner, and undertake his cause, then it must go with you as with him; I will not spare. Lo, I come, says Christ, notwithstanding this, to do thy will, O God; -- Whatever thou dost require to make good this cause I have espoused, lo, I come to do it. So Christ loved me, and gave himself for me. Everlasting rest and peace will dwell upon our souls, if the Lord will be pleased to help us to exercise faith on Christ's love in this ordinance, wherein all these things are represented to us."*⁸

CONCLUSION: How Jesus died is critically important to our understanding of the gospel. "When a person dies we know that the bond uniting that person to us and to life in this world has been severed. Every human death is a definitive break, a break that cannot be mended (cf. Psalms 37:36; 103:15, 16). The cross of Christ was such a break. In one sense we can say that the Lord Jesus died, physically speaking, like any other person. He had a real human body that experienced physical pain just like we do. But that is where the similarities end. The death of Christ is unlike any other. Galatians 2:20 is one of the key texts in the Bible that serves to explain the nature of Christ's death. Unfortunately this text is often used by preachers as an exhortation to personal sanctification. We are told that in a very *mystical* sense, we must experience crucifixion to self in order to discover the pathway to spiritual victory. However valid that thought might be, it is not, I repeat, it is not the point that Paul is laboring to make. If we pay close attention to the context we will see that this passage is, in the words of Alan Cole, "a power argument for the total sufficiency and efficacy of the work of Christ."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ *What If: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, II, ed. R. Cowley (Putnam, 2001), p. 61.

² As cited by Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Fortress, 1977), p. 1.

³ 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.

⁴ *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.

⁵ Hengel, op. cit., p. 5.

⁶ C. Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 30.

⁷ M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Crossway, 1986), p. 60.

⁸ *The Works of John Owen* IX (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 602.

⁹ A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1956), p. 82.