

The Centrality of the Cross in the Theology of Christianity

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 1:17-18
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Turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter one and we are not going to concentrate on the whole passage that we have read—we read from chapter one verse 10 down to chapter two verse five—for we are going to concentrate on mainly verses 17 and 18 and some of the other verses in the passage.

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.¹

And I want to speak today on the importance and the centrality of the cross of Christ in the theology of Christianity, the importance or the centrality of the cross of Christ in the theology or in the belief system or in the doctrine or in the life of Christianity. Remove the cross and we have nothing. Remove the cross and we have bare, human religion. Remove the cross and every reason why we gather together is gone.

Paul starts off by making a comparison in verse 17 comparing the importance of the cross even with an important practice of the Church, an important sacrament as some would call it. And he said, “Christ [didn’t send me] to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross...should be made of none effect.”² So even when we compare an important sacrament like baptism, compared with the preaching of the cross Paul says, “That is not why Christ sent me. This is why Christ sent me.” We can get to heaven without baptism, but we can’t get to heaven without the cross. We can approach God without baptism, but we can’t approach God without the cross.

The old hymn says, “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time.” And that should be the viewpoint of the Church. When we see the cross in the light of the history of the world we see the wrecks of time, but over above all that is the cross towering as a standard, as something to look to that isn’t wrecked, that isn’t defeated. The cross towers above the wrecks of time.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:17-18

² 1 Corinthians 1:17

The word in the Greek is the word σταυρος (stauros) which can be translated a stake or a post, but also can be translated a cross. A word that is in a similar...in the same family of words στηριζω (sterizo) has an interesting meaning. It can mean to appoint, to continue to covenant or to establish. And that is exactly what the cross means to the Christian. For the cross for us...for us it is that which has brought the new covenant. It has established. It laid up. It is held up everything for us that is needful to approach God and to be found acceptable in him.

That is why Paul said the words, "But God forbid that I should glory, save [or except] in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."³ The cross is the great divider.

First of all the use of the term cross is a synonym for the gospel in the writings of the apostle Paul. We see it even here. To Paul in this passage, preaching the cross is synonymous with preaching the gospel. And, in fact, we could go so far as to say if we don't preach the cross we are not preaching the gospel.

One of the things I like to do often with the false religions who come to our doors, I will ask them, you know, do they preach the gospel. And they always say, "Yes."

And I will say, "Well, what is the gospel?"

It is a pretty good question to ask them. Now, what is the gospel? Ask a Mormon. Ask a Jehovah's Witness. "Please tell me what the gospel is."

And they...to date they have never given me the right answer. And then I always go to 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul gives the outline of the gospel. And then I challenge them. I say, "You have come to my door and you don't even know what the gospel is." And if you say nothing else to them that is a good rebuke that their claiming to come to your door with some message from God and they don't even know what the gospel is.

Secondly, we learn from this passage that the cross and the gospel is to be preached. Notice, it is not to be dramatized, but it is to be preached.

Why is it to be preached? Is it because we want to be old fashioned? Is it because we want to be like, you know, the reformers? Is it because we want to be like the ancient Church? No. The reason it is to be preached is simply because God has commanded it to be preached. And God's command has never been removed. The same God who commanded God to preach is the same God who commands us to preach.

Notice in the end of Matthew's gospel when Jesus sends the disciples out he commands them to preach. And then he says, "And, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."⁴

³ Galatians 6:14

⁴ Matthew 28:20

Why does he say that? The implication is, “Keep preaching until I come back,” isn’t it? “Keep preaching until I come back.”

Did the Lord Jesus know that the 20th and 21st centuries would come when there could be TV and all that wonderful stuff? And he says, “Keep preaching until I come back. Don’t be swayed and diverted from what I commanded you.”

Titus chapter one, in verse three it says, “[God has] in due times manifested his word [How?] through preaching, which is committed unto me.”⁵ And Paul here emphasizes not just the message, but the method by which the message is to be communicated.

Secondly, it is to be preached because it exalts the Word of God, not just because God has commanded it, but because practically it exalts the Word of God. It puts the Word of God in its proper place.

Notice in the following verse from the Psalms how God puts a high value. Turn with me to Psalm 138. And, by the way, this is another excellent verse for the Jehovah’s Witnesses. That is not my main purpose today, but just as sort of a by product of the message to point some of these things out. Psalm 138 verse two. The JW’s put a huge emphasis on the important of God’s name, don’t they? They even believe that if they do nothing else when they come to your door but mention the name Jehovah they have succeeded. So they put a huge emphasis on the name of God.

What I sometimes say to them is, you know, “Who is the Word?”

And they know this. They know Jesus is the λογος (logos). And they will say, “Well, it is Jesus.”

And then I will say, “Well, can you read with me from Psalm 138 verse two? “I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.”⁶

And I say, “Now, this is interesting. We have the name and you say it is named Jehovah. Well, look at what Jehovah has done. He has put his word, who is Jesus, above his name.”

They can’t answer that one. I look to see their reaction when that one is pointed out to them because there is no answer to that because they put such value in the name of God—and so does God himself—but God puts more value in his Word than in his name.

Sometimes we try and protect our name. God is more concerned about protecting his Word.

⁵ Titus 1:3

⁶ Psalm 138:2

Thirdly, preaching, as opposed to portraying, protects the mind from idolatrous tendencies. Humanly speaking we have an absolute human tendency to idolatry. We have a tendency to create pictures of God in our mind, to fill our mind with wrong pictures of God. The problem with portraying is it just adds more pictures to that natural tendency where the Word of God protects the mind from building up unscriptural pictures.

Paul said to the very Corinthians—and I believe this is why Paul starts this letter because Paul goes on further on in his writing to the Corinthians and says, “If somebody bring unto another Jesus you accept him all too easily.”⁷ And it seemed to have been a problem in the Corinthian Church that their emphasis was not on the Word of God. Their emphasis was on all sorts of other things. And Paul points out to them when it comes to even the miracle of gifts and so on...and it seems to be that all their emphasis was on those issues, the outward things, the manifestations of God rather than on the Word of God. But in the Scriptures the Word of God is to be essential. It is to be the one thing that is indispensable above all else.

Notice in Exodus—you needn’t turn to this—verse four what is forbidden. What is forbidden in Exodus 20 verse four? “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”⁸ You are not to make...it doesn’t forbid the making of false gods. It is interesting, I think, about the statement. It doesn’t forbid the making of false gods. What it forbids is the misrepresentation of the true God. It is slightly different, isn’t it? God doesn’t forbid—and this is what I often say to Roman Catholics—it is not that God is forbidding the Baals and forbidding the Ashtoreth. That is not what Exodus 20 verse four is all about. It is misrepresenting the true God. So it totally defeats any making of any image even if it is trying to represent the true God, because that is exactly what is forbidden in Exodus 20 and verse four.

In preaching the Word of God we are not conveying an image of God. We are conveying what? The mind of God. That is what people need to know. People don’t need to know what God looks like.

Even in the Old Testament some of the prophets wanted to see... “I just want to see what you look like.”

And the Lord says, “You may not behold my face.”

And, you know, that is not what is important. It is important to know what God’s mind and what God’s will is for our lives. “This is the will of God, even your sanctification.”⁹ That is what we need to know.

Preaching, fourthly, by its very nature conveys the seriousness of the message that it is proclaiming. “And the LORD spake unto Moses, Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him,

⁷ Paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 11:4

⁸ Exodus 20:4

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:3

Thus saith the LORD, Let my people go, that they may serve me.”¹⁰ (Exodus 8 and verse one).

Could you imagine if Moses had come to Pharaoh and said, “Pharaoh, I would like to do a bit of drama for you to sort of illustrate my message, or a bit of a dance or a bit of song. I would like to do a solo.” You know, we have soloists in some gospel meetings. It doesn’t convey the seriousness of the message.

Moses comes to Pharaoh and says, “Thus saith the Lord, Let my people go.”¹¹ The message is supported by the method.

Fifthly, God is revealed in the preaching of the Word in a way which he cannot be revealed by any other method. “The majesty,” as Calvin has said, “The majesty of God is indissolubly,” I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to pronounce that word, “indissolubly connected...” Did you ever put a tablet, one of those tablets into the...? I am taking vitamin C tablets. They are great, actually. I highly recommend them. They really do make you feel better. Vitamin C tablets, as soon as you put them into the water they start to dissolve.

Well, the majesty of God cannot be disconnected or dissolved from the public preaching of his truth. That is what Calvin is saying. He cannot be separated. If his Word is not allowed to have authority, it is the same as though its despisers attempted to throw God out of heaven. If his Word is not allowed to have its rightful place, it is the same as though his enemies sought to throw him out of heaven.

Thirdly, in the main headings, preaching the gospel is the supreme mission of the Church. Preaching the gospel is the supreme mission of the Church. Paul says it again that the reason he was sent was to preach. Everything else is second place.

The dying thief—we have said it already—baptism was not possible for him, but the cross was before him. The last breath of his life he sees the cross. The last breath of his life he sees the cross, he sees the Savior upon the cross. He realizes that this man is not here for his own sins. This man has done nothing wrong. He must be there for somebody else. “Maybe it is me? Maybe this is the one who had been promised?” And then he believes.

What are we to avoid when we preach the cross? According to the passage, in preaching the cross we are to avoid human inventions, ingenuity or wisdom. “Not with wisdom of words, [Why?] lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.”¹²

That is hard to imagine, isn’t it? It is hard to imagine. It is hard to imagine it is possible for the cross to made ineffectual. That is possible. Amazing. We think the cross is so powerful, the cross is so majestic, the cross is so...something that can do things for eter-

¹⁰ Exodus 8:1

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 1 Corinthians 1:17

nity. And yet this amazing admission is made that this cross can be made powerless if we don't stick to the Word of God. Amazing.

That is why Paul says in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians two, "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."¹³ And Paul was almost fearful and he was in trembling that anything he would say would remove the force of the cross, that remove the effect of the cross, verse five, "That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."¹⁴

One commentator on these verses has said this. "Paul, in his own estimation, was not a philosopher, not a moralist, not one of the world's wise men, but simply a herald of Christ. His royal master had given him a message to proclaim. His whole business was to deliver that message with exact and studious faithfulness, adding nothing, altering nothing and omitting nothing. And he was to deliver it not as another of one of people's bright ideas needing to be beautified with the cosmetics." Is that cosmetics, Julie Ann? "Not with cosmetics and the high heels of fashionable learning in order to make," and look at it. No reference here so I will just [?] put it out. "But as a Word from God spoken in Christ's name, carrying Christ's authority and authenticated in the hearers by the convincing power of Christ's Spirit."

Could you imagine if Mick went to work this week and said to his ambassador, "You know, I think this week I don't really want to drive. I would like to paint the walls"?

I mean, what would the ambassador say, "Well, that's not really why I have employed you."

You know, it does not the purpose...or if Benny went to the counsel this week and says, "Well, you know, I would like to become an artist for the counsel."

Well, they would say, "Benny, you know, you cut the grass great, but we don't want you to paint, you know."

So we need to do what we have been employed to do. We need to serve as God would have us serve. The greatest liberty for the Church is doing what God has asked us to do, isn't it? Obeying God's command.

That is why Samuel said to Saul, "You know, Saul, don't you understand that what God wants is simple obedience?" "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."¹⁵ "Do you not understand that you are the King of Israel? Do you not understand what you have been called to do is simply to obey the Word of God?"

Fifthly, we are to preach the cross no matter what the heathen say. The preaching of the cross will be foolishness to the world. That is because they are blind. They are lost. They

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:2

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:5

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 15:22

are unspiritual. The world will deride us and mock us for preaching Christ. They will try to convince us to be more sophisticated. We must stick to the old paths as Jeremiah six says. “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way”¹⁶ You see Jeremiah thought he was up to date. So he had to look backwards to the old paths. We think Jeremiah is old. Well, Jeremiah was even looking back. “...where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.”¹⁷

You see, it has never been fashionable for the world to follow the Word of God. It never was. It is not that we are no longer in the nineteenth century so therefore back then the Word of God was fashionable. It never has been fashionable. In the Garden of Eden the Word of God was not fashionable. So let us not fall into the lie of Satan thinking we are in a much more sophisticated age and advanced age. That is irrelevant.

Sixthly, the preaching of the cross is the great divider between the saved and the lost. I was watching late last night, just for the last half an hour, the film *A Night to Remember*. You know, amazing scenes as that big ship goes down into the water. And at the end of the film the big issue that they wanted to know: How many is saved and how many is lost? And 1500 were lost and 700 were saved. And there was no in between. They didn't say, “Well, is there any half lost and any half saved?”

No, you are either lost or you are saved. And the cross is what makes that difference. Which side of the cross...? And when we bring the cross to the world we are telling...we don't bring 10 Commandments to the world. We don't bring the law to the world. That doesn't make the difference because they think they can keep the law. I am not saying the law has no relevance to gospel preaching. Of course there are some aspects where people need to be shown that they have broken the law, yes. But primarily we don't bring Moses to the people. We bring Christ to the people because that is what divides between the lost and the saved.

If we remain committed to preaching the cross we will suffer persecution, seventhly. Paul could say in Galatians five verse 11, “And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.”¹⁸ Paul is saying, “Listen, I am not preaching circumcision.” Some were accusing him of that. “But if I was still preaching that I wouldn't be persecuted. It is only because I am preaching the cross.”

The word here in the Greek, the word “offense of the cross” is the word σκανδαλον (skandalon). I am sure you would not be a Greek scholar to know what English word comes from that; scandal. That is where the word scandal comes from. The offense of the cross...to the world the cross is something of...and to hear the cross preached to them it is scandalous. It is something that is offensive to them.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 6:16

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Galatians 5:11

Why was the message of the cross a scandal to the Jews? Well, we know well, don't we? Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree."¹⁹ And that goes back to Deuteronomy 21 verses 22 and 23.

And to tell a Jew that the only way you can be saved is by trusting in a cursed man was a scandal. They couldn't accept that. It was scandalous to the Jews, but it was also scandalous to the Greeks because to them it didn't make sense. It wasn't philosophical enough. It wasn't wise enough. It wasn't complicated enough. It was too simple. To one it was heretical. To the other it was simplistic. And still they are two reasons today why the world will put pressure on us—not outwardly, I mean, I think most of the pressure comes in our own minds. We are trying sometimes to impress the world, aren't we? Whereas we should just stick to what God has asked us to do.

Notice—I have already said this—eighthly, there is no middle ground on this issue. Paul could say to the Galatians, "As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ."²⁰ There is a tendency, isn't it? Paul exposes the motives of their hearts. There is a tendency as Christians to become more acceptable to the world. And if that means mentioning the cross a little bit less, if that means just putting across the fact when people say to us... You know the way people say to you, "You are a very good living person." Our immediate response should be, "That is irrelevant. That is not what I want you to think about when you look at me. What I want you to think about when you think about me is that the most important thing to me is the cross."

Because people are trying to flatter us when they say, "Oh, you are a very good living person. You don't curse. You don't do this. You don't do that." That is flattery. And we need to cut right through that and say, "Oh, that is irrelevant. What you need to know is the cross and the cross saving your soul."

The Lord Jesus could say, "And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."²¹

Paul in Philippians three verse 18, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ."²² He doesn't say they are enemies of the law of Moses. He doesn't say they are enemies of a certain standard of living. He says, "They are enemies of the cross of Christ."²³

Ninthly, the cross should be the Christian's greatest boast. Galatians six verse 14. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the

¹⁹ Galatians 3:13

²⁰ Galatians 6:12

²¹ Matthew 10:38

²² Philippians 3:18

²³ Ibid.

world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”²⁴ The word here “glory” in the Greek is literally “to vaunt,” literally “to explode with boasting,” to say to everybody, “Look what I have!”

We are approaching a time of year when many children on a certain day of the end of this month will go to their friends, “Look what I got. Look at this. I got the best present.” That is the way we should be with the cross. We should go to religious people and say, “You have got that, but look what I have. This is so much better. This is so much more wonderful. You might have a religious life. I have the meaning of life. You might have efforts. I have the result.” It is so much better. The cross in the world’s eyes might be nothing. For the Christian it must be everything.

Tenthly, what did the cross achieve? In Ephesians two—if we had time to read it we would read 11 to 22. For the sake of time...the cross achieved reconciliation. Ephesians 2:16, “That he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”²⁵

Did you ever think about this when it come to dispensationalism? They say a time will come when God will yet again work with his people the Jews. That is an implied denial of the effect of the cross. God no longer has a physical people. God no longer has a physical nation. And he will never again isolate his work to a physical nation because that will be a denial of what the cross has achieved. God, for once and for all, all people of all nations, all tribes, all languages have been brought by the cross together. And for God to go back to the old shadows would be to deny the cross himself. “Having made peace through the blood of his cross,” Colossians one verse 20, “by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him.”²⁶ See, nothing else needs to be reconciled. There is no [?] work. Dispensationalists undermine the cross because they say something else has to happen. God hasn’t fulfilled all these promises. Yet Paul could say to the Corinthians, “For every promise of God is yea and Amen in him.”²⁷ It is already fulfilled. Nothing else has to be done. There is only one thing that needs to take place in the history of this world. It is for Christ to return and for the eternal state to be brought in. That’s it. That is all that needs to happen, no big complicated pattern of prophecy has to be fulfilled because all has been achieved in the cross.

Dispensationalism and futuristic ideas about some dreamed up antichrist in the future is completely unbiblical. But it is dangerous theology because it removes all the attention away from the cross and puts all the attention on some sort of Hollywood idea of something that might take place in the future.

²⁴ Galatians 6:14

²⁵ Ephesians 2:16

²⁶ Colossians 1:20

²⁷ Paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 1:20

The cross has achieved in Colossians 2:14, “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.”²⁸

Eleventhly...it is hard to say that one. Eleventhly, what did the cross mean for Christ? Philippians two verse eight. “He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”²⁹ That is what it meant for Christ. It meant that he must humble himself. And when we come to the cross it should only mean the same. The greatest way to be humble is to come to the cross. We come to the law...I am not saying... The law hasn’t been abolished. The moral law of God still stands. But if we come to the moral law of God and try to match ourselves up against that we might start to get proud.

“Well, I’m actually not doing too bad. I am obeying that one. I think I am obeying that one.”

There is a chance of pride setting in. When we come to the cross there is no room for pride.

What are the blessings or the blessed consequences flowing from the cross of Christ? I finish with this, just five minutes look at this; the blessings that flow from the cross of Christ. Hebrews 12 verse two. “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”³⁰

Number one, we have one to inspire us in the greatest times of difficulty. Looking unto Jesus, looking to the one who endured the very cross. He is the one we can look to.

Now I think I can say without fear of contradiction: We have never endured such an experience as going to a cross. We have many other difficulties. But listen. In the midst of those difficulties and the writer of the Hebrews has just gone through chapter 11 of Hebrews pointing out all the great heroes of faith. But then it culminates in this. They are a good example, but listen. The best example, the best one to look to is to the Lord Jesus himself.

The word “looking” there literally means in the Greek “to consider attentively, to consider attentively.” When is the last time you have personally sat down and really spent time considering the Lord Jesus and what he has done for you?

Secondly, we have a leader who has gone before us to victory. The word “author” there means “chief leader” or “captain” or “prince.” We have one not only as an example to inspire us, but we have one who is a captain to lead us.

²⁸ Colossians 2:14

²⁹ Philippians 2:8

³⁰ Hebrews 12:2

Did you ever look at the war movies and one of the things that is essential to the rest of the army feeling brave is for the leader to stand out and to be strong and say, “Men, let us go together and we have won like that.”

Interesting. I read a story about Alexander the Great Greek leader and one of his men was a bit cowardly about going into the fight. His name was also Alexander. And Alexander the Great leader comes to this young Alexander and says, “Either fight like Alexander or lay down the name of Alexander.”

And we are Christians. Either stand like Christ or lay aside the name of Christ. Now I know we don’t want to do the latter, but let us be like the one we are named after. Let us be like him.

Thirdly, we have one who has fully satisfied all the demands of God on our behalf. “Finisher” it says, “finisher of our faith.”³¹ It literally means...τελειωτης (teleiotes) in the Greek literally a consummator, a completer. We don’t have to add anything, nothing. There were those of us who say, “Christ has done 99%. We just need to add something to make it complete.” It is a denial of this verse. He has done it all.

Fourthly and lastly, we have one who is in the place of all power and authority. It says in the verse, “...and is set down at the right hand...of God.”³² And because he is in the place of power, because he is in the place of authority, because he is our example, because he is our leader, because he is the one that gives us all the blessings flowing from the cross, therefore Paul could—or the writer to the Hebrews—could say, “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”³³ That is not a verse for the ungodly. That is a verse for the believer because Jesus makes intercession for his people.

Today do you feel not quite up to the mark? Today do you feel not quite a Christian? What is the answer? It is here. Look to the cross. Look to Christ. He is our leader. He is the one who has done it all. He is the one who has gone before us who has made the way perfect. He is the one that can inspire us. Come to him because he can save you to the uttermost, not just for eternity, but even in time.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you, Lord, for the importance and relevance of the Word of God to our lives this day. Father, we pray that you would inspire us to look only to the cross, to look to the one who loved me and gave himself for me. We thank you, Lord, that the cross is everything we need for this life and for eternity. And as we look now, Lord, to the Lord’s Table, we pray that you would bless our hearts as we partake of the bread and of the wine. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Hebrews 7:25