

STUDY 10

The Cross and True Healing

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REGAINING THE CUTTING EDGE

I am not ashamed of the gospel, [for] it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith (Rom. 1:16).

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18, NIV).

... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).¹

In preaching and teaching the crucified Lord Jesus, we are dealing with the cutting edge of the gospel. Here we have the two-edged sword that comes from Christ's mouth to subdue the fury of humankind (Rev. 20:15). This cutting edge means being in the position to bring the greatest advancement in the true healing of men and women. The sharp knife for healing cuts through the tough, obdurate and hostile mind to save people from their carcinogenic ways of folly. If God were not wise, he would not be holy and true, nor gracious and merciful in his speaking and ruling. Christ encapsulates the wisdom and power of God to bring the senseless to their right mind, bringing them home from the far country into communion with God the Father.

Some denominations of the Christian Church in Australia now have access to more resources for mission and opportunities than ever before. Congregations have access to DVD power point presentations of high quality, comfortable seating arrangements, splendid musical and sound systems and more. Financial grants can be made available for missional projects. For this, we can be grateful. Nevertheless, we are not cutting it in the community in terms of people turning back to God. (The National Christian Life Survey intimates a continuing falling away from the churches.)

Do we have a cutting edge in our worship and mission? Are we more likely to be running ambulances than pioneering with a gospel that does more than reflect the mind of the community? Is our calling upon a generic god the dull instrument of a faceless spirituality? P. T. Forsyth reflects on the relationship of the church to modern culture, which we could equally apply to our relationship with the postmodern world:

Yet it is for decision that Christianity calls . . . far more than for a mere impression in response. We are not set in such a world as this simply to return its note as artists or esthetes, but to act.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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... Christianity can endure, not by surrendering itself to the modern mind and modern culture, but rather by a break with it: the condition of a long future both for culture and the soul is the Christianity which antagonizes culture without denying its place. Culture asks but a half Gospel; and a half Gospel is no Gospel. We must, of course, go some way to meet the world, but when we do meet we must do more than greet.²

The message of Christ crucified is more like the bleeding edge. The bleeding edge is in front of the cutting edge but implying a greater degree of risk for it does not fit the mould of postmodern thought. The bleeding edge of the gospel does not have the supports and technologies of postmodern thought and processes to support it. The idea of the Creator God being aligned with the bloodied corpse of a failure hanging on a criminal's cross is despicable and forbidding.

The wisdom of God is not found as miners discover precious metals in the ground. It cannot be expected to encounter us as a phenomenon, which is immediately and directly illuminating and acceptable to us.

The risen crucified Lord Jesus exposes the wisdom of the world as folly. By nature of the case the wisdom of humankind cannot be compared with the wisdom of God for God cannot be subjected to the world he created (Isa. 55:8f.—cf. the Greek idea of wisdom). The same wisdom that created the world (Prov. 3:19ff.) is identical with God's true witness in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the meaning of God's will and purpose, that is, he is the wisdom of God (Col. 2:3; Eph. 3:8–9; Heb. 1:1–3).

Jesus Christ is the cutting edge of the gospel. This Jesus is no empty symbol to be detached from his oneness with God and into whom people may project their own religious fantasies and ideologies. This Jesus is one and the same being with God (Matt. 11:25–27). In the wisdom of God his eternal purpose of redemption has been revealed and brought to culmination in Jesus Christ, making Christ crucified the centre of our faith and the cutting edge of the Gospel. For example the Masai people's response to the teaching of Vincent J. Donovan in his book *Christianity Rediscovered*.³

TRUE HEALING

True healing would have to be salvation from the tragic disaster of human folly:

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin. They die for lack of discipline, and because of their great folly they are lost (Prov. 5:22f.).

The foolish are those without faith who regard the death of Christ as another demonstration of the meaningless of life and turn away from it with impatience (Acts 17:32). They refuse the prophetic cries of wisdom only to be destroyed by their waywardness and complacency (Prov. 1:20–32).

The postmodernist, like humankind in the past, replaces wisdom from above with wisdom from below. People who reject God think they are powerful and wise,

² P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 89.

³ Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, SCM Pr., London, 1991.

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reinventing the world with brilliant philosophies to suit their dreams and goals. Modern enlightenment humanism has risen up to believe it can save the world. Postmodern society is still recovering from the shock of massacres like those of Verdun in World War I, the holocausts of National Socialism, obliterations such as Hiroshima and catastrophes like Chernobyl. Jacques Ellul said technical advancement does solve some difficulties and problems, but the widespread conviction has developed that everything is ultimately a technical problem. However, the problems which techniques raise are much bigger and harder at every stage than those they solve.⁴

At a personal level, we now experience forms of stress unknown in previous generations. The urge for excitement advances depression. We are growing angrier from the increasing demands being put on us to function efficiently. We use our advances to fight God even more strenuously and concoct ways of life that work against the ordering of creation, against our being made in God's image and which use others to satisfy a carcinogenic self-ism:

Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the LORD; and I will heal them. But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace . . . for the wicked (Isa. 57:19–21).

What is true healing? To be freed from the tyrants of our own and other's making. To see through the illusions of our idols and to renounce them. True healing is for the consequential guilt of our foolish and destructive behavior to be forgiven. It must include being brought home in peace with the God to whom our minds have been hostile (Col. 1:21). Trapped in the coils of our sin, true healing could only come when our folly is undone and we are redone (example from the film 'Atonement'). Only the strange event of Jesus Christ as the crucified Messiah can give us new saving insight of the wisdom and power of God, for example the transformation of Paul of Tarsus (Acts 9:4–6).

THE CUTTING EDGE OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED

To regain our cutting edge we will not only have to put Christ at the centre of our preaching and teaching (with a consequential Trinitarian theology), but also be faithful in bearing witness to Christ clothed with his gospel as the crucified risen Lord.

In his wisdom, God chooses to act foolishly in the eyes of the world. First, God acts in a manner that we would not imagine (1 Cor. 2:8–9). The living God is a coming God and, in sheer mercy, he came amongst us as a man. In Jesus, it is God himself come amongst us. Not just as a human being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but as a *Man*. What is breathtaking is that God the Almighty Creator becomes fully one with us and speaks our human language. It will be as a man that God will penetrate the depths of humanity and the perverse minds of men and women. As Emmanuel Jesus will open the mystery of God to us in his humanity and as the one who is uniquely the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his nature (Heb. 1:3; cf. John 1:14–18; 14:6).

⁴ J. Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990, pp. 48f.

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Truth is not immediately and directly illuminating or welcome to man. God opens the mystery of himself in Christ; nevertheless, we have to be made able to receive it. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary making him to be part of the same stock as all of us. By Jesus' unique birth, he enters our condition of folly and sin. As the incarnate transcendent God, Jesus is secured in his humanity. As our brother, Jesus did not succumb to our sin but, in his obedience, he pushed back our twisted humanity step-by-step, incident by incident. Jesus was about undoing sin.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus identifies with the sinful race. In his temptation, Jesus refused to fulfill his mission by separating himself from sinners. He forges ahead, doing wonderful deeds but all the time being taken to his atoning death.

In our hostility to God and his ways, the human race took out its anger on Christ, insisting that he should die (Isa. 53:3–7; Rom. 15:3; Acts 3:14–15; Mark 15:6–15). Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24) until he had overcome our raging in his non-retaliating love. Our anger has been judged for the folly and madness that it is in God's holy eyes (Hab. 1:13).

God has appointed Christ our head and representative to recapitulate and reconcile all things (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20; 2 Cor. 5:19; John 1:29). None is left outside the pale, all humanity is included, all sin, all guilt and evil has been born by Christ forever in his death for us. Christ made our lost and damned condition his own. Healing is found by our conscience being at peace (Rom. 8:1–4; Heb. 9:14), coupled with the knowledge that our old corrupt humanity has been finished in the death of Christ.

The wisdom of God is identified with Jesus Christ. This is exactly the same wisdom that James speaks of when he asks, 'Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom' (James 3:13; cf. Luke 2:40). This is the cutting edge that penetrates our blindness, goes down to the depths of human depravity, descends into hell and identifies with human atrocity, suffering and the loneliness of dying.

Alan Lewis in his book *Between Cross and Resurrection* deals with repentance and what it takes to change a person's mind so that they turn back to God. He says that the 'word of the cross' is subversive and iconoclastic with power 'to shake up our preconceptions of what is possible, or powerful or wise, and forces our thoughts, in reluctant but obedient discipleship, to follow the truth and wisdom of what is heard'.⁵

PREACHING THE CROSS

To preach Christ crucified is to participate in the folly at the bleeding edge. It is not enough to have a theology of the atonement on our shelves or neatly packaged in our memory. Declaring the word of the cross is the divine means which brings faith and repentance. Cowardice and shame can cause us to pull back from being overly identified with such a foolish subject. P. T. Forsyth observed that in his day preachers were more inclined to speak of sacrifice than preach an atoning death. We may be more inclined to use the death of Christ as a moral example for Christian living or as an emotive means for people to make guilty commitments to social justice.

⁵ Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001, p. 24.

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Those who preach the cross must be identified with the cross. I do not mean mystically or by emotional pietism or by histrionics, but relationally one with the risen and ascended Lord of the cross. It is necessary to see that Christ takes our place in all of our human life and activity before God. He not only obeyed God as the one wise man in our place, but he died in our place, and when he was raised from the dead, we were raised with him.

Moreover, when Jesus ascended to the Father his oneness with us did not cease, nor did he shed his humanity. He did not ascend as a solitary human being but ascended with us as participants in his glorified life: 'you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). Christ's priestly ministry did not end with his making an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He continues as our High Priest forever (Heb. 7:16, 25; Rom. 8:34). Christ's continuing priesthood changes people's lives. What is very significant is that he continues his ministry vicariously in us. Believing this can take the brakes off from much tired and disillusioned ministry.

'I have been co-crucified with Christ; and it's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in, or by the faithfulness of, the Son of God' (Gal. 2:19–20, lit. trans.). The ascended Christ works within our life as our life. The ministry of the gospel is Christ's life vicariously lived through us (Phil. 1:9). He remains our great Apostle, the ministry is his, and in union with him, God has made us his co-partners. We have the mind of Christ who became for us wisdom, from God (1 Cor. 1:30; 2:16). This ministry of Christ in us is not the building up of emotions or the product of human wisdom, but comes by faith in Christ's faithfulness.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18ff. Paul acknowledges that people turn away from the preaching of the cross because they regard it as stupid. What happens in the preaching of the cross is that human wisdom is eliminated and superseded in judgement (v. 19). What God has done through his gospel has shown that the wisdom of the perishing world is not true wisdom (vv. 20–24). The gospel is not what the wisdom of the world claims it to be but the exact opposite. The so-called folly of the gospel has in fact saved people who could be healed by no other means. Paul's mission was to glory in God, and therefore he would not please his audience by glorying in human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:31–2:4).

I could not believe in God apart from the healing work in Christ crucified. Without living in this strange world of the biblical witness to these things, I believe I would never have survived as a Minister of the Word of God. Preaching Christ crucified fills me simultaneously with dread and great joy; and with confidence that Christ is at work truly healing men and women.