

Beware the 'Cross-less' Gospel

When we talk about our faith, do we remember the heart of the matter?

I watched a television program that featured interviews with a number of people at a well-known evangelical church. One person after another gave testimony about how their lives had been changed: "I came to this church and was thrilled about what I saw. God changed my life." Someone else said, "I was a drug addict, and God dealt with that." Every testimony mentioned God, but in that whole program Jesus was mentioned only once. What Christ did on the cross was not mentioned at all.



In preaching today, generally speaking, the cross hardly features-sometimes Jesus doesn't even feature. We have a duty to make the cross of Christ central in our evangelism.

The Bible says that the cross is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). The Jews thought, "How could anyone preach about the Messiah *dying on a cross*? Don't the Scriptures say that anyone who dies on a cross is cursed by God?" As for Gentiles- who didn't have or care about the Old Testament Scriptures- the whole idea was complete foolishness. The verse uses the Greek word *moros*, from which we get "moron." You have to be a moron to preach and believe in a dying Savior. Can you see the temptation to put the cross of to the side?

Sometimes you hear people say, quite rightly, "Jesus will give you a purpose for living." Without a doubt He does, but that is not why He came. Others say that He came as a good example to follow. He's the greatest example to follow, but again, that is not at all the heart of why He came. "Jesus came to give us joy in a world of unhappiness and misery," some say. But that was not why He came either. And great though His peace is, He didn't come to give us peace.

John tells us why Jesus came: "He appeared so that he might take away our sins" (1 John 3:5, NIV). We need reminding of this. Otherwise, in our evangelism we may say, "Have some peace, have some joy, have some happiness, have a purpose for living, have an example to follow." Although Jesus does give these things, they are not the central point. We may find these things apart from Jesus, but apart from Him we will never find forgiveness of sins. We can understand the centrality of the cross from three different perspectives: What does it mean to God? To us? To Satan?

The Cross from God's Perspective

The Bible says, "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2, KJV). Propitiation is the means by which God's anger is assuaged; His anger is dealt with, and God is made favorable toward us.

Some have said it is barbaric to think that God's anger needs to be assuaged by blood. They say, "How can a sacrifice that makes an angry God favorable be given by the God who is angry in the first place? And what about God's love?"

But it is precisely because God loves us that He had to deal with our sin- and it is on the basis of this that we are accepted. Jesus could die a thousand deaths and yet not achieve salvation for us unless God were satisfied with the sacrifice. Yet the question remains: How can God be both the one who provides the sacrifice that make Him propitious and be the One who receives the sacrifice?

The simple answer is that God's holiness demands propitiation. God is blisteringly angry about our every single sin. You can see the awfulness of sin only by seeing what it did to His one and only lovely Son. If God looked at a sin and said, "Well, I'm not too bothered about that one," there would be injustice in His character. God retains His honor by giving His Son.

God unfolded a plan that both showed His unbelievably strong anger at sin and His infinitely strong love for us. He sent His son and punished Him on our behalf. "The Father has sent his son to be the savior of the world" (1 John 4:14, NIV). No other message beside the cross is able to deal with the root problem of man's sin in relation to the justice and holiness of God.

The Cross from Our Perspective

The heart of the Gospel is that through Jesus-and His work as our Substitute- God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. The punishment for our sin was dealt with by a substitute: Namely, Jesus. The Bible says, "When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6, NIV, emphasis added). The Greek word translated "for" means "on behalf of." The word is used repeatedly concerning Jesus: "While we were still sinners Christ died for [on behalf of] us" (Romans 5:8, NIV, emphasis added).

In our evangelism it is so important that we grasp this because it tells us that when Jesus died on the cross He died on behalf of someone. There is no greater news than the glorious news that Jesus took our place on the cross. We are sinners by nature, but "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV). What a breathtaking verse!

The Cross from Satan's Perspective

The Bible calls Satan "the accuser" in Revelation 12:10. He whispers, "You cannot possibly expect God to accept you. You have a disgusting imagination. Look at those things you've done- your deceitfulness, your hatred and bitterness. You call yourself a child of God? And to God, Satan says, in effect, "If You are just at all, You cannot possibly forgive his sins and accept him. Your justice demands that he be punished."

But John tells us how such accusations are dealt with: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1, KJV). Generally, an advocate will stand up before a judge and plead on behalf of the accused something like this, "My lord, yes, he is not perfect-he has failed- but he is now a kind and helpful citizen, and I am bringing witnesses to testify to his good character." In so doing, the advocate pleads for the judge to be lenient.

Jesus, as our Advocate, doesn't work that way. When Satan accuses, Jesus says to His Father, "Everything You said about him. But, Father, You cannot punish him because the punishment already has been paid—by Me."

The Father looks to the sacrifice of the Son to see that the punishment was paid in full. Atonement made, acceptance guaranteed- and we are free. This is what is meant by Jesus being our Substitute.

“Because the sinless savior died,
My sinful soul is counted free,
For God, the Just, is satisfied,
To look on Him and pardon me.”

Jesus provided for our greatest need- the forgiveness of sin. Apart from Him it could never happen. That is why the cross must be at the heart of our evangelism.

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