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THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

By David Samuel

The Church's mandate to evangelise is based upon the words of the risen Christ when he commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. The context of these words is significant for the nature and content of the message to be proclaimed. The command is given at the conclusion of the Lord's work on earth. Now that that work is complete the disciples are to go and declare what God has done in Christ for man's salvation. They are to declare that, because Christ, the Son of God, has died upon the cross and risen again, reconciliation and peace have been effected between God and man. Something has been done in the person of Christ which not merely makes possible a new relationship, but has actually brought into existence a new relationship between God and man.

HERALDS

That is why the preaching of the good news in the New Testament is described as a 'royal proclamation'. The Greek word *kerygma* means a heraldic announcement. The *kery* or herald is despatched by royal authority to declare some event or decree that is of importance to the people. This is the nature of the Gospel message; it is, in the first instance, an announcement of what God has done, not what man must do.

This is the pattern we find emerging as the theme is developed in the New Testament. The nature of the commission is filled out in Luke's Gospel in these words:

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them. "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24: 45-48).

As witnesses they were to declare the mighty acts of God in Christ for the salvation of the world. This is exactly what the apostles did. Peter and John declared before the Sanhedrin:

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things. (Acts 5: 31-32).

And Paul preaching in Antioch of Pisidia said,

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39).

This is the pattern of the apostolic ministry - the apostolic proclamation or *kerygma*. This is the Word committed to the church, the Word of reconciliation; we are ambassadors for Christ, and the apostolicity of the church is essentially this Word. Even the Lord's Supper is a further proclamation of this truth:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

There are several reasons why the Gospel must take this form of proclamation.

First because this is a truth of history. God has acted in history in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son. He was ‘born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate...’ The act of redemption and reconciliation is a concrete, historic reality, not a philosophical theory, or a piece of speculative reasoning. Therefore, men could not arrive at this truth for themselves by meditation or reflection. They could only know it if those who were the witnesses of it proclaimed it and declared what had happened; if the circle of witnesses began where they were and worked outwards to make the fact known to the whole world. Paul argues in this way in Romans 10.14:

But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how shall they hear without someone preaching?

Secondly, because it is the announcement of man’s deliverance by a hand other than his own. Redemption is something which has been accomplished for him, on his behalf and in his place. If this were not so it would not be good news; it would be some moral exhortation or demand upon him to be better, to improve and try harder with the help of God to put himself right. That is, indeed, how the Gospel is sometimes portrayed, but it is a travesty. The Gospel is by definition Good News, because it is the proclamation of grace; it is the announcement of something which has been done for man that sets him free and confers untold benefits upon him in consequence. It is the proclamation of a work of deliverance which is perfected and finished *independently* of his efforts, and that is indeed Good News!

CHRIST EVENT

What then is this event of which the Gospel is the heraldic announcement? It is the Christ event. That is the best way of summing up the total significance of what has been accomplished by Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. The Gospel is essentially preaching Christ. ‘Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ . . .’ This is the characteristic expression in the New Testament for preaching the Gospel. But it is a kind of shorthand. What it means is that the Apostles declared what God had done in Christ, who ‘came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation.’ The Good News begins with the birth of Christ . . . ‘Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy . . .’ This is the Royal announcement. But as we read the New Testament we see that the birth or incarnation of Christ is not an end in itself. If God had merely become man it would not have affected the salvation of the world. ‘And this is the judgement: the light has come into the world and people have loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.’ The presence of the perfect Son of God amongst sinful men served only to reveal their sin and wickedness and expose their hopeless condition. The incarnation of the Son of God could not and did not of itself effect man’s redemption.

An incarnational theology, that is one which lays the stress and emphasis upon the fact of God becoming man and makes that pivotal, (as if by the mere taking of human nature upon him Christ redeemed and reconciled man to God), is inadequate, and indeed unbiblical. It would certainly not be ‘good news’ for it could only teach that each man must emulate Christ and follow the pattern of life he marked out if he would be saved. That surely must be a message of despair not hope. It would differ in no way from the demands of the Law under the Old Covenant.

The New Testament does not leave us in that position, ‘For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’. The New Testament shows us the incarnation as the necessary condition to the fulfilment of the great object for which he came into the world, to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me . . . He takes away the first, that he may establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’. (Heb. 10:5ff.).

The special emphasis laid upon the suffering and death of Our Lord in the Gospels, the large amount of space, proportionately, to the other parts of the narrative allotted to it, spells out the significance of the cross for mans redemption. This is the event that affects our redemption for, ‘without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins’.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Preaching Christ, therefore in New Testament terms means, pre-eminently, preaching Christ crucified. The message of the cross is that which spearheads the evangelistic message. The Gospels themselves are evangelistic messages and we see there the emphasis is laid upon the crucifixion of Christ, his death for sinners, as the culmination of his whole life and work, the grand object for which he came into the world. ‘For the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.’ Or again in St John’s Gospel, ‘Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ (John 12: 27-28).

In Paul, similarly, it is abundantly clear that the heart of his preaching was the cross of Jesus Christ. ‘For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.’ Again, ‘We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles . . .’ And again, ‘For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified . . .’

We may conclude then that the preaching of the Gospel is the declaration, the announcement of what God has done in Christ for the salvation of men, the proclamation of that divine event and intervention on behalf of man which finds its focus and culmination in the cross. The heart of the evangelistic message is therefore Christ crucified. There can be no substitute for the preaching of the cross. Indeed, there can be no real or truly effective evangelism without this message being central to it.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS?

The first is that God has decreed it to be so. The cross is no accidental phenomenon - a chance event resulting from the collision of religious and political interests at that particular time. Something which might have been averted with greater wisdom and tolerance, with understanding and forbearance on the part of the different interests involved. That may be how modern humanistic thought views it. The Bible views it differently, as ordained of God. ‘This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.’ The cross of Christ is an integral part of the will and purpose of God for the redemption of man. There could be no other way to reconcile God to man and in that sense Christ is the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

But there is another reason. The message of the cross is the only thing that can meet the deep moral and spiritual need of men. Perhaps the testimony to this truth of someone who looks at the matter from outside may be useful. Professor James Burnham was Professor of Philosophy at New York University. In his book *The Suicide of the West* he discusses the problem of guilt in Western secular society, and the inability of modern liberal philosophy to explain it or dispel it. The problem will

not go away. Modern man is laden with a sense of guilt. All the 'do-gooding' of our society, he considers, is an elaborate attempt to expiate it, the modern counterpart of the mediaeval system of penance and pilgrimages and good works. This is how he states the answer of Christianity to this universal problem of human guilt:

Christianity, the traditional religion of Western civilisation, faces the reality of guilt, provides an adequate explanation for it, and offers a resolution of the anxiety to which it inevitably gives rise. Each man is guilty merely by being a man, because the entire human race, in the person of its progenitor, committed a supreme crime. The exact content of this crime, or sin, is obscure; but its infinite measure is known from the fact that it was done in defiance of the will of the infinite Being who is Creator at once of the world and of man himself. Every man is therefore born with this guilt; and since it is infinite, neither any man nor all men together can, solely by their own efforts, wipe it out. God himself however, freely chose the only possible solution, if there was to be a solution: that He, the infinite Being, should himself become Incarnate as man, and sacrifice himself, so that through this infinite sacrifice, man, and men, might be redeemed from their infinite guilt.

The Christian doctrine does genuinely solve the problem of guilt; . . .

The Bible understands man better than he understands himself. We must take full advantage of this truth, of the authenticity of Scripture, of the way that its central message and truth are corroborated by human experience. The Bible speaks with unique authority to man, and with deep penetration and insight into the human condition.

It is only the message of the cross that can resolve man's conflict with God and his conflict with himself. The message of the cross is the message of peace, - of reconciliation already effected, perfected, completed . . . There is no other message that can deal with man's deep and fundamental need.

UNIVERSALITY OF SIN

We see this in the way in which both man's basic need of forgiveness and the message of the cross transcend all human divisions and cultural barriers. What, in Paul's view, united both Jew and Gentile was the fact that they were sinners. This is the force of his argument in the first chapters of Romans, in which he affirms that God has concluded all under sin that he might have mercy upon all. The message of the cross therefore is a message for Jew and Gentile alike. The universality of sin ensures the universality of the message of reconciliation through the atonement of Christ crucified. There can be no question of it being confined to one particular section of humanity, or one particular age. The solidarity of the whole human race in sin, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God', is the guarantee of the relevance of the Gospel in every age and place.

But it is objected by some today that this is not how modern man understands himself and his need. Today, it is said, we are aware of a multiplicity of cultures and needs. Man sees himself differently today from the way in which he saw himself in the first century. His understanding of himself and the world is determined by his background, his culture, his civilisation or the lack of it. His felt need may not be that of deliverance from sin but something else, it may be loneliness or anxiety or frustration or depression or boredom or whatever else may afflict individuals and societies. Because of this, it is argued, there is not one simple Gospel, there is not one universal message of salvation applicable to all men in all places. The Gospel has to be adapted to be relevant to whatever is man's felt need.

The important thing to recognise here is that we must not simply accept modern man's account of himself. John Stott has made this point very forcibly in his book *Our Guilty Silence*. He acknowledges that we must listen to what people are saying, but we must not stop with their felt

needs or their own understanding of their condition. That would be like a doctor simply accepting the patient's own diagnosis and treating him accordingly.

We must not, then be deflected from the preaching of the message of the cross in the present age simply because it appears to be irrelevant in the eyes of the world. So it did in the ancient world - it was 'to the Greeks foolishness and to the Jews a stumbling block', yet Paul persisted because he knew it was the 'power of God', the divinely ordained message of salvation for the real need of all mankind. 'It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching (the *Kerygma*, the message itself) to save those who believed.'

While some, therefore, today may disagree and seek to adapt the Gospel to the present age and man's understanding of himself, we must go on in believing that the message is essentially the same as it was in New Testament times - 'Jesus Christ, and Him crucified' - and making that the burden.

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