

No Cross: No Christ by Geoffrey Bingham

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PAUL'S CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

Paul's view of the Cross can be found as we go through his writings. In I Corinthians 2:1–2, 'When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'. In I Corinthians 1:18 he spoke of the power of the Cross, '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.' Indeed he added, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.' (I Cor. 1:22–25). The matter of the Cross was always central to Paul, for in Galatians 6:14 he says, 'But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' As if all this emphasis were not enough he adds in the midst of a powerful passage (II Cor. 4:1–18) that he, with his readers, is 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies'.

What does all this add up to? Does it mean Paul was overly obsessed with the fact of Christ's crucifixion death, or that he made an exaggerated doctrine of that death so that it appeared to be the main matter which he preached? The answer must be, 'No! His thinking and his preaching were not unbalanced. To him the preaching of the Cross was central, and because it was central, it was indispensable to the true nature of the gospel he called "the gospel of God"; "the gospel of Christ"; and "my gospel"'.

We know that many who heard his preaching opposed him, either bitterly, or scornfully, or cruelly, to the point of seeking his death. He wrote to the church at Philippi:

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Phil. 3:18–19).

Without pausing here to explain his meaning, we see that many refused to accept his preaching of the Cross, and for reasons which are still alive today. We have already seen some of these reasons in I Corinthians 1:22–25, where the preaching of the Cross is a scandal to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek. For the moment we need not go into them, except to say that a crucified person in Israel was a curse as long as his body hung on the cross, and the idea of calling him 'Saviour' was abhorrent. For the Greek philosopher the idea of a man—crucified for crime—being the Son of God and the Saviour of the world was ridiculous, worthy not even of a hearing.

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THE EVERLASTING NATURE OF THE CROSS

Paul was not alone in making the Cross central. Other New Testament writers had the same view. The Apostles preached the gospel of the Cross, as did all apostolic proclaimers. The writer of the Book of the Revelation—known as St. John the Divine—gives us the picture of Christ crucified and risen, as that of a Lamb-as-it-were-who-had-been-slain. This Lamb is seen in Chapter 5: as one who bears the marks of the crucifixion he had undergone, and yet who is forever alive and ruling all creation. The term ‘Lamb’ often appears in Revelation, and in 13:8 there is named a book which is ‘the book of life of the Lamb’. The names of those redeemed are written in this book. It existed ‘before the foundation of the world’. One possible translation is ‘the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world’. What we can be sure of was that the one we call ‘Christ’ was intended, in God’s plan, to be for ever the Lamb of God, who by his crucifixion had taken away the sins of the world.

The early church saw Jesus as Lord over creation, over the nations, *and this because of his crucifixion*, to say nothing of *his resurrection*, for resurrection was the sign of his lordship over death, and so over sin and the powers of darkness. It can be shown from the Apostolic writings that the working power of the Cross can be known—and must be known—in the daily life of the believer in Christ. It is not a power which was once effective in the life of the person at his conversion, but which goes on being effective every day of his life here on earth.

NO CROSS: NO CHRIST

Christ died to save men and women from the penalty, pollution and power of sin. He also died to save them, ultimately, from the very presence of sin. He died to save them from the powers of darkness, from the judgment of the law and so from the wrath of God—ultimate judgment. He died to save them from fleshly living, and worship of idols. If then they are living in sin, and so are under the power of evil—are living in fear of death and judgment—then they have not come under the power of Christ crucified. The death and resurrection of this Saviour and Lord has not yet liberated the person from these things. Those who are liberated live in love, joy and peace, no matter what the forces are that oppose him. If, then, a person shows no evidence of being liberated, then he/she cannot be knowing Christ crucified.

What makes the matter difficult to assess is that there are many church people who seem to understand Christian doctrine and practice, and seek to live according to that knowledge, because it is what people do in their peer group. Having been brought up in their church they assume they are Christians, yet when the tests of knowing Christ crucified are applied it seems apparent that they do not live in Christ. They may know the form of the doctrine of the Cross, yet they do not live in the freedom-reality of the Cross. The statement, ‘No Cross: No Christ’ would appal them, but they may be trying to live according to a doctrine or a proposition, and not according to the living, indwelling Person of Christ.

In order to understand the work and word of the Cross we will take one example, that of the tax gatherer who was a sinner but of whom Christ said, ‘He went down to his house justified’. We take this example because to believe in Christ’s work of the Cross is to be justified by that faith. The following is the text of Jesus’ words:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke 18:9-14).

Jesus was trying to show that the Pharisees 'who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others' had, in fact, missed the heart of the true faith. They were sure they were good people. We can likewise think this of ourselves. The tax gatherer was a Jew who had become what we call 'filthy rich', for he had worked for the occupation troops, the Romans, and had profited from taxing his fellow countrymen, often defrauding them. We will take it that he so loved riches that he was prepared to do anything to get money. This certainly could equally be said of many of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Jesus told the scribes that they 'devour widow's houses', and it seems the Pharisees could be included in this judgment.

This rich tax gatherer had come under condemnation of his own conscience. He had gone to the temple in a state of full repentance. It does not take much to understand his problem. He had accumulated guilt over a number of years. Something had happened to show him his terrible state. If he were not an excommunicated person then he could have gone with sacrifices and offered them for his sins, but being as a sinner or a Gentile, he could only stand in the court of sinners, without recourse to the altar. The Pharisee assumed he was a righteous man and stood in the court of worship, congratulating himself. It is said that he prayed thus *with himself*. He despised the tax gatherer for being a sinner, yet his own heart held no sense of sin.

The tax gatherer was in a fearful state. He beat his breast, and this, when done sincerely, was a thing fearsome to behold. He was overwrought with the sinfulness of his sin. He cried out for mercy, and his words were, 'Lord! Be propitious to me, a sinner!' This gives us a clue: he required propitiation for his sins. He was addressing God as one Who provided propitiation where two things were present: (i) genuine repentance—that extraordinary change of mind in regard to one's own sins, and God's great grace; and (ii) the faith that God would somehow—without a temple sacrifice—work the propitiation which brought redemption from sin's dreadful guilt.

This takes us back to the sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel. Abel offered his sacrifice by faith—faith in a propitiation-making God—and Cain did not offer by faith. His faith was in himself and his act, whereas Abel's was in God's act. Abel was justified: Cain went on to further anger, and, finally, the murder of his justified brother. Abel's faith was in the Cross, had he known it. The tax gatherer's basis for justification was also in Christ's self-sacrifice—had he known it.

The Pharisee who trusted in himself that he was righteous went down to his house not acknowledging himself as a sinner. He was loveless. The tax gatherer went down to his house justified, filled with relief and love for God. This is an important matter.

THE CROSS IS THE MATTER OF PROPITIATION OUT OF LOVE

In I John 4:9–10 the writer says, ‘In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation [propitiation] for our sins.’ A little later he adds, ‘We love because he first loved us’. He means that the result of Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice is that we love God and we love all humans. Love has come to us in Christ. Love would have come to the tax gatherer, but not to the Pharisee. The first person was in Christ; the second in himself and not in God. He was loveless: he despised others.

Today let us test ourselves as to whether we are in Christ. Are we as the tax gatherer before conviction of his sin, that is, those who seek something of this world—even something quite religious—to be our main aim? It could be money, or power or position: it could be anything which has become an idol. If we are like that then we are have not been crucified with Christ—we are yet on our own. On the other hand, if we are self-righteous and despise others, then we are self-righteous and without Christ, in spite of the fact that we belong to the Christian constituency, and perhaps what we call ‘Bible-believing people’. The test is whether we know the matters of the Cross but lack the true relationship with Christ. We may have a Christless Cross, as also we may have a Crossless Christ. We have to look at these matters.

A simple test is whether or not we love people. We do not mean ‘get along with people’, that is ‘make do with them’. Do we have a set of deep relationships? Are our churches places of mutual love and trust, so that our lives are lived in love, such love as we have seen was in the early church, manifesting itself in unity and in care for the poor and needy? If our churches are true families, without feud, or fight, or power struggle, then the power of the Cross is in our midst.

Further, do we have a passion for Christ, a deep compassion for the lost of this world and a genuine love for all God’s people? Do we feel for those who are in sin and without Christ, and do we yearn to show them the one, true sacrifice which can liberate them from the guilts, fears and dreads which are theirs? We cannot have a Cross but not have Christ; nor can we claim to know Christ but yet not live the life of the Cross, with its freedom of forgiveness, justification and love.

What, then, about ‘always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies’? This would mean we are so identified with Christ’s death that daily we show it to the world by our demeanour, by taking the persecution and suffering which goes from being one with him in his death. That is, we take the brunt of being disliked, hated and persecuted, as he was in the very hour of his death. We see no hope for mankind apart from that death. Is that how it is with us? Do we determine to know nothing but ‘Christ and him crucified’, which is the scandal to the Jew and foolishness to the intellectual? Are we willing to take the ignominy and the shame? Has, in fact, the gospel really penetrated to our hearts and gripped us so that we cannot but proclaim it? We repeat: ‘No Cross, No Christ’.

**CONCLUSION FROM HISTORICAL REALITY—
NO CHRIST: THEN NOTHING!**

Had there been no Cross,
then there had been nothing in the world today which would be of any worth.
There would be no Christ such as the one who has accomplished all things,
accomplished so much even to the eyes of those without faith. History shows his effects.

There would have been no resurrection if this one had evaded the Cross,
for God would not have raised him. No Cross: no resurrection.
There would have been no point even if He had raised him without the Cross.
No Cross: no forgiveness. No forgiveness: no eternal life.
There would have been no forgiveness in the world that would be of any account.
So no Cross: no freedom of conscience, and so no true relationships.
Nor would there have been justification.
Nor total cleansing of the impure mind and spirit, and freedom from moral pollution.

There would have been no remedy for human guilt
and the impending judgment on all human sin and failure.
No Cross: only the load of guilt, judgment and moral pollution to be borne for ever.

There would have been no entrance into the Presence of the God,
and the becoming sons of Him as our Father.

There would have been no Shepherd to walk with us in life,
and in the valley of the shadow of death, and to raise us from death.

There would have been no Head of the Church, no Bridegroom of the Bride, and thus no bride.
No Cross: no Bride, for she needed him give himself up for her.
Had there been a Bride she would never have had the sign and proof of His love:
so she would remain loveless.

There would have been no hope of glory, firstly Christ for us, and then in us, and then with us.
No Cross: no ascension; no Spirit; no indwelling Father, Son or Spirit.

There would have been no pure worship. Romans 12:1–2 springs from the ‘mercies of God’.
No Cross: no motivation to pure worship. No offering up of spiritual sacrifices
(I Peter 2:4–5; Heb. 13:15).

There would have been no impact in history on the various rising cultures,
some too dreadful to name, all having fearful features.
No Cross: no liberation from Man’s enemies anywhere.

There would have been no defeat of Satan and no victory over him and all his evil hosts.
No Cross: no true Kingdom of God, triumphant over all the kingdom of darkness.
No Cross: no putting down of all enemies and ultimately destroying them.

History has taught us that Christ has so many times tamed the cruellest of cultures,
defeated the barbarians,
gentled down the fierce hordes until they come under the reign of Christ and His love.
No Cross: no person or nation would have been reconciled to God.

We would have been left in our sins, our guilt, our terror, our personal loneliness,
and to the mercy of the many gods, and the tyranny of many cultures—
even more than we are today.