

The Cross and Service

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Introduction

Finally going to consider the Cross and its implication for our service. Our responsibility as a fellowship and as individuals. What do we stand for? What do we preach? To which truths should we be witnessing? What are we in business for? What is our message?

The Message which we preach

Bible leaves us in no doubt about message to which we are committed. Paul's message: **Christ and him crucified** (1 Corinthians 2:4). That is the tenor of the whole New Testament. **I delivered as of first importance that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day** (1 Corinthians 15:3). This is what Jesus Himself came said He came to do and this is what His apostles preached (Mark 10:45).

Not have to preach politics or international situation or social service with religious veneer. Of course message influences how we think and behave about these things. But heart and core is Christ, God Man, died for sins to bring us back to God. And He is alive forevermore, mighty to save. In the story of the Christian church, the times when church has been revived and at its most vigorous and most effective – these were the times when this message was at the heart. During the Protestant Reformation, Luther declared “We preach Him always”. John Wesley, in 18th Century Revival, used to say, “I went into such and such a town and I offered the Christ”. And Charles Wesley wrote:

*“Tis all my business here below
To cry ‘Behold the Lamb’.”*

Some men have been in the ministry for years before revolutionized own lives, and therefore their ministry. Dr Chalmers learned through bitter experience to give no uncertain sound on great doctrines – utter ruin by sin, deity of Christ, His atoning death, regeneration by the Holy Spirit. For 12 years he had preached the virtues of social life. But it had the weight of a feather on the moral habits of his parishioners. Then Chalmers realized alienation of human heart from God, and started to make the central theme of his preaching reconciliation through free forgiveness via Christ's blood. Told them to make that their unceasing dependence. Then he began to see changes in character and conduct of congregation. Thus he realized that the preacher withholding offer of immediate reconciliation and doctrine of Cross fails to wield any power.

A clear unambiguous statement of Christian truth was never more needed that at present time. Many are totally ignorant, and often within the professing church the vaguest views are held - everybody is right and nobody is wrong, Christianity is all about citizenship and problem solving, Christianity is about getting peace of mind etc.

At the start of 20th Century, William Booth said, “The greatest danger of the coming century is religion without the Holy Spirit, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without regeneration, morality without Gospel, heaven without hell.” Alas that his fears are realized in many places.

The preacher is handling, in the Gospel, God’s own Word - powerful, wonderful, unique. **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved** (Acts 4:12). Warned by Paul against preaching any other Gospel (Galatians 1:8). Only message we should preach is that which tells of Christ’s redeeming grace to lost men and brings men into right relationship with God and brings eternal salvation. This is the only message reaching to depths of human need – peace of conscience, snapping chains of evil, real purpose and full satisfaction in life.

To be entrusted with the Gospel is to be entrusted with tremendous responsibility. Eternal consequences are at stake depending on how people react to this message. There should be an urgency and entreaty and earnestness about us. Great issues of life and death are at stake. God has spoken His last word. Nothing more to reveal and do now He has sent Christ.

Immeasurable joy or immeasurable loss is at stake. Richard Baxter said, “We must preach as if we are never sure to preach again. A dying man to dying men.” We never know when we will preach our last sermon.

In the days of J.C.Ryle it was generally assumed everyone was right and no one was wrong. All were saved, none were lost. There was a dislike of distinct and decided vicars. Bishop Ryle declared “If you want to do good in these times, throw aside indecision and take up a sharply cut doctrinal position. Tell men about Christ’s work of substitution and Justification by Faith; Ruin, Redemption and Regeneration. This is the only teaching God will bless with success. Let those who advocate cold morality show us any English village or district which has been evangelized without dogma. Christianity without doctrine is a powerless thing.” [unclear where this quotation ends]

Method we must use

Not going to go into matters like church meetings, house meetings, and personal witness. But concerned with spiritual methods. How did the apostles preach their message? Paul to the Corinthians, did not come with clever speech, depending on own ability. Not look to brilliant speech, knowledge, ability to tell a good story, parade of scholarship, eloquence, sensationalism, gimmicks, learning. Not dazzle congregation. Come in weakness, fear and trembling. Concern is to preach in demonstration of Spirit and power.

Very same mind as Saviour when on earth, humble and dependent and submissive – even though He was the Lord of Glory. Entire dependence on God. **The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do** (John 5:19). **I can do nothing of myself** (John 5:30). **The words that I speak to you, I do not speak on my own authority** (John 14:10).

So many think God's word depends on big personality, gimmicks, big show, pomp, human learning, sensationalism. God's work must be done in God's way. Many things men can do – entertain, amuse, move people emotionally, indoctrinate, instruct intellectually – but we are concerned with eternal salvation, and people being transformed into the image of Christ – and only God can do that. Only the living God can resurrect spiritually, eternally save, inwardly transform. It is God who gives the increase.

Therefore the only true method of Christian service is reliance on the Holy Spirit – His authority and power. Need to wait on God, that He would come down and touch lives. If men in ministry and people in pews really believed that, their devotional life would be so different, the prayer meeting would be too.

Story goes of a preaching convention 150 years ago. Everyone assembled and waiting – but the visiting preacher did not arrive. The minister sent his maid to the house where the visiting preacher was staying, to tell him the people were all there waiting. The girl returned without the preacher, saying “I didn't like to disturb him, he was talking to somebody”. The minister thought that was strange since everyone was gathered in the church, and sent the maid again to insist he came because it was after time. She returned again, “He is definitely talking with someone because as I stood outside his room I heard him say to the other person ‘I will not go to preach if you don't come with me’.” Then the minister realized it would be worth waiting!

Is that what we say when we are about our Christian service - “I will not go unless you come with me”?

Motives by which we are inspired

Why should we preach this? Why should we endure persecution, unpopularity, rejection and the contempt it brings? Why spend and be spent in the Lord's service? Paul knew prison, beatings, dangers of death, starvation, shipwreck, robbers, traitors, weariness, pain, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness (2 Corinthians 11:23ff). How little we know of that in Western Europe in 21st Century. What impelled him and kept him going? **For Christ's love compels us** (2 Corinthians 5:14). Leaves us no option. **He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.** Back to the Cross again. The Cross gives message and also motive.

Paul's motive - I am a debtor. I owe it to others and above all the Lord (Romans 1:14). The Cross reminds me He owed me nothing except banishment from His presence, eternally. I owe Him everything. What He did for me, I could not do for myself. Salvation without money and without price. **The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me** (Galatians 2:20). Up to eyes in debt. In debt to extent we do not realize. Never able to clear selves of debt. Therefore the least I can do is live for Him, and serve Him with all my might. Wholly and solely committed to Him. To live in His will and for His glory, Lord of my life, without reserve.

By New Testament standards it is really unthinkable we should be selfish enough to live for selves. Yet we dare to do it. Even in Christian circles, it has been known for a

really consecrated Christian to become the object of comment or matter of surprise, sometimes criticism.

Geoffrey Bull, Brethren missionary. Fire in Chinese village. Rescued woman, who fought for her life for 10 days, and eventually pulled through. Badly scarred hands and face. Every time she met Bull in the village street afterwards she said “But for you, I should be dead”. Bull said this made him realize the debt he owed to Christ, who gave Himself to save him from everlasting banishment and destruction.

C.T.Studd said, “If Jesus Christ is God and he died for me, no sacrifice I can make is too great for him”.

Also love for fellow men should constrain us. We owe the Gospel to them. Charlie Peace, burglar, forger and double murderer, on his way to the scaffold. Chaplain en route spoke to him of Christ’s power to save. “Do you really believe that? If I believed that I would willingly crawl across England on broken glass to tell men it was true.”

Text I have seen in churches in Warrenpoint, N. Ireland, and Stradbroke, Suffolk – **Necessity is laid upon me. Yes, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel** (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Conclusion

Very imperfectly, looking at greatest story ever – the love of God for sinful men. Fills His Word, the Bible. Effected through His well-beloved Son, who came from heaven to earth, and took our nature upon Himself. Then took on Him our sins and their punishment.

That death has opened to us unimaginable blessings. Taken us out of condemnation, our lives, which were forfeit, have been set free because ransom price is paid. Brought out of far country and brought home and into relationship, whereby we are God’s people and we know Him. But this is only beginning of the story.

New life with new resources and enormous potential because One who died for us now lives in hearts by Holy Spirit. One day return to take us to Himself. All from beginning to end a free gift for those who deserve nothing. Cost, burden, responsibility – all taken by God Himself.

Now it is up to us to know this message personally, for ourselves, then live lives in gratitude and witness to this truth. Cannot do that unless we know the truth in our own experience. Be open to God’s call to spend lives in this service. Added other blessings – given Holy spirit it enable us to speak in His name with power. No option, because of His dying love.