
The Cross And the Church

Those familiar with the New Testament concept that Christ paid for our sins would agree that “the Christ without the cross would be as powerless to save sinners as the cross without the Christ.” However, the good news of the gospel is that Christ, the Anointed One of God, gave His physical life on the cross for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The heart of the story of the Bible is the sacrifice made by the Son of God on the cross for man. The pages of the Old Testament, with its prophecies, and the pages of the New Testament, with its historic reality, drip with the blood of Christ. Henry C. Thiessen calculated that the story of the last three days of Jesus’ life take up about one-fifth of the Gospels. If the three and one-half years of Jesus’ public ministry had been treated in as great detail as His death, the Gospels would comprise a book 8,400 pages long.¹

¹Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), 313.

R. A. Torrey estimated that 1 out of every 53 verses in the New Testament makes a specific reference to Christ's death.² Christianity is the only religion in the world that has as its center the offering of a divine sacrifice for sin and the resurrection of that sacrifice from the dead.

In a world of sin and sinners, of guilt and godlessness, of separation and suffering, the cross is *God's power for salvation*; it is the divine solution for the world's ultimate problem. He is the propitiation for our sins—that is, the One who pays for the wrong we have done and makes things right for us. It is written: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18); "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

Among our spiritual discord, separation from God, and disunity with God, the cross is *God's instrument of peace and reconciliation*. Paul wrote, "And through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross . . ." (Colossians 1:20). Ephesians 2:14–16 says, "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall . . . and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity."

Where spiritual hunger and poverty abound, *God provides full redemption*. The riches of righteousness

²R. A. Torrey, *What the Bible Teaches* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1898), 144.

are freely given at the foot of the cross. Paul said, "But we preach Christ crucified . . ." (1 Corinthians 1:23). He further said that the crucified Christ "became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Without question, the Holy Spirit shines a light on the cross of Christ as the centerpiece, the central message of the Bible.

Because the cross is mixed together with all other truths regarding redemption, one would expect the church to flow from the cross as a stream from a spring, as healing rays from the sun. A careful reading of the New Testament confirms that this is the case. There cannot be a Christianity without Christ and His church; logical thinking tells us that there cannot be a living body without a head. The striking feature of the New Testament is its message that the cross and the church are intimately joined together, combined into one plan, as God's gift of grace to lost humanity. Out of all the nations of the earth, God calls forth by the cross a new family—one body in Christ—to be His chosen people.

Let us pursue this thought further: How is the church connected to the cross? What relationship do the cross and the church have to each other? What does the cross do for the church?

CREATED BY IT

First, the cross creates the church. The church emerges through the redemption of sinners. If there were no cross, there could be no church.

When a person responds in obedient faith to Christ as his Savior and the Son of God, he is washed from

his sins in Christ's blood (Acts 22:16). Through that washing, he is added to the community of the redeemed, a society of the saved that the New Testament calls "the church." For this reason, Paul could speak of Jesus' purchasing the church with His blood. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Clearly, Jesus died on the cross for the church. Paul said, "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25b). The purpose of the death of Jesus was to provide a "called-out" people who would live in the world in fellowship with Christ and give themselves to His spiritual work. Paul told Titus that Jesus "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14).

After a gospel meeting in southern Arkansas, a lady came to the preacher with an unusual, touching story. She told of something which had occurred when she was four years old, living in Dallas, Texas. At that time her family lived near a busy highway, and their yard provided little space for children to play outside. One evening, she and several of the neighborhood children were playing ball in the yard. The ball bounced away from her and rolled into the highway. Without thinking, she ran after it. As she reached down to pick it up, she froze in horror at the sight of a big truck coming down the highway. Her brother, who was nine years old at the time, had seen her run into the highway. He had also seen the truck. Like a flash, he ran out behind her, hoping to bring

her back to safety. He ran in front of the truck and shoved her out of the way, saving her from certain death at the risk of his own young life. That brief moment was enough time for the boy to save his little sister, but not enough time for him to save himself. The truck smashed into him, killing him instantly.

The lady said she does not remember much about the details of the tragedy, but she does recall how her brother's lifeless body was lifted from the street and placed on the porch of their house until an ambulance could come and carry it away. She said with deep meaning and an appreciation too special for words, "My brother died for me." She is a faithful Christian, but the opportunity for her life and service in the church today was created by the sacrifice of her brother many years ago.

In a similar but far deeper way, the church receives life from the sacrifice of Jesus. His death is not only an opportunity for us to enter life, but the source of continued life; His death is our atoning sacrifice, our means of forgiveness for past sins. Jesus came into this world, walked among us as the God-Man, and by His death purchased for Himself "a people for God's own possession" (1 Peter 2:9). The church is not made of brick and mortar; it is a people bought by blood.

We respond to Christ's sacrifice in three ways: First, we embrace the cross by *appreciating* what Christ did. Gratefully, the redeemed rejoice over Christ's gift of grace! Christ was rich with heavenly glory; yet for our sakes He became poor by leaving heaven and becoming man, that we through His poverty might be made spiritually rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Second, we must react by *accepting* the benefits of His death. True appreciation leads to proper acceptance. By faith and obedience to Christ, we take the benefits of His death into our lives (Romans 6:1–4). He died for all (Hebrews 2:9), but only those who obey Him receive the benefits of His death (Hebrews 5:8, 9). Third, we should respond to His sacrifice with *abounding service* (1 Corinthians 15:58). We belong to Christ from head to foot—body, soul, and spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Accordingly, our business in this world now is that of rendering the service He designs, directs, and delights in.

CLEANSED BY IT

Second, the cross continually cleanses the church. Its purifying power daily flows to and through God's people. As surely as the blood of our physical bodies circulates through us, sustaining and purging us, the precious blood of Jesus courses through His people with life-sustaining strength.

We not only need *to be saved*, but we also need *to be kept saved*. The church is increased each time a sinner, through his obedience to the gospel of Christ, is washed in His blood and, by divine grace, placed in Christ. The Christian is cleansed continually with the blood as he daily walks in the light. John wrote, "But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). John put "cleanses" in the present active tense in the Greek language, indicating a constant, continual, present-fact washing.

A Christian is not a perfect person, though he seeks to sin less and to grow in Christ each day. *He*

is not faultless, but he should be blameless. The presence of sin in the sinner's life necessitates salvation through the blood of Christ, and sin in the saint's life necessitates that he or she be kept saved by the blood of Christ. We will never outgrow our need for forgiveness in this world.

It is interesting to watch a child learn to ride his bicycle. He faces two primary problems in acquiring this new skill: getting the bicycle up and keeping it up. Salvation may be viewed as involving two steps even as learning to ride a bicycle does: The sinner must first *get right* with God, and then he must *stay right* with God. Getting right is necessary, but it is only the beginning. The same problem which made him a sinner in the first place—the stain of sin in his life—is the problem which could condemn him after he becomes a Christian if he is not continually cleansed (Acts 8:22). If he needed saving from his sins before becoming a Christian, will he not need saving from any sins he commits after he becomes a Christian?

The Christian remains saved as long as he “walks in the light.” According to John the apostle, walking in the light involves two spiritual character traits. It begins with *trusting Jesus for salvation*: “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Obviously, we cannot earn salvation (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Jesus said that if we will respond to Him in faith and obedience, He will save us. We must trust Him to do what He has said He will do. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Walking in the light also requires *honestly doing His will*. John wrote, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments . . .” (1 John 5:3); “The

one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected" (1 John 2:4, 5a). Walking in the light means admitting our sinfulness (1 John 1:8, 10), acknowledging our sins to God (1 John 1:9), and correcting our sins in harmony with our ability (1 John 2:29). It means walking as He walked (1 John 2:6) and sincerely following the inspired revelation from God, the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16).

COMPELLED BY IT

Third, the cross compels and activates the church. It implants the spiritual motivation into the heart of the church to be the persons Christ wants us to be and to do the work He wants us to do.

Christians need continual cleansing as well as personal power. Christianity provides many noble motivations; the grace of God is the highest and most permanent. The cross controls the lives of Christians. Jesus said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32). Paul wrote, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

The cross *fills* Christians with greater love for God and for each other. John wrote, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As Christians meditate daily upon His love for His people, they are drawn to love Him more deeply. John further said, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life

for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Any review of Jesus' life produces new and stirring pictures of the depth and steadfastness of His love. Thinking about these images gives Christians a similar love for Jesus and for each other: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The cross *fixes* in Christians a hatred and disdain for sin. Two powerful testimonials to the evil and devastation of sin are the cross of Calvary and the bottomless pit of eternal destruction. No one who understands the reason for the cross and the necessity of hell can argue that sinning has any merits. The child of God cannot forget that his redemption was bought by the painful death of God's Son on a cross outside of Jerusalem. God Almighty could provide atonement (payment) for sin only by the sacrifice of His Son. This costly event should compel every sensible person to abhor sin and shun it.

The cross *forces* Christians to give themselves completely to Christ's mission. It provides both the reason and the strength for Christians to serve God and help other people. Paul wrote, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (Romans 1:14). He also said, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). No Christian is more fully motivated to do Christ's work than the one who understands and appreciates what God did for him at the cross.

The church of Christ carefully keeps the commandments of her Lord. She does His wishes and fulfils His plans, but she does not find the obedient life burdensome because of the constraining force of love and the inward inspiration of His grace. "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Keep in mind what Christ has done for you, remembering daily the sacrifice He made for you. This careful thinking about His gift of salvation can change you day by day into His image, driving you to do labors of love in His kingdom of grace.

CONCLUSION

By God's design, the church and the cross are tied together. The church is created, cleansed, and compelled by the cross.

As Jesus suffered upon the cross, two of the mocking questions hurled at Him from the lawless crowd below were "Why doesn't He save Himself?" and "Why doesn't God save Him?" (See Matthew 27:39–43.) Little did the crowd realize that they were striking at the very foundation of God's mission. If Jesus had saved Himself, or if God had delivered Him from His death on the cross, it would have been impossible for the church to live; for the church is composed of people who are forgiven of their past sins by the cross and are daily cleansed and purified by the cross. Furthermore, without the cross, the church would be without inner drive in her ongoing life, since the church is compelled by the cross to be God's people and to do God's work in God's way.

If you are outside of the church of Christ, hasten

to enter it, because in entering the church, you receive all the benefits of the cross. The church is nothing more than the body of people who have been redeemed by Christ's blood and are living as God's children.

Each person is surrounded in this world by God's generous gifts. He provides air for us to breathe, water for us to drink, land for us to live on, family relationships for us to enjoy, and countless other benefits. One would be at a loss to name all the kindnesses of God. Without a doubt, the supreme expression of His grace is the salvation He gives us through Christ. It involves the greatest cost to God, and it pays the highest dividends for those sinners who receive it.

Many have seen the gracious hand of God in the physical blessings He has given to them, but they have not received His salvation. Is this true of you? Through belief in Christ (Romans 10:10), repentance of sin (Acts 11:18), confession of Christ as God's Son (Romans 10:10), and baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:27), you may enter Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:13), the place of grace, and receive His eternal life. Paul said, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" (Romans 6:3); "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses [sins], according to the riches of His grace which He lavished [gave generously] on us" (Ephesians 1:7, 8a).

Jesus, through His cross, invites you to the forgiveness and life that creates His body, the church. Will you accept His invitation?

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 264)

1. What is the heart of the story of the Bible?
2. What does Christianity have at its center that no other religion has?
3. Explain why there cannot be a churchless Christianity.
4. What three things does the cross do for the church?
5. Many have seen the gracious hand of God in physical blessings but have not received His gift of salvation. How can you enter the body of Christ?
6. Jesus, through His cross, invites you to have what two blessings?
7. The body of Jesus is created when those who come to Him receive forgiveness and life. What is this body called?

WORD HELPS

head of the church—Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

reconciliation—bringing back together; mending a broken relationship. We are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

sanctification—being “set apart” for God’s special purpose.