

have taken the final step out of the moral world. We have exited from it only in our heads, but not in our reality. God is still sovereign, and he still sustains the moral fabric of human life. The law of God is written on the human hearts, and our consciences indict us. We are caught up in God's moral universe. We cannot escape from it. Whatever we think in our heads, we remain moral beings.

But now let us look at the other side of the subject: preaching the cross in the modern world.

When you look at what is said on the cross in the NT, you can put all of those verses into one or two categories. You have in one category simply the statement of the *fact* of Christ dying. In the other category, you have all the other categories that *explain* the death he died. *The first category* includes the following texts: Mark 10:45; John 10:15; John 15:14,15; Romans 5:8; 1 Thes. 5; 1 Pet. 3:18. It was for the many, for the sheep, for his friends, for the ungodly, for the unrighteous, and for us that he died. Even in these passages which explain a little more than just stating the fact, it is hard to miss the notes of uniqueness in the substitution that is spoken of. In his death, he did for us what he did not do even in his life. It is true that we could say that he lived for us, that he hungered and thirsted for us, that he was weary for us, and tempted for us. And yet, the NT offers for us to not put the accent or stress at that point; rather, it is at the point of his death. It falls on the fact that in his death, he was doing what could not be done any other way – restoring fellowship with God.

The second category interpret the first and takes us further in our understanding. They say that he died for sin, to spare us from God's wrath, to deliver us from sin. To say that someone is suffering for a crime, he or she is bearing the consequences and penalty for the crime. If the apostles meant something else, they would have told us. Jesus said, "This is my blood which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 2:2). **There was no gospel in the early church and there is no gospel today which can be summed up in any other way than to say that God forgives us because Christ died for us.**

And God forgives our sins because Christ bore them in our place, and he could not bear our sins without dying for them. It was our death that he died in our place, for the love of God was paying the price that the holiness of God required. The Father and the Son was united in saving lost, condemned sinners. To speak of the cross as cosmic child abuse is an awful insult to God, and it is derogatory to what he did. Christ himself paid our debt.

Let me conclude by putting these two sides beside each other. **Our task today is to tell people who no longer understand what sin is, no longer have the categories for understanding it, who no longer think they are sinful, who no longer in their heads inhabit a moral universe that Jesus Christ died for something they believe they are not guilty of.**

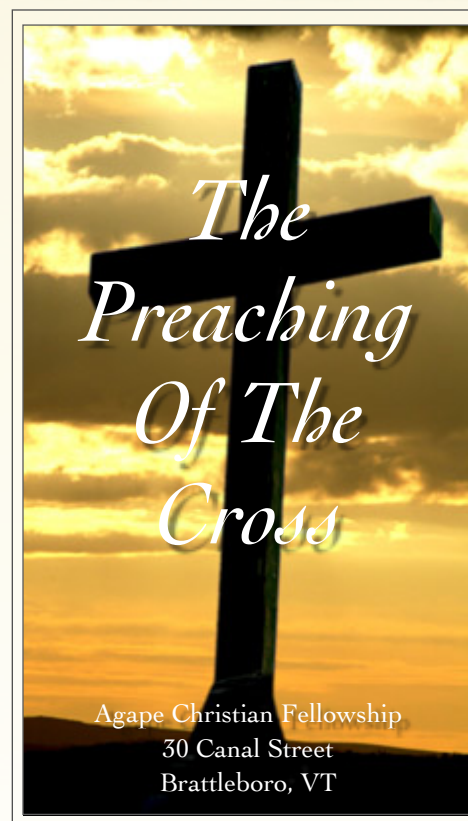
Let me make one simple point: *the Bible does not begin with John 3:16. It begins with Genesis 1:1.* What we see between Genesis 1:1 and John 3:16 is the patience of God, bit by bit, stone by stone, an edifice of understanding that corresponds to what is there – a worldview to understand life. Only when the last stone was in place, in the fullness of time, (Galatians 4:4) then God sent his Son. This is a message which is anchored in truths, the whole of which comprises which embraces the whole of life and the whole of reality.

By the time we come to John 3, what we have established is **God's enduring character** of holiness, a moral universe, a distinction between good and evil. This holiness of God stands outside of us, over against us. We also **know something about the person of Christ,** the Incarnate, second person of the Godhead, taking upon our flesh, bone of our bone, without diminishing his deity. We **know something about ourselves,** being made in the image of God, corrupted by sin, sightless and willfully so. When we come to John 3:16 and think about Christ and his death, paying the penalty for our corruption, this message of the cross makes connections of all other things *without which the message of the cross is incomprehensible.*

Our question to our postmodern neighbors is this: which of these points that you understand. Let's talk. Which of these you cannot accept? Tell me why. This slow, remedial, anticipatory work doesn't work for many. We want the evident successes, the sale, and we want it now. Between Genesis 1 and John 3, there is the long, patient work of God in preparation so that when Christ comes in the fullness of time, people can understand this magnificent work of God.

AGAPE

PULPIT SERIES



The Preaching of the Cross

Part I

The Foolishness of the Cross

2 Corinthians 5

Rev. Michael Gantt

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit, the truth of God. They are foolishness to him. But what we need to consider is that this spiritual blindness is given cultural confirmation today, making this blindness more stubborn and more resistant the gospel. We might be wise to take note of the ways in which Paul connects these things in Ephesians 2. In the first two verses, it speaks to a trilogy of corruption: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Paul speaks of the children of disobedience who walk according the course of this world (the culture in its fallenness), and behind it is the spirit of disobedience. This evil power imprisons us within our fallenness partly through the confirmation our culture gives to us. We need to be redeemed, not only from our own sin, but also from walking according to the course of this world. This double redemption releases from the bondage of evil which is held through fallen human nature and fallen human culture. **It has occurred to me in recent days that many of us in the church have been redeemed from our fallenness, but are still walking “according to the course of this world” and in that simple truth we find the primary reason we so often fail to enjoy the abundance of life Christ promised. In other words, many have been set free from the bonds of sinfulness, but continue to follow the course of the culture - and are crippled in their walk toward spiritual victory.**

Paul’s address on Mars Hill in Acts 17 was probably much longer than what is recorded in Acts, but Luke gives us the main points. What he was doing was engaging the worldview of its time, deconstructing it, and asserting a Christian worldview. How to think about God, ourselves, creation, what does God want, etc. Only when he breaks down the prevailing worldviews and places the Christian worldview does he hint that something seriously has gone wrong with human life. And only then do we hear about the coming judgment and about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So Paul engaged the reigning worldviews of his time, and he did it for the very reasons seen in Ephesians 2. ***I want to think with you why it is that postmodernists find the death of Christ so incomprehensible. I want to explore in our postmodern context the disintegration of the modern world that makes the biblical explanation so hard to grasp. Secondly, I want to think with you the way the NT presents the cross to us. Finally, I want to put these two things together.***

First, **the breakdown in our moral world.** Today, there are at least four major markers, or signposts that hasten people out of the moral world that we have

inhabited in the West for a long time. Once people follow these signposts, they find they are exiting a moral world. Once we have exited the moral world in our minds, ***the character of God and the moral world become simply incomprehensible.***

The first shift from ***thinking about virtue to thinking about values.*** Virtues are the aspects of the good which are enduringly right in all places and in all times. The use the word virtue very much, but it does speak about the moral perfection and excellency of God’s character. These things which are enduringly right because the character of God never changes. As a society, we have a stake in how everybody behaves; therefore, we have always put a premium on good character. We have prized it. **Good character results from the internalizing of the virtues so that they become somewhat habitual.** In the 19th century when people wrote a job reference, they were mostly character references, and people carried them in their pocket and read them with some satisfaction. Today, rarely do you have a “character reference.” Today in our competitive, globalized, bottom-line driven world, it is **competence** that matters much more than character. Character is nice, *but it does not make much money.* Besides, who is to say what is right and what is wrong? So one person’s internalized virtues might be entirely different from another’s, so how can we speak to one another? So we move from talking from virtues to talking about values.

The second signpost is the shift from ***thinking about character to thinking about personality.*** When people talk in terms of virtues, they speak in terms of character; when people talk in terms of values, they speak in terms of personality. In the 20th century, there was the rise of the fascination of personality, how we present ourselves to people, staging our character for people to see. *It is how you appear;* hence, all the talk and literature to convey a sense of power, where you sit in a room if you want to dominate, etc. God wants to judge the heart, but we think that the outer appearance is what is important. Success or at least the appearance of success is everything; character is not. Today, people engage in selling themselves. Personality is a marketable commodity; character is not. You just have to be likable and believable, and you can make a fortune. Once the cameras on television are turned off, you can be a scoundrel. Appearance is so often about performance. In the old modern world, people talked about self-restraint and sacrifice for moral reasons. We don’t know that anymore. For us, it is self-realization and self-promotion. So it is that we have case after case people who have “puffed” their resumes and made themselves look good but also falsified what they have done. In

the modern world, appearance is everything, so lying has become the coin of the economy. 77 percent of Americans believe they have been lied to by politicians. The art of lying has been taken to such a level of proficiency that we do not know what is true and what is not. All of this is a symptom of what has happened to us, and we have shifted from virtue and character to values and personality.

Thirdly, we have moved from ***thinking about nature to thinking about self.*** For centuries in the West, we have talked about the human nature. We have talked about being made in the image of God, and the point that was being made was the human nature is what distinguishes us from human animals, and also we have a common possession among human beings in that we are human because we have a human nature. What is common to us all is more basic than the surface characteristics which distinguishes us from one another (i.e. race, possessions, social standing, ethnicity). Everywhere human nature is under attack. It is insulting because it leaves the impression that I am just like everybody else, and I am not unique. Therefore, we have moved from what we have in common from one another to thinking what is distinctive and unique about me. The focus is now on the self. My own personal biography, ways of thinking, and education all come together to form feelings, perceptions, and insights which are in combination unique to me. This is my self. This is the message our schools have given to our children since the 1960s. Our private values, private meanings, private place to stand. These values must be respected, and each person must have the liberty to express them, or else we will have emotional wrecks on our hands. Indeed, there is widespread public support and government funding to address these issues. The common perception is that all of this comes down the perception that our children are lacking self-esteem, resulting to anti-social behavior, violence, and dysfunctional lives. We have thus moved out of the modern world into the therapeutic world.

Finally, there is the shift from ***thinking about guilt to thinking about shame.*** This is the fourth and final signpost. I know we use these words interchangeably, but today they are being distinguished. Guilt is understood vertically, in line with the character of God, His Law, and His Word. Shame by contrast is what lines up our action horizontally to someone else. ***Shame is what I feel when somebody sees me doing something I did not want them to see or hear.***

Psychologists say that shame is a crippling emotion from which we must be liberated; therefore, we must become entirely shameless. When this happens, we