

“The Cross Alone”

Galatians 6:12-16

October 4, 2009

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, once made this declaration: "The cross alone is our theology."¹ That is a short but powerful declaration. "The cross alone is our theology." The cross tells us all that we really need to know about God.

Think about the four Gospels writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What event do all of their narratives lead up to and concentrate on? The cross. We're told far more about Jesus' death than we are about his birth. We're told more about the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry than any other single period in his entire life. The writers of the Gospels shape their narratives so that we have to think about the cross. "The cross alone is our theology."

Or think of Paul's pithy statement in Galatians 6:14: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

At the heart of the Christian faith stands the cross. The cross must cast its shadow over all of our thinking as Christians. As we think about who God is—as we ponder God's purpose for this world—as we try to discern God's working in our own lives, we must allow Jesus' crucifixion to mold our thoughts. "The cross alone is our theology."

Sin

What does the cross say about sin? Sin today is not a popular subject. It's a word that our modern culture seems to go to great pains to avoid. When was the last time you heard the word *sin* used on TV or on the radio when it was not immediately dismissed as nothing but a hopelessly old-fashioned idea? We, twenty-first century Americans, are quick to talk about how we have been treated unjustly. With hardly any hesitation we'll explain the mitigating circumstances that lie behind our behavior. We seem to effortlessly produce an endless list of excuses and rationalizations and justifications. But we are extremely hesitant to face up to our own responsibility for our actions.

But the cross tells us what God thinks about sin. So seriously does God take our decisions to disobey him that he sent his Son to earth to die on the cross for the punishment of our sins. Jesus hung for hours upon the cross enduring the agony of that cruel execution for a reason. That reason was sin. Sin cannot just be cleverly excused and then brushed aside. Sin is a reality that has to be dealt with. That's what God says through the cross.

So take into consideration the way that you were raised and the evil things that people did to you. Don't deny any of that. That is a part of human experience. But isn't it also true that you and I make deliberate decisions to do what we know is wrong? God says that our disobedience is not something that we can lightly dismiss. The cross tells us how serious sin is. "The cross alone is our theology."

Love

The cross tells about sin, but it also tells us about love. Eradicating the guilt that comes from sin required an extraordinary price to be paid. Jesus was nailed to a cross and left hanging there in order to die. It was an extraordinary price! But the good news is that God decided to pay that price. God sent his only Son to earth for the express purpose of dying on the cross for you and me. Isn't that astounding?

¹ Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1994), 75.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was at one time thinking about his future and how he would be crucified. Those thoughts filled him with fear. But then he asked a question: "Shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?'" Then he answered his own question. "No, it was for this very reason I came" (John 12:27). Jesus went to the cross because he wanted to. He wanted to take the punishment for your sins and mine.

It's in the cross that we see the ugliness of sin. Oh, but it's in the cross that we are also struck by the beauty of God's love. Why would God choose to love those who have ignored him and who have disobeyed him and who have consciously chosen to rebel against his standards and his instructions? Why? Why would God choose to love people like that? Why would God choose to love people like you and me? The good news is that he has made that choice. He didn't have to, but he did choose to love us even though we are completely unworthy of his love.

We see God's love with the utmost clarity at the cross. That's why we can join Martin Luther in saying, "The cross alone is our theology."

Daily Life

Think about it on an everyday level. How do we evaluate the experiences that we have day-in and day-out? When something bad happens or when our expectations are dashed, we're disappointed and sometimes even depressed, aren't we? And how often our disappointment is not just with the circumstances but with God himself. Why did God allow that evil thing to happen? Why didn't God do what he obviously should have? Where was God when I needed him? It's those questions that we need to bring to the cross.

Consider the scene on Good Friday. Jesus is hanging on the cross. The crowd gathered there is expecting something dramatic to happen. If Jesus really is the Son of God, then surely God will intervene and rescue him. Yet as the hours drag on, there is no sign of any dramatic divine intervention. Even Jesus experiences the absence of God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus suffers and finally dies. The people standing there evaluating all that they see taking place draw the obvious conclusion: God is not here.

Just three days later, however, that evaluation of Good Friday is proven false. God raises his Son Jesus from the dead. Then it becomes obvious that God was there on Good Friday after all. He wasn't seen. Nobody could figure out what he was doing. When Jesus was being crucified the only conceivable explanation was that God had abandoned Jesus. But as it turned out, God was there. In fact, God was there not just as a spectator. No, he was an active participant. It was at the cross that he was accomplishing his greatest work. It was at the cross that God was actively paying the price so that you and I could be forgiven for our sins and so that we could come into a living relationship with God himself.²

All of our experiences need to be brought to the cross. We see so many things that depress us and puzzle us and frighten us. Those experiences often lead us to think that God is absent or, at least, he isn't doing very much. But it is the cross that reminds us that our experiences and our reasoning are not a reliable guide. Even when things seem so confusing and contradictory, the cross reminds us that we still have reason to trust in God's unchanging love.

The cross. The cross! "The cross alone is our theology."

Now let us come to the Lord's Table and consider once again the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This communion meditation was delivered at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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² Ibid., 79-80.