

“By the power of the blood”
 Pastor Sam Richards
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 1 Cor. 1:18 and Numbers 21:4-9

The preaching of the cross is *to them that perish* foolishness.

The week has been challenging for sermon preparation. I got about two and a half pages in and hit a brick wall. And that was before Lynne fell and sustained an injury to her left foot, as well as before mechanical failures and unavailability eliminated my back-ups for church jail ministry! So, I went to my stand-by's and pulled up a magnificent sermon by C H Spurgeon (#1611) entitled “The Word of the Cross.” Then I, having lost a day to sermon prep due to family matters, retired Wednesday evening a little concerned as to how this was going to work out. Thursday morning, in the hours preceding breakfast, the Lord spoke to me about the balance, in a normal Christian life, between activism and pietism wherein righteousness is what righteousness does, or where character/being good precedes doing good—**a good tree bears good fruit; therefore make the tree good.** (Matthew 7: 16-20)

Conversion, being born-again, or truly redeemed, really matters; they preceded everything else and determine whether your fruit is good, or evil. It is the Lord who effects this change, who exchanges our nature and conforms us to Himself. **We are His workmanship created in Him for good works.** (Ephesians 2:10)

Under pietism, within the body of Christ, we are shaped, or formed by rebuke, reprove, exhortation and encouragement in love—this is edification. Under activism, we judge, confront, critique and advocate bringing about righteousness and justice—this is outreach and evangelism. When pietism and activism are balanced, in synch with each other, there is an integration of the private and the public spheres which is essential of health, spiritual well-being and our obedience. Exaggerated emphases of either pietism, or activism leads to extremism! We dare not live prayer-less lives. We dare not neglect worship, fellowship and service. And we dare not do any of it without love—for without love, it is all useless, futile and vain. If we are selfish, it is in order to be serviceable—like putting on our oxygen mask first, and then assisting others.

The point of this balance is simple: we are to be centered to be effectual. We are to be centered in Christ so that we may advance His Kingdom, His goals and His rule. While it is Christ working through us, a balanced life is an effectual one: it counts, has meaning and significance, it makes a difference. ***Being alive to God results in such a life!*** God's servant is a provider and supplier; God's bodyguards are protectors and defenders. All Christians are productive workers and active investors—they invest in others to build the kingdom, to create wealth. Their getting is more about giving than it is about possessing, accumulating, or spending . . . more about stewardship than stockpiling. Their opportunism can be a very good thing when harnessed to opportunity because they are living wisely and not passively, or fearfully! And through all of this, in all these ways, Christians are **preaching the gospel of the cross**. They are preaching the power of God unto salvation by living lives empowered by the atoning sacrifice of Christ—or through ***the power of the blood of the Lamb***.

The question arises, naturally enough, whether all of this pre-breakfast reflection on the balanced life, the balance of pietism and activism, has moved me past the brick wall. What are the connections between the **word of the cross** and the **bronze serpent**?

Let's begin here: the people of God are discouraged, languishing on the journey from slavery to servitude—yes, bondage in Egypt to their role as *God's servant people*. Under the leadership of Moses, which they complain about as surely as they complain about the lack of water and food. (It is not that they had no food, but they didn't have the diet they had become accustomed to in Egypt: spices, herbs, onions and leeks—all they had was **manna** (bread of life from heaven? The diet of angels?).) It is also untrue that they had not water, God had provided the necessities: sandals, clothing—both durable—as well as water and food! **Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?** (v. 5) is a bald-faced lie. **But the people spoke against God and Moses.** This provoked God to wrath and judgment: **He sent fiery serpents . . . to kill them.** The point of the judgment was to bring them to repentance!

So we might take the dire circumstances of our world situation. The Roman world in the first century was perhaps even more precarious than our world today! Some of us, especially those of a pessimistic bent, or disposition, are likely discouraged these days. *Things don't look good and that is because they aren't good.* There is a pall of negativity over us—all this news is bad news—public trust in our government and institutions is at a sixty years low. I-phones and cyberspace have cast us into a time of global awareness and round the clock news/commentary—opinion, spin, or propaganda! A former president spoke of hope and change; but progress has brought us increasingly change without hope. Our situation is comparable with that of the people of God in the wilderness—not identical, but comparable. The dread, or sense of impending doom, the death of millions (COVID) and the deaths of tens of thousands to wars, floods, fires and earthquakes—all covered by the Internet in horrific details—swamp our senses and overwhelm us—to the point of empathetic exhaustion. Understandably the cry goes up, “Why is there so much evil? Where's God in all of this?” And, what has happened is that the complaints have overshadowed the things that God has done to address our helpless and hopeless estate. What has God spoken into the discomfiting and alarming state of our world?

He has spoken the good word of the cross. As surely as He commanded Moses to **make for yourself, a bronze serpent and to affix it to a pole** that it might be exalted, lifted up for the smitten to turn to, to see and to be healed.

Wherein is the word of the cross a good word? It is a word that encourages every believer's heart. It declares that **Christ has died!** It further declares that **Christ is risen**—that **He is currently alive, vigorously active and engaged with us and our world.** **God has engaged with the world:**

the atonement is complete!

God is satisfied!

**Therefore peace is proclaimed, the Kingdom has
come with power! Heaven glitters with proof of triumphant
mercies! Upon ten thousand times ten thousands! And the church, with saints
teeming, the kingdom advancing, all gleaming with bright redemption! The night is
as a shattered bowl, upended and its contents are in full flight—even now, even as
we speak! Advance, therefore, you saints, advance**

to certain, full and final victory!
of the Lamb: And they overcame
and by the word of their testimony; and
unto the death. (Rev. 12:11)

You shall overcome through the blood
him by the blood of the Lamb,
they loved not their lives
In [a]Him we

have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of His grace 8 which He [b]lavished on [c]us. In all
wisdom and insight. (Ephesians 1:7-8)

We must

believe in the power of the cross for the conversion of those around us. We say of none, he cannot be saved. ***Because the blood of Jesus is omnipotent!*** There is no place, district, country that is too sunken, nor any class of individuals so far gone as to be beyond the reclamation power of the cross!

If we believe the cross to be **the power of God unto salvation**, it shall be so unto us! Believe in Christ crucified and declare salvation in His name and you will see great, gladsome and glorious things. Leave no room for doubt. Do not allow mistrust to fill your soul with regard to this salvation. The cross has conquered, the cross will conquer and the victory with which it shall be crowned will be commensurate with Christ—to the brim with his bitter agony and suffering. His reward shall track with his sorrows—that is just and that is right.

Trusting in God, we lift the banner of the cross high and, with psalms and songs, we advance with Him. Let us worship with the Lord of hosts in our company and advance boldly! With the Son of the Most High as our vanguard! Take heart! To shout that “the battle belongs to the Lord” is to proclaim both that it is His battle and that the outcome has already been secured in our favor already! We are invincible in His invincibility!

This bronze serpent incident is referenced in the New Testament in two ways: firstly, we have Jesus declaring: **If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto Myself.** (John 12:52) And as this lifting up was accomplished on the cross, the idea of looking unto Jesus on the cross was presented as salvific, as *saving in itself*. Looking upon Jesus on the cross, we live!

Secondly, we have Jesus alluding to the bronze serpent (John 3:14-15) as a foretelling of salvation: **That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.** This saying is trustworthy despite eternal life not being the result of looking on the bronze serpent in Numbers 21. Still, *there was power* placed in the serpent, on that pole, power to save the physical life of those who had been bitten *and were sure to die*.

The power of God to live tracks with the **power of God unto salvation/** and **eternal life** which the sacrifice of Jesus, or, which **the power of God in the shed blood of the Lamb communicated**. This is an extension of the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb—the blood of which was commanded to be painted on the doorpost of the believing homes, It had *the power to deflect* the ravages of the angel of death—who would “passover” that house, sparing all the first born within. The outcomes of looking on the serpent, and the painting of the door post were strikingly alike! A continuation of physical life in each case resulted from, obedience to the Lord’s command: whether paint the doorpost, or look upon the serpent.

However, **The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.** Paul is very clear that there are other gospels—they are an anathema to him! He uses the phrase **wisdom of words** to allude to these other gospels. These false gospels tend to veil the truths of God, competing with revelation as sources of authority.

What is set forth in the gospel of the cross are various objectionable features: penal substitution is one such feature. The laying of the sins of others upon the Savior offends those who believe that justice can only be laid upon the perpetrator, or perpetrator. Some matters are less theological in nature (theological as in quarrels over doctrine, the incarnation, the trinity, the nature of the sacraments and various heresies). Others object to the grim, grisly and bloody manner of Christ's cruel death—this despite inflicting death upon countless sacrificial animals over the centuries! The offense of the Sinless One being counted for all sinners ("the 'just' for the unjust"), a legal offense also exists. So theories are adopted to by-pass, or leave out the objectionable parts and well as to advance "self-salvation" a "high, heroic alternative" to Jesus as Redeemer is set forth!

Viewed spiritually, these philosophies and theories are sheer homage paid to unbelief, which in turn is fed by rejection of revealed truth. "Adapting the truth of God to 'the advance of the age'" is how they typically frame it—we need a scientific gospel for the scientific age. *But if we substitute "philosophy" for 'scientific' what we have is nothing new—historically just another form of gnostic heresy framed in "the wisdom of words," esoteric knowledge operating like a mutating "mind virus."* [For a more detailed explanation, I have appended some End Notes on the intellectual history of Western thought.]

There is "no wisdom of words," no narrative which can explain away the gospel in general, and the gospel of the cross in particular. "Wisdom of words" is a phrase employed by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:17: **For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.** That is, that the cross as **the power of God unto salvation** would be subverted, or submerged in a wash of words (fancy talk, speculation, sophisticated theology, high rhetoric, or poetry even)—so that to **those words, and not the cross, not the sacrifice of Christ in our place on that cross(!)** **would be attributed with the power to save!**

That would be an elevation of opinion, point of view, or speculative prowess (such as Evolution/Darwinism, Marxism, Capitalism, or Psychological Schools—Freudianism, Jungian, Analytical, Gestalt, Frankel, Rogerian psychology; Critical, Gay, or Queer Theory or any other eclectic mix of the same) would "carry the day" as another, or alternate gospel. Veiling the truth of God, the truth of the atonement by Christ's blood, any attempt to prettify, beautify, or even **dignify** the gospel by making it *relevant*, or *adaptable* to the spirit of the age, **any age!!**, is expressly exposed and forbidden.

There is only one gospel, the gospel of the cross. To modify even one of the objectionable features of Christ's great sacrifice is hellish, blasphemous. *Don't even think of trying to explain any such feature away.*

Amen.

End Notes

Now the great thing about the Enlightenment (1685-1815—the long 18th century) is one of two things: either first that it lies so far behind us; or second, that we have actually advanced beyond its dreadful apostasy. Deism, the belief in the existence of a non-interventionist creator god is apostate, Liberalism, the belief in human rights and freedom builds on the illusion of autonomy and Republicanism, that human government should be a republic governed by laws with an emphasis on personal liberty dismisses God, making man the measure of all things—these three chief emphases of the Enlightenment, which “produced modernism: secular theories of psychology and ethics.” As the “scientific studies of the natural phenomena were encouraged”—usually against a backdrop of materialism (and skeptical empiricism)—scientific principles were applied to theological, philosophical and theoretical fields, or disciplines, with a view to man-centered problem solving.” All of this constituted a “new gospel,” “scientism,” a gospel opposed to the Scriptural **word of the cross! Science explains and science interprets, but science does not save—that, in brief was the error of Gnosticism, of the mystery religions** (in the ancient world), **of Mormonism and of Islam** (in our contemporary world).

This “enlightened” expression of modernism now lies nearly two hundred years in the past, but the havoc it created has left so much debris and demolition that we are still on clean-up! *It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the Enlightenment was a massive attempt to explain away God, revelation and Scripture and to install, imperialistically, the age of human reason, permanently in its place.* Religion was held to be obsolete, and its adherents uneducated, irrational and superstitious and ignorant. And the Idealists/Utopians in the mix believed, most eagerly and fervently, that religion (particularly Christianity) would pass away—this despite the role of Christianity in founding the very institutions, of higher learning upon which this intellectual revolution was built!.

The advanced philosophy of the 19th century, with its bullish, optimism and progressivisms (political, economic, social and philosophical) have not proven very enthusiastic about the clean-up! Of course, this is not the first rodeo for those who would radically re-orient society: The Hellenistic Empire which succeeded the Persian,, Assyrian, Babylonian, Chaldean and Egyptian Empires and was followed by the Roman, Italian, French and Spanish Empires all shared the same hubris as marks the German, Soviet and Communist hegemonies of much more recent history. Each culture had its intellectuals and philosophical wannabe’s who typically surrendered their souls to those in power for a place in the sun! Such sober observations lend credibility to the cyclical theories of world history, marked by the rise and fall of empires. It takes some restraint to step back from this storyline and to recognize that God’s over-all plan puts all human striving in the shade! And, particularly, that the offense of revelation (a major emphasis of Scripture) is indelibly present in any, and all these developments.