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THE CROSSLESS CHRIST

By Revd Jonathan Fraiss

Our society is renewing its interest in spiritual things. The name 'Jesus' is heard in circles in which it was once unknown.

FALSE CHRISTS

Christians can be encouraged by this, but we may also be misled. For not all talk of Jesus is healthy. Some things done in his name are unwholesome, even when performed by those who own his name. There are false Christs around; and none is more prevalent than the crossless Christ. This imposter masquerades as the object of true religion, and yet he is a deceiver. His popularity misleads many into the worship of a false God. So the Corinthian error or following a Jesus 'other than the Jesus (Paul) preached' (2 Cor. 11:4) is repeated.

In Mt. 16:23 Jesus responded to Peter's objection to the path of suffering. Our Lord said three things about the desire for a Saviour without a cross. First, Jesus said that such a desire comes from Satan, not God. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said.

SATAN'S STRATEGY

Satan's strategy is not to oppose Jesus as a person. He is too smart to think that he will make many of us stop following Jesus completely. Rather, his aim is to encourage us to forget what Jesus came to do. 'Build a church on Jesus,' he advises church leaders, but not on the cross. You have outgrown that barbaric appendix to real faith.' But the Jesus who came from God bears scars in his hands, side and feet. No matter how sincere the attachment to Jesus, without his death it exchanges Christianity for a satanic counterfeit.

Secondly, Jesus said that such a desire promotes sin, not holiness. 'You are a stumbling-block to me,' said Christ.

A stumbling-block is an occasion for sin. Peter's words tempted Jesus to avoid his messianic calling. Rather than encourage godliness, Peter was inciting rebellion against God. Unwittingly, he rejected the call to put to death our sinful natures, to consider ourselves crucified along with our Saviour, and to live lives of purity in ways that honour him. Such religion without a cross lets us live for ourselves rather than care for others. We ignore or misuse people to promote our own plans. Pride rules and humility is banished. The cost of commitment is minimal and no love for others is demanded. When we have Jesus and bypass his death we promote sin and not holiness, and we are not on God's side at all.

EARTHLY THINGS

Thirdly, Jesus said that such a desire is concerned with the business of the world, not that of heaven, 'you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men,' he said.

The crossless Christ is ultimately the product of this world. Evidence of this is not elusive. Many outside the church respect his ethical standards, his law of love, his care for the oppressed, and the way he gives hope to the hopeless. If we knew what he looked like, no doubt Madame Tussaud's would make a waxwork model of him. But he would not have a cross. For unless God opens our minds to understand his death, we will simply see the untimely death of a good man. The crossless Christ, therefore, is no friend of biblical Christians. Our hearts should warm to the mention of his

name only when he is authenticated by the nails of Calvary, and our teaching should be saturated with crosscentred applications.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

Unbelievers need to be told that the real Jesus was crucified. Other Christs are bogus: just a good man, the first socialist, a misunderstood philosopher, a failed politician, a fictitious product of the early church, a prophet whom others have blown up out of all proportion, a Son of God who is not divine, the cosmic life-force within us all. Yet none of these is the picture the Bible draws. None of these aims specifically and deliberately at the cross. It is the Jesus who purposed to die who is real. He demands our worship and our obedience.

New converts need to distinguish between triumphalism and maturity. The latter is good for spiritual health, the former is not, and they are regularly mistaken. Scripture teaches that 'the message of the cross is foolishness to those that are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1: 18). But if we reject the cross, we will expect the world's admiration rather than its mockery. The Bible also says that 'we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). But if we forget the cross, then we will say that the Gospel only solves problems but does not bring them. Further, we read that God's power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). But if we forget the cross we will want the church to present a strong face and we will be improperly equipped to handle suffering.

WITNESSING FROM EXPERIENCE

Older Christians should be encouraged to give an example of enduring appreciation for the cross. They have persevered through many trials and are invaluable to the church. Younger believers grow up in a world with much attractive teaching which threatens to take us away from the cross. For every sermon about the way of the cross there are two on self-potential. For every new song about the Jesus who died, there are five about him which ignore it. For every Christian biography which witnesses to enduring through hardship, there are ten about knowing Jesus without reference to the cross. We need to stick fast to the biblical Jesus. Let us not echo the world with its rights movements and neglect of responsibilities. Rather, let us follow the Christ who was crucified, the lamb of God who died for the sins of the world.

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