

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Summer 2006 No. 101

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

Conference Report by David Meager

Church Society met for its annual conference at High Leigh Conference Centre in Hertfordshire from 22-24th of May. The theme of the Conference was 'The Gospel of Grace.'

The aim of the Conference was to encourage us to stand firm to the gospel of grace by examining in the light of Scripture what the gospel really is and how it should impact our lives. We also looked back into the past to see how the gospel has been obscured and then rediscovered. Some of the contemporary theories about the gospel were critiqued, in particular the 'New Perspectives on Paul' movement. The main speakers were Dr Guy Prentiss Waters (Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Belhaven College, Jackson, Mississippi), Revd Philip Eveson (Principal of The London Theological Seminary), Revd George Curry (Chairman of Church Society) and Revd John Cheeseman (Vicar of Holy Trinity, Eastbourne).

George Curry opened the conference with bible exposition from Jude with the title 'A Call to Strive'. George based his talk around v3 'to contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints.' George quoted frequently from the puritan Thomas Manton as he encouraged us to be active in contending for the faith. George then set out to answer the following questions: What is the faith for which Christians are to contend? In what spheres should Christians contend? How are Christians to contend?

Guy Prentiss Waters then gave his first of three talks: 'Justification in Scripture'. Guy spoke firstly about the problem of justification. People had inadequate views of sin with many believing that we are basically good people. However, the bible makes it plain that we all have sinful hearts and cannot be justified by works. (Romans 5 v12-21) Both Jew and Gentile alike are under sin. The solution to man's sin is through Christ's righteousness given to us (by faith) this justification is a forensic act (a declaration) by God.

Day two began with Guy's second talk on 'Justification and Liberty'. We are justified by faith and not by works, those who rely on works of the law are under a curse as we cannot keep the law. We are to look to Christ as he has redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galatians 5 v1-3) As Christ has set us free, what does this freedom entail? Firstly, Christians have peace with God (Romans 5 v1-5), and secondly, this freedom must result in holy living. We have been set free not to indulge the flesh but to delight in the law, to love God and our neighbour by the power of the Spirit of God. (Galatians 5). We are not saved by works, but salvation will always lead to good works (James 2).

Guy's final talk was on 'Justification undermined' (the challenge of the New Perspectives). Justification by faith alone has its opponents in every generation. One current theory undermining this doctrine is the New Perspectives on Paul. The name of this theory was coined by James Dunn in 1982 and has been taken up by other theologians including Tom Wright (Bishop of Durham). This teaching rejects justification by faith alone and attempts to reconstruct the meaning of Paul's letters with the belief that differences between first century Judaism and the church have been exaggerated. The theory holds that Christ's righteousness is not imputed to us, but that we are saved by entering into the covenant people of God.

After Guy's talks Philip Eveson spoke on the subject: Justification Rediscovered. Philip examined what the Reformers and their successors believed and why they considered it so important. They believed that justification was a legal declaration concerning sinners. In Christ sinners are declared

righteous. We can be declared righteous because Christ has kept the law perfectly and our sins have been imputed to Christ on the cross. We obtain this justification by personal reliance (faith) in Jesus. Our works are not meritorious but are the fruit and signs of our salvation. The Reformers believed we could have assurance because we look to Christ alone. The confessions of faith in the 16th and 17th Centuries (such as the 39 Articles) witness to what the Reformers believed. The Roman church accused the Reformers of inventing a new teaching but this teaching is also present in the early church fathers. The Reformers were prepared to die for this doctrine, sadly the Roman church has not changed its stance.

On Tuesday evening John Cheeseman preached on Ephesians 2. 1-3 'A Dead Loss.' Ephesians 2 v1-3 explains that the world is in such a terrible state because of sin. Man's state is in sin, he is spiritually dead because he does not know God, he hates God and is always restless. Man is governed and controlled by the mindset of the world which is in turn under the dominion of Satan. How did this all come about? In Adam we all sinned and therefore we are all born sinful with our sinful nature in control of us. God sees us as children of wrath, God is angry with our sin and will punish us for it. We will not understand the love of God until we understand the wrath of God. This is essential from the standpoint of evangelism. People need to see that they are sinners under God's wrath otherwise they won't see their need to repent. Do we share the gospel with people and pray for people?

The final day of the conference began with Philip Eveson speaking on the subject: 'Preaching Justification Today'. We are in a spiritual battle, the devil will always try to undermine this teaching and our sinful hearts naturally oppose it. If we do not preach justification we have lost the gospel. We need to keep preaching justification today even when people do not want to hear about God's wrath. We must not divide God's wrath from his love even though many modern evangelical scholars are playing down God's punishment. This doctrine reveals the only way we can have peace with God and hope for the future.

John Cheeseman closed the conference by preaching on Ephesians 2.4-6 'Amazing Grace'. We were once objects of God's wrath, but God has had mercy on us. God has made us alive together with Christ, he has raised us up with Christ and we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. This means that a Christian is someone who no longer belongs to this world. Our home is in heaven, we are strangers in this world passing through. Do we set our minds on heaven? Do we diligently use all the means of grace God has given us to grow spiritually? i.e. prayer, bible study, Christian fellowship. Our salvation is due to grace alone, God chose us to be his workmanship created in Christ to do good works.

There was also time for prayer and worship during the meetings and opportunities for fellowship with each other over meal times and breaks, there were also prayer meetings and a chance to discuss some contemporary issues in the Church of England. Overall it was a good time of teaching and fellowship with like-minded Anglicans and we should all have been strengthened and encouraged to stand firm to the true gospel in difficult days.