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THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

No theology is genuinely Christian which does not arise from and focus on the cross.

—*Martin Luther*

I HAD A LONG LAYOVER while waiting for a connecting flight at a California airport, so I decided to take the fifteen-minute drive north to tour a major university campus. I was greeted by a ten-foot totem pole dedicated to “All Humankind” as I crossed the campus. Then, to enter the student bookstore, I had to run a gauntlet of homosexual literature, feminist books, and radical environmental propaganda strategically placed at the front entrance. I felt like a stranger in a foreign land.

I decided to go to the library to do some reading. A jovial, middle-aged employee with a long gray ponytail stopped me at the entrance. He must have sensed that I needed directions. Around his neck on a leather string hung a large wooden cross.

“Are you a Christian?” I asked, nodding hopefully toward his cross.

He fingered it, paused for a second, then looked at me with a knowing smile. “You bet I am. I love the Man that died on this for me.”

We shared our faith for a minute, shook hands, and parted. *God always has his seven thousand who have not bowed their knee to Baal*, I thought. *What an encouragement to meet a brother in this hostile environment.* The man’s cross was our point of contact.

The Centrality of the Cross

The cross is more than a symbol connecting two Christians in a hostile environment. It is the heart and soul of our faith. The cross alone is our theology, wrote Martin Luther, a remarkably prescient thinker.¹

In other words, what the heart is to the body, the cross is to our faith. What the foundation is to a building, the cross is to Christian thought and practice. Lay this doctrine crooked, and our faith will be a Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The cross is also the motor of the Christian worldview. That is why Dr. James Denney wrote in 1903:

It will be admitted by most Christians that if the Atonement [the cross] . . . is anything to the mind, it is everything. It is the most profound of all truths. . . . It determines more than anything else our conceptions of God, of man, of history. . . . It is the inspiration of all thought, the impulse and the law of all action, the key, in the last resort, to all suffering. . . . It is the focus of revelation, the point at which we see deepest into the truth of God, and come most completely under its power. . . . It is Christianity in brief; it concentrates in itself, as in a germ of infinite potency, all that the wisdom, power and love of God mean in relation to sinful men.²

Some think that the cross is a basic doctrine learned in the early stages of our spiritual development so that we can advance

to the deeper mysteries as we mature. But the cross is the deeper truth. There is nothing deeper. It is a bottomless well, a fountain of vibrant truth, and a pinnacle of wisdom and knowledge. In it lie the depths of the mysteries of God. The first sign of spiritual maturity is when one increasingly thinks about, ponders, marvels, and wonders at the mystery of the cross.

The Cross Matters

The message of the cross matters to us for at least four reasons.

First, the cross is our message. It is the heart, soul, and center of Christian faith and practice. There is no good news apart from the cross. The ensuing chapters will argue that almost every subject addressed is enlightened by reference to the cross. It is the manual to which all Christians should turn to fill their spiritual tank, resolve every ethical question, and amplify every doctrine. Does this sound like an exaggeration? It is not. It is an understatement.

For this reason, powerful preaching is usually cross-centered. Not just evangelistic preaching, but teaching to provoke holiness, to strengthen family life, to motivate stewardship, and to advance every other subject of Christian interest. The cross is the socket into which the preacher plugs for power to illuminate these subjects.

When Christian culture, politics, church government, Calvinism,³ health and wealth, or the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” become our message, we suffer. I speak from experience. Many of these things have distracted me.

Of course, these doctrines have a place at the table. And they are helpful—if their place is secondary. But when they become central in our focus, they turn our thoughts to this world. By contrast, the cross turns our thoughts to heaven. These doctrines bend our minds to ourselves and our needs, but the cross rivets our gaze on God and his sufficiency. These doctrines puff up our

contentiousness, but the cross breaks us, making us meek, gracious, and humble. These doctrines obscure the love of God, but the cross magnifies it in our experience. These doctrines distract us from personal holiness, but the cross motivates us to be holy as God is holy.

Second, the cross is our teacher. The cross is a window through which we learn everything we need to know about God, humanity, wisdom, worship, the purpose of suffering, the purpose of life, and a host of other issues. If you knew nothing else but the cross, but you knew it thoroughly, you would know everything essential for this life and the next. That is not to say that the rest of the Bible is unnecessary. But it is to say that the cross displays for us all the essential teaching of the Bible in vivid terms. The message of the Bible is more than the message of the cross, but it is never less.

Third, the power of God is in the cross, and we desperately need God's power. That is why Paul wrote, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (I Cor. 2:2, 4). Paul knew how to get results. He understood that God's power is in the proclamation of the cross, because the cross displays God's character and our immense need.

For this reason, the preaching of the cross often initiates revival. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *power of God*" (I Cor. 1:18, emphasis mine), wrote one who experienced that power daily. This message shakes nations and converts multitudes. It takes great courage to proclaim it, and we must proclaim it, because a Christianity that does not understand and boldly preach the cross is cowardly, powerless, and unfocused. It is flavorless salt.

After studying in great detail the history of revival, Brian Edwards notes:

The emphasis on the blood of Christ as the way of salvation has never been popular. . . . In revival, Christ, and the blood of the cross particularly, is central to the preaching. . . . In the eighteenth century Whitefield and Wesley found that the preaching of the cross was hated, just as it is hated now. But thousands found in the blood of Christ justification, redemption, propitiation, peace, reconciliation and cleansing, whether or not they understood all those terms.

Joseph Kemp returned from a visit to Wales in 1905 (during the Welsh Revival) and reported to his congregation at Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh that the dominating note of the Welsh revival was “redemption through the Blood.” Whenever we hear or read that the Spirit is at work we can assess the genuineness of the work by how central the blood of Christ is to the preaching and the worship.⁴

If we want the refreshing rains of God’s Spirit to fall, we must restore this message to prominence. The power of God flows through it and from it.

Fourth, the presence or absence of cross-centeredness impacts behavior. Christianity that is not cross-centered will be sympathy without decisiveness, kindness without justice, charm without backbone, and sentimentality without action.

Christianity then becomes a religion for the deserving but not for sinners, a message for the upper-class but not the lower-class. Without the cross, justification by faith alone degenerates into moralism, and God’s holy wrath morphs into tolerance for the well-intentioned. A cross-less Christianity tames the terrible God enthroned between the cherubim before whom the nations tremble (Ps. 99:1). God becomes love, but nothing else. In short, when the message of the cross is removed from the center of Christianity, Christianity removes itself from the center of our thoughts and devotions. A bushel basket is placed over the lamp. It is that simple.

Most importantly, cross-centered Christians grow progressively humble. I fellowship with one church that preaches the cross. They sing it, they preach it, they read about it, and they exult in it. Therefore, they feel deeply their sinfulness and unworthiness. Humility is their outstanding quality.

Another church in my area believes in the cross, but transforming the culture is their central focus. They write about culture, sing about it, and discuss it constantly. By contrast, their outstanding quality is pride. They look down on other Christians. They are contentious and lack grace.

Therefore, our attitude toward the cross is crucial. When its importance recedes in our thoughts and affections, we become cold, sterile, and lifeless. But when the message of the cross takes center stage, we burn with zeal for God and his kingdom from a deep sense of our spiritual poverty.

Taking the Cross for Granted

If you are like me, though, you have probably taken the cross for granted. Then we are like the second church just mentioned. The cross is on our sign and over our sanctuary, but we never think or talk about it. As P. T. Forsyth observed in 1908, when that happens, “we are merely running the kingdom . . . without the cross—with the cross perhaps on our sign, but not in our centre. We have the old trade mark, but what does that matter in a dry and thirsty land where no water is, if the artesian well on our premises is going dry?”⁵

Reasons for Neglecting Christ’s Message

The artesian well of the Christian faith is the proclamation of Christ crucified and the vital truths for which this message

stands. It is easy to neglect the message, and we do so for several reasons.

First, we neglect the cross because its sheer familiarity numbs us to the reality of the critical truths for which it stands. As Forsyth noted, it becomes just a “trade mark.” Crosses sit atop church steeples and mark graveyards. Basketball players make the sign of the cross before they shoot free throws. Crosses emblazon ambulances hurrying by in rush-hour traffic. Drug companies put crosses on pill bottles. Crosses adorn our hospitals and relief agencies. Movie stars wear diamond-studded crosses on necklaces or earrings. Some people even plant crosses on highways where fatal accidents have occurred.

The amazing fact is that despite our secularism, the symbol of the cross is still all around us, speaking mercy, compassion, and healing. It is a symbol of hope and virtue. “No word in human language has become more universally known than this word [the cross],” notes *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. “And that because all of the history of the world since the death of Christ has been measured by the distance which separates events from it.”⁶

In this case, the old saying can be true: “Familiarity breeds contempt.” The ubiquitous presence of the cross in Western culture numbs us to its piercing, life-changing truths. This frequency deafens us to its message, much like when we see a commercial too many times.

Second, we neglect the cross because we don’t clearly understand it. I remember a men’s conference I once attended at which an admired friend was asked to speak about the cross. I came with high expectations, but he gave three messages that were confusing, powerless, and unconvincing. He had been a church leader for thirty years, and he was a good teacher, so how could he speak so lifelessly on such a vital message? He only understood the cross on a superficial level, and this is a common problem for many.

Third, we neglect the cross because it offends. A friend from a large, seeker-friendly church recently boasted that his congregation

had removed the cross from their sanctuary. To him it was an embarrassment and an impediment to evangelism. This embarrassment is both a symptom of and a reason for our complacency. When some see the offense, God's pristine holiness and hatred of evil, and the depth of humanity's sinfulness, they turn their backs on the cross's scandalous message. But the message of the cross will always be "foolish" and "scandalous" to the mind of unbelief. Even after New Birth, we may have a substantial element of this "foolishness" still residing in us, making it possible to still be deeply "offended" by the word of the cross. Neither you, nor I, are immune from this problem.

Once we see its offensiveness, the cost of identifying with it becomes apparent. I remember a Christian brother who once told me, "I can tolerate anything except being misunderstood. I hate to be misunderstood." But those who really understand and proclaim the cross will be misunderstood. Right after Jesus explained the cross to his disciples (Luke 9:23–24), he warned, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26). Jesus knew the message of the cross would embarrass. It was this "offense" that caused most of Paul's persecutions and sufferings. So if no one is persecuting you, you probably haven't grasped this message sufficiently to offend anyone yet.

Embarrassment about the cross is embarrassment about Christ himself; we cannot separate our feelings about Jesus and our feelings about his cross. "Christ is to us just what his cross is," noted P. T. Forsyth. "All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there. . . . Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross."⁷

We can't despise the gift and admire the giver. The cross was God's great gift. The wonderful Being who died there was infinite in value and dignity. In return for the lavish expenditure of an

infinite life, God rightfully expects our devotion. That is why no one can take his cross for granted and at the same time love him properly.

We may claim fervency about the cross, but our behavior speaks our real feelings. We are what we do, not what we say. For instance, my wife is God's greatest earthly gift to me. But after fifteen years of marriage, I began to take her cooking, housecleaning, washing, and mothering of our children for granted. She interpreted my apathy about what she *did* for apathy about herself, and as a result she felt hurt and unimportant. So I confessed my sin and asked her forgiveness.

In a far more significant way, we grieve God's Spirit when we take his cross—his great act of servant-love—for granted. And we are all guilty, at least to some extent, of this sin.

Symptoms of Apathy

Apathy about the cross has clear symptoms. The first is that we just never think about it. We think about evangelism, church growth, prayer, the Bible, God's mercy, maybe even God's love, our friends, or our jobs, but we seldom meditate upon and delight in the cross itself. Imagine selling everything you owned to purchase a diamond ring for your beloved, only to have her bury it in a box and never wear it. That is what we unknowingly do with God when we fail to make the cross the center of our thought life.

A second symptom of cross apathy is legalism. We know what to do, but we don't know why we should do it or how to handle failure when it occurs. For many years I attended a church with strong teaching on practical holiness. We emphasized holiness in relating to our families, handling money, serving God with our time, and serving our employers. Our genuine desire for holiness was Spirit-inspired, but we didn't understand what should motivate holiness or how to handle failure. Therefore, our teaching

manipulated people into holiness by appealing to duty and the guilt that followed when they failed. But the cross pulls us into holiness for the right reasons and salves our consciences when we fail. The cross produces spiritual disciplines responding to grace rather than guilt.

Our prayer life is the third important barometer for apathy. When our church gathers for prayer and we don't issue heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving, exultation, and praise for Christ's work on the cross, it is because the cross is not at the center of our affections. For many of us, the cross is an afterthought. We pour out our needs and then conclude, "And thank you for dying for my sins."

The Bible calls cross-centered prayer the "new song." It is the song of redemption that the Holy Spirit teaches every true believer in varying degrees. This song is a deep and profound sense of gratitude for our deliverance from sin, hell, guilt, and the wrath of God. It is always a response of exuberant joy to God's saving work. "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a *new song* in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God" (Ps. 40:2–3, emphasis mine).

We learn the new song to the degree that we are deeply enamored by the cross. It cannot be suppressed in one amazed at God's saving work—anyone who knows this joy will pray it regularly from a sense of personal unworthiness.

A fourth symptom is leaders who do not preach the cross with power—as if they see and feel the dreadful realities of heaven and hell revealed there. Those who really see the message of the cross will preach like Richard Baxter: "I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."⁸

A fifth symptom of cross apathy is when there is little mourning for sin in our midst. "They will look on me, the one they have pierced," prophesied Zechariah. "And they will mourn for him as

one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (Zech. 12:10). To the degree that we really see the message of the cross we will be stricken, deeply stricken for our sins, the sins of our church, and the sins of the nation in which we live. To the degree that the cross does not speak to us there will be little mourning for sin and its consequences. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

A sixth symptom of cross apathy is the lack of a growing spiritual capacity to embrace the love of God. The most common complaint I hear from Christians is that they wish they experienced the love of God more fully. The cross is the cure. The absence of a heartfelt experience of God’s love usually points to a dearth of preaching and meditating on the cross. “We love because he first loved us” (I John 4:19). “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (I John 3:16).

The lyrical content of our worship music is a seventh symptom. An article by Mark Noll in *Christianity Today* titled “We Are What We Sing” sums up an important principle. Music reflects what we value and reveals what we really think about. In fact, our music usually sings the truths most important to us.⁹

A friend just went through several hundred worship songs from a church he used to attend. The tunes were good, and the lyrics extolled God’s greatness, his holiness, his love and mercy, and the importance of his lordship. But there was not one song that specifically and exclusively spoke about the work of Christ at the cross. Significantly, none mentioned our sinfulness and depravity or the fact that we deserve judgment but instead received amazing grace. The church that this music came from believed in human sinfulness and the atoning work of Christ at the cross. But these lyrics revealed how little they understood and valued these truths. Worship is a response to the goodness of God revealed at the cross. A collection of music with little cross emphasis will dilute our worship from the high purpose God intends.

My friend's worship experience could be duplicated in many churches today. To find cross-centered lyrics, you often have to go back two or three hundred years to hymns written during times of profound revival, when God had bared his holy arm, exposing the church to the profundity of the cross. It is a sad indictment that the church writes very little cross-centered music today.¹⁰

Conclusion

Cross apathy has a price. If some or all of these symptoms describe you or your church, you need the following chapters. But before we go to those chapters and describe some of the lessons taught by the cross, let's examine six foundational principles apart from which the following chapters cannot be understood.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. In your own words, sum up the content of this chapter.
2. This chapter discussed four reasons why the cross matters. Which was the most significant to you personally? Why? (See pages 17–20.)
3. This chapter also suggested three reasons why people neglect the cross. Which best describes you? Why? (See pages 20–23.)
4. The last part of this chapter listed seven symptoms of cross apathy. Which symptoms are most apparent in your life or the life of your local church?
5. What does God want you to change in order to make the cross more central in your life? How does God want you to respond to this chapter?