

ANOTHER WAY?

by Arthur M. Climenhaga

The new missionary, said *Newsweek* magazine a number of years ago, does not try to convert the heathern. "He bears witness to his faith by helping them in material ways . . . In a world where political, cultural and economic independence are being pursued with religious fervor it is hard to argue that any one religion has a special virtue above any other."¹

Then *Newsweek* quotes as an example of the "new breed" of missionaries, Colin Davis who is reported as saying, "St. Paul's methods are no longer successful. The direct approach does not work." The implication is starkly clear: today there is another way than that in which the church of Jesus Christ has been engaged for nearly two thousand years.

But before we give in so easily to the demands of another way, what is the way which Christianity has been following in the missionary motivation, the missionary message, the missionary method? The appeal is to Paul, not necessarily to his methods as Colin Davis alleged, but to Paul's word.

At the heart of the Pauline expression is the following word:

¹⁸For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. ²⁰Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. ²²For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: ²³But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; ²⁴But unto them which are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. ²⁵Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.²

The spirit of these verses can only be understood against the backdrop of first century times. No longer could the Greeks boast of great soldiers or statesmen but they still held their heads high as the intellectual leaders of the hour. The world of that day was dominated politically by the Roman but the conqueror in turn was conquered by the philosophy of the Greek. Standing to the side in religious disdain was the Jew who sensed in his own development the fullest insight concerning the fact of God. All of these have been classified so well as the respective proponents of "know yourself," "rule yourself," "know your God." None of them felt any sense of lack.

Yet it was of this diverse group embodied in the cosmopolitan crossroads of the Near East, Corinthian in character, that the Apostle Paul spoke. To these he declared the simple yet profound fact of the Gospel of the Cross of Christ. He saw them, the contemptuous men that they were, perishing in their sins. In the word of the text the wisdom of the Greek and the practicality of the Jew, the humanistic/anthropomorphic philosophy of one and the self-centered theistic religion of the other, these stood under the condemnation of God. They fell so far short of even a minimal achievement of the noblest aspiration. The inner dynamic, the inner power to change, know, and rule life simply was not there. And as for knowing God, the worship of the ecclesiastics was expressed in forms and traditions and hundreds of laws, but no transforming grace was there.

The modern day is so like Paul's day. The spirit of the hour calls for a new word, a new concept, a new morality—a so-called renewal of old theologies into modern terms and concepts; a renewal of dying church systems into new forms of redemption, reconciliation or liberation; a fusion of all world religions into one glorious, new, unified world religion; a belief in the universal "redemption" of all humanity who come to God in their own sincere ways.

The world was seeking a religion with world-wide validity long before Symmachus, the Roman prefect, remarked about religion, "It is impossible that so great a mystery should be approached by one road only." The strong tendency to synthesize the world's religions, to filter off the elements of truth in each and unite them into a whole, is no longer a major trait of the Eastern religions alone, however. Official statements of spokesmen for too many church and interchurch movements back down from the exclusive claims of Christianity that "neither is there salvation in any other."

From this compromising stance it is but a step to a new universalism of all religions and faiths—a veritable universal fusion of Christianity with animism as well as major ethnic faiths. A leading journalist, David Lawrence, once pictured it as follows:

"Although religious conflicts still divide some countries, emphasis in recent years has turned toward the many things which all religions have in common."³

After speaking of the attempts of several church bodies, so diverse in theology, to meet in a new spirit of dialogue as examples of this new spirit, Lawrence goes on to say,

"This is not a new objective. Thirty-five years ago in India, Bhagavan Das, a noted Hindu scholar, traced similarities of Judeo-Christian doctrines and those of ancient Persia, Arabia and China, comparing the teachings of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius and earlier spiritual leaders. The concept of a supreme being was dominant in virtually all. He concluded: "So

long as men and women are taught to believe that religions differ in essentials, so long will they continue to differ, quarrel, shed each other's blood. If they are led to see that all religions are one and the same—in essentials—they will also become one in heart, and feel their common humanity in loving brotherhood.' ”³

In these developments then the sense of the mission of the church comes to full syncretistic flower. Here there is no necessity to challenge men to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ. Here there is no “Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” Here there is no wishing oneself accursed for his kinsmen's sake because they are lost. Instead here is the overflowing spirit of a love and service which looks to dialogue with the faiths and practices of the world with a view of introducing to them that which they already are by the grace of God and which they will be whether they accept it or not in this life.

To this world, the word of the cross is foolishness; to the wise, it is the essence of mental stupidity. To believe that the man Jesus, a product of Nazareth, is the Son of God, that He lived in unspotted righteousness though tempted as we are and yet without sin, that He died the death of a criminal and was buried, that He literally rose from the dead in bodily form, that He ascended to His Father in heaven, that He now intercedes for His own at the right hand of the Father, that He will come again to judge the living and the dead, this is the height of foolishness.

Especially the preaching of the cross as an emblem of the crucified Christ, crucified to shed blood as redemption for fallen, sinful man, this today is:

- foolishness to the “honest to what God addict,” the believer in concepts of God who is not “out there” but the “ground of being” (whatever that may mean);
- foolishness to men who believe they can purge their consciences and renew their wills by a denial of guilt and by the process of cultured thinking and insight into a new morality which makes ethical standards of very little effect;
- foolishness to the scientist who places the finding of ultimate answers in norms, computations, formulae;
- foolishness to the man who seeks the answers to the social ills in human concept alone;
- foolishness to the man who is bent on weekend pleasure, recreation;
- foolishness to the worldling who sees in the cross no source of power to carve out a fortune or create a career or become a political power.
- foolishness to the rebels against society who proclaim “love” as

the end all of life but who have no place for the cross of Christ in that love.

This is the situation to which the Apostle Paul speaks—these, he says, are perishing. A fact today which axiom-like needs reaffirmation, which desperately needs renewal in concept and affirmation, is this: Our world is not under the rulership of a benevolent God who will surely save His own. Rather the Bible says the lord of the earth is the evil one, satan, the devil, the prince and power of the air. Society, instead of being under the Lordship of Christ, is under the lordship of the fallen Lucifer. The words of Jesus need re-emphasis, "I saw Satan fall as lightening from heaven."⁴

The world and society as we know it are perishing, and what is the church and the ministry doing about it?

Too often the Church offers humanistic philosophy or anthropomorphic sociology or involvement on a human level alone to lost sinners. There is no word of grace, no surgery of the cross, no Jesus Christ who is the Redeemer of the lost, the Savior of the sinner.

Louise Stoltenberg spoke to this point in *Christianity Today* by citing three examples:

"There is an unusual coffeehouse in Washington, D.C., that is operated by members of a unique ecumenical church in the city. In San Francisco a 'night minister,' a clergyman with fifteen years of pastoral experience, wanders the streets of the Tenderloin district nightly from ten o'clock to early morning, making himself available to any persons who need help. In a Baltimore shopping center anyone interested may step beyond a reception desk into a chapel to pray. Descriptions of all three of these new patterns of church work specifically disclaims any efforts to convert involved; the object rather is to be helpful, to listen, and to serve."⁵

Then she went on to declare in incisive and telling terms:

"So when the institutionalized church makes a gargantuan effort to break out of the confines of its conventional ministry, it too is in the embarrassing situation of not knowing how to be completely true to itself. It too takes the easy route and settles for humanitarianism. But can we even imagine the Apostle Paul trying to 'help people' while remaining silent about the Gospel? Indeed, the Gospel was *the* help he could offer, the key to renewal and the transformed life. 'How shall they hear without a preacher?' was his cry, and it applies to men today just as in Paul's time."⁶

Ah, here lies the key, the resource of renewal, for a church involved in a world in crisis, the affirmation of the evangelical imperative is here in the word of the text, "the preaching of the cross . . . we preach Christ crucified." Here there is no magnification of the liturgical, no delineation of the philosophical, no peroration of the artistic phrase. For in the words of Edmund W. Robb,

The world does not need a better philosophy; it needs a Savior. It does not need a new morality; it needs new life. It does not need reformation; it needs regeneration in Christ. Too often the Church has offered humanistic philosophy to lost sinners. This is giving stones when men ask for bread. We have preached morality and have not offered forgiveness and grace.

It has been noted that the modern Church is not a singing church. No great hymns are being written. You do not sing about a philosophy, and you do not rejoice in a cold morality. We sing about a Person, a Saviour, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.' In the Cross of Christ there is an attraction that will bring sinners to repentance and faith. In the Cross we see the love of God. In the Cross we see the awful penalty of sin. In the Cross we see a Saviour dying for us. Let us preach the Christ of the Cross and the empty tomb, and we shall see the world kneel at the feet of Jesus. ' . . . every knee shall bow' . . . 'every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord. . . .'

If we are to have effective evangelism we must believe in the saving power of the Gospel. The Church is not for nice people but for sinners saved by grace. There is no sin so great, no heart so hard, no person fallen so low, but that Jesus Christ can forgive and transform him and make him whole. Perhaps the Church has lost faith in the changing of the redeeming power of the Saviour. Alcoholics can be made sober, prostitutes made pure, materialists made spiritually minded, sick personalities made well; broken homes can be restored, and wrecked lives can have a new beginning in Christ. Our faith to obtain life-changing power must pass from the psychiatrist's couch to the altar of prayer.

Let us offer to the world the mighty Saviour. In so doing we shall see the beginning of renewal in the Church and salvation for the lost."⁷

Why then has the word of the Cross this power unto salvation? Let us put the question to the New Testament and gather up the broad effect of the New Testament writings as codified in our text so as to learn the secret of the power of the Cross.

First of all, as Dr. W.M. Clow, a great Scottish divine, put it, the word of the Cross of Christ is *the dynamic of a sublime fact*.⁸ Any painter attempting to symbolize the Christian Church in human figure would paint her looking forward rather than back—the stance is one of hope rather than a pensive attitude of memory. And yet! the Church looks back repeatedly in remembrance to one supreme fact—the death of Christ on the Cross.

— While we remember the words of the Lord Jesus with awe and wonder and delight, yet the Christian symbol is a cross and not an evangelist's text.

— While we recall Jesus' holy character with reverence and adoration, the Christian symbol is not a lily or a shining face. It is a CROSS!

— While we still go back to the Lord of glory's birth in Bethlehem with gladness and sing carols with our children in praise of the Babe of Bethlehem, the Christian symbol is neither a "wide-eyed babe nor a manger cradle." It is a CROSS!

The supreme fact in Christian history is that Jesus died and the cross stands as the watershed of all of history.

In the New Testament this is the historic fact ruling men's thoughts. Not only does it dominate all else in the Pauline epistles, but you see it running as a thread through Peter and James and John, and with wonderful emphasis in the eloquence of the Hebrew epistle, or in poetic cadence in the Revelation, the word that looks back to the "Lamb that was slain." They knew and understood what was in the heart of the cross because they understood Christ's own emphasis on His death. They could look back to remember the print of the nails, the tragedy of death, the pathos of loneliness, the love that breathed out tender solitudeness, the charity that was fashioned into prayer, the cries that told of grief and pain and torture—these supreme things of the past in Churchillian cadence could be said to be the Son of God's finest hour. The cross was His hour, His cup, His baptism, His uplifting. And as these disciples of old recalled the Cross, its love and sorrow entered their souls. It softened their hearts with convicting grace and through it the shed blood on the cross cleansed their hearts.

And so today we need to declare anew that no man, past or present, ever looked back or looks back to the Cross without knowing it to be the power of God unto salvation. This dynamic is more than a symbol on a church building or a pin in a lapel or an amulet hung around the neck; it is the cry in every human heart, "Oh God, Thy will be done!"

In this sense we declare the word of the Cross to be *the dynamic of a doctrine*. Every student of the New Testament can find this truth expressed in two ways. The first is to be found in the pages of the New Testament. The second, the way in which the power of the Cross is to be seen is in its work of actually redeeming modern day sinners.

Note the arrangement of the New Testament books in a chronological order and you will see the writers grasp of this truth is firmer, their assurance of it more unshakeable, their insight into it more penetrating, and their joy in it more abounding, in the later than in the earlier epistles—thus referring to the truth of the Cross and all it means. For example, compare First Thessalonians to Romans and you will find the doctrine of the Cross has eclipsed in the latter every other truth. Not that the earlier books had any doubt that Jesus came to redeem men by dying for them. But as the years passed, the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of the N.T.

writers found more fertile understanding of the meaning of the Cross.

This is the dynamic of the doctrine in maturing of understanding and experience in one's own life. But the dynamic power is still to be seen in the lives of sinners today who come face to face with its revolutionary message.

Third, the word of the Cross is *the dynamic of a law*. There are other laws in Christian teaching which do demand attention—the gentleness of the Christ, His pity and charity, his patience with the reviler, His longing for the erring and the outcast, His joy in little children, His tenderness with the weak—all of these do speak in relevant terms to us today with respect to our social and community obligations of the hour. BUT we must never forget that to New Testament men the Cross was the supreme law of life. Says Peter speaking of the Christ, "Who suffered for us leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps, who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree." "He laid down his life for us," says John, calling up the vision of the Cross to selfish hearts, "and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." "Looking unto Jesus," cries the author of the letter to the Hebrews writing to men tempted to look back, "looking unto Jesus who endured the cross and despised the shame." "These are they," rhapsodises the seer of the Revelation as he finds the Cross to be the law of those in the heavenly life, "which follow the Lamb whithsoever he goeth."

This is the way of those who see their Lord in the garden of Gethsamene and cry with him, "Not my will but thine be done," as they face their cross of life.

To such as find the cross the dynamic of a sublime fact, of a doctrine, of a law of life, it will become their ever abiding motive.

Is any person tempted to be mean in his giving? He is pointed to the Cross. Is any one prone to be proud, bitter in temper, rasping in speech? Is any one shirking his or her duty, stinting service, and declining to make the sacrifice conscience claims? Is any person facing a sorrow, or passing through a trial, or becoming bitter with life's misfortunes? The one recourse for all is to the Cross. When one's feet stumble, when one is inclined to seek some softer or forbidden way, when one enters any dark and inexplicable experience, when one goes through the valley of the shadow of death, hold the Cross before that person's eyes. No one of you have ever meekly humbled herself or himself, taken men's slights without resentment, endured their caustic tongues, and kept your feet unflinchingly in the narrow way, without a daily recurrence to the Cross.

There are but two alternatives. There is no other way! The word of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. It is the power of God to those who are being saved.

"I'm not ashamed to own my Lord,
Or to defend his cause,
Maintain the glory of his cross,
And honour all his laws."

FOOTNOTES

¹*Newsweek*, (December 30, 1963).

²I Corinthians 1:18-25.

³David Lawrence, *Reader's Digest*, (October, 1965).

⁴Luke 10:18.

⁵Louis Stoltenberg, "What's Wrong With Church Renewal", *Christianity Today*, IX (April 23, 1965), p. 761 (5).

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Edmund W. Robb, "Effective Evangelism", *Christianity Today*, IX (April 23, 1965), p. 764 (8).

⁸W.M. Clow, *The Cross in Christian Experience*, (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), and note especially chapter XVI, "The Dynamic of the Cross", p. 193.