

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John Stott Memorial Service

A sermon preached at
St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne
on 28th August 2011 by Peter Adam

Reading: Galatians 6:11-18

Thousands, and indeed millions, of people have good reason to thank God for John Stott. For through his ministry at All Soul's, his international ministries, both in person and in the organisations he contributed to or created, through his 50 books, and through the leaders he has trained, countless people have benefited directly or indirectly from his life and work.

I heard John Stott give five wonderful expositions of 2 Corinthians at the Church Missionary Society summer conference at Belgrave Heights in January 1965, just 18 months after my conversion. As I listened, I thought: 'That is how to teach the Bible, and that is what I want to do.' That was my call to ordained ministry. My mother also came to those Bible expositions: she had been converted just four months before the conference, when I lent her my copy of Stott's '*Basic Christianity*'. We bought tapes of those Bible studies, and could eventually recite them with him word for word!

Those expositions had a significant and long-lasting effect here in Australia. Until that time, most preaching was based on what were called 'texts' that is, isolated verses of Scripture. The growth in expository preaching in Australia, as around the world, is in large part due to the influence of John Stott.

I knew that such a ministry of Bible exposition would grow a church, and so it was a great joy to visit All Souls Langham Place in 1972, and see the results of that ministry. His book that had the greatest impact on me was *Christ the Controversialist*. Gospel clarity, a passion for the truth, Biblical authenticity, and a desire to honour Christ by accepting his teaching came together in a life-changing book. I had the great joy of working on a doctrine commission chaired by John when I lived in England. It is a great privilege to preach here today. I well remember John himself preaching from this pulpit at the end of his mission to Melbourne University in 1958.

John chose the Bible reading from Galatians for his funeral. It includes these words: *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*, Galatians 6:14. These words come in the climax to this letter, in words written down in Paul's own hand [6:11]. With these words Paul addressed himself, and he also addressed the Christians in Galatia.

Why did Paul say to himself: *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*? I suppose because Paul knew that he shared the universal human tendency to reject the gracious work of God in the atoning death of his Son for our sin. Paul knew that his own natural tendency was to avoid the cross, to contradict the cross, indeed to fight against the cross, as he had done when he persecuted Christian believers. Paul's natural tendency, as he tells us elsewhere, was to boast in other things: 'If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ'[i]. So in Romans he wrote, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel'[ii]. Why write 'not ashamed' unless it is our natural tendency to be ashamed of that gospel?

The words, *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* are at once a prayer, a commitment, and a curse: May God help me not to boast in anything other than the cross of Christ; I will never boast in anything other than the cross; May God forbid that I boast of anything except the cross of Christ. Why that reminds me of other definitive words of St Paul's self-talk: 'I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'[iii]; 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel[iv]. As John Stott wrote: '[the cross] lies at the centre of the historic Biblical faith...and this is in itself a sufficient justification for preserving a distinctive evangelical testimony'[v]

And was there a cost to Paul in boasting only in the cross of Christ? Yes, for says 'by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' [6:14]. Paul's message not only cuts him off from the false teachers and their followers, but also cuts him off from the values of his age and culture, of his world. There are here, as John has pointed out, one cross, but two crucifixions: Christ crucified for us, and our crucifixion as we die to sin and die to the sinful appeal of the world[vi].

And why did Paul write these words to the Galatians, *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*? Because they were susceptible to the counterfeit Christianity among them, and were being pressured to submit to it.

This was a different gospel, a perverted gospel, a gospel contrary to that preached by Paul [1:6-9]. And here in Galatians 6, Paul analysed those purveyors of a perverted gospel as desiring a good show in the flesh that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ [6:12-13]. That is, they wanted a publicly and culturally acceptable form of religion, and to do that they must abandon the cross of Christ. Their aim was to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ: Paul's aim was that he would never boast of anything except the cross of Christ.

Any why read these words today to ourselves? Why might we be ashamed of the cross of Christ?

- Because the cross of Christ points us to one God, one Saviour, one work of salvation: one reality, one revelation, one mediator, one Saviour, one finished work of Christ, act of one Spirit, one work of reconciliation, one forgiveness, one way of discipleship, one church, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, one scandalous particularity.
- Because the cross of Christ points us to the reality of human sin, and to the justice and wrath of God. It tells us of our need for a substitute to die in our place. For God to permit a substitute was very merciful; to provide a substitute amazing grace—but to become the substitute is grace beyond all measure. It tells us we need propitiation as well as expiation, and to the fact that in the cross, the self-substitution of God delivered us from eternal judgement, death and hell. For Christ 'gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age' [1:4]. For on the cross, Christ was God saving us by shedding his blood, becoming a curse for us. Christ was cursed on the cross, that we might be blessed by the cross.
- Because the cross of Christ reminds us of our human inability to save ourselves. For we are warped in every part of our person, we are by nature children of wrath, programmed against God, and we are our entirely and absolutely dependent on the free and gracious gift of God to do what we cannot do, to save us, and to make us a new creation [6:15].

I can think of many reasons why John Stott may have chosen these words to be read at his funeral: words he needed to know would be read, and words he wanted others to hear again.

- One is that by background and by gifts he was programmed to trust in himself, his abilities, his place in society, and his many gifts. As an Englishman he would not boast

publicly, but may well have been tempted to engage in that powerful and persuasive self-confidence that blinds many to God. *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.* And what an overwhelmingly productive, energetic, effective, varied and world-wide ministry flowed from that continuous decision, that prayer, that iron self-discipline!

- Another is that he knew himself to be a sinner, saved only by God's grace in the atoning death of Christ. He had this awareness at his conversion, and miracle of miracles, he retained it throughout his life. Perhaps one of the ways he retained that awareness was by asserting these words: *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- Another is that John was determined not to be a celebrity, that great folly of our society and of the church. He exercised his immense self-discipline in turning attention away from himself to Christ, and that self-restraint was enabled by these words. For to boast in the cross of Christ, to be crucified to the world, is the perfect antidote to the poisonous cult of celebrity, which does so much harm to the celebrity, and even more harm to those who engage in that idolatry. Those who idolise celebrities despair when they die: those who glory in the cross have hope for eternity. Boast in nothing but the cross.
- Or again, it may be that John remembered that that in the Church of England in which he was brought up many evangelicals had embraced a form of Liberal Evangelicalism which flourished from the 1900s. It set aside commitment to the Scriptures, and replaced it with an inner piety. It set aside the cross, and replaced it with the incarnation without the cross. If it retained the cross, it was as a sign of God's love and Christ's example, but no longer the only means of salvation through atonement. This was the form of evangelicalism that flourished in the All Souls of John's childhood. John led a renewed and robust evangelicalism after the second world war, with a commitment to the exposition of the Scriptures, adherence to the atonement, a reshaping of the Christian life, active evangelism, and commitment to the use of the mind, and to historic Reformed and Evangelical Anglicanism. John, with the assistance of our own Leon Morris, recovered the cross for evangelicalism, glorying in the cross. Furthermore, in his later years John was concerned that there was a return to a similar liberal evangelicalism, which was repeating the mistakes of

the former movement[vii]. Perhaps he wanted to warn us from the grave: *May you never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Of course we are not like those foolish Galatians! We would not contradict the cross, but we might neglect it in our theology, our preaching, our evangelism, our ministry and our lives. We might engage in heresy by silence: we might replace the cross with sincerity, achievement, success, good works, religious energy, exciting worship, or internal experiences of grace.

Why might we do this?

- Because of fear of persecution, as Paul makes clear in Galatians [6:12]. In Australia that means fear of disapproval, fear of rejection, in the church or in the world, or because preaching the cross and living by the cross and boasting in the cross is too much bother, too demanding.
- We might think that God meets our need, and forget that he forgives our sins. We might think that God will supply what we lack, and forget that he calls us to repent. We might think that the death of Christ rescues us from evil, and forget that it also rescues us from the deeply deserved judgement and wrath of God. We might think that the cross shows us God's love, which it does, but forget that it also shows us God's judgement. Christ died because the wages of sin is death. No blood, no atonement, and no atonement, no forgiveness.
- We might forget that our greatest problems are our sinful nature and our sins. We might forget to confess our sins either in our services or in our daily lives. We might love Christ's example, and forget his salvation. And we might forget that the cross is at the heart of Christianity, and that without the cross there is no gospel at all. As John wrote, those who do not glory in the cross are enemies of the cross[viii].

Paul knew that we need a radical reversion, a total transformation. For it is by the cross that the world is crucified to us, and we are crucified to the world. The cross breaks the power of the world over us and within us: we are a new creation in Christ [6:15]. And God's peace is on those who follow this rule [6:16].

And, of course to glory, to boast in the cross of Christ now is great practice for eternity, when we will join all the saints and angels in singing with a loud voice:

- ‘You are worthy...for by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.’
- ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’[ix]

Let me end with an appeal, to all in this Cathedral, lay people and ministers like:

- If you have never thanked God for the death of Christ in your place, if you have never thanked God for forgiving and accepting you through Christ’s death, if you have never boasted in God’s grace and your weakness, if you have never gloried in the cross Christ, and never set aside other boasting, then please do so now. Boast in Christ’s cross.
- If you have gloried in the atoning death of Christ, boasted in the cross of Christ in the past, but neglected to do so more recently in your own life, or in your ministry, then please repent now, ask for God’s forgiveness and change your practice. Boast in Christ’s cross.
- If you have gloried in anything other than the cross of Christ, in your achievements, your success, your promotion, your recognition, your popularity, your gifts, your experiences, then please repent now, ask God for forgiveness, and change your practice. Boast in Christ’s cross.
- If you have gloried in Christ but not in his cross, not in his atoning death as our substitute and our Saviour, then please repent now, adore your Saviour, and boast and glory in his cross.

I appeal to you now, that you would, like Paul, bear the marks of the cross of Christ in yourself, boast in Christ’s cross, and let that Lord Jesus Christ and that cross shape and form your life and ministry.

[i] Philippians 3:4-9

[ii] Romans 1:16, and see also 2 Timothy 1:8

[iii] 1 Corinthians 2:2

[iv] 1 Corinthians 9:16

[v] John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 7.

[vi] *The Cross of Christ*, 350.

[vii] Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Movement*, 164

[viii] *The Cross of Christ*, 351

[ix] Revelation 5:9-12