

October 23, 2005 by Steve Brandon



The Centrality of the Cross

Romans 10:9; Galatians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Timothy 2:8

1. Believe in the Cross (Rom. 10:9).
2. Boast in the Cross (Gal. 6:14).
3. Preach the Cross (1 Cor. 1:23).
4. Remember the Cross (2 Tim. 2:8).

About eighteen months ago, I read a book entitled, "Spirit Empowered Preaching," by a man named Art Azurdia, who pastors a church in the San Francisco area. He is one of the most gifted preachers that I have ever heard preach. The premise of the book is that the Spirit's role is to glorify Christ (John 16:14). So the preaching that is most blessed is the preaching that is doing what the Spirit is doing, exalting Jesus. Spirit empowered preaching doesn't mean ranting and raving and yelling and sweating. Rather, Spirit empowered preaching means lifting Christ high, for this is what the Spirit longs to do and will empower you to do so. I want to read to you a few paragraphs from his book. I read them for you, because his experience has become my experience. He writes,

When I scan my Christian pilgrimage, I can quickly identify the three most significant high points. The first is my conversion. God saved me when I was twenty years old. The second is the evening God's Spirit opened my eyes to see the implications of the doctrines of grace. It felt as though I had been saved a second time. The third occurred a few years ago when I enrolled in a class at Westminster Seminary taught by Dr. Edmund Clowney. It was entitled, 'Preaching Christ from the Old Testament.'

Admittedly, I began the class with my resistance level turned up to full capacity. 'Never preach Christ if He is not specifically mentioned in the text from which you are preaching,' I had always heard. And yet for three hours each day Dr. Clowney showed us, from both exegetical and theological perspectives, how the Old Testament ruthlessly points to Jesus Christ.

Each day I left class saying to my roommate, 'I love Jesus more today that I have ever before loved Him.' Without sounding hopelessly sentimental, it was something akin to an Emmaus road experience. Each day my heart would burn. ^[1]

My experience in this life closely parallels that of Mr. Azurdia. Growing up in church, my life was saturated with the things of Christianity. And yet, it was not until I was 21 years of age that I fully grasped the gospel message of Christ, the message that when Christ saves an individual, He transforms that individual. A year later, I was confronted with the doctrines of grace. These are the doctrines that teach that my salvation had nothing to do with me, but had everything to do with God's choosing of me before the foundation of the world. At first, I resisted them. I can remember having a pointed discussion with someone who believed this. I said to him, "Doesn't the Scripture say that you need to work out your salvation with fear and trembling?" He said, "Yes, but look at the next verse. It give the reasons why we need to do so. It is because 'God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' In other words, it is precisely because your salvation is God's hands that you seen to fear and tremble." His answer stopped my mouth. Over the next few months, I came to embrace these doctrines. Since then, I have come to see how central these doctrines are to the entire teaching of the Scriptures.

But, it has only been in recent years that I have seen the centrality of Christ in *all* of the Scripture. The Old Testament points to Jesus. The Gospels describe Jesus. The Epistles interpret Jesus. Like Art Azurdia, I too resisted this thought as well. I am eternally grateful to God for the training that I received in seminary. I believe that my training was top notch. I was trained to study each text of Scripture and taught how to proclaim the truths of the text as they come out of the text. So much focus was placed upon the text of Scripture and its immediate context, that I had come (perhaps by my assumptions only) to embrace the maxim: Never preach Christ if He is not specifically mentioned in the text from which you are preaching.

It has only been in recent years, since I have been preaching week in and week out, that I have come to see the truth of the centrality of Christ as the overall message of the Bible. Perhaps the words of Jesus Himself have helped me more than any other. Speaking to the religious leaders of the day, Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them is eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). This was a slap in the face to these religious leaders. They were experts in the content of the Bible. But, they had missed the answer. They had all of the clues to the puzzle, and they understood the clues, but yet they couldn't come up with the answer. In John 5:39, Jesus gave us the answer to the Bible. It's all about Him! And it's our joy to discover how the Scriptures speak of Him. And thus, I believe that it is permissible (and preferable) to preach Christ from every text, because He is always to be found in the greater context of the entire message of the Bible.

Now, I don't believe that every text of Scripture speaks *directly* of Jesus. Some have fallen into this error. Rather, it's that there are some great Scriptural themes found in the Bible, which all direct themselves to Jesus. Every text in the Bible helps to build or shape or support these great themes. Let me describe a few themes and examples for you. There is this theme of sin deserving punishment. An example of

that them occurs when Adam and Eve fell. They were cast out of the garden and punished with pain and toil all their days. There is this theme of God being the great deliverer. He delivered the Egyptians from bondage. There is this theme of sacrifice needed for sin. Leviticus tells us in great deal about the sacrifices that needed to be offered. There is this theme of God's faithfulness to provide. He provided manna in the wilderness. He provided a land for Israel to live in. All of these themes point to Christ. Jesus took our punishment upon the cross. Jesus has become our great deliverer. Jesus was the great sacrifice. Jesus is God's great provision for us. In this way, these texts direct us to Jesus.

Each of these themes can be likened to the tollway which takes you into Chicago. You can drive into Chicago on I-94 or on I-90 or on I-88. All other roads simply feed into these major roads. The roads in our neighborhoods hook up with larger roads which feed into the toll-roads, which take us to Chicago. Each Biblical text is like a road that eventually funnels into a toll-way taking you to Christ. The specific passage may not be directly pointing to Christ. But, it leads to the theme of I-90, which takes you to Christ. It's not just that there are a few themes in the Scriptures. There are many. Some are more prominent than others: the role of the prophet, the role of the priest, the role of the king, the suffering of the people of God, the promise of future blessing, God's favor upon the humble, God's choice of His people, and God's wrath upon evil-doers. All of these themes find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. I'm personally very excited to flush these things out for you next year as we travel through the whole Bible together.

So, what does all of this have to do with today? Good question. Here's what it has to do for today. For the past month and a half at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been looking at the cross of Christ. We have seen Jesus suffer at the hands of the Romans, being scourged and whipped. We have seen Jesus being crucified. We have seen Jesus dead and buried. We have seen Jesus risen from the dead and appearing to His disciples. Lest we simply move on and miss the importance of the cross, I want for us to take a few weeks to realize how central the cross was to all of human history.

We need to think about the implication of the cross in our lives. The Old Testament anticipated the cross. The New Testament explains the cross. My message this morning is entitled, "The Centrality of the Cross." It's my purpose this morning to show how the New Testament writers viewed the cross as utterly crucial to the Christian life.

When I was a little boy, I remember taking road trips with my family. As we drove down the highway, we would frequently see brown signs along side of the road, directing our attention to something important. It might be a scenic lookout. It might be a state park. It might be a unique geological formation. And as we drove by these signs, my father would often stop and have us look at what is there. As a little boy, I was usually disappointed at the stoppage, as I was often uninterested in the scenic lookouts and in the geological formations. Whenever he did, I often remember a groan coming from the back of the car, "Do we really need to stop?" As I learned a bit later, this groan also came from the passenger seat where my mother would sit.

You might consider this sermon this morning to be a brown sign along the side of the road as we travel through Matthew. If you groan, thinking to yourself, "Let's keep going on with Matthew," then it is because you don't understand the centrality of the cross. And if you don't understand the centrality of the cross, then this message is definitely one that you should take to heart. We are stopping along side the road to gaze upon the cross of Christ.

For all who name the name of Christ, the cross is central to their lives. The cross isn't some secondary doctrine. The cross isn't something that can be neglected. The cross of Christ lies at the very center of our lives and our ministries. I want to give you four exhortations this morning. My exhortations this week will be centered around the cross of Christ.

1. Believe in the Cross (Rom. 10:9).

Central to the Christian life is the belief in the sufficiency of the work that Christ performed on the cross. This may be obvious to you, but it bears repeating. In Romans 10:9, the apostle Paul distills the truth of the gospel down into one simple sentence. In fact, this is such a good summary, that many of us have memorized this verse. Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." In this succinct summary of the gospel, the apostle Paul puts forward two requirements of the one who will be saved from his or her sin. Both of these requirements focus upon the person and work of Christ. There must be an external confession of who Jesus is. And, there must be an internal conviction of what Jesus did. With the mouth, there must be a confession that Jesus is Lord. And with the heart, there must be the conviction that God raised Him from the dead.

In terms of sequence, it is the heart that will first believe, and then the tongue that will follow in confession. This is what verse 10 says, "with the heart a man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." It is the words of the mouth that express the reality of the heart. Let me illustrate this. Suppose I call one of you up here to the front and ask you to place your hand upon the pulpit. And then, suppose that I take out a hammer and hit your hand which is resting upon the pulpit. What will happen? You will cry out, "Ouch!" What caused you to cry out this way? It was the pain that you experienced! In other words, the reality of the pain caused you to express it with your mouth.

When one believes in the good news of the gospel of Christ, the mouth will confess and rejoice in who Jesus is. This is nicely illustrated for us in the Old Testament. Perhaps you remember the story of the four lepers during the time of Elisha. The Arameans came to attack the people of Israel during a time of great famine in the land. As they came upon a certain city, there were four lepers who were sitting at the gate of the city. Being at the gates of the city, they would be the first ones to fall under attack. They reasoned to themselves, "Why do we sit here until we die? If we say, 'We will enter the city,' then the famine is in the city and we shall die there; and if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us go over to the camp of the Arameans. If they spare us, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die" (2 Kings 7:3-4).

Before the lepers came into the Aramean camp, "the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of

horses, even the sound of a great army," which caused the Arameans to flee, thinking that Israel had allied with the Hittites and the Egyptians (2 Kings 7:6) who were coming to help deliver them. When these lepers finally arrived in the camp, they found it deserted of people, but full of food, drink, silver, gold and clothes (2 Kings 7:8). At first, they had a party, eating and drinking to the fill. And then, they began to take away the silver and gold and clothes to hide them so that they could recover them later (2 Kings 7:8). After a few trips, they realized the error of their ways. They said, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent" (2 Kings 7:9). And so, they returned to the gatekeepers of the city and told them how the Aramean camp was deserted! (2 Kings 7:10).

This is exactly how the one who is saved from his sin will respond. "It is a day of good news, I cannot keep silent! Jesus, the Lord of the universe, has come to this earth to save sinners like me! He died for me, though I might rightly be called His enemy (Rom. 5:10). He sought me when I wasn't even seeking Him (Isaiah 65:1). I deserved to die in my sins, but God gave me the gift of eternal life instead (Rom. 6:23). What amazing grace! It is a day of good news, I cannot keep silent! You, too, can be saved!"

Peter said it this way, "You are a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). God saves us and makes us His people, that we might be a mouthpiece to speak forth of His own glories. One of which is His exalted posture right now! He is Lord!

Should your mouth remain silent and not confess the sovereign reign of Jesus Christ, you cannot be saved. The opposite of Romans 10:9 is absolutely true: "If you don't confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, you will not be saved." Jesus said, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). God doesn't have a secret army of His followers. His followers are bold to profess the name of Jesus. His followers will tell others that they have become disciples of their master, who is King Jesus. His followers will overflow with the good news of their own sins forgiven!

It is not merely the mouth that is important. The heart is all important. Should your heart refuse to believe, you cannot be saved. "If you don't believe in your heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead, you will not be saved." Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Jesus isn't "a" way of salvation. Jesus is "the" way of salvation. You cannot be saved from your sins apart from Jesus. This is what the apostle Peter said, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In other words, the only way to be saved from your sins is by faith in Jesus. To the Philippian jailer, Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Now, please realize that this faith isn't a nebulous, pie in the sky sort of faith. No, it's faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is what Paul means when he says that you must "believe that God raised [Jesus] from the dead." This gives the substance to your faith. It is faith that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead. In this verse, the resurrection is used as the culminating event in Christ's work upon the cross. To believe in the resurrection is to believe in all of the events that lead up to the resurrection: His sufferings, His crucifixion, His death, His burial, and His resurrection.

Do you believe? If you are to be saved from your sins, you must! The cross of Christ is central to your salvation. And the cross of Christ is also central to how you live....

2. Boast in the Cross (Gal. 6:14).

If indeed, the Lord has saved you from your sin, it will have a mighty effect upon your life. We saw in Romans 10:9 that your mouth will speak forth of His excellencies. But, it goes far beyond this. If you believe in the cross, it will affect your thoughts, your attitudes, your minds, your desires, and your speech! Galatians 6:14, "May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

For those who have come to embrace Christ, the cross is everything to them! That's what Paul is saying! So engaged is he with the work that Christ did on the cross for him, that he considers it the uttermost of folly to boast in anything but the cross. Now, this verse does have a double-negative, which makes it a bit tricky to understand. He says that he has no desire to boast in anything, except in the case of boasting in the cross. In other words, Paul says, "I will boast only in the cross!" And so, I exhort you, "Boast only in the cross!"

This is a verse that attacks our culture head on. We are surrounded by university professors who boast in their degrees and in the endless books that they write. We watch television actors who boast in their personalities. We observe football players who boast in their strength. We see the rich and famous who boast in their houses and yachts. But, all such boasting is wrong! The words found in Jeremiah 9 still ring true for us: "Thus says the LORD, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and know Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD" (Jer. 9:23-24).

How is it that we know the LORD? It is only in the cross that we know Him?. How is it that we know of His lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness? It is only in the cross that his love, justice and righteousness shine through for us. It is in the cross that "God demonstrated His own love toward us" (Rom. 5:8). It is in the cross that God demonstrates both His justice and His righteousness. In Romans 3:26, Paul writes that in the cross God has demonstrated His righteousness in that He is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). God is just in that He has punished Jesus for our sins. God is the justifier, in that He has imputed the righteousness of Christ to our account. And then Paul says in the very next verse, "Where then is boasting? It is excluded." Where can we boast? Nowhere but the cross!

In fact, God has saved us in such a way as to exclude all boasting. It is by His grace that He has saved us. He has saved us by giving us the grace to believe! Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast!" Don't boast in your intelligence. Don't boast in your strength. Don't boast in your riches. Rather, boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When you think about it, this is a very strange thing to say: Boast only in the cross. If it doesn't sound exceedingly strange to boast in the cross, it is because your image of the cross is decidedly different than Paul's. When we think of the cross, we think about a nicely varnished furnishing that is often displayed in a church. When we think of the cross, we think of it as a nice symbol for us to wear on as a piece of jewelry around our neck. But, you must realize that the earliest of Christians never would have displayed a cross in their church buildings. Neither would they ever have worn a cross as jewelry, it would have been far too revolting for them. It was only when the cross was no longer used as an instrument of torture in the Roman world that anyone ever used it as an item of adornment.

Let me try to put this in context for you. Imagine that I have just moved to Illinois from Texas. As you begin talking to me, I tell you the story of a poor farmhand, named Santo, who lived a few years ago, but died a tragic death when some of his enemies tied him to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him around the desert in Texas until he finally died. Rather than being sad or distraught over the event, for some reason, I appear to be exceedingly happy as I tell you this story. I tell you that if you believe in the death-ride that Santo experienced, all of your sins may be forgiven you and you will have eternal life. But, not only you, but your whole family as well might join in on this blessing! All you need to do is believe in my friend, Santo, who was dragged around the Texan desert. As you get to know me for a bit, you find out that I'm busy every weekend because I like to gather with some friends who have also come to believe in Santo. When we get together, we speak highly of this pickup truck. In fact, we even sing songs about this pickup truck.

"O mighty, truck
O chain so strong,
They tied his hands,
He dragged so long.

His being dragged,
On rocky roads
Has made the mighty truck,
A ride of life for me."

When we get together, we love to sing and to talk about all the details about the events that took place as Santo died. We talk about the suffering that he endured, the rocks in the road that would have hit his head, and the time he slammed into the cactus. When with my friends, we like to talk about the things that Santo said and the things that Santo did during his short life here on earth. You have even caught me talking to Santo as if he is present in the room with me. On many occasions, I have told you of what I believe and how you need to believe it as well! I have even told you, "I will boast in the pickup truck!" I hope that you catch how strange this is! But this is the reality of boasting in the cross of Christ.

It isn't natural for us to boast about the realities of someone being dragged around a Texan desert until they died. What do we boast about? We boast about great things, like ourselves! Pride is so engrained in our hearts that we all love to speak highly of our accomplishments and our possessions and our abilities and our children! For all of us, these things come naturally. But, boasting in the pickup trucks or crosses doesn't come naturally, unless we see reality.

We see reality when we realize that our ultimate object of value is on the day when we stand before God on the day of judgment. On that day, all boasting in self will become utter foolishness! Suppose you came up to Shaquille O'Neal and said, "Hey Shaq, look at what a great basketball player I am!" You take a basketball, dribble it a few times, and shoot a lay up. Shaq might stand on his toes and dunk and laugh at you. Or, how about boasting about the house you own! Suppose you came up to Bill Gates and said, "Hey Billy, look at what a large house that I have!" You give him a tour of your house (which lasts all of 5 minutes). He would break out in laughter. Mr. Gates might invite you to his home in Medina, Washington, which might be better described as a compound, rather than a house. He has some 66,000 square feet of buildings. His dining room alone is 1,000 square feet. His estate is worth \$140 million, for which he pays more than \$1 million a year in taxes.

[2](#)

If such boasting before others is difficult, try boasting to God about anything! Should you attempt to boast before God about your strength, you will be undone. God created the world in six days with the word of His mouth. Should you attempt to boast before God about your intelligence, you will be embarrassed. God numbered the hairs on your head and has counted all of the stars by name. Should you attempt to boast before God about your riches, again, God will top you by reminding you of Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the LORD's and all it contains."

But, you need to realize, that there is one thing that you can legitimately boast about before God. It is the cross of Christ! You can say to God, "I may not have much, but I have the righteousness of Christ!" God will be silent. Even He cannot top that one! And if you can boast before God of something that you have, it is worthy of boasting before anybody at anytime. As strange as it sounds, we need to be boasters in the cross. Which leads nicely to our next point, ...

3. Preach the Cross (1 Cor. 1:23).

For this point, I want for you to turn over to 1 Corinthians 1:23. This point only makes sense in light of the other two. If the cross is the only way of salvation, and if the cross is the only boast of our souls, then, it only stands to reason that the cross would be at the focal point of our message as well. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified." The cross isn't a popular message. It wasn't popular in Paul's day. It isn't popular in our day.

Some turn away from the gospel because it's not sophisticated enough for them. It's too simple. "Faith in Christ for forgiveness of sin?" they say. "Surely, the great reality of the world must be more complex than that!" And so, some find the gospel to be foolish.

There are others in this world who turn away from this message because it's not flashy enough for them. In this age of high impact cinematography and surround sound, people are looking for something exciting in their religion. A message about a man who dies some

2,000 years ago isn't quite thrilling enough for these people. And so, they ignore the message of the gospel of Christ.

In Paul's day, the Jews were looking for signs in their religion, and the Greeks were searching for wisdom (this is what verse 22 says). And as a whole, neither group of people received Paul's message. The Jews stumbled over the message of their Messiah crucified. They couldn't fathom the thought! They knew from the Scriptures that the Messiah would come with power and great displays of might! Despite the clear testimonies of Scriptures, they could not imagine that He was to die on a cross.

The Greeks considered the message of the cross to be foolishness. In the foundations of the palace of Septimus Severus, one of the Roman Emperors, there is an etched cartoon, which dates back to the early centuries after the death of Christ. The drawing is of a man kneeling before a god, whom he is worshipping. The god is on a cross. The god has the body of a man and the head of a donkey. Beneath the picture of the man worshipping the donkey on the cross is written the words, "Alexamenos worshipping his god." It comes from the second or third century in Rome. It summarizes the world's quarrel with the Christian gospel. To the typical first century Roman citizen, if you were going to worship a god who dies upon the cross, you might as well worship an ass. This is because the message of the cross was foolishness to the Greeks. ^[3]

Despite the unpopularity of the gospel message, it didn't stop Paul from preaching the cross. He said, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). In fact, so focused was Paul upon the message of the cross that he said in chapter 2, verse 2, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." In saying this, it doesn't mean that the resurrection was excluded from his preaching. In 1 Corinthians 15, a passage we have examined often in the past few weeks, Paul spoke about the full content of his message. He said, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to [many]" (1 Cor. 15:3-8). When Paul said, "We preach Christ crucified," it was a simple summary of the entire events of the cross. But notice how focused Paul's message was. He said, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). He declares that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the *only thing* we determined to know among you (1 Cor. 2:2). And he proclaims that Jesus Christ, crucified, buried, and risen is of *first importance* (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

It's the same message that we ought to preach. And when I talk about "preaching," I'm not just talking about the activity that takes place here on Sunday mornings with a man behind the pulpit delivering a nice 50 minute talk. No, I'm talking about any sort of proclaiming that we do. I'm talking about your discussions that you might have with your neighbor or your family member or your friend. When you speak to them, you ought to leave them with the impression that your message has to do with a person who died upon the cross. But, this message isn't only for those who haven't believed. It's the message that you ought to be telling your friends in the church. The message of the gospel is also for believers. That's why Paul said it "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2). When Paul was among the Corinthian believers, the constant words on his tongue were about his Savior. He constantly spoke about the work that Christ had done on the cross on our behalf.

Now, this doesn't mean that he was always chanting, "Christ crucified, Christ crucified, Christ crucified" like a parakeet. When my wife was a little girl, her family had a pet parakeet bird named Cinnamon. They locked the bird up in a room and played a tape over and over again that said, "Come up and see me sometime." As a result, the bird would often say, "Come up and see me sometime. Come up and see me sometime." Paul is not implying that everywhere he went he would use the same words over again, never addressing any other subject except the cross. Rather, it means that the cross was so central to his preaching that all things that he preached were centered upon the cross.

This past week, my family traveled down to Petersburg, Kentucky, where Answers In Genesis, an apologetical ministry, is building a Creation Museum. The aim of the museum is to present a Biblical view of our world, from the creation of the world to the cross of Christ to today. Their projected finished date is in April of 2007. But, we were privileged to spend Thursday morning and Friday morning in the Museum to see the progress that had been made. During this time, we had an opportunity to listen to Ken Ham speak on two different occasions. Over the years, I have heard Ken Ham speak more than a dozen times. Every time that I have heard him speak, he has always had the same message: the book of Genesis is foundational to our faith and it must be believed in order for the cross of Christ to make sense. But, his message has never come across as repetitive, because he has always taken a slightly different angle on his topic. For those of you who have heard him speak, you know what I am talking about.

With Paul, it is the same way. Every time, throughout all of his letters, the message is always the same: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. But, never do his epistles come across as dull or overly familiar, because he is constantly looking at the cross from a different angle. For instance, just think about the issues that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians.

In chapter 1, Paul addresses the issue of personality cults. He writes that only Christ was crucified. Neither Paul nor Apollos were crucified. Therefore, we are all followers of Christ, not of gifted personalities (1:12-13). In chapter 2, Paul addresses the issue of true wisdom. He said that it isn't of the world, for if the world had known it, it would not have crucified the Lord of glory (2:8). But, we have the true wisdom of God, which is found in the cross. In chapter 3, Paul addresses the issue of church growth. Christ laid the foundation through His work on the cross. All who build the church much build it upon Christ (3:11). In chapter 4, Paul addresses the issue of ministry. All ministers of the gospel are to be regarded as servants of Christ (4:1), who has given to us everything (4:7). Therefore, none of His servants are superior. The cross has leveled all playing fields.

In chapter 5, Paul addresses the issue of impurity in the church. He said that Christ was our Passover, that cleansed the church through His sacrifice, and we ought not to allow sin to spread inside of the church (5:6-7). In the first half of chapter 6, Paul speaks about lawsuits being brought up within the church. And so, he reminds the Corinthians that they have been washed and sanctified in the name of Christ, and therefore, such behavior is wrong (6:11). In the second half of chapter 6, the issue of sexual immorality comes up. He says that believers have been joined to Christ, and bought with the price of His blood (6:14-15, 20) As such, they are not to join a harlot, for the body isn't for immorality, but rather for the Lord (6:13, 16). In chapter 7, Paul addresses the issue of marriage and singleness. All of his counsel is filtered through one's relationship with the Lord. He bought you. You are His slave (7:22), therefore, walk consistently. In chapters 8-10, the issue of how to live in community. As Christians, we are free from the religious requirements of the law. Christ has died for me to set me free from

these things. But, Christ has also died for my brother as well. Therefore, I must not act in such way that we might ruin another brother for whom Christ had died (8:11).

In chapter 11, it's the issue of the Lord's Supper, which ought to be eaten in a manner worthy of the Lord, who sacrificed Himself for us. In chapter 12-14, the gifts of the Spirit are the topic. The error of the Corinthians is that they were seeking to exalt one gift above another. In so doing, they were creating dis-unity in the body of Christ, which He purchased with His blood, of which we are all members. But, the gifts are given to unify and to edify the members of Christ's body (12:27; 14:12). In chapter 15, it's the resurrection that gets the focus. Christ really died (15:3). Christ really did rise from the dead (15:4). Therefore, He conquered death and so may we through Christ (15:46-47). In chapter 16, it's the issue of helping other churches financially. There are those in other cities who are suffering for the cause of Christ crucified. It is our obligation to help them.

That's what it means to preach, "Christ and Him crucified." It means that we "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). We think of His sacrifice for us. We think of our resultant union with Him. We think of the gift of His grace, and all of our thoughts and all of actions are placed under His authority.

4. Remember the Cross (2 Tim. 2:8).

Let's look together at Paul's second epistle to Timothy. Timothy was a young pastor of the church in Ephesus. Paul, his spiritual father, was soon to die. He was writing his last advice to his beloved and faithful friend. He says in 2 Tim. 2:8, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel." What an amazing statement! Timothy was probably converted through the preaching of Paul, as Paul referred to him as his "true son in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2). Timothy became very dear to the apostle Paul, as Paul called him "my son" on several occasions (1 Tim. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:1). Timothy traveled together with Paul on some of his missionary trips, where he was no doubt trained for ministry by Paul, himself (Acts 16:1-3). Paul left him in Ephesus to pastor the church there (1 Tim. 1:3). In Philippians 2, Paul tells the church at Philippi that there was nobody else "of kindred spirit," than Timothy (Phil. 2:20). And yet, to Timothy, Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." Or, you might say it another way, "Remember Jesus Christ and Him crucified." In other words, "Remember the message that you are to believe, boast in, and proclaim! It's Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!"

Why do you suppose that Paul reminded Timothy of this? Because he could easily forget. The same is true for us. We can easily forget. It is so easy to lose focus on the central doctrine of our faith. I don't believe that it is any accident that when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He told us to do it "in remembrance" of Him. In so doing, He has given to the church an ordinance that has forced the church to reflect upon the most central event in all of history: the cross of Christ.

It's easy to think that we know all about the crucifixion and have no need to be reminded of it anymore. The day that you are ready to move on from the message of a crucified Christ, is the day that you will drift from the purposes of God! This is what the Galatians did. They heard the message of Christ and repented of their sins and received the Spirit of God. But then, something happened. They drifted. Paul had to warn them, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). In their case, they began to think about the Old Testament law. Sure, they were saved by faith. But, how do laws like circumcision now work into the equation? There were some among the Galatians, who insisted that you must be circumcised to be saved (Gal. 5:2). It works like this:

"Have you been saved by the blood of Christ?"
"Why yes, I have."
"Then, don't you have a desire to please God with all that you do?"
"Of course."
"God commanded His people to be circumcised."
"So?"
"And so, you need to be circumcised to please him!"
"I do!"
"Yes. God commands it. And so, you must do it!"
"And what if I don't?"
"Why then, you cannot be saved!"

The result in Galatia was that those who were saved by faith were attempting to be perfected by the law. And as they began to think this way, they forgot Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, who sanctifies by faith. I'm telling you, it is easy to do. The Galatians went the way of legalism. We aren't exempt from this. It can easily come to us as well. Any number of legal requirements can easily slip into our church, whereby we create these external standards of righteousness that must be kept.

This is especially true of us who have walked with Christ for a number of years and experienced a growth in sanctification. As we have learned to overcome sin, and as we have learned to walk in obedience, there will be this daily temptation to look back and reflect upon our activities of the day and say to God, "I'm pretty good, aren't I? I went to church this morning. I'm caught up in my Bible reading. I've memorized these passages of Scripture this week. I am disciplining my children, just as you have commanded me in your Word. I abstain from alcohol. I read the right version of the Bible. My children are breast-fed, not bottle fed. I home school my children. I don't smoke. We don't have a television in our house." Now, many of these things are good. In fact, I would encourage you in many of these things. But, the tendency for us is to look back on these things as meritorious. And when we ever look upon our Bible reading, our prayers, our commitment to Christ, or our evangelism and boast before God concerning them (however slight our boast), we have missed the cross of Christ. We are forgetting it. We are forsaking it.

In order to prevent this, you need to be constantly preaching Christ to yourself, to your family, to your church members, and to the world. You need to be often reminded that it was at the cross of Christ where you were reconciled to God. Jesus purchased it for me by grace. He obtained it on His merits, and not my own. I don't earn anything by all my righteous living. My righteousness is all a gift from God. To think

otherwise is self atonement. [4]

It is good to live more righteously and holy every day. It's okay to have your convictions about right and wrong. But, they can easily slide into the arena of legalism, whereby you are seeking to plead your own righteous living before God. Before long, such thinking will move into judging others for their weaknesses and failures as they fail to live up to your standard. At some point, you may very well cross a line that says that you can't be a Christian unless you do "x" and "y" and "z."

The solution to these things is focusing your mind and attention upon "Jesus Christ, risen from the dead" (2 Tim. 2:8). And when you do, all these things will be placed in their proper perspective. You will come to see clearly than none of these things ultimately sanctify you before God.

The error of the Galatians is our tendency as well. But there is an opposite error into which some fall. Rather than adding to the gospel, you can take away from it as well. And you take away from it when you forget Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. How many churches begin with a central focus upon Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, only to end up a century or two later denying the very foundations of their faith. This is the story of many denominations. When they started, they held firmly to Christ and Him crucified for sinners. But, over the years, as they got bigger, purchased more buildings, added more staff, and expanded their ministries, they lost sight of the main thing. Soon it was the social cause that attracted their attention. Soon it was the political cause that consumed them. Soon it was the internal strife that hindered them. Soon it was the financial shortfalls that directed their attention to raising funds and slowly, but surely, they drifted. Many have even denied the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! Why? Because they forgot the centrality of the cross! They forgot Jesus Christ, rising from the dead. The same happens to schools: Princeton, Harvard, and Yale all started as seminaries, where preachers could be trained. Over the years, they drifted away from Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Today they stand as bastions of pluralism. Why? Because they forgot the centrality of the cross!

The story is told of a church that was planted upon the gospel of Christ. As the church grew, they built a beautiful, red brick, building. Above the entrance to that building they placed a sign which read, "We Preach Christ Crucified." Everyone who attended that church was constantly reminded of their purpose in this world. But over the years, some ivy began to grow up around the entrance to this church building. This ivy began to cover the big sign above the door. Soon, the sign simply read, "We Preach Christ." The members of the church never quite noticed that this took place, because the sign accurately reflected what was going on from the church. Rather than preaching a crucified Messiah as they had in the past, they were now preaching a loving man as an example of how to live. As the years continued, the ivy continued its encroachment upon the sign, which now read, "We Preach." Again, the people in the church hardly noticed the change in the sign, as the message of the church had become more of a lecture than a gospel proclamation. Some time later, the ivy had covered even more of the sign, to the point where the sign simply said, "We." Again, the church hardly noticed as they were only interested in themselves. By the time the ivy covered the entire sign, the church was forced to shut its doors, due to lack of attendance. How did this happen? The church had forgotten Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. May this not be the case with Rock Valley Bible Church!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on October 23, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Art Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching*, p. 59

[2] I obtained this information from http://www.forbes.com/billionaires/2005/03/10/cx_sc_bill05_0310home.html

[3] I remember initially hearing this illustration from David Jackman, who was speaking at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois on May 2, 2001. Details of this drawing can easily be found on the internet.

[4] I am indebted to C. J. Mahaney and his excellent book, *The Cross-Centered Life*, for the thoughts in the previous two paragraphs.