

The Spoiling of the Church (No 3)

If you wanted a few words to describe the essence of the Christian life it would be hard to improve on Paul's words in Colossians 2:6-7 where he writes, 6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Paul wanted the Church at Colossae to be 'rooted' in Christ. There is a very definite reason why the Apostle wants the Church to be 'rooted' in Christ. It is because Satan is a roaring lion; Satan never tires from 'spoiling' the Church; i.e., carrying away believers into false teaching and error, as an enemy carries away spoil from those he has overthrown! Paul warns the Church of Satan's work in vs. 4, and 8, 4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 8 Take heed lest there be any one that makes spoil of you through philosophy and vain deceit, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.(v.8 RV and NIV)

If you would like some structure to grasp Paul's letter to the Colossians and chapter 2, in particular, let me suggest that at the centre of this chapter, is 'Christ', and at the centre of Christ, is the cross, and on either side of Christ and the cross is the contagious threat of error/false teaching. If you look closely at the chapter you will see that Paul refers to error and false teaching in vs. 4,8. In vs. 9-15, part of the section we have been considering, Paul is concerned to set forth the central tenets of the gospel; Christ and His cross.

And in the concluding verses Paul again returns to the theme of error and false teaching. Christ and the cross are sandwiched between two sections on the danger of false teaching/error that threaten to carry away believers from the truth of the gospel and to their eternal destruction! Still under the overall theme of 'The Spoiling of the Church', let me now consider,

3.The Sentence Cancelled

Let me read vs. 13-15 13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, (or your flesh) God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. This is the 'core' section dealing with Christ and the cross. What is Paul's fundamental teaching in this passage? It is that through Christ/cross the 'sentence has been cancelled'; "having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." Paul is referring to the sentence of God's condemnation and judgement upon human sin via the 'written code' i.e., God's Law of Commandments. This 'written code' pronounces a sentence of judgement upon all law-breakers! It condemns all mankind in their failure to keep the Law.

Three key facts lie behind the cancellation of God's 'judgement' upon sinners.

Sin: *"When you were dead in your sins". Man is sinful; he is perpetually breaking and falling short of obedience to God's commands. Man is 'dead' in 'sins'; cut off from*

fellowship with God, and will incur God's righteous condemnation for his failure if he refuses the gospel!

Supernatural intervention: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, (or your flesh) God made you alive with Christ." This is 'spiritual birth' and 'supernatural birth'; the fact that those at Colossae have become a 'new creation', through faith in Christ.

Status: "He forgave us all our sins". This is God's affirmation in the gospel of their new status; accepted and adopted as God's children.

I will assume that you are familiar with these crucial Christian teachings; the very 'heart' of the Christian gospel and God's grace! So let me return to what Paul is saying in this passage; he is saying that Satan's aim and agenda is the 'spoiling of the Church'; carrying away believers into the error of false teaching. If this is the case, then such 'spoiling' will not fail to seek to contaminate this 'centre piece' of the gospel itself, i.e., the work of Christ on the cross; the doctrine of justification by faith; he will seek to distort this doctrine in such a way that will lead to the spiritual destruction of those who claim to be believers and members of the Church. I indicted last week how 'reductionism' was affecting this crucial teaching. Such reductionist thinking utilizes very significant theological principles of the Reformation like 'grace alone' and 'faith alone', **but fails to carefully explain such Reformation principles and the 'balance' that must be retained in such principles, with the growing tendency towards a disregard for biblical obedience.**

The Church then begins to increasingly adopt an 'antinomian' stance i.e., it begins to think and teach that obedience to God's law is an unhealthy dependence upon works for salvation; obedience to God's law is seen as 'a form of legalism' that has been abolished by 'grace' and plays little part in a believer's salvation! I also said, "a delicate balance must be maintained between the relationship of 'faith' and 'works' / 'obedience', and it requires a thorough theological comprehension if dangerous mistakes are to be avoided." It is for these reason that I said that the way the Church now views salvation represents a massive shift from Reformation thinking. N T Christianity with respect to the doctrine of salvation (and the Christianity expressed in our 1662 P/B/Liturgy) begins with 'conversion'. But it does not 'stop' there. N T salvation anticipates and articulates that following 'conversion' the believer will 'continue' to strive to live in holy obedience to God's law as completed in Christ. And only after a life of continuing obedience will salvation find its 'crowning'! Current Christianity omits the second stage; a life of continued striving towards holy obedience as of absolute necessity to securing final salvation! Therein lies the very grave danger facing those who are deceived with respect to the doctrine of salvation: **there can be no 'crowning' without 'continuing'!**

I believe the Church today needs a radical reappraisal of its doctrine of salvation! Christian believers must begin to take 'obedience' to the gospel seriously; very seriously indeed! Now, in saying such things I am very likely to be misunderstood and accused of teaching salvation by obedience or works.

I am teaching no such thing! But because the Church has been saturated in recent decades by very 'superficial' teaching about salvation; 'abbreviated teaching', 'short-cut'

Christianity; 'popular teaching' because it gives us a good excuse to play down obedience and to ignore our Christian duty, what I am saying sounds very unorthodox indeed! If you understand me to be saying that much of our current Church teaching runs counter to the teaching of the protestant Reformation and our Anglican heritage, then you are hearing exactly what I am saying!

I do not have the time to give you a long defence of my theological position. But let me try to say a few things that support my claims. Of all the fictional material that flows out of the Reformation perhaps the best known, but little read, is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The very title, 'Pilgrim's Progress' spells out Bunyan's view of the Christian life; it is a life of progress; of persisting and of persevering! It starts with Pilgrim's 'conversion', and then the rest of the book is taken up with Pilgrim 'continuing' to keep struggling and persisting in a life of holy obedience – seeking to avoid all the dangers of 'the world, the flesh and the Devil', as the Devil seeks to make spoil of Pilgrim, by carry him away in false thinking and behaving! Now, leaving aside the 'fiction', but it is not really fiction at all, for Bunyan knew the Bible backwards, and was only writing what was the plain teaching of Scripture, nevertheless, let me tell you why I believe our Church has arrived at this deplorable stage in its understanding of the doctrine of salvation. We have 'ignored' our heritage; we have abandoned our Liturgy, and by 'inventing' 'user friendly' patterns of public worship we have become intoxicated in a shallow and superficial theology!

We have ignored our heritage. Listen to a few brief quotations of Cranmer's teaching on the doctrine of salvation from his 'Homily on Faith'. **"No man should think that he has a living (true) faith which Scripture commands, when he lives not obediently to God's laws"...** "Let us therefore, Christian people, try and examine our faith, what it is: **let us not flatter ourselves, but look upon our works, and judge of our faith, what it is .. your deeds and works must be an open testimonial of your faith; otherwise, your faith, being without good works, is but the devil's faith, the faith of the wicked, a fantasy of faith, and not a true Christian faith.**" (The words 'fantasy of faith' are a perfect description of that 'massive shift' in the doctrine of salvation that has taken place in the last few decades.)

Again he says, "so those that be christened, and have the knowledge of God and of Christ's merits, and yet of set purpose do live idly, without good works, thinking the name of a naked faith to be either sufficient for them, or else setting their minds upon vain pleasures of this world do live in sin without repentance, not uttering the fruits that belong to such a high profession; **upon such presumptuous persons and willful sinners must needs remain the great vengeance of God, and eternal punishment in hell...**" At the conclusion of the 'Homily on Good Works' we read these words, **'And travailing continually during your life thus in observing the commandments of God, (wherein consists the pure, principal, and direct honour of God, and which, wrought in faith, God has ordained to be the right trade and path-way unto heaven;) you shall not fail, as Christ has promised, to come to that blessed and eternal life, where you shall live in glory and joy with God forever.'**

Members of the Anglican Church in Australia are meant to give their assent (agreement) to the doctrine or teaching expressed in the Book of Common Prayer (1662). What is its teaching concerning how men and women are saved from God's coming judgement? In answer to that question let me quote directly from Cranmer's Homily on Justification (justification means God's acceptance of us as forgiven) where he says that the apostles taught,

“three things which must go together in our justification; upon God's part, His mercy and grace; upon Christ's part, justice, that is, the satisfaction of God's justice, or the price of our redemption by the offering of His body and shedding of His blood with fulfilling of the laws perfectly and thoroughly; and upon our part, true and lively faith in the merits of Jesus Christ ... out of which faith springs good works ... and a life according to God's commandments”.

Cranmer says, ***“three things which must go together in our justification”.*** In other words, Cranmer says that 'justification' is composed of three parts that must not be separated! Those parts I want to suggest have been separated in the last few decades! One gets the distinct impression that 'works' are 'tacked on' to our 'justifying faith', but they are in no way part of it or necessary to it! While our works/obedience cannot save us, nor do they in any way contribute to our salvation, they are none the less a vital component of true justifying faith, as understood by the Reformers. Faith that rests on Christ for our atonement is relentless in its pursuit of obedience. Without the substitutionary atonement of Christ expressed in Scripture (and reaffirmed at the Reformation) we possess no hope of salvation; but having this hope we must purify ourselves as He is pure! As Cranmer says in the Homily on Faith, ***“No man should think that he has a living (true) faith which Scripture commands, when he lives not obediently to God's laws.”***

We have abandoned our Liturgy.

I cannot run through all the passages of our Anglican Liturgy, let me simply refer to the Collects for Trinity 11 and 13. “O God, who declares your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity; Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of your grace, that we, running in the way of your commandments, may obtain your gracious promises.” (Trinity 11) Notice the 'balance' in the last two phrases; “running in the way of your commandments, may obtain your gracious promises.” Trinity 13 says, “Almighty and merciful God, of whose only gift it comes that your people do to you true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech you, that we may so faithfully serve you in this life, that we fail not finally to attain your heavenly promises.” I read these Collects to reinforce that the constant teaching of the Liturgy is never that of presumption upon God's grace for salvation, but perseverance with God's grace towards a life of continual obedience. The Collects, in fact our whole Liturgy, embodies what Jonathan Edwards declared when he said that biblical salvation was, “celebrating grace while living by God's Law”! This is what our Liturgy is all about: “celebrating grace while living by God's Law”.

Now some here may think that my 'head remains in the past' so to speak, speaking and quoting as I am about 'heritage' and 'liturgy'. Let me say in response that it is not only the past that supports what I am saying. I am grateful that I am not alone in such concerns! Let me quote some words of Prof Anthony Thiselton (Prof of Theology – University of Nottingham in the UK) in his recent book, 'The Hermeneutics of Doctrine'. With respect to the doctrine of salvation he refers to the three Greek tenses that describe

'salvation' in the N T; tenses that describe salvation with respect to an act in the 'past' e.g., 'for by grace you have been saved through faith' (Eph 2:8); then in respect of the 'present' (e.g., "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved (in the process of) it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18); and finally in the 'future' e.g., "For God has not destined us to wrath, but to obtain salvation (something yet to receive) through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:9)

Commenting on these tenses Anthony Thiselton says, "Like people in a lifeboat rescued from a sinking ship, they were saved when they left the sinking ship; they are in the process of being saved as they are carried towards the shore; they will be saved when they finally step onto terra firma. These temporal distinctions have practical significance for the Christian life-style. Christians put their trust in promises and pledges of future salvation, and do not judge the glory of the future consummation by what they perceive in an imperfect Church and fallen world in the present. They are warned against the presumption of behaving like those who think they have already "arrived" (1 Cor 4:8-13). Their present pilgrimage is sober, joyful, and confident, but they remain vulnerable to temptation and the need for self discipline and the assistance of present constraints."

In other words, Christians must be confident about their salvation through 'grace', but also remain vigilant, awake, and always keeping to the path of obedience, utilizing every opportunity to increase in knowledge of God and godliness of life. They must never relax in Christian discipleship with the idea of 'cheap grace' (grace at the expense of godliness); but rather, they must 'see' discipleship as 'costly grace'; costly both for Christ, and costly for us in the surrender of our wills to being servants of Christ, seeking sincerely to live according to His Commandments.

Pastor J Lowe