

NEAC4: Saturday 20 September 2003 at 4.00 pm  
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## **THE CROSS: POWER AND WEAKNESS.**

In the First Epistle to the Corinthians Paul writes:

**"For the proclamation of the CROSS is folly to those are on their way to ruin, but the POWER of God to us who are on the way to salvation... We proclaim a CRUCIFIED Christ: to the Jews an affront; to Gentiles, folly; but to those who are the called (both Jews and Gentiles) a Christ who is God's POWER and God's wisdom. For God's 'foolishness' is wiser than human wisdom, and God's 'WEAKNESS' is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1: vv.18 & 23-25).**

**It is not surprising that the Jewish and Gentile worlds of Paul's day perceived the very notion of a Christ crucified upon a cross as an affront, as folly, as weakness. Death by crucifixion upon a cross was the most shameful, the most ignoble, and the most disgusting of all possible ways to die. The very notion that a "Christ" (the Greek translation of the word "Messiah", meaning "one anointed by God to do God's work") should end his life in crucifixion could be nothing but folly and an ineffective gesture of weakness: a contradiction in terms; an affront to common sense. It outraged Jewish hopes and Gentile respect for rational understanding.**

**Jews and Gentiles alike would expect that any divine agent sent by God would be imbued with divine power to overcome all opposition, if need be by force. But Jesus made himself subservient to a Roman governor, and died a death reserved only for slaves, for terrorists, and by those with no status in society -- a death so humiliating, so brutally agonizing, so abhorrent, so disgusting to good taste, that by common consent the cross was never mentioned in civilised society except if necessary on rare occasions by euphemisms which avoided bringing the revolting process of crucifixion before people's minds. As Jürgen Moltmann observes, by elevating the cross into a silver icon, we obscure its ugliness and repulsive horror, by "surrounding it with roses".**

**It is easy to see why Jews and Gentiles who had not yet become Christians regarded the very notion of preaching the cross as folly, as a contradiction, as preaching ineffective weakness. But Paul's more specific point in these verses is that even Christians at Corinth have moved the cross from the centre of the stage. They had tried to construct in its place a religion that offered a pathway to public recognition, honour, self-fulfilment, and a high status for the self; and this had little to do with the cross or the gospel. It owed more to their cultural background before they became Christians, on which we shall say more in due course.**

**Paul consistently keeps the cross at the centre of the stage. He defines the very Gospel itself as "the proclamation of the cross" in 1: 18. Two or three years before he wrote 1 Corinthians he wrote in Galatians 6: 14: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world**

has been '*crucified*' to me." In Galatians 3: 1 he says that he "placards" (Greek, *prographô*, places on a bulletin board in the public square or city centre) the CRUCIFIED Christ. Three or four years after he wrote 1 Corinthians, he roundly declares in Romans 1: 16: "for I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe"(Romans 1:16), where once again "the Gospel" means the proclamation of the cross.

**What can account for these different and irreconcilable views of the cross? Is it power or weakness?** It is easy to understand how one person may be repelled by what another perceives as life-giving. In the fourth century Chrysostom used to analogies to explain these different apprehensions of the cross. If we become sick or ill, he commented, healthy food may actually repel us, and when we are well again we may long for it. Young children may dislike or even hate what is good for them; but in maturity they will welcome what is for their good. But what of Paul and Corinth?

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**Christians at Corinth see the cross as weakness:** it encourages feeble dependence, and discourages self-reliance and self-promotion.

**Paul sees the cross as power: the power of God's freely-given gift, to give release from sin, and the start of a new life,** freed from the past.

**Christians at Corinth see the cross as weakness:** it has none of the rhetorical power of the professional rhetoricians at Corinth, perceived as Paul's rivals.

**Paul sees the cross as power: power of redemption from bondage, and life under a new Lord.**

**Christians at Corinth see the cross as weakness:** it fails to build on their existing achievements and even sets these aside as irrelevant.

**Paul sees the cross as power: power to enter a new world, freed from blindness and illusion.**

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**This suggests three headings for the remainder of our reflection:**

1. **THE CROSS AS POWER TO BEGIN A NEW LIFE** (Christ through his cross frees us from past penalties and burdens, and gives us new status);
2. **THE CROSS AS POWER TO SERVE A NEW LORD** (Christ through his cross frees us from other competing powers, and makes us his own);
3. **THE CROSS AS POWER TO ENTER A NEW WORLD** (Christ through his cross frees us from blindness and illusion, and gives us new vision).

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**I. THE CROSS AS POWER TO BEGIN A NEW LIFE.** Christ frees us from past penalties and burdens, and gives us new status.

Much as I should like to expound a theology of the cross at this point, I cannot trespass upon the area to be covered by the Archbishop of Sydney. Nevertheless, I cannot do justice to Paul's main point in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians about

misunderstandings of the power of the cross if I omit to point out that these arose because **they focused on what they ACHIEVED rather than on what they RECEIVED: the power of God's freely-given gift. In chapter 4 v.7 Paul diagnoses the Corinthian problem as their obsession with status, self-promotion, and achievement, with the words, "Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not RECEIVE? But if you "received" it, why do you boast as if you did not RECEIVE it?" [1,000]**

The power of the cross operates as sheer, unmerited, gift. In this sense perhaps the simplest exposition of the meaning of the cross is that "Christ did for me what I cannot do (and could never have done) for myself." "He died for me". This means, in turn, that the power of the cross is experienced when God takes the initiative, and determines the cross as the place of meeting and of reconciliation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses this brilliantly. He writes, "If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a 'God' who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says whether He will be... that place is the cross of Christ." This lies at the very heart of any genuinely evangelical exposition of the cross, and it is also where Paul's theology of the power of the cross conflicts most sharply with misunderstandings at Corinth.

For evangelical Christians this is distinctively bound up with the belief that "Christ died in my place", and that the love of God which set this in motion is "love without strings". In more technical doctrinal terms, it is the free, sovereign, grace of God. Evangelicals do not limit the meaning of the atonement to this alone, for the New Testament uses of variety of imagery to expound the meaning of the atonement. Nevertheless what characterises our identity as evangelicals, among other things, is our insistence that this forms and irreducible centre to the proclamation of the cross.

The logic is irrefutable, provided that we leave room for other dimensions. Professor J. K. S. Reid expressed this well. Two distinct principles operate. On one side Christ wins for us gifts and blessings of which he himself had no need: forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, being put right with God. "Christ wins these benefits for us who himself had no need of them". But there is also "a rule of correspondence": "Because he lives, we shall live also"; "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies" (Romans 8: 11). The very earliest Christian creeds and acclamations (from before Paul's letters) include such doctrinal summaries as "Christ was handed over for our sins and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:24, 25); and "Christ died for our sins in accordance the Scriptures..." (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Our critics often ask, "Where does Jesus say all this?" Strikingly, as Bonhoeffer also points out, Jesus says it at the very point at which many liberal thinkers perceive the heart of a liberal gospel to lie. Jesus exclaims: "**Blessed are the poor! Blessed are the mourners! Blessed are the meek!**" and amazingly "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing right**". -Why? How can it be blessed, happy, or lucky, to be one of these? It is blessed because all of these know *their need*: their agenda is *not how to ACHIEVE* that *how to RECEIVE*. Hence Jesus does not say, "Blessed are the powerful", or "Blessed are the achievers"; but

**“Blessed are the persecuted, for they shall be called children of God”** (Matthew 5:3-5, 9, and the parallel in Luke 6:20-21). [1578]

Jürgen Moltmann brings home to us something of the distinctive suffering of Jesus that *in its fullest sense* can only be *“in my place”*. When Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he encounters **“God's silence, the hiding of God's face, the eclipse of God, the death of God, hell... abyss... Jesus died the death of God's Son in God-forsakenness”**. To be sure, there is also a secondary sense of participation in the cross. Paul writes that he experienced a coming to the end of his own strength and what he could bear, to pass on to a **resurrection** experience. **But Christ alone experienced such hell in all its raw depths “in my place”**. **We have been delivered from true hell by the power of the cross.** (1719)

What does this **“power of the cross”**, then, signify for the Christians of Corinth and for us? It means power to begin a new life, because Christ has freed us from the burden of guilt and shame of past sins and past self-centredness. This is what Paul means when he says in Galatians that he glories in the cross of Christ by whom **“the world is crucified to me and I to the world” (6:14)**. He lets anxious care about himself go: care about his sin and failures; but by the same token he leaves in God's hands as a matter of indifference whether his supposed achievements are really achievements or not. Thus he writes to the Christians at Corinth: **“I do not even judge myself; it is the Lord that judges me” (ch.4: v.4)**

We have been released, or to use the Biblical and Pauline word, **“redeemed”**. Paul tells the Christians at Corinth: **“You have been bought with a price” (6:20)**. The word **“redemption”** first came into its own when Israel was redeemed from Egypt. The redeemed could leave behind forever their old life of bondage and fear, to begin a new life, with a new identity and a new status, as God's liberated people. But liberation more redemption is not only redemption *from the past*; and not even only redemption *by a costly act*; *it is also redemption to a new kind of existence*. This brings us to a second aspect of the power of the cross. (1968)

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## II. THE CROSS AS POWER TO SERVE A NEW LORD: Christ through his cross frees us from other competing powers.

Evangelicals have been criticised for seeing the power of the cross only in terms of freedom from the sins and burdens of the past, and for failing to perceive the power of the cross in the present and for the future. We often reply that sanctification *in the present* is the work of the Holy Spirit rather than a direct effect of the cross. But it is both. We receive the Spirit through Christ (Romans 8: 9-11), as Lord (1 Corinthians 12: 3). Christians at Corinth had forgotten that the gifts of the Holy Spirit remain cruciform. Hence Paul's first exposition on the Holy Spirit and being **“spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:6-3:3)** culminates in **“But we have the mind of Christ” (2:16)**.

Here the logic is not only that of substitution (Christ died for me) but also that of participation ("I am crucified with Christ"). By *sharing in* Christ's death, we shall be raised with him in resurrection (Romans 6 and 8: 11).

Paul reminds those at Corinth that they no longer belong to themselves, because their Jesus has redeemed them. He writes, "You have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your whole being" (6:20). This sums up the first six chapters: believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, purchased by Christ's blood from slavery. Until some ten years ago, many explained this on the analogy of pagan deities "purchasing" slaves from Roman or Greek masters to be set free. There are inscriptions from Delphi and elsewhere depicting Athene, Asklepios, and other Greek deities redeeming slaves to enjoy freedom. But, as fresh research corroborates, Paul has a different picture – of a purchase that effects a change of owner as a new Lord.

This relates to the cross in three ways. First, in the first-century a slave's condition depended on the character of the master or Lord, and for what work he had purchased them. This could range from menial, punishing, toil, to that of a manager over the Lord's business, farm, or accounts. Many did exploit slaves as mere personal property; but some were caring masters, who accorded them trust. We could not explain why some who were in difficulties chose to sell themselves into slavery voluntarily unless at least some situations were tolerable. Slavery could be unspeakably dreadful, or it could be very different.

Paul understands the purchase of the Christian as liberating, but only in terms of belonging to Jesus as Lord. He writes, "If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or die, therefore, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7). This is an exultant declaration of trust and obedience to the Lord who taken over the care of us from ourselves to his own wiser, love.

Second, prior to our redemption, we ourselves carried the burden of caring for ourselves. But after our purchase, who has the care of us now? If we do not over-press a merely partial parallel, we may compare the very best possible feudal Lord as he might care for you as his serf: if you died, he would provide for your widow; if you became injured, he would see that you were nursed to health; if you were in need, he would provide. You are his responsibility.

Thus the Lord gives provision to his purchased people for their every need. He provides *protection*. Those of ill intent would think twice before interfering with the slave of a powerful Lord. Thus, similarly, Christ has redeemed us from hostile powers, whether we think of these as non-earthly forces, or more probably in Paul's view, forces of structural, organized, or corporate evil, beyond merely individual hostility. Christians carry the protective mark of Christ's ownership: the seal of the Holy Spirit. They belong to their Lord. He provides *correction*. He does not abandon us to make fools of ourselves or to harm ourselves. Christ is our Wisdom (1:31). He provides *direction*. Paul stresses this to Corinth: he is Lord. We belong to him. (2,700)

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### **III. THE CROSS AS POWER TO ENTER A NEW WORLD: Christ frees us from blindness and illusion, and gives us a new vision.**

The cross opens up a new world of *reality*. It shatters illusion, just, as when we open the curtains, the morning sunshine streams in and disperses the tatters of an idle dream into fading memories of a scrambled, far-fetched, caricature of the world.

One central theme of this Congress has been that evangelicals believe not only in the centrality of the cross, but also in the authority of God's self-revelation in Christ and in scripture. Revelation means, "unveiling", like opening curtains to let in the light. Everything looks different in the light of the cross. What we may have perceived as God's "weakness" becomes manifest as God's power. What we might have perceived as "folly", we now see as God's wisdom. We see with new eyes. For the cross discloses the very heart of God. (2,800)

Among all that we see in a new light, the very notion of "power" takes on a new definition and meaning. Under the legacy of Sir Isaac Newton and 18th century rationalism we have tended to construe power in terms of the machine age. Powerful machines are those that apply the maximum force. After Einstein we may perceive power as energy derived from matter and velocity, but at a popular level, we may still think of power as high-voltage electric current, or as high-speed phenomena. We may conceive of power in the Christian sphere too readily as "high voltage religious experience". And we may be influenced by politics and the social sciences, and think of power in terms of majority votes or shallow but forceful, manipulative rhetoric.

Paul insists that the cross undermines such notions of power. It was the Corinthian Christians who were dazzled by what was supposedly impressive and forceful, was achieved social ends, and what promoted self-esteem. Then notion of Christianity without the cross came dangerously near to the diagnosis of religion put forward by Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century: "the salvation of the soul? -- In other words, the world revolves round me!"

Is this view of power peculiar to Paul? Jesus firmly teaches this also. First, we have already noted that in the beatitudes Jesus exclaims, not "blessed are the powerful"; but "Blessed are the meek, the mourners, the persecuted". Second, in the messianic temptations, Jesus rejected a messiahship based on force, or on an appeal to miracle. He accepted the path of constraint and suffering that led to the cross. Third, in his final entry to Jerusalem he chose the humble donkey rather than the warhorse of worldly power. Fourth, alluding to the cross, Jesus declares, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

Biological sciences help us to understand that Jesus appeals to a fundamental axiom in God's universe. If an organism is defensive and puts up walls for self-protection, what will survive is only the organism itself, with all its limitations. If an organism yields its life and empties itself, there will emerge some transformed life, for which it has yielded its own. "Whoever gains his life shall lose it, and

whoever loses his life shall find it" applies to more than Christian discipleship; it is built into the very structure of creation as God decreed it to be.

Here is Paul's understanding of power, but it remains a thousand miles away from misunderstandings of "power" at Corinth. Christians at Corinth drew from the culture around them notions of power as force, influence, and ability to control others sometimes even by manipulative rhetoric. Hence Paul rejects the demand that he should turn rhetorician and convey the Gospel "with high sounding cleverness". He does not want "to know anything except Christ, and a Christ crucified". Yet-- why is this problem so acute at Corinth?

Corinth was a bustling, thrusting, busy, commercial city. It boasted two harbours, one to the East and one to the West; it controlled the land route between North and South; and it stood at a key crossroads for trade and business. When Julius Caesar re-founded it in 44 BC, Roman soldiers, freed persons, slaves, and entrepreneurs, flocked there to better their position and status. The Isthmian Games nearby guaranteed a huge income from tourism, and generated a vast demand for goods and services. Springs guaranteed a massive water supply for all needs. Paul's Corinth was a *self-sufficient* culture, *obsessed with the desire for self-promotion*; a culture that defied "power" and "success", and assessed truth by what would win approval among market consumers. Plutarch writes contemptuously of those who, having failed to rise by their own ability, try to get to the top by fastening onto influential or wealthy patrons like ivy climbing up a tree.

How could Corinth understand the utterly different "power" that belonged to the cross, or to the grain of wheat that fell into the ground without concern for self-preservation? How could they see Jesus of Nazareth hanging upon the cross of shame and disgrace, as "God's glorious power? Only *the cross itself* could bring about such transformation, by drawing them into its world.

Only thus could they hear Paul's proclamation of the cross as one of *power* (1: 18,24; 2: 1-5). Only thus could *transformation occur over* making church leaders divisive (1:12-17, 3: 5- 4: 21); immorality (ch.5); using law-courts to manipulate fellow-Christians (ch.6); eating food from pagan temples without concern for the vulnerable (ch.8-10); retaining Roman dining customs at the Lord's Supper, thereby giving poorer Christians second-class food in a second-class room, both different from more esteemed guests (ch.11); using freely-given gifts of the Spirit to promote the self, with insensitivity towards others (ch.2-14); overlooking the creative power of God in the resurrection (ch.15). (3,665)

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**How do we compare with Christians in Corinth? Or does this very question lead us into a trap? Augustus Toplady wrote:**

**“Rock of Ages cleft for me,  
 “Let me hide myself in Thee.  
 “Let the water and the blood,  
 “From thy riven side which flowed,  
 “Be of sin the double cure,  
 “”Cleanse me from its guilt and power.**

**“Nothing in my hand I bring,  
 “Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
 “Naked come to Thee for dress;  
 “Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
 “Foul I to the fountain fly;  
 “Wash me, Saviour, or I die.”**

**Yet Isaac Watts captures even more strongly the “New World” of the cross:**

**“When I survey the wondrous cross,  
 “On which the Prince of glory died,  
 “My richest gain I count but loss,  
 “And pour contempt on all my pride.”**

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"For the proclamation of the CROSS is folly to those are on their way to ruin, but the POWER of God to us who are on the way to salvation... We proclaim a CRUCIFIED Christ: to the Jews an affront; to Gentiles, folly; but to those who are the called (both Jews and Gentiles) a Christ who is God's POWER and God's wisdom. For God's 'foolishness' is wiser than human wisdom, and God's 'WEAKNESS' is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1: vv.18, 23-25).

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