

## **The People of the Cross**

Someone may say: "Since I was born into a Christian family and my national identity card says I am a Christian, then I am a Christian, right?" My answer is, No, wrong! That is not what the Bible teaches a Christian is!

Another person may say: "Since I was baptised when my family took me to church, and I later confirmed the meaning in front of the visiting Bishop, then I am a Christian, right?" Again my answer is, not necessarily.

A third person may say: "Because I was carefully immersed in river water as a believing adult, by my own choice, then I am a Christian, right?" I still reply, not necessarily.

Someone else says: "I can speak in tongues, so I must be a Christian, right?" Again, I'm sorry, but no!

The Bible teaches clearly that there is no outward observance, no ritual to be performed, no written ceremony nor any visible or audible phenomena that can give indisputable evidence that a man or a woman has become a genuine Christian – a real follower of Jesus Christ.

Some of the earliest Christians were those who became Christians when Barnabas and Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ through towns and villages in what is now south east Turkey, where modern Europe meets West Asia.<sup>1</sup> Even these first century Christians were not immune from the danger of turning away from the true gospel and following a similar one – *one where believing the truth was being replaced by a false belief in practices.*

Paul wrote to them, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all", Galatians 1:6-7. False teachers were saying that to be a Christian peoples' bodies had to be circumcised. Paul said, "No! Nothing we can do to, or with, our bodies will make us Christians".<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament tells us that becoming and being a Christian involves coming to the cross, beginning to understand all that was happening when Jesus Christ died there,

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 13 & 14; Acts 16:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:1-16.

personally applying it to yourself, and so becoming a new creation of God from that moment forward.

In saying “come to the cross”, I am not describing a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (as a Muslim will try to do the haaj, journeying to Mecca). I am not even talking about church attendance. *This personal encounter with the crucified Lord Jesus Christ can happen anywhere.* You can be sitting in a quiet corner of your home, or walking out in the pasture fields, or kneeling under a tree by the riverside. *Anyone can meet Jesus at the cross anywhere they are.* All you need to do is to try!

It is too easy to make a cross out of wood, or to go to a building with a cross fixed to it, or to wear a cross around your neck, or to carve a cross on your walking stick, and then to think, “I am a Christian”. Some people live their entire lives mistakenly thinking that doing these three or four things changes a person into a Christian. Let me emphasise again this is not so! It may mean you are not a Muslim! But that by itself does not make you a Christian! The title of this chapter, “The People of the Cross”, means so much more. Please come with me as I try to explain.

### **Second birth is necessary to be an authentic Christian**

A second birth is the key to the Christian life. Jesus described it five times as becoming “born again” and being “born of water and the (Holy) Spirit”, in John 3:1-8. The second birth is an internal experience. The truth of this experience will of course become evident externally in a person’s life. But nothing external anyone can do actually starts that new life off. The start is an act of God, not a human act. As a person grasps hold of the meaning of the cross of Christ – which God is revealing to them – God’s Spirit creates in them a second (new) life. The person discovers Christian standards to live by. They choose to do so. They develop an increasingly Christian lifestyle. This is not the way we live in order to earn our salvation. It is the other way around. Because we have become Christians, this is how we live. We choose against our old (natural) way of life and we choose positively for our new (Christian) lifestyle.

When a young man or a young woman leaves their home village and journeys to university in the big city he or she leaves behind certain things while learning others. Perhaps a tribal language is set aside for the national language. Family and village customs are replaced by university traditions. Dress, eating habits, daily routines may all have to change as life at university begins. Once accepted as a student by the university, the challenge of a new life has begun for the student.

Becoming a Christian is similar – though not exactly the same – as this. The student has earned the right to attend university. No-one earns the right to become a Christian. It is an act of God's grace, Romans 3:21-26.<sup>3</sup> The student has changed the place where he lives. The Christian is to live her new life in the same place she was before, but now she has new values, John 17:6-19.<sup>4</sup> The student will probably return home during or after university, and will again speak her old tribal language. For the Christian there is no going back to the way things were before being born again, 2 Corinthians 5:17. The cross of Christ is not a place to develop an old life into a new one. It is the place of death to the old life. It is the place of new birth into the Christian life, Romans 8:12-17.<sup>5</sup> Our Lord Jesus Christ carried His cross through Jerusalem's streets. He was later crucified on it. His followers are told to take up their own cross every day and to follow Jesus, Luke 9:23.<sup>6</sup> Unless we choose against our own natural desires and choose to live the way our crucified Lord Jesus has called us to, then we are NOT people of the cross. We are NOT disciples of Jesus Christ, whatever we may think.

When we believe in Jesus our values change. The freedom we enjoy to live is not for self-indulgence. In fact it produces self-control. We do not have to follow our natural desires any more. The crucified person is a person *of* the cross because he or she is a person *on* the cross! He lives, not his old life, but a new life in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Notice verse 24 God's grace freely justifies a person through the costly atonement He made.

<sup>4</sup> Notice verse 15 where Jesus prays His followers will be kept faithful in the world.

<sup>5</sup> Notice verse 13 how the new life is shown to be being lived.

<sup>6</sup> It is no accident that the most frequently recorded saying of Jesus in the Bible is, "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it", Matthew 10:39; Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; Luke 17:33; John 12:25. Every time Jesus says this He is encouraging His followers to choose against their natural desires and to choose to follow Him.

### **It is what God does for us that counts (not what we do for Him)**

“One of the saddest features of Islam is that it rejects the cross, declaring it inappropriate that a major prophet of God should come to such an ignominious end. The Koran sees no need for the sin-bearing death of a Saviour”.<sup>7</sup> Islam as a religion encourages a person to work towards earning salvation by their own merits. The belief that ultimately a person’s good deeds will be balanced against their bad, and the hope that there will be a credit balance, are the salvation Islam offers. The problem for every Muslim (and everyone else) is that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”, Romans 3:23.

“The cross is at the centre of the evangelical faith....Evangelical Christians believe that in and through Christ crucified God substituted himself for us and bore our sins, dying in our place the death we deserved to die, in order that we might be restored to his favour and adopted into his family”.<sup>8</sup> This is divine satisfaction through self-substitution. “God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us”.<sup>9</sup> “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”, Romans 6:23. I do not have to rely on my own good deeds for salvation. Instead, I rely on Jesus – the great Saviour.

I am aware of the many bloody wars in Sudanese history. Some have been internal while others were against external enemies. Despite all this bloodshed one fact still remains. *The most important blood shed for Sudan will always be the blood of Jesus!* Without the blood of Jesus applied to a person’s life, he or she remains destined to face the wrath of God. The person who rejects God’s loving offer of salvation through Jesus’ blood will experience God’s holy and loving wrath against sin on Judgement Day, Hebrews 9:27-28.

Human pride is an enemy of the cross of Jesus. Most of us would rather save ourselves than be saved by someone else. But God demands that we humble ourselves before Him, James 4:7-10; 1 Peter 5:6. We caused Jesus to be crucified! It was sin – mine and yours – for which Jesus died. Yes, Jesus died *for* us, but we caused Him to die! Our pride must be broken into

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<sup>7</sup> John Stott The Cross of Christ (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1986, p.41.

Sura liii.38; xxv.18; xvii.15; xxxix.7 and vi.164 are among passages in the Quran which reject a suffering Saviour.

<sup>8</sup> John Stott The Cross of Christ (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1986, p.7.

<sup>9</sup> John Stott The Cross of Christ (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1986, p.160.

personal repentance. Among Jesus' first ministry words were, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near", Matthew 4:17.<sup>10</sup> Only when we repent can we genuinely rejoice through faith in the forgiveness of all our sin and in God's gift to us of newness of life.<sup>11</sup>

Notice there is a difference between an objective understanding of the cross and a subjective understanding of the cross. An objective understanding is based only on facts and evidence, and not influenced by personal feelings or beliefs. A subjective understanding is based on your own feelings and ideas, and not on facts. In relation to the cross of Jesus, the fact is, it is what God did there that counts!

"God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood", Romans 3:25. God Himself became Jesus, to become the one who would turn aside His own wrath against sinful man by taking upon Himself the punishment all of our sin deserved. Because He has done this, He can now be our Saviour. We do not have to stand on our own. The choice is ours.

"And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life", 1 John 5:11-12.

### **A different view of suffering**

I know myself that it is hard to bear suffering in life. Physical pain, emotional disturbance, the never-ending grief of loss, are tough to live through. But I am trying to learn that a correct understanding and appreciation of the cross of Jesus helps every Christian see suffering in a different way.

Our Lord Jesus Himself lived on earth *in order to suffer and to die*. He saw that His suffering was necessary. He accepted it was planned by a loving Father's hand and for a far greater good than His own ease or comfort. The gospels tell us that when Jesus introduced the idea of a suffering Saviour to His followers they did not understand – perhaps in part because *they*

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<sup>10</sup> "God commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead", Acts 17:30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Twice Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you too will perish", Luke 13:3,5.

*did not want to understand!* Yet Jesus kept on bringing His suffering and its purpose to their attention, see for example in Mark 8:31-32; 9:9-13; 9:31; 10:32-34; 10:35-45; 12:1-12; 14:3-9; 14:22-25; 14:43-50.

“People seem to me to forget that all Christ's sufferings on the cross were *fore-ordained*. People seem to me to forget that all Christ's sufferings on the cross were *only necessary for man's salvation*. People seem to me to forget that all Christ's sufferings were endured *voluntarily*, and of His own free will. I see nothing painful or disagreeable in the subject of Christ's cross. On the contrary, I see in it wisdom and power, peace and hope, joy and gladness, comfort and consolation. The more I keep the cross in my mind's eye, the more fullness I seem to discern in it. Reader, the cross is *the grand peculiarity of the Christian religion*”.<sup>12</sup>

Authentic Christians bear on their bodies, minds and spirits marks of an earthly life scarred for Jesus. They will have been persecuted, 2 Timothy 3:12; Matthew 5:10-12. They will have been matured through sufferings, James 1:2-4; Hebrews 12:1-12. Such Christians also show a knowing understanding in their minds, Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 3:1-3. Hopefully, they also reveal the grace of the Lord Jesus in their spirits, Galatians 6:14, 17-18.

“Paul never gloried in his *national privileges*. He never gloried *in his own works*. He never gloried *in his knowledge*. He never gloried *in his graces*. He never gloried *in his churchmanship*”.<sup>13</sup> But Paul did glory (boast about) the cross of Jesus, Galatians 6:14. In the Bible “the cross” sometimes means the wooden cross. “The cross” also sometimes means the afflictions and trials. But “the cross” also means in some places, the doctrine that Christ died for sinners upon the cross—the atonement that He made for sinners, by His suffering for them on the cross—the complete and perfect sacrifice for sin which He offered up, when He gave His own body to be crucified.

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<sup>12</sup> J.C. Ryle 1816-1900 [The Cross of Christ](#) (Drummond's Tract Depot, Stirling, Scotland).

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*My challenge is to suffer as a Christian should suffer, not as a worldly person.* “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good”, 1 Peter 4:19.<sup>14</sup> Do I find myself growing weary and losing heart? Do I draw back rather risk spilling my own blood?, Hebrews 12:3-4. Do I stop reading part way through Philippians 3:10-11? The first part is easy, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection”. The second part is very tough, “and (I want to know) the fellowship of sharing in his (Jesus’) sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead”.

In Jesus’ life on earth He first met His own death and it was followed by His resurrection. For us, we first meet the risen Lord Jesus and then we learn daily to die to ourselves, 1 Corinthians 15:31; 15:57-58.

Two of the most challenging Bible verses I know are these: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God”, 1 Peter 4:1-2. These verses surely have to be carefully linked with 1 Peter 3:17. Taken together they mean that ‘obeying God, in spite of the suffering it causes, helps the Christian to break from his old sinful life’. See Romans 6:6-7. To live for the will of God means I accept I will often not get what I want!

It is so *easy to say*, “God the Father knows best”. It is *unbelievably tough to live* uncomplainingly with pain and hardship and so to show that you really believe that your Heavenly Father is outworking His best purpose, Romans 8:28. In the eyes of much of humanity I may be disabled, but in the eyes of my God the most important thing is am I faithful to Him? Do I love God more than I love my precious earthly life? Matthew 22:37-40; Matthew 5:29-30; Matthew 18:8-9; Matthew 6:25-34; James 1:3.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter has a lot to say about suffering: 1:6;1:11; 2:19; 2:20; 2:21; 2:23; 3:14; 3:17; 4:1; 4:1 again; 4:12; 4:13; 4:15; 4:16; 4:19; 5:1; 5:9; 5:10.

### **A regular reminder in church life, for our daily lives**

Why did Jesus want Christians to remember Him in a Communion<sup>15</sup> with bread and wine? Different churches have slightly varying forms and rules governing the Communion service, but the central theme of something to remember is common to all Protestant churches. Communion symbolises a dead body and spilt blood. The bread represents Jesus' dead body and the wine represents Jesus' life-blood spilled out. *Both* speak of His suffering and death!

Paul's gospel was, "the message of the cross" and he wrote, "we preach Christ crucified", 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. When Paul baptised new believers they were "baptised into his (Christ Jesus') death", Romans 6:3. Paul's teaching was that the Lord's Supper proclaims "the Lord's death", 1 Corinthians 11:26. These summaries of early Christian teaching do not focus on Jesus' life, nor on His resurrection, but they do focus on His death.

When we take communion, every Sunday morning in my local church, we remember together the death of our Saviour Jesus for us all. We are also reminded that we are individually called to take up our cross and follow Him. The cross was always on the mind of Jesus. He wants it to be always on our minds too! This is why we have Communion. And we should regularly think deeply about the meaning.

"The communion service is a supper served by a minister from a table, not a sacrifice offered by a priest on an altar".<sup>16</sup> The sacrifice for humanity's sin was made once and for everyone at Calvary by the Lamb of God, John 1:29; Hebrews 7:27; Hebrews 9:28; Hebrews 10:10-12. I like the picture of a *supper* because it reminds me of a meal, necessary for my daily health and strength. Present day *sacrifices* that please God are praising Christian hearts and voices, plus Christians doing all the good we can to everyone we possibly can share with, Hebrews 13:15-16. Seen in this way our Communion reminds us that our focus in life is largely outward, towards other people, and not inward towards ourselves. We believe what

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<sup>15</sup> Communion (with a capital C) "a Christian ceremony in which people eat bread and drink wine in order to remember Jesus Christ". Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

<sup>16</sup> John Stott The Cross of Christ (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1986, p.262, where Stott summarise Thomas Cranmer.

God has done within us and we live to show everyone what God has done, Ephesians 1:7-8; Colossians 1:13-14.

“The cross is not an elementary stage (of the Christian life) which we later grow out of. We never graduate from the school of Calvary. And the Lord’s Supper continually brings us back to it”.<sup>17</sup> Every week at communion I make a recommitment to accept by faith Christ’s work for me. Then every day I try to make the right choices in my own life to show I am a disciple of “Jesus, who was crucified”, Matthew 28:5.

### **Conclusion – Christians are to be a holy people**

Living with the cross uppermost in thought is the way to live in holiness.

”Notice that although Paul mentions only one cross, he refers to three crucifixions on it. First, there is of course the crucifixion of Jesus. Secondly, “the world has been crucified to me”. Thirdly, “I have been crucified to the world”. Thus Jesus Christ, the godless world and we ourselves have all been crucified on the same cross”.<sup>18</sup>

My daily life-choices, and I suggest the daily life-choices of every Christian, must be made in view of these three crucifixions.

- I must not do anything that would make Jesus’ death any worse for Him.
- I must not do anything in response to the glitzy and enticing (but dead-ended) world around me.
- I must not listen to my old master (self) since my new Master (Jesus) has paid for me to serve Him. Here is one kind of slavery – or servanthood – even Sudanese Christians must embrace for their own.

The cross is a place of death, not a place of mere redirection! Beware people who preach a well-meaning cross, but false cross that is not really Christian. “In coming to Christ we do not

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<sup>17</sup> John Stott, Evangelical Truth, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1999, p.91.  
The whole of chapter 2, The Cross of Christ, pages 81-100, is uplifting reading.

<sup>18</sup> John Stott, Evangelical Truth, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1999, p.96.

bring our old life up onto a higher plane: we leave it at the cross". "In Roman times, the man who took up his cross and started down the road was not coming back".<sup>19</sup>

Holy living without putting to death our old selves is not difficult – it is impossible! Holy living is letting the risen Lord Jesus live in us and through us. Other people looking on will see Jesus in us. That will attract them to become real Christians too.

Jesus died alone, rejected by His people, deserted by His followers – to create a community made up of all kinds of people, but who all share a new life! Lifted up Jesus drew people to Himself from every nation and tribe under the sky. And He still does it today! Even in a Moslem controlled Sudan. No country is ever closed to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He has a habit of appearing where He is not expected. I urge you to join me in living and in dying for His glory.

### **Discussion guide.**

*Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:*

1. Share with the group your personal encounter with Jesus Christ.
2. Describe as best you can *how* a person is "born again", John 3:3.
3. Give examples of how people's values change when they live as genuine Christians.
4. Why is it sad that Islam rejects the death of Jesus on the cross?
5. Why do you think Jesus' disciples did not want to hear about a suffering Saviour,  
Mark 8:31-35?
6. Should a Christian bear sufferings in a different way to a non-Christian?  
Why? How?
7. Describe one type of slavery that Sudanese Christians must not avoid living.  
Consider John 8:34-36; 2 Peter 2:19; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.
8. Explain why the Communion service "proclaims the Lord's death", 1 Corinthians 11:26.

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<sup>19</sup> A.W. Tozer Renewed Day by Day (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House) 1980, reading for January 5<sup>th</sup>.