

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The power of God unto salvation

Presented by Bob Smith

If I had ten dollars for every paragraph of theology I've read I'd be quite a wealthy person. However if you were to ask me to quote from memory some of the great statements I'd read I would be hard pressed to come up with more than a handful. I could talk for a long time on the great themes of theology, but easily remembered quotes are bit more difficult. To some extent this is understandable; after all theology means the study of God and it is obvious that the human mind could never grasp the immensity of God, just as the human mind cannot grasp the immensity of the universe.

But one quote I do remember comes from the late Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of recent times. Just before he died he was asked to sum up his life's teaching in a few words, and he chose that old Sunday school song; *"Jesus loves me: this I know, for the Bible tells me so."*

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Many of us who have to drive through busy city traffic complain about the mass of street signs and traffic notices we are supposed to obey while trying to drive safely on already congested roads. Those signs and notices, which originally were there to guide us, now tend to confuse us because there are so many of them. We suffer from information overload. To make it worse the signs sometimes seem to be contradictory like the overhead traffic signs on the Princes Highway at Kogarah that have white arrows pointing right, indicating that those lanes are for turning right, but then have regular stop lights at the side of the road.

The first time I encountered that intersection I nearly caused an accident by thinking the overhead lights with the white arrows were telling me I could turn right and then realising the red light meant I needed to stop. I realised just in time that the red light at the side of the road was the one to obey not the white right turn arrow in front of me; but not having encountered that before it was confusing when I only had a split second to work it out.

Doug Lansky, a travel writer and photographer has collected photos of such signs from around the world. They include a white highway sign that says, "Entrance Only / Do Not Enter;" a yellow sign that says, "Not a Through Street" but has below it a white arrow pointing straight ahead and the words, "Evacuation Route." And another is a sign that says, "Invisible Fence Now Open". No wonder drivers get confused!

Well, it's not only government departments that, in their attempt to give guidance, end up creating confusion. Religious organisations do it too. Over the past two thousand years the Christian church has grown from its humble beginnings to be an enormous and complex organism which attempts to express the good news of the gospel in a multitude of ways that are even more complex still. We have accumulated layer upon layer of dogma that, though well-meaning, have left most people more confused than ever: Mortal sins that send us to hell and venial sins that don't; religious rituals that guarantee grace if we perform them and the opposite if we don't; pleasures that are harmless and others that are definitely sinful, and so it goes on.

The end result is that most people still tend to think that being a Christian means living in such a way as to ensure that, when the final balance sheet of their lives is examined by God, they will still be in credit, and that the good in their lives will outweigh the bad. The sad thing about this is that it is the very opposite of the way it all started. Like the great Karl Barth, we need to remember that the Gospel is the good news, so succinctly expressed in that children's chorus; *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."*

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In the first chapter of the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul says; *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes."* And what I want to say to you today is that, despite the fact that the study of God is the study of something far beyond the capacity of our mind, it is of the utmost importance that we remember what the simplicity of the Gospel is; because the salvation of our souls is based on it, not on the accumulated clutter of twenty centuries of church dogma and tradition.

And what is that Gospel? Well Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. He says *"I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..."* Just about every religious system that has ever been has taught that the way to God's favour is either by placating God through religious rituals, or by living in such a way that the good in us outweighs the bad. In other words we earn our way to Heaven. But the Bible teaches that it doesn't work that way.

The Bible describes us as beings that are separated from the life of God by our own inherent sinful human nature. The word in the original language which we translate 'sin' was the Greek word 'hamartia' which literally means, 'missing the mark.' The image is that of shooting an arrow at a target and not hitting it. It doesn't matter whether you miss by a centimetre or kilometre, you still miss. It is this unescapable fact of our human nature that separates us from a holy God.

The good news - and that's what the word 'gospel' means - is that God alone has done what had to be done to bridge the gap between us. He sent his Son amongst us, first to teach us by word and deed how great his love for us is. Then to die as a sacrifice for our sins and, in a way that we cannot fully understand, become what we are and take upon himself the consequences of our sin, which is separation from God. Finally, to rise from the dead and send his Spirit into our hearts, bringing the very life of God within us.

We are, in a sense, like a cut flower in a vase which, though it may look beautiful, is in fact dead because it has been separated from its roots which draw from the life that is in the soil, and after a few days will wither away. But Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has reconnected us to the source of spiritual life; to God. That's the Gospel - the good news. It is God's gift to us. We can't make it happen. All we can do is accept God's gift by faith and then, through a life that is committed to him, allow his Spirit to transform us more and more into that life of God.

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It's only when we get back to the simplicity of the Gospel that we start to see how much the centuries of accumulated religious dogma has clouded the message and confused us. It was that realisation that brought peace to a brilliant but overly conscientious German monk named Martin Luther, and resulted in what came to be the Protestant Reformation. Two centuries later the Protestant Churches had succeeded in clouding the message again with more accumulated dogma. Then a young Anglican minister named John Wesley found

peace for his troubled conscience in that same realisation - that none of us can earn our way into God's favour by our own merits or by religious rituals, but solely by accepting God's free gift of forgiveness and new life by faith. The result of that realisation was the Great Evangelical Awakening that also led to the rise of modern evangelicalism. The Apostle Paul described this message as "*the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*" - and it still is.

John Stott, an Anglican minister from London renowned as one of the foremost evangelical scholars, writers and preachers of this age, tells about a time when he was to preach at the University of Sydney but had lost his voice. Writing about this he says:

What can you do with a missionary who has no voice? We had come to the last night of the [evangelistic campaign]. The students had booked the big university hall. A group of students gathered around me, and I asked them to pray as Paul did, that this thorn in the flesh might be taken from me. But we went on to pray that if it pleased God to keep me in weakness, I would rejoice in my infirmities in order that the power of Christ might rest upon me. As it turned out, I had to get within one inch of the microphone just to croak the gospel. I was unable to use any inflection of voice to express my personality. It was just a croak in a monotone, and all the time we were crying to God that his power would be demonstrated in human weakness. Well, I can honestly say that there was a far greater response that night than any other night. I've been back to Australia ten times now, and on every occasion somebody has come up to me and said, "Do you remember that night when you lost your voice? I was converted that night."

Well, it's time for us again to step back from the complexity of competing religious and philosophical formulas and fix our eyes again on that central message of the Gospel, that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again, and to base our faith on that message which, on the one hand, is so simple, but which is also profound beyond our understanding.

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St Augustine, one of the greatest theological thinkers of history, once saw a boy running backwards and forwards from the sea shore to a lagoon with a bowl full of sea water that he would pour into the lagoon. Augustine asked him what he was doing and he said he was trying to empty the sea and fill the lagoon. Augustine realised that that was exactly what he, as a theologian was trying to do - to exhaust the knowledge of God and pour it into human understanding; and just as that boy could never do that with the sea, neither can we do it with God; God is too big.

But God has given us what we can understand; it is the message that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. He became what we are so that we could become what he is. Though we can never exhaust the depths of this message, we can understand it, and it still is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

*Father, help us to realise that nothing we can do can bridge the gap between your life and ours, but to accept by faith that in Jesus you have already done it for us. **Amen***