

The 16th Annual Columbus Day Weekend of Evangelicals Concerned
Ocean Grove, New Jersey, October 5 – 7, 2018
Three Centennials on Christian Liberty, 1918 – 2018
Gardner C. Taylor, Billy Graham & Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn
Dr. Ralph Blair's Centennials Lecture and his Three Sermons for the Occasion

“Liberty – therefore, Gratitude”

One Sabbath, in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus stood up to read the Scripture. Isaiah's scroll was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found where it is written: “The Lord's Spirit is upon me. He has anointed me to proclaim *good news* to the poor, liberation to the oppressed, recovery of sight for the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on Jesus, as they awaited *his* words. Here's what he said: “*Today, in your hearing, this scripture is fulfilled.*” (Lk 4:16ff; Isa 61:1f)

Paul shared this tremendous good news, writing to Galatians: “Christ has set us *free!* We're *really free!* Hold on to that freedom. Don't ever again be slaves to the Law.” (Gal 5:1)

In Christ, we're *really freed* from all of the legalist demands and rituals. Therefore, our only *reasonable response* is *genuine gratitude*, lived out daily, fully and affordably, in our freedom, as we follow Jesus, in the continuing proclamation and active demonstration of this Good News to all of the poor and oppressed.

Well, all have always known *half* of the Bible's message. All sense their poverty and oppression, however poorly they diagnose it, however poorly they prescribe their remedies. Paul summed it up in these words: “All have sinned, and all fall short of God's glorious goal for us all”. (Rom 3:23)

That, “all have sinned” and “all fall short”, was *not at all, news* to anyone in the ancient world. It's *not at all, news* to anyone today. Nobody, anywhere, at any time in all of human history, has been without an *anxious awareness* of *not measuring up*. Nobody has been without a gnawing sense of *guilt*. And, nobody has been without a *fear of being caught*.

No people group, from the most primitive to the most progressive, from the poorest to the most prosperous, has ever been found without pseudo-solutions for trying to deal with this unavoidable awareness of guilt and anxiety over not measuring up, of falling far short. They've tried to cope by way of what's recognized as “religion” – shifting blame from themselves to animal sacrifices or a scapegoat, trying to appease deities, trying to put them in their debt. Coping later evolved into psychotherapeutic terminology in which fault was shifted to a parent or to society-at-large. Today, sociopolitical identities of race and gender try to *shift* the blame from “us” to “them”, a pluralizing of individualized blame games and a duplication of ages old nationalist rivalries. Such blaming has more lately metastasized on steroids of intersectionality whereby an accumulation of “approved” identities over against *disdained* identities attempts to assuage the unwanted sense of not measuring up.

But such blaming only gets everyone more mired in a mess, for blaming can't remove our own sense of not measuring up. Finding fault with others can't remove the sense of guilt that *prompts* the blaming that, then, only *amplifies* our sense of inferiority, and, predictably, brings on a *retaliating* backlash of blame from those who, likewise, sense they don't measure up.

So, all *fail* to solve the problem of guilt when they try to cope with guilt on their own. Their own guilty consciences constantly accuse them, of what they can't, on their own, escape, for they

do buy into their own sense of not measuring up. They, themselves, experience their falling far short.

So they try to cope by using drugs, by getting dead drunk or by dropping dead, whether by intent or by accident.

They try to get affirmation, but cannot buy into it, even if those from whom they seek such affirmation can somehow afford to mumble some semblance of such, out of their own distracted sense of inferiority.

No such efforts ever do anyone any good. Neither does any effort at any *unbelievable* posturing of one's so-called "self-esteem". No *seeking* for affirmation, no *self-affirmation*, no popularity, no monetary gain, can do it. Nothing works to work *one's way* out of a pervading sense of sin and guilt and its final payoff.

There's no comfort in one's own cover-ups that can't cover up one's own sense of self that doesn't measure up. There's no easing of ever-experienced anxiety that dreads exposure of one's sin and guilt. There can be no real gratitude in a life governed by unrelieved guilt.

Nothing but *that other half of the Bible's basic message* will do it. And here's that *Good News* that Paul shared with Romans, when he put this way: "By the *free gift of God's grace all are put right with God through Christ Jesus, who sets them free.*" (Rom 3:24)

Paul repeats this *Good News* in all his letters. He proclaims it to Corinthians like this: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting *their sins* against *them.*" (II Cor 5:19)

Postmodernists may be *unaware* of *Paul's texts*, but *their own prefabricated pretexts* for all their *paranoid* blaming and *perfumed* boasting are attempts to cover up the stinking seepage of their own sense of sin that they do, indeed, smell down deep inside of their own *secret privies*.

But, on their own, they can't come up with that other half of Paul's great summary of biblical truth: the *Good News of Christ Jesus*. They know there's something wrong with them, but they can't, on their own, come up with the *Good News* that, says Paul, God committed to us, in Christ, to share with all, *reconciliation* with God through Christ's sacrifice of himself on behalf of sinners. (II Cor 5:19). Without this *Good News*, we're all left clutching to our own contaminated chaos of quick fixes that fix nothing.

Quick fixes fix nothing at all, for what's broken is far more broken than even the most guilt-ridden have even the foggiest of clues. They may think they fall short of their own fantasies for themselves. That's a falling short of *merely* what they can *imagine* on their own – a fantasy stuffed with the stuff of *triviality*.

But Paul says that we all fall short of the *glory of God's goal* for us all, what we were *created* to be as *God's own Image-bearers*. So, by that high standard, whatever we may have in mind in terms of our not measuring up falls pathetically far short. They – and we – are not only dead wrong about how wrong we all are. In their sin and ours, they and we, are *dead*. Period.

Today, we get ourselves so easily distracted, we hurt our feelings, we outrage our egos, we get ourselves hooked on cell phones and selfies, obsess over what we anxiously project into others' brains. We frantically de-friend others at the drop of a "diss" with which we obviously *agree*, but can't afford to *admit*. Our very vengeance reeks with rationalization – a clue to our problem if we could but admit we do see it. We so strive to *belong*, to be *affirmed*, to *disprove* our guilt, to try to *counter* our sense that we don't measure up. And, on our own, we have no identity that is deeply *meaningful* for our true identity is our *creation* in the Image of God and *redemption* in Christ. Folks wander around on their never-ending quests in never-never land that can never to be found.

Folks talk about “affirmation” and “belonging” on such trivial levels, while neglecting, even resisting, even rejecting, even renouncing, the very deepest affirmation and eternal belonging that’s offered in the great truth, that, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us, and entrusting to us, this good news of reconciliation.” (II Cor 5:19)

Apart from the glorious *second half* of the truth of Paul’s pivotal preaching, there’s no good news. But in that second half of the truth there is the very best news there could be. In this second half of Paul’s statement to the Romans, he adds these words: “... and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”. (Rom 3:24)

This is the glory of God from which we fall so far short – His own intrinsic glory, and our glory by His grace in Christ Jesus at the cross.

And it’s God’s *gracious gift of guilt* that gets our attention, our clue that we do, indeed, fall far short.

No wonder Gardner Taylor so often urged pastors: “We ought to preach the cross not only in the Passion season. The devil has driven us from our central place. Calvary ought to be in all of our sermons, explicit or implicit.” Taylor surely was right, for, without Good Friday, we’re without Good News. We’re left with only this: “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

Yet, under allegedly “progressive” Protestantism, dressed up in fashionable clerical robes of rainbow colors and a canon of political correctness, anything *but* the *cross* and the *blood* of Christ is preached. No “bloody” Gospel for them! The *substitutionary atonement* of Christ on the cross is labeled, in their virtue-signaling lingo, as “Divine Child Abuse”, even when those who speak this way are otherwise loathe to speak of Jesus as any more than an ancient sage.

But Jesus’ laying down his life for us on the cross was *the only way out of our sin and death and into our liberation from sin and death*. To deny biblical revelation is to deny the *crux* of Christianity. The Good News for us is found in Christ’s body bloodied on the cross and in his resurrection body on that first Easter morning.

But the so-called “liberation” that’s so often preached today, isn’t liberation *from* sin and death, but a liberation *for* more sin and death, i.e., a “liberated” *self-indulgence* in *self-seeking self-centeredness* and a “liberated” *self-obsession* in intolerance of all who aren’t as “advanced” as *we* are in *self-righteousness*.

It’s never been wise to assume that the spot at which one’s lately *arrived*, is the *apogee* of advancement rather than merely another dumb detour, another dumping ground that will be shown to have been a big mistake even a bit later on.

For those who refuse to tolerate the biblical theology of Christ’s cross, there can be *no liberation from sin and death* for postured *self-righteousness* can’t redeem *itself*. Pretended *self-righteousness* refuses *God’s gift of a sense of guilt* as well as *God’s gift of Christ’s righteousness*, taking the place of our putrid pretensions.

There can be no joyous *gratitude* for sins *forgiven*, for life *restored*, if what we’re *owed* is what we’ve tried to *earn* by being self-centered, self-righteous selves.

Under such unscriptural, even counter-intuitive premises, we create a “god” in *our* selfish image, a “god” in our self-centered debt. We refuse to admit that God, in a body like ours, paid our debt in full and at unimaginable cost at the cross. He came to us in *our* image, as it were, and bore our sins, to restore us to Himself in *His* Image, for life eternal with Him.

The New Testament Greek word for *freedom* or *liberty* is *eleutheria*. In that ancient world, it was used of liberation from chattel slavery. I noted at our Luther weekend that the Reformer was so moved by the *liberation* of the Good News that he changed his family name, *Luder*, to *Luther*,

a play on that Greek, *eleutheria*, pointing to the *freedom* from sin and from death that was won for us at Christ's cross.

Paul expounded on *eleutheria*: "To the one you give control of yourselves, you are slaves". He points out that we're all *slaves, servants*, to *whatever* or *whomever* we give *ourselves* – whether foolishly, selfishly, to sin and death, or wisely, gratefully, to Christ and life in him and life for the welfare of others. It's to that, that Paul alludes in noting that *sin's* final payoff is *death*, but "the *gift* of God's grace is *eternal life* in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Rom 6:23)

Writing to Corinthian Christians, Paul says: "Don't you realize you're not your own, you're a temple of God's Holy Spirit in you?" (I Cor 6:19) *Don't we realize, we're not our own!* Thank God! That's *good news!* But today, folks think it's *bad news!* I'm not my own?! *I am my own!* Okay. If you're "your own", you're *on your own* – from now on, forever.

They don't "get it". Who would be better to serve than the ever-loving God who, in Christ, gave Himself for our liberation from sin and death? Does that everlasting fact of liberation from sin and death call for gratitude? If you "get it", there's no other response *but gratitude – now and forevermore*.

To be *truly freed*, like that, *from deadly bondage*, like that, is to experience the *deepest gratitude*. Gardner Taylor knew it. Even though that fatal car crash was no more *his fault* than his grandparents' enslavement was *their fault*. Yet the *liberty* in either case was *real*. His grandparents were among the millions who were sold into slavery around the world, though through no fault of their own. And yet, though sinned against, they were, as *we all are*, sinners *otherwise*. Taylor's own close call reminded him that, nonetheless, his life was *not without sin and guilt*. And for God's liberating him from *his own sin and consequent death*, there at Christ's cross, he was *profoundly grateful* throughout his life.

At the Graham Crusades, those who came forward under conviction of sin, found *freedom* at Christ's cross for which they felt *gratitude to live for Christ's sake*. As Paul put it: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all for the sake of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father, through him". (Col 3:17)

A truly *grateful* heart isn't experienced or expressed in *self-righteousness*, or in greed, or hostility in response to not getting one's way, not getting one's fantasies. A truly *grateful* heart is freed from all of the "self" that's been left, with relief, at the foot of Christ's cross.

The Greek for "gratitude" is *eucharistia*, as in, the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. For such *freedom in Christ*, Paul exclaims: "Thank God for His *indescribable gift*." (II Cor 9:15) *Thank God!*

Hopefully, we've all had reasons throughout our lives to be so frankly grateful – at least from time to time, if not as a *daily* habit of our being in this world *with* Christ Jesus. But in view of God's great gift of our liberation from sin and death in Christ's sacrifice, alone, have we been, are we now, grateful? Think about it. Pray about it. We're privileged to rejoice in him, for his grace, now and through all eternity. Amen.