

Paul's Priority

By Pastor Alan Utting



'Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first and we lose both first and second things.' C. S. Lewis

What do you think is the most important thing in ministry? Prayer, sharing one's faith, Bible study, doing good deeds and so on? The Apostle Paul gives us his answer: 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: 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,' 1 Corinthians 15:3,4. Paul is not of course stating that the other matters are unimportant, but have we lost the proclamation of the 'gospel' as 'good news'? Paul spent much energy spreading this message.

Of recent times I have read many books about what the UK and America was like in the 18th century. Both Britain and America experienced significant social unrest. Britain had a rigid class system with a wide gap between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses, while America's social structure was shaped by its colonial origins, growing independence movements, and the institution of slavery. The Industrial Revolution in Britain brought about both progress and hardship. For the poor there was mass unemployment, child slavery, domestic violence and alcoholism.

Religion overall was ignored or those belonging to established churches in both countries during this period of 'enlightenment' were generally lifeless and formal until there was a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. This move of God radically changed the spiritual atmosphere of UK and America and hundreds of thousands of people came to know the Lord. The social environment in both countries was hugely improved. This came about largely through prayer and the raising up of people like John and Charles Wesley and William Wilberforce in the UK (and later William Booth), and in America George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards in particular. In Europe there was a significant move of the Spirit on Count Zinzendorf's property. It birthed the Modern Missionary movement and 24/7 prayer.

These people proclaimed a '*biblical gospel*' centred on repentance from sin, the forgiveness of sin, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John Wesley also placed strong emphasis on the essential principles of discipleship. In his small groups, which met twice a week, members were encouraged to confess their sins to one another, fostering accountability, encouragement, and spiritual growth.

In the Bible Peter's first sermon he preached was 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:38). In the Western world many mainline churches sideline this truth (unlike the evangelists above) and as a result numbers are declining in many of our mainline churches. All the Spirit-led movements mentioned above were marked by a strong call to repentance, driven by love. Jesus, out of deep compassion, spoke more about hell than heaven, not to condemn, but to warn and save. It was this same love that led Him to lay down His life for the sin of the world (John 3:16).

The apostle Paul was likewise compelled by love. He writes, 'I speak the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race' (Romans 9:1-3).

Meaning of repentance.

1. A biblical definition of repentance is a 'heartfelt turning away from sin and turning towards God, involving both a change of mind and a change of behaviour. 'In the New Testament, the Greek word *'metanoia'* means a change of mind, but not just intellectually; it implies a transformation that leads to a changed life.' The shedding of tears is not necessarily a sign of repentance, but simply remorse.
2. John the Baptist boldly challenged the people, saying, '*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*' (Matthew 3:8). Tragically, he paid the ultimate price for his stand and lost his life.
3. We do a disservice to God's people when leaders who have fallen into serious sin are hastily restored to ministry. Genuine repentance is often a journey that unfolds over time. When repentance is real, the fruits will become apparent.
4. Fasting as a sign of repentance was an Old Testament practice and is still applicable today.

'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter,
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?'

New life in Christ

1. Jesus took all our sins upon Himself at the cross. 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness' (1 Peter 2:24)
2. As we experience forgiveness of sin through repentance and faith, so we become new people in Christ. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!' (2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. Through his resurrection our new life opens a pathway of power. 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.' (1 Corinthians 4:20)
4. We now have the task of taking this gospel (good news) to the whole world. 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28: 18-20).

'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land' (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Resources

Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries*