

CHRISTIAN CONVERSION 1 Corinthians 1: 18

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”

John Wesley’s Forty-four sermons play an important part in our understanding of the message of the Bible, and though Wesley himself did not use the expressions that we have come to know as the “Four Alls of Methodism”, they have long been used to sum up the essentials of our faith. In this first part we look at numbers I and II - ‘All need to be saved’, ‘All can be saved’ and in the second part we look at numbers III and IV, ‘All can know they are saved’, ‘All can be saved to the uttermost’. For my references to John Wesley’s sermons I’m using the modern text of James Holway.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

I am taking the first two of the ‘Four Alls’ which I think I can find naturally in that text:

All need to be saved,

All can be saved

First and foremost, the Christian faith is a faith of salvation, because the Christian gospel is a gospel of salvation. It is good news about salvation. God has saved his people. The whole of the Christian story, right through from Genesis to the end of our Bibles in Revelation, is about God’s plan of salvation and about people who have responded to his grace. God has saved his people, he is saving his people, he will save his people. The Christian story is a salvation story and Christian worship is offered to God in thanksgiving for the grace he has shown to his people. When we gather together to worship, first and foremost I think we are saying ‘thank you God for saving me’.

I. ALL NEED TO BE SAVED

You immediately come into conflict with the world at large when you make that statement, because the world at large does not agree with it. For ‘all need to be saved’ requires the notion that there is something from which salvation is necessary and if you were to say to the person in the street: “Do you think you need to be saved?”, the probable answer would be: “From what?” Our text describes people in two categories, as ‘perishing’ and ‘being saved’. That’s something of a surprise, for perhaps even Christians think of salvation either as something past, (on a certain day in history ‘I was gloriously saved’ - and we want to say ‘Amen’ to that of course) or as something future (that is, when I get to the Kingdom of Heaven, God will save me). But the text doesn’t say that. It thinks of salvation as being something essentially present: ‘perishing’ on the one-hand, ‘being saved’ on the other. The Bible contrasts two groups. In my estimation there are five important elements in the Bible and in the teaching of John Wesley from which men and women need to be saved. So you have these five handy and convenient answers ready for the person who says to you: “Saved from what?” They’re not options or alternatives. I’m not saying

that one person needs to be saved from one, and another person from another, and a terribly wicked person needs to be saved from two or three of them. I'm saying that *all* of us need saving from all five - not options, not alternatives. All men and women must be saved from each (and I mention each of them briefly).

(i) Sin.

The Anglo-Saxon archer, when conducting archery practice had a name for the arrow that he fired which fell short of the target. He called that arrow 'a sinner'. Here is the element as Paul expressed it in Romans: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Missing the mark in day to day living is a characteristic of sin. The man in the street, the world at large, concedes that nobody is perfect but muddles on regardless.

Sin also has the sense of straying from the right path, going off the rails as we might say, or as the lawyer calls 'the wooden lie', "Trespassers will be prosecuted." You trespass when you put your foot where it ought not to be.

The third definition of sin is 'disobeying God's commands'. Three definitions of sin: falling short of God's glory (like the Anglo-Saxon arrow); trespassing (putting our feet where they ought not to be); disobeying God's commands. The roots of sin are pride and unbelief - but when doubt comes in you're not surprised to find disobedience following hard on its heels.

(ii) Guilt

There was a survey conducted recently as to what young people were thinking about most. I think it was a survey conducted by an advertising company which wanted to catch people's imagination; when they were very interested, the product would be introduced. Three things stood head and shoulders above everything else as to what young men and women think about. The first was food - men and women after my own heart, you may say. The second was relationships, particularly with boyfriends or girlfriends, or husbands or wives. I don't think those two are any surprise to you if you think about it. The third was guilt. It pinpointed something in the young person's consciousness that no-one really seems to know how to deal with and we need saving from it.

(iii) Power of Sin

I've separated this from sin itself. Most of us know what it is to fall short of our own best intentions. We thought of the arrow falling short of the target, which is the target that God sets. The trouble is that we even fall short of the standards which we set for ourselves. My college principal used to say:

"The trouble with sin is that we do not take it seriously enough. We are caught up in a mysterious vortex of evil in which one sin leads to another. It is a total complex of sin, a sinful environment within and without from which it seems impossible to break free."

It is not only that we have the burden and guilt of past sin, but also that we seem unable to get out of it in the present.

(iv) Death

The Bible clearly relates death and sin. It describes death as ‘the wages of sin’, but it does more than that: it speaks not only of physical death but of spiritual death – and, if you want to go on further, it speaks also of eternal death, and implies that physical death is the sign of a spiritual reality. In his sermon on the New Birth, John Wesley says:

“When Adam and Eve died spiritually, so did all their descendants. Consequently all human beings come into the world spiritually dead, dead to God, completely dead in sin.”

(v) Judgment

The sceptic says that physical death is the end of everything, but that is not the message of the Bible. The Bible tells us: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (Hebrews 9: 27)

I don’t know how long ago you last heard a Sunday sermon on that text - but my guess is that it’s a while ago! At a first glance judgment is not a happy thought for any of us. Far too many people are allowing themselves to be swayed by sentiment or by woolly, unbiblical thinking at this point. I want to tell you that judgment is profoundly *good* news. If you have never heard that before, you need a while just to take it in. Judgment is tremendously good news. If you were in Sarajevo today, waiting for justice to come to that city, looking for the powers of authority of the world to come in and to mete out justice, don’t tell me that the day of judgment would not be good news!. I tell you, it’s profoundly good news. If you’re falsely imprisoned, the Day of Judgment is good news. The Christian is, if you like, falsely imprisoned by the things that still hold us but from which Jesus Christ has already set us free. He has already pronounced us ‘not guilty’ by the power and authority that has been committed to him by God, his Father. Nevertheless, we are awaiting the Day of Judgment. The end of evil in the world is a great message of hope. Being called upon to give account does not conflict with our own ideas of justice. So when we deny God’s righteous and sovereign justice, in fact we are denying a message of profound hope in a needy world.

Now there are many schools of thought at this point. There are those who say that God is such a God of love that all will enter his Kingdom. They do not add, “they will enter his Kingdom whether they like it or not,” but they ought to. But what then are we to do with our Bibles? God’s love is so compelling that it seems right that all people should want to love and serve him, but they don’t. There are those who are comfortable in saying that the very evil people from world history are condemned in God’s judgment, and that Christians and very good people are commended in God’s judgment, and that between them lies is a huge middle-ground of people who are admitted to the Kingdom of God because they are following Jesus without knowing it, leading good and upright honest lives, paying their bills and so on.

This is an idea to which I personally and emotionally incline: I don’t mind the ultra-baddies getting their come-uppance, but apart from that I like the idea that everybody goes into the Kingdom of God. But it’s *not* the teaching of the Bible. You just cannot reconcile this threefold division into Christians, the very evil, and those who are following Jesus without knowing it with the message of the Bible. You have to abandon the Bible to have that point of view. The Christian message is of just two groups - those who are ‘being saved’ and those who are ‘perishing’.

The Biblical teaching is, in my estimation, expressed symbolically, but whatever the symbolism of all that is associated with hell means (lostness, perishing, condemnation, second death and so on), it is something from which we need saving. I think that a lot of today's Christians are committing a sin against God as they question his justice, because that is what we're doing when we introduce the third group. The judge of all the earth will do right and we know that for certain. The judge of all the earth says that there are only two groups - those who are perishing and those who are being saved. What we can say then is that 'all need to be saved'. We go on from that to proclaim in love and joy:

II. ALL CAN BE SAVED

Salvation is not something that God owes us. We do not go to God and demand it. We do not go to God and demand forgiveness or remission of sins ("God will forgive me - that's his job"), which I think is how many people view it. Through his grace and mercy, it is possible for all to be saved. It would be in accord with God's justice if none were saved. It is only because of his grace and mercy that *any* are saved.

Our understanding of the Bible - of the relationship between human responsibility, freewill and the sovereignty of God - causes us to be in conflict with both the 'Universalists' and the 'hyper-Calvinists'. The Universalists say that 'all will be saved'. I hinted at them a little while ago; they do not add, 'they will enter the Kingdom of God whether they like it or not, and no matter how they have exercised their human responsibility and freewill,' but that's what they mean. The hyper-Calvinist school of thought says that some are chosen to be saved and others are destined to be lost - and there is nothing that anyone can do about it. Human freewill doesn't really enter into it, though they clutch at straws and try to make it so.

Wesley followed the school of thought of the Dutch Theologian Arminius when he affirmed God's sovereign grace and the offer of salvation is to all. This is expressed with genius in his brother's hymn:

"Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

Throughout the world its breadth is known,
Wide as infinity;
So wide it never passed by one,
Or it had passed by me."

I think you should see the point that Charles Wesley is making through that hymn.

The hyper-Calvinist theory is also one of 'irresistible grace': when God calls you and loves you, his love and grace are so great that you can't do anything other than respond to them. Verse 4 of the hymn: "Come sinners to the Gospel feast" is a great exposition of that:

“His love is mighty to compel;
His conquering love consent to feel,”
(No conqueror really asks you for your consent. That’s the mystery of it all.)
“Yield to his love’s resistless power,”
(Nobody is *asked* to yield to that which cannot be resisted.)
“And fight against your God no more.”

This latent conflict, this tension, is found throughout the hymns of the Wesleys, which is why we must never abandon the singing of them.

We must recall our text to mind: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

We do no better than to remind ourselves again and again that the very ground of salvation is the grace of God, and that the grace of God is shown perfectly in the death of Christ on the cross. Through his atoning death on the cross, Jesus offers salvation to all. The *invitation* is to all. But how do we receive that salvation and claim it as our own? Only by repentance and faith. Let’s look briefly at the five elements again.

(i) Sin

The roots of sin are pride and unbelief. They bear fruit in disobedience. The Christian is saved from sin. This is the promise to Joseph before the birth of Christ: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” No wonder then that in one of our hymns we sing: “Jesus is the name we treasure, Over every other name.” It means “he will save his people from their sins”, “Jehovah my salvation”, “the Lord saves”. Or, as Wesley says in his Sermon, “Salvation by Faith”:

“No limitation is ever placed on that promise, neither here nor anywhere else in the Bible. Jesus will save all his people, that is, all who believe on him. All who believe in Jesus are saved, through faith.”

Pride is replaced by humility, unbelief by faith, disobedience by obedience.

(ii) Guilt

On the subject of guilt, which perhaps we think is a modern ailment; Wesley is at his most powerful (same sermon):

“Jesus saves us from the guilt of all past sin. We need to realise that every human being is guilty before God, and that even obeying the law is no way out of this situation. But Jesus brings a new element into our circumstances. God says that he will pronounce us ‘not guilty’ because of the redemption that has been made available for us in Jesus. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins. He used his blood and our faith to remit our past sins and declare us righteous.”

I wish that he'd said "by our faith" but never mind about that - he probably got a bit carried away at that moment. The believer is saved by Christ and his death on the cross, from sin and guilt and fear; when we put our hand by faith on the head of Jesus Christ as he is on the cross, we claim him as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Our faith does not contribute to our salvation - as if it is what the Wesleys would themselves have called a work of supererogation - but it is appropriating what God has done through us in Christ, and saying "mine."

(iii) Power of Sin

The believer is saved by Christ and saved from the power of sin. That is, the Christian believer may know victory over the power of sin because Jesus has broken into the "vortex of evil" (the whirlpool of sin) and by his grace in the power of the Holy Spirit we may experience victory. Sin no longer dominates the believer's life and neither does the prospect of death.

(iv) Death

We need to distinguish between the physical, the spiritual and the eternal. The Bible teaches that the one without faith is "dead in trespasses and sins". I'm sorry that a lot of people these days don't like it, but it's still true. The unbeliever is dead to God in trespasses and sins but by faith in Christ the believer comes alive to God through spiritual birth. We could add there that even the faith that we have is God's gift- it's not something we create within ourselves, but something that by God's grace we are enabled to receive. Everyone who is born physically needs need to be born anew. The "born again" Christianity that we speak of is not a 'deluxe edition' of Christianity. There is no Christianity without the new birth. The Christian is born anew, born from above through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I'm just tempted to have a little digression here about Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus: "You must be begotten again." Nicodemus answers: "How can I be born again?" "No", says Jesus, "you need to be begotten again, that is you need to have a new Father." Nicodemus answers: "How shall I have a new Mother? Can I get back inside her womb when I am old?" Jesus says to him: "Nicodemus, you're Israel's teacher and what I am trying to tell you is that you need a new Father." That's my rough paraphrase. Being begotten again, having a new Father, born again in shorthand, born from above, through the power of the Holy Spirit - this is the spiritual life which endures to all eternity, not an optional extra for Christians. As John Wesley said:

"You may say, 'I don't hurt anybody; I don't drink, I don't slander my neighbour'. This is good but it does not go far enough. You may say, 'I do all the good I can'. I wonder whether you do. I think you have had a thousand opportunities for doing good and you have missed a lot of them. But even if you had done all the good you could you still need to be born again. Even if you go to church twice a day, and take communion every week, say lots of prayers, hear lots of sermons, and read lots of good books, still you must be born again."

It's no wonder that we're sitting so loosely to the Forty-Four Sermons these days when the one on The New Birth says that!

(v) Judgment

If judgment is about justice, it sounds like bad news for all, but I want to say that judgment is profoundly good news for all. In justice we could not complain at God's condemnation. What is needed is forgiveness. If good works were what was needed for forgiveness it would be unfair. Some people would have greater gifts and be able to do more good works than others, and some would have longer lives and therefore more opportunity, but in any event none of us could reach the standard set. However, the cross bears news of pardon through faith in Christ. There are some people within our Churches today who are suggesting that somehow the message of the cross is unfair and that being judged by good works would be fairer. You must make sure that you put them right because any theology of good works is profoundly unfair! The message of the cross and of God's grace to all is profoundly fair: this is the good news for anyone who will seek God's forgiveness, repent and believe the Gospel.

Wesley's Sermon on "Justification by Faith" says:

"Suppose you throw yourself before God and ask for mercy (which God's grace enables you to do). Who can doubt that you will be forgiven at that very moment? What else is needed? Justification is as simple as that."

What a wonderful Gospel we have. Certainly being made right with God (that's the expression I use for justified - 'made right with God') or justified by faith rules out pride. . But the way of salvation is open to all, since because of the cross, 'all can be saved'.

I would be selling the whole thing short if I failed to ask this question:

III. ARE YOU SAVED?

It's not a popular question and I find it a singularly unpopular question among Christians. What does it mean? We have seen what it means - it means 'salvation from sin'. My feeling is that a lot of people (and a lot of Christian people) only desire to be saved from the *effects* of sin. We flirt with sin and we hope to be left untouched by its effects: guilt, its enthralling power, death (spiritual, physical and eternal) and judgment. We are saying that we are saved and we are saved from sin - but we'd like to flirt with it a bit.

(i) Sin

Firstly, let's look at salvation from sin and then move on to its effects. Charles Keysor, an American, tells the story of Mr Garretson, a Marylander in the USA. Garretson inherited a Southern estate and slaves. He was a preacher but after the inheritance he found he had lost all his power in preaching. At the prayer meeting the Lord revealed his problem. (Now we have to say the Lord isn't revealing many problems to Methodist people in prayer meetings is he? The great majority of us don't go to one!) He set the slaves free. "Dejection, melancholy gloom vanished in a moment." That, I think, is what we're singing when we sing: "O for a heart to praise my God, A heart from sin set free,"

Are you really BEING saved or is salvation a date in the past? So often the evangelical Christian may say to a stranger or acquaintance: "When were you saved?" They'll say something like

“23rd January 1971”. What they should say is “Now”. Who are the most miserable people that you’re ever likely to meet? I’ll tell you who they are. They are those who are neither for Christ nor the world. They are those who know the claims of the Gospel but are not liberated from inner emptiness, and still seek to fill their inner emptiness with different things. ‘Some have friends who cause them pain and have not found a friend in Thee’. They’re looking for relief from inner emptiness in drugs, alcohol, sex, hypnotic music, dance, and even (light blue touch paper, stand well back!) in the emotion of Christian worship. Salvation is not about formal prayers, obsessive discipline or ritual. It is not about the right parents, upbringing or habits (thankful as I am for mine). It is not about legalistic words, rules and regulations. It is not about self-reliance - ‘me getting myself right with God’. It is not about any one of the thousand and one things that we can substitute for knowing Jesus Christ and his salvation, appropriated by faith personally to me. It is about the change in my life wrought by the grace of God that gives me a new relationship with God, a new relationship with others and freedom from sin, guilt, the power of sin, death and judgment.

(ii) Guilt

We must be very careful to distinguish between emotion and experience. Authentic Christian experience is different from ‘how I happen to be feeling right now’. It is the heart that burns or feels because of the truth applied from Scripture. By God’s grace and the blood of Christ shed on Calvary’s cross, I may through God-given faith have my sins remitted. Now that’s an awkward word - ‘remitted’ - there is a difference between ‘remission’ and ‘forgiveness’. ‘Remission of sins’ comes when God wipes the slate clean. ‘Forgiveness’ emphasises how I feel at a particular time. Both are necessary, but it is possible to get it wrong. It is possible to go into a Christian meeting and feel forgiven but with no basis. You feel in your heart - that’s emotion - but you’re not forgiven so there’s no basis to it. It’s one of the devil’s counterfeits - and the essence of a counterfeit is that it looks remarkably like the real thing. On the other hand (and, I think, more commonly) it is possible not to feel forgiven when our sins are remitted. I had this experience with a friend of mine who shared with me some personal circumstances and said: “I know that Jesus died on the cross for my sins but I feel that I’m carrying this burden.” I felt able to say to that person: “You know, every time you’ve laid your burden down at the Communion Rail you’ve picked it up and taken it away again,” - that’s terribly, terribly wrong. Remission and forgiveness go together. Remission is the very basis of our faith that God does, in fact, let us off - not at no cost, but at the cost of the cross. Forgiveness emphasises how I happen to feel about it, so it is possible to have your sins remitted and not to feel forgiven. Forgiveness is always on the basis of God’s remission for sins, not how I happen to feel about it at any particular time. For most evangelical Christians I think that means we are more forgiven than we often feel, but I don’t want to lead us down a wrong path.

(iii) The Power of Sin

The promise from the Scriptures:

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear but when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The Christian has no excuse. The Christian is not entitled to say: "I know I did that. I know it was wrong. I just couldn't help myself." If you're saying: "I know it's wrong, I just couldn't help myself," then know this for sure - you're either lying or you're not saved. The Christian can help him or her self. Sometimes we make it harder when we allow the enemy to build a bridge-head into our lives. We make a mistake if we see temptation as coming only from outside. Life becomes a legalistic observance of 'dos and don'ts'. Don't do this; don't go here; don't watch that; don't do the other thing. But by saying temptation is only from inside, which I think we've been guilty of saying in these last 30 years, some have made profound mistakes. Some have made this a licence to do things, to watch things, to listen to things and to go to places that Christians would never formerly have entertained, feeling that outside stimuli present no problems. I accept that the real problem is inside, but if you start stimulating what is *inside* with a whole lot of stuff from *outside* then you can be sure that the inside will wake up to what is outside! If you believe the modern line, why did the devil when tempting Jesus show him all the kingdoms of the world? That was the stimulus to the humanity of Jesus. Stimulus is sometimes external, the weakness is always internal. Some people apparently live good Christian lives until they are tempted. Have you met them? Grand Christians, but when temptation comes....

Lutzer, another American writer says: "Temptation is an opportunity to test our loyalties." You know which side you're on when the temptation really starts. My experience is not so much of an absolute fall into temptation but courting it for fun. R. C. Sproul says: "We need to be convinced of the sinfulness of sin." The class meeting of a bygone age, I think (though some of you may know otherwise) was about living in victory. It was about confessing your sins, it was being told your faults plain and home. Some think that the mid-week meeting is about growth - but I say that the mid-week meeting is about survival. We don't hear anything about the backslider these days. He disappeared from our hymn book in 1983. Perhaps it is because we are all backsliders that we're too frightened to mention the backslider for fear that everybody else would know that we were backslidden!

A backslider is a person who has allowed something other than God to come back in and hold first place - sometimes selfish desire, a wrong relationship, or something else very obvious - but there are others. Perhaps it's your Church that secretly comes first, or your part in it, or (preachers and Ministers look out) your ministry! I think some people need to put their ministries back on the altar of sacrifice. Perhaps it's your ambition in the Gospel (that's a subtle one). Some of them are obvious, and we spot them coming. It is the double agent that we have to watch out for - our ministry, our part in the Church, our ambition in the Gospel, all the things that we want to do for Jesus. Some Christians have made the work of the Lord their God, and are now serving the work of the Lord instead of the Lord of the work. Their Christianity, their ministry, has become an idol, and they've grieved the Lord of the work by serving it. If only it were a little tin-god we'd all see it.

We speak these days of our large Christian gatherings as celebrations - and that is an infinitely better name than 'rally', because 'rally' in my dictionary means 'the last stand of a dying-cause'. 'Celebration' is in a sense a better word, but in our celebration let's not forget chastening. A good theme for celebration is joy, but let's not forget the good themes of our Conventions in past years have been repentance. 'A godly grief of sin impart.' (No wonder that hymn was lost to our collection because nobody would be singing that would they?) We are in danger of making

repentance a past, rather than a present, experience. We desperately need testimony in conversion and salvation, but all the more we need testimony in victory. Too many Christians are settling for truth but abandoning triumph. When 'truth and triumph' is our experience, death and judgment are greeted with the words "No condemnation now I dread."

Not sin - but obedient service from a heart set free. Not guilt - but peace with God, remission of our sins through the blood of the cross, peace with God through the witness of the Holy Spirit. Not imprisoned - but set free by the one who 'breaks the power of cancelled sin'. Not death - but victory in the cross and a judgment where we know remission is complete and the knowledge of forgiveness, not in the future but NOW.