

AT THE CROSS  
*Big deals outside the city*

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## *Introduction*

### *Sin is a big deal*

**T**HERE is a story which makes me smile and which says a lot about how undiscerning human beings can be. Back in the earlier part of the twentieth century, silent movies drew large audiences, and one of the megastars of the silent screen was the slapstick comedian Charlie Chaplin, famous for his baggy trousers, bowler hat and toothbrush moustache. The story is that, in the state of Illinois in the USA, there was once a Charlie Chaplin lookalike competition. But, unbeknown to anyone, Charlie Chaplin himself entered the competition just for a bit of fun. The result? It was a classic moment. He came third!

This incident acts as a parable for the contemporary church. These days there are many competitors and 'look-alikes' around for the gospel of Christ. And the tragedy is that there is such a measure of confusion and lack of discernment in the churches that we are often unable to recognize the genuine article when we see it. The good news of the New Testament comes in a creditable third with many church people. It is regarded as just one among quite a few options for the church's message. It is being replaced, even in the thinking of many Christians, by rather deceptive lookalikes of various kinds.

## HEARTBEAT OF THE GOSPEL

The central burden of this book is to go back to some key passages of Scripture and rediscover, restate and rejoice in the breathtaking reality of what the cross of Christ achieved, which is the gospel as preached by the apostles. By this I mean gospel truths such as salvation by faith alone, the cross of Christ as a penal substitution and Christ's righteousness being credited to us. Singling out certain truths and Bible passages might give the impression of jumping from one thing to another rather than making for a smooth read. But an army has to defend its position by concentrating on the points in its line where it is being attacked, not elsewhere, and at present we are seeing the gospel assailed at various key points, rather than facing an offensive over a broad front.

The very truths under attack, over which so much confusion and controversy have arisen in recent years, are those truths which I personally find the most exhilarating and God-glorifying. Who could not be excited, for example, by the fact that salvation is by faith alone, or that the Son of God died in our place to eradicate the punishment we deserved? These things are a continual wonder to me. In business terms we tend to think in Britain of 'big deals' being done 'in the city', the square mile which forms the financial district of London. But the biggest deals of all, those which secure eternal riches for sinners, moral bankrupts like us, were done 'outside the city'. They were achieved by the Lord Jesus Christ at the cross. Outside the city wall of Jerusalem was where 'the dear Lord' was crucified.

However, sadly, as already noted, these things which have formed the very heartbeat of gospel proclamation for evangelicals for many centuries have fallen under a shadow. Those of us who do cling to these classic doctrines and believe that they really are important are often looked at askance by others. We find ourselves now, like Christ and

his cross, 'outside the city', disowned by the secular world and even by professing Christians who see themselves as more flexible on such matters.

I believe the setting aside of, or failure to defend, these truths is a grave mistake. Such things are actually God's big deals which alone 'do the business' for us as sinners. They are the truth which makes salvation a rock-solid certainty for all who trust Christ. When properly understood they set believing hearts on fire with love for Christ and provide a sure foundation for radical Christian discipleship. They show us 'How deep the Father's love for us' and just how far he has been prepared to go in his grace. The central reason for writing this book is simply to bring these wonderful gospel doctrines into the light again.

#### CHANGING CULTURE

What is the reason for the attacks upon, and uncertainty over, these vital areas of the gospel? My own suspicion is that, though there may be various secondary contributory factors, the major cause is to be found in a covert revolution in Western culture which has been gradually changing people's thinking. This shift in the way we approach life has come very subtly and taken many Christian people almost unawares.

What is this change? We have moved from a moral culture to what I will call a culture of emotion. This change can be understood fairly simply. Whereas previously the word 'good' was defined in terms of 'right' and 'wrong', these days the idea of what is 'good' is much more likely to be understood in terms of what 'feels good'. Things are good if they make you happy. Let me give some examples which indicate this move.

You can see this change very simply, for example, in the way the word 'wicked' has changed its meaning at the popular level. During the 1990s it was released from its

standard meaning of denoting something which is morally bad. Instead it has come to mean something which is exciting and will give you a high. One of the Bible writers speaks of 'the pleasures of sin' (Hebrews 11:25), and that 'pleasure', or 'feel-good' factor, is perceived as good. So 'wicked' now means 'good' (see Isaiah 5:20).

You can see this change also in, for example, the area of parenting. Recently I heard of a parenting course which insisted that we must never tell children that they are 'naughty', or that some of their choices are 'bad' in the old moral sense. 'There are no "good" or "bad" choices; there are only "happy" or "sad" choices,' those attending the course were told. Do you see the shift?

At the more serious level Professor Frank Furedi has described and chronicled the rise of the new way of thinking in his book *Therapy Culture*. The culture of emotion is the outcome of secularism. Secularism (which denies God's existence, or at least his relevance to everyday life) believes that there is no overall meaning or absolute truth about the world. Hence there is no faith or ideology worth living for, so living for self and feeling good about oneself become the only possible purpose for life. This is at the root of the shift from a moral culture to an emotional one. Furedi presents, among other things, statistical evidence underlining the reality of this culture shift. He tells us, for example, that a search of 300 UK newspapers in 1980 did not find a single reference to the term 'self-esteem'. It found three citations in 1986. By 1990 this figure rose to 103. A decade later, in 2000, there were a staggering 3,328 references. Similar figures apply for words like 'trauma' and 'stress'. This is the language of emotion and of therapy for damaged emotions. The old way of keeping a 'stiff upper lip' and not letting your feelings show is decried. We are encouraged to wear our hearts on our sleeves, let our feelings show and be 'authentic'.