

The Preaching of the Cross

Introduction

The “preaching of the cross” was the distinctive message of the Apostle Paul. It was the gospel he preached, that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead for our salvation (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Paul’s gospel was faith + 0. Neither the Twelve nor the other writers of the New Testament preached this gospel until they learned about it from Paul. And, as a result, Paul’s gospel, his “preaching of the cross,” precipitated a great crisis among the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem that resulted in the Council of Jerusalem (c. 51 A.D.)¹ The goal of this study is to examine Paul’s message and how it was unique to his ministry as the “apostle to the Gentiles.”

Usage of “Cross” σταυρός in the New Testament

The table below gives Pauline and non-Pauline use of the word “cross” [σταυρός](#). More important to recognize than use of the word σταυρός by writers other than Paul is their lack of understanding of its conceptual significance. They had no understanding that Christ’s death on the cross was the means by which God had solved the problem of sin. The the significance of the cross, that Christ’s death on the cross solved the problem of sin, was revealed through the Apostle Paul alone.

	Usage of “Cross” σταυρός
Non-Pauline Usage (17x)	Matthew 10.38, 16.24, 27.32, 27.40, 27.42; Mark 8.34, 10.21, 15.21, 15.30, 15.32; Luke 9.23, 14.27, 23.26; John 19.17, 19.19, 19.25, 19.31.

Pauline Usage (11x)	1 Corinthians 1.17, 18; Galatians 5.11, 6.12, 6.14; Ephesians 2.16; Philippians 2.8; Philemon 3.18; Colossians 1.20, 2.14; Hebrews 12.2.
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Paul's Use of "Cross" σταυρός

Paul used the term "cross" (σταυρός) 10 times, (11x, counting Hebrews).² In context, the σταυρός was the instrument of torture and death the Romans invented and employed to execute criminals or those who threatened Rome. The Gospel writers employed the word in their accounts of Christ's crucifixion. But as seen from the table above, no writer used the word outside of the Gospels, except Paul. Put another way, "the apostolic preaching of the cross" is a wholly Pauline phrase.³

Cross (σταυρός)	Passage
1 Corinthians 1.17	For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.
Comment:	Paul's statement demonstrated how different his ministry was from John the Baptist and the Twelve (cf. Matthew 3.11, 28.19; Mark 1.4; Luke 3.3; John 3.22, 4.1-2). Paul lent little importance to water baptism by the time he wrote the Corinthians (about 57 A.D.) By the time he wrote the Ephesians (about 62 A.D.) he had abandoned water baptism entirely (Ephesians 4.5; 1 Corinthians 12.13).
1 Corinthians 1.18	For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

<p>Comment:</p>	<p>Paul taught that God's power was ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ, "the word [or doctrine] of the cross." To the world, the cross is foolishness. To those who believe God it is eternal life. The "word of the cross" is that Christ died for our sins and has solved the sin problem.</p>
<p>Galatians 5.11</p>	<p>But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.</p>
<p>Comment:</p>	<p>The "cross" was Paul's gospel of faith + θ. This message was a "stumbling block" σκάνδαλον for the Jews of the Jerusalem church who preached circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law for salvation (Acts 15.1, 5). Paul declared that to require circumcision for salvation "abolished" καταργέω the message of the cross. Those who continued to preach circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law violated the preaching of the cross and what Peter had declared in Acts 15.11.</p>
<p>Galatians 6.12</p>	<p>Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.</p>
<p>Comment:</p>	<p>The Jews who opposed Paul in Acts 15 taught that Gentiles who responded to Paul's gospel of grace had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to be saved. They wished to avoid the humiliation and persecution of Christ's cross which was Paul's boast (Galatians 6.14 cf. Acts 15.1, 5, 7-11).</p>
<p>Galatians 6.14</p>	<p>But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.</p>

<p>Comment:</p>	<p>God allows no boasting in His presence (1 Corinthians 1.29). The only boasting God permits is in what He has done (1 Corinthians 1.30-31). The cross was Paul's boast. The one who believes Paul's gospel of faith + 0 gives all glory to God.</p>
<p>Ephesians 2.16</p>	<p>and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.</p>
<p>Comment:</p>	<p>Jew and Gentile equality in Christ (Galatians 3.26-28; Ephesians 3.3-7) was a "secret" (μυστήριον) Paul revealed. Paul disclosed that Christ's crucifixion and resurrection solved the problem of sin and made possible equality of Jew and Gentile. The Twelve knew <i>nothing</i> of this until they learned it from Paul.</p>
<p>Philippians 2.8</p>	<p>Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.</p>
<p>Comment:</p>	<p>The Lord Jesus Christ knew the suffering the cross entailed. He prayed to the Father, if possible, to be spared it (Matthew 26.39). His physical suffering was intense but His suffering for the sins of the world was unimaginable. He, the Lord God Almighty, suffered as no one ever suffered to give those who will trust Him life.</p>
<p>Philippians 3.18</p>	<p>For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ,</p>
<p>Comment:</p>	<p>The enemies of the cross of Christ are those who oppose Paul's gospel of faith + 0, that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4).</p>

Colossians 1.20	and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross ; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.
Comment	God reconciled man to God by the “blood of His cross.” The cross was quite literally, the crux of all history, the event to which all history was working.
Colossians 2.14	having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross .
Comment:	Christ’s work on the cross canceled the “debt consisting of decrees against us.” This was the accounting of sins by the Mosaic Law and moral law. Christ’s last word on the cross was τετέλεσται (it has been finished!) This was His declaration of victory over sin and death.
Hebrews 12.2	fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross , despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Comment:	No one but Paul used the word σταυρός after the Gospels. This lends further evidence of Paul’s authorship of Hebrews. Jesus endured the cross, its shame and suffering, because He loved us. As a result of His sacrifice and victory God has exalted Him to His right hand.

Use of “Cross” ξύλον

Peter used the word “cross” in 1 Peter 2.24 but instead of σταυρός used [ξύλον](#), which means “club,” “tree,” “cross,” “stocks,” “wood.” The following are the usages of the word in the New Testament with their translations (NASB): Matthew

26.47, 55; Mark 14.43, 48; Luke 22.52, 23.31; Acts 5.30, 10.39, 13.29, Acts 16.24; 1 Corinthians 3.12; Galatians 3.13; 1 Peter 2.24; Revelation 2.7, 18.12, 22.2, 22.14, 19. Of the five verses in Revelation which use the term, four refer to the tree of life.

The Blood of Christ

Closely associated with the cross of Christ is the “blood of Christ” and again it is with Paul that we find the greatest emphasis. The following verses refer to the blood of Christ: Romans 3.25, 5.9; Ephesians 1.7, 2.13; Colossians 1.20; Hebrews 9.12, 14, 22, 10.19, 29, 13.12, 20; 1 Peter 1.2, 19; 1 John 1.7; Revelation 1.5, 5.9, 7.14, 12.11. We do not discover the significance of the “blood of Christ” until *after* Paul’s salvation and *after* he wrote about it.⁴

Conclusion

Paul, the apostle of grace, the apostle of the Gentiles, revealed the significance of Christ’s crucifixion. His message and understanding of Christ’s crucifixion was in stark contrast to that of Peter. For Peter, Christ’s crucifixion was a message of accusation and condemnation—an act that required Jewish repentance before God could establish His earthly kingdom (Acts 2.36, 4.10). But for Paul, Christ’s crucifixion was the message of salvation. It was not an event to be repented of but what he boasted (1 Corinthians 1.23, 2.2, 8; 2 Corinthians 13.4; Galatians 2.20, 3.1, 6.14). For Paul, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection were Christ’s victory over sin and death.

How did Paul learn the significance of Christ’s work on the cross? He learned it by direct revelation from the risen, glorified Christ. Paul is the one who taught redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, justification, the blood of Christ, etc. Paul’s gospel, that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead was a “secret” (Romans 16.25) God had kept.

Paul declared that the gospel he preached was *his* gospel (Romans 2.16; 16.25; 2 Timothy 2.8; Galatians 2.2, 7; Galatians 1.11-12). Only *much later*, through Paul's teaching, did Peter apprehend and write of the significance of Christ's death on the cross (1 Peter 1.18-19; cf. 2 Peter 3.15-16).

¹ See the author's article on the Council of Jerusalem: [The Great Hinge](#).

² Use of the word "cross" (σταυρός) in Hebrews lends linguistic weight to Pauline authorship.

³ Leon Morris' excellent work, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, considers various aspects of the atonement, e.g., redemption, blood, propitiation, reconciliation, etc. When one reads the text and examines its scriptural index one is struck by the abundance of Pauline references and paucity of non-Pauline references to Christ's work on the cross. The obvious conclusion is that the revelation and explanation of the significance of Christ's work for salvation came from Paul.

⁴ The Lord taught the significance of His blood (cf. Matthew 26.28; Mark 14.24; Luke 22.20) but the Twelve clearly did not understand it for they did not preach it. Only after Paul's teaching did they mention it.

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