

## Jesus Loves Me, This I Forget

### Why the Cross Must be Central

By [Randall R. Greenwald](#)

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When I step behind the pulpit to preach, I know that sitting off to my left, near the front, will be Dr. John Frame. Dr. Frame, now retired, has had a long and distinguished career in academic theology. His books have influenced the ministries of many well known pastors. He has debated theological fine points with some of the world's most influential evangelical scholars. And so I'm occasionally asked what I preach that might mean something to him.

That question arises mostly out of the profound respect many have for Dr. Frame. But it also touches upon a common, but misguided, idea of what preaching is. If the object of preaching is to teach people new things, then there is nothing at all that I can offer Dr. Frame or, for that matter, any other mature Christian. All preaching is to some degree instructive, to be sure, but its goal is not primarily to instruct, but to remind.<sup>1</sup>

All Christians, from seminary professors to elementary school students, need to be reminded that Jesus died for them because we all forget it so easily. Certainly, every well schooled ten year old (and seminary professor) if asked could tell you that Jesus died on the cross to take away their sins. It's not the facts of the gospel we struggle to recall. Rather, we have a hard time remembering the personal significance of this gospel. We lose touch with the reality that Jesus died on the cross for us. I think of all of this as I revisit the ministry of John Stott through the lens of Tim Chester's book *Stott on the Christian Life*.<sup>2</sup>

It was the message of Christ's cross that animated Stott's ministry, and it is to be no different for us. As pastors, it's the cross we need to hear and the cross we need to preach. When I began a long-awaited sabbatical in 2018, I was empty. For thirty plus years I had tried to preach a gospel my heart was struggling to

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1 Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding: Stirring Memory in an Age of Forgetfulness* (United States: IVP Academic, 2017).

2 Tim Chester, *Stott on the Christian Life: Between Two Worlds* (United States: Crossway, 2020).

hold on to. I needed to rest, to be quiet, and to find Jesus again. To the end that God might restore to me the joy of his salvation, I resolved to read Fleming Rutledge's well regarded and then newly released *The Crucifixion*<sup>3</sup> and to re-read Stott's classic *The Cross of Christ*.<sup>4</sup> These fanned to flame what had grown dim, and I was grateful.

But I needed this message to be preached and applied to my soul. In this I was largely disappointed.<sup>5</sup> I visited a dozen or so churches as a congregant hungry to hear the gospel. I heard instead articulate and often hip challenges to change my behavior. I heard stern warnings that my view of God was insufficient. When I needed to hear "His steadfast love endures forever" I rather heard preachers plant flags declaring their stances in the culture wars.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson confessed in a chapel message at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando his concern that the cross was not being preached in evangelical churches. My sample size had been small but resonated with his fears.

On this side of that experience I'm mindful that every time I preach there is a drained soul in my congregation who doesn't need to hear anything new. What she needs is to be reminded that Jesus Christ positioned himself to take her sin, to die in her place, and to rise with the promise of life for her. She needs to hear the old gospel spoken newly into her life.

But is this relevant? It is if in our preaching we engage our listeners in a way that shows them the applicability of the cross to their own broken lives. In our justifiable zeal to be heard, we're tempted to preach messages that situate people in this or that camp or messages full of good advice. But these won't give them life. The issues that swirl around us are important, but if any of these matters removes the cross from our central focus, we have lost any reason for being a church to begin with.<sup>6</sup>

If we lose the cross, the pulpit becomes just another public forum on which to rehearse the issues of the day or from which to set the vision of the church. Without the cross the pulpit is the self-help section of the bookstore, and not a particularly helpful one at that. Without the cross we lose confidence in the word

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<sup>3</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (United States: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (United States: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Happy exceptions included Lake Nona Presbyterian Church and Harbor Community Church.

<sup>6</sup> "The Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Jesus, and which is the only regular commemorative act authorized by him, dramatizes neither his birth nor his life, neither his words nor his works, but only his death. Nothing could indicate more clearly the central significance that Jesus attached to his death. It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus." John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (United States: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 71.

that we preach, and without the cross we deprive our people of the very food they, perhaps unknowingly, crave.

So, no, it is not a mystery to me how to preach to the theologian our church knows simply as “John.” He needs what Tom, Dick, Harry, and Jane are all hungry to hear, and what Stott reminded us was central. They all, we all, need the cross.

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