

The Greatest News of All

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Romans 3:28)

We live in a world of cause and effect. In many ways, it is good that we do. Put your hand in a fire and you can expect to be burnt. Put sugar in your petrol tank and you can expect your car to die. Get angry, abusive, and aggressive with someone and you can expect similar behaviour in return. Excommunicate someone – cut them off – and you can expect to get excommunicated – cut off – in return. Cause and effect gives our lives predictability, stability, and a reasonably amount of reliability. This is the world of rules, regulations, formulas, laws, justice, order. We can know what to expect and so we can plan how best to live our lives because we know that it will be less hassled and more enjoyable if we treat fires with respect, keep petrol in our tanks, and treat people kindly and courteously.

Now, the world of cause and effect also has its down side. It doesn't give you any legitimate ways of escape when things get nasty. The law of gravity will work on a person of any moral character who finds themselves outside of an aeroplane without a parachute. Electricity will zap good and bad alike. Do something wrong and there are always consequences. Drive through a red light camera or a speed camera and your photo will be taken. Be violent or adulterous or deceitful and you do destroy relationships. Such are the effects. They happen. We don't deserve anything else. If you want better effects then provide better causes. Simple. Otherwise don't be surprised or hurt if gravity works, electricity flows, the summons arrives, or the person leaves. The world of cause and effect brings us punishment when we break the rules.

The world of cause and effect creates some interesting thinking if there is more to life than what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. If there is life after death, what sort is it? Is it better here or worse? If there are better and worse eternal destinies, then naturally we would like the better one: peace, joy, harmony over torment, suffering, and pain any day or any eternity. So how can we get this eternal effect?

People come up with the same basic answer, 'If you do the right cause, you will get the desired effect'. And people determine, deduce, and devise that the right cause is essentially something that they do – some behaviour or belief that will produce the desired effect. Our pride cannot conceive of or really believe that our destiny is not in our hands. And so people work out what the deities require in the supermarket of religions and set about giving it their best shot (even effort must count for something).

Now when you come to Christianity, the law of cause and effect is particularly strict, even harsh. The holy righteous God demands perfection of his people and any rebellion on their part will be punished. Cause and effect is sharp, to the point, unmistakable – sin and you die. This is divine justice. It leaves us no room to move. Sinners are condemned.

This message is blunted, a great deal, today where we live in a society and at a time that increasingly relegates spirituality and religion to the private domain of life (and therefore under less scrutiny) and increasingly shifts ethics, language, the arts, and even civic life to the post modern view of the individual. What emerges is the increasing self justification by people of their beliefs and behaviour. And yet at death, everyone becomes a 'good' person and most people are 'really sacrificial and loving and caring'. Why these words? I don't know what it's like in other countries – countries in which Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism is prevalent – but in countries where Christianity is prevalent then these words are used because there is a general view that good people go to heaven and good equals loving and caring and sacrificial.

But Christianity won't let us justify ourselves before God. No excuses; no extenuating circumstances; cause and effect. Perfection brings eternal life. Sin and you die.

Who will save us from these bodies of death?

Thanks be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ!

Cause and effect may exist but there is something else – the Good News of Jesus Christ – a message of mercy – a gospel of grace – a report of rescue – a song of salvation. God speaks into our context and flips our world upside down. People try and try and try to use the right cause for the desired eternal effect but only fill themselves with either pride or despair. Both kill us. God comes along and declares that the wicked are righteous (Rom 4:5) and that there is no condemnation for those linked to the condemned man, Jesus of Nazareth (Romans 8:1). God comes along in human flesh, appears so sinful to us that humanity condemns with the curse of God and God takes such curses upon himself so that you and I receive blessing. That is what Jesus' cross and empty tomb declare. There is a divine absurdity at work – forgiveness breaks the immutable grind of cause and effect and proclaims a new beginning and new life. This was the message at the heart of the Reformation early in the 16th century. Later in the Lutheran Confessions, The Formula of Concord, Article 3, it was put this way: *'... a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.'* (FC SD 3:540,541)

Because of the death of his Son, Jesus, God's words to each of us is simply 'Not guilty'. Cause and effect says we should get what we deserve but God steps in declares us righteous because of the life and death of Jesus. And we didn't cause this rescue by being healthy, wealthy, or wise, or even potentially so. That's trying to claim credit for salvation through our potential or some other 'redeeming feature' – a return to cause and effect. The declaration is unequivocal – it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8,9). God loves you as you are; no ifs ands or buts. God's actions are always for us not against us.

The broad message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is so powerful, and provides such hope and relief that it creates faith. This faith, trust in God's verdict of 'Not guilty' clings to God's Word no matter how much sin we see in us and around us – no matter what effects our thoughts, words, and deeds create – good or evil. This faith directs us away from ourselves and always to Jesus. Any other ground, any other justification on which to live lives of meaning and hope – now and beyond death – is sinking sand.

Words shape reality. 'I love you', 'Not guilty', 'You are free to go', 'Don't worry about your homework' change how we see and live life. It's scary to live by words. We usually prefer deeds or assets. Human experiences testify that words are unreliable, untrustworthy, and can mislead, confuse, and kill. The words of the triune God scandalise us and leave us no room to move – sin and you die. The words of the triune God comfort us and give us freedom to live – 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; now remain in my love' (John 15:9). The word that shapes reality is the Word made flesh who hung on a cross and died; who couldn't be held by death; who recreates and sustains life through water, bread and wine. Cause and effect are useless here – the water couldn't clean a stain; the bread and wine couldn't nourish anyone; and the words are spoken by people as flawed (or as good) as we are.

Yet these words – visible and spoken and lived out – bring about life, hope, meaning, and purpose. God loves you. God forgives you. God is with you. These words are true no matter what the context.

So much of our living is cause and effect – and as I said at the beginning – much of it is good. But when we ponder and share with others why or more importantly who features most prominently in our lives – then our faith quickly moves past the world of cause and effect and our place in it to the scandal of the cross, the person of Jesus, and the love of God.

There is no other message to tell.