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The Offence of the Cross

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased." (Galatians 5:11).

It is a perfectly obvious fact that wherever the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ has been most faithfully preached and presented - while bringing hope and new life to many - it has almost invariably been the cause of trouble.

Wherever it has gone it has aroused antagonism. As it was a stumbling block to the Jews and an absurdity to the Greeks in the first days, so, ever since, it has been unacceptable, not only to the men of the world as such, but to the religious communities also.

This we unhesitatingly affirm to be as true today as ever, in spite of the fact that it is the most popular symbol in the world. There is hardly a city in Christendom where the architecture, galleries of art, collections of literature, conservatoires of music and religious institutions do not declare to the world a certain regard and honour for this sacred sign.

It is found necessary even in certain phases of some missionary enterprise today to eliminate from the text books and hymn books, the mention of the Cross lest it offend.

Much of the preaching and teaching in the Christian Church is either confined to the "Historic Jesus" which presents a Crossless Christ, or gives a very modified meaning to His death.

And yet it is surely necessary to get rid of the Bible before we can get rid of the fact that it unites in all its parts to declare the Cross is God's way of salvation, God's sufficient and God's *only* way.

It is, further, surely very clear that the Cross has proved to be the means upon which God has made to rest the full weight of His mighty saving power. It was dominant in New Testament days. The recovery of, or re-emphasis upon some vital and essential phase of that Cross gave rise to such movements as are signified by the names of Luther, Moody, Finney, Jonathan Edwards, Whitfield, the Wesleys, Spurgeon, and many other especially God-honoured men.

Now we ask why has the Cross always been such a maker of trouble and such a cause of offence? And why is it that it is today behind much of the upheaval even in many of our professedly evangelical institutions, and denominations, Christian homes, local churches and individual Christian lives?

This we will seek to answer, but first let us discriminate. It is not the heroics of the Cross or the aesthetics which cause the trouble.

Sacrifice, suffering, unselfish devotion, self-effacing service for the good of others, enduring the penalty of setting oneself against the evil current of the times, etc; these are romantic elements and are seized upon as the themes by which multitudes are captured and captivated.

It is the deeper meaning which the Bible gives to the Cross which causes the aggravation, this can be seen in one or two clearly defined applications.

1. The Cross condemns the world.

In His Cross Christ created a great divide between the old world and the new, a divide which cannot be bridged.

Two distinctly different systems, scales of value, standards of judgment, sets of laws, prevail on the two sides of the Cross, the system of each is not only entirely different but irreconcilable and forever antagonistic to the other.

The Cross demands an absolute distinctiveness of interests, and objectives, relationships and resources.

It draws the final distinction between the saved and the unsaved, between the living and the dead.

The Word of God emphatically declares that the age is evil, and that "the whole world lieth in the wicked one," and that its ways, motives, purposes, ideas, imaginations are all the opposite of God's and that it is utterly incapacitated from either receiving the revelation of the divine mind, growing of itself into the divine image, enjoying and appreciating real fellowship with God, or being entrusted with the privilege of co-operation with God.

These are alone the consciousness, capacities, relationships of the newly-born or regenerated soul. It is this verdict, condemnation, and demand of the Cross which is unacceptable and irritating to a very great number of even professing Christians. Further, it is the presence of much that is called "worldliness" both in the individual Christian life and in the Church which absolutely neutralises their effectiveness in the realisation of the essential purposes of the Cross.

2. The Cross condemns the flesh.

By it the Word of God declares that "our old man has been crucified with Christ." "One died for all, therefore all died in Him, that they which live should henceforth live no longer unto themselves but unto Him." We have tried to bring some of the old creation life into the new creation and God won't have it. The history of the fallen race was concluded so far as God was concerned at Calvary. From that time onward, God's entire concern was the new creation, but alike our human capabilities as our infirmities, what we call our better human side, as our worse, our goodness and our badness have been included in that death. Henceforth we are called to live not on a human level but on a divine. Humanly we possess nothing which is acceptable to God. It is always the assertion of some human element, some like or dislike, some fad or fancy, some ambition, some personal interest, which paralyses the real spiritual work of God. To regard not only our sins but ourselves as having been taken to the Cross by Christ is the only way by which the purposes of God can be wrought out through our lives. It is strange that while we ourselves are the bane of our own existence, the trouble of our own lives, we are so slow to accept our crucifixion with Christ, to have the Cross wrought out to our death in order that the life of Christ might be made manifest in us. Herein lies the offence of the Cross, not only for the worldling but also for the Christian.

3. The Cross casts out the devil.

Here we touch, perhaps, the deepest cause of the offence, for the world and the flesh are only the instruments and weapons by which the great hierarchy of Satan maintains its hold and its existence as the controlling force. Christ said, as He approached the Cross, "Now is the prince of this world cast out," Paul reflecting upon that Cross said that by it "Christ stripped off principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, and triumphed over them." It is perfectly natural, then, that the great hierarchy should by every means and resource seek to make the Cross of none effect. By the "pale cast of thought" it will dilute the message of the Cross; by pushing in the world's methods, its means, its spirit, it will tap the spiritual vitality of the Church; by stirring up the flesh, the self and the old Adam, it will cause schism, strain and disintegration; or by making much of the human element in its artistic, aesthetic, heroic, humanitarian side, it will be blind to the need of regeneration. Reputation, popularity, bigness, the world standard of success, are all contrary to the spirit of Christ, but they are the toys with which the enemy engrosses the minds of many, even Christian ministers. If, therefore, the Cross is preached in its full victory over and emancipation from the world, the flesh and the devil, it is to be expected that by hook or by crook the intelligent forces of evil will leave no stone unturned to stop it, and will stir up every cause of offence to lay to the account of the Cross.

In conclusion let us not forget that the enjoyment of the full life of God, the experience of victory, and executive co-operation with Him that sitteth upon the Throne in the sure realisation that His eternal purposes are ours just in so far as we are one with the full and essential meaning of the Cross as set forth in the word of God. "I have been crucified with Christ, henceforth... no longer I but Christ." "They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony, and they counted not their lives dear unto the death."