

# The Offence of the Cross

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*"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).

The verse from which this title is taken suggests that if only Paul had continued to preach circumcision he could have avoided persecution and been freed from the inevitable offence which is created by the message of the Cross. It is an obvious fact that wherever the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ has been faithfully preached it has not only brought hope and new life to some but also caused trouble with many more. Wherever this message 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 it has ever since been unacceptable not only to men of the world but even to many religious people.

This is a fact, in spite of its being the most popular symbol. There is hardly a city in Christendom where the architecture, galleries of art, collections of literature and conservatoires of music do not give a prominent place to the sacred sign of the cross. It is a pity, then, that so much of the preaching and teaching in the Christian Church is either confined to the "Historic Jesus", which presents a crossless Christ, or to an interpretation of the cross which is much less than the Scriptural one.

Yet the consistent message of the whole Bible is that the Cross is God's way of salvation, His sufficient and His only way. It is further very clear that this has been the message which God has blessed to the salvation of men. It was dominant in New Testament days, and the recovery of, or re-emphasis upon some vital and essential phase of that Cross gave rise to such movements as are signified by names like Luther, the Wesleys, Whitfield, Moody, Spurgeon and many other God-honoured men.

Before we begin to discuss why the Cross has always been such a

maker of trouble and cause of offence, we need to make it plain that no exception is taken to the heroics of the Cross or its aesthetics. Sacrifice, suffering, unselfish devotion, self-effacing service for the good of others, enduring the penalty of setting oneself against current evils; these are romantic elements which are popularly appreciated. It is the deeper meaning which the Bible gives to the Cross which provokes men's opposition, and it may be profitable to examine a few of these more closely.

## 1. The Cross condemns the world.

In the 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, stand contrasted on the two sides of the Cross. The system of each is not only quite different, but irreconcilable and forever mutually antagonistic. The cross demands an absolute distinctiveness of interest and objectives, relationships and resources. It draws the final distinction between the saved and the unsaved, between the living and the dead.

The apostle Paul said that by the Cross of Christ he had "been crucified to the world" and the world crucified to him. The Word of God emphatically declares that this age is evil and that "the whole world lieth in the wicked one". It says that the world's ways, motives, purposes, ideas and imaginations are all the opposite of God's. It further asserts that the world 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.

Such capacities and relationships belong only to those whose new birth has delivered them from this present world. It is understandable that the world finds the condemnation of the Cross irritating and unacceptable, and it is to be feared that the presence of "worldliness" in the individual Christian life and in the Church is in direct contradiction to the essential purposes of the Cross. The Lord Jesus described His cross as being "the judgment

of this world" (John 12:31). Those who follow Him must accept this verdict, and will consequently have to suffer from the offence of the Cross.

## 2. The Cross crucifies the flesh.

The Word of God declares that "our old man has been crucified with Christ" (Romans 6:6) and that "One died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). So far as God was concerned the history of the fallen race was concluded at Calvary. From that time onward, God's entire concern was the new creation. It is no use our trying to bring some of the old creation life into the new creation, for God will not accept it. Our human capabilities as well as our infirmities; what we call our better side as well as what we recognise to be our worst side; our goodness and our badness have all been included in that death. Henceforth we are called to live not on a human level but on a divine. In ourselves we possess nothing which is acceptable to God.

So often it is the assertion of some human element, some like or dislike, some ambition or some personal interest, which paralyses the work of God in and through us. To regard not only our sins but ourselves as having been taken to the Cross by Christ is the only way by which those purposes of God can be wrought out through our lives. It may seem strange that while we so often deplore our lack of spirituality, we are so slow to accept the verdict of the Cross on our natural lives. We find it humiliating to accept the same verdict on ourselves as has been passed on the world, namely that of death by crucifixion. Nevertheless there is no other basis for a really spiritual life and witness: the Cross must work out death in us in order that the life of Christ may be released in full expression through us. So there may be a sense in which the Christian also has to face the offence of the Cross. Only by really knowing the power of the fact that he is crucified with Christ can he know the blessedness of the new life. When it is truly "no longer I", then the way is opened for the affirmation: "but Christ that liveth in me". The end is

glorious but the way is the painful way of the Cross.

### 3. The Cross casts out the devil.

Here we touch 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. As He approached the Cross, Christ said: "Now is the prince of this world cast out" (John 12:31). As Paul reflected on the deep meaning of the Cross he said that by it: "Christ stripped off principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, and triumphed over them" (Colossians 2:15).

It is perfectly natural, then, that the great hierarchy of evil 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 and spirit it will sap 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 elements in its artistic, aesthetic, heroic side, it will be blind to the need for regeneration. Reputation, popularity, the world's standards of success, are all contrary to the spirit of Christ, but they are the attractions by which the enemy engrosses the minds of many, sometimes even Christian ministers.

If, therefore, the Cross is preached in the full content of victory over and emancipation from the world, the flesh and the devil, it is to be expected that by hook or crook the intelligent forces of evil will stop at nothing to silence it, and will stir up every cause of offence which can be laid to the account of the Cross. No wonder that this message is repudiated or misrepresented, since it is God's solution to the problems of fallen man. Crucifixion is a harsh end; it reveals the utterness of God's repudiation of everything which belongs to the old creation. To the believer, however, the Cross as presented in the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

In conclusion let us not forget that the enjoyment of the full

purpose of God, the experience of victory, and association in life with Him that sitteth on the throne in His glory are ours just in so far as we are one with the reality of the Cross as set forth in the Word of God. Perhaps it is best summed up for us in the words: "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" (Revelation 12:11 ).

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