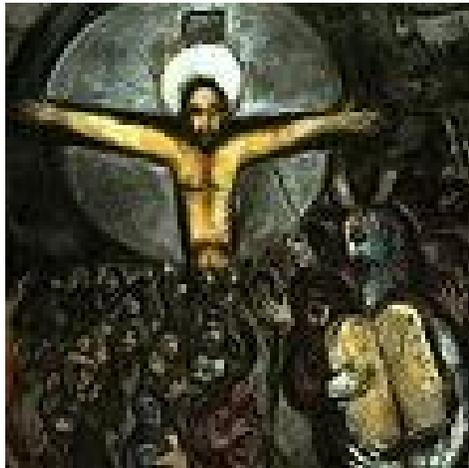


SKANDALON () Scandal (stumbling block) Offense of the Cross

Gary Heartsill



But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

Galatians 5:11 New Revised Standard Version

Dear brothers and sisters, if I were still preaching that you must be circumcised--as some say I do--why am I still being persecuted? If I were no longer preaching salvation through the cross of Christ, no one would be offended.

Galatians 5:11 New Living Translation

Abstract

This paper discusses the issues of the term “The offense of the cross” using as a first reference the verse in Galatians 5:11 and comparing Paul’s words in a select number of Biblical interpretations and then discussing the scholastic and theological comments of other particular writers of what the term means for us today.

The specific questions raised are: (a) What is the definition of the offense of the cross? (b) What is the Scandal or stumbling block? (c) What should be the response of the Christian believer to this offense?

Prelude

This is the second in the series of theological issues designed for The Small Group Studies (SGS). The first paper dealt with Mary Magdalene as Witness to the First Easter using Jn xx: 11-18 for the Scripture background. Please note the last line in the following paragraph as it is the precursor to this study:

The exegesis of Jesus calling Mary by her name and Mary finally recognizing Him as Lord was followed by her “going forth to the disciples and saying ‘**I have seen the Lord**’ ...thus she tells them what Jesus himself had already told his followers... It was not about ‘faith in a palpable demonstration of the Risen Lord’ but that He is ‘*ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and to your God.*’ The existential part of this “is not new thought that is thereby added, but the declaration gains a great pathos: the Father of Jesus is God! And through him God has become the Father of those who belong to Jesus...**The real faith therefore is that which believes this: it consists in understanding the offence [sic] of the cross.**” (MM xx 11-18, p. 8)

The Offense of the Cross in Scripture

Paul in Galatians 5:11 is saying circumcision is no longer required by Jewish law but he has no problem with people being circumcised – even his circumcising Timothy. The offense to the Jews is Paul doing away with the law and preaching Christ crucified. So, the problem is offending people like the Jews with this preaching or condoning the ceremonial law. Paul was offensive with his preaching. The preaching therefore offended the Jews.

Below is a truncated list of comments on Galatians 5:11 and Paul’s stance or commitment on this sometimes troublesome issue with circumcision – and offense.

Review of Relevant Literature

C. H. Spurgeon preached sermon #2594 “The Offense of the Cross” on October 30, 1898. He said “strange, yet strangely true it is, that the Cross of Christ has always been an offense and that it has provoked the fiercest battles and the sternest strifes which men have ever had with their fellow men” (p. 1).

“The man who is relying for salvation on his own strength does not like the Doctrine of the Cross...When you preach against it, see how men will roar at you – they cannot bear that teaching!” (p. 2).

He quotes: “old John Berridge said ‘If you do not preach the Gospel, you may sleep soundly enough. But if you preach it faithfully, you will hardly have a sound place in your skin for you will soon have enemies enough assailing you.’ How is it that we never hear of any slander against a great many ministers? Everything goes easily and comfortably with them. Nobody is ever offended with their preaching. People go out of their chapel doors and say, ‘what a nice sermon! It was just the thing for everybody, and nobody could be offended’...A celebrated preacher was once told that he had pleased all his hearers. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘there is another sermon lost’” (p. 5).

Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible

“If I yet preach circumcision – it is very likely that some of the false apostles, hearing of Paul’s having circumcised Timothy, Acts 16:3, which must have been done about this time, reported him as being an advocate for circumcision, and by this means endeavored to sanction their own doctrine. To this the apostle replies: Were it so, that I am a friend to the measure, is it likely that I should suffer persecution from the Jews? But I am every where persecuted by them, and I am persecuted because I am known to be an enemy to circumcision; were I a friend to this doctrine, the offense of the cross – preaching salvation only through the sacrifice of Christ, would soon cease; because, to be consistent with myself, if I preached the necessity of circumcision I must soon cease to preach Christ crucified, and then the Jews would be no longer my enemies.”

John Gill’s Exposition on the Whole Bible

“The Syriac version reads by way of question, ‘is the offence of the cross ceased?’ no it is not, a plain case then is, that the apostle did not preach circumcision, but only a crucified Christ, as necessary to salvation. Moreover, the Jews that believed would not have been so offended as they were at his preaching, had he preached the one as well the other; their offence was not that he preached Christ crucified, but that he preached, that, by the cross of Christ, circumcision and the other rituals of the ceremonial law were now abolished.”

Wesley's Explanations and Notes

But if I still preach circumcision - As that troubler seems to have affirmed, probably taking occasion from his having circumcised Timothy. Why do I still suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased –

The grand reason why the Jews were so offended at his preaching Christ crucified, and so bitterly persecuted him for it, was, that it implied the abolition of the law. Yet St. Paul did not condemn the conforming, out of condescension to the weakness of any one, even to the ceremonial law; but he did absolutely condemn those who taught it as necessary to justification.

Jesus and the Offense - and as The Stumbling Block

Jesus is the offense. Jesus was offensive. He offended most people. Most people were offended by Jesus and his cross. They were offended when told to “Follow me.” Rich men were offended when told to sell their goods and follow him.

“The offense of the cross is inextricably part of the proclamation of the message of salvation itself... Take up your cross and follow me!” We are told to “forsake everything we know – family, friends, culture, tradition, a sense of identity as a Jew – to experience the miracle of newness of life.” (The Offense of the Cross, Parsons, p. 6)

“Paul never glamorized the gospel. It is not success, but sacrifice! It’s not a glamorous gospel, but a bloody gospel, a gory gospel, and a sacrificial gospel! Five minutes inside eternity and we will wish that we had sacrificed more, wept more, bled more, grieved more, loved more, prayed more, given more.” (Ravenhill, 2011)

Paul says in I Cor. 1:22-23 that Jesus is a stumbling block to the Jews and an embarrassment to the Greeks; “*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...*” Parsons further explains how the crucifixion was an offense and a stumbling block:

(a) “To the Gentiles, the image of a crucified man was a symbol of shame, weakness, and disgrace. The Greek mind esteemed learning, virtue, aesthetics and strength as the path of attaining wisdom, and therefore regarded the idea of ‘a god dying on a cross’ as the utmost in ‘foolishness’...

“The Jewish mind...regarded anyone ‘hung on a tree’ as irrevocably cursed by God (Deut. 21:23)...To the Jew, the idea that Yeshua had to die a death cursed by the law of Moses is regarded as entirely repugnant to the fundamental *meritocracy* of the Jewish faith. How could the Messiah – the anointed one of God – ever be truly cursed?

(b) "...the message of the cross offends because it reveals the unvarnished truth about our spiritual condition. The 'real Jesus' offends us and deflates our pride. God's way of salvation is an affront, a scandal, an insult, and ultimately a *verdict* about the insufficiency of human effort to attain righteousness before a Holy God.

(c) "...the message of the cross is offensive because it requires the death of the ego...In Jewish terms, the cross is an offense because it eliminates the hallowed 'mark of circumcision' – the token that something man can add is needed to be right with God (Gal 5:16). But the cross is an offense because it states that circumcision does not make you a true heir of salvation (1 Cor. 7:19). Indeed, ritual circumcision implies an agreement to abide by the terms of the old covenant and therefore makes you its debtor. The two covenants are mutually exclusive on this point. Works righteousness is antithetical to the grace of God given in the Messiah (Gal. 5:2-4). The divide of the Cross represents an absolute break with traditional Judaism. We are justified by trusting in the LORD and not by the deeds of the Torah (Rom. 3:20).

(d) "...the message of the cross is offensive because it is *exclusivist*. The cross is an offense because it declares that faith in the atoning sacrifice of Yeshua is the **ONLY** way to be forgiven by God. There is no other name than the Name of Yeshua for the salvation of human beings (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 1:23; 1 John 2/23)...there is considerable offense by proclaiming that Yeshua is the **ONLY** way of salvation, and there *is* offense by stating that His sacrifice upon the cross (alone) is the **ONLY** thing that makes us right with God. That kind of talk will be regarded as offensive – intolerant and even hateful – to those who attempt to justify themselves apart from God.

(e) "...the message of the cross is offensive because of Yeshua, the 'Skandalon of God.' The Man who was regarded as a criminal was really the King; the powerless one became LORD over all; the one who could not save Himself became the Savior; the one who was killed became Victor over death itself.

"Christianity claims to be the eternal, essential truth that has come into existence in time. It proclaims itself as the paradox and thus requires the inwardness of faith – that which is an offense to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks, and an absurdity to the understanding (Parsons, *The offense of the cross*, pp. 1 - 6).

Christian Response to Offense without being a Stumbling Block

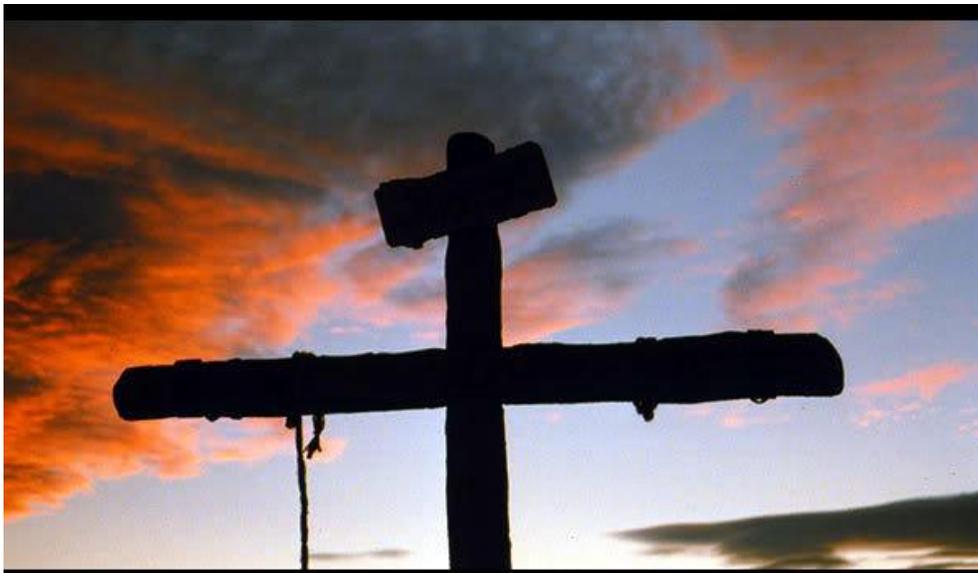
Christians must preach/teach/show Christ as He is and with His demand to follow Him; however, they must not run listeners off or be a stumbling block. They must know what is offensive but at the same time not back down on the demand of what it means for one to pick up their cross.

Glen's closing comments in his article hold the essence of what a Christian response is without being a stumbling block:

"Bultmann believes that the myth of a literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a false offense unnecessarily alienating modern man. He does not believe that Jesus is

still alive on a new plane of existence which Paul attempts to describe by using analogies in First Corinthians, chapter fifteen. This writer believes the resurrection to be a genuine offense and need not be demythologized. It must of course be carefully explained so that resurrection is not misinterpreted as resuscitation or re-incarnation. It is the historical essence of the Gospel and it is offensive to modern man. This difference between what constitutes a genuine offense and a false offense is crucial to an effective witness.

"On the one hand, we should never falsely offend; on the other hand, we should never lose the genuine offense of the Gospel. If we fail in our witness, it is usually something like the following true incident related by a well-known Boston minister. He told of a department store clerk who said, 'I have know you for many years reverend and you are such a great minister. I am glad you have never offended me by telling me that I need Jesus as my Savior!' It is tragic but true, that most Christians err not so much in falsely offending non-believers, but rather in never offending men at all with the genuine offense of the Gospel. This is Bultmann's main concern: that man be offended, but not for the wrong reasons. Paul Tillich expresses the same concern when he writes, 'What we have to do is overcome the wrong stumblingblock in order to bring people face to face with the right stumbling block and enable them to make a genuine decision' (p. 213). Once again, we see that the concern for apologetics, as the *proper* communication of Christian truth, is a unanimous concern among contemporary theologians (p. 81).



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