

THE OFFENCE OF THE CROSS

Galatians 5:7-11

Where is the cross in your Christian faith? If your understanding of the Christian faith does not lead you to glory in the cross of Jesus Christ, you are the victim of a misunderstanding.

Paul raises this very point with the Christians in Galatia. In this paragraph he uses some of his sharpest language in opposing the false teachers. He affirms that in spite of their claims, they are not from God. "This persuasion cometh not from him that calleth you." (v.8) The persuasion he is referring to is the one that has hindered them in their Christian progress. Furthermore, he warns that Christian truth is such that a little false doctrine will corrupt the whole system. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." Leaven symbolizes evil and false doctrine in scripture. False doctrine works just like a pinch of yeast in the bowl of dough --- it permeates and affects the whole thing. This is the reason that Paul takes this inclusion of legalism so seriously---it would affect the whole system of doctrine.

These false teachers are to be the objects of divine judgment. "I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded, but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be." This was a not-so subtle way of saying, "You had better not follow them."

But then Paul says, "And, I brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offense of the cross ceased." This brings us to the heart of the matter. Why were these Judaizers trying to wed the law of Moses and faith in Jesus Christ? They had become convinced of a reality in Christ, but the Jewish community put such pressure on them that they were seeking a point of compromise where they could be Christian and escape the wrath of the Jews. Paul puts himself in their place. He reasons that if he would just preach that circumcision and obedience to the law were necessary for a Gentile to become a Christian, he too could escape the persecution --- but the offense of the cross would also be annulled. The cross was a scandal to the Jewish people --- it kept many of them from identifying themselves with Jesus Christ.

So a real test for doctrine is where does it place the cross of Jesus Christ. Let us consider in some detail the offense of the cross.

I. The cross is an offense because of its criminality.

It is rather difficult for us to recapture the mindset of the first century world concerning the cross. To those of us who have grown up under the influence of the Christian faith, we have always had a rather warm feeling about the cross. But to first century man death on a cross was not some special kind of redemptive

death, it was a means of getting rid of the criminal element. The worst of criminals would be put to death on a cross in some public place as a means of discouraging others from following their example, and as a means of executing justice. The Romans used it most in conquered countries as a warning to those who might be tempted to defy the authority of Rome. So when Jesus Christ was crucified, he died the death of a criminal.

The Jewish law also associated the public hanging of a body on a tree with the curse of the law. Those so put to death were understood to have violated the law, and to have died under its curse. Do you not see why a Jewish man might be rebuffed by the message of "The Crucified One"? But this was only the surface part of the problem. It goes much deeper.

II. The cross is offensive because of its centrality.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross could have made him a hero of the people of Israel. If he had been put to death on the cross as a martyr for the cause of Israel against Rome, he might have received much adulation and might have become a national hero. But this was not instigated by Rome, but by Jerusalem. And He never spoke of his death as being that of a martyr, nor did his disciples. They made his death on the cross the center piece of the Christian faith. They understood it as being central to everything. This offended the Jews.

They were offended by its centrality in the purpose of God. From the first sermon preached on the day of Pentecost onward, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross was declared to have been by the design of God. Peter preached at Pentecost that he "was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." (Acts 2:23) To the sorrow of the Jews, the early Christians persisted in interpreting his death in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 53. This just did not fit in with the pre-conceived ideas the Jews had about God. He just would not deliberately plan for His servant Son to die the death of a criminal!

Then the centrality of the cross in redemption was offensive. This is the heart of the issue being raised by Foul here. Paul along with the other apostles proclaimed that by dying on the cross Jesus Christ purchased redemption from sin for all mankind. They declared that trusting this Crucified One, you could be forgiven for all of your sins, and be reconciled to Holy God. They furthermore declared that it really made no difference as to who you might be --- whether Jew or Gentile. His death upon the cross was a sufficient propitiation for the sins of the whole world.

It was too much for a faithful Hebrew man. How could he place his trust in the death of a Jewish man on a Roman cross to make him acceptable before Holy God? It was a scandal, a stumblingblock to him.

The teachers under the attack of Paul had found a way to remove this stumblingblock. They reassured the offended Jews by telling them that Gentiles must come under the protective umbrella of the mosaic law by being circumcised, and living as Jesus. Faith in the crucified one by itself would not be enough. This made more sense to the opponents. So by removing the cross from its place of centrality in redemption, they would annul its offense.

The place of the cross in redemption is still offensive to sinful man. Proud man is offended by the message that declares that he must depend upon the death of Jesus Christ as a criminal to make him acceptable before God. Proud man wants to "do" something. He responds more readily to a message that gives him something to do. He will be baptized, take the mass, keep the Golden Rule or almost anything. But it is offensive to just depend upon another to die in your place. Consequently, we have many versions of the Christian gospel that removes the cross of Jesus Christ from its central place in redemption. Some of them re-interpret the death of Christ as being that of a martyr. They call on us to follow the example of Jesus in being willing to die for truth and righteousness. Or, they put His moral and ethical teachings in the center, or his institution that he established, the church, or some religious experience. Their renovated Gospel puts something in the center besides the cross.

Conclusion:

Where is the cross in your personal faith? The observance of the Lord's Supper provides us with a beautiful opportunity to re-affirm its centrality. We can truly declare that rather than being offended by the cross, we glory in the cross. We can confidently declare, "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Are you ready for such an affirmation? The deacons are ready to lead us in declaring that we are trusting in the crucified one, and in Him alone for salvation.