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THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS¹

Billy Graham, adapted by Jeff Woodhams

And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased (Galatians 5:11).

[Today we turn from Genesis for the time being and proclaim instead a message that has its roots in Genesis but is carried to fruition in the New Testament. In Genesis, man sinned and lost his position of fellowship with God; in the New Testament, we find the restoration of the fellowship. In Genesis, we have the promise of a Redeemer; in the New Testament, we have the fulfillment of that promise, that precious promise.

The sermon I want to share today was originally published in a 1957 edition of *Eternity* magazine.² This sermon is so fundamentally right that I want to present it to you today largely as it appeared then, but I will start it off in today's context.

As you know, this week President Barak Obama signed a health care reform bill that is less about health care reform than it is about the restructuring of American society. After all, providing health care to the uninsured, if that were the actual target, could have been accomplished at a fraction of the cost and with wide bipartisan support. Many people, including every Republican in Congress and thirty nine Democrats, saw this bill as a violation of fundamental American freedoms and values. Our nation is in a time of great unrest and turmoil.]

As one incident of crisis follows another, it seems to many as if demonic forces are at work to bring mankind to destruction. The Christian outlook has not been as black since the days of the first century. Never was the New Testament's message of hope more needed by a confused and alarmed people. Never has the cross of Jesus Christ towered so significantly in judgment over the events of time.

The late German theologian Karl Heim once said that the answer to the world's dilemma is the *kerygma*, or the proclamation of the Gospel; and that the heart of the *kerygma* is the cross. Yet the Apostle Paul referred to the cross as a "scandal" to the world. He asked the churches of Galatia why it was, if he preached "works," that he was being persecuted. If that were true, he said, "the is the offense (skandalon) of the cross ceased" (Galatians 5:11).

That expression, "offense of the cross," at first may sound strange to the modern mind. We have crosses on our churches, embossed on our Bibles, and worn as pendants from our necks. The cross is an emblem of art to the poets. There may be nothing wrong with this sentimentality, but the Bible teaches that the cross as understood in New Testament days was an offense, as stumbling block, a scandal to men.

Christ is not always attractive to the human heart, no matter how he is presented. Isaiah says with prophetic vision as he looks down the corridors of time: "There is no beauty in him that men should desire him." Paul, living after Christ, found that the cross provoked the scorn and aroused the antagonism of men. When he held up Christ and him crucified, many were offended and turned away in

¹ Wilber M. Smith, editor, *Great Sermons on the Death of Christ* (Natick, MA: W. A. Wilde Company, 1965).

² Billy Graham, "The Offense of the Cross," *Eternity* 8.11 (Nov. 1957).

contempt and rage. Today we hear the cry all over the Christian world, “Back to Christ.” I want to ask, “What Christ are we going back to?”

I [Billy Graham obviously] attended a conference at Princeton Seminary some time ago. The president of one of our theological seminaries remarked, “I am convinced we are having a religious revival in America, but,” he said, “it is not the Christian religion.” Sometimes when we look at Christ, we get a wrong concept of him. Too often he is only the Jesus who walked in Galilee, only the picture of wisdom in Jerusalem, or an ideal created by a picturesque imagination. He is not the Christ of the cross. The cross in the days of Christ stood for a place of horrible execution. It was reserved by law for murderers, inciters of rebellion, and the lowest kind of criminals. The cross meant tragic suffering and slow death, for the victim was exposed to the elements and to the animals that prowled at night.

When Jesus said, “If you are going to follow me, you have to take up the cross,” it was the same as saying, “Come and bring your electric chair with you. Take up the gas chamber and follow me.” He did not have a beautiful gold cross in mind—the cross on a church steeple or on the front of your Bible. Jesus had in mind a place of execution.

Paul found that wherever he went he had no difficulty until he began to preach the cross. Wherever he went he found that the cross was an offense. People did not want to talk about it, and they did not want to hear about it. After two thousand years it has not changed. In America, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is still a stumbling block to men who want to go to heaven but are not willing to pay the price of the cross.

There are four reasons why the cross is an offense:

WE SEE OURSELVES BY CONTRAST

First, the cross of Christ condemns the world. The thief on the cross beside Christ looked at Christ dying, confessed openly his sins, and said, “Lord, remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom.” The fact that Christ was dying and his blood was being shed had thrown the searchlight on his own wickedness. He saw the purity, holiness and righteousness of Christ, dying not for his own sins but for the sins of the whole world, and he recognized immediately that in comparison to Christ he was a sinner, and he cried out to God for salvation.

That is how I know I am a sinner. Not only because I have broken the Ten Commandments, sin being a transgression of the law, but because I have come short of the glory of God. The glory of God is Christ, and, if I have failed to live like Jesus, to be as holy, good, pure and righteous as Jesus was, I come short. I am a sinner. Who of you can stand up and say, “I am as good as Jesus?” None of you can. For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death.

Look at Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. He was living in adultery—committing the sin that broke the Seventh Commandment. But you can commit adultery several ways. Jesus said that if you look upon a woman to lust after her, you have committed it already. A word, a dirty joke, obscene language, filthy literature that plays upon the imagination—it is the same as if you committed it. Herod condemned Christ because his purity, love and graciousness shone upon Herod’s sins. Herod did not like it, and the cross became an offense to Herod. Neither do you like the cross. Either it will make you turn away and harden your heart, or it will melt your heart and bring you to the foot of the cross, where Jesus will forgive you, cleanse and make you pure.

Caiaphas, the high priest, filled with pride and cold, crafty wisdom, faced Christ, and the shadow of the cross pointed as a dagger at Caiaphas. He saw his own selfishness, but he could not stand it, and the cross became an offense to him—and to all of you filled with your ego and pride.

SALVATION NOT BY OUR PRIDE

Pride was the sin of Lucifer, and it is the sin of the world today. We feel that we can please God by our works, and somehow get into heaven by valiant effort, even religious effort. But the Bible says, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourself: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any many should boast.” We don’t like that. It offends us. This is the offense of the cross.

We have developed rockets and think we can do anything. We don’t like to be told in our day that we have to become as little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But I tell you salvation is of God. It is God who took the initiative, God who gives repentance, God who plants the seed of faith, God who regenerates.

The sin of Pontius Pilate was fear. He was a moral coward. How many people would give their lives to Christ, but they are afraid to face their family. They don’t want to be called a “holy Joe.” It is quite respectable to be baptized and confirmed and go to church at Christmas and Easter. That does not cost anything; that kind of churchgoing is simply a status-symbol of successful modern social living.

When it comes to real heart-commitment to Jesus Christ and personal daily fellowship with him many are like Pilate. They don’t have it. They cannot say with Paul, “I die daily to the things of this life.”

HE CRINGED FROM THE CROSS

The cross shone in the direction of Judas, filled with covetousness, greed and ambition. He wilted and became a suicide, because the cross was a stumbling block. Judas could follow Christ when the people were cheering; Judas was right there in the parade on Palm Sunday when the band was playing and everything was going fine. But when the chips were down, and Jesus began to talk about a cross, Judas said, “Count me out.” He was putting his money and his ambition above God.

Has money come between you and God? A few months ago a man accepted Jesus Christ and said, “From now on, although my business may go broke, I shall make only honest dollars.” It may cost you that to give your life to Christ.

Look at the Apostle Paul. Wherever he went to preach, the cross was an offense. He preached before Felix, and the burning message of the cross condemned Felix so that he trembled, but he said, “When I have a more convenient season I’ll call for you, Paul. Go away.” There never came a more convenient season for Felix. That was his last hour and he did not know it. A man in the gallery one night during a [Billy Graham] Crusade trembled. He gripped the seat until his fingers throbbed with blood. He went home and dropped dead that night. Paul preached the cross to Festus, who cried out, “Paul, you are mad; you are a raving maniac.” The cross is an offense.

The Scripture says, “Men love darkness because their deeds are evil.” The cross throws spiritual light into the dark recesses of our soul and shows us our sins. The cross becomes an offense because it condemns us as sinners.

GOD HIMSELF IS REPULSED BY SIN

Second, the cross is an offense because blood was shed there. People say this is a slaughter-house religion, a repulsive religion of blood. From Genesis to Malachi in the Old Testament, you will read of the blood of Christ. It is repulsive to some, but God put it there. Blood means life. “The life of the flesh is in the blood.” When blood is shed, life goes. Jesus gave his life on the cross when he shed his life’s blood.

It is the blood of *propitiation*—Romans 3:25; “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past.”

It is the blood of *redemption*—Revelation 5:9; “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation.”

It is the blood of *remission* or forgiveness—Hebrews 9:22; “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.” If Christ had not shed his blood on the cross, we could never be forgiven of our sins.

It is the blood of *reconciliation*—Ephesians 2:13; “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” We were separated from God by sins, but the blood of Christ brought us back to God again. That is why many of you are in deep distress. You make money, but you are not satisfied. You have glamor, you go to amusements, you drink alcohol, but you do not have satisfaction in yourself. Your soul was made in the image of God, but your sins and iniquities have separated between you and your God. There is only one way to find peace and forgiveness, and that is by the cross.

LUTHER’S ANSWER TO SATAN

It is the blood of *justification*—justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him, says the Bible. It is the blood of *peace*. Peace is found at the foot of the cross and only at the cross.

It is the blood of *entrance into his presence*: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19). Because Christ died and shed his blood on that cross, I have a right in the name of Christ to come into the very presence of God.

It is the blood of *Christ*: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

It is said the devil once confronted Martin Luther with a tabulation of his sins. Luther asked, “Is that all?” “No!” said the devil, “There are many more.” Martin Luther said, “Put them down.” The devil sneeringly wrote them down, and Martin Luther said, “Is that all you can think of?” The devil said, “Yes. Now what?” “Now,” said Martin Luther, “write beneath them all, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.’” There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE CROSS

Third, the cross of Christ is an offense because it sets forth an imperative ideal of life. Jesus said, “If

any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up cross, and follow me.”

We are busy in our churches today building astronomical figures--sending in reports: how many new members we took in, how many people affiliated with the church. Jesus worked on the opposite principle. Every time the crowd got too big, Jesus would say, “All right, deny yourself if you are going to follow me, take up the cross.” That eliminated almost all of them. The crowd did not want self-denial; they wanted a kingdom, they wanted a crown, they wanted to rule, to live in a palace. They wanted all the blessings of the Christian life, but they were not going to go to the cross with Him.

How many chafe at the restraint of a life like Christ's! We refuse to give up what we know his cross condemns. In a great city, with its sensual indulgences of rich and poor, with its neglect of the miserable in the slum areas and the careless eye toward the wretched condition of thousands, with the selfish attitudes in the growing race problem, we see the evidence that the cross is an offense to us.

THIS WAY AND NO OTHER

Fourth, the cross of Christ is an offense because it claims to be the power and salvation of God. It demands from every man as his first duty that he get right with God. We do not like that. We like to think that there are other roads to heaven besides the one road. Jesus said that the gate to heaven is narrow. At the beginning of that gate is a cross, and no man will ever gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven unless he comes by way of the cross. The cross humbles us, the cross demands, the cross expects everything we have to be given to Christ. The cross condemns every other way of salvation. Man and his ego says, “I am going my own way.” Many are sincere. They think they are going to make it, but if there were any other way of salvation, Christ would never have gone to the cross. He would never have died. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “If there is any other way, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.”

I tell you as a minister of the Gospel of Christ that there is no other way one can be saved but this. Have you been saved? Have you trusted in Christ? You can find a new life here and now and eternal life to come, for you become a partaker of God's life the moment you come to the cross. Jesus finished this work. You don't have to add to it. All you do is receive it.