

The Scandal of Christianity

*“And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offense of the cross ceased” (Galatians 5:11). “For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).*

God’s ways are diametrically opposed to man’s ways, at least and especially in this matter of evangelism, the proclaiming of the gospel to lost men. He has deliberately chosen to throw stumbling blocks before men in this matter. *“But God hath chosen the foolish . . . to confound . . . and God hath chosen the weak to confound . . . and base things . . . things which are despised, hath God chosen . . . to bring to nought . . . that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).*

The further the external church gets away from the Bible, the more evident it is how deeply the leaven of Egypt has penetrated and shaped its philosophy and witness. We are taught that we should be careful to form statements and arguments in non-inflammatory, non-offensive terms, to seek common grounds with unconverted men, to speak subtly, softly, to avoid any truth that should repel our prospects and raise hostilities. If we thus prosecute our case with appealing, inticing words of men’s wisdom, we are assured that we shall soon win them to Christ without so much as causing a ripple on the waters of their depraved, God-hating, rebellious hearts. After all, that is the way of politics, of international diplomacy. It is the way good managers get more work out of employees. It is how good salesmen market their merchandise. These are the tools the philosopher uses to win converts. It is, in short, man’s proven way of manipulating men.

But it is not God’s way. If men are converted through the power of human persuasion, such diplomatic subtleties and niceties are valid. But if they are persuaded by nothing less or more than the powerful operation of the Spirit of God, they are worse than worthless.

God does not come to us smiling, seeking common ground, offering amenities. He comes to us scowling, waving red flags, deliberately provoking issues, forcing us to face hostilities, and threatening divine retribution. Nor is He concerned that such a rash approach will diminish the number of souls saved or drive away His elect. When the Lord’s disciples warned Him that His teachings were offending the Pharisees (Matthew 15:13-14), He answered, *“Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up. Let them alone . . .”*

A present-day preacher giving such an answer might be accused of callous hard-heartedness; but who dares accuse the Saviour of sinners of want of compassion?

Compassion or the lack of it is not the issue, but the nature of salvation, the character of truth, the state of natural man and the essence of true Christianity. Man, in his natural state, is so violently contrary to everything about true Christianity, that no conversion can be expected until the opposing and offending issues are dragged out in the open and addressed. The sooner this is done, the better. Dallying around trying to find “common ground” is a waste of precious time with those who will ultimately reject the truth anyway when they face it. *“Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted must be rooted up.”* We must get to the issues. Get to the point right away. That is what the prophets did. It is the method the Lord used. The Apostles followed the same pattern. Nothing is to be gained by tiptoeing around problem spots. They must be encountered head-on.

But this worldly-minded generation of professional religionists calling themselves Christians will have none of that. They have too much at stake in public opinion, in their image in the eyes of this evil generation. They can not afford the scandal of Christianity.

This was vividly illustrated recently in the Phil Donahue circus. Mr. Donahue had as guests on his show two chief antagonists in the current Southern Baptist flap: Judge Paul Pressler of Houston, a leading spokesman for the conservative wing (whom the liberals now call “fundamentalists”), and Dr. Russel Dilday, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the loudest mouths of the “liberal” wing (who now call themselves “Conservatives”). The leading question first put to Mr. Pressler went something like this: “As I understand it, you believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved, and that no one can go to heaven who does not believe and trust in Him. Is that true?” Now, it seems that the good judge, being knowledgeable of the necessity of definite answers in examinations, should have been able to answer that with a simple yes or no. But he did no such thing. Instead, he said something like this: “Well, now, I don’t believe that there is any difference between myself and Dr. Dilday on that matter. All Southern Baptists are pretty well agreed on that issue.” Turing to Dr. Dilday, Donahue put the same question to him, saying, “Is this true, that you are agreed on the matter of faith in Jesus Christ being the only way of salvation, that no one who does not believe in Him can go to heaven?” As with the judge, it seems this honored theologian, understanding the necessity of lucidness in doctrinal matters, should have been able to answer with a simple yes or no. But instead, he launched into a vague and general monologue about salvation being a matter of the “whole man”, his quality of life involving social issues, world peace, human rights, civil equality and that sort of thing.

As I remember, Mr. Donahue then repeated his question to the two men three or four times each, in an attempt to extract a straightforward yes or no answer to the question, “Is Jesus Christ the only way of salvation?” Each time, the answer he got was a clever, diplomatic sidestep. They well knew that as soon as they gave an affirmative answer to Donahue’s loaded, yet perfectly valid, question, they would be vehemently attacked for bigotry. “Then, you are saying that all Jews, Moslems and all other non-Christians in the world are all lost, and that you are the only ones to be saved.” They knew that was coming next, and were not about to leave themselves open to that accusation.

It seems as remarkable as tragic, that neither of these two men, both of whom profess to be earnestly contending for the faith, had the courage, moral fortitude or evangelical conviction to say, "Yes, Phil Donahue, that is exactly right. The Jew how refuses to bow to his God and Creator as revealed in Christ Jesus will go to hell, as well as you, with all the rest of rebellious God-hating humanity."

The idea that one can be a faithful witness to Biblical revelation in Christ and avoid censure, ridicule, outrage and hostility from this world is sheer nonsense. Consider:

1. The gospel makes humiliating and insulting assertions about people. They are declared to be unrighteous, unprofitable, no good (Romans 3:10-18). They are said to have lying tongues, cursing mouths, murderous feet, to be bereft of due reverence to the Almighty. They are charged with stupidity (Isaiah 1:3), blindness and evil plotting (Isaiah 59:2-11). John the Baptist greets visitors to his baptism by calling them sons of snakes (Matthew 3:7), making mockery of their pedigrees, demanding evidence of repentance. Jesus called some of the finest religious leaders of that day fools, blind guides, hypocrites, widow robbers, serpents (Matthew 23). Peter accused his first post-Pentecost congregation of deicide (Acts 2:23). In his later general epistle he speaks of men as "dogs returning to their vomit" and "sows wallowing in the mire" (2 Peter 2:22). Stephen rightly pegged his contemporaries as stiffnecked, uncircumcised murderers (Acts 7). Peter spurned a lucrative offer from one of his converts by deriding his potential benefactor as being in the bond of iniquity. Paul said of the Creteans, "evil beasts, slow bellies, liars" (Titus 1:12). These are words poorly chosen to "make friends and influence people." Men diligent to have men reconciled to God are no less direct and plain in what God says about them. Benjamin Franklin, himself an unbeliever, nevertheless marvelled at the thoroughness of Whitfield's converts, even though the great evangelist called them somewhat "half beast and half devil".
2. Exclusiveness. The gospel claims that of all the religions in the world (and there are thousands), Christianity is the only valid one. The Lord Jesus claims to be *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (John 14:6). He tells us that he has proceeded from His Father, the one true God, and that no one can come to that Father except by Him (John 17:3). The gospel reduces all the religious rites and rituals, all the so-called good works of men which they do in hope of gaining favor with God, as utterly worthless. This is the crux of the matter that Paul addressed in Galatians 5:11. It was not just leaving circumcision out that made the gospel offensive. It was the exclusive claim that faith in this man, Christ Jesus, whom we affirm offered in His death the only acceptable sacrifice for sins for all time and all eternity. That leaves every other religion out in the cold. If you think that this non-Christian religious world is going to cotton to that idea, you are mad.

Not only does the gospel make exclusive claims for Christianity, but it make exclusive claims for Christians. Those who believe are said to be "elect", "chosen" ones (Ephesians 1:4, 1 Peter 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:13). There is no essential difference between select and elect. The Bible clearly teaches that God, according to reasons within Himself alone, chose certain people to salvation and left the rest to follow their own self-determined way to destruction. Nor can man do anything to influence God in this choice. He has made the choice before the foundation of the world without any regard to the good works His objects of mercy might do (Titus 3:5). Unenlightened men are going to receive that bit of information either with rage, or the patronizing smile offered as response to the ranting of religious morons. Such is the opinion, expressed or not, held by the unbelieving world of Christians who claim that they, and they alone, of all the people in the world, will be saved.

3. Bigotry. Yes, that is a very good word to describe Christianity. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines a bigot as "one obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his own church, party, belief or opinion". To be bigoted is to be "so attached to some creed, opinion or practice as to be illiberal or intolerant". Christians are quite willing to allow others to differ with them, to practice their own religions according to their own beliefs, but they insist that they will all go to hell. Paul's opening remarks in his Galatian letter sounds extremely bigoted: "*If (any) preach any other gospel to you than we have reached unto you, let him be accursed*" (Galatians 1:8). Jude writes (verse 3), that we "*should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*". The writer of Hebrews declares Jesus Christ, God's Son, to be God's last word to the world (Hebrews 1:2).

Twenty centuries of Christian history reveals a creedal people. A people devoted to Christ, but a Christ Who is revealed in concrete terms, Who made concrete statements which, if believed to be true, can tolerate no variation. Faced with the choice of renouncing the least claims of the Christian faith or death, our best have quickly and cheerfully accepted the end of this life in order to obtain the "better resurrection". Yes, Christians believe what they believe, and that certainly means that they believe that everyone else is wrong. If we are to bear the name of Christ and be faithful to His teaching, we will also wear the title, "Bigot!".

4. Cult. Yes, indeed! A cult is defined as "a system of worship of a deity. Great devotion to some person, idea or thing . . ." Christianity perfectly fits into the basic idea of a cult. It is essentially the worship of God as revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. His claim to be the only begotten Son of God (he who is begotten of man is man, but he who is begotten of God is God), to be One with the Father, to have power to forgive sins, His demonstrated ability to create new parts of the body that never existed, to raise one who has not only died but decomposed . . . these all are irrefutable evidences of His deity.

The World has successfully pawned the image of Elmer Gantry and Jim Jones off on the public as typical of Christianity. Consequently, modern and liberal churchmen have attempted to rid themselves of the centrality of worship in Christianity by painting for themselves pictures of social activism, political reform, the improvement of this present world and humanity in its natural state. And they have been successful in their objective. Such churchmen and churches have attained an excellent image and great favor in the eyes of this evil generation. But that is not true Christianity. The Person of Jesus Christ is the cohesive force in His church. It gathers around Him, fixes its adoring gaze upon His face, walks in His footsteps, and is diligent to do that which He has commanded us to do. That is not to say the true church has no regard for humanity or social issues, but that when it acts in these areas, it is moved, not primarily by the plight of man, but by obedience to Jesus Christ our Lord. Christianity is truly a Jesus cult.

5. Sect. "In religion, a party dissenting from an established or parent church; a body of sectaries (dissenter from the established church, nonconformist)" Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Possibly no other characteristic of the true Christian church has brought upon it more violence and persecution of every sort than its inflexible sectarian stance. It has always stood apart from established religion, even when the religion established was "Christianity". Every human society and culture very soon establishes a religion of sorts. In some cases it is mandated by civil law and enforced by the magistrate. Often, however, in these modern "enlightened" days we give some sort of deference to the idea of separation of church and state. But that does not keep society from establishing a religion. It is not by cultural mores; and it is enforced by social acceptance or ostracization. They who regard men and men's opinions will, therefore, embrace the established religion, be it Moslem, Judaism, Hinduism, Mormonism, Anglican, Catholic, or any other heathen deity. The true Christian church will exist in the same society, but will stand apart as a sect and will be held in contempt and derision.

The true church does not hold its sectarian character simply because it is obstinate and contrary. It has no objection to being a part of the established church if such a church worshipped the true and living God and stayed true to the Christian faith. But it never does. The Bible is a spiritual book. States and societies are governed by men with unspiritual minds, so that even when they share the Bible in common, their views of the Bible are irreconcilably opposed to one another. Societies are man-centered, politically oriented. Christians are God-centered, heavenly oriented. That is why the true Christian church has always been a hated and despised sect within society . . . and it always will be. He who decides to become a Christian will ready himself to take part in the communion of those who are society's outcasts.

6. Clannish. Another look at Webster and his definition of this word will be helpful. Clan: "A social group comprising of a number of households, the heads of which claim descent from a common ancestor." Clannish: "Of a clan' disposed to associate only with one's clique." Christians are all members of one Family. They are begotten of God by the Holy Spirit and pray to one Heavenly Father through the mediation of one Elder Brother, Jesus Christ. They are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). And although they have and demonstrate a benevolence toward all men, they love one another with a pure heart fervently. They are continuously meeting together. They are intensely committed to serving, caring for and praying for one another. And although they are not isolationists (they take their part in the secular world more diligently and conscientiously than most non-Christians), they have *no* fellowship with anyone who is not also a Christian. This is a matter of obedience (Ephesians 5:11, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18), but also a matter of spiritual necessity (1 John 1:3-7, Colossians 3:1-14). The Christian's quality and manner of life is spiritual and heavenly; the natural man's center of life is carnal, fleshy, of this world, so that it is impossible for there to be any meaningful fellowship between the two.

So there it is. That is what we have to offer men who are evangelistic prospects. We come to them in the name of a God Who has deliberately chosen to confound them, to utterly strip them of all self-respect so that they stand naked and helpless before Him, with no hope but His sovereign mercy. The Bible gives us no compliments for them: only insults and threats with a promise of hope to those who take the humble place assigned them by their Creator. We come to them with one way, no alternative, utterly ruling out any other hope under the sun, claiming Christ the only Saviour. We come as confirmed bigots, asserting that all who do not trust in Christ will be left out. We offer them the cult of Christ worship, urging them to love God as revealed in Christ with all their heart, soul, mind and body. They are pointed to the hated sect of Christianity, torn from the religious roots of their ancestry and all respectable society. And we urge them to become a part of our clan, to enter into an exclusive brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ.

*"Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from the vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, . . . Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, even to them which stumble at the word being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 1:18-19, 2:7-9).*

- C. M.