

The Offence and Superiority of the Cross

by G.W. North

The cross is a symbol of God's righteousness and His just reaction to sin, and it is a trigger for spiritual life, but it is also an offence to those who do not understand its significance.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:5, Matthew 27:35, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 5:11, Ephesians 2:8-9, Colossians 2:14, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Salvation", "The Cross"

Description

G.W. North explores the profound implications of the cross, emphasizing its offensive nature and the superiority of its message in the context of salvation. He explains that the crucifixion, a method deemed barbaric by modern standards, was deliberately chosen by God to reveal the seriousness of sin and the necessity of redemption. North argues that the cross serves as a public exhibition of justice, demonstrating God's wrath against sin while simultaneously offering salvation to humanity. He highlights the tension between the cross and traditional religious practices, particularly circumcision, illustrating how the cross challenges and transcends ceremonial law. Ultimately, the sermon underscores that the cross, while offensive to many, is the cornerstone of Christian faith and the means by which believers are transformed into new creations.

Transcript

The gospel of the cross is thrust upon us unasked; of themselves it is almost certain that men would never seek it. Crucifixion was a most distasteful and shameful method of capital punishment. Beside and beyond being a mere instrument of death, crucifixion was devised by the Romans as a punitive measure for several other reasons (mostly offensive to our taste). The Romans were a civilized nation, one of the greatest civilizations the world has known, but they were also a very warlike nation, heathen, fierce and cruel. By many and frequent battles and conquests they forced their way into foreign lands afar and built an empire over which they imposed their iron will. They did this with such success and to such degree that to this day their mark remains ineradicably impressed on the nations they successively conquered and ruled. Wherever they went they introduced crucifixion; in the Roman world justice was a byword and the cross was its ultimate symbol. No country under their authority would have been left in any ignorance about the power and meaning of the cross, though not its saving power -- the Roman cross did not symbolize salvation but death.

Today the cross is regarded as barbaric and loathsome; the whole civilized world now condemns the savage nature which could devise such a thing and the heartless system which could apply it. How then could modern man be expected to accept and look with equanimity upon this most inhumane method of imposing the death sentence? God knew that it was almost beyond expectation -- why then did He send His Son into the world to face that kind of death and incorporate it into salvation? It should be borne in mind that God sent His Son into the world at the end of an age specially to be crucified. The crucifixion was foreshadowed, though not forecast, in such scriptures as Psalm 22: what God did was quite deliberate -- it was done in full cognizance of what effects it might have in the twentieth century A.D. It should also be taken into account that it was precisely because of what took place by the crucifixion that men and women of this century think it to be an atrocity. Christ not only accomplished redemption by the cross, He started something in the mind of humanity that has changed the world so radically that men and women think crucifixion is barbarous. But at that time Romans were not considered barbarous; they were the leading nation on earth, educated, civilized, law-abiding and victorious; when they came to Britain they brought the inevitable cross with them. This land was then heathen, our forebears were savages, scarce removed from cavemen we are told; they were defenceless against Rome and were soon made slaves; many who escaped the sword were hung on crosses.

In this modern age it is not what Rome accomplished by the cross but because of what Christ accomplished by it that people think the cross to be philosophically and aesthetically wrong. It is no longer a legal or historic matter, it is a spiritual matter; God used the cross, that is the challenge. It ill becomes sensible people to despise that which God has made their only hope. Yet still the cross is a scandal. Even in those far-off days many other methods of putting people to death were known to men, yet God chose none of those for His Son. He chose the time and sent Him into the world precisely that He should suffer death by crucifixion and we are told that for Him it was the fulness of time. Why? And why did He do such a thing? He knew that the death of His Son would need to be preached throughout all time in all the world as the central determinative factor of salvation. Whatever made Him choose the cross? Why not decapitation or poisoning or even stoning (primitive and torturous as that was) or some other method equally well known to men, just as effective and certainly less barbaric; why did it have to be the cross? He realized that the cross would cause disgust and shame and be outwardly offensive to countless human beings, furnishing the gentle and the civilized and the cultured and the merely religious with sufficient aesthetic grounds to reject His proffered salvation, yet He chose to do what He did. What then are His reasons for so doing?

It is an axiom in law that when crime, especially serious crime, is to be punished, the judge, in passing sentence, should bear in mind that there must be an exhibition to public justice and that it is his duty to include that in the sentence. Crime against society, though it be perpetrated against one person, must never be treated as a private matter; it must be treated as a public outrage and punishment must be meted out accordingly. Punishment may not be inflicted according to the tastes of, or to suit the desires of, an individual or a small group of individuals in society; the judge passing sentence may not do so according to his own whim or because of any personal injustice or damage he may have suffered. Punishment must be imposed according to outraged public conscience. When passing sentence the mentality, decency, standards and desires and intentions of the whole people must be interpreted by the judge. He may not act as an individual but must apply the verdict of the people because he is acting as their representative; the judge is the servant of the nation.

A judge is as a president and must pass sentence as from a body of law agreed upon by a law-abiding nation. His own personal tastes or standard of ethics, his views on the particular case or person on trial, though they may be identical with the people's, are not primarily taken into account. The body of law is an expression of the will of the people. It is either the agreed opinion of a nation of people or the decision of their received head(s) of state; ideally it should be both. Therefore the sentence when passed is the will of the people and before passing it, it is the judge's duty to rightly ascertain by proper investigation whether the accused is guilty or not guilty. He may not decide whether or not the guilty should be punished; the law (and therefore the people) decides that. Certain crimes merit certain retribution and although a little latitude in interpretation may be permitted, the judge may not alter the law, he may only apply it; especially is this so in the case of capital punishment.

The death sentence is not imposed with the idea of educating the individual in social morality by corrective punishment. It may have a salutary and corrective effect upon others in society who may be planning misdemeanours and that is good; it may also act as a deterrent to the spread of similar criminal intent; but be that as it may, capital punishment is not regarded primarily as corrective and certainly not as reformatory to the individual; it is the final word of the people upon certain forms of crime. Capital punishment is the execution of the will of the people, it is insistence upon total exaction, full payment and strict justice without mercy for a crime which has no forgiveness; it is based upon the Mosaic code of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'; fairness and justice are its commendation, and righteousness its foundation. It must therefore be thoroughly understood by us all that the death of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion was an exhibition to public justice by God. Jesus was crucified according to the will of God in order to reveal to men the effects of sin upon God and His creatures. The crucifixion was the execution of God's implacable will, God was outraged beyond placation because of sin. Beyond being an exhibition of God's personal wrath against sin, the crucifixion was also the demonstration of His righteousness, it is His just reaction to sin, not a merely emotional one. Further still the crucifixion was not only executed for Himself as expressing His own personal revulsion, but also as expressing the will of all righteous people.

When Jesus came into the world it was an understood thing between Him and His Father that once becoming a man He would have to accept and bear the sentence of death in Himself. He had already accepted that position before being born but He was God only then, He was not the God-man, therefore when He did become a man He had to re-assess the position from a human angle and re-affirm His commitment as a man. This is what took place in the garden of Gethsemane. It cost. He could not shed His blood there -- that was reserved for the hill of redemption and the actual cross, but His sweat was as His blood in that garden of consent and commitment. There the sentence was passed and accepted and from thence He bore it as against Himself on behalf of others, right through crucifixion and death and burial.

The high priest sentenced Him to death, Pilate sentenced Him to death, nearly everybody sentenced Him to death, but the death they thought of and imposed upon Him was not that death, it was not the death He accepted in the garden. They, all of them together, though they marshal all their power and combine all their authority, could not pass upon Him the sentence He had already agreed to and accepted on the throne in heaven and on the ground in Gethsemane. How could they? They did not know the grounds upon which to sentence Him. Neither priest nor Pilate, great and high though they were, knew with whom they were treating, nor did they know why they were sentencing Him, 'Art thou the Christ the Son of the Blessed?' cried the priest, 'Whence art thou?' asked Pilate like an echo. They and all who questioned with them did not know, they were ignorant, it was beyond their ken as confessed out of their own mouths, and

it was out of their hands. Their sentences were as nothing to Him: He had already been sentenced. God did it. When Jesus was finally led away to be crucified He went bearing the sentence of death He had accepted from God. He suffered for the crimes of humanity against God and humanity, crimes He Himself had never committed nor ever thought of committing: He was punished as though He was the guilty one of heaven and earth -- all who had perpetrated those crimes both directly or indirectly since the foundation of the world: this vital truth of the cross is perhaps too little known.

There is a comprehensiveness about the cross. When God punished His Son He did it not only as from Himself but also as from the considered opinion of a completely convinced people, a people who, if they could have known the whole truth and had been able to adjudicate, would have passed a body of law utterly justifying what He did at Calvary. What He did there He did for us as us, as though we were one with Him in the act, On our behalf He exhibited what would have been our outraged sense of justice had we known and had we been He. This is perhaps one of the greatest of the many reasons why God chose the barbaric cross for His Son. If He had done this to anyone else but Him, for any lesser reasons or with any other purpose than this, it would have been monstrous sin, but in this light it is totally right. This very comprehensiveness of the cross was the greatest reason why the cross was so offensive to the men who were troubling the Galatians. They never understood its fulness, they were offended simply because by it God has accomplished everything which was formerly accomplished only by the ceremonial law; this did not please them at all. They wanted their religion, not the cross.

The great thing at issue among the Galatians was the religious practice of circumcision. It was to them the most fundamental ceremonial of all. By it every male child in Israel was made a child of Abraham, an inheritor of the kingdom and a debtor to keep the whole law. So important was the tradition that, irrespective of the day, circumcision must be performed without fail eight days after the birth of the child, whether it be solemn sabbath or feast day or even the great day of Atonement. Failing this, despite his birth, even though he be a very Isaac, he was cut off from the altar of God, doomed. It can well be imagined what a tender point this was among people; every earnest caring person would have been most concerned to keep the commandment. Imagine then their consternation of heart when people realized, and rightly so, that it struck right at the root of their traditional faith. It destroyed their foundations.

Paul's teaching cut clean across everything; he taught that circumcision was nothing but an outward symbol and quite valueless in the Church; he went so far as to say that under some circumstances it could be definitely harmful to spiritual life. He certainly made it clear that if circumcised people were saved it gave them no spiritual advantage over uncircumcised members of the Church. The cross of Christ rendered the faith and practice of Jewish rites no other than merest superstition. He insisted that all circumcised people were to recognize that circumcision practised for spiritual advantage was quite useless, it provided none; it must be regarded as concision only and its supposed advantages renounced. Paul laid down that circumcision is now accomplished by the cross of Christ alone, it is of the heart and not of the body, it is in the spirit and not in the flesh and it is done by God and not by man.

So then, whether to Jew or gentile, the cross was an offence -- it still is, there is no minimising the power and scope of its meaning, it is unlimited and uncompromising. Because of this it is a very delicate subject now as then, though for different reasons. This is brought out by the figurative meaning of the word translated offence here. We are informed that the word refers to the trigger of a fall trap, a very delicate piece of mechanism included in the setting up of traps to catch birds or animals: by this trigger the poor creature brought about its own captivity, for the slightest touch would move it and cause the trap to spring. This device was always set up well within the trap so that almost always the prey was inescapably caught

and held. So it was with the matters of ceremonial circumcision and the cross: both are triggers and they are diametrically opposed to each other. In either case the person who embraced one or the other was 'caught'. The circumcised person was debtor to keep the whole of Moses' law, the crucified person was debtor to keep the whole law of Christ. The cross was a very 'touchy' subject indeed in Paul's day; preached properly it stripped Jewry of all its symbolic religious overtones and outlawed its former ceremonial practices. 'Neither circumcision availeth any thing nor uncircumcision but a new creature': Paul says we must walk by this rule. Circumcision today is only a show unto men in the flesh, crucifixion shows in the spirit before God.

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