

The offence of the gospel

I've already told you [08] about an awful situation I experienced when helping to run an evangelistic course once: the leader asked the assembled group, 'If you arrived at the gates of heaven and wanted to be allowed in, what would you say?' Setting aside for a moment the vision of heaven as a walled and gated compound(!), you can imagine the responses that attendees came up with. 'Actually, those are all wrong,' announced the leader, 'The Bible says that, however hard we try, we can never be good enough, because God is holy. But the good news is that God loves us so much that he provides a way through which we can get into heaven.' Well, I can't remember his exact words, but that was the gist.

Afterwards, I challenged the leader about this and asked whether he realised what a negative impression he had given. His response was to point out (words to the effect that), 'Yes, but the Bible teaches that the gospel **will** offend people. Our responsibility is simply to preach the gospel, and if people reject it, then that's their responsibility.' And I think he might have even quoted '*The god of this age has blinded their minds of unbelievers.*' (2 Cor 4:4)

Thinking about it again, I started asking myself whether 'the offence of the Gospel' really is a biblical concept. Maybe it's just an excuse for our botched attempts to put across 'the gospel' (sin and a holy God)? Maybe it's just our lack of sensitivity to our hearers that is causing offence, and not the gospel per se?

So to check its biblical veracity, I Googled 'the offence of the Gospel'. (Well, why repeat the biblical spadework when someone else has probably already done it.) I looked at the first website that came up, read (bits of) it and wished I hadn't. It was horrendous! From the picture, Bill looked a regular nice, smiley chap but words fail me to describe his 'I'm right' (disguised as 'the Bible teaches') attitude, as he hatefully commented on a range of issues (you can probably guess some of them), including Notre Dame, even before anyone knew the cause of the fire. Still, it saved me searching for the scriptures myself, but it was a sobering experience to see what we're up against in trying to witness to our loved ones, and trying to assure them that, yes, Jesus really did preach 'love your enemies'.

Here, with the context **included**, are the proof-texts used to justify 'the offence of the gospel', i.e. to claim that the Bible teaches 'if we preach the gospel, people **will** be offended'.

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles**, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:18-24)*

Is this saying that people in general will be offended if we 'fearlessly preach the gospel'? Or is it just that the cross is a stumbling block to the **Jews**? Well, if you're saying to devout Jews that Jesus is God, Jesus is the Messiah, and that God (Jesus) was crucified, then that might indeed be a cause for offence. But people in general? today? No, I don't think that's what it's saying.

*I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case **the offence of the cross has been abolished.** (Gal 5:10,11)*

Are people in general going to be offended by issues to do with circumcision? I think not!
(Another scripture quoted out of context.)

*For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,**” and, “**A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.**” They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:6-9)*

This sounds to me as if it's referring to the way the Messiah was rejected by the religious leaders of the day. I can't see how you can use it as an excuse for preaching the good news in a way that causes offence to people in general. (Maybe the term 'good news' is a clue that we shouldn't expect the gospel to cause offence.)

So, once again, as with 'the wages of sin' [52], Christians are ripping biblical phrases out of context and to justify their own views.

If we preach the gospel (the narrative of Jesus) then any 'offence' we cause is likely to be because we failed to do so 'with gentleness and respect' (1 Pet 3:5)

Yes, the cross is an offence, an utter and total scandal, but not in the sense that Bill Muehlenberg uses it. And, yes, we need to restore the scandal of the cross, if we're to see how the cross is so much bigger and more powerful and more life-changing and more culture-changing than I had ever realised [13,14,46-49] (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, Mark Baker and Joel Green).

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