

# The Offense of the Cross

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by  
***Thru the Bible Radio Network***  
P.O. Box 7100  
Pasadena, California 91109-7100  
(800) 65-BIBLE  
[www.ttb.org](http://www.ttb.org)

All Scripture references are from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.

*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)

The symbol of Christianity is the cross; it is the badge of the church. The “fraternity pin” for believers in Christ is the cross. It is the identification tag of faith. It is the emblem for Christ today; it is the passport for tomorrow. It is identified with the cause of Christ as is nothing else in this present day.

The cross has actually become popular in this modern world, too. Charity organizations and honor fraternities have adopted it to enhance the value of their groups, as evidenced in the names of Red Cross, Blue Cross, White Cross, Victorian Cross, Croix de Guerre, and Maltese Cross.

Even the church today uses the cross as if there were no odium attached to it. Many church buildings are built in the shape of a cross. A congregation of almost any persuasion sings lustily and blandly:

In the cross of Christ I glory.  
Tow’ring o’er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers ‘round its head sublime.

– “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” words by John Bowring

The content of the gospel is no longer contained in the symbol of the cross. Much use has cheapened it; it has been abused and made commonplace. The meaning of the cross has been watered down to the extent that it is meaningless. Churches that deny the efficacy of the blood are generally the ones that have the largest crosses. The cross appears in the queerest places. It is often displayed in lodge rooms, undertakers’ parlors, and knife-and-fork clubs.

After a ministers’ retreat near Santa Monica, California, three of us drove over to Wilshire Boulevard for a sandwich. As we entered one of the familiar drive-in places in that area, a carhop approached us. She was wearing about her neck the largest cross that I have ever seen. The cross was jet black against her white uniform, which enhanced its size. This cross, which she wore as an ornament, was a very obvious introduction. When she approached, I asked her why she was wearing such a large cross. Her reply was, “Don’t you think it’s pretty?”

I countered, “Don’t you know what that cross means?”

She said, “No, I do not.”

Then I asked her, “Did you know that 1900 years ago Jesus Christ died on a cross for you and for me?”

“Huh?” she asked. Then I gave her the story of salvation as it relates to the cross. Her only answer was, “Well, I saw it downtown and liked it, so I bought it for an ornament.” She said that it meant nothing more to her.

I gave the girl a gospel tract when we left and urged her to read it before wearing that cross again. This little incident reveals that the average person has no clear conception of the meaning of the cross. It has become an ornament and is no longer an offense.

There is a startling bit of information that we would like to pass on to those who make so much of the symbol of the cross. Actually, the Lord Jesus was not crucified on the cross as we have it designed today. Two pieces of wood laid crosswise is not the Scriptural picture of the cross. One piece of wood as an upright and another acting as a crossbar on which the arms of Jesus were stretched is the artist’s conception. In fact, there are three conceptions of the shape of

the cross. One is termed generally as St. Andrew's Cross in the shape of an X. Another is in the shape of the letter T. The third, with which we are familiar, is like a dagger. The Greek word that is translated "cross" is *stauros*, which only means "stake." It was an upright pale or pole. Peter and the other apostles called the cross a "tree [*xulon*]" (Acts 5:30; 1 Peter 2:24). Neither of these words can be fashioned into a cross. Let us put it another way: We get our word "cross" from the Latin *crux*, and "cross" is the translation for the Greek word *stauros*. Now a *crux* and a *staurus* are no more the same thing than are a stick and a crutch the same thing. The early church never used the symbol of the cross as we understand it today; they only referred to it in a veiled and hesitating manner.

There is another startling fact that needs to be stated: There is no merit in the cross as a piece of wood. Any piece of wood that was similar would be of equal value. The cross can actually be a stumbling block if it is an object of superstition.

During the Middle Ages, the cross became a fetish, and relics of this kind of paganism are in evidence on every hand. During the reign of Henry VIII of England it was estimated that there were fourteen carloads of splinters removed from the cathedrals of London, all purported to have come from the original cross. There was enough wood to build a five-bedroom house! This shows the absurdity to which the human mind goes when it takes the eye of faith away from Christ.

Even today, the cross is treated by Protestants as a sort of good luck charm. It's like the rabbit's foot that is supposed to have peculiar merit because it's the left hind foot of a rabbit caught in a graveyard after midnight during the dark of the moon. Surely that foot did not mean good luck to the rabbit that lost it.

There is value in the cross, but it is in the One who died there. The redemption that He wrought there has value; the power is in the blood that He shed. Paul used the cross to gather up the work of Christ in redemption. Christ's person and infinite sacrifice alone give a full-orbed view of the cross. Listen to Paul:

***For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.*** (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Since the Corinthian epistle deals with the death and resurrection of Christ, I am of the opinion that Paul included all that is comprehended in the gospel by the word "cross." See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

***Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and in which ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.***

Again in Galatians 6:14 we read:

***But God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.***

Here Paul apparently refers to the redemptive work of Christ. This is what the Christian means today when he sings "At the Cross."

In what way is the cross of Christ an offense today? Is the redemptive work of Christ an offense, and in what way is this true? There are three ways in which the cross of Christ is an offense to modern man, but Paul had reference to only one of them.

### **1: The Cross is an Aesthetic Offense**

This means that the cross offends the good breeding, good taste, and finer feelings. It is offensive to culture and refinement. The mention of blood makes some people actually sick. To talk about the death of Christ and the blood that He shed is crude to a certain type of mind. Now, may I say this – His death was a horrible spectacle. “There is no beauty that we should desire Him,” the prophet said. “He is despised and rejected of men . . . and we hid as it were our faces from him” (Isaiah 53:2, 3). I say this carefully – it is not always a mark of orthodoxy to picture the cross in all its lurid details and to tell minutely what took place on it. I say kindly, but I say it nevertheless, it may be just a lack of good breeding in not knowing what is proper. And actually it is ignorance of the entire subject.

There is a reverent reticence in all that God records concerning the crucifixion of Christ. Not one Gospel writer gives us the detailed account of the crucifixion of Christ – not one of them. Have you ever noticed that? Every one of them draws a veil over that cross, and they do not tell us about the details of how He was riven on the cross, how He suffered on it, or how He died on it. They merely pick out a few fragmentary facts to give to you and to me, and they do not go into detail at all. It is as if the Holy Spirit drew a veil over that cross and said, “This is too horrible! This is too awful! You cannot look upon it!” There is nothing at the cross to satisfy the curious. There is nothing for you and for me to gaze upon at all. If you read the Gospels through, you will find nothing in detail is given to us there. Therefore, there is such a thing as an aesthetic offense of the cross to some.

Dr. Thornvill, probably the greatest theologian that the South has ever produced, used to say this to his boys at seminary, “Young gentlemen, preach the cross, but do not magnify the offense of the cross. It is bad enough as it is.” And, today, you and I need to remember that.

I want to say this very carefully, but I want to say it nevertheless: The cross was an awful thing. It was not the pretty white cross that we see on the tops of our churches and in our decorations today. The important thing is not the shape of the cross but the One who died there. He was marred more than any man, and when after the darkness, the light finally broke upon the cross, He was nothing but a mass of quivering human flesh. I don’t think He even looked human.

By the way that some people picture the cross today, it is little wonder that the liberals turn away in repugnance from it. And the natural man, repelled by it, talks of it as a “religion of the shambles.” But let us understand one thing: You and I should not be offended by the cross of Christ.

Many years ago in the city of Washington, in one of the leading churches there, the pastor who had served for many years resigned, and a young man was called. After the young man had preached on his first Sunday, there came down front one of those rich dowagers. (Dr. Ironside called them “female dreadnaughts.”) She came down to this young preacher and said to him, “Now, I hope you aren’t going to say too much about the blood. Our other preacher talked about it all the time, and I hope you aren’t going to make too much of the blood.”

He looked at her and said, “Why, madam, I’m not going to make too much of the blood.” She said, “Oh, I’m so delighted to hear that you are not.”

And then he said very seriously, “You *can’t* make too much of the blood.”

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said that when he first came to this country, a lady came up to him and said, “Dr. Morgan, the cross is offensive to me. I don’t like to hear a preacher talk about it because it is ugly and it is unsightly, and I don’t like to hear that sort of thing.”

Dr. Morgan, in his characteristic manner said, “Madam, I thoroughly agree with you. It is an offense. It is an ugly thing. But the only ugliness in that cross is your sins and my sins.”

Yes, it is an aesthetic offense yonder at the cross; but God, at the very beginning, set a line of demarcation leading to it. When the sons of Adam and Eve brought their sacrifices, Cain paid God the fruit of the ground – something aesthetic. While on the other hand, Abel brought a bloody little lamb. It was not a pretty sight, but it told out once for all that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4), and that there was coming “the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Christ didn’t die on a pretty white cross. He died on an ugly tree.

Cicero, who lived in Roman times, wrote: “The cross, it speaks of that which is so shameful, so horrible that it should not be mentioned in polite society.” Think of that! The very thing that they didn’t speak about in Roman society became the very subject of the gospel of Jesus Christ and was preached throughout the Roman world. The cross was as infamous as the gallows is today; Christ died in what then corresponded to our electric chair. That awful thing became the very center of the preaching of the early church. For from His cross there came forth healing and righteousness, and there came forth salvation for you and for me.

That ugly cross tells the greatest story; it sings the sweetest music; it brings the best news and the most glorious truth; and it whispers the infinite love of God to your heart and to my heart. Look into the heavens tonight and will see something of the glory of God. Look at the mighty mountains that are round about us and you can see something of His greatness. Look into a little fragile flower, and it will tell you something about God. But listen, if you are going to know about the love of God, you will have to look upon the cross of Christ. Oh, I say to you, Paul didn’t mean that the cross was an aesthetic offense.

## **2: The Cross is an Intellectual Offense**

There is another way in which the cross can be an offense. It can be an intellectual offense. Let me repeat this verse: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.”

It was Samuel Butler who said, “Jesus Christ’s carriage blocks the way.” The cross impedes the intellectual progress of mankind. From the days of Christ to the present, men have been saying practically the same thing.

I could identify, but I will not honor them by doing so, a dozen liberals who say, “The preaching of the cross, with all of its blood and its sacrifice, is for people who are not intellectual.” One man has gone so far as to say that one cannot be in his right mind and believe that another could die for him on the cross.

Beloved, the cross stands as the wisdom of God. The pyramid stands out as a monument to the engineering ability of man. Homer’s *Iliad* and Shakespeare’s plays are a tribute to the literary genius of the race. The Parthenon, built yonder on the Acropolis by Phidias, is a symbol of the architectural perfection that man can accomplish. The sayings of Socrates and Plato’s essays are an evidence of the intellectual achievement of mankind. Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, in what they could put in color and could take out of stone, are abiding facts of the genius of the race. Beethoven and Bach have given us monuments of melody for today. This modern scientific age in which we live is a tribute to the ingenuity of mankind; someone has said that science is the triumph of man’s sagacity over the strategy of nature. Man has accumulated

wisdom, and he has deposited it and has stored it. But all the knowledge, all the science, and all the philosophy can never lead a lost soul to Jesus. Think of that! With all that man has accumulated and with all that he can do, he has no way to save a poor lost soul.

The cross, that ugly tree yonder on Golgotha's Hill, is a monument to the wisdom of God. When "the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save" those who are lost (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Have you ever noticed where they crucified Christ? Scripture says that they crucified Him on Golgotha, the place of the skull. That has always been very symbolic to me. Right up on top of man's intellect, right where man can go no farther, God reared a cross. That cross is not contrary to the wisdom of man, but it is above the wisdom of man, and the race is bankrupt. You can talk about the offense of the cross all you want, but when you see what is happening in this poor, war-weary, sin-stained, and blood-soaked world, I tell you, man is bankrupt. But the cross reveals the riches of God and the grace of God to a poor lost world.

May I tell this little story? Dr. Bill Anderson, who was for many years the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas, finished preaching one Sunday morning. He had been speaking on 1 Corinthians 1:18. After the message, there came down to him a young man who had a Phi Beta Kappa key. (You know, a man who has a Phi Beta Kappa key usually lets you see it. Someone has said that the greatest salesman in the world is the man who sold a double-breasted suit to a man with a Phi Beta Kappa key.) This young man from Harvard came down and said to Dr. Anderson, "I was reared in this church as a boy and have always loved you, honored you, and respected you, but I give you my word, as I sat there listening to you today, everything you said was foolish."

Dr. Anderson said, "Now, this is interesting. About 1900 years ago Paul wrote that this was what you would say."

The young man asked, "What in the world do you mean?"

Dr. Anderson answered, "Paul said, 'But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.'"

This young fellow asked, "Where does it say that?" And so Dr. Anderson showed him 1 Corinthians 2:14.

They made an appointment to speak about it further, and the next day the young man came into Dr. Anderson's study. In his very winsome manner, Dr. Anderson presented the plan of salvation to the young man and told him about the wisdom of God and how it was above the wisdom of man. The young man said that he would take Christ as his Savior. They got down on their knees in the study, and the young fellow took Christ as his Savior. After they had gotten up from prayer, Dr. Anderson said, "By the way, what did you think of my sermon yesterday?"

The young man reddened and answered, "I'm sorry for what I said. I don't think it is foolishness any more. I think it is wonderful."

Listen to me, a right relationship to Christ and a correct attitude toward the cross make all the difference in the world.

Although the cross of Christ is an intellectual offense to some, that is not what Paul meant at all.

### **3: The Cross is an Offense to Man's Pride**

Now very briefly, I want to see what Paul meant when he said that the cross was an offense. He meant that it is an offense to the *pride* of man.

Will you note that in Galatians 5:11 we read:

***And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?  
Then is the offense of the cross ceased.***

If Paul had gone into the synagogue and preached something like this, “Now brethren, I was a Pharisee and I followed the Jewish religion, but I’ve got something I think is a little better now. It is all right if you want to follow Judaism and if you want to be circumcised and if you want to follow the Mosaic system. Those things are wonderful, and I commend them to you – you go ahead and do them. But I want to suggest that you add something to that. You try Jesus.” If he had said just that, he wouldn’t have gotten into trouble with the Jews. And you know, that is the kind of preaching that some give today, just a compromising sort of thing. “Well, you go ahead, but take Jesus along with you, too.”

On the contrary, Paul went into the synagogues of his day and declared that Judaism, the sacrifices, and circumcision were valueless in bringing a man to God. Only Christ can bring a soul to God, and nothing else is needed. God accepts nothing else but the sacrifice of Christ, and nothing else will avail. Man is declared as bankrupt before God and is reckoned “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). He does not come as a customer to the counter with something to offer God for so great salvation, but he comes as a beggar to the back door of heaven to receive something for nothing. We come empty-handed; yet we receive *everything*. This wounds the pride of man; it slays his vanity; it lays his glory in the dust. If man could only offer something to God, it would flatter the flesh and build up his ego. This is the real offense of the cross.

The cross of Christ is a display of the grace of God. Without merit, God grants His favor and bestows His love. The reason is not in man, but God finds it all in Himself. The cross offends those who have confidence in the flesh, but it causes poor lost sinners not to glory, “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

A businessman in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was asked to give his testimony, and it was brief but much to the point. He said, “I’ll tell you how God saved me. I did everything I could against it, and God did the rest.” This is the message of salvation in a nutshell. We didn’t do anything for it; we did *everything* against it. God did the rest.

Tertullian said that the early church was not persecuted because they worshiped Jesus but because they worshiped Jesus *only*. Rome was broad and liberal in its thinking and offered these worshipers of Jesus a niche in the Pantheon where they could place a statue of Him. The early church would rather die than have Jesus put on a plane with the pagan deities of the Roman Empire, for He was to them “King of kings and Lord of lords,” and ONLY SAVIOR.

The gospel is what God did for you and for me, and it is not what we do for God. The gospel is not a *modus operandi* whereby man can make himself good. It is God’s method of making men good, but God does the work. He is not asking you to become good in order to be saved. God wants to save you as a sinner in order to make you good. If you are saved, you ought to be the best person in your neighborhood, but this will be *His* work. God wants to make you righteous so that even He can accept you and so that it will be impossible for anyone to lay any charge against His elect. This is His work of grace. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

God is not trying to get people to join the church to get them saved. Church membership is splendid and scriptural in its place. As a minister, I believe that every Christian ought to

identify with some organized body of believers. There is something wrong when one does not. However, joining a church never brought a man into a right relationship with God. God is not trying to get people to go to church to pay for His salvation. Church attendance would mean that more folk would come to Christ, but going to church builds up no deposit on salvation. Surely I believe in church attendance, but no man was ever brought to God because of any meritorious work in going to church.

Likewise, God is not asking folk to read the Bible, pray, or give in order to merit His salvation. He says that we have no merit, and if we receive His salvation by faith, *then* we will read the Bible, pray, and give. God is not trying to get you to be baptized for salvation, but if you are saved you will be baptized. God is not even asking you to lead a better life in order to be saved, but He is saying that if you get saved, you will lead a better life.

The offense of the cross means to come to God just as you are, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.” Since the cross takes away all the glory from man and places it all on God, it becomes an offense to some folk.

Many years ago, a mother brought her little baby girl to an orphans’ home in the state of Texas and asked them to take care of the child. The mother’s face and hands bore horrible scars from a burn, and she urged the officials of the home not to tell the baby about her when she grew up. The mother assured them that she would not come to see the child. Then she told them the story of how she was burned.

Time elapsed and the mother-heart of this woman yearned to see the baby who was now a little girl of five or six. One day she could restrain herself no longer, and she applied at the orphans’ home for permission to see her little daughter. This was readily granted and an interview was arranged. The mother was seated in the living room, and the little girl was sent in to her. The little girl entered with fear and trembling, and the mother held out her hands to her – hands that were horribly scarred. The mother’s face, which was misshapen, was filled with longing to see her child. When the little girl got a glimpse of her mother, she screamed, turned, and ran out of the room. The mother broke down and sobbed.

Then the matron took the little girl into her room and told her the story – how that when she was a baby asleep in her crib, the house had caught on fire, and how her mother had rushed into her room that was in flames, wrapped her in a blanket so that she would not be burned, and in so doing had been horribly burned and had to spend long weeks and months in the hospital. When the little girl heard that her mother had been so terribly scarred for her sake, she went back into the living room where her mother was sobbing, pulled the misshapen hands down from her mother’s face, and covered them with kisses. She did the same with her mother’s face and thanked her from her little childish heart for what she had done for her.

My friend, the cross may be offensive to you, but He bore all of the offense for you and for me that we might stand before God blameless and without spot or blemish. Surely, we ought to be able to sing with thanksgiving:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Tow’ring o’er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers ‘round its head sublime.