Capitol Commission™

An Unacceptable Proclamation

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***Romans 1:15-16.* Though the gospel is a message with eternal hope and joy, it's never been easy to swallow. The apostle Paul says it is a shameful message, one that confronts and offends the world. What is it about the gospel that bothers people?**

Paul was once a well-educated Pharisee who heavily persecuted Christians. He had studied Judaism under the illustrious teacher Gamiliel and made a name for himself among the teachers of Israel. Yet, when Paul heard the voice Christ on the Damascus Road, his life changed (Acts 9:1-7). Trading power and prestige for persecution, he became a Christian and sacrificed all the privileges of his past.

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" — Philippians 3:7.

Paul's passion for proclaiming the gospel left him imprisoned in Philippi, forced out of Thessalonica, smuggled from Berea, mocked in Athens, scorned in Corinth, rejected in Jerusalem, stoned in Galatia, and beheaded in Rome. He had been beaten to the point of death more than once, flogged multiple times and shipwrecked. He was hated, betrayed, ever on the run, regularly starving, always exhausted for Christ's sake (cf. 2 Cor 11:24-27). What Paul proclaimed couldn't have been more politically incorrect to first century sensibilities. It chaffed against all that was socially acceptable, intellectually established, and culturally relevant.

The point is this: A well-respected Pharisee turned apostle had nothing to gain by preaching the message of a crucified Christ. Despite losing all that was dear to him, he actually says he was "eager" and "unashamed" to tell the world(cf. Rom 1:15-16). Since the gospel was so unacceptable in the first, I'm led to ask: Why was this message so shameful, and why was Paul so eager to share it?

A Shameful Message

"So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" — Romans 1:15-16.

Writing to the church in Rome, Paul says he is eager to visit, because he is "not ashamed of the gospel." This implies there was something so very shameful about being a Christian.

If you were to invent a religion in the first century, you never would have suggested to build it upon a crucified messiah. History had sealed the horror of crucifixion. It is common, even fashionable, to wear a golden cross in our culture. Such was not the case 2,000 years ago, for the cross was an object of death and ultimate shame. Victims were publically beaten, flogged at times, and then nailed unclothed for all to see them take their final breaths. It was horrific, and crosses were not uncommon at time. Crucifixions happened frequently, and sometimes they happened *en masse*.

When Alexander the Great stormed across the world in conquest, he was challenged by the city of Tyre. He didn't have a navy, and the city lay a mile off the coast in the Mediterranean Sea. The people felt safe and taunted the great conqueror for a time. It stopped when Alexander ordered his army to build a bridge across the sea at all cost and destroy the city. In his fury, he ordered 3,000 men to be crucified at once.

In the year of 73 B.C. a Roman gladiator named Sparticus used his military skills to lead an army of slaves against the empire. They won a handful of victories but were soon overpowered. The Roman general/politician Crassus then ordered more than 6,000 of the men crucified and left the bodies on display.

> "THIS VERY WORD 'CROSS' SHOULD BE REMOVED NOT ONLY FROM THE PERSON OF A ROMAN CITIZEN, BUT FROM HIS THOUGHTS, HIS EYES, HIS EARS."
> ~ MARCUS CICERO (106-43 B.C.)

The emperor Vespasian sought to end a major Jewish rebellion in A.D. 69 by ordering Titus, his son, to see it done. Titus ordered a siege of Jerusalem, marched his armies into the city the following year, and destroyed it (the temple was razed and has never been rebuilt to this day). When Titus walked into the city, the Jewish historian Josephus recorded much of the barbaric scene. It has been said that so many Jews were crucified there was hardly enough wood for all the bodies or space for all the crosses.

The stories could go on and on, but from one century to the next the stigma of the cross deepened. It became the most loathsome device ever conceived, and ironically, this cruel device would come to encapsulate our faith. Upon it the Son of God would die that sinners like you and me could be saved.

Bible Studies

Legislators: Thursdays at 7:30am, Governor's Office

Justices and Staff: Tuesdays at 7:30am, Supreme Court Building

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"For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" — 1 Corinthians 1:22-23.

In addition to the stigma was the fact that honorable men didn't die on a cross. This kind of execution was reserved for traitors, notorious thieves, murderers, and assassins. Any who posed a threat to the empire hung on a cross to inflict terror in the hearts of others. Thus, the cross was an effective means of discouraging insurrectionists and maintaining stability. Good men weren't the kind that died this way.

To the Jews, the whole idea of messiah dying on a cross was absurd. They looked for a wonder-working messiah. For instance, when Jesus fed the 5,000 families in Galilee they unmistakably hailed Him as their king (cf. John 6:15). Each family saw this overwhelming provision of food and came back the next day expecting more of the same. It was thought that if Moses could provide food for the people day and night for 40 years, the messiah must be able to do even more. When the free food stopped, they left Him. Though Jesus did countless miracles, He did nothing of the magnitude demanded by the Jews.

Even worse than failing to present some overwhelming sign, Jesus Christ was crucified. He claimed to be God in human flesh (cf. John 8:58, 10:33), and He received a cross. The contradiction couldn't have been greater to any Jewish theologian. Deuteronomy 21:23 states that any man hanged upon a tree has been cursed by God. How could Jesus be God and be cursed by God? Christianity was a blasphemous contradiction to the Jew.

JEWS WANTED A MIRACULOUS CHRIST AND GREEKS WANTED A PHILOSOPHICAL CHRIST. PAUL PREACHED A CRUCIFIED CHRIST.

Is it any wonder why the gospel incensed first-century religious leaders? It shouldn't surprise us why they wanted the church destroyed. Paul says the gospel is a "stumbling block" or *scandalon* (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). The Greek word he chose here is the English equivalent of "scandal". To the faithful Pharisee, Sadducee or scribe, the message of the cross was a scandalous fraud worthy of destruction.

The Greeks had different reasons for rejecting Jesus. They loved deep insights, high and lofty thoughts, grand arguments that plumbed the depths of philosophy. They were into complexities and chains of reasoning, nothing so simple, lowly, or humble as Jesus. Jesus didn't only fail to stimulate their thinking, He was crucified. It's hard to overstate the contempt of the worldly wise towards anyone who worshipped a crucified man as God.

Christians were thrown to wild beasts for sport in the first three centuries. They were thought uneducated, foolish, stubborn, unworthy of life. Many ideas existed about the nature of God, but no one ever suggested that God became a man and then died on a cross. This is why the Roman philosopher Celsus said, "Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible… if any is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, let him come boldly [to Christianity]."

AN EAGER PROCLAMATION

The world gagged on the gospel from day one, and in striking contrast is the apostle Paul. All he ever talked about was the one thing no one wanted to hear anything about, and that was the cross. After preaching, he says to the believers in Rome, "I'm not ashamed" (cf. Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 2:2).

Why was Paul unashamed of the cross? He says it's because in the cross lies the power of God unto salvation (cf. Rom 1:16). As opposed to the belief systems, politics, and philosophies of the day, the good news of our risen Lord can actually do something. This message has the ability to do what no other message can—save sinners and transform them into saints (cf. Eph 2:1-10). It affects both time and eternity.

The cross may be more fashionable today, but a faithful presentation of it is still offensive. This cruel instrument still demonstrates the vileness of your sin and mine in the eyes of a holy God. We may like to think of sin in terms of mistakes and accidents. No one wants to hear that his deeds are actually vile in the sight of God (cf. Isa 64:6), so offensive as to merit an eternal sentence of suffering. There's nothing marketable about this or in calling sinners to repent of their sin.

Though shameful in the eyes of the world, praise God this message has infinite power. If it has transformed your life, you know exactly the kind of power it contains. Reflect on it, and tell others.