

## Column

In a chapel in the New York City headquarters of a major (or former major) denomination, two men were talking quietly before a noonday service. One was the pianist for the service, the other apparently a friend or colleague. As I slipped in and took a seat, I overheard the second say to the first, “I do find that jade cross behind the altar oppressive. It needs to be replaced with something more positive.”

The cross of which he spoke was Celtic in design and had been placed there when the building was opened in 1963. Located in the heart of Manhattan, the high-rise was erected to be a beacon of faith. Out front, engraved on the stone exterior, were words pointing to Jesus the only Saviour: “Whose service is perfect freedom.” Sadly, this building, instead of being a beacon of light to the city, (if indeed the conversation I overheard was representative of those occupying it), had become a place of darkness. I might add, I did not stay for the service.

Unfortunately, the disdain for the cross in the NYC denomination's flagship chapel is no isolated phenomenon. Many "seeker-friendly" churches, following the lead of such church-growth gurus as Rick Warren, either remove or hide crosses in existing buildings or leave them out entirely when constructing new facilities. They do so in order to avoid offending non-believers' sensibilities. The preaching at these locations often follows suit. Christ's sacrificial death is sidelined and replaced with 'how to have a better life now'.

What might St. Paul say to those who find the cross either repressive or bad for marketing? At least part of his answer can be found in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

Those who follow the path of historical, Biblical Christianity and not some insipid water-down version of it must dare to be counter-cultural in this regard. They must lift up the cross unashamedly.

Why is the cross important and the center of the faith of a Christian? Because the cross is the place where man's need and God's action met. It displays both the love and justice of God. It is the place where Christ the Victor does what is promised in Genesis 3:15: the seed of Woman (Jesus) crushes the serpent's head, that is, wields the final and decisive blow in the conflict of the ages and opens the gate to new life and new hope.

Have I said all there is to say about the cross? Absolutely not. In the New Testament, every time St. Paul speaks of it and the associated doctrine of the Atonement (Christ becoming sin for us so we humans can go free), he does so in a different way. What happened on the cross is so profound and great that it can only be spoken of in metaphor and understood in the context of a meal – the Lord's Supper.

Is the cross oppressive and offensive? No, liberating and life-giving! In the end, the hymn writer Isaac Watts perhaps said it best and gives us food for thought as we head towards Good Friday:

“Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

*ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer).*

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