

The Old Rugged Cross

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

Commentary By Andy and Berit Kjos

Emphasis added below

"...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the power of God." 1 Corinthians 1:18

"O most merciful Christ," wrote the faithful reformer John Hus as he waited for his execution in 1415 AD, "give us a courageous spirit, so that it may be ready. And if the flesh is weak, may your grace go before it, for without you we can do nothing."

In the eyes of the church establishment, Hus had committed heresy. He believed that everyone should be allowed to read the Bible in their own language -- an unthinkable notion in a culture that reserved God's Word for elite students of Latin. He also opposed the pope's money-raising efforts to sell indulgences (the false assurance that people could **buy or earn pardon for sin instead of trusting in Christ's redemption** through the cross).

Hus was "tried" and found guilty. When asked to recant, he refused. Instead he knelt and prayed that God would forgive his accusers. Mocked and humiliated, he was led naked to the stake, where executioners covered him with wood and straw for the torturous fire.

Given a last chance to recant, he answered, "In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached I will die today with gladness." Then the fire was lit using pages from the forbidden Bible printed by John Wycliffe as kindling. Enveloped in flames, Hus kept singing an old hymn, "Christ, thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me." He died praising the Lord He loved! ^[1]

*O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.^[2]*

Despising the Cross

To a world bent on social unity and moral laxity, the cross stands as a divisive and humiliating obstacle. Attempts to minimize its offense through laws and intimidation have bullied both secular and church leaders into continual compromise. Public crosses are demolished or hidden; Bibles are forbidden in schools, the traditional days for celebrating the resurrection have been renamed "spring break;" and countless corporations and government agencies ban cross-shaped pins or jewelry. Even Jesus Himself has become a popular target for media mockery and ridicule!

Results-driven churches and Christian colleges are marketing a new, more inclusive form of Christianity. Afraid to offend unbelievers, they present a watered-down version of the gospel that veils the significance of the cross. Trained to pursue self-esteem rather than self-surrender, few share Paul's delight in the source of our salvation:

"God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Galatians 6:14

Back in 1963, that Bible verse was the focus of a series of sermons preached by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, then pastor of London's Westminster Chapel. Reminding us that human nature hasn't changed in the last forty years, he asked some probing questions:

"There are contradictory voices going out in the name of the Christian church.... So the first thing we have to do is to discover **which is the true message**.... What is the Christian gospel? What does it proclaim? What [must I do] which –

- will render me immune to what may happen round and about me...
- would **enable me to smile in the face of death**...
- assures me that I have nothing to fear when I come to the judgment of God...
- guarantees me everlasting and eternal bliss in the glory indescribable? ...

"The central thing, the thing that matters above everything else... is the cross -- the death on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.... This is what they preached.... The preaching of the cross has never been popular...."^[3]

It's true. That's why Jesus warned us long ago that "they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." Matthew 24:9-12

The Heart of the Gospel

Some years ago, Graham and Gladys Staines left the comforts of Australia to serve poor lepers in India. Because of their loving encouragement, many Hindus believed in Jesus and burned their idols. One day, Graham and their two young sons traveled to a distant church to share God's encouraging message. While they slept in their car, a crowd of angry Hindus armed with bows and arrows surrounded the car, doused it with gasoline and set it aflame. Imprisoned inside, the father and two children were burned alive. At their memorial service, the grieving mother and daughter (who would stay in India and continue their ministry) sang these words:

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because he lives, all fear is gone,
Because I know he holds the future,
And life is worth the living just because he lives.

Why is this wonderful old Gospel so offensive to the world? Why does it stir such murderous responses? Or more important, what is it? The apostle Paul summarized it for us almost 2000 years ago:

"I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to 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.... He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once...." 1 Corinthians 15:1-10

In short, the gospel is the "good news" of the **historical event** of **Christ's death, burial, and resurrection** -- all for our salvation. But in today's market-driven

churches, this gospel is overshadowed by an enticing counterfeit gospel. In the place of the cross, many of today's most popular churches are celebrating their visible "good deeds" -- the kind of "works" and ethical living that draw man's applause, not God's approval. [Galatians 1:10] As in the days of John Hus, people are fooled into thinking they can earn their pardon from sin and their place in heaven. Rick Warren summarized it well:

"The first Reformation was about **belief**; this one's going to be about **behavior**.... The first one was about **creeds**; this one's going to be about our **deeds**. The first one divided the church; this time it will unify the church."^[4]

This new "reformation" focuses on human goodness and ignores human depravity. It leads to pride and blindness, not humility and repentance. It assures sinners that their good deeds merit God's approving smile, while it hides their actual need for the cross.

Such self-justification sounds good to the masses. When led by our human nature, we all would "desire to make a good showing in the flesh," not "suffer persecution for the cross of Christ." [Galatians 6:14] So, to maintain a Christian identity while avoiding "the offence of the cross," many adapt their message to politically correct standards for tolerance. Thus they please the world, but not God.

None of the Bible's ethical lessons can make us holy or acceptable to Him. Neither the Ten Commandments nor the Sermon on the Mount can save us from our sin and prepare us to follow our Lord. They were given to show us God's high and holy standard (a criterion we can't possibly reach by human will or strength) and then to draw us to the cross.

I'm not saying God doesn't value "good works." But until He changes our hearts, our deeds are worthless as a means to salvation.

However, when we are "born again" everything changes. The *result* of the cross in our lives will be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness... -- manifestations of the good "fruit" of His Spirit at work in our hearts. (Galatians 5:22) But such "good works" can neither replace nor precede the cross. His fruit can only come after our hearts are rooted in Christ.

In other words, our primary need is for a new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having "put to death" our old sinful nature on the cross, Christ fills us with His own victorious Life! "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." 2 Corinthians 5:21

This wonderful "exchanged life" was prophesied and promised centuries before the cross became a physical reality:

*"He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...
He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed."* Isaiah 53: 4-6

When we, by His grace, truly believe what Christ accomplished for us through the cross, we may share in His death and resurrection on our behalf. Filled with His Spirit, we are enabled "to work out" the salvation we have in Christ through the cross. For *"it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."*

[Philippians 2:12-13]

All is from Him, through the cross, and by His Spirit: our salvation, our new Life, our changed hearts, and our Spirit-led service and sharing. And all bear witness to His sovereign love and grace.

Spiritual Battles Ahead

But such a distinctly Christian witness may soon be banned. Spirit-led kindness and service will continue to offend the world as long as we keep sharing the cross of Christ. Since the world's religious leaders have little appreciation for that divisive message, they have been negotiating an "international code of conduct" with regard to conversions -- a code that would place the world's authorities above God's commands.

Back in 2000 AD, the United Nations provided a platform where religious leaders from around the world could express their intolerance for cross-centered missions. Meeting in the UN General Assembly Hall, the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders discussed the problem of unwanted conversions. In his article, "*U.N. Religious Summit Speakers Decry Efforts At Conversion*," Tom Strode explained that the Peace Summit –

"...evidenced widespread opposition to efforts at religious conversion....

"...pronouncements were voiced by speakers from different religious traditions against attempts to convert people to other religions, and they met with strong affirmation.... **Evangelicals especially would be targets for such sentiments....**

"On numerous occasions, there were 'very negative comments regarding proselytization'.... Such declarations were met by 'vigorous applause,' said Richard Cizik. ...the representatives of Christianity were joining that same call to denounce proselytizing...."^[5]

Last year, the World Council of Churches joined hands with the Vatican "to seek a **common code** for religious conversions" and "explore '**the dos and don'ts**' of **trying to spread Christianity** among other faiths." Notice their hostility toward Biblical evangelism:

"Religious freedom and **missionary outreach** by Christian groups have become increasingly sensitive topics as many Muslims perceive their faith as under threat by the West and nations such as China struggle to maintain state controls on churches.

"How can we - anxious to maintain, develop and nurture **good relations with people of other faiths** - deal with this highly complex issue that sometimes threatens the fiber of **living together**?' said the Rev. Hans Ucko, head of the interreligious relations office for the World Council of Churches....

"The biggest **challenges** to the project will be highlighted by who will be absent: Pentecostal and evangelical-style congregations that often lead the drive for conversions."^[6]

Since "living together" has become a common purpose, this conversion code implies that mission groups from America will be welcomed as humanitarian servers, but despised as God's ambassadors.

Lutheran bishop Mark Hanson exemplified this attitude at an interfaith meeting in Indonesia. He "assured the Muslim participants that the Lutheran World Federation did **not try to convert** disaster victims from Islam to Christianity **in exchange for its help.**"^[7]

Actually, if he had tried to convert, he would have violated UNESCO's *Declaration on Tolerance*. This "soft" international law tells us that

- "Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures... It is not only a **moral duty**, it is also a political and **legal requirement.**"
- "Tolerance involves the **rejection of dogmatism and absolutism....**"
[especially Biblical truth]
- "Tolerance... means that one's views are **not to be imposed on others.**"
[Especially religious views]
- "Intolerance... is a global threat."

But Jesus told His followers that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name 'to all nations'" (Luke 24:47) Are we ready to "obey God rather than man"? Acts 5:29

Only because He took my sins to the cross and joined me to Himself could I ever be such a witness. Only because my life is forever "hidden in Him" can I face each future challenge with confidence in His triumph! For –

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Gal. 2:20

*To the old rugged cross I will ever be true;
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.*

Endnotes:

1. Notes from <http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/john-hus.html>, <http://www.lavistachurchofchrist.org/LVarticles/JohnHusThePreReformer.htm> and *Extreme Devotion*, an email from *Voice of the Martyrs*, February 16, 2007.
2. Hear the melody at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/r/oruggedc.htm>
3. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Good News Publishers, 1986), pages 18, 20.
4. Ken Camp, "Second Reformation' will unify church, Warren tells Dallas GDOP," 2005, at <http://www.pastors.com/article.asp?ArtID=8280>
5. Tom Strode, "U.N. religious summit speakers decry efforts at conversion," Baptist Press, September 2000. <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/62.htm>
6. Brian Murphy, "Vatican, Churches Work on Conversion Plan," AP, May 11, 2006. <http://www.wvrn.org/article.php?idd=21482&sec=56&con=56>
7. Religious Conversion Ecumenical efforts toward an interreligious issue: from controversy to a shared code of conduct on religious conversion, <http://www.eif->

pcusa.org/InterfaithRelations/ReligiousConversion.html