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The Culture of Offendedness

by David Dunlap

Contemporary western culture wants to see Jesus either as a cute baby in a manger or as a champion of their causes and values. Absent from contemporary thought is the wonderful and elevated declaration that God, the eternal Jehovah, shattered the silence of centuries, rent the heavens, and invaded our world. God became man. This One is very God of very God.

Nevertheless, being offended by God or the Bible is practically a daily occurrence in our society. And have you noticed that being offended is seen as a positive virtue in our culture? Everyone is “triggered” or angry about something. To be frank, being offended is not a virtue. It is nothing to be proud of. It’s a choice. “Offenses will come” to be sure. We probably all have daily reasons to be offended about something. Perhaps, someone posts a political item on social media we don’t agree with; or someone displeases us, or causes pain, annoys us, or acts rudely or thoughtlessly. Maybe we are overlooked, unappreciated, disrespected. Maybe we think someone should have done something for us (or not done something to us), should have said more or said less.

The risk of being offended is part of what it means to live in a culture that honors and celebrates free speech and the right to have an opinion. A right to free speech means our speech may offend others; otherwise the right would need no protection. These days, it seems there are more and more who are intent on pushing the supposed right never to be offended by the Christian Gospel, a Christian witness, Christian speech, or even Christian symbolism.

The Art of Being Offended

Many in our present culture appear to act like little children mastering “the art” of getting offended for the sake of being offended. It is like taking an “emotional drug,” giving one a temporary feeling of moral superiority and a short-term sense of empowerment. But once that high wears off it seems the need for additional “fixes” becomes progressively more insatiable. Is this not a sad, pathetic self-destructive way to go through life – living as a perpetual victim?

The above motivation lies behind the effort to remove mostly Christian symbols, Christian images, and Scripture references from every aspect of

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society. The very existence of a large cross placed on private property has been a source of offense. An employee who brings his Bible to the workplace and reads it during the lunch hour is a reason to be offended. Believers singing Christian songs together in a public park are offensive. Those pressing for the removal of all references to Christianity claim to be offended by the fact that they are forced to see Christians and Christianity in various forms from time to time.

Highly Charged Emotional Offense

We should note carefully that this notion of offendedness is highly charged with personal feelings. In other words, those who now claim to be offended are generally in an emotional state that has resulted from some real or perceived insult they experienced. As a result they live on an emotional razor’s edge, acting out on their feelings. They believe that if they are feeling something, that feeling is an unalterable fact. Moreover, they have never been taught the discipline of self-control or that others have a right to free speech and the open expression of their faith. Therefore, when they are offended in the smallest of ways, they believe they have the right to fly into a fit of rage, insisting that the offender be punished and silenced.

The History of Offendedness

Throughout history, causing offense has been a very grave matter. A serious offense may cause a person or group to stumble, to be brought down, or to be crushed. Today, however, desperate straits are no longer required for an individual or group to claim the emotional status of offendedness. Becoming offended is often prompted by the notion of emotional distaste at what another has said, done, proposed, or presented. This shift in the meaning of the word and in its cultural usage is subtle but extremely significant. It also leads to inevitable conflict.

People have always been upset by insensitivity and negligence; but the profile of “offendedness,” understood in this modern sense, is being immeasurably heightened. Now, “the right never to be offended” is not only accepted as legitimate, but is promoted by the media, the government and activist groups. Sadly, the “social value” of offendedness is now increasing. All that is necessary for a claim to be taken seriously is for the claim to be offered. After all, if the essence of the offendedness is an emotional response, how can any individual deny that a claimant has been genuinely offended?

The Attack on Christianity

Many are right to worry that this will lead to the fracturing of society. We all hear negative things said about people and causes of which we are fond. In this changed social atmosphere, certain groups are being encouraged to give public notice if such language offends them. They are now being repeatedly told that they are entitled to “not to be offended.” So, from now on, the right not to be offended is what they desire.

Given our mandate to share the Gospel openly, Christians must assume the responsibility to protect free speech and to resist this culture of offendedness that threatens to shut down all public discourse. Of course,

the right for Christians to speak publicly about Jesus Christ necessarily means that adherents of other belief systems will be equally free to present their claims in a public manner. This is simply the cost of religious liberty.

An interesting example to this point is Salman Rushdie, the secular novelist who was once put under a Muslim death sentence because he had insulted Muslim sensibilities in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Mr. Rushdie wrote an opinion essay in 2005, entitled “The Right to Be Offended”, in which he presented the idea that the very nature of a free society is that we are all subject to being offended. He wrote:

The idea that any kind of free society can be constructed in which people will never be offended or insulted, or in which they have the right to call on the law to defend them against being offended or insulted, is absurd. In the end, a fundamental decision needs to be made: Do we want to live in a free society or not? Democracy is not a tea party where people sit around making polite conversation. In democracies, people get extremely upset with each other. They argue vehemently against each other’s positions. (But they don’t shoot.) 1

The Offense of the Gospel

As the Apostle Paul made clear in writing to the Corinthians, the preaching of the Gospel has always been considered offensive by those who reject it. When Paul spoke of the cross as “foolishness” and a “stumbling block” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NIV), he was pointing to this very reality—a reality that would lead to his own stoning, flogging, imprisonment and execution.

At the same time, Paul did not want to offend persons on the basis of anything other than the cross of Christ and the essence of the Christian Gospel. For this reason, he would write to the Corinthians about becoming “all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22, ESV).

Without doubt, many Christians manage to be offensive for reasons other than the offense of the Gospel. This is to our shame and to the injury of our Gospel witness. Nevertheless, there is no way for a faithful Christian to avoid offending those who are offended by Jesus Christ and His cross. The truth claims of Christianity, by their very particularity and exclusivity, are inherently offensive to those who would demand some other gospel.

No Right to Be Offended

Christians must not only contend for the preservation and protection of free speech, essential for the cause of the Gospel. We must also make certain that we do not fall into the trap of claiming offendedness for ourselves. We must continue to support the right of individual liberty, free speech, and the free exchange of ideas. Once we begin playing the game of offendedness, there is no end to the matter. There simply is no right not to be offended, and we should be offended by the very idea that such a right could exist. The apostle Paul exhorts us to conduct ourselves “with all

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Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 494-1680

e-mail
daviddunlap100@gmail.com

web site
www.bibleandlife.org

f Facebook
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bible-Life/139555992799868>

lowliness and gentleness, with long-suffering, bearing with one another with love"(Ephesians 4:2, NKJV). Former missionary to China Christopher G. Willis illustrates this verse with a personal story:

Years ago, I was walking with Mr. Willie Crossly, when he suddenly asked, "Christopher, what is the difference between lowliness of mind and meekness?" I had to reply "I don't know." He said, "I will tell you. Lowliness of mind will never give offense. Meekness will never take offense." 2

Conclusion

It is an accepted truth that anything a person says or does is a reflection of them alone. Remember that when someone does something rude, unkind, or callous it is because of their character. Also remember that being offended and holding onto an offense is purely a reflection of our character.

Sadly, the increase in offense, rude speaking, hate, and crudeness in our society is the result of a lack of love for Christ and concern for each other. The Lord Jesus Christ taught that this same correlation between lack of love, the rise of hate, and offendedness would be present in the last days(Matthew 24:10-12).

Christians should lead the way in living differently than the world. Have you allowed yourself to live in offendedness? How long have you been carrying a grudge? What personal sin have you justified in your offended state? If you are a believer, we should be hard to offend. You should give the benefit of the doubt (when there is doubt), and be quick to forgive.

Endnotes

1. J. Albert Mohler, Jr, *Culture Shift – Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2008), p. 34
2. Christopher G. Willis, *Sacrifices of Joy*, (Hong Kong: Christian Book Room, 1963) p., 122