

Adam T. Ross

## *The Theology of Offense*

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Commonly among Christians, it is assumed that we should not give offense. Being offensive is “unloving.” I think that we can all agree that giving offense *for the sake of* giving offense is, in fact, unloving. Or, rather, it is loving yourself and not others. This is giving offense because you enjoy offending people, and this is self-centered sinfulness.

Unfortunately, because there are some among the brethren that enjoy giving offense for offense’s sake, the wider evangelical world has largely abandoned giving offense at all. We sweat blood about offending a potential convert. And the result is candy-coated rat poison. We’ve taken the teeth out of the gospel. The modern evangelical oozes “love” from every pore and orifice, and we flee at the first sign of conflict or differences in opinion. This is partially how we ended up with glaze-covered dung-bombs like *The Purpose-Driven Life*. However good some of its material may be, that book (and the wider world of evangelicalism), is still trying to fend off the spears of pagans and Muslims with the intellectual equivalent of powdered doughnuts.

People don’t like the fact that deep down, we are all morally corrupt sinners without Christ. That’s a nasty, sticky truth. It doesn’t fit into our modernist categories and the private agendas of the psychological community. It’s truth with all the bumps and warts, and it doesn’t taste well on the tongue. We *hate* the fact that we’re all sinners. We hate the truth that we’re not *good* deep down. People are *offended* by this statement. They see it as a personal attack. He’s calling *me* a moral *pervert*. And, in effect, he kind of is. How many women (or men) have you lusted after today? I know my tally isn’t going to be zero.

And so, with the interest of being *relevant* and “*seeker friendly*,” sin is eliminated from the sermon. Do the hymns mention sin? Better replace them with songs that just repeat different names for God over and over. And, in the interests of relevance and seeker comfort, our churches become strangely . . . *irrelevant*. We’re no longer ministering to the heart problem with humanity, and so we lose our claim to being the only treatment for that problem.

And the average evangelical responds that including sin makes seekers uncomfortable. It makes them *squirm*. And the average evangelical misses what is dancing right before their nose. The seeker is *uncomfortable*, and *that is the whole point*. Christianity, the teachings of Moses, Christ, Paul, Peter and John, they’re *designed* to make people uncomfortable. *That’s the point*. The problem (sin) isn’t going to fix *itself*, and we aren’t going to fix it by *ignoring* it. Sin is an unpleasant truth, and the best way to be truly loving to a non-believer is to face that problem dead on. If a cancer patient doesn’t believe they have cancer, the doctor does *not* save them by *agreeing* with their amateurish diagnosis.

Again, objections to this idea leap to the evangelical mind. We’re supposed to be peaceful, and we’re supposed to bring comfort to the downtrodden. I can wholeheartedly agree. We should be peaceful, and we should be bringing comfort to the downtrodden. But I don’t see the modern Church, at least, in America, doing this very well. In fact, if we were being graded, we would not be pleased with our test results. We’re not *peaceful* in the modern church, and we’re not bringing very much comfort to anyone, let alone the *downtrodden*. Which suggests that perhaps we should rethink our definitions of peaceful and comfort, and how we’re going about being and giving that.

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Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah observed how Israel was living, and it is disturbingly applicable to our own time: “They have healed the wound of my people *lightly*, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when *there is no peace*,” (Jer. 8:11). Israel sought for an easy answer, apparently a non-confrontational answer with the pagan nations. Israel was at peace with their neighbors, but at the expense of the truth. The truth is too expensive to be *peaceful*.

American Christians want peace with their enemies. The Muslims, the Wiccans, the Roman invaders. With these, the enemies of Christ, they would like to have peace. But with brothers of their same religion, even their same sect, they will persecute and draw blood. This is the great irony. A church will split over how to design the bulletin or what kind of music to play in their services, and they will draw the church through the ringer. They will crucify each other (metaphorically), but both splinter groups want to have peace with people opposed to the spread of the gospel. The spirit of this age is very curious indeed.

We're still not understanding our God properly, nor, I think, our mission in this world. We're to be peaceful with other *Christians*. With our brothers, we are to strive for likemindedness. Division is to be an absolute last resort.<sup>1</sup> Also, Christians are not to be violent without cause. In other words, holy wars are out. We don't bring in the kingdom by violent revolt.

On the other side of the peace line, there is no peace for the enemies of God, (Isa. 48:22; 59:8).

Oh, yeah.

Missions of mercy for the poor and downtrodden are all good and fine, but their blessings are to be found inside of Christ's body, not outside of it. This is primarily about bringing in the Kingdom. We should not force anyone to come to church to receive our charity, but if they are totally unwilling then perhaps we shouldn't be tossing our valuables in the mudpit. Those who refuse to take refuge in Christ come under the wrath of God. Blessings are not automatic. They come through faithfulness to Christ. Curses are not automatic either. They come through faithlessness or rejection of Christ.

If we are embarrassed over one passage in the Scriptures, we will not live effective Christian lives. We should not whimper over things that pagans scoff at. What do they know, anyway? According to Scripture, they're blinded fools who exchanged the worship of God for the worship of the creation (Rom. 1:22-27). Evolution is wrong. Homosexuality is a sin. Sex outside of marriage is a sin. Shoplifting is immoral. We're all sinners. Hell is very real. These are offensive doctrines. They're not *fun* truths, but then, since when was the truth always cotton candy?

I think our definition of truth is askew. If we think the truth is fun and games and everybody will agree with it, then we need a strong cup of black with no cream or sugar. This kind of truth presumes that we're all on the same page, and we're not. Some people know the truth of Christ. Others do not, and never will. The truth is a Person, named Jesus, the Messiah, and no one comes to salvation without him. That's true, but it isn't very *fun*. Avoiding confrontation on this point is simply . . . well, *pointless*. In fact, the longer we pussyfoot around this truth, the more people we're losing.

This brings me back to the idea of giving offense. I would like to talk about how *not* to do this. Our message is offensive enough. Just because homosexuality is a sin does not give us the right to be homophobic. That is as much of a sin as homosexuality. We should not treat homosexuals, or anyone who disagrees with us, as our own personal punching bag. Yes, we could clobber them with the truth, but we're not called to destroy people by using the truth, we're called to knock down philosophies and ideas and all lofty notions that set themselves up against Christ. Our battle is to eliminate the *idea* without destroying the *person*. Our goal in opposing falsehood is to *convert* people, not to crush them into tomato paste. We must watch our words, and the way we use them. We're called to be offensive for the sake of the Gospel, and that isn't the same thing as being Asses For Christ.

Our offensiveness is to come directly from our love and care, not a callus disregard for people and their opinions. You don't deal with an 18-year-old Christian college student philosophizing improperly in

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*.

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the same way as you would deal with a hardened atheist of 40 years who is not and never will be a Christian.

In many ways, Christians have forgotten the theology of warfare. We are at war with spiritual powers and principalities. They have been de-throned by the King of Kings, but they are still seeking to regain their lost rule and authority. We know that they never will (for who can dethrone the King of Kings and Lord of Lords?), but we are still in the midst of the battle. There will be bloodshed. In fact, there *is* bloodshed. Muslims all over the world are systematically hunting down and murdering Christian converts, particularly in the Middle East, where Christianity is spreading like wildfire. So too are the Communist holdovers. China is still one of the world's leading persecutors of Christians, where public declaration of the gospel is still illegal and pastors are found and imprisoned, beaten, or killed by Chinese secret (and not-so-secret) police. About a month or two ago (2006), one Chinese pastor was arrested while he spoke to his congregation, dragged to prison, and beaten and whipped for twelve hours in punishment for his "crime." His response? The whole time, he preached to his guards, to anyone within earshot, the good news of Jesus Christ. When he was released, the guards said to him, "You preach too hard, father."

The Bible is a story, and it is a story about how the great Prince came to rescue His Bride (the church) from the grip of the Dragon-Serpent, but it is *also* and *just as importantly* a war against the Dragon-Serpent and all his minions. And both the war and the rescue are motivated from the Prince's deep *love*. He *loves* His Bride, who has been kidnapped, beaten, and enslaved by the Serpent *so much* that He will travel to the ends of the earth to find and free her, and He loves her *so passionately* that he will destroy anyone or anything that tries to harm her. Both God's love *for* His people and God's wrath *against* those opposed to His people comes from the same bright, holy center: God's great *love*. This is somewhat paradoxical, but it is true nonetheless.