

With so many English-speaking tourists and businessmen travelling to China, the Chinese are having to translate their signs to help visitors. This was especially the case back in 2008 when Beijing was preparing to host the Summer Olympics. Sometimes, the message gets lost in the translation. The results are often utterly baffling. Like the sign that is meant to say, "Don't worry, everything is clean in this store." It reads, "The store be sterilised inside, please be contented." Another demands that children must be accompanied on the escalator. It reads, "When old man's child go up hand ladder temporary need the family to accompany." And then the poetic way of telling people to keep off the lawn, "Your careful step keeps tiny grass invariably green." All of this is everything but user-friendly. But, in our day and age, user-friendly is what it's all about! The product that is not user-friendly just won't make it. It's all about the user-friendly mindset. We even make our churches as user-friendly as we can. And then we are confronted with this text that portrays Jesus just about as user-unfriendly as it gets: Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. What do you do with this?

When we hear these words of Jesus, before our horrified mind's eye, we see Charlemagne patting himself on the back for the conversion of the Saxons by the sword; we see new swarms of Christian Crusading armies riding off with new swords once again to reclaim the Holy Land from the heathen. We imagine all kinds of Jesus-sanctioned Christian violence for the sake of the kingdom. What else could you do with such an user-unfriendly Jesus?

But, if Jesus did not come to bring peace, then why is he called the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6)? How can he then say, Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you (Jn 14:27)? Indeed, how could the angels sing at his birth, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace (Lk 2:14)? Well, the earnest student of Scripture will know from the Scripture that it is not the Lord's intention for us to baptise and convert the heathen masses by the sword and the gun. What was His intention then? The answer is in John 3:17: God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him – there we have the intention of God. Imagine if Jesus had not come. The whole world would be mired in sin, darkened in understanding, forever rebelling against God – and therefore lost forever. God sends Jesus in order that the world might be saved through him – but the next verse

says, Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

If a sick man goes to a doctor and the diagnosis is that the man has full-blown gangrene in both legs, then it will not help one bit if the doctor sends the man home with ointment. The legs are incurable. For the man to be saved, the doctor must cut. And when the doctor cuts, his intention is not to harm the man, but to heal him, to give him life. So it is with this world. This world is not just neutral toward God. Every man, woman and child in it is sick. Terminally ill. Some well-meaning Christians think that a good church is all about relationships. So they try to make the church as user-friendly as possible, to get people into the doors, avoid all the offensive stuff (like talking about sin) and make them feel good at all costs. Of course it is good to make people feel welcome, and we should go out of our way to make that happen! But it can't stop there. Diagnosis is uncomfortable. Healing often hurts. Ask anyone who goes to a physical therapist. To send people home from church without talking about the law, without reminding them we're all by nature terminally sick with sin, in need of cure, is like a doctor trying to massage life into a gangrenous leg. It doesn't help. If anything, it's dangerous. It confirms people in their sin. If we truly want to win people for the church – and we do! – then this is about diagnosis and cure.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world. He came to save it. But the effect of his coming is the surgeon's knife. Better yet, the sword. Christ came to take away sin and guilt. At once, the result was war, and it remains war, because in their perversion men cling to sin, they fight Christ and the Gospel, and produce two hostile camps. So the result of your ministry, your bringing the Gospel of peace to people, will be the sword. That's what Jesus foresees, and emphatically he declares that he came to bring a sword. Better the conflict and the division, better that as many as possible be saved and have peace in the end, than that everybody perishes in their sin. As you confess Jesus, as you live Jesus, as you proclaim Jesus, you must know: It will cause division in families; it will cause alienation; and it will cause conflict in yourselves too.

Dwight Moody once said that most believers have just enough Christianity to make them miserable. How terrible if that were true! Jesus does not want you to be miserable. That's not why he came. No, he came that you too may have peace. But it's peace on HIS terms. User-friendly? The Lord Jesus Christ is not yours to use. He is yours to receive and proclaim.

He came while you and all this world were riddled with the gangrene of sin, to give you life. To be your victory in the war, that you could win; he took up the cross to give you life, that you would not perish. Jesus is saying: 'If you deny yourself out of loyalty to me, you will find complete self-realization. You will know true life. In the end, you will share my glory and live forever with me in my new heaven and my new earth.' And what makes the difference is repentance. Repentance means we need Jesus more than anything or anybody else. More than family harmony, more than avoiding conflict, more than anything else. When the gangrenous man realizes he needs the doctor, he is worthy. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (Jn 8:36). Jesus is our top priority. He says: 'Whoever loves me more than father or mother is worthy of me. Whoever loves me more than son or daughter is worthy of me. Whoever takes his cross and follows me is worthy of me. Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'

'Remember: When you take your cross, when you face the embarrassment of knowing me, then those who reject you reject me. But those who receive you receive me, and those who receive me receive my Father.' What an honour! To the world, a Christian might be a nobody, insignificant in fame, insignificant in fortune. But whatever people give to you because you a Christian, Jesus sees as given to himself. And whatever you give to others because they are disciples, Jesus sees as given to himself. And the reward will definitely not be lacking. What reward is that? Think of peace of mind. Think of peace of conscience. The peace of forgiveness. Think of the peace of belonging. Think of Jesus publicly acknowledging you. Though the whole world would war against us – forevermore the blessing of finding true peace, real life! Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Karl Böhmer

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