

SNOWFLAKE CHRISTIANITY

I recently took a class on early church history in which extensive attention was given to the first two centuries of Christian development. I learned many fascinating things about such matters as their approach to doctrinal catechesis, worship emphases, and methods of cultural engagement. But the facet of their experience that most stood out to me was their attitude toward persecution. I read, for example, of Blandina, a young girl perhaps no more than thirteen, who was mercilessly tortured in the gladiatorial arena in Lyon over several days for the crime of being a Christian. During her trial, she was scourged without pity, tied to a stake, and exposed to wild beasts by which she was savagely mauled and torn. When she did not die, she was thrown again into prison only to return the next day to endure roasting in an iron chair to prolong the agony of her suffering. When she still survived, she was covered with a net and thrown into a herd of wild bulls that stomped and tossed her till she perished. To my mind, the whole scene is ghastly and horrific, but her fellow church members did not share my revulsion. They were worried not about the torments she would endure, but about whether she would have the strength to maintain her confession.¹ Those who are familiar with the patristic writings will know that Blandina was by no means unique. The famed historian Eusebius recounts the Christian trials so prevalent throughout the Roman Empire in those early years. "Some of them were slain with the axe, as in Arabia. The limbs of some were broken, as in Cappadocia. Some, raised on high by the feet, with their heads down, while a gentle fire burned beneath them, were suffocated by the smoke which arose from the burning wood, as was done in Mesopotamia. Others were mutilated by cutting off their noses and ears and hands, and cutting to pieces the other members and parts of their bodies, as in Alexandria... Those in Antioch ... were roasted on grates, not so as to kill them, but so as to subject them to a lingering punishment... Others ... preferred to thrust their right hand into the fire rather than touch the impious sacrifice."² These were genuine disciples – steadfastly devoted to their LORD. Loving Christ and His Word, they had peace despite trials and "*nothing [could] offend them,*" not even the white-hot furnace of affliction (cf. *Psa. 119:165*). But "*how are the mighty fallen!*" To quote Loretta Lynn, "We've come a long way, baby," – almost all of it in the wrong direction. A considerable portion of contemporary Christianity could be lumped into the so-called snowflake generation.

Is Shallow: In case you're unfamiliar with the term "snowflake" as an adjective, a brief history may prove enlightening. In 2015, Yale University, once home to our nation's best and brightest, became the scene of a sad spectacle. YouTube footage showed a mob of apoplectic students screaming and cursing at a campus administrator for failing to prevent other students from wearing Halloween costumes, which they found "triggering" (i.e., offensive) on the grounds of something they called "cultural appropriation."³ The incident, which quickly went viral on the Internet, was so appalling that viewers began to mockingly describe the offending students as "snowflakes" melting under the heat of normal life. Since then, the expression has become an epithet to refer to anyone with "an inflated sense of uniqueness, an unwarranted sense of entitlement, or [who is] overly-emotional, easily offended, and unable to deal with opposing opinions."⁴ The label became so popular that *Collins English Dictionary* awarded it one of 2016's top ten words of the year. They define it as "the young adults of the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations"⁵ But as I said, the "snowflake" mentality is hardly limited to the unsaved, pagan "Left," or even to the young. Supposedly Christian adults are afflicted with it too. "I recently read of a Christian couple who actually considered becoming atheists because they had difficulty conceiving a child. They did conceive, mind you, but because they had difficulty, they began to doubt the existence of a loving God."⁶ In typical snowflake fashion, this couple got offended over the fact that God did not meet their expectations. Hence they threw a fit and essentially threatened to leave God unless He granted their desires. Of course, I do not want to be insensitive to the pain of being unable to have children, but to raise such a difficulty "to the level of spiritual crisis, leading to the rejection of [God] altogether, reveals a very weak and shallow faith."⁷

Is Narcissistic: The reaction of this particular couple to their trial of barrenness is illustrative of a much larger problem behind the entire modern offense culture, namely, pride. By and large, Christians today suffer from a severe case of narcissism. We seem to have transformed the doctrine of God's love for us into an expectation that He grant our desires and shield us from the everyday trials of ordinary adult life. It, therefore, warrants repeating and with the greatest emphasis that no servant is greater than his lord. "*If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household? 'If they have persecuted me,'* Jesus warned, "*they will also persecute you*" (*Matt. 10:25; John 15:20*). To have any hope of avoiding the pit of offense inherent in snowflake Christianity, we must realign our expectations and toughen up. Jesus was quite clear about what to expect should we decide to follow Him: "*... a man's foes shall be they of his own household.*" He was equally clear that He is worth far more than whatever we might suffer. "*He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*" We must reckon again with the most basic fact of Christianity: it is not about *us*. Christ does not exist to serve us; we exist to serve Him.

Takes Offense When None Has Been Given: A second problem exists in the offense-ridden culture of snowflake Christianity: taking offense when none has been given. The gifted philosopher Roger Scruton has described it as "the art of taking offense." As he explains it, "the new culture tells us that you should always take offence if you can. There are now experts in the art of taking offence, indeed whole academic subjects, such as 'gender studies', devoted to it. You may not know in advance what offence consists in – politely opening a door for a member of the opposite sex? Thinking of her sex as 'opposite'? Thinking in terms of 'sex'

¹ Stephen Presley, "Church History 1" (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Summer 2019).

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VIII chapter 12.1.2

³ Ironically, those who so easily *take* offense attempt to get their way by intentionally *giving* offense (e.g., screaming and cursing the administrator).

⁴ *Snowflake (slang)*, Wikipedia. Archived 28 September 2019. Retrieved 4 October 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowflake_\(slang\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowflake_(slang))

⁵ Top 10 Collins Words of the Year 2016." *Collins English Dictionary*. Archived 3 November 2016. Retrieved 8 October 2019, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/word-lovers-blog/new/top-10-collins-words-of-the-year-2016,323,HCb.html>

⁶ White, James Emery. "Lawnmower Parents and Snowflake Spirituality." *Crosswalk*. Archived 27 September 2018. Retrieved 8 October 2019, <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-james-emery-white/lawnmower-parents-and-snowflake-spirituality.html>

⁷ *Ibid.*

rather than 'gender'? Using the wrong pronoun? Who knows. We have encountered a new kind of predatory censorship, a desire to take offence that patrols the world for opportunities without knowing in advance what will best supply its venom" [sic].⁸ No real offense was given in any of the examples mentioned. Instead, offense was taken to be used as either (1) a shield to protect from having to acknowledge the truth of reality (e.g., there are only two genders). Or (2) the offense was weaponized and used as a cudgel to beat the other party into ideological submission by painting them as an insensitive aggressor. In the Christian context, particularly in the church setting, this phenomenon has reached epidemic proportions. More often than not, when church members or attenders are offended, it is not because anyone said something untrue or did anything unkind. They are offended, rather, because they were given a healthy dose of reality (i.e., confronted with the truth), but rather than repent and bring their life into conformity with the truth, they chose to lash out. My mind goes back to an incident in which a young lady went with our teens to camp. All week she had a wonderful time. By week's end, however, she was under conviction. When one of our workers kindly dealt with her at the altar and addressed the rebellious spirit in her heart, she took offense. "I had a bad experience" became her mantra. But did she? Someone finally loved her enough to tell her the truth. Rather than accepting blame, however, and getting right with God, she tried to justify herself by painting others in a bad light.

Shifts Blame: "But wait!" Someone will protest. "Aren't you just blaming the victim? After all, just because offense was not intended does not mean that it was not given" – or does it? J. F. Sargent certainly doesn't think so. "We didn't *mean* anything cruel, so no one should be upset -- only there is no situation in the world where what we *mean* to do is more important than what we *did*. If the world really functioned like that, we all would've aced every test in high school (we *meant* to give the right answers, right?). Good intentions mean [nothing] if you're too incompetent to do anything with them."⁹ At first glance, this seems like a compelling argument, but upon further review, a few problems surface. To start, Sargent is equivocating between something objective (answers on a test) and something subjective (the *interpretation* of someone else's meaning). But the bigger problem is one of hermeneutics: he is arguing that the listener determines meaning rather than the speaker. Does this work when writing? Can the reader of a mortgage determine the meaning of his bank loan? More to the point, would Sargent himself be upset if we were to interpret his article in a way he did not intend? Presumably, since he is writing an essay, he assumes that people will take his words as he intended them. His position is thus self-contradictory. In the end, then, it is not me who is shifting the blame onto the victim. It is rather Christian snowflakes that are trying to shift the blame for their shallow, narcissistic, offendedness onto those who dare to confront them. The remedy for the offense culture is as simple as it is old: "*Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them*" (Psa. 119:165).

⁸ Scruton, Roger. "The Art of Taking Offence." *The Spectator*. Archived 10 August 2018. Retrieved 30 September 2019, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/08/the-art-of-taking-offence/>

⁹ Sargent, J. F. "Five Things Everyone Gets Wrong About Being Offended." *Cracked*. Archived 8 October 2013. Retrieved 9 October 2019, <https://www.cracked.com/blog/5-things-everyone-gets-wrong-about-being-offended/>