

Session 7

The Church as Scandal of Salvation: Pentecost and the Continuity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Wolfgang Vondey)

Abstract

This presentation raises the question of the continuity of the church with the life of Jesus, that is, what the Scriptures call the scandal of Christ. The use of the term *scandal* is derived from the Greek *skandalon* as used in the New Testament. In its ancient usage, the root of the term identifies the “means whereby one closes something” and refers to the mechanism sealing a trap to which the bait is mounted. The trigger is the stick or the stone preventing the trap from closing, but once removed, along with the bait, the victim is caught and unable to escape. A typical use of this image in the New Testament is to translate *skandalon* as “stumbling block,” a metaphor applied repeatedly to Jesus and to the gospel. The story of Jesus exhibits a striking pattern of division, culminating in the public scandal of his criminal trial and crucifixion. In turn, this scandal that forms the core of the Christian gospel is itself portrayed as a “stumbling block” to Jesus’s followers, Jews and Gentiles alike. However, few studies have examined the meaning of this scandal, identified how it works, or explored its consequences for the life of the Christian community today. This presentation examines how exactly the scandal of Christ continues to function in the life of the apostolic community and, by extension, in the church today. It proceeds in four steps: (1) an explanation of the scandal found in the gospel of Christ, (2) the identification of the mechanism of the scandal, (3) an exposition of how this mechanism continues in the church at Pentecost, and (4) a discussion of the way the church today can endorse this scandal and how this task reflects the challenges the churches face in today’s world.

Key Words: church, scandal, Jesus, flesh, salvation

Introduction

The history of early Christianity is frequently told in stories of outrage and disgrace.¹ The story of Jesus, especially, culminates in the public scandal of his criminal trial and execution. The

¹ See Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Hendrickson, 1991), 25–66; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox, 1998), 14–34.

advent of the church at Pentecost presents an immediate case of public offence following the scandal of Jesus. Today, however, Christianity has largely lost touch with the public scandal that characterised Jesus and his disciples. Instead, the history of Christianity is convoluted with myths and controversies aimed at evading any form of scandalous behavior.² Scandals are indications of the need to reform, at best, or to be avoided altogether.³ Contemporary scandals among church leaders and clergy have discredited the notion of a scandalous community as unfit to apply to the Christian life. Among the Christian values of love and tolerance, the prominence of seeker-friendly churches and entertaining worship, and the popularity of personal faith and private spirituality, the public scandal has lost its place.⁴ As a result, we know very little about the nature of the biblical scandal, what is at the heart of the scandal of Jesus Christ, and whether the church can avoid this scandal if it follows in the footsteps of Jesus. I want to address this dilemma by explaining the mechanism of the scandal in the life of Jesus and at Pentecost with the aim of pointing the church to the uncomfortable discovery that to be a follower of Christ is not an escape to a private and spiritualised life of a gospel of bliss but a public witness to a gospel that upsets and corrects for the sake of the salvation of the world.

The Nature of the Biblical Scandal

The origin of the word *scandal* in most of the world's languages derives from the Greek term *skandalon*. In its original sense in the ancient world, the word identifies the “means

² Cf. R. T. Kendall, *The Scandal of Christianity* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011); Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2006); David McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 3–13; Manfred Lütz, *Der Skandal der Skandale: Die geheime Geschichte des Christentums* (Herder, 2018); Patrick Connolly, “The Concept of the Scandal in a Changed Ecclesial Context,” *Studia Canonica* 51, no. 1 (2017): 135–48.

³ See Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Beacon Press, 2016).

⁴ See Michael Kerrigan, *Dark History of the Catholic Church: Schisms, Wars, Inquisitions, Witch Hunts, Scandals, Corruption* (Sterling, 2014); Angela Senander, *Scandal: The Catholic Church in Public Life* (The Liturgical Press, 2012); Otto von Corvin, *Scandals in the Roman Catholic Church* (Merkur, 2003).

whereby one closes something” and is etymologically connected with the ideas of “springing forward and back” or “mounting” and “slamming.”⁵ In its figurative sense, *skandalon* refers to the mechanism sealing a trap to which the bait is mounted. The trigger is the stick or stone preventing the trap from closing, but once removed along with the bait, the victim is caught and unable to escape. Hence, the scandal constitutes the risk for the unsuspecting victim, and in its metaphorical sense, the mechanism becomes identified with the threat of entrapment and the trap itself: the *skandalon* marks an obstacle, a hindrance and offence and thus becomes a reason for confusion, fear, and resentment.

The action of the scandal involves the notions of stumbling, striking, or dashing against something, either in the active sense of pushing or knocking someone down or passively in the sense of slipping, falling, succumbing or suffering hurt and misfortune.⁶ The idea of stumbling occurs particularly often in metaphors involving the image of the stone or a path, usually with a negative connotation of scandalising as the placement of a stumbling block or obstacles before others.⁷ This sense of the scandal entered into popular ancient use as a figurative designation for the instrument of suffering harm and adversity. In the religious context, the scandal became a warning of potential obstacles of the faith, including heresy and idolatry, both in the sense of warning against actively teaching false doctrine and in the passive sense of being led astray into doubt and apostasy.⁸ Hence, the act of offence includes always both the one who scandalises and the one who is scandalised. This distinction entered the world of the New Testament

⁵ Gustav Stählin, “σκάνδαλον, σκανδαλίζω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, ed. Gerhard Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, G. Friedrich (Eerdmans, 1971), 338–58; Johannes Lindblom, *Skandalon: Eine lexikalisch-exegetische Untersuchung* (Almqvist & Wiksells, 1921), 5–6.

⁶ Gustav Stählin, “προσκόπτω, πρόσκομμα, προσκοπή, ἀπρόσκοπος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, G. Friedrich (Eerdmans, 1971), 745–59.

⁷ Stählin, ‘σκάνδαλον’, 340.

⁸ Lindblom, *Skandalon*, 14–18.

nowhere more clearly than regarding the identity and destiny of Jesus (Matt 13:57; 26:31; 33:11; Mark 6:3; Luke 7:23; John 6:61).

The Scandal of Jesus Christ

Luke offers perhaps “one of the purest expressions of the central New Testament concept” that identifies the scandal with the messianic character of Jesus.⁹ In the unfolding story of his ministry, it is the fate of Jesus culminating in his suffering and crucifixion that marks the direct cause of offence, and Jesus himself exclaims to his disciples that “all you shall be scandalized in me” (Matt 26:31, Douay-Rheims Bible). The subtle difference between the scandal as a form of offence located in Jesus and the scandalising as a response to Jesus allows for an important distinction.¹⁰ Jesus’s own perception of being scandalous becomes inevitably apparent in his rejection by others (see Matt 13:57; 15:12; 17:27; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; John 6:61).¹¹ Put differently, the scandal is triggered not by his own actions but in the public response, so that Jesus can say “blessed is anyone who takes *no* offence at me” (Luke 7:23).¹² Jesus is eminently aware of his own identity as the mechanism of offence (see Matt 11:6; Mark 12:10; John 11:9) and finds this characteristic predicted of the messiah in the Jewish scriptures (see Ps 118:22; Zech 13:7).¹³ Yet, Jesus offends only when he becomes an obstacle, and only when others are scandalised by Jesus is the mechanism of the offence exposed. It is not Jesus but those who are scandalised who initiate the scandal. The tension between the offence located

⁹ Stählin, “σκάνδαλον,” 345. Luke does not use the actual term ‘σκάνδαλον’ but ‘πτῶσις’ in this text.

¹⁰ Stählin, “σκάνδαλον,” 345; Gustav Stählin, *Skandalon: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte eines biblischen Begriffs*, Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie 2 (Bertelsmann, 1930), 105–271. See also Lindblom, *Skandalon*, 50.

¹¹ Lindblom, *Skandalon*, 37.

¹² Cf. McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels*, 107–27. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NRSV.

¹³ Stählin, “σκάνδαλον,” 353, n79.

in Jesus and its scandalising effect in the response of others provides important insight in the anatomy of his scandal.

The most immediate offence of Jesus is his outward observable behavior, especially his public practices. Often seemingly in direct conflict with religious customs, social expectations, cultural norms, and political regulations, the history of Jesus tells the story of a scandalous outsider. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus enflamed Jewish debates about Jewish laws and customs (see Matt 12:10; Mark 1:25; 3:2; Luke 4:39; 6:7; 13:14; John 7:23; 9:16).¹⁴ The care for the sick, the poor, and the outcasts of society was a hallmark of his life, and the Pharisees were regularly offended that Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1). His radical companionship with people at the margins, including his fellowship with women, offered one of the most frequent grounds for offence (Matt 11:19; Mark 2:16; Luke 7:34).¹⁵ Not only was it a common occurrence to find “sinners and tax collectors” (Matt 9:10-17; Mark 2:15–22; Luke 5:29–39) in his audience, but his custom of attending meals with them uninvited earned him the reputation of being “a glutton and a drunkard” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34).¹⁶ Jesus did not fit the public image of a religious leader let alone the normative Jewish expectations of the “Christ.”

Intimately connected with his scandalous behavior is the manner and content of Jesus’s teaching. The full force of the scandal is found in Jesus’s teaching regarding his own fate, where the mechanism of the scandal is triggered by his contradiction of the dominant messianic expectations—or more precisely—by his followers’ rejection of Jesus’s prediction of his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Despite Jesus’s warning that he had taught the disciples

¹⁴ Nina L. Collins, *Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate: Healing on the Sabbath in the 1st and 2nd Centuries CE* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, “Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus,” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute of Howard Clark Kee*, ed. J. Neusner (Fortress, 1988), 264–89.

¹⁶ Mary Marshall, “Jesus: Glutton and Drunkard?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 1 (2005): 47–60.

everything so that *they* may *not* be scandalised (John 16:1), Jesus's public trial and death ultimately become a scandal to both the political authorities (Matt 27:64; 28:12; Acts 2:31; 4:2; 10:40) and the disciples (Matt 24:11; Mark 16:11; Luke 24:25–26; John 20:9, 25). The offence of this scandal divides the entire world. From the perspective of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18, the “stumbling block” is the proclamation of the crucified Christ, which divides not only the Jews amongst themselves but the whole world into “those who are perishing” and “those who are being saved.”¹⁷ In 1 Peter 2:7, similarly, the stumbling block of the Cross divides the world principally into those “who believe” and “those who do not believe.” Yet, while the scope of the scandal is universal, the mechanism is not triggered by Jesus's own action but by anyone who attempts to oppose and remove the scandal. Moreover, the full force of Jesus's scandal becomes evident not in its universal distribution but in its effectiveness among Jesus's own followers. The culmination of this internal scandal is particularly visible in response to Jesus's teaching following the multiplication of bread to feed a crowd of five thousand (John 6:25–71).

Although it is the audience who draws explicit parallels between Jesus's feeding of the five thousand and God's provision of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 16:4, 15; Ps 78:24; Neh 9:15; John 6:31), Jesus instead rebukes them for their literal interpretation.¹⁸ For Jesus, the audience tied the bread incorrectly and exclusively to Moses as the source and model of redemption. Instead, Jesus argues that it was not Moses who had provided the manna but God

¹⁷ Karlheinz Müller, *Anstoss und Gericht: Eine Studie zum jüdischen Hintergrund des paulinischen Skandalon-Begriffs* (Kösel-Verlag, 1969), 108–18.

¹⁸ See Jan Heilmann, “A Meal in the Background of John 6:51–58,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 481–500; Jan G. van der Watt, “I am the Bread of Life: Imagery in John 6:32–51,” *Acta Theologica* 2 (2007): 186–204; Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 406–46; Ulrich Busse, *Das Johannesevangelium: Bildlichkeit, Diskurs und Ritual* (Leuven University Press, 2002), 273–402.

(v. 32). His teaching breaks with the identification of the bread as ordinary “loaves” and shifts to the “true bread from heaven” (v. 32) that is then identified as “the bread from God ... which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (v. 33).¹⁹ Offended by Jesus’s claim to be “the bread that came down from heaven” (v. 42), the audience distances itself from him, and the text says, “the Jews began to complain” (John 6:41), echoing the murmuring of the Israelites in the wilderness. Yet, the offence increases to the breaking point with Jesus’s explanation that the bread he will give them is his own “flesh” (v. 52).²⁰ Jesus’s final response to their dispute unleashes the full force of the offence, dividing not only his audience in the synagogue but his own disciples:

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which the ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever (John 6:53-58).

In a provocative shift of subject from God to himself, the bread of life (in the present context and in the wilderness) is instead given by Jesus, and even more controversially, it is actually identical with him.²¹ In the end, his exposition of the bread returns to the beginning claim that God gives the true bread from heaven, albeit now it is Jesus’s flesh that is true food and his blood that is true drink (vv. 31 and 55).

¹⁹ Susan Hylan, *Allusion and Meaning in John 6* (de Gruyter, 2005), 137–41.

²⁰ Cf. Wolfgang Vondey, *People of Bread: Rediscovering Ecclesiology* (Paulist Press, 2008), 129–35. A different reading offers Tucker S. Ferda, “Flesh from Heaven: The Text of John 6.52 and Its Intertext,” *New Testament Studies* 65, no. 3 (2019): 371–87.

²¹ Hylan, *Allusion and Meaning*, 140; Gary A. Phillips, “This Is a Hard Saying: Who Can be Listener to It? Creating a Reader in John 6,” *Semeia* 26 (1983): 23–56; Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John* (Brill, 1965), 87–90.

Jesus's identification as the source and material of the bread is an offence in its own right, but the encouragement to eat his flesh and drink his blood while he is still alive is even more scandalous.²² The disciples respond with bewilderment and rejection, and many find "this teaching" too difficult to accept (John 6:60). In turn, Jesus not only questions rhetorically whether his followers have now been 'scandalised' but suggests again that among his disciples "there are some who do not believe" (v. 64). We find Jesus's followers at a turning point in their relationship with Christ and are told that "because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66). The scandal had reached deeply into the core of his followers, and eventually Jesus questions even the original twelve whether they wished to leave him. Although they affirm their belief in Jesus as the Christ, he exposes that they are in fact the real subject of the scandal: "One of you is a devil" (v. 70). John's Gospel adds that Jesus was speaking of Judas Iscariot (v. 71), who would later betray him, yet in the history of the scandal now attributed to the apostles, we find that Judas is not the only offence to Jesus but that the scandal had penetrated the entire Christian community.

The Mechanism of the Christian Scandal

The mechanism of the scandal is deeply rooted in the Cross. However, this mechanism is not triggered by the crucifixion nor by Jesus's own endorsement of the Cross or the violent act of his execution, but by the rejection of Jesus's fate among his own followers. The earliest manifestation of this mechanism appears as soon as Jesus began to proclaim his suffering and death. With immediate focus on Peter, Matthew 16 tells us that the apostle took Jesus aside "and

²² Heilmann, "A Meal in the Background," 491; Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and Its Historical and Cultural Context* (Brill, 2011), 231–7, 252–70; Jane S. Webster, *Ingesting Jesus: Eating and Drinking in the Gospel of John* (Society for Biblical Literature, 2003), 76–79.

began to rebuke him” (v. 22). In a sharp reprimand, the emboldened apostle corrects his own master: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (v. 22). In turn, Jesus, who had just named Peter the “rock” upon which he will build his church (v. 18), reacts by identifying the apostle as a *skandalon*, a stumbling block, and more vividly as “Satan” (v. 23) who stands in his way to the Cross.²³ The close proximity of admiration and accusation, following and deserting, in the same person, reveals the dual nature of the offence: scandalised by Jesus’s endorsement of the Cross, Peter has now become a scandal for Christ. In a striking development, Peter’s instrumental use echoes that of Jesus: they are both the stones of foundation and of stumbling.²⁴ Jesus and Peter exemplify what we might call the “law of scandal”²⁵ that “whoever scandalizes others is first scandalized himself.”²⁶

The confrontation of Jesus and Peter and their mutual scandalisation by the other exposes the full offensive violence of the gospel. The Cross is consistent with Jesus’s teaching but conflicts with the disciples’ expectations of the Messiah and ultimately of themselves as followers of the Christ. They are scandalised by the despair of this irreconcilability, which eventually becomes the occasion for their own denial and forsaking of Jesus. The relationship of Jesus and Peter shows that the risk of the Christian scandal is not only to be offended but, by being scandalised, to become the cause of another scandal, which threatens even the potency of the original offence. In the heat of the scandal, the scandalised Peter, already declared to be the foundation of Christ’s church, stands at a diabolical distance from Christ, because Jesus, now scandalised by Peter, resists the pressures of his demands, which have not only aligned with the

²³ Hector Patmore, “‘Arrière de moi, Satan! Tu m’es en scandale!’ (Mt 16.23). Analyse de l’ajout du rédacteur dans son contexte juif,” *New Testament Studies* 66, no. 1 (2020): 1–20, doi:10.1017/S0028688519000237.

²⁴ Stählin, “σκάνδαλον,” 348.

²⁵ Samuel Clark, *Of Scandal: Together with a Consideration of the Nature of Christian Liberty and Things Indifferent* (Benjamin Alsop, 1680), iii.

²⁶ Thomas Beverley, *Woe of Scandal: Scandal in Its General Nature and Effects* (Thomas Parkhurst, 1682), vii. See Clark, *Of Scandal*, 16–17.

normative expectations but become a destructive voice for the dominant authority. Jesus resists the demands of authority vocalised by Peter who by being scandalised threatens Jesus's identity and destiny.²⁷ And Jesus emerges from this conflict once more as a scandalous figure through both his humiliation by and resistance to his own followers.²⁸

Any resistance to the norms of authority only further enforces the scandal. As those who are scandalised by Jesus begin to challenge and criticise Jesus for his actions, he responds with equal criticism and condemnation.²⁹ Rather than avoid the scandal, Jesus instead responds by offering a subversive alternative to the model of the dominant expectations.³⁰ In doing so, he both confirms the scandal and bears its consequences. Paradoxically, the law of scandal is not aimed at abandoning the offence but at increasing its scandalous potential. Hence, Jesus's parables destabilise and reconstitute the entire familiar world and interpretive universe of the Jews.³¹ His behaviour towards social outcasts and companionship with sinners rejects and reorganises normative roles, identities, and relationships.³² His teaching radically shatters expectations of the Messiah and assembles a new image of the kingdom of God that fully embraces the scandal of the cross. Jesus' response to the scandalised authority is his own flesh, which both literally and symbolically endures the scandal in his own suffering and crucifixion.

The disciples learned that the overthrow of the norms and expectations of authority is aimed at liberating the world for the acceptance of the scandal albeit transformed for the

²⁷ Jan Rippentrop, "Mark's Passion Narrative as Political Authority," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44, no. 4 (2017): 11–19; Warren Carter, "Matthew and Empire," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, nos. 3–4 (2005): 86–91.

²⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1994), 112–33.

²⁹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Palestine* (University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 128–53.

³⁰ Paul Hertig, "The Subversive Kingship of Jesus and Christian Social Witness," *Missiology* 32, no. 4 (2004): 475–90.

³¹ Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Blackwell, 2005), 46.

³² Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Re-membering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Church," *Horizons* 19, no. 2 (1992): 199–218.

purposes of God. The scandal of the crucified Messiah therefore demands an understanding of God and the church that does not resist the scandal but refuses its suppression. The law of scandal brings to the church similar consequences to those suffered by Jesus, including persecution, imprisonment, suffering, and death. In other words, the church retains Jesus's power to offend and to be offended as both the model and anti-model of its own existence. The gospel of God crucified in Christ is also the scandal of the church because it demands a fundamental decision: to accept the offence or to be scandalised. Yet, to accept the offence is not the route for escape but for participation; when the church arose into the public world at Pentecost it emerged as a partner in the scandal.

The Scandal of Pentecost

At Pentecost, the scandal of Christ manifested in his flesh continues in the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ "on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). The church emerges in public view not in complete contrast to Jesus but in continuity with the original offence. Where the scandal of Jesus directs the attention to the scandal of the Word of God that had become flesh, Pentecost directs the attention to the scandal of the church "in the flesh" that is baptised with the Holy Spirit.³³ As much as it is impossible to separate the coming of the Messiah from the flesh of Jesus, so it is impossible to separate the outpouring of the Spirit from the flesh of his followers. It is a scandalous discovery that the physical, biological, physiological, and psychological dimensions of human nature are the cooperative conditions for the Word and the Spirit in the world.

³³ See Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005), 31–80.

The scandal of the flesh is demonstrated with particular clarity in the visual, behavioral, linguistic, and prophetic behavior of the disciples.³⁴ Like Jesus, the church offends when it becomes an obstacle to the norms of authority, and in response, the intoxicating effects of receiving the Spirit in the flesh are trivialised, rationalised, and suppressed by the public accusation of the disciples' drunkenness. The obvious intoxication with the Spirit finds a climax in the further offence of the disciples captured in their speaking with other tongues.³⁵ That the church speaks not in its own language but in all the languages of the world widens the Christian scandal to global proportions. Yet, the ecstatic character of the Christian community and its universal prophetic claims are the fertile ground for the astonishment and wonder that lead the audience to the gospel of the crucified Christ—and to its scandal. It is the “incarnational” character of the divine revelation operative in human flesh anointed by God’s Spirit that becomes a witness to the redemption and the judgment of all flesh. The birth of the church as a public community at Pentecost displays not a private embodiment of divine power, a personal relationship with Jesus, an ascetic withdrawal from the world, choreographed rituals of worship, grammatically articulative doctrines, or domesticated religious behavior, but a social and relational witness to the salvation of all flesh that had begun in the flesh of Christ. The church at Pentecost suffers the scandal of the flesh for the sake of its public witness to God.

That the Spirit is poured out not on specific flesh but on *all* flesh has far reaching consequences. The promise of the Spirit to men and women, young and old, slaves and free (Acts 2:17) signals that the church must resist any public pressures, social customs, cultural

³⁴ See Wolfgang Vondey, *The Scandal of Pentecost: A Theology of the Public Church* (T&T Clark, 2024), 85–234.

³⁵ See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Sober Intoxication of the Spirit: Filled with the Fullness of God* (Servant Books, 2005).

norms, religious regulations, and demonic powers that seek to suppress the redemption of all flesh. The scandal of Pentecost signals that before we can understand the church as a community of Christ and the Spirit, we must learn how the church can exist as a community of the flesh. The challenge to the church is that this “enfleshed” reality of the Christian witness cannot avoid extending the scandal of the flesh we have seen in Christ. Because the outpouring of God’s Spirit on *all* flesh aims at the salvation of “*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord” (Acts 2:21), the public witness of the church must embody and empower the whole scope of humanity. The scandal of Pentecost is the resistance of the church to claim the power of the Spirit as its own, to elevate the divine empowerment above ordinary humanity, and thereby to sever the continuity with the humanity of Jesus and to domesticate the power of the Spirit by placing it in the service of its own ambitions, institutions, and regulations.

The baptism in the Spirit is a scandal of the flesh because it subjects the body to the power of the Spirit so that the Christian witness to the world is both ordinary and extraordinary. The effect of this baptism is “charismatic” in the sense that it is a “gift” of the Holy Spirit into the brokenness of human flesh and therefore transformative of human nature.³⁶ This charismatic witness of the church is grounded in neither a triumphalist anthropology of exceptional human abilities nor a realist anthropology that surrenders to human weakness. Because the source of power is not the church but God, the public Christian witness functions as the scandal of the realisation of divine power enacted and embodied by the ordinary, the weak, the sick, the disabled, the poor, and the persecuted. This *is* the true scandalous image of the church!

The scandal of the church is a witness in the flesh that proclaims the hope of the world in scandalous fellowship with the flesh of sinners, social outcasts, marginalised, and

³⁶ Vondey, *Scandal of Pentecost*, 193–234.

stigmatised human beings, in every challenge of the flesh of the strong, the healthy, the abled, and the powerful, and in every attempt at human transformation, reconciliation, healing, and redemption—even at the risk of public failure. The path towards rediscovering this scandal must begin with a rediscovery of the flesh, Christ's flesh and our own, which together form the body of Christ in the world.

Conclusion

On the most basic level, the scandal of the flesh constitutes a great challenge to the institutionalised church with a history that has forgotten, above all, the redemption of the flesh. This forgetfulness of the flesh reflects the law of scandal: scandalised by the flesh we spiritualise salvation and exclude the flesh as sinful and unnecessary from God's Kingdom, and scandalising the flesh, we elevate it above the Word and the Spirit as the expression of human independence and power. We see this among Pentecostal congregations who, on the one hand, demand the sanctification, if not the crucifixion, of the flesh, but on the other, proclaim a gospel of the prosperity and authority of the flesh. Particularly challenging is a witness to humanity that receives the gifts of the Spirit not for the sake of possessing the power of God but for the sake of giving it away to the world. The scandal of the flesh is that the power of the church is not tied to the control of wealth, possession, status, education, age, gender or the exercise of institutional, political, religious, and spiritual authority. The Christian world cannot afford a triumphalist image of the flesh that censors anyone who does not measure up to normative expectations of intellectual ability, physical strength, linguistic or cultural conformity.

The detachment of the church from the scandal of the flesh can produce several deeply interrelated threats to the life and well-being of Christian congregations. The first is the separation of the community from the public scandal of Jesus. Without this scandal, the church is

publicly no longer recognisable as the body of Jesus because it has sterilised itself from the outrage of the public scandal of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ and the gift of his flesh. A sign of this church is the absence of “sinners and tax collectors” from the local community and of the “gluttons and drunkards” who care to have fellowship with them.

A second threat is the separation of congregations from the scandal of the gospel, which proclaims that in Jesus the Word of God has become flesh. The public witness of the church is then more concerned with the quality of the mechanisms, structures, and methods of its proclamation than with the scandalous quality tied to the Incarnation. A sign of this church is the preference of praise over transformation and of a life in the Spirit that aims to please rather than to point back to the life in the flesh evident in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and his followers.

A third risk is the separation of congregations from the scandal of Pentecost, that is, from its own offensiveness as the public witness to God’s Spirit poured out on *all* flesh. The disregard of this scandal isolates the public witness of the church from the confrontation with the world through which Christianity came into public existence. A church without this scandal suppresses the physical, biological, physiological, and psychological dimensions of the human beings that form the cooperative conditions for the divine acts of redemption. Aided by these pervasive risks, a false dichotomy lures the church to an even more severe threat where those who have become attuned to a life in the Spirit neglect to live the Christian life also deliberately in the flesh. The opposition of the flesh and the Spirit is an opposition of the Incarnation and Pentecost—of God and humanity, Christ and the church. The Christian response must be that the awe and wonder of the world at the difference of the Christian life cannot be produced without the “carnality” of the human constitution made evident through the whole range human beings and of the gifts of

the Spirit poured out on all flesh. The question for Christian congregations today remains whether we are offended by the scandal of the flesh or ready to be a partner in the scandal.

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**Response to Wolfgang Vondey’s “The Church as Scandal of Salvation:
Pentecost and the Continuity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”
(Daniel Lim)**

Thank you, Dr. Vondey, for the opportunity to respond to your excellent paper. Your insightful analysis challenges us Pentecostals to participate in the “scandal of salvation” and embody the Spirit-empowered witness in the public sphere for the sake of the gospel. Your call for the church to resist retreating into private comfort and instead remain bold as a social and relational witness is both timely and compelling.

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First, Vondey’s central argument is that the *skandalon* (1 Cor 1:18–24, NIV) of the crucified Christ demands an understanding of God and the church that does not resist and suppress the “scandal.” In addition, rejection of the “scandal” is a scandal on its own, which can sometimes become an obstacle to our understanding and application of our faith. Perhaps Vondey, who has lived in Japan, can give some practical examples on how he sees Asian Pentecostals returning to a public ecclesiology divinely rooted in the scandalous nature of Jesus’s life and death and in the advent of Pentecost, where God’s Spirit is imparted to the “flesh” dramatically in the public sphere.

Second, Vondey critiques the contemporary church’s view of Pentecost, marked by an unwillingness and apprehension to fully participate in the continuous witness of the “scandal.” In a quest to become culturally relevant and “seeker-friendly,” some—by their fears and regulations—have institutionalized the faith and domesticated the Spirit along with his gifts. Sometimes, we Asian Pentecostals face pressures from the churches in the West, who admonish us for not being modern enough, “cool” enough, or “seeker-friendly” enough. We are seen as too conservative, backward, and boring. I wonder if Vondey can share more on how European

Pentecostals remain steadfast to their witness and do not succumb to the same pressure. The contemporary tendency is also to shy away from any public engagement that elicits criticism. This stands in stark contrast to the foundational impulse of the early Pentecostals, through whom the Spirit's transformative presence actively confronted and subverted the prevailing social and religious norms. Their speaking in other tongues alone was an offence that persists even today, which, as Vondey says, widens the Christian scandal to global proportions.¹ In some Asian contexts, it is not easy to be Pentecostal.

Third, Vondey also rightly highlights the significance of Spirit embodiment in the flesh. The baptism in the Spirit is a scandal of the flesh because it subjects the body to the power of the Spirit so that the Christian witness to the world is both ordinary and extraordinary. The "visible" church becomes an eschatological sign that salvation of all flesh is possible. The tangible, bodily manifestations of the Spirit is also an ongoing evidence of God's active presence in human brokenness. The scandal here is that the church is a witness in weak human flesh that proclaims the hope of the world—even at the risk of public failure. As Amos Yong points out, "Our salvation involves both present renewal and future hope, acknowledging that our struggle persists until Christ's return."² As we acknowledge the Spirit working through human brokenness, perhaps the "scandal of salvation" can expand to address negative scandals, not only as points of reform, but as part of our witness.

¹ Wolfgang Vondey, "The Church as Scandal of Salvation: Pentecost and the Continuity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," in *Pentecostal Voices Across the Continents*, ed. Kong Hee et al., Regnum Studies in Mission (Regnum, 2026), 65.

² Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005), 97.

As I reflect on Vondey's challenge to overcome the danger of "normativity," which will domesticate the Spirit in our churches, I would like to offer three observations within the context of Asia.

First, a need exists for a deeper and more robust Pentecostal education here in Asia. Theologically, a scandal in the church is the active teaching of false doctrines and the passive sense of being led astray into doubt and apostasy. As Asian Pentecostals, we must reject a gospel that conflates Spirit embodiment with materialistic success or a triumphalist physical perfection. At the recent 2023 Global Pentecostal Summit, Pastor Kong Hee underscored the importance of how we must engage in self-reflection and honestly deal with the inadequacy and abuse of theologies within our ranks, and not allow fringe teachings like hyper-faith, hyper-grace, the prosperity gospel, and dominion theology to hijack Pentecostalism.³

Second, in Asia, "the scandal of salvation" is even more nuanced because of the honour-shame dynamics and the high regard for relational reputation.⁴ The Chinese word for "scandal" is shameful news or disgraceful matters. The association with any scandal, whether justified or not, often leads to a loss of face and, thus, dishonour. Hence, the inward inclination to avoid any scandal often dictates our relationship with God and our yielding to the Spirit. We Asian Pentecostals need courage to "shamelessly" allow the Spirit's continuous in-breaking, as we proclaim God's transformative power in present tangible ways. Perhaps Vondey can offer examples on how Pentecostal churches can practically live out their scandalous witness, like speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy in an increasingly secularised world.

³ Kong Hee, "Singapore: The Antioch of Asia?" in *Voices Loud & Clear*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum Books International, 2024), 198.

⁴ Ajith Fernando, "Confronting Lying Biblically in Honour- and Shame-Oriented Cultures," in *Evangelical Review of Theology: A Global Forum* 46, no. 2 (May 2022): 171–79, ed. Thomas Schirrmacher, Bruce Barron, and Francis Jr. S. Samdao (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), 172, <https://theology.worldidea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ERT-46-2c.pdf>.

Third, Pentecost's "scandal of the flesh" is that God's divine power is enacted and embodied through ordinary persons like you and me, still subject to human brokenness. A perfect God can indwell an imperfect body, which can still fail in life and ministry. Even though we do not actively look for negative scandals to discredit our witness, we need to make room for them as part of our redemption narrative in our public witness.

A Case Study: City Harvest Church

The City Harvest Church ('CHC') case study illustrates these tensions in contextualizing the "scandal of salvation." In 2002, CHC embarked on an unconventional missionary effort called the *Crossover Project*. Inspired by Mark 4:35, "Let us cross over to the other side" (NKJV), the project aimed to share the gospel through the medium of pop culture. Sun Ho—wife of the senior pastor and a worship leader—ventured into the Asian pop music scene with the goal of reaching secular audiences, particularly in nations closed to traditional evangelism. Through her concerts, she shared her personal testimony and ended most performances with an invitation to receive Christ. Over a twenty-five-month tour across Asia, more than half a million people were reached, resulting in more than 140,000 decisions for salvation.⁵ Despite its evangelistic success, the project drew criticism when it expanded to the West, with scrutiny over Sun's Hollywood image and allegations that funds meant for church buildings were redirected to finance the mission. In response, CHC stated that the Crossover Project embodied its evangelistic purpose of the church.⁶

⁵ Theresa Tan et al., "20 Years after the Crossover Project," City News, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://www.citynews.sg/2022/04/22/20-years-after-the-crossover-project/>.

⁶ Jany Yip and Susan Ainsworth, "'Whatever Works': The Marketplace Mission of Singapore's City Harvest Church," *Journal of Macromarketing* 36, no. 4 (2016): 443–56, DOI: 10.1177/0276146716641990.

At the trial's conclusion in 2015, six CHC leaders were sentenced.⁷ The judge highlighted the unique nature of this case, noting that those found guilty did not seek personal gain and genuinely believed they were fulfilling the church's mission.⁸ The court found that there was never any sinister or malicious plan by any of the six to strip the church of its funds and that the senior pastor had acted in the church's best interests, although he was still found guilty of criminal breach of trust.⁹

This highly publicized case brought embarrassment and scrutiny, leaving both church members and the public "scandalized" by the media coverage and the unfolding events. While the experience was painful and deeply humbling, CHC chose to respond with brokenness and faith, trusting that God would work all things together for good (Rom 8:28).¹⁰ Nonetheless, this case serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us that even well-intentioned missional efforts must be exercised with discernment and care—especially when scandal or public misunderstanding may arise. Perhaps further research can be done on how Pentecostals can maintain our public witness and minimise causing "scandal" or misunderstanding. When we are "scandalised"—whether justified or not—what should our posture be? And how should we treat others who are going through negative scandals?

In closing, we need to recognize Pentecost as the ongoing event of the church today. The clearest evidence of the presence of the Spirit in our witness is the outpouring of the

⁷ Tessa Wong, "Inside Singapore's City Harvest Megachurch Scandal," BBC, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34589932>.

⁸ Lim Yi Han et al., "City Harvest Trial: Kong Hee Sentenced to 8 Years in Prison, 5 Other Church Leaders Get between 21 Months and 6 Years," TheStraitsTimes, last updated April 29, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/city-harvest-trial-kong-hee-sentenced-to-8-years-in-prison-5-other-church>.

⁹ Edric Sng, "'I Am Truly Sorry': City Harvest Pastor Kong Hee," Thirst, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://thirst.sg/truly-sorry-city-harvest-pastor-kong-hee/>.

¹⁰ City Harvest Church, "Dear Church Family..." Facebook, October 20, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/cityharvestchurch/posts/10153747244519711>.

“scandalous” divine love of God,¹¹ which continues to invite us into an inclusive fellowship that transcends social, racial, and economic barriers. Perhaps Vondey can advise us on how we Asian Pentecostals can practically live out the scandalous divine love of God.

¹¹ John Haughey, *The Conspiracy of God* (Claretian Publications, 1995), 56.

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