

## Thoughts, Opinions, and Comments Related to Christianity

I trusted Christ 57 years ago this month. Walking with the Lord all this time has been thrilling; I wouldn't have wanted my life to be any different. So, to celebrate, I'm going to indulge myself and offer some views I've been harboring, for what they're worth. I offer them in the hope that they provoke deep reflection on these issues. They aren't in any order, and there's no pattern or lesson that unites them.

1. We've created a dichotomy between faith and works that I don't find in Scripture. The slogan since the Reformation has been "We're justified by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone." We're so afraid of creating a salvation by "works" that we've abandoned the notion of works altogether. I've heard theologians from all over the U.S. say that the modern American church is thoroughly antinomian. The currently popular "free grace" movement has severely exacerbated this dreadful situation. It's absolutely true that works alone are fully inadequate to save and only serve to aggrandize ourselves (Paul's argument in Ephesians 2). No one is arguing that works alone save. After all, only God can do what's necessary for anyone's salvation. But faith must be associated with works to be genuine. (It may be that early Christians misunderstood Paul's statement in Ephesians 2, as we do today, so James needed to write, "faith without works is dead," as a corrective.) Abraham believed God (that was his faith) to go to the Land and to have a son while he and his wife were too old to bear children, yet he also obeyed God (his "works"). Think about this: God Himself had to suffer humiliation and a painful death because it was necessary for atonement to be made in the real physical world, because it was necessary to actually demonstrate His love and goodness. I suspect there were other ways God could have made salvation available, but in His wisdom, there had to be a real demonstration. Likewise, there needs to be a real demonstration in this life of our faith, and we do that by submissively obeying God's Word, i.e., our "works." I see justification and sanctification as a unity. If we're truly justified, then we're regenerated, and anyone who's regenerated will do works. *Pisteuo* is an active verb; it means we do something about what we say we believe. There's more to say on this, but I think I've made my point.

2. Except for the Hasidim, modern American Jewry is totally assimilated into American culture and values. Their meetings at their synagogues have only a superficial resemblance to piety; mostly they gather to discuss politics. Is it any different in our Protestant churches? Assimilation is deadly! John calls it "worldliness." We've missed what it means to be a believer in Christ. And we're smug about our spiritual condition; we're certain we're on our way to heaven with all our sins forgiven regardless how we lead our lives. The argument of the Letter to the Hebrews is (at least in part) that Jesus' humanity was necessary for Him to demonstrate obedience. For us to be Christ-like, we too must be obedient to God's Word and fully committed to His will. Otherwise, our professions of faith, I fear, are empty and vain. Do we know what God's will for us is?

3. God created humans to serve Him by being mediators. We were to mediate between God and His created world. We were also to rule the physical world in God's stead. We were to function as priest-kings. We promptly failed in that work. God created the Nation of Israel to be mediators between Him and the Gentile world. We miss the importance of mediator-ship in the Bible. Moses was made a mediator. The monarchs of Israel and the prophets of Israel all served as mediators. Israel failed too. But the Second Adam, the ideal obedient Israel, Jesus, did not fail. The Son, the Servant of God, is the ultimate Mediator. He mediates between us, sinners, and a holy God. He mediates our access and our transport to the Father. He is our great High Priest, interceding continually for us in heaven. And He'll return to earth one day to rule in His kingly role. And we, His Body and Bride, in union with Him, are to continue His mediatorial work in the world during this era. We serve as priests, mediating God to others all around us and around the world, and mediating them to God. We do that by sharing the Gospel. Paul writes of "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God" (Romans 15:16). At the end of the Millennium, Christ will hand all His mediatorial work over to God . . . Mission accomplished! There then will be *koinonia* (fellowship) forever, no need for a mediator.

4. God gave us only certain sensory organs so we can perceive the visible, three-dimensional world we dwell in. We're thus aware of only what we can see. But there's a lot more in our world that we can't see – but it's there! So for example we have a soul, but we can't see it or feel it. God's Spirit pervades the cosmos observing everything we say and do and think. Our thoughts are real things to God! And we're surrounded by invisible beings, angels and demons. God never gave us the ability to sense these beings, but we have His revelation to know that they're there. Why is this important? If we ignore His Word, we go thru life oblivious to the influences

of demons who seek to control us. They can give us thoughts, they can distract us, they can lead us into error or sin. We belong to whom we obey and believe, and whose will we act on. We live in an exceedingly dangerous world, and we must exercise the greatest care for our soul.

5. God is truth. That means that what we know He said is truth. If we don't know He said something, whatever it is cannot be trusted or assumed to be true, because God wants us to know truth and act on it. We were given the ability to imagine lots of things, including, sadly, the idea that God speaks to us personally. Charismatics especially are guilty of this; they proudly attempt to appear super-spiritual by alleging that God speaks to them. But it's a temptation for all of us that we need to eschew. We dare not ever say that God said this or that, something that we don't really know that God said, because if we do that makes us gods if not false prophets. It makes us liars and blasphemers. Similarly, we need to be careful not to allege that God is doing this or that, when we don't (and can't) really know that to be true. We only know as truth what's in the Word. And if what's in the Word is truth, we're required to know it, to live it and to proclaim it to those who don't know it. If we don't, we're essentially denying that God's Word is truth. Worse, we're being indifferent to God Himself.

6. Why did God allow America to have so much protected liberty? It's too easy to say that our freedoms are a blessing from God. Perhaps that's so. But perhaps our freedoms are a test to see what we do with it. Will we use it to indulge in sin or use it to fulfill His will for us? Or let's ask the unthinkable: Could our liberty be from Satan? Persecution isn't his only strategy by which to attack Christians. Same with prosperity. Is it a blessing or is it a curse? Wealth may have been given to us to see how we will use it. "To whom much is given, much is required." We cannot know why we've been given so much peace, prosperity, comforts, and freedoms, but let's be careful how we live because we do know from Scripture that God tests us. Church leaders and other Christians may suppose and allege that all that we have in abundance in America is God's blessing. Beware Groupthink!

7. The Book of Genesis has a curious ending. Right near the end, Jacob says, as if it's the one great lesson he learned in his extraordinary life, "I know, I know." But . . . What does he know? Well, he knows to bless Joseph's second son as if he were the firstborn. Do we get the significance of this? What it took Jacob a lifetime to learn is this, God's ways are not our ways. And we need to know God's ways so that we can live God's ways, because to live God's ways is life. Genesis opens with a test of the first humans: Will they submit to God's knowledge and live by it, which is good and leads to life, or do they prefer other knowledge, which is evil and deadly. We can know what Jacob learned the hard way because God has given us extensive revelation of His ways. To "walk with God" is to live confidently and with commitment according to His Word. The world we inhabit is saturated with "other" knowledge, which we absorb just by growing up in it. We MUST know God's Word, reflect deeply on it, and make it our life. That's godliness. A huge problem in the West is that our otherwise pagan and worldly society has incorporated some biblical values, and we thus err grievously in supposing that because we adhere to those values, we're godly people. We need to reflect carefully on how to live and not thoughtlessly and complacently muddle along just as we have always been doing.

8. John Piper presented a paper at the 2022 Annual ETS meeting arguing that saving faith has an affective component that we've lost. And of course he's right. He was rehearsing what Jonathan Edwards taught centuries ago. But what I found appalling is that after he finished, the other theologians and church leaders there attacked him for making faith something more than mental assent. "He's front-loading the Gospel," they argued. We don't have to love Jesus to be saved? I was horrified at their failure to grasp what's so clear in Scripture. Evidently, we modern evangelicals don't know what faith is, and we don't know what the Gospel is either. We seem to have adopted an instrumental view of Christ. In our modern, self-absorbed mind-set, we see Christ as the means by which we get to heaven. Well, yes, Jesus said that's what He's there to do. But what we miss is that it occurs through a personal, loving, trusting relationship with the living, exalted Son. He's not a set of facts, He's a Person! He's the greatest reality there is. He's the most perfect, the most beautiful Person in existence. In Matthew 7, certain religious people had an instrumental view of Jesus. And Jesus said, "Depart from me. I never knew you." There was no personal relationship, so there was no salvation. To know Jesus is to love Him. And to love Him is to obey Him. And what is the Gospel? I can say it in one word. Jesus. The Gospel is everything Jesus, who He is, all that He did, what He is doing and will do, and what He wills for us. Everything Jesus.

9. God said something totally outrageous (to our pagan way of thinking) in Jeremiah 21. Jerusalem was surrounded by Babylonian troops, and the people of Judah inside were hoping God would miraculously deliver

them. Instead, God said, "Surrender!" Surrender? If they surrendered and went into exile, they would survive. But if they listened to the false prophets and remained in the city, they would suffer horribly when Nebuchadnezzar broke into the city and slaughtered everyone. So, it would be exile for those Jews who obeyed God. Exile is symbolic of death. Exile is living in the hope of resurrection. This is why when Jesus came, He went willingly into the hands of the Roman authorities and to His death. As the ideal, obedient Israel, He was fulfilling Jeremiah 21. He surrendered, He died (a figure of Exile), and He rose from the dead (which Israel also will do one future day when their exile ends and God restores them to their land and fills them with His Spirit). This is why Jesus gave us the "hard" sayings, such as, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (twice in Matthew) and "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." And this, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate . . . even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," and, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." In other words, we're to go into exile, a figure of death, along with Jesus. This is big! If we're a follower of Christ, we're to live as if in Exile. That's why Peter calls us "sojourners" or "pilgrims." It's why Paul taught a theology of weakness. This land, America, is not our own. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we're only here awaiting our resurrection and return to our real home. We need to thoughtfully form a biblical worldview and then live it.

10. Paul throws back at the Corinthian believers their assumption that it's OK to eat meat offered to idols. That's in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul isn't saying there that it's OK; he's using the rhetorical device of repeating their (wrong) belief. Then in Chapter 10, he writes what the correct understanding is: We do NOT eat meat that was offered to idols because that would be participating in pagan idolatry, which is the worship of demons. The Corinthian believers, especially those more well off, wanted to be sociable and in that pagan society, that necessarily meant eating at their pagan temples and eating there . . . What else? Meat that had been offered to idols. Paul essentially told them, suffer the loss of your sociability and people's respect for you for the sake of faithfulness to a holy God. We today don't need to deal with meat that had been offered to idols, but there are extensive idolatrous practices in our modern culture, and the discerning believer will think long and hard about participation in them. Paul knows something that we don't, which is that salvation is not merely a matter of avoiding condemnation for sins and hell. Salvation is an invitation to *koinonia* (fellowship) with the living, eternal Creator God with whom we are now reconciled. (This is why the Gospel is "good news.") So if we're in relationship with a holy God, our obsession should be to honor and please Him in every way conceivable. That means we're to be holy too. That precludes participating in any way whatsoever in demonic worship. God is engaged in a cosmic conflict with evil, and if we're on God's side, the side of good, we'll eschew any involvement in idolatry, regardless what it costs us.

11. Satan's many strategies include counterfeiting. He makes it difficult to know the real thing, thereby keeping people confused and off balance. In Jesus' parable of the weeds in Matthew 13, it's an enemy (Satan) who sows weeds in the wheat field, weeds that look just like the real wheat – until harvest time when the fruit reveals the difference. Satan's Nebuchadnezzar was an anti-David, just like in the time of the Tribulation, an anti-Christ will be a counterfeit Christ. Satan has evidently made the Western world to be civil, forgiving, kind to the disadvantaged, and expressing other biblical values so as to obscure the unique goodness of followers of Christ. Satan counterfeits goodness so the real entity is lost, diluted by the vast mass of phoniness. So unbelievers are "good people" NOT because of Christ's indwelling or their following His Word, but because of having adopted Satan's deception. Satan's persecution strategy isn't his most effective; what he's doing in the Western world is. So, what can we in the Western world do to demonstrate true goodness? Evangelism! We steal people from Satan's grip so that their changed life in response to the Gospel shows Satan to be a liar and a deceiver. Beware: America is a counterfeit Millennium.

12. I'm getting old. And my body is not as it used to be. The troubles that advanced age brings provokes me to ask, Why do we have to be embodied? And the answer isn't obvious in the Bible, but I think we can reason it out. The Son had to have a body in a real, physical world in order to fulfill His mission, to carry out God's great purposes. I suspect that God might have had other options but in His infinite wisdom, embodiment in a material world was the best. In Hebrews, we read that the Son had to learn obedience. He had to reveal to all observers true righteousness. He had to be humiliated, suffer real pain and die a real death. All that was for the purpose of defeating evil. Couldn't God have defeated evil some other way? That's unanswerable. But this is clear: In perfect wisdom, God ordained that goodness be demonstrated, just as evil is demonstrated, in real life. We live out

what's in our innermost being. We demonstrate whether we're good or evil by our actual lives. God certainly knew that Job would remain faithful to Him despite suffering great loss, yet Job had to demonstrate that faith in real life. So the best I can surmise is, we're embodied creatures purposely to demonstrate in a space and time world either good or evil, by how we live. So I cherish embodiment despite its finitude and failures because it's how God wants me to honor Him. And because a resurrection body awaits, we know that embodiment is a core, essential element in God's great purposes for His creation.

13. Peter Gentry is an expert in linguistics whose specialty is the meaning of words used in Scripture. He rejects using etymology to determine the meaning of words, but derives their meaning from how the words are used in context. He argues from his studies that holiness is really commitment, or devotion. Yes, there are the aspects of moral purity and "otherness," but they flow from the core meaning, which is commitment or dedication. So here's my suggestion why God demands holiness (Gentry's definition) of us: Thoughts are transient, evanescent. They come and go. Same with beliefs, if all beliefs are is thought. So if belief is merely a thought, it's a brief, powerless, even trivial mental experience. Even if it recurs. Commitment, in contrast, is permanent. It's demonstrable, or it doesn't exist. It's an act of the will (not merely of the mind) that exerts on-going control of the mind and of the life. It demands personal sacrifice. And commitment engages us in a personal relationship, something that thoughts are incapable of doing. Commitment is why discipleship is essential for a believer. Hey! What makes a marriage successful? Commitment. So salvation is like being married to Christ. That's holiness.

14. We don't have good ecclesiology. We basically have a somewhat modified form of the corrupted Roman Catholic understanding of church that derived from Constantine. So we miss a lot that's biblical. Church meetings are not supposed to be for "worship" (as we moderns define it), but for mutual edification, encouragement, helping each other with needs and other expressions of love for each other. Fellowship, in other words. It is to be proleptic of the fellowship of our future existence together in glory. We're to glorify God in community by mutual love and care. We don't practice discipleship in our modern churches (although it probably occurs to a degree in Bible colleges). Our churches are essentially just preaching points. All we want is to attend, listen, and then get on with our lives. We don't do catechism for new believers as the early church did, so most believers today, even in evangelical churches, are sadly ignorant of core doctrines. Baptism has rich significance, including that it should be regarded as an oath of allegiance to Christ; it's not just a ritual we need to practice because the Bible says so. It's a public declaration of a decision to dedicate one's life to Christ and His will and His purposes. The Lord's Supper serves as a renewing of that oath while also affirming the Return of Christ to earth in glory to establish His Kingdom. It's more than just a "memorial." OK, so what then is worship? It's loving God, serving God, obeying God, trusting God, being loyal to God, and being like God (that is, godly). And loving others as we've been commanded to do. Worship is personal self-sacrifice out of love and gratitude to God for His grace. It's how we live every day, honoring God for who He is and all that He did and will do for us. There's no such thing as a "worship service."

15. Romans 13 is a difficult chapter dealing with a difficult subject, our attitude toward government. Didn't Paul know that Nero was wicked and would have his head chopped off? How can we submit to a government that demands we have liberty to kill pre-born babies? Let's understand two things about this chapter: It is universal yet it has its limitations. Thus, we must affirm that government was ordained by God to maintain order within society. The pre-Flood people must have been uncivilized, violent, rebellious and their society chaotic, and God won't allow that again. But God's permissive will gives us . . . wicked rulers. So we submit to governing authorities, even if they are corrupt and cruel and fully intend our death. Paul certainly knew from Daniel and other Scriptures that those authorities are corrupt, all of them. He understood that we're in the Times of the Gentiles, not the Millennium. In this era of the rejected, suffering Servant, with whom we identify, we're to embrace and live out Paul's theology of weakness, laid out in 2 Corinthians. Yet, this chapter is not a comprehensive treatise regarding the relationship of believers to government. It's an example of how a renewed mind (12:1-2) will submit to authority, and it was especially relevant to the church at Rome that unjustly got thrown out because of certain disorderly unbelieving Jews in the city. We are to disobey government in certain situations according to other Scriptures and the exercise of wisdom. As our American governments become progressively more anti-theistic, we'll have to develop great discernment as to when disobedience is necessary. But let's keep in mind that Christ submitted to governing authorities, wicked ones, and if we're Christ-like, we'll do the same, trusting God either to protect us or vindicate us.