

Christianity in Name Only

Christianity is not a set of convictions. It's not an intellectual pursuit. It's not being religious. Something very obviously is wrong in today's evangelicalism. Our "worship" is mainly entertainment. Our day-to-day lives are inconsistent with our theology. Our beliefs are sincerely held, but they are impotent, having no power to transform our character (if we even think that our character needs to be changed). Forgiving the offenses of others is cheap talk, not reality; that's because forgiveness is an aspect of love, and love of others—biblical love—doesn't really exist. Evangelistic zeal has almost totally vanished, as has any notion that life is purposeful. The contemplation of God and meditation on the Word of God interests but a few. There seems to be scant difference between how professing Christians live and the lives of their unbelieving neighbors. Something very basic is very wrong.

What's wrong? I suggest that part of the problem (but only part) is modernity. We have a secular and materialistic worldview so deeply embedded in our minds that we can't conceive of a life in pursuit of biblical godliness. The Bible seems out-dated, alien to us; so that however much we honor it, we really find it irrelevant, superfluous to life today. Our modern society is so advanced with inventions and technology, with ease and comforts, with fully engrossing interests and with narcissistic culture that a fulfilling life can be had without need for anything from the distant past, especially something that's invisible and intangible. Yes, we hold to certain propositional truths regarding salvation, but we suppress or ignore anything beyond that. A "pre-modern" worldview is simply inconceivable to us today. But it's worse.

Modern American "Christianity" (if we can call it that) is love-less. Biblical love always sacrifices self for the sake of the one loved. Always. Obedience was added to the relationship between God and humanity as an element of self-sacrifice (and commitment), a component of love. Loss-less love is an oxymoron. Love-less salvation is also an oxymoron. Belief without love is an oxymoron too, as is belief without obedience or other form of personal sacrifice (such as suffering persecution, doing acts of righteousness, serving Christ, and more). Self-sacrifice as a necessary element of love is the reason Jesus requires self-denial of His followers. Today's evangelicalism knows nothing of this kind of love. American Christians suppose their God is some indulgent, avuncular deity, someone who smiles on them as they live as they please, indifferent to any demands or responsibilities. We love God because He first loved us, but the converse is also true: The God of the Bible rejects His people if they reject Him. Indifference to God's will is really a rejection of God. If we quench or grieve the Holy Spirit, His presence is no longer experienced; in American Christianity, no one even realizes He's missing.

We were created to reveal, in a physical, time-and-space world, the glory of the invisible God. That's the reason for the "imago dei." Salvation makes it possible for fallen, sinful man to do that. Salvation is not an end in itself. We were also made to receive God's love and blessing, but that is conditioned on love for Him. That's love that is expressed in obedience. To fulfill our creational purposes we must be humble before our Creator. The will to be autonomous and disobedient are expressions of pride. Proud people cannot love God, cannot experience God's love and the blessings of salvation, and they cannot glorify God. The humble recipient of salvation, in contrast, lovingly transforms into the kind of person who can glorify God. How does that happen?

The Son came to glorify God. How? By expressing humility, righteousness, obedience to God's Word, trust in God, and self-sacrificing love. He was committed to God full time; His purpose in life was serving God according to His will. If we identify with the Son, His character must become our character, and our desire likewise is to reveal God's glory the same way He did.

The Old Testament screams at us a warning: How we respond to God's initiatives determines His attitude toward us. It's everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. For just one example, in 1 Kings Chapter 8, God sovereignly chose to dwell with His people in the Temple that Solomon built. But maintenance of that presence depended on the faithfulness and sanctity of the people. If the people were to reject Him, He would reject His people. And that's exactly what eventually happened! They were cast into exile, and that's where they remain now and until Christ returns.

And it's in the New Testament as well. Paul warned the believers at Rome that, in view of all that God had done for them in Christ, they were to respond with self-sacrificing love for God. **"Behold the kindness and severity of God, severity to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off"** (11:22), he wrote. *Severity!* The NIV translation uses sternness instead of severity. This was directed to believers! What God had done to His people of Israel, the church was also vulnerable to. We *must* respond to what God does for us, in the way He expects and has revealed. It's God's will that we obey Christ, and be sanctified, and that we serve Him and bear fruit. The author of the Book of Hebrews likewise warns believers: Press on to maturity, or else! The Book of Revelation closes with a dire warning: The prohibition on adding to or taking away from the Words of Christ, an allusion to Deuteronomy 4:1-2, means we're to be faithful and obedient and not to ignore the message of Christ to the churches. The Book of Revelation is not something to be decoded but to be obeyed, or else. Why?

We need to understand something fundamental. Honor, love, loyalty, commitment and gratitude—all that we owe God—are concepts. They are abstract ideas. Obedience and self-sacrifice, however, make those concepts a tangible reality. The Son had to condescendingly come to earth and suffer humiliation and death so as to express God's love. Love has to be manifest in the real, physical world. We too must manifest honor, love, gratitude, etc, with obedience and self-sacrifice, with Christ-likeness, with holiness . . . with all that's revealed in the Word. That's how God's creation works.

"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). The invitation to intimacy with God thru Jesus is open to all, always. We need to repent of indifference, of smugness, of presuming on God, of trusting in church attendance, of distracting interests, and of lots more. If we're sincere in wanting the kind of relationship on offer in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit will create a new man in us. Radical change will occur, and a desire will be ignited to know Jesus and to do His will. It'll be like life from the dead.

We easily miss what's big, *really* big, although it's right before our eyes. God exists. And He has revealed His will for us. And Christ Jesus redeemed us, rose from the dead and lives today. These are the very great realities of this world. So they must control how we think, how we value things, how we live, because the implications and consequences of these realities are enormous. Unbelievers don't care, that's their folly. But what about us, believers? Why can't we grasp how these realities must determine all of life? Let Paul help: **"You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God . . . "** (1 Corinthians 6:20). As Creator, God owns us. Jesus has an even more compelling claim on us. We're not free to live as we please but in light of these great realities.

Dear reader: If we're not so complacent with the form of religion known popularly as Christianity that we'd refuse to gamble with our soul, we'll heed the warnings in Scripture, take the Word of God seriously, and follow Christ as God expects. The motive for such deep commitment is love for Jesus and gratitude to Him for all He's done. We really, really need to be faithful. Now.