

THE CRISIS OF A CHRISTLESS CHRISTIANITY

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"As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him. beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And you are complete in Him." (Colossians 2:6,8,9a)

The Christian life is a life that is lived IN CHRIST. That is to say, to walk IN HIM is to live as a Christian. Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship. A Christian is a branch that grows out of the Vine and continually produces abundant fruit for the Husbandman. The Church is the gathering together of all individual branches into one Vineyard (see John 15). In this metaphor we see that Christianity is supposed to be a living phenomenon, an observable reality, not a religious philosophy or set of teachings.

As we first received the Lord Jesus, so we continue to walk in the Lord Jesus. Receiving Christ is the Gate, but walking in Him as we have received Him is the Path. The Gate is an event, while the Path is a process. The Gate is for entering, while the Path is for walking.

Everything God has done, is doing, and will do is aimed at bringing us deeper into Christ, to finish what was begun in us when we first received Him. God is the One Who brings us through the Gate, and God is the One Who leads us along the Path. Everything God has done, is doing, and will do has the same purpose, and that purpose explains everything you have been through, everything you are going through, and everything you will go through.

Jesus is the Alpha from Whom all things in God are initiated, and Jesus is the Omega unto Whom all things of God find their purpose, their meaning, and their reason for being. Everything begins in Christ, and everything ends in Christ. He is the Beginning as well as the End.

Real spiritual growth occurs when we realize that God has only one goal for us, and that is, the full, mature, complete, and experiential knowledge of Jesus Christ. To the extent that we discard "things" and become focused wholly on Christ, to that extent we will make progress.

THE CHALLENGE OF REMAINING CHRIST-CENTERED

Christians should walk in the Lord Jesus as they received Him. We must not allow anything to keep us from growing up in to Him. Spiritual growth in the life of a Christian is determined by the measure of the increase of Christ and the decrease of Self: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). It is not a question of gifts, knowledge, years of experience, or power. If by the end of today there is less of me and more of Jesus then I am growing. Otherwise I am not. Jesus must become greater and greater in my life, and I must become lesser and lesser. This is the Path.

Along this Path towards apprehending Christ as all in all there are many pitfalls, snares, hindrances, and detours. Thus, Paul says we are to be on our guard and let no man spoil us. In this context, the word "spoil" means, "to destroy and strip of one's possessions; to deprive of something valuable by force." Every spiritual blessing heaven has to offer is found in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Each believer has an incredible fullness and completeness in the Person of Jesus Christ. Christ is THE Gift of God, the ultimate Gift, and this Gift is precious, valuable, and of great worth.

How then can we be spoiled? According to Paul we are spoiled "through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments (elements) of the world, and not after Christ." It matters not if the philosophy is good, right, morally excellent, and praiseworthy. It matters not how well intentioned, meaningful, or helpful the tradition is. It matters not how necessary we think the worldly element to be, or how important it is to society in general. If none of these things are "after Christ", that is, if they are not of Him, through Him, and unto Him, then they are worthless insofar as God's Purpose is concerned and must be discarded.

This is what Paul alludes to in Philippians 3. Paul represents the very best that religion, philosophy, and tradition has to offer – education, gravity, intelligence, doctrine, zeal, community service, and so on. "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (v. 7,8). To be able to sweep aside all religious upbringing, moral philosophy, and tradition with one wave of the hand and consider it refuse is to know Jesus experientially as Enough. This is what it means to be decreased. God's Purpose for all believers is to be reduced to Christ, and everything is working to bring us to this final conclusion: "not I, but Christ" (Galatians 2:20ff).

The apostolic letters that make up a significant portion of our New Testament, more than anything else, seek to redirect the saints back onto Christ and away from a myriad of things seeking to rob them of their time, energy, attention, focus, and spiritual devotion. Many things competed with Christ and tried to spoil these new believers. These distractions were abundant in the early Church. They became entangled in many things. The whole controversy of Jews and Gentiles; to be circumcised, or not to be circumcised; to marry, or to remain single; to keep the Sabbath, or not to keep the Sabbath; which foods to eat, and which foods not to eat; whether one should follow Peter, or Paul, or Apollos; to speak in tongues, or not to speak in tongues; how men should behave, and how women should behave; what about this, and what about that. On and on it went, and on and on it still goes today. I have said many times that we do not need more of the Lord, since we are already complete in Christ – we just need less of everything else. There are many things that spoil, hinder, distract, and lead us away from the simplicity of an abiding relationship with Jesus. Many of them are spiritual and religious. The spirit of Antichrist is not necessarily seen in something that is obviously satanic or demonic. Instead, the spirit of Antichrist is revealed in anything that seeks to spoil us by taking our eyes off of Christ – it is anti-Christ, against Christ, antithetical to the great Purpose of God.

How easy it is for us to become distracted into something less than Christ! Are you centered on Christ? Is Jesus your obsession? Is He your focus? Or have you set your sights on something beneath Him? This speaks right to the heart of the crisis we find ourselves in today.

CHRISTLESS EVANGELISM

The crisis of Christless Christianity begins with the way we go about reaching the Lost. Jesus said if He is lifted up then He will draw all men to Himself (John 12:32). Instead, we lift up religion and draw all men into an institution. Sinners today are presented with a Gospel that is decidedly in their favor. It is marketed and packaged the same way a salesman makes a sales pitch: it must answer the all important, universal question: "What's in it for me?" And the answer is salvation, the assurance of a home in heaven, deliverance, solutions to problems, peace, blessings from God, and so forth.

The death of Christianity will not be the result of everyone rejecting the Gospel, but the result of everyone accepting a watered-down version of it.

All too often the object of salvation, its very purpose, is overlooked. Why should a sinner repent? Not for what he or she can get out of it, but for what the Lord Jesus gets out of it. Do we reach out to the world based on their own self-serving need, or based on the Lord's Need? The harvest is for the Lord, not for the workers, and not for the ones who are harvested. The sheep are for the Shepherd.

A sinner ought to repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand. They should be shown that God is gathering together in one “all things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10ff), that this is God’s Purpose for all men, and that yielding to Him now is the only reasonable, logical, and life-saving alternative they have. But an easy Gospel begets easy disciples. If our message is easy then many will respond under the impression that they are doing God a big favor by “getting saved”. Thus, God becomes their debtor, and they expect Him to repay them many times over, not merely with a future promise of life in heaven, but with good things for them in their present life on earth. Is it any wonder that the Church is spiritually weak and immature, with “disciples” such as this? Christless evangelism does not give anyone salvation, it only gives them the false assurance of salvation. The Church is supposed to make disciples for Christ, not record decisions for Christ. A decision does not necessarily make a disciple. Christ must be the object and the focus of all outreach.

CHRISTLESS APOSTLES AND PROPHETS

What is “the ministry”? According to the Scriptures, there is but one ministry, and that is the ministry of directing everyone to Christ as all in all. Now how this ministry functions in each one of us is different according to how God has placed us. There are many operations and many functions, many gifts and many manifestations, but there is only one goal and that goal is Christ. For example, the purpose of the apostolic ministry is not church planting, or setting churches in order, or taking missionary journeys. The purpose is Christ. Now, they may DO those things.

We are not suggesting that Paul did not do all these things; we are simply saying that Paul’s purpose was Christ, and towards that end he labored accordingly. Without God’s End in clear view, all these things become mere activities, religious carryings-on, but there is nothing ultimate about it, nothing that ties it all together or justifies it in terms of furthering God’s Purpose. I have my little work, you have your little work, but there is no harmony, no communion, no relatedness between any of several million projects, ministries, and outreaches. Each one struggles to achieve their own ends, and there is little if any agreement on what exactly that “end” is supposed to be.

The apostle communicates the ultimate Purpose of God, lays the foundation, and then keeps the End before the builders at all times. But many of today’s apostles seem to be presenting themselves as church planting or church growth experts. Is this what the apostolic ministry is becoming? Church growth is not God’s goal. Church planting is not His purpose either. These are merely things: they are not Christ. You can plant churches and grow churches and completely miss Jesus in all of it.

What about the prophetic ministry? The purpose of all prophetic speaking is Christ. “It is the truth concerning JESUS that inspires all prophecy” (Revelation 19:10b, Knox). Those inspired to speak or proclaim something by the Holy Spirit should be helping to direct our attention onto Christ and away from everything that distracts us. The prophetic voice should rise up like a trumpet and bring clarity and direction out of confusion and misunderstanding.

The prophetic word is given to point us to Jesus. Everything the Holy Spirit would speak, reveal, teach, and show us is towards this same end, which is CHRIST. We do not need to mull over every dream, vision, word, or prophecy, trying to exegete its hidden meaning, struggling to extract some spiritual significance where none exists. If what we see and hear does not point us to Jesus then it is not prophetic and should be discarded. This simple test will keep us from distraction.

Apostles must point people to Christ. Prophets must point people to Christ. Evangelists must point people to Christ. Pastors and teachers must point people to Christ. Otherwise they are not fulfilling the purpose for which God placed them in the Church to begin with. Apostolic ministry is not an end unto itself, but is a means to an end. Prophetic ministry is not an end unto itself, but is a means to an end. Evangelistic ministry is not an end unto itself, but is a means to an end. Pastoral and teaching ministries are not ends unto themselves, but are a means to an end. What is the end? What is the purpose? What does it all lead to? It leads to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13b). The fullness of Christ, the full-knowledge of Him – this is God’s Goal and His Ultimate Intention.

CHRISTLESS FELLOWSHIP

We know by now that the actual church building has nothing to do with God’s Eternal Purpose. The church service

is a thing created by us and for us – God’s Need is seldom, if ever, considered. If we recognize that the service, ministry, meeting, gathering, or building is not the end, but only a means to an End (which is Christ), then we do well. But when we attach spiritual, emotional, or even superstitious significance to a mere thing, or place, or day, or tradition, or way of doing things, then we will be spoiled through “traditions of men”, and will not walk after Christ Himself.

Even something as good as fellowship with other believers becomes such a distraction from Christ that He cannot trust us with relationships. We hunger and thirst for “like-minded believers”, which is sometimes a code word for “anyone who thinks and believes the same as I do and will always agree with me no matter what!” The end result is we seldom find what we are looking for in other people.

Christians go here and there looking for “fellowship”. They participate in meetings, conferences, seminars, groups, and online discussion lists and email exchanges. To be sure these can be useful tools for bringing Christians together -but not if they are looking for fellowship as a “thing”, instead of the fruit of a Christ-centered life.

If fellowship with others is my focus then I am bypassing the Head and trying to have fellowship on some ground other than Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that “what we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.” (I John 1:3,7a).

Fellowship is ordained by God as a means through which the Life of Jesus may be shared: “From Whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, making increase of the body towards the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16). In other words, we are joined together to experience the Life of the Lord together. This is what makes us of one mind and one accord. Like-mindedness only occurs when we agree to “let this mind be in [us] that was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Life is not in a meeting, or in a gathering, or in a way of doing things – Life is Christ, and Christ is Life. He is the Purpose.

So true fellowship is grounded in Jesus first of all. Fellowship with others on THAT basis is neither forced, nor orchestrated; it is effortless, spontaneous, and full of life. Fellowship naturally occurs because we have all seen and heard the same thing from the Lord – we are walking in the same Path towards Christ as all in all. We are in one accord not because we all look, think, and act just the same, but because we all, in spite of our differences, have God’s End in mind.

If we look to one another for fellowship apart from what we have seen and heard of the Lord then we are limiting ourselves to relationships with people with whom we naturally get along with. If we see fellowship as the reason for our existence as Christians then, ironically, we will never be satisfied. We cannot know one another according to the flesh and find contentment. We cannot properly discern the Body until we establish communion with its Head. Life is given and received as we stand with one another in relationship to Christ.

CHRISTLESS SPIRITUALITY

What is the “deeper Christian life”? It is nothing more and nothing less than Christ Himself. To be deep is to be simple, focused, and devoted to the One Thing that is needed (see Luke 10:41,42). But even here, some believers seek the deeper Christian life as a thing, a teaching, a certain way of acting spiritual. The “deeper life” becomes the goal instead of Christ as Life. They become profoundly mystical and spiritual, but it is death because they do not touch Christ, they touch spirituality. There is no life in spirituality, or mysticism, or religiosity; there is only Life in Christ. Anything less becomes a distraction.

I came to the Lord in the midst of the Charismatic movement. The emphasis was on Spirit-filled living, restoring spiritual gifts, the power of God, and so forth. We find no fault with walking in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. But what is the purpose of all this fullness? Why tongues, and prophetic words, and other spiritual gifts? Why the manifest power of God? All of these things are given us by the Lord to draw us deeper into Himself; to repeat, they

are means to an End, but they are not the end, for the End, the Purpose, and the Reason for all things is Christ.

”When He, the Spirit of Truth is come, He will guide you into all Truth [Christ]: for He shall not speak of Himself. He will glorify Me, for He will receive from Me, and will reveal it to you” (John 16:13,14ff). All the gifts, all the power, all the counsel, everything pertaining to the Holy Spirit has the goal of bringing us into a more complete knowing of Jesus Christ. Everything must be in harmony with this.

But just see how the experience of being “filled” or “baptized” or “anointed” or “slain in the Spirit” has replaced Christ! What is the result? Excess, error, and a falling away into the flesh. Today we see only a shadow of what we once saw. How many “Full-Gospel” believers are still living off of the glory that they saw twenty-five years ago! They are still looking for an experience, but if God gives it to them, it is a step backwards. They have not grown one bit; they are simply coasting on the energy of what God as doing twenty or thirty years ago.

It is time for us to leave elementary school and go on to maturity. “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man I put away childish things” (I Corinthians 13: 11). The Lord has a high calling for us, and we are called to “go on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1ff). The spiritual life begins in Christ, is sustained by Christ, and leads us to Christ. We may begin by having some profound spiritual experiences, but maturity is certainly not achieved through them.

CHRISTLESS WARFARE

Out of the Charismatic movement came an intense interest in spiritual warfare. Here is yet another potential distraction from Christ. What is spiritual warfare? It should be the process of demonstrating the preeminence of Christ over all things. It should be bringing all things into conformity to God’s Ultimate Intention and showing that Christ is the Head of all principality and power. It should be learning how to defeat the dragon by the blood of the Lamb, the word of our testimony, and the denial of Self (cf. Revelation 12:11).X Instead, spiritual warfare has become a weird end unto itself, and Jesus is scarcely seen. The revelation of Christ is seldom found; instead, we are often told to seek the revelation of satan and all his workings. Saints are kept occupied day and night fighting the devil (sometimes only in their imagination), or traveling all over the world to “confront” territorial spirits (which only proves they are warring after the flesh, for there is no distance in the spirit realm), intruding into things they have no business getting into. The backlash is swift and the damage is severe. Why? They have grasped spiritual warfare as a “thing” apart from Christ.

True, we cannot afford to be ignorant of satan’s devices (II Corinthians 2:11b), but neither can we afford to make darkness the focus of our lives. Our focus is not the devil, what the devil is doing, or what the devil is planning to do. Our focus is Christ, and to the extent that we walk in the Light, to that extent the Darkness will be exposed by the Light and will flee.X Victory is not the result of everything we know about spiritual warfare: Victory is a Man. All the formulas, methods, teachings, manuals, and books in the world will not sufficiently prepare us for demonstrating the preeminence of Christ over all things if we do not, in fact, have an abiding relationship with the One Whom we are proclaiming.

What is the focus? Spiritual warfare, or Christ Himself? The first is a thing, the second is a Person. Spiritual warfare, properly carried out, is harmonious with God’s Purpose because it exalts Christ (not the devil) and demonstrates that all things are submitted to Him. But without this foundation we are inviting disaster.

RESTORING CHRIST TO CHRISTIANITY

We are trying to get to the heart of things, down to the very root of these matters. The bottom line is there are many things that are ABOUT Jesus, but are NOT Jesus. Then there is Jesus Himself. When the things about Christ become more important than Christ Himself then we need to revisit who we are and what we are doing.

We live in the Laodicean age that is characterized by insipid lukewarmness and blindness to the truth of our own spiritual condition (cf. Revelation 3:1-19). The picture presented to us is one of Christ standing on the outside of things, knocking at the door, and waiting for someone to open the door to Him (cf. Revelation 3:20). Since this is

written to the saints it cannot be construed as an invitation to sinners to “invite Jesus into their heart”; instead, it is the Lord calling upon the church to make Him the center again. The issue was, and still is fellowship, communion, and abiding – maintaining its relationship to the Head.

God’s solution for a lukewarm, tasteless, colorless, odorless church is a fresh revelation of Jesus Christ. He will bring us back to our foundation. He will align us with His Purpose. He will adjust us back to Himself. God will purge, refine, chasten, and conform us to the image of His Son. But we must respond to His invitation and open the door.

O Christian, come back to Christ! Simplify your life, eliminate the “many things”, count them as dung, and cling to the One Thing! Be reduced to Christ!

The Lord says, “To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne” (Revelation 3:21).

Amen! Even so, come Lord Jesus.

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