

The Sad Reason So Many Christians Place Their Hope in This False Security

Growing up in the church has given me a beautiful foundation to learn about life lived for other people. It has taught me a great deal about how our lives are riddled with meaning and purpose, rather than the chaos and turmoil that threaten to define our days. But I also believe it set me up to learn a twisted perspective on hope.

The hope I learned was based in all the good things God was going to do for me, as long as I kept doing right things. Being a Christian was about doing good things, and not doing the bad things. Unfortunately, I have never been able to be that cut and dried about my behavior. Some things I've done are super good, and others, well, not so good. Some of my motives have been pure, and others have been muddier. So where did that leave me? It left me trying to figure out what I needed to do to make God happy with me. Which meant reading the Bible, getting super-duper involved at my church, avoiding all the fun things people I knew at school were doing, and most importantly, smiling really big. My smile, my inner joy, would be what would draw people to me and make them wonder what was that "something special" about me. That's when I'd get to talk about Jesus and tell them how great their life could be, as well.

I got really good at being good. But my big problem was that I never completely believed this Christian stuff myself, because I never felt like it was working for me—even while it appeared to be working for all the happy, firm-handshaking people at church. I wanted it to work so badly for me. I justified my disappointment by thinking I wasn't supposed to be living for any level of joy in this temporal life, but merely for the

eternal next. I wanted my relationship with Jesus to be the most amazing thing that it was advertised to be. I wanted the joy and good hairstyles I saw the religious people on television had. I wanted to have it all together. But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't get it all together. I didn't have all the answers. I wasn't happy all the time. And I spent most of my life afraid that somebody would find out.

So I went to more Bible studies, more retreats, conferences, listened to more Christian music. I sang in front of the church. I sang with a tie on. But still something wasn't connecting.

It always looked like other people had it all figured out. They were happy as they conversed over coffee in the lobby. They were great with eye contact and firm handshakes. Then I'd hear stuff about them outside of church and my stomach would turn. I rarely took the chance to be honest with anyone in leadership at church, knowing that honesty could put you on the prayer list before you got in the car. It could also disqualify you from sharing your musical talents or future leadership opportunities. *Just keep it inside, keep smiling and keep hoping people see Jesus*, I'd think to myself.

Being raised with "God as a gumball machine" mentality has held me back from fully understanding the truth of what it means to live with hope. I put a quarter in—with a prayer, a memorized verse or an act of selfless service—and then expected God to give me what I wanted. But having expectations of how God should act will always lead to disappointment.

The message I kept hearing was that the problem is not with God, it's with me. If I just did more, tried harder, read more, memorized more, gave more, served more—maybe that would be the answer! These activities kept me busy, yes. But it simply left me exhausted, feeling as though the intimacy I was craving would always be unattainable.

Fortunately, I woke up one day and realized my best intentions had turned me into a depressed, fear-driven, score-keeping, self-righteous man, living in glass-bubble isolation, lacking compassion and any idea of what grace was all about. Attractive, right?

But instead of leaving the arena, I decided to search for the meaning underneath it all, to enter the maze underneath all the memorized rhetoric and dogma, and hopefully, reach the center, the epicenter of the Christian life.

I was determined to find the answer to this important question:

What is the core of the gospel message?

I landed on the simple, four-letter word “hope”—for some, an overused buzzword to keep people looking forward with optimism. I want to reclaim this word as the true anchor for our souls—something tangible we can dive into and make our own. For me, it doesn’t take much to feel hopelessness. But it’s this very hopelessness that gives me the hunger for hope. This hunger has taken me on an extensive study of hope—I could probably qualify for my doctorate in hope.

By going on this journey and sharing it with others, I’ve found so many people who also want to go on this journey. Whether you are someone who’s in church every Sunday or someone who never attends a service, we all have a similar longing for hope, meaning, and purpose.

A warning: This journey is potentially more difficult for people who have always been in church who are wanting to find a way to step outside the confines of expectations and instruction they’ve had ingrained their whole lives. This has been the case for me. It’s as if we’ve become well-intentioned learners of what to believe, that the concept of how to let our faith and beliefs be lived out has been lost in a tangle of worship and sin management. Many people haven’t any idea

how a relationship with God should transform our lives or our perspective on life, or how a life with God actually is what we need to get through these difficult days. Not just to survive, but to thrive and flourish.

Next time, we will think about hope in a tangible way and uncover some interesting ways we can live hope to the world through our words and actions. {eoa}

Mark Smeby is a Nashville-based author/musician/speaker who is all about hope—creating products, resources and live events all focused around the topic of hope. His Live Hope Minute one-year devotional is available for order through and all major online retailers. The “Live Hope Minute” radio feature, nationally-syndicated on 250 radio outlets in US and Canada is also now available as a free mobile application for both Apple and Android devices, in addition to its availability as a podcast through Apple Podcasts and iHeartRadio. Enter to receive a free copy of the Live Hope Minute devotional and get a free sample of the book, by texting LIVE to 54900 (messaging rates may apply). More information about Mark and his projects can be found at , , or