

True Faith Looks to God

Perhaps the struggles we endure in trying to live for Christ are due to our faulty understanding of Christianity

All the defects of the faith of many people in our day can be traced to a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the foundational doctrines of the faith they profess: the true state of human nature, the truth of what Christ accomplished on the cross and the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit. Here is the watershed between nominal Christians and those who truly practice the faith that Christ came to make possible. The difference is so critical that I will attempt to further illustrate the problem.

Many people give no serious consideration to Christ and spend their lives drifting along with the culture's ideas of the good life. Then, through some circumstance, these people experience a wake-up call about their faith.

Maybe they have contracted a serious illness or experienced the sense of loss that comes when a friend or loved one dies. It could be that they experienced a reversal of fortune that awakened them to the reality of the precarious nature of life.

Whatever the reason, they begin to look for some source of meaning in their lives that will give them a more stable foundation. In their search, they become aware that they have offended God by the way they have lived. With this sense in their minds, they set out on a course of personal reformation.

The issue of Cultural religion Right at this point we see the tragedy of the common understanding of cultural Christianity. These men and women might desire to change, but they don't have any understanding of what their real problem is or of the only solution that is able to address it.

They might be aware that they need to make some changes in

their behavior and give up something they are doing, and they might even have the idea that they should get involved in religion.

But lacking a sense of the radical problem of spiritual death and the knowledge of the solution for this condition, which only the work of Christ provides, they attempt to fix things by means that never work.

It is not unusual for these men and women to fall back into the habits they were previously enslaved by and to deceive themselves into thinking that the small changes in behavior they have made have fixed the problem. They might even assume that what they have done makes them Christians.

It doesn't take long for them to realize, however, that at some level their performance does not match the standard Christ has set for His followers. Unable to hit the mark, they tend to lower the standard. Once they have reached a place where their behavior meets the new requirements or vice versa, they settle into a state of contented complacency regarding the issues of authentic faith.

Others go further than this. If they have come to grips with some sense of the coming judgment and the serious business of sin, they strive with all their effort to correct their behavior. Over and over, they fail to meet the standard that they sense they must reach.

Finally, in total frustration they simply give up and quit trying. Sometimes in their despair, they give in to the former temptations, seeking some kind of comfort from the very actions that have led to their sense of defeat.

Or, again out of despair, they might attempt to change their thinking and argue against the demands of authentic faith, never really believing what they are arguing about. These are men and women who are pursuing the right goal but have mistaken the way it can be accomplished. The path they are now

pursuing is not the one made possible by the work of Christ and will not lead them to the life they are desiring nor the peace they crave.

They may turn to ministers and counselors for help with their spiritual instruction. If these helpers have embraced the prevailing religious system in our country, they will lead those in need astray by assuring them that as long as they try to do the right thing, they have nothing to worry about.

These ministers and counselors might even teach those in need of instruction that they don't need to worry because Christ has died for their sins. They actually reinforce the faulty thinking that all their counselees need to do is give it their best effort and trust that everything will come out all right in the end.

But what they really need is to take seriously what the Bible and the church say to those who find themselves in this dilemma. They need to study and grasp the entire foundation of their confessed faith.

This would include recognizing that the awareness of their problem and their desire to do something about it are gifts from God to get them started on their spiritual journeys. In response to this awareness, they are instructed to bow before the cross of Christ in true repentance and, turning from sin, place all their hope and confidence in the grace of God and the work of Christ to get them on the right track.

Believing in Jesus means we personally accept His work on our behalf and open our lives to His indwelling presence by the Holy Spirit. Those who are not familiar with the teachings of the Bible must come to terms with the statement that they are required to "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31, NKJV).

Submission and dependence are the appropriate responses to the teaching of Jesus: "'Remain in Me, and I will remain in you.

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me'" (John 15:4, NIV).

All of it is a gift. As Paul says in the letter to the church in Ephesus, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

This is the central truth on which all authentic Christianity rests. You cannot work your way to heaven. You cannot do anything to earn the grace or forgiveness of God. Your good behavior does not balance out the guilt of your sin.

The great distinction between Christianity and cultural religion is that cultural religion believes all these things can be obtained by our own efforts. True Christianity is looking for something much greater.

Authentic Christianity

True Christians look to God to restore the image of God to their souls but know that this is not something they are able to accomplish. All their hopes of attaining this rest on total reliance on the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell them when they open their lives to Jesus Christ.

Notice the critical order here. Our change of behavior does not precede our reconciliation to God and somehow become the cause of God's favor; it follows our coming into relationship with God and is its effect!

It is by faith in Christ only that a man or woman is made right in the sight of God; is delivered from God's judgment and the hold of Satan; is adopted into the family of God; becomes an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ, entitled to all the privileges that belong to this high relation; is partially renewed to the image of the Creator in this life; and is totally renewed to the perfect likeness of Christ in

the life to come, when we will experience God's eternal glory and love forever.

Having entered into this relationship, the true Christian then seeks to grow in his or her spiritual life by studying the Bible in order to understand the doctrines of the faith. In studying and contemplating the life of Christ, the true Christian attempts to model his or her behavior after that of Jesus.

It is the neglect of study of the Bible and reflection on the life of Christ that is at the heart of the practical errors of the majority of confessing Christians. Mere morality is dwarfish compared to the results of true faith. Morality as an answer to the pitiful state of the human condition reveals a total misunderstanding of the enormous problem of the fallen human condition.

This is a problem so massive that God gave His Son to die on the cross to solve it. When we think we can atone for our sin by becoming good, it is like a slap in the face of Christ. The cold sense of obligation and the grudging attitude of any act of service that accompanies cultural Christianity is completely inconsistent with the fact that a true Christian "is the temple of the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 6:19, KJV) and that our response to Christ is to demonstrate that we have been "delivered...from the power of darkness, and...translated...into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col. 1:13).

All our behavior, as those who have entered into this union with Christ, is to flow from these biblical truths. These truths are to motivate us to serve God with joy, thankfulness and love. We are to be a people who live with the experience of eternal gratitude.

If we are going to walk worthy of Christ, we have to practice one central discipline. As the writer of Hebrews exhorts, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus. We are to run our race looking

unto Jesus as our motivation.

This is the key. If we do this one thing, we will be unable to treat our faith in the superficial way most cultural Christians do in our time.

In looking unto Jesus, we:

- realize how logical it is to make an unconditional surrender of our total beings to the will and service of God
- see how hateful sin is to the perfect holiness of God
- grow in the love of God and receive the motivation to treat our fellow man with compassion
- become more humble
- develop the attitude that is required to be a true servant of Christ on Earth
- learn to live by faith.

To the men and women who possess authentic faith in Jesus Christ, the core truths of the gospel are the center of gravity toward which all of life is in motion. They are the origin of all that is excellent and lovely and the source of light and life.

The human mind cannot reason to these conclusions. But when you read the Gospels, your eyes are unveiled and you can see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). And as we behold His glory, we are transformed so that we can reflect His glory in all we do and in all we are (see 2 Cor. 3:18).

Read a companion devotional.

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) *has been described as “the greatest reformer in history.” He was born in Hull, England,*

on Aug. 24, 1759, and soon after graduating from St. John's College, Cambridge University in 1780, he secured a seat in Parliament for his birthplace. By 1787, Wilberforce had taken up the charge for which we remember him today: the fight to abolish the British slave trade. Wilberforce retired from political life in February 1825, having served his nation for nearly 45 years. Yet his efforts to secure the emancipation of slaves throughout Britain's colonies continued until his death in 1833.