

Go Against the Flow

In his book *Waking the Dead* Christian author John Eldredge wrote: “We are at war. The world in which we live is a combat zone, a violent clash of kingdoms, a bitter struggle unto the death. You were born into a world at war, and you will live out all your days in the midst of the great battle, involving all the forces of heaven and hell and played out here on earth.”

Indeed, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan are at war in our society today, and sometimes it’s hard to know which side even some Christians are on. Many of them think and act just like people in the world. Why? Because they don’t truly know God, and their minds have not been renewed.

It is possible for a person to love God with all his heart, serve Him every week and feel His presence in worship, yet not know Him. Some armchair theologians out there may disagree, but thousands of pastors and lay leaders in the U.S. and around the world would confirm that this is true.

Let me state it another way. A person can love God and serve Him regularly but not have His mind on many of the critical issues of our day. To not have His mind on the issues of the day, secular and spiritual, places the rank-and-file Christian in a dangerously precarious position both inside and outside the walls of the church, in a world that is increasingly hostile to anything and everything “evangelical.”

Henry Blackaby, co-author of the best-selling book and workbook *Experiencing God*, was once asked, “What do you see as the future for the United States?” Blackaby replied: “If you put the U.S. up against the Scriptures, we’re in trouble. I think we’re very close to the judgment of God. The problem of America is not the unbelieving world. The problem of America is the people of God.

"You see, right now, there are just as many divorces in the churches as outside the churches. There are just as many abortions inside the churches as outside the churches. There's only a 1 percent difference in gambling inside the churches as outside the churches. It's God's people who hold the destiny of America. Don't fuss at the world. It's acting just like its nature. We've got to be salt and light again. We've got to have an observable difference."

Being a keen observer of the church and its people during the last several years, I have been burdened by two factors: a series of Scripture passages that should concern all of us, pastors and laypersons alike, and the results of a study conducted by well-known researcher George Barna.

The first Scripture passage is powerful and alarming. Jesus told His disciples: " 'Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!" ' " (Matt. 7:21-23, NKJV).

I believe Jesus' words confirm that there will be thousands of well-meaning men and women who attended church and served their congregations faithfully yet never knew the God of the church or did His will—and as a result, won't go to heaven.

The second and third Scriptures talk about what it means to truly know and love God. Jesus made it clear that if we claim He is our Lord we must obey Him: " 'But why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and not do the things which I say?" ' " (Luke 6:46). The apostle John confirmed Jesus' words: "By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.

"He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His

word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:3-6).

Consider these passages in light of research conducted by the Barna Group. In an article titled "Spiritual Progress Hard to Find," Barna details the findings of a study in which he analyzed more than 10,000 personal interviews from around the nation—and discovered that most people who claim to be Christian don't have the mind of God on important issues. Here's what Barna reported:

- 84 percent said their religious faith is very important in their own life
- 70 percent claimed that their own religious faith is consistently growing deeper
- 84 percent claimed to be Christians
- 60 percent said they believe the Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches
- 75 percent said they are absolutely or somewhat committed to Christianity.

But the same people also deemed the following behaviors and lifestyles "morally acceptable":

- cohabitation—60 percent
- abortion—45 percent (In the U.S., nearly 45 million babies have been sacrificed since the Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion in 1973.)
- adultery—42 percent
- sexual relations between homosexuals—30 percent
- gambling—61 percent

- pornography—38 percent
- use of profanity—36 percent

The only conclusion we can make based on the study is that the respondents either don't know God's Word or choose not to abide by it. Clearly, a decision to follow Christ does not supernaturally impart the wisdom found in God's Word. But rather than studying it, far too many evangelicals are living from church service to church service or religious experience to religious experience—a habit that will not help them develop the foundation they need to navigate life successfully according to God's will.

Praise and worship, for example, may create an environment in which a person encounters God, but it may also set a person up to experience a myriad of emotions and feelings in a vacuum, and though the person leaves church feeling complete and full of God, he in fact does not have the strength, courage and wisdom he will need for the long haul. These do not come from the worship experience alone.

In fact, the Bible says it is the preaching of the Word that spurs us to faith in Christ. "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:14,17).

The stuff of life happens Monday through Saturday, and for that, believers need more than good feelings. They must commit to growing in their faith and in their knowledge and understanding of the Word of God. To do anything less results in spiritual starvation and a life ruled by the confines of one's mortal mind.

The Bible tells us that man will never think the thoughts of

God unless he experiences a transformation of the mind. “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Is. 55:8-9).

So how does one begin the transformation process? Simply put, you must learn what God has to say about *everything*. How? Become familiar with His Word and allow it to change the way you think.

As the apostle Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

If you are doing the work of relationship and are drawing near to God daily, you are halfway there. Then you must learn His commands and commit to keeping them. In fact, it is in keeping these commands that your love is tested.

You stand today at a place I refer to as the “tipping point.” You can decide to stay right where you are, content with ignorance, and hope for the best, knowing you will continue thinking your own thoughts and doing what you reason is best. Or you can surrender your right to yourself, bow your knee and come under the authority of God’s Word—whatever that might mean and wherever it might lead.

Commit today to growing deeper. Become a part of an accountability group or a small group. Begin to take time each day for prayer and reading the Word.

Invest in a course of study, whether it is through a workbook, devotional or class at a local seminary. Begin journaling, and become purpose-driven by setting realistic growth goals with timelines. God will meet you at each of these places, and you will find that it is entirely possible to live out your faith in an increasingly secular world.

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