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## WHAT ABOUT HYPOCRITES IN THE CHURCH?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009



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"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

—Matthew 7:3-5 (NIV)

With these witty but also biting words, Jesus causes his listeners – then and today – to carefully examine their own lives. Are we going about accusing others of minor shortcomings when, in fact, we ourselves are ignoring our own behavior? If so, we are hypocrites. Once our hypocrisy is removed, then we are in a position to help others.

Unfortunately, one obstacle to the acceptance of Christianity that is often raised is provided by Christians themselves. Phrased in many ways, the core of the objection is, "If Christianity is true, why are there hypocrites in the church?" In other words, if Christianity is really supposed to change people, then why do some who profess to believe in Jesus set such bad examples? This article will answer the "hypocrisy objection" to Christianity. But first, let's explore the definition of hypocrisy in general, as well as in a biblical sense.

## What's a Hypocrite?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hypocrisy as follows: "The assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations, esp. in respect of religious life or beliefs; hence in general sense, dissimulation, pretense, sham. Also, an instance of this." It defines hypocrite in this manner: "One who falsely professes to be virtuously or religiously inclined; one who pretends to have feelings or beliefs of a higher order than his real ones; hence generally, a dissembler, pretender." *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v., "hypocrisy," "hypocrite."

In simpler terms, a hypocrite is someone who not only does not practice what one preaches, but a person who does the opposite of what one preaches. A parent holding a beer and smoking a cigarette who admonishes a child not to drink or smoke, for instance, may be viewed as being a hypocrite by the child.

Similarly, critics of Christianity who raise the hypocrisy objection usually point to some moral failure in the lives of Christians they know as examples of Christianity being false or at least highly suspect. "See!" they exclaim. "There goes another hypocrite in the church! How can I believe Christianity if the church is full of hypocrites?"

Before directly answering the question, we'll take a brief look at biblical examples of hypocrisy.

## The Bible and Hypocrisy

"Hypocrisy" or variations of it appear 17 times in the NIV translation of the Bible. Often it is Christ calling people hypocrites (see, for instance, Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15; 23:23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51; Mark 7:6; Luke 6:42; 12:56; and 13:15). "You hypocrites!" in fact is a recurring phrase.

Was Jesus guilty of pointing out the speck in someone else's eye when in fact he had a plank in his own? Not at all. As Josh McDowell and Don Stewart write:

"Christianity does not stand or fall on the way Christians have acted throughout history or are acting today. Christianity stands or falls on the person of Jesus, and Jesus was not a hypocrite. He lived

consistently with what He taught, and at the end of His life He challenged those who had lived with Him night and day, for over three years, to point out any hypocrisy in Him. His disciples were silent, because there was none. Since Christianity depends on Jesus, it is incorrect to try to invalidate the Christian faith by pointing to horrible things done in the name of Christianity." Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith* (Here's Life Publishers, 1980), 128.

McDowell and Stewart bring up three important points. First, whether or not Christianity is true does not depend on how its adherents behave. This, of course, does not excuse hypocrisy in the church, but neither does it mean that hypocrisy is sufficient reason to dismiss Christianity. Second, Christ was not a hypocrite in any sense of the word. Often even critics agree with this point, exalting the high moral standards of Christ without understanding His larger claims. Third, seemingly hypocritical behavior on a large scale, such as the Inquisition, does not invalidate Christianity, either. Again, this does not excuse hypocritical behavior, but separates it from the center of Christianity: Christ and His claims.

## The Positive Influence of Christianity

Are all Christians hypocrites? Not at all! In fact, the history of the Christian church is filled with examples of selflessness, courage, moral action and reform and many other positive influences on the world. These are not the acts of hypocrites, but of sincere believers transformed by the resurrected Christ and moved by the Holy Spirit to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). See, for instance, my booklet *What Christianity Has Done for the World* (Rose Publishing, 2008) and *How Christianity Changed the World* by Alvin Schmidt (Zondervan, 2004).

The church is a work in progress (and so are its members). Like a cathedral that may take decades or centuries to complete, the process is long and arduous, but someday it will be complete and stand as a beautiful testimony to the power of Christ to transform lives for the better. Remember, too, that only some professing Christians act hypocritically. What about all those who do not? What about all those who consistently live out the love of Christ in the world?

## Hypocrisy, Moral Standards, and Sin

Until the church and all followers of Christ are glorified, there will, unfortunately, be hypocrites in the church. What's important to remember, however, is that this does not negate Christianity or the claims of Christ. In addition, accusations of hypocrisy assume that there is a moral standard that hypocrites break. But where does this standard come from? In this sense, the hypocrisy objection actually supports the reality of a transcendent, moral lawgiver (that is, God), rather than argue against Him.

We must also remember that, biblically speaking, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). In other words, no one is perfect and all are dependent on Christ for redemption, salvation and growth in spiritual maturity. On the one hand, Christians should not act hypocritically, lest we provide critics with a flimsy reason to reject the gospel message. On the other hand, critics should know better than to attempt to throw out Christianity and all of Christ's claims on the basis of the hypocrisy objection.

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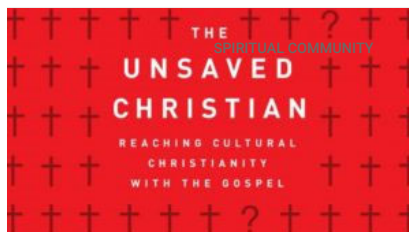


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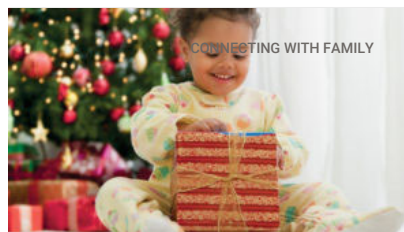
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