

PREFACE

WHY DON'T CHRISTIANS GROW?

Jesus' first words in the book of Mark as He started His public ministry were: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel."*(Mark 1:15) After counseling hundreds of Christians during some 50 years of ministry, it is clear that many of the people who sit in our churches are struggling and failing in their Christian walk. The Amplified Bible describes those who are walking with Christ, in part, as those who have a peaceful mind free from fears, agitating passions, and moral conflicts (1 Peter 1:2). That is far from the experience of many church members and even many church leaders. Why are they, why are we not walking in the peace and victory that God has provided through His Son? If we are to grow as Christians we must start as Jesus instructed, with repentance and faith. Let me give a visual demonstration of our life:

All of us are born into this world in a state of rebellion against God. The natural man is blind to the reality of God, is certainly not submitted to God, and is doing whatever is right in his own eyes. This is what we look like: (I walk from right to left across the platform in a cocky swagger with fists clenched.) "I am free! I do whatever I want to do! If I want to get drunk, I get drunk. If I want to take drugs, I take drugs. If I want to have sex, I have sex. If I want to take something, I take it. If someone crosses me, I run over them. We are going to do things my way in this family! Or on this job! Or in this church! Don't argue with me, I am always right! I am the king of my life!" (At this point I put on a shiny, cardboard crown.)

This is a fun way to live, for awhile. There is an exhilaration connected to power, independence, and control over others. And the Bible acknowledges that sin is pleasurable, for a season. But the Bible also tells us that when a person sins he is really not free but that he becomes a slave to sin. Alcohol was my choice. I loved the way it tasted and I loved the way it made me feel strong, fearless, and free. Of course, it was all deception. 82% of the inmates in Colorado prisons have a substance abuse problem. That doesn't sound like freedom. Chains of slavery gradually wrap around that free spirit. Chains of addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, anger, power, and money, there is a long list. My kingdom is challenged by others who are kings of their domain. Problems start with my spouse, on my job, with my health, and possibly with the law. While I am free to engage in my sins, I am not free to stop engaging in them, for I have become a slave. My fun gradually turns into misery. Perhaps my wife leaves me, I lose my job or a series of jobs, I am in debt, I am sick, and I am on the police department's computers. I become discouraged, disgusted with myself, depressed, and I start thinking about a way out. The thought of suicide comes into my mind with increasing frequency. (Over 50% of suicides, and about 50% of those killed in auto accidents, occur when the person is drunk or high.)

At this low point, as I am walking through life with less of a strut but with my crown firmly in place, I hear the gospel – perhaps through someone's witness, or while visiting a church, or on the media: "God loves you! Christ died for you! If you only believe, He will forgive you and help you and bless you and give you heaven instead of hell!" "Me? You mean me? Oh, thank you, God! I believe. I accept that deal."

As a pastor I saw many people who made a profession of faith, and became church members. Most of them were serious about it, at least for a time. But some quickly decided that the cost of giving up their addictions, their ungodly relationships, their idols, was unrealistic and unnecessary. They may have attended church and done the usual churchy things, mimicking the other lukewarm church members around them, but they kept wearing their crowns and never changed their direction. "Now I'm saved and sure of heaven. Hallelujah! But I'm only human, and I have this need, this weakness, and God understands that I can't function without my daily 'vitamins.'" Or, "God understands that I am over-sexed and simply incapable of ending this perversion or this relationship." Or, "My attitude of anger and harshness and domination over my spouse and children is probably not good, but I can't help it." And the list goes on.

Need I tell you that churches are full of “Christians” like this, and that there are even many Christian leaders like this? Why do pastors equate salvation with coming to the altar, with having an emotional experience, with joining a church? Why are they so quick to assure people that now they have been born-again and have a contract with God that will never be broken when Christ Himself warns again and again of the danger of false conversions?

- Didn’t Jesus say at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that there are many who will say on the Day of Judgment, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we serve you by doing thus and so,” but that He will say to them, “Depart from me.....I never knew you!”
- And didn’t He warn His disciples in John 15 that if you abide in Him you will bear much fruit, but “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”?
- And that “on that day” there will be a separation between sheep and goats, good and bad fish, wheat and tares?

There is a key word that many modern church people are not aware of, sometimes because their preacher considers it to be a negative word and carefully deletes it word from his messages. The word is **REPENT!** The Bible tells us again and again that we must repent and believe. Jesus Christ is the One on whom we must believe, and He was preceded by John the Baptist whose message was one of repentance. Repent and believe. On many occasions Jesus said that people must repent (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3, 5). His apostles “went and preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12). On the day of Pentecost when the people asked, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter responded, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized....”(Acts 2:38). After Christ’s resurrection, Peter preached to a multitude, “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...”(Acts 3:19). To the men of Athens Paul said, “...God commands all men everywhere to repent”(Acts 17:30). In Revelation 2 and 3 the risen Christ warns five of the seven churches to repent.

What does it mean to repent? It means to change your mind and change your direction. (At this point I turn and start walking in the opposite direction.) To repent means that you have a sorrow for your sins, that you make restitution where possible to those you have hurt, and with God’s help and grace you stop sinning! Paul asks, “Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound?” (Ro. 6:1) And he answers that question resoundingly: “Certainly not! (or God forbid!) How shall we who died to sin continue to live in it?” (Ro. 6:2) He goes on to explain that whereas we were slaves to sin now we are slaves to God and that God has overcome the reign or rule of sin in our life. He points out that those who continue to live in sin are deceived and will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven (in other words, they will not go to heaven).(1 Cor. 9:16ff) The apostle John points out clearly in the book of 1 John that there are three tests that prove the genuineness of Christianity: the test of belief, the test of obedience, and the test of love. He states in Chapter 3 that the one who practices righteousness belongs to Christ and that the one who practices sin belongs to the devil. Peter warns us to test our call and election to make sure that it is valid (2 Peter 1). And Paul warns us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, not to be blasé’ and passive about it (Phi. 2:12).

Many Christians are confused and think that Christ came to save us from hell. That is, of course, an immeasurable benefit of Christ’s salvation, but when the angel told Joseph, the betrothed of the virgin Mary, to marry her, the angel said, “...you shall call His name Jesus (which means “Savior” in the Hebrew language), for He will save His people from their sins.”(Mt. 1:21) Christ came and died on the cross to save you and me from our sins. Let me be bold to state a biblical truth: if you haven’t been saved from your sins; that is, if you haven’t stopped willfully sinning, then you haven’t been saved. Our sins are what separate us from God. “The wages of sin is death,” eternal death, separation from God. And without holiness no one will see the Lord. It was for our sins that our Savior died on the cross, not so that we could continue to sin but so that we could be forgiven for the penalty of sin and could break the reign of sin in our lives. This is Christianity 101. **THE REASON THE CHURCH LOOKS SO MUCH LIKE THE WORLD IS THAT IT HAS NOT UNDERSTOOD, TAUGHT, AND MODELED THIS BASIC BIBLICAL TRUTH.**

When I repent, if I repent, I take the crown off my head (and at this point I do that) and lay it at the feet of Jesus. Jesus means “Savior” and Christ means “anointed one” or “King”. In Israel when a man became king he was anointed by a priest or prophet. Oil was poured upon his head, and this signified that God endorsed his rule. Christ is our King. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. A king is not elected; he is recognized as having been appointed by God. We do not have a vote. We only bow the knee to Him. God only wants one thing from you and me. What is that? Our obedience, love, loyalty, faithfulness, worship, service? All of the above! He wants our life. What else do we have to give Him? He doesn’t need our vote; He is already God and King. He doesn’t need our money; He is the creator and owner of everything. He doesn’t need our service; He has legions of angels to do His bidding. We need to give Him all of these things as a part of giving Him our lives. We are a speck of dust with built-in obsolescence. We are but a vapor that appears for a little while and then melts away. He wants your life! If you haven’t given Him your life you haven’t given Him anything. We are told very clearly, “You are not your own, you were bought with a price.” We are told, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice.” Jesus warned people again and again to count the cost, that while salvation is free, being a disciple is not cheap, it costs a man everything.

In the Great Commission, Christ called on His followers to go into all the world and make disciples, not converts. Michael Brown, a Jewish Christian who is president of Fire School of Ministry in North Carolina, says in his book, Revolution in the Church, that being a disciple of Christ means (1) to deny yourself, to say no to self-will, personal desires and fleshly lusts (2) to take up your cross and die to your old life, with the implication of embracing rejection, shame and suffering if necessary (3) the unconditional sacrifice of your whole life for the whole of life in order to do God’s will. Michael says that when he teaches this biblical model many people will say to him, “You are describing a ‘disciple’ in the time of Jesus. But I am just a normal Christian, a member of a local church. But I am born-again. I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior as it says in Romans 10.” Michael points out that the word “Christian” is used only 3 times in the New Testament, the word “believer” is used 26 times, while the word “disciple” is used 260 times! And the first time the word “Christian” is used is in Acts 11:26, which says, “...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

Michael asks, what does being a “believer” in Christ mean anyway? It can mean absolutely nothing. You can believe the words that Christ was the Son of God who died for our sins and was resurrected, etcetera, and be a million miles from being a disciple. Remember that James 2:19 says, “Even the demons believe, and tremble.” But the demons are not Christians (disciples)! James is illustrating the point that faith without works is dead. Michael makes the telling point: Who gave us the right to change the conditions that Jesus clearly spelled out again and again, and that the New Testament clearly defines in a hundred different ways, of what it means to be a Christian (a disciple)?

There is a difference between sin and sins. There are hundreds of different kinds of sins, and they all come from sin. Sin is: “I am my own king.” That is the basic rebellion in man’s heart. Until that issue is settled, we are putting Band-Aids on people’s lives. When God looks at our hearts, He looks to see one thing: who is king, you or Christ? You might not do any of those overt sins that the Bible calls the works of the flesh: fornication, adultery, pornography, anger, hatred, greed, etcetera. But who is the king of your life? We cannot be saved by our good works, for all our works are as filthy rags. Remember that the Pharisees prayed, gave, fasted, and studied their Bibles more than we do. And they hated God and crucified His Son. There is a saying I heard years ago: “The meanest man I ever saw, always lived within the law.”

So repentance is the first step to living the Christian life, and the second step is believing. Let me give you a little true or false quiz. I have watched a certain preacher on Christians TV from time to time. He is a loving man with a large church, and the following is more or less his ongoing message: “My friends, all of us are sinners. We make many mistakes because we are human. But God loves us. Yes, I tell you no matter what kind of life you have lived, God loves you! In fact, the Bible says that God is love. God accepts you just as you are. God wants to forgive you and bless your life and give you His peace. He wants to bless your family and your finances and your health, and He promises to take you to heaven when you die. Decide today to accept that new life that God has for you. Let us pray.”

Is that good Christian preaching? The majority of church people to whom I pose this question say “yes.” The things that preacher says are all true, aren’t they? We are sinners, God loves us, God is love, God accepts us just as we are, God wants to forgive us and bless us, etcetera. But I have a problem with his preaching because of two critical omissions: First, he never says that we must REPENT, that we must turn away from our sins and renounce the crown that we are wearing. Second, he never mentions JESUS CHRIST. Christians do not simply have faith in faith or even faith in God; they have faith in Jesus Christ. Father God transferred all power and authority to His Son, Jesus. He is the object of our faith. He is the Savior. And God does not accept us just as we are because of His love. God is not Santa Claus. He is a holy God, and He cannot look upon us or welcome us into His heaven because of our filthiness. If He could, then why did Jesus Christ go to the cross? His bloody death was a meaningless charade unless it had cosmic significance. John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that He gave His Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Verse 18 says that those who reject Christ are living under the condemnation of God. Hebrews 9:22 says that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. And Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me. Jesus Christ is the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. He is our substitute. It is through faith in Him that we are saved, and it is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance.

I have spoken in a matter of fact way about repentance as if it was a simple thing to do, but it is not. Repentance is a divine-human experience. We can only repent because the love of God has been revealed to us in and through the magnificent sacrifice of the Son. We can only come to Christ because God draws us to Him. The miracle of faith happens in our hearts when He opens our blind eyes and allows us to inwardly perceive His great love. Except for His grace, we would be bound for the destruction that we deserve. Because of His grace, we can bow before Him and remove the arrogant crown from our head and lay it before His throne.

One other crucial point: repentance is not a one-time experience, it is a life-style. Five of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 were warned by the glorified Christ to repent. 1 John 1:9 was written to Christians: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Our loving Good Shepherd promises to be with us and to guide us with His rod and staff all during our earthly journey. Our part is to be humble, listen to Him, and be quick to repent, obey, and follow Him.

A TIME OF REFLECTION

- Where is your crown?
- Do you need to repent?
- Have you by faith accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, Lord, King?
- You are loved with an everlasting love. Give Him your heart, your life, and your all.