

CHRIST OR CHRISTIANITY?

“For who maketh thee to differ from another? For what hast thou that thou didst not receive [as a gift]? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory [boast] as though thou didst not receive it?” (I Corinthians 4:7).

Life is a struggle; the Christian life is a struggle. Making Christianity “work” is a struggle. To say that it isn’t, *IF* one has entered into this or that special experience, is deceptively simple. No matter what level of growth one is at or whatever special experience one has had, Satan is not going to leave one to sail blithely into heaven with calm seas and gentle winds.

Peter knew this when he said, *“Be sober [level headed], be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world”* (I Peter 5:8,9).

There is no way to avoid the struggle of life; no way to avoid the struggle of the Christian life. There *IS* a way to avoid the struggle of “making Christianity work;” and that is not to try to “make Christianity work.” It is hard enough to fight the devil for survival in the flesh without having to fight for survival in the spirit. But that is what happens when we try to “make Christianity work.”

Paul said to the Corinthians, *“What do you have that God hasn’t given you? Why do you act as though you had done it by yourself?”* To the Galatians he said, *“Having begun in the spirit are you now made perfect in the flesh?”* (and he adds, *“Are you such fools?”*) It is important to make a distinction between “making Christianity work,” and having a flow of life in the spirit through Christ. The former is humanly oriented and the latter is divinely oriented. The term “Christianity” is, after all, of human origin (although the word “Christian” may or may not be). Christianity *per se* implies a system rather than a life force, while the term is a convenient one for handy reference, it often obscures the vital nature of our personal relationship to God and puts the focus on a religious system. It tends to give one the sense of being a member of a particular society rather than the member of a family. The idea of “making Christianity work” is in the nature of being a member in good standing of a club. Of course there are such societies within the body of Christ—groups who choose to organize around a chosen set of doctrines and rules.

Many so-called churches are of this nature. Membership in these churches is only attained by signing the agreements to acceptance of the basic tenets of the group. That is, of course, legitimate within the body of believers, so long as such agreements are not regarded as the requirements for membership in the body of Christ. To be a member of the body of Christ, one thing is essential—the presence of His Spirit within. His Spirit comes in for the asking—*“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1:12,13). Jesus said that the Holy Spirit is given to them that ask (Luke 11:13). There may be many things that must occur in one’s life before that point, but they are only preludes to salvation and not preconditions. For example, one will not ask for salvation unless one has come to the humble position of seeing one’s needs, but humility is not *per se*, a condition of salvation.

There are hosts of different societies within the family of God. Each has its own conditions of membership. But, if the members have received the Spirit of Christ within, they are all one in Christ. It is like a human family. Within the clan structure there are family members with common interests who tend to gravitate together. The term “Christianity” is generally applied to the formalized expressions of faith as represented by these groups. The problem is not with the fact of such separate groupings, but with the assumption (presumption) by one particular group that their own conditions of membership are applicable to all. Or, for that matter that one must belong to any special group to belong to the family of God. Theological distinctives which are the basis of these groups are always subject to question. They are the effort of the human mind to comprehend and classify truth that is of the Spirit Christ within us is our truth. “*I am the way, the truth and the life*” (John 14:6). His presence is our salvation. His attributes are our possession when He is within us. Our spirits know things that our minds cannot yet articulate. We will only be able to comprehend them when we are glorified. “*Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known*” (I Corinthians 13:12). Our efforts to articulate truth must always be limited to the inadequacies of our human mind. Music of the concert hall, however magnificent, is limited by the conditions or audio-transcription, as well as human capacities of reception. Most of the controversies that have made a shambles of the unity of the family of Christ are based upon the unreliable efforts of the human mind to classify divine truth. There is nothing wrong with differences of theological opinion. The problem lies in putting too much weight on the human capacity to express divine truth.

The point of the above discussion is to show that many of the concepts of “Christianity” are only human concepts about the meaning of Christianity as a religious system, and not necessarily essential to salvation or to the favor of God. “The fact of salvation does not include the content of salvation” (Ellens). That is, we are saved by the sacrifice of Christ and the touch of His Spirit, and not by our theological understanding of that truth.

The numberless hosts of ideas about Christianity as a religious system may evolve out of the Bible as a basic point of reference, but have taken on so much of human methodology as to lose the loaf in the lure of the wrapper. Paul puts it succinctly to the Galatians—“*having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect in the flesh?*” (and he adds, laconically, “*are you such fools?*”) Human systems derived usually out of isolated “proof texts” have brought countless numbers of the members of God’s family into guilt and bondage, whilst others judge their salvation, sincerity, and service. Whatever the believer has of spiritual reality—salvation, gifts and devotion—he has from Christ. None can judge another’s commitment or capacity, especially on the basis of criteria derived by human societies in terms of their own perceptions of truth. This is the essence of Paul’s sharp rebuke of the Corinthians in chapter 4. He warns them about judging others (he does not even judge himself). The Lord is the final judge. They should not judge anything before the time when the Lord will bring everything to light, even the inner “counsels of the heart.” The purpose is clear that no one should be “puffed up” over another. And then he says, “*Who makes you to differ? And what do you have that you have not received [as a gift]? And if you have received it, why do you boast as though you had not received it?*”

The flesh is only the instrument through which the Holy Spirit within us expresses Himself. It is an imperfect instrument at best, and cannot be relied

upon to fully comprehend or reflect the realities of Christ in the Spirit. Jesus said, *“Without Me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). We can develop and refine the instrument by prayer and attendance upon the Word of God, but ultimately what comes through that instrument must be an expression of the Holy Spirit, Himself, and not some human religious effort, devised either by oneself, or by others who claim to be the chief spokesmen for Christ. It is one thing to explore the great truths of scripture as pertaining to Christ and our relationship to Him. It is quite another to put together religious systems for the regimenting of the family of Christ.

Most of our struggles come from trying to conform to these religious systems devised by others as a method of gaining favor with God. Not fully familiar with what the Bible says, many are simply trusting that the leaders of such systems are speaking the truth. A good test of the truth is to determine what is flowing naturally from within, and what, on the other hand, is merely an effort to conform to someone else’s ideas. If it doesn’t flow, don’t go. We are all individuals. Our personalities are different, and each one relates to God in keeping with one’s personality, as with human relationships. The Bible tells us about the nature of God and man and the universe. It also tells us about the meaning of our relationship to Him and to one another. It does not offer classified systems of devotion or service. Christ came to bring peace and joy to the people of earth who would follow Him, and a vital personal relationship to Himself. He did not come to put people in bondage to a system, by whatever name. He said, *“Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me: for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls; for my yoke is easy [cut to fit] and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30).

If you are struggling to “make Christianity work,” maybe you are trying to conform to someone else’s yoke. When the Spirit of Christ is within us He will express Himself through us in keeping with our own personalities. We will be comfortable with the “yoke” (although not complacent). Life will not be without struggle, but neither will it be with out the grace and capacity to handle it. Nor will it be unnatural to our own redeemed personalities.

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