

Christian Faith As A Way of Life

In the early part of the 20th century in the US, a number of prominent Seminaries (where pastors are trained) changed their theological perspectives. They began adopting different views of the place of Scripture in the Christian faith, and their definition of the inspiration of Scripture (if they believed in that at all) also changed. Some of the professors in these seminaries began to call into question the most basic tenants of the historical faith – such as the Divinity of Christ and the Doctrine of the Trinity.

In response to that, another part of the church came up with a list of what they considered to be ‘non-negotiables’ – the ‘basics’ of our Christian faith. They called them ‘the fundamentals’ and so this group became known as ‘Fundamentalists’ – a term that first appeared in a dictionary in 1950. The intention of this group was admirable, and in fact, there was little, if anything, in their beliefs that were out of the main stream of Orthodox Christian teaching.

But something else happened along with the listing of those ‘Fundamentals’. Something that very few saw coming, something that galvanized a long slow-moving historical trend, and which ended up shaping the church for the past 75 – 80 years, and has at least partially resulted, I believe, in a full-blown crisis today. A crisis of identity, a crisis of purpose, particularly within the evangelical church.

What happened was that from that point on, the Christian faith began to be defined by *content*. By knowledge. The sign of maturity for a believer became how well a person ‘knew their Bible’, how articulate their theology was. Christianity for many was reduced to a set of propositions that a person either ‘believed’ or ‘didn’t believe’. Salvation was boiled down to a forensic (i.e., legal) transaction that provided a ‘ticket to heaven’ for persons who believed correctly. This was presented as Christianity. This led to a crisis, because of something very critical that was largely left out of that picture. And that’s what I want to talk about with you tonight/ this morning.

I’m sharing this because I have for some time been at the conclusion (along with many others) that the church is in crisis. And that bothers me. I had already decided on the gist of this message before I saw the article in Monday’s Courier-Post about the numbers of people in our society who now claim to have ‘no faith’ – something like 15% of our population. It’s the highest

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percentage ever recorded. At the same time, church attendance among ‘believers’ is down. Again. And while Christianity is actually growing worldwide, it is floundering in the US, not just in numbers (we make too much out of numbers at times) but more importantly, in *effectiveness*, in outreach, in fulfilling our mission. In making a *difference*, healing the world we live in.

There is a book that came out recently (by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons) entitled “UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters¹”. It reports the results of a comprehensive survey commissioned by the Fermi Project and conducted by The Barna Group, examining the perceptions of Christianity by outsiders between the ages of 16 – 29.

In other words, what do young people outside of the church think about Christians? What kind of message/ perception are we sending out to the world? I had the privilege of sitting in a seminar with the two authors a couple of weeks ago, and the first question they were asked after giving a thumbnail sketch of the results of this survey, was the place of the media in portraying Christians in an unfavorable manner. (“Is this simply a result of our getting bad press?”) Their response was disappointing (I was hoping that they would say ‘yes’!) Instead, they reported that this was part of the survey, and the majority of respondents claimed that their conclusions grew out of personal contact with self-identified Christians.

What is really troubling in this report is that most of the top perceptions of Christians by young non-Christians were *highly* negative. Here are some examples:

Anti-homosexual 91%. This was referring not to a person’s Biblical view on homosexuality; it is rather a belief that Christians have a special *contempt* for homosexuals. Many in the survey group reported that they would think of their gay friends, and their belief that you are against my friend so I want nothing to do with you.

Judgmental 87%. Meaning, we find the worst thing about a person, pick that out and dwell on it.

¹ unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007. 256 pages.

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Hypocritical 85% We say one thing and do another...we are inauthentic about their walk/ talk.

Sheltered 78% (i.e., old-fashioned, out of touch with reality)

Too Political 75%

Proselytizers 70% Insensitive to others, not genuine in the sharing of our faith. The authors explained this: the conviction was that Christians only invest in people long enough to invite them to church, or talk about a 'spiritual issue' with them. If there is no positive response, we're out of their life.

I am not saying that I believe that this is an accurate portrayal of Christians. Although I have met people who fit into all of these categories (as you have), I don't by any means believe that this describes the majority of Christians. Certainly not the ones that I know! But we need to face this, as uncomfortable as it may be. We are part of the Church *universal*. And this is the way a significant portion of our world sees us. This is *our* culture, these are people that God has called us to love. These are people who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. How do we communicate with such a culture – which has automatically stacked the deck against anything we might have to say to them?

This all concerns me because I love the church. I don't love the church because I'm a pastor; I became a pastor *because* I love the church. Yes the church is a human institution, that houses (and sometimes hides) the Body of Christ in the world. But it is ordained by Christ as the main means of God's interaction with this hurting, broken world. And if we have strayed from our purpose, I think we need to talk about it. Even if we end up challenging - directly or indirectly - the way we've done some things for a long, long time.

Now, admittedly, I expect am going to be raising more questions today than I can answer. (Which is not totally unusual for me, I know!) This will be, Lord willing, the beginning of a discussion among us here in this *healthy* faith community. And we'll see where the Holy Spirit takes us. And if there is no response, then I'll assume that I am barking up the wrong tree, and I'll try to listen more carefully before I cash in any more chips...

I opened up sharing what I think may be one of the contributing factors in our identity crisis in the church (the faith has become knowledge based). Then I shared with you one survey's results

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about the perceptions that young people have of Christians today. But let's think about the kind of people that were attracted to Jesus when he walked this earth – let's remember how he was constantly criticized by the 'religious establishment' of his day, because he hung out with the wrong kind of people, the 'tax collectors and the prostitutes'; the 'dregs' of society found Jesus to be a winsome and inviting personality. But we seem to be attracting only the 'respectable people' these days, and the rest of the world has pegged us as unwelcoming. And I wonder why that is...

So let me say it again: perhaps we have moved the focus of being a disciple from the heart to the head. Let me try to explain what I mean. [And let me just say that if you are hearing me say that I don't think that doctrine or theology is important in our Christian development, then I'm not doing a very good job at explaining myself. I hope you know me well enough to know that I don't believe that at all. But I'm trying to explain a different perspective of what might be at the top of our list of priorities... so even if you don't agree with me, let's look at this as the beginning of an ongoing conversation, not the final word by any means. OK?]

We talk a lot in the church (for good reason) about the Great Commission. There are many churches that include some form of the Great Commission in their mission statements (i.e., "Jesus' last command is our first priority", etc.). The Great Commission can be found at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. It literally is the last thing that Jesus taught, or commanded his disciples after his Resurrection, and it set the agenda for the Church – forever. These are our marching orders.

I asked over 20 different people this week to tell me what it was that Jesus told us to do in the Great Commission, including two pastors. Most everyone got the beginning of it: make disciples. But then Jesus gets specific as to what that means. And again, most everyone in my very limited survey got the 'Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' part as well.

But what is next? I gave a hint: the next word is 'teaching them...' Teaching them *what*? Again, the response I got (including that of two pastors) was that we were to teach them about the Gospel, to teach them Jesus' teachings, teach them belief, and so forth. In fact, all the responses were about 'knowledge' – which is what I'm trying to point out! We've come to this

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conclusion because it has been drilled into us for our entire lives...and we don't even *see* the actual words:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What Jesus says is that we are to teach these new disciples "*to obey everything I have commanded you*". We are to teach, not *less* than good doctrine, at some point content *needs* to be part of our agenda, our teaching... But in Jesus' list (truthfully, the *only* thing in his list) in the Great Commission was a baptism in the name of the Trinity, and to teach people how to live like Jesus.

I heard a seminar recently by Brian McClaren; a guy who for 10 years or so has been my mentor 'from afar'. I've read a number of his books, and have heard him in two or three live sessions. He shared something that he experienced back in 1999.

He was interviewing a non-Christian scholar, Dr. Peter Sengi, in front of a group of 500 evangelical pastors at a Leadership Network conference near Denver. Sengi speaks and writes a lot about something called sustainability/ or the regenerative economy movement – which is a very current issue for today as we are trying to 'rebuild' an economy in shambles. (An opportunity, perhaps, to re-think the way we've always done some things.)

Anyway, in this interview, McClaren began by stating to Sengi (who was being interviewed via satellite) "There are 500 evangelical pastors in front of you here. What would you like to say to them?" He said, "I would like to ask them a question." He continued, "I was in a large bookstore recently and I asked the manager what were the 'hot' books right now? His response to me was that the most popular religious books are books on Buddhism." He said, "My question is, why do you think that is?"

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McClaren reported that this really took him by surprise, but he thought that he recovered pretty well by turning it around. “Well, Dr. Sengi, how would *you* answer that question? Why would Buddhism would be outselling Christian books at that store?”

His response was profound... Sengi said, “I think it is because Christianity presents itself as a system of beliefs, and Buddhism presents itself as a way of life.” Get his actual words: *‘presents itself’*. But what did Jesus actually commission us, *in the church* to do? Didn’t he say, “teach them to *live* like me?” Do you see the difference?

The word *Christian* occurs in the New Testament just 3 times. The word *Christianity* doesn’t occur in the New Testament at all – it is a word that we cannot find in use anywhere until well after the first 1,000 years after Christ. It is, perhaps, a word that denotes that our *primary* unity is found in a system of *beliefs*.

Compare this: 261x’s in the Scripture find the word *‘disciple’*, even more times *‘follower’*. The question that McClaren asked us, and which I am now passing along to you, was: Did Jesus come to make Christians or to form disciples? Again, do you see the difference?

Disciples are people joining with God in the healing of the world. (God so loved *the world* that he sent his son). A disciple is a follower of Christ. A learner of *the way* of the Master.

Jesus issues call after call not simply to know stuff *about* him, but to do what he says. “*If you love me, you will keep my commands*”. “*Come, follow me; take my yoke upon you and learn from me*”. The Great Commission, as we just saw, “Teach others to actually practice what I’ve taught you.”

Paul picks up the same themes: “*be conformed to the image of Christ*”, “*Let Christ ‘be formed in you’*”, ‘Ephesians 4: *‘learn Christ’*, ‘Philippians, “*put on Christ*”, Colossians “*it is Christ in you, the hope of Glory*.” ‘Philippians: “*Let the attitude of Christ be in you*”... and more. The point of discipleship is to form/ shape Christ-like people through intentional spiritual practices and disciplines. Through learning how to live in this world as Christ lived. Because Christian faith is

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more than a system of beliefs, it is a way of life, and if we present it otherwise, we're missing something crucial.

McClaren, in that same seminar, told us about a man, Michael Polanyi, who was a Jewish Hungarian physical chemist, a Nobel Prize contender, who lived in Berlin just before the onset of WW2. He loved Berlin, had great confidence in Germany to oppose this scary guy Hitler. But then the Nazis came to power anyway².

Polanyi was offered a job in England and he reluctantly left Germany. Berlin was a center of scientific and philosophical inquiry. But Hitler began sending Jews to ghettos and making them wear yellow stars, and his friends convinced him he had to leave. He managed to escape with his wife and two sons, leaving behind his home, and everything he owned. Barely made it out alive.

Now, who knows how we would feel after something like that? But after the war, Polanyi just couldn't go back to his science, he became obsessed with the question "what went wrong?" Enlightened culture...doing such things...

He became a moral philosopher, focused with this question. "What happened in Western Civilization; what went wrong with European society where it could reach such heights scientifically, but be so despicable in morality and ethics?"

Polanyi became convinced that the problem was a fault in our theory of knowledge. We developed this idea that knowledge was just information, of the kind that could be learned from books. He developed a term: "elbow knowledge", the kind of knowledge that could only be learned by being at the side, the elbow, of a master. Later he called it 'personal knowledge' because it came through personal contact.

² *Much of the following is from Brian McClaren at the 2009 National Pastor's Conference, in a seminar titled, "Christian Faith as a Way of Life"*

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For example: wine tasting. You can't learn about wine by reading books. You don't really even learn by drinking it – you can drink lots of wine and just become an alcoholic, not an expert wine taster.

We need people to teach the methods: swirling the glass, slurping it on your tongue. But still you won't get it, until someone is with you saying things like, 'So, do you get the taste of ... dirty socks in there?' 'Oh, is that good?' 'Yes, it's good!' I.e., they give you words to describe what you are experiencing. You need to *join the community* to learn, person to person.

Polanyi went to tanneries in England, this scientific nerdy guy with suit, among these rough tannery workers and ask, "How can you tell a Grade A hide from a Grade D hide?" They'd say, "Come 'ere mate, feel this... now feel this one, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"But they all feel the same!" he'd say. How did you learn to tell the difference? Well, you learn it by paying attention to a master, by elbow knowledge, personal knowledge. So Polanyi began paying attention to communities that had practices that they taught, passed along through apprenticeship, learning how to do these certain skills – wine tasting, leather making, violin making.

And *that*, he said, is what was lost in the West. And he made this amazing observation: "*It is only when an apprentice submits himself to the authority and tradition of the master that he can learn an art, the rules of which are not even known to the Master.*"

Get that? He's saying, "You can't go to a violinmaker and ask him to write 'violin making for dummies' because there is a skill to it that goes beyond words, it can only be *shown*." It's in your fingertips, and hands, and arms, and in your ear.

Brian McClaren, who shared this story with us, then asked another profound question, "What would happen if the Christian faith preserved all the rules of the art [of being a Christian] that could be written in books, and heard in sermons, but we lost the actual *practice* of the art?"

What would we do?

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How would we recover that?

Earlier in this message I described this church, this faith community, as *healthy*. I believe that. But let me tell you something that I and pastor HeyYoung and all the rest of our staff know about this church, and maybe you do or do not. We tend to think of a church as a homogenous unit – i.e., everybody must be pretty much like me. Maybe we don't look the same, but we all believe the same things, have the same passions, and so forth.

Well, that's not exactly true. One of the things that makes this church unique is that we are a diverse community. We have within our four services and groups, through members and regular attenders pretty much the entire spectrum theologically – from seekers (“I don't know *anything* about faith, or the Bible”) to classic liberalism to very conservative. And everything in between.

We have the same diversity politically from 'left to right' from 'red to blue', or whatever terms you want to use. Economically – same thing. We have people who are very well off, and people who are just making it, and some who are really struggling. I believe that you rejoice with me in noticing that we are at last seeing more racial and ethnic diversity among us as well.

Now, it's a challenge to preach and lead in such an atmosphere. But I believe we are healthy because we have instinctively recognized that our unity is based on our common response of Jesus Christ's call to be his disciples. We are responding to his call – “follow me”. We are at many different places on that road. And through the Holy Spirit among us, we are *all* under construction. Yet we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

And there is more to say about this community and what our purpose is in building disciples. But that will have to wait until next week, where we'll look more closely at what it means and can mean to be in community together in Christ.

The Lord be with you!