

Faith and Works LXVI

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

Context

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Introduction

Cultural, ethnic, political, even religious associations tend to have certain characteristics that provide a way of distinguishing the difference between the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the typical nature and function of the systems of the world. All define oneself within society, or a subset of society.

When an individual has been removed from such a system, reflection may reveal that the system represented externally to surrounding systems, an abhorrent or immoral culture and or ideology. Yet while the individual sees themselves as defined within that system the system itself provides the context and justification for the individual's actions.

All those in these contexts live within these systems which have their own laws define themselves by them.

People seek security in these systems because man, apart from all the other animals, is aware that life is not something that he will survive. To seek continuance beyond that end, or to simply seek the means to make our journey to that end as comfortable as possible is the goal of all those who realize that eternity will eventually encompass man's temporal finite experience of existence in this fallen and entropic material world system.

In the sense that all systems of tribal or social identity serve the same purpose, that of providing a context for an individual to identify who he is and what he does in a rational system that justifies and approves of his actions all these serve the same goal. The impulse to join a gang is a religious one, in the sense that the divine is our connection to continuation and permanence beyond our helpless fallen condition, and where what we do is defined, and regarded as legitimate currency for gaining our acceptance and approval according to the context of the given system.

The laws of a given culture will include both prescriptions for indicating allegiance to the system, and those rules that involve the appropriate social and/or religious codes for personal and group conduct.

In a sense, all cults are those that define themselves in a self enclosed system that is without connection or any dependency on any system that defines the purpose and value of the individual's actions beyond its own.

The problem for the future is that with the increasing ability of technology to measure and track the actions and communications of all individuals that a global system based on a single ideology will then have the power to punish all who do not submit to its supremacy as the source for justifying all actions and thought.

Inside Looking Out

While a sub culture within a given society, such as a gang or religious sect, may be critically judged by the surrounding culture, yet those within these systems justify themselves by their own internal rules. They see themselves within the context of their chosen cultural affiliation. All cultural systems present scales of achievement wherein the pride, ego, and self esteem of men find a foundation establishing the identity and worth of the participants.

If one were to remain in that context they will never recognize the true Jesus of the Bible and history. Not until we come out of those systems, when we no longer have or trust the support of the old foundation they supplied, not until we come to the end of dependence on all that man made religious, political, economic and cultural support, do we come to recognize Jesus Christ for who He is.

In the context of the world system where men assume that by their own works and religious or spiritual knowledge they can earn God's approval, or even become as God, Jesus is a good man, a teacher, someone who has demonstrated a way among many ways. Many times the subtle doctrine of demons seeks to diminish Jesus to the role of a religious or moral teacher, rather than the He who died, and rose again, taking upon Himself the sins of the world.

Acts 16:16-18

And it came to pass in our going on to prayer, a certain maid, having a spirit of Python, did meet us, who brought much employment to her masters by soothsaying, she having followed Paul and us, was crying, saying, `These men are servants of the Most High God, who declare to us a way of salvation;' and this she was doing for many days, but Paul having been grieved, and having turned, said to the spirit, `I command thee, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come forth from her;' and it came forth the same hour.

Young's Literal Translation (YLT)

In the context of eternity, in the context of fallen man's separation from God, Jesus is recognized as the only name under heaven by which we can be saved.

Only those who are ill know that they are in need of a physician. Those forgiven much love much. Those who think they are rich and in need of nothing are lukewarm.

The fire burns away the dross, for all that is not faith is sin. The lust of the flesh, the boastful pride of life, the debt to flesh that is ever seeking rest in the possession and control of the material things of this world, those things that the sense can taste and touch, those things that on behalf of man is consumed by the cares and worries of this life, choking the seed of the Gospel.

Luke 5:1-3

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat.

The crowd was pressing in. To effectively minister the Gospel, the word of God, we sometimes need to remove ourselves from the press of the crowd. They have come with their needs, their concerns, and the pressure of those seeking their own interests can push things along the lines of their personal agendas. But the world of God has its own agenda; it is first and foremost an answer not to the common concerns of the crowd. The result was not a crowd of followers seeking their own temporal needs, but true disciples who would be able to effectively minister the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

John 6:26-27

Jesus answered them and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. 27 Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”

John 6:53-66

Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?”

When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.

When we attempt to cloak the Gospel and position it to be relevant to a given cultural context not just in communicating the message of the Gospel so it is understood, but to the extent that the very message of the Gospel is redefined or redirected along the lines of the concerns of the given culture, the Gospel is then no longer being presented.

In short, our culture should find its relevance in the Gospel, not the other way around.

Only those with a hunger and thirst for God and His righteousness, who seek a connection beyond themselves with their Creator, will be able to hear and respond; only those who know they are lost will respond to God's message of reconciliation in Christ. We will seek Him and find Him when we search for Him, alone, with all our heart. Any allegiance to a cultural system that is the ultimate foundation of one's identity will thus filter the message of God's grace to only those points and issues of use in maintaining a successful relationship and dependency not with God, but with the source of the value system, the current cultural context.

To be a citizen of heaven is to be a peculiar people, strangers in a land that now to the mind renewed by Christ, looks strange.

To the extent that the modern culture speaks of a constantly emerging definition of God, that God will only be as large as the space allotted alongside all the other cares and concerns of the cultural system. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan women at the well, he spoke with one who already could no longer trust in relationships, who no doubt had lost her hope of achieving self worth in the eyes of her community, she was empty and looking for the peace that only a restored relationship with God can give, and she had not found it as religion was primarily only concerned debates over whose method of worship would earn God's favor.

The system itself may change, its rules and values adapt to changing political, economic, even ethnic and environmental factors, yet the dynamics within each for that it takes will always define man by his place and role within the given system.

Thus in a system that in the broader evaluation of time and history may be judged to be immoral, yet for those identified and living within that system, they will see themselves as good or bad within that specific system and its values.

John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, drawing people from all walks of life outside the walls within which they normally defined themselves.

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" They would define Jesus by the roles needing to be filled within their own cultural context. To some He was a good man, to some a prophet, to others a political Messiah who would restore the earthly kingdom of one group of people over another.

Yet to see Jesus not as an artifact of our own culture, but as the Son of God, places His identity outside the definition and context of our own culture and perspective.

Jesus is not offering man a context in which to save and maintain their current state of being. He has not yet another variation of world systems to offer. The context for man that Jesus offers is in Himself.

As He is defined in the context of His Father's kingdom, so are we to be when we are truly at rest and in faith in Him.

Colossians 3:1-4

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

He does not offer us a new context in which to identify ourselves, He offers Himself as our identity.

Colossians 2:9-10

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Many came to Jesus seeking to perfect their works within a religious system, or to have Jesus define a new system in which they could work to earn or achieve eternal life and blessing.

John 5:38-40

But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

John 6:28-29

Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

And in this is the unique and most radical anti- religious system, the Gospel.

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

God's law defined a system based on God's righteousness, by which mans inherent fallen nature was revealed to himself, and the need for the shedding of blood for the remission of sin.

Romans 3:20

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Hebrews 9:22

And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

We are not to be seeking Jesus in order to find our own life, we must let go of our life and the context of the world as our foundation for who we are and will be, and find ourselves in Christ. Jesus is the living context, in which we become members of His body, joint heirs with Him in the Kingdom of God as children of God's own household.

Matthew 16:24

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Authoritarian Culture

The danger even within organized Christian religion, is that it can become a cultural means to an end, rather than simply an opportunity to reinforce the believers consciousness and their separation from anything but identification of who they are in Christ.

Having lost Biblical bases for the value of man, it may be legitimate to now ask if there can be anything like a civil rights movement, in the sense that the rights and dignity of man are inalienable, and are not to be superseded by man-made institutions and laws.

Whereas currently we seem to be caught in a cultural clash of ideologies, the superiority of one over the other is in its ability to grant equality by suppressing the value and rights of individuality. But it does so by making mans' value subservient to a global cultural system that would deny the legitimacy to any system of value other than granted by itself.

The authoritarian society denies the legitimacy of any man's ability or talent to enable him or her extended opportunities or merit above their fellow man, as those rights and or privileges are now uniquely derived from that individual, and not granted and controlled by the state.

Thus the final authoritarian system will seek to erase all moral distinctions, but will not do so by citing a higher authority as in the Christian system for human worth and dignity. It will derive all systems of value relative to the value they have relevant to the success and support of itself.

But instead, that the state itself becomes the final grantor of the purpose and value of its members, thus insuring its continued existence, and resisting all attempts to question or undermine the internal legitimacy of its policy by any standards other than those set by itself for itself.

The temptation is to respond to the press of the crowd, to seek to make God's word relevant to their pressing needs. And yet the Gospel is only the answer to a problem that God Himself has had to reveal to us. Both by giving a history of the fall of man, by demonstrating man's true condition by allowing us to be measured by His righteous standards in the Law, and having failed that, as it is written, by the works of the law no flesh will be justified, and then at that point providing in the temple sacrifices the knowledge that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin, and thus anticipates the need for a final sacrifice that only God Himself could provide to fulfill His covenant with man.

Systems of prosperity do not even really have to demonstrate a high success rate to ensure the allegiance of faithful followers. All that is necessary is to implant the idea that success should be the outcome and experience of those who have truly conformed and met the standards of the given belief system. If those promised results are not evident in a particular individual's life, often, rather than becoming discouraged with that system, their allegiance will be all the more enforced due to the guilt they will feel for being personally responsible for failing to meet that system's requirements and failing to demonstrate or realize its benefits. Thus the authors and teachers of those systems rarely come into question by those who have entered into a commitment to follow their teachings.

Paul said that his own body bore the marks of a follower of Jesus Christ. He did not, we can be sure, mean to suggest that those with physical disfigurements as a result of ill-treatment due to religious persecution, had by those very marks somehow earned themselves recognition and status in the kingdom of God, but rather such marks were simply a visible testament to the fact that Paul's allegiance and orientation was to a kingdom other than the kingdoms of men, and that he sought the approval of God rather than seeking the approval of men in order to be accepted into the context of the cultural consensus of his day.

This is why, though we sometimes hear of spectacular testimonies of those involved in a particular lifestyle of social context such as that of a gang member or

organized crime boss, and then hear of their miraculous transformation from what they were in that culture, and what they now have seen develop in their character and life as a believer and follower of Christ, however, regardless of the situation that we find ourselves prior to faith in Christ, it is not an issue of where we have been but rather an issue of that place all men need to come when they cease to define themselves by their past culture and environment and seek instead to identify themselves in the salvation God offers in Christ. Such testimonies are significant not because the salvation is greater, but rather as a testimony that all men, regardless of their past, can be saved by the completed and might work of salvation God has wrought in Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

The cross accepts all sizes and types of previous life styles, for regardless of the occupation or the environment of the roles we played, the cross signifies the coming to the end of ourselves, and our attempts through these various systems to objectify and justify ourselves, and the foundation is now Christ. Who we are and define ourselves as believers in Christ, is now based upon not what we earn by our works as Christians, but on what Christ has purchased for us, and our ability to let go and cast down every thought that would seek to rise above the knowledge of our completeness of Him, and to grow in love and forgiveness on the bases of our completeness in Jesus Christ.

Clothing of Culture

It takes true courage, and a hunger and thirst for God alone, to be willing to hear what He would speak without filtering and qualifying His truth to conform to the traditions of culture and religion that are the foundation on which the natural man trusts and seeks to build.

When we only seek God for what He can add to what we have already built, while refusing to learn that our righteousness is but filthy rags, we will not come to that place of humility where we can both hear God's diagnosis of our condition, nor will we understand the great gift that He offers to enable fallen man to be reconciled to Himself.

The tower of Babel would have become a monolithic system which would forever entrap man into a system of his own making, one whose bars, once in place, would prove impervious to the influence of any truth but that defined by itself. Once religious tradition becomes so defined that it has become in itself the point of man's relationship to God, it has become an idol, whose stones ultimately must be shaken down so that only that built on the one foundation that a man can lay, that of the rock Jesus Christ, will remain.

Such shaking can be painful, especially to man's pride and ego, yet but a brief momentary trial compared to the possibility of an eternity apart from the light of God's presence. Momentary affliction, when it reduces us to complete dependency and faith in God not just for what He can do for us, but for who we are in Him, even as an anchor that goes beyond the veil of this temporal life, refines the gold of faith, producing an eternal weight of glory, treasure in reserved in heaven where rust, moth and thief cannot destroy.

2 Timothy 1:12

For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

John 16:32-33

Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

The Citadel of Culture

Within the boundaries set by voluntary submission and conformity to culture and religious tradition, there is a reluctance to disrupt what we know with new information that might challenge the security we place upon our routine and actions when we believe they are sufficient to meet the currently defined obligations to society and to God, and in that order.

We will shut our ears and gnash our teeth, and seek to kill any messenger that might threaten and challenge the belief and trust we have in those things in which we have already placed our trust.

Jesus said that in the last days He would say to some, "depart from Me, I never knew you". These people were indeed engaged in good religious works. Man's ability to perform good works was never in question since the fall of the first Adam. But Jesus spoke of those who while performing good works consistently throughout their mortal lives, never did so abiding in Him, the only way, truth and life to the Father. They had no bases to be in fellowship with God, they simply wished to believe that this unknown God could be appeased as long as they met the current standards defined by their culture for what is considered holy and good.

But as they are turning to man as the source for their approval their actions are merely done as eye service in order to win the approval of men. And the only certainty that we can ultimately have rest upon whether or not our external actions will enable us to be accepted by an eternal God within the context of our current temporal culture.

In Jesus' day, opposition to Him came from those who had put their trust in Moses. The Temple had become, as Jesus quoted Jeremiah, a "den of thieves" in that, men no longer came to the Temple for the sacrifices, for the shedding of blood, though which there is no forgiveness of sin, but instead the Temple had become a place of posturing and posing, and a pretentious external show of

religious acts of piety and devotion, so much so that to ensure public notice of their works, men would have trumpets blown as they made their temple offerings.

And so their religious thinking had progressed to the point that they said it was the gold that sanctified the temple. In this was their trust, in this was their foundation. And when Jesus spoke prophetically of the temple and its coming destruction at the hands of Titus in 70 A.D., that every stone would be thrown down, and to the women at the well that God would soon seek those who would worship Him in spirit and in truth, that true faith in God would no longer be a matter of worshiping at this temple or that, He was cutting to the heart not only of religious tradition, but of the carnal realm of the natural mind seeking a process whereby the works of the law the flesh could be justified.

Matthew 23:16-17

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?

Too often we do not love God enough to risk hearing Him tell us something that might challenge the security we have within current culture and traditions by which we have become accustomed to define ourselves.

We have surrendered our personal responsibility before Him, and now place our future on behalf of those to whom we have relinquished that responsibility. Those who lead and set the religious traditions and the rules for conforming and being accepted by our culture, those things which define us within the world system. Ultimately they may or may not, bear any relevance to our being able to abide beyond this current temporal dispensation in the eternal Kingdom of God.

God in the Context of Man

Many people indeed express anger towards god, and seek to judge Him thinking they have made a case for exempting themselves from any obligation or responsibility to God.

And yet the first order of business is not to seek the resolution of those temporal circumstances to which we may regard God responsible, but rather to address the larger issue of the need for our eternal salvation and reconciliation to our Creator.

For Jesus said it is after we seek Him and His righteousness, when we have truly loved God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength in response to the love and forgiveness He first demonstrates in offering His only begotten son for the sins of fallen man, that our temporal daily needs will be cared for.

But when we judge god thus so, we do so in the context of our own temporal existence, usually by a system of justice not divined by God's revealed law, but by our own sense of injustice, where we feel we have been injured or wrong to an extent that invalidates our obligation to be reconciled to God. At that point we in fact have morally placed ourselves above Him. We have sought to attain a superior position that by our own canon of right and wrong we have found Him guilty.

Often in effect what we are doing is holding God responsible for allowing us, His creation, to do what we will to do, as we each in our own sphere seek to build on the foundation of ourselves and be our own authority.

Often we hear the question asked, if God is a good God, why does he allow such and such to happen?

And yet men must no longer seek to measure themselves by themselves, but by the standard that mans creator, God has set. To truly evaluate the merits of our righteousness, which as Jesus pointed out, must be of the heart, not merely the

performance of external actions. To those He taught, Jesus would often ask questions to remind them that all men are mortal and all live under the same inherited sentence of death due to the fall of the first Adam.

Luke 13:4-5

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

It is impossible for the inward motivations of the heart to produce the external works and actions that will meet the standards of the Law, for if our actions are necessary to forestall the wrath of God, then we truly cannot love Him, for He is our enemy, someone we must appease. And yet it is we ourselves who are born spiritually apart from unity with Him.

There are others who believe that their works are sufficient to earn them acceptance before God, that they can meet His requirements, but this is usually only a religious system consisting of conformity to external behavior and ritual, not that of the true transforming of the heart due to faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it is to those who tenuously cling to a belief in the integrity of those systems in which they have placed their hope, who are the most instinctively opposed to any challenge to the validity of those systems, even if God Himself were to speak against those truths.

John 5:45

Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you — Moses, in whom you trust.

The men who set religious cultural traditions are but men as ourselves, and will perish as we do. They cannot save us, and we cannot make them responsible

for our own choices, whether or not we would hear from god concerning our sin and His salvation in Christ, the one way that He has provided in Himself by which all men can be saved.

The real question might be would God be a good God if he denied man, who is created in His image, freedom of choice?

For whether we are successful or not, from the standpoint of eternity, all of our works are as filthy rags. There is none righteous, no not one. And while the cares and concerns of our day to day existence might be pleasant enough to distract us from our eternal condition, and we may feel we are rich and in need of nothing, there remains the unanswered question of our alienation and need for reconciliation with God, and this issue must be dealt with before our ability to choose our orientation while inhabiting the vehicles of our clay vessels in time and space is terminated by the final unchangeable state of eternity.

Institutionalized Religious Context

How is it that throughout history movements in the church have often strayed so far from the plain teaching of the scriptures of the Bible, which has always been available? Perhaps it is because men get caught up in their own agendas, and so they seek to sanctify their actions and decisions within a religious context. It is at that point that the scriptures will be mined and harvested for those particular verses can be tied together to create a pseudo doctrinal imperative for the given cause or movement, and to legitimize the authority of those leading the move in the new direction.

But this move, or shift, will always be always from a focus on Jesus Christ, and the authority of God's complete counsel in the scriptures of the Bible, and will ultimately begin transferring authority to temporal instances where men invent and cause ideas and dreams to arise out of the imaginations of their hearts, due to their focus on their own desires and causes, and all too often the desires of those claiming to receive a dream or vision from God are themselves the actual source.

Jeremiah 29:8

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed.

There seems to be a reoccurring progression in the focus and dynamics of a given small community of believers (that is often lead by a central individual) that begins to attract more and more members. At a certain point in the size of the membership, the concerns of facilitating the members so that when they come together for worship and discipleship they can continue to be focused around the central leadership will often become the primary concern. At that time in the growth of the given congregation or fellowship, the concept of God's kingdom increasingly is evaluated in terms of property, seating, the scheduling of

performances, and most importantly, insuring the members remain focused on the participation and financial support of the increasing cost of the resources involved.

At so at that point, power and favor from God is sought, and new techniques and strategies to gain God's favor are sought and derived from the scriptures so that the members might increase in their ability to support the ever growing resource demands of the organizations facilities and services.

The dynamic of the small group is now replaced by those of business and marketing cycles, the pastor or group leader now assumes the role of CEO or president focused no longer on the spiritual growth of the members in Christ, but on the members continuing support of the institution. The teachings and instruction therefore will be overall focused on reinforcing the participation and support of the members for the institution and its facilities which will come to represent the what is understood as the Kingdom of God, even as a idol. The true church of course, is not a physical building, but rather those members identified by their membership, by faith, in the body of Christ.

And so the teachings are geared to focus the individual on themselves, and how much activity and support they are providing the physical institutions structures and programs. At that point, with the focus on the individual and their actions, there is no longer remaining an attempt to lift Christ up and focus on Him. And the dynamic of love and forgiveness, produced by a true rest in faith in Christ, will not necessarily always be conducive to maintaining and encouraging the work ethic and sacrifice needed for the continual support for the buildings and structures of the given institution. The institution and its facilities and leadership must therefore come to represent the success with which the individual members identify their own spiritual status in the kingdom of God, the kingdom itself now localized and represented by the given organizations facilities.

There are even now large segments of institutional religion that interpret the scriptures and teachings of the Bible to actually communicate the principles of

pragmatic marketing and organizational growth by social thinkers such as Peter F. Drucker, who saw the organization, even of institutionalized religion, as the primary concern to effect social change, rather than the influence of individual lives that have been changed by faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and nurtured and reinforced in that faith by fellowship in a local community of likeminded believers in Christ.

The focus on God's work will thus be less on changed relationships between the individual and God, themselves and each other, and will increasingly be focused on what they are doing to help support the increasing resource needs of the physical structures of the given institution.

There is always an attempt to shift the believers focus onto these structures and to get the believers to identify their own spiritual or religious progress in terms of how successful the institution they are associated with and support with their time and recourses becomes. The larger the buildings, the greater they will be led to believe is the miracle and working of God. And therefore as supporters of that institution, they can vicariously share in its glory.

This is, of course, a far cry from a church that may not have a physical building, but may yet have a firm edifice built on the rock of Christ, with all of the members growing to the full stature, operating the gifts of the Holy Spirit amongst each other on behalf of that growth, to know the fullness of what it means to be in Christ, and rest in Him, complete in Him. They thus can then operate in His authority as they are clothed in Him and His identity, and their self worth is not derived from their association and participation in a particularly ostentatious or large physical temporal instance of cultural man made religion.

All too often when there is indeed a genuine revelation of God the carnal religious tendency in man is to try to build an institution to house and facilitate that revelation. We see this on the mount of transfiguration, where the first inclination

of the disciples on seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah, was to put up three tabernacles.

Luke 9:29-35

As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!”

The tabernacles would become physical temporal points of reference to which the attention of people would be focused. But the voice of God from heaven corrected this inclination when the disciples were told that their focus and attention should be on Jesus.

It is rather curious that at the point where the numbers of believers coming together and seeking to realize the Kingdom of God through a socialistic community, found themselves in order to maintain the operate and administrate the increasing logistics of the institutionalized physical implementation representing that ideal, that one of the first persons appointed to such an administration position, Stephen, in the next chapter of the book of Acts becomes one of the most significant martyrs of the early Christian Church, and due to the resulting persecution, the members of the church are then scattered, no longer able to congregate and develop a physical community presence, an institutionalized

organization to represent and administrate the Kingdom of God, for now the church is being scattered, and individuals, not institutions are now witnessing to towns and communities bringing the Gospel, rather than the Gospel being localized and encapsulated in the community that was at one time growing in Jerusalem.

Acts 6:1-6

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

There is only one foundation that a man can lay, that of Christ Jesus. When the church becomes diverted, into politics of religion, denominationalism, the institutionalized church tends to focus participants on the needs of their own community and the religious structures and programs, rather than on Christ. While corrections in doctrine and theology are indeed necessary, from the standpoint of the simplicity and purity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in almost every instance where error might occur, as long as Jesus is lifted and every thought, idea, philosophy, and political movement, is brought under subjection to the knowledge of Christ, so there will be balance and correct doctrine necessary for saving Christian faith and practice.

When the lack of focus of the body of Christ on Christ Himself takes place, it is then that religion becomes diversified, categorized, by those religious elements that a derived to focused on defining man's actions and participation within religious institutions, rather than beginning in the completeness of Christ, being transformed in the inner man, producing the true fruit that Jesus said would last.

The Context of Christ

Our context will be where we find our value. That place where we can be sustained, find completeness and acceptance, that place that will define us. If we continue in our normal context, and try to fit Jesus into that context, at best He will be but another teacher of truth, another way to miraculously meet the daily cares and concerns of life.

Because of the miracles He performed, Jesus could always draw a crowd, yet a crowd of people eager to have Jesus meet their temporal needs was not primarily what He was seeking, for He sought disciples who could do the work of God in His authority, and authority that only could come when their trust was no longer in their own abilities, but in Him. He was looking for those who would be leave, as did Abraham, the context and security of the way of life they had been born into, and be born again by faith in Jesus, the way, truth and the life.

Miracles fit into the pattern and life style of all people. Miracles are the short cut to the things everyone who have no other bases for their existence than their clay vessel and the temporal environment they inhabit. In this realm are the kingdoms of men built. Yet Jesus, even at the risk of offending the multitudes who were attracted to Him for the loaves and the fishes, caused many to stumble at His teaching concerning Himself, and even among His disciples there were those who would turn from following Him.

Matthew 6:31-33

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

He is offering entry into God's kingdom through Himself. To gain such a great gift, not just acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, but to actually partake of the heavenly promises, we must leave all that we had trusted and known, and make Him the foundation for all that we are and all that we do in the work of God. This is an aspect of Christian faith that will not be found by those merely seeking a short cut to the security of material possessions. The kingdom of heaven, life in Christ, is not to be a means to an end, for Jesus Himself is the pearl of great price that to possess of our own we must first let go of all that is in our hands.

Mark 8:34-35

When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

Many would therefore be surprised, on a careful reading of the letter of James in the New Testament, to discover, contrary to much modern teaching that is supposedly about how to have and operate faith, that we can be rich in faith without necessarily being rich in this world's material goods.

James 2:1-5

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

The contentment and rest in faith is not reaching a place of contentment when faith seems to produce an abundance of the things of this world, for as Paul says, we brought nothing into this world, and we shall take nothing out. What matters is the treasure we have stored in heaven, reserved for us in Christ, and living on behalf of that faith, steadfast on the rock of Christ, through all of life's circumstances. We will know when we have reached this place of faith, this separation from the kingdoms of men unto the kingdoms of our Lord, when we can say as Paul:

Philippians 4:10-13

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Galatians 2:20-21

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

John 17:13-16

But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

Matthew 6:19-22

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

1 John 2:15-17

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Colossians 3:1-3

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Matthew 13:44

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

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