

# Faith and Works XIX

*The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts*

Col. 2:8

## Join the Club

Many people now associate with or join a religious community because it provides roles through which they can identify themselves and find acceptance by agreeing to the group's beliefs and participating in the groups corporate activities.

Unfortunately there seems to be an inverse relationship to the level of a person's sense of self worth, self esteem, insecurity, and how willing they may be to seek the comfort of surrendering the responsibility for their self image to an authority figure.

Indeed, Jesus often referred to His followers as sheep, and so instructed His disciples to feed his sheep in the good pasture, that which is found when the shepherd leads the sheep through the door, Christ Himself.

When the focus is in Christ, and rest in His finished work, then fruit from that relationship can develop where individuals love much because they have tasted and received the Lord's love for them, or as the Bible says, "we love because He first loved us". Jesus said "Abide in me or you can do nothing".

When we are standing firm on the grace and knowledge of Christ, when our attention is fixed on Him rather than being self conscious (Col. 3:1), and when the body of Christ is literally clothed with Christ and seeks to allow the gifting of God to increase the knowledge of the unseen, to build up the knowledge of Christ, then we are seeing the church as Christ's body, with Him as the foundation and the head, then there will be a building whose builder and foundation is God.

But without a complete Gospel, all too often we gravitate to the normal patterns of religion where looking at the external we create a fellowship of people measuring themselves by themselves to see who is the most prosperous, talented or popular.

While a given movement or fellowship may use the name of Christ, the dynamics that provide social cohesiveness may often be established by submission to the leadership and values of the group.

Christ is no longer the foundation and head of a church or religious social structure whose members see their value in identifying themselves with a given ministry or organization precisely because it offers them a role to play that will award them with acceptance and affirmation in terms of the measurements defined by what it means to be successful in participating and supporting that community.

Unfortunately a lot of our participation, and the allegiance we give to certain causes, has more to do with the identification of the roles we are offered to star in as we perform in and the recognition we perceive we are receiving from those we have placed in authority over us, then it does true heartfelt service to God for what He has already done for of us. Those who are not resting in Christ and seeing themselves complete in Him are often completing themselves by their own works.

Those that are complete in Christ, are working from a point of rest, and realize that even if they give all that they have, that they know whom they have believed, and that He is faithful and just to keep that which they have committed unto Him against that day. Their treasures are truly in heaven, as is their identity, strangers and aliens as they sojourner in this age. They are not motivated by the need for their ego or persona to be supported by the opinions of those included within the arena, the social group in which they have chosen to earn their acceptance.

Many so called media ministries today boast in being significant in changing lives, but in reality they are simply drawing viewership and the participation of those who wish to share in the importance and significance of the media's presence as evaluated by our current cultures standards of what is success. It all comes down to ratings, the more people think about us, the more successful we are. Many people are simply looking for the movie that offers them the best starring role.

It is easy relying on the motivations of fallen man to build an organization and attract supporters where those who participate are constantly reminded of how important and significant their contributions are, so their worth is derived from their utility to the organization, rather than their being built up as individual members of the body of Christ.

Once a sense of one's community has been established, and one finds and rests in one's security within the role one plays within the confines of the behavior proscribed and sanctioned by that community, and as a prerequisite has turned away, as an act of fidelity to the accepting community, from all other potentially contrary view points that might bring into question the foundational principles that establish and validate the community's value that they bestow when they accept an individual into the security of the group's collective identity, it is very rare that one will have the emotional and spiritual confidence and fortitude to challenge or question the premise and foundation that established and gave validity to that community in the first place.

To be accepted is to submit and give allegiance to the authority of the group and/or its leadership to bestow value to the individual by accepting their inclusion within the group's identity. In a sense, this frees the individual from the burden of developing their own self confidence, but the price is now the individual's servitude to continue to meet the conditions dictated by the collective consensus.

When people say that to deny any authority is to disobey God, in reality, they are choosing to value their work of obeying a law over obedience to the final authority of God's word and His spirit.

Fear of man, and dependence on man for our confidence to stand or fall, is a snare. What kind of life do we really have if it is based on the approval and acceptance of others? And if purpose gives us our meaning, it is the purpose that is important, not the reason for the purpose.

The true shepherd is to lead the sheep to Jesus, not run and provide direction for a corporation or business. Religious institutions that in themselves become the center of focus are providing a false kingdom, a community based around participation in the organization, instead of the one we are to be truly at home in as we are to be aliens and strangers in this one.

This is probably the pitfall many attempts at organized community religious practice around procedures and committees. It isn't so much that we use doctrines to define the word of God instead of having the word of God define our doctrines, it is rather that ultimately, we have our reward here, the kingdom and city we are seeking is simply inclusion within a local fellowship of like minded people, the doctrine is almost incidental and subservient to that purpose, which is probably why it is so hard to discuss anything beyond what people have accepted as the ground rules for their being included in their own particular group in which their confidence and self identity is derived.

People can be drawn into an organization and find fulfillment in the identity they derive from the acceptance they gain by the role they play and their significance to that organization. Attracting people like that will indeed grow the organization, but that is not growth of the body of Christ in Him, that is the growth of dependence on the relationship of the individual to the organization.

There are those who are satisfied with a performance oriented support of their self esteem, confident they have the necessary talents, skill, or charisma to continue to be relevant to the organization. Some of us have overflowing cups, but what is in the cup? When we do things to be seen and approved by men, we are performing according to a set of rules defined by the group that we are seeking to support us in self esteem or in practical material goods.

There will, however, be those whose insecurity goes deeper, who will not find comfort in performance oriented acceptance.

These may very well be those that Jesus spoke of, those who have such an insecure foundation in themselves, who are not confident they can meet the world's standards, who have faced rejection too often to take comfort in the shallow praises of man, who in the end will only be satisfied with the love of God Himself and the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ, and not from their own works or qualifications.

These are those who hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, who take no comfort in the flesh. They do not want what they can build but are instead looking for a dwelling place whose builder and foundation is God.

If someone has been serving faithfully in a ministry or religious organization for a number of years, completed all the Bible study courses, served faithfully, yet after a number of years their self esteem is still hanging by a thread, based upon whether or not they think that day they are going to receive approval and acceptance for what they have done, it may be a case of an unbalanced diet, an incomplete presentation of the Gospel. Above all we are to stand in Christ. If our spiritual or emotional feet keep getting kicked out from under us, perhaps we are not standing where we think we are.

Ideally one would assume, that a church that is Christ centered, and focused on Christ, and seeking to build up the body of Christ with Christ as the foundation, the church as His body, and with Christ as the head, would be seeking to affirm each member in who they are in Christ, rather than pointing out all their differences, and making them self conscious and aware of their external circumstances or measurement.

**Galatians 3: 26-28** For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The early church was a community that one joined not to find oneself in the membership of the community itself, their meaning and personal sense of worth did not derive from the community and participation in its activities, but instead they came to participate in the reinforcement of faith through doctrine, worship, prayer and the breaking of bread together that all might find and be strengthened and remain steadfast in their identity in the completed work of Christ Himself, and to also recognize the church as members of His body. And so we are told the gifts of the spirit, as God wills, are deployed to that same end.

**Eph. 4:11-16** And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

In that setting, self worth did not come from participation and acceptance of a religious group, the religious group and its members found unity together through faith as members of the body of Christ. They were letting go of all such man made foundations based on external cultural valuations and instead were seeking to place the weight of all that they were on the foundation of Christ Himself.

Do we then come together that we might be recognized and accepted, or are we coming that we might recognize Christ and learn to walk in faith and abide in Him?

The group that only identifies and defines themselves by their membership, or non membership with a certain set of doctrines or political views, shared activities and the roles they play in those activities within a local community centered perhaps around a charismatic personality, will be often doing so to exercises through corporate reinforcement the very spiritual error that has persisted as a tendency in man's nature since the fall in the garden. That is, man makes himself by choosing to identify with how he or she and others judge themselves by the roles, or fig leaves, they are performing.

When we start deliberately speaking of finding our purpose this way, and design religious institutions to facilitate this process of man making himself through his works, we are no longer walking in the light of the Gospel and seeking to be included in God's kingdom through Christ. Instead we are making our own kingdom.

If one is going to church for the wrong reasons, chances are the church one is going to will be the wrong church. If our fulfillment comes just from the participation in the church organization itself, and the church is not an aid in focusing oneself on Christ and learning to rest and abide in Him, being satisfied in the heavenly riches in Christ, but instead, our self esteem is coming from the approval we get by meeting the expectations and fitting into the roles prescribed by the local social group, many would be better off not attending a religious institution.

One might as well toss horseshoes with the boys on Wednesday night or join a bowling league. It will not be God's best, but if the only reason we are attending church or a religious fellowship is to simply be accepted and base our self-esteem on the approval of a group of people, and one has found a church where that is essentially all that is happening, one has really not found the Lord or done themselves any good in the area of eternal things.

The answer for this life is the confidence and hope for the next. When we seek first God's kingdom by abiding in Christ, then all the other aspects of our lives are brought into proper balance and are able to receive God's blessings.

There are also attempts to unify communities through shared mystical experiences. But if our mystical state is an experience induced by our own practice of some method, why not do as Huxley advocated (and later, Timothy Leary)? We should conclude the only logical course of action is to just take drugs.

Drugs can bring about the perception of cognitive gestalt so one experiences profound comprehension of normally perceived unconnected ideas and events. But the unity of the experience is due to the chemical state of the mind and the ideas it contains within the context of the altered perception and experience, not revelation of truth. This approach is the only valid option for those who despair and no longer seek for revelation of absolute truth, values or meaning. They no longer search for a truth “higher” than themselves because they are not looking up, they are looking within.

If we are looking to find ourselves, the Bible has the answer. We are lost. As long as we hang onto ourselves, we will stay lost. But if we instead look for ourselves in Christ, we find our life, the higher life, in Him, as well as truth, as truth is in Jesus.

When we come to, and are ready to face, the realization that the self is the problem, and not just something that needs directions so we can continue on the way toward self perfection, then we will have ears to hear the truth that will set us free.

Our completeness does not come through purpose; it is to come from a person.

**Acts 4:12** Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

**Matthew 17:1-5** Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was

transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”

The scriptures tell us that when the heart is changed by salvation by faith in the finished work of God in Christ, fruit will result. But the axe needs to be laid at the root of the tree that we might be grafted into another. Focusing on the self through positive or negative works as a means of perfecting man, of building on his own foundation is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has not given us a message through His Sons ministry on Earth along with the writings of the Apostles and Church tradition and doctrine. No, He has spoken to us in His Son.

**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.”

But the Gospel message today is packaged to appeal to what people are looking for, the loaves and the fishes, and in turn, they will love God for helping them to sustain the life that in reality Jesus says we must die to, reckoning ourselves crucified with Him on the cross, before we can find our life in Him.

The building plans God has for us will only withstand the storms that will surely come, tribulations are promised in this life, when the foundation is His Son.

We are not supposed to be asking what works would Jesus do so we can imitate Him and learn by our works to be like Him, we are supposed to be trusting and resting in the confidence that He has finished it.

**John 5:39-40** “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 6:29** Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

And as there can really only be two kingdoms, when we build on any foundation other than Christ, we create more darkness, more places for ego and pride to flourish, and all the works done there, even if with good intentions and good in themselves, will not achieve the new birth of the Gospel.

If we do not know Him, seek to be found in Him, we cannot abide in Him. And while we may do great things in the kingdom of men, He will say to each and everyone individually on that Day, “I never knew you”.

He is the rock in the dream that Daniel described to king Nebuchadnezzar, the rock not cut by human hands that will destroy the remaining kingdoms of man when He returns to set up His own eternal Kingdom.

May we be found clothed in Him when the call is made for the bride of Christ to come to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Amen.