

# Faith and Works XVIII

*The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts*

Col. 2:8

## When Its All About You

There is a popular song with lyrics that speak about getting back to the heart of worship, where it is all about Jesus. But we currently live in a day and age where Christ is no longer the focus among the members of those that professes to be His body.

Why is church not about Christ? Because it is usually about us, our weekly effort to come together and learn how to become like Him in His power and/or success. We want to change ourselves to look like Him, not let go of ourselves and step off our natural foundation and find our life in Him.

Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord God with all our heart, and our neighbor as oneself. He said the world would know who His disciples were by the Christian love they demonstrated to one another.

Often when we hear contemporary teaching on Love and Forgiveness, the idea being presented is that we love by faith, that it is not a feeling, but we operate it by faith the same way we would if we were praying for rain. The modern teaching seems to be that love is a substance that we get access to when we are born again. When we need to love or forgive someone, we just believe we have it by faith, just like healing or prosperity. There isn't a lot for the heart to do.

And of course there is great emphasis about not being offended by anyone (especially against those teaching contrary to scripture) because that will block our ability to manifest the prosperity that is already ours. We are said that we have everything now, that God is waiting for us to act as He does. One needs to be nice to others so one will prosper. The modern teaching is that we should not let other people bother us, we should just let it go. But there is a difference between ignoring or disregarding the thoughts and opinions of those around you due to our focus on ourselves, and truly forgiving someone in a loving relationship those whom we love as God has loved us in Christ.

The point is, many today have been heavily influenced by the Gnosticism and mind-science doctrines that have been main-streamed into contemporary "Christian" teaching.

Love becomes an externalized force, rather than a choice we make when we recognize and are compelled to love and forgive others based on God's love and forgiveness for us.

It is becoming more and more clear that there is a difference between recognizing the value and need to forgive each other due to the value God has put on us, and the modern concept of forgiveness of others, or rather the dismissal of the significance of others offence. It is happening because the modern spirituality that suggests we are all Gods and that the world around us is simply a manifestation of the thoughts we choose to think, is a system of belief that will tend to make those around us less real than ourselves.

It one thing to forgive, its quite another to be able to dismiss another's offence because they are less real or substantial than ourselves. Teaching faith as a technique that we need to learn to operate, rather than a relationship with a God who is to be trusted, will both focus the individual on their own actions, and also presuppose a world system that legitimizes profound preoccupation with ones self.

Indeed, we are told it is a lack of faith not to be focused on thinking ourselves into prosperity. One hears that those who are poor, are so because they have a "poverty" mentality. You can hear this any night of the week on prime time religious programming from multi-millionaire televangelists.

This suggests a rather unsettling idea, that the mega churches of today are not full of a community of believers united by their mutual identification with who they are together in the literal body of Christ, but instead the modern religious institution is in reality producing through their Gnostic teachings legions of Narcissists.

It is not that we do not need the things the gentiles seek, Jesus said our Heavenly Father knows that we do, it is just that the focus of a Biblical Christian is to be beyond those things, they are anchored behind the veil. As the life based on the foundation of the fallen nature is left for that of life in Christ, so too, the needs of the old life for sustenance and improving itself to reach equality with God and sustain themselves with eternal life is no longer a debt to the flesh that we must pay.

By having faith taught as a means of becoming more than human, or as a redefinition of the nature of man with the focus on man transforming himself by his own knowledge, Christ is no longer the focus. The more spiritual we try to become by our own efforts, the more we focus on ourselves and not on Christ.

For instance, in the Gospels Jesus teaches that when we give we should not do so with a thought or motivation of what we will get in return. That is because, we are to be content in all circumstances, as we are eternally complete in Him, and recognize it is better to be absent from the body and be present with the Lord, as all that the old nature might have tried to live in is destined to perish (Col. 3:5-7; 1 John 2:15-16).

Yet now it is common for churches to entice their members to give by teaching that tithing, rather than a service to God and a testimony that we are no longer live for the things the unsaved world seeks, is instead a law of the created order, such as gravity is a natural law, and that we are to manipulate or operate this "law" for our own advantage, and so the focus is always taught to be about what one will receive, such as the popular "hundred fold blessing" teaching used to bring in donations to the ministries of many prosperous televangelists. Indeed, they teach that the richer their followers make them, the more their followers will prosper.

It is also commonly taught that one of the ways one can be sure that the law of sowing and reaping will work, is by not being in offence. This usually means not questioning those at the top of the religious organization or whether or not what

they are teaching is sound Biblical doctrine such as the apostles taught. But the kind of love and tolerance they are teaching about is far different from that of the Bible, where Jesus speaks of the woman who was forgiven much because she loved much. By conceptualizing love as an external force that one accesses by faith (by one's own mental self-concentration) the focus is thus on one's self and thus the process begins of depersonalizing the external world, and with it, the personal connections to those around us.

How serious is this condition in the modern church today? Consider this description of the end times personality:

2 Tim. 3:1-5 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

What is chilling about this description is that in modern terms this is a perfect description for the Narcissistic personality disorder that clinical psychologists see as increasing at an astonishing rate in the past decade. Some common traits of Narcissistic personality disorder include the following:

- They are self-centered and boastful often exaggerating their own importance, achievements and talents
- They seek constant attention and admiration and positive reinforcement from others.
- They consider themselves better or more enlightened or spiritual than others.
- They have a need to exaggerate their talents and achievements and dominate conversation with talk about themselves often appearing arrogant in their behavior and/or attitude

- They believe that they are entitled to special treatment due to innate abilities or achievements
- They be easily hurt but might not show it and may react to criticism with anger
- They might take advantage of others to achieve their own goals, often disregarding or unable to recognize or identify with the feelings of others, lacking empathy
- They are obsessively self-focused and pursue mainly selfish goals

While sociologists such as Christopher Lasch in his bestselling book "The Culture of Narcissism" identified the phenomenon beginning with the "Me" decades of the late 70's and 80s, the numbers of those meeting the criteria for this disorder are now dramatically on the increase. Such early development factors that are thought to be responsible include excessive praise or flattery of children, or oddly enough, on the other side of the coin, children neglected or abused or suffering trauma inflicted by parents or other authority figures during childhood.

In the last days we are told that because of the increase in lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold (Matthew 24:12). Two parent families are becoming a minority.

But that is only a part of the factors thought to be involved in the increase of this disorder. While there is a precedence for the environmental conditioning for this disorder due to the upheaval and breakdown in the fabric of the traditional family and social life, there is now a both a cultural philosophical and a religious metaphysical trend that is actually facilitating the development of the Narcissistic personality.

When the church loses its Biblical foundation and follows the trends of the World, in the past it has always been a step or two behind in terms of music or theological trends. Not so today, where the church prides itself on being in the forefront of the new spirituality that is sweeping western civilization with it

combination of relativism concerning Biblical truth due to centering the world around one's personal experience, and collectivism based on systems of pantheism and panentheism.

While past generations of Christians often saw a negative legalistic approach to God through the self-abasement and a constant focus and awareness of personal sin, our current generation is now being swept up in a positive legalistic approach to self-improvement.

After rational objective truth was replaced by the leaps of faith into the non-reason of modern ideologies that ended in despair, Frances Schaeffer pointed out that modern man in western civilization had turned to subjective meaning though a focus on personal peace and affluence with profound apathy towards any hope of absolute meaning in the categories of the ultimate meaning of life and the values that depend on that meaning.

The result was a spiritual void that needed to be filled. But what kind of spirituality would suite a generation focused exclusively on their own personal peace and prosperity? One did not need to be invented, it already existed and had been slowly working its way into contemporary Christian thinking till it no longer looked like the foreign belief system it was due to its completely different foundations from that of Biblical Christianity. The culture of self-esteem would prove to be the perfect stepping stone to this belief system.

Our culture is now fully immersed in the paradigm of self-esteem started by those, such as Norman Vincent Peal, Robert H. Schuller and others who held that the essence of the Gospel message was "You have to love yourself before you can love others". While some warned that if you love yourself too much, you won't have any left for any one else, yet these ideas found fertile ground in an increasing materialistic society preoccupied with what to do to amuse itself in its leisure time.

When Rick Warren incorporated the business practices of Peter Drucker seeking a model with which to grow the contemporary church into a significant force for socialistic social change, the emphasis was on attracting members by making them feel at home in the church community. Biblical faith and doctrine was set aside in favor of programs designed to meet the modern needs of the current culture. That culture, raised on decades of materialism, increasingly sought to focus on teachings that were pragmatic and targeted toward improving ones potential and influence.

And unfortunately, as we redefine Love and forgiveness to mean that one now can remain unmoved and disregard the opinions and feelings of those who might be in disagreement with us, true love, where we regard our neighbor as ourselves and value others more than ourselves is replaced by a cold indifference as our preoccupation with ourselves makes us loose sight of the significance in God's eyes of those around us. We have come to the place where the character traits of the Narcissistic personality are now regarded as virtues.

Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., co-author of the book "The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement" points out that Narcissism is seductive because it has both good and bad qualities. Narcissists can be outgoing, confident, charming, exciting, and likable; they also can be controlling, self-centered, manipulative, unfaithful and even violent. Here is the catch: the good parts of narcissism are what get you into a relationship, and the bad stuff doesn't show up until much later.

In his book "Against the Protestant Gnostics" which was published in 1993, Phillip. J. Lee used the ancient heresy of Gnosticism as an archetype by which to gage contemporary trends of Protestantism in North America. However, while the metaphor may have been appropriate, we now face today, in the popular movements of the modern church and religious culture, the literal explosion of teachings that use Biblical terminology, but in structure owe their foundations to the Gnosticism of the mind-science and new age Theosophical teachings which began to make inroads into Christian teaching beginning in the 1800s. What was

metaphor then is now the metaphysics underlying the belief systems that give context to the spirituality practiced both in and outside the contemporary church.

What was less obvious, until now, was that there was a counter part to the influence a culture of materialism was having in encouraging the development of the Narcissistic personality. This was a trend in the spiritual world view of both the culture and the modern Gnostic doctrines being mainstreamed in the church. While many variations of this exist to one degree or another in various denominations or popular religious trends, it can easily be argued that over all the current religious spectrum has come under one main denomination, that of the Church of Narcissism. Its doctrine now owes more to the doctrines of the New Spirituality than to Biblical Christianity.

Attacks on the Bible are no where more evident than within the modern church itself as they rush to become relevant to what they say God is doing in the culture around them. There are those who now see themselves as new Apostles, adding the visions they create out of their own heart and who believe that what they are teaching should be regarded as seriously as the Bible, and even replace it with new revelation.

There are others, particularly within the Emergent Church movement, hard at work denouncing the God of the Bible in favor of a man made God more in line with the modern viewpoint that "I'm OK, your OK", expressed in popular books such as "The Shack". All of these are allowing a new faith which equally embraces the religious expressions of all faiths, as religious experience, ones personal viewpoint and feelings are given ultimate consideration rather than the revelation of God's word in the Bible and the Holy Spirit witness of the Glory of God in the face of Christ.

The modern church is no longer the salt of the Earth, and having left its first love, for itself, now finds itself just a variation of the trends rapidly moving the world to

its final confrontation with the one true God. The modern church is now facilitating the problem, rather than offering a solution or alternative.

This would explain why often there is noticeable apathy amongst church attendees for reaching the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and concern for the suffering of Christians being persecuted for the testimony of Jesus in other countries. After all, it is not about them. People are more concerned with learning how to have their best life now. Their focus is not on the hope of salvation spoken of so often in the scriptures. If anyone is not having their best life now, they will usually be encouraged to quickly get a check in the mail to the marketers of the currently popular teachings so they can learn what they are doing wrong.

And these teachings will usually be with an emphasis on Gnostic principles that focus on self will and controlling circumstances by ones own thoughts, and that practice is of course justified because we are said to be as God (we just need to be reminded that its all about us). While the name of Jesus may be freely used, along with some scripture taken from the Bible, it is usually in the context of teachings that in essence are no different than what are taught in best selling books such as "The Secret". This re-orientation of the kingdom of God into something that can be quantified by the things of this world can only be supported by avoiding scriptures such as the following:

2 Cor. 5:1-8 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith,

not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

Today faith is measured by many by how useful it is in increasing worldly possessions, and living on behalf of our treasure in heaven as described in the Bible is said to be foolish and impractical. Yet the Bible has always been consistent in warning of the effects that weeds will have on the seed of the Gospel.

Rev. 3: 17-18 Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked — I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

It will only be about in Christ when we voluntarily let go of our hold on this life to find it in Him, with our eyes focused on the author, perfecter, and finisher of our faith. Yet to lift our eye on Him, we must look away from ourselves.

Col. 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.

1 Cor. 15:20-28 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For

He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

Jesus asked His disciples if the Son of Man would find faith when He returned (Luke 18:8). He was speaking of Biblical faith in Him, not the working of signs and wonders that He often predicted would be used in the last days even to fool the elect if that were possible (Matthew 24:24). There is no end both in the modern church and even in non Christian society to teachings about faith and the supernatural. There is very little attention paid to Jesus.

But mankind by nature is born with characteristics he shares with the father of his current fallen condition, so natural thinking follows patterns that lead to self rather than the child like acceptance of the Gospel that leads to Christ. We seek religious experience to lift ourselves up, when the Bible declares that it is Christ Himself, just as Moses lifted the bronze serpent, that must be lifted up.

John 8:44 You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

When our own experience becomes the bases for truth rather than the plain teaching of the Word of God we are no longer in the realm of Biblical faith. In many ways studies of current theological (or Theo-illogical) trends are drawing legitimate parallels to past movements of philosophy such as Fascism, that system of thought, based on Western occultism, which denies truth outside our own experience, and the increasing irrelevance that modern religious teaching has for

sound Biblical doctrine. For true Biblical faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17).

The power of the Gospel is not to bring about spiritual experiences per se. It is about the fruits of those born new in the kingdom of God who are joint heirs with Christ. Until Jesus came, all teaching about the kingdom of God was in the form of how to get there. Jesus taught men how to live when they were accepted there through Him as joint heirs of the kingdom. But to be in Him, means we must leave the foundation of ourselves and put all our faith, hope and trust in Him. Its hard to let go when based on ourselves and our potential we are being told we can have our best life now, that we don't need to abide in Christ, we can be as God.

Christian love is not about being so self centered that the concerns of others no longer matter, it is loving others as oneself.

2 Cor. 5:14-15 For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.

Matt. 22:37-40 Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

We can not love God if we are all destined to die due to our being born by nature children of wrath. But God is not calling the rich, the powerful, the charismatic, those who see themselves as well. He is calling the sick, those who are willing to come into the light that their deeds may be exposed, for in the light of God's law we learn what sin is, and that by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified, for all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. To those who know they need

salvation, not a life improvement coach, Jesus offers Himself to replace the worthless old man, the first husband who legally must be left to die that we might be born again into a living hope through the Holy Spirit in Him.

That is the reason the Law was given with the sacrificial system of the Tabernacle and later the Temple in Jerusalem, where even the high priest could not enter the Holy of Holies, that which was after the heavenly pattern, without the shedding of blood. It was not to be opened until the Lamb of God shed His blood, tasting Himself the death all mankind faced since the fall, and that all, like Abraham, put their faith for an eternal future in the provision of God, even beyond the cross that all who would follow Jesus would have to pick up. It was not a cross of severe treatment of the body, but a complete annihilation of the old foundation of the self, man's soul, on the cross of Christ, that our foundation and what we began to build upon in the new life might be on Him and in Him.

Biblical Christianity is about a relationship where God is at the center, where the focus is on Him, and not ourselves.

It is not about behaving as if people around us do not concern us, nor is it about operating "laws" that bring us material gain. We are to laugh with those who laugh, but also weep with those who weep. Not just regard the rich and proud, but equally consider the poor rich in faith (James 2:5). We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. A self centered life cannot do this from the heart, but out of self interest may indeed be seen to perform works of charity, especially if the social economy offers merit for such behavior. Jesus warned about this kind of self serving religion.

Matt. 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done

many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

Only those who have become complete in Him, in His body, can respond with unconditional, Agape love. Those truly abiding in Christ are members one of another, of His body, neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free.

Matt. 22:35-40 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

1 John 4:19 We love Him because He first loved us.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever would believe on Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Psalms 100:3 Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.