

Faith and Works XXXIV

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

Membership

Too often our criteria in evaluating truth is not that of the Gospel, but is instead whether or not we feel people's needs are being met, and in turn we have loosely come to define that in itself as what the Gospel is all about, regardless of the particular need or needs being met.

Christ is God's answer to the need of fallen man for redemption and salvation. Christ is not an accessory or life style coach for aiding fallen man to become comfortable and successful in his fallen condition. To be married to Christ, to be a member of His body, the Church, the bride of Christ, is to be divorced legally from our first husband the only way that God allows, by the death of the first husband, left for dead, by faith understood to have been crucified with Christ on His cross.

People want to belong, to feel part of something, to feel accepted. And to be in control to the extent that they are confident the actions needed to secure those things are within their capabilities. A smart organization will provide places for people like that to draw new members and encourage participation and support.

People do indeed need loaves and fishes, and most love bread and circuses. If there is enough excitement and entertainment many will be attracted, especially if the teachings and programs promote and aid in the success of those attending.

But there are a few out there who are looking for something more that will satisfy for eternity, the bread and the wine of Christ. There are indeed a lot of things we can be focused on and preoccupied with, but really only one thing is necessary. There are those who will need more than the praise of men, especially those who know from experience what is in themselves.

It seems that today most of the emphasis from those popular leaders who seek to educate the "church" on how to increase its membership (market share) have to do with the organization itself developing the capabilities to meet the needs and desires of those lacking purpose, who need a place to belong to feel accepted, or

who are simply bored and looking for more of the same entertainment they find in the secular world. These techniques are not usually geared to answer the needs of those who have a hunger and thirst for God and His righteousness, probably because that constitutes a far smaller percentage of the overall potential market.

While we may not know the details concerning a particular religious organization, it is true that the behavior of those attending has relevance to its viability as an authentic Christian fellowship, but it is not the most significant issue from the stand point of the Biblical Gospel of Christ.

For it isn't really a question of whether or not people are behaving differently, though a lack of change for the better would be indicative of significant problems, but instead the focus should be on why the behavior is changing.

Are people in a contest with each other to see who can give the most, act the most loving and cheerful, volunteer for the most activities, show the most submission to the leadership? Or are people forgiving because of what they realize they themselves have been forgiven, are loving because of the love they have first received from God in Christ? Are people doing things to get God or the leadership or community to reward them with acceptance and the things of this world, or are they doing things because of what God has already done in Christ?

A lot of folks who are wonderful to have as neighbors will still have to decide whether to keep their fig leaves, nicely woven though they may be, or leave them and put on the covering God now offers in His Son.

The bride of Christ is not an organization that we join because it is a great place to find our purpose and gain acceptance by supporting its programs and leadership.

The bride of Christ is comprised of those who are one, by faith, in the finished work of Jesus Christ. They are in unity not because of the focus they have on their groups social mechanisms to maintain and enforce unity, but because they are together in their personal identification of who they are in Christ Himself, and in

helping each other to share that vision until the whole body attains to the full stature of being complete in Christ.

The church is His body, He is the foundation, and He is the head. Organization, leadership and doctrine are important, but they should never become a focus in themselves, but rather should be an aid and safeguard in maintaining the focus of the body on the Christ of the Bible.

When the church itself becomes the focus, and we are leaning on the support of the organization rather than Christ Himself, it has potentially become an idol. Instead of an organized outlet for those wishing through acts of love to express their appreciation for the treasure they have been given in heaven, the modern church many times takes credit itself for whatever good works it may achieve or inspire as if such virtue. In the scriptures, some plant the seed, some water, but God is credited for causing the growth.

It is fruit that God seeks from those hearing and receiving the message of the Gospel, that God was in Christ reconciling a lost world to Himself, not counting their sins against them, and offering them the opportunity, by faith, to become the righteousness of God in Christ.

A shepherds job, at least according to John chapter 10, is to lead the sheep to the door, not to themselves. The door being spoken of here is Christ Himself. The Shepherd is not draw the attention of the sheep elsewhere and entertain them while they continue to stand outside of Christ becoming distracted from their need for the bread of life.

By seeking to offer them practical suggestions on how to have their best life now, many are thus not focused on the higher eternal life that God is offering as a foundation and place of rest for those strangers and aliens seeking a city whose builder and foundation is God.

God is looking for fruit, the evidence of a changed heart, those who love much because of the forgiveness and love they have received from God. Not those who instead of trusting in God's grace would rather trust in their own ability to continue to try to win approval and acceptance on the bases of their external behavior and works.