

Christianity: A Radical Commitment

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LIFE OR DEATH?

Jesus invites his followers to come and die. But perhaps you object, “Jesus said he came to give us abundant life, which is it?” That’s a good question. Allow me to come back to it, but first look with me at what Jesus said about dying. We read in Mark 8:34: *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

The apostle Paul gave a similar teaching in Colossians 3:5-10: *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

RADICAL CHOICE

These passages teach us clearly that being a Christian involves a radical choice and a radical change in the way we live our lives, dying to self so we may live for Christ. The unfortunate thing is that many of us are not interested in radical change. We act as if Christianity consists of wearing a cross on a necklace, or of going forward in a church service or at a concert. Or we think it is simply attending church once a week, or once a quarter. We act as if we can say some words, get our ticket to heaven and then live the rest of our lives the way we please for our own pleasure and purposes.

Such a lack of commitment of our lives to Christ as Lord will never make it with him. Jesus said very plainly in Matthew 7:21-27: *Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven... Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.*

Being a Christian involves doing the will of God. It involves putting the word of Christ into practice in our lives. Dabbling in Christianity will never satisfy God and won’t really satisfy us either.

One of the problems we have in the evangelical church is that we have a tendency to think of being a Christian as a token commitment. You pray to receive Christ and presto you have escaped hell and you have a home in heaven no matter what. That way of thinking misses a whole lot of Scripture. Being a Christian is way more radical than that.

RADICAL CHANGE

When Jesus called people into relationship with himself he often used two words, “Follow me.” If we are going to follow Jesus, there will need to be a radical rearrangement of priorities and of the way we live our daily lives. Paul also insisted that belonging to Christ involves radical change, *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away, all things have become new* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul envisions a change that is radical to the core.

In those familiar verses in Romans 12:1-2, we are called upon to lay our lives on the altar of God—a living sacrifice—again this is a very radical dedication. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

But, you ask, “What of the grace of God?” Paul, as much as any other New Testament writer, understood the grace of God, but he warned firmly against abusing grace: *Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound, God forbid, how shall we who are dead to sin live any longer therein*” (Romans 6:1). Grace is a marvelous thing, but we must not call ourselves Christians if we act as if that grace is a license to sin.

Clearly our relationship to Jesus Christ must be front and center, before any other relationship, before any project or pursuit. To quote Jesus again: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matthew 6:33a). Seek first—not second or third or tenth.

Anything less than putting Christ first is an affront to the Savior who died for us. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says: *He died for all that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.*

RADICAL RELATIONSHIP

Being a Christian calls for a commitment like the one required of marriage. Like marriage it is a relationship that totally rearranges one's life. What would you think of a bride who would say to her new husband at the marriage altar, "I'll see you next Sunday morning at 8:30, Honey. I'll meet you here by the altar and I'll sing love songs to you and I'll listen to someone say nice things about you, but don't bother me the rest of the week, I'm very busy you know. By the way please deposit some money in my checking account tomorrow. I want to buy a new car this week, and I need some new clothes, and the rent is due."

No bride in her right mind would say such a thing to her husband, and no husband in his right mind would think that he had a real marriage if she did. And yet unfortunately, I'm afraid that is about the way we treat our Savior who died for us. We leave church and go our own way the rest of the day and rest of the week, making precious little room for Christ in our work world, our relationship world, or our entertainment world. What kind of Christianity is that? It isn't.

RADICAL BELIEVING

The Bible teaches us that we have eternal life through believing. It makes it very clear however that believing is not simply a matter of head knowledge—*the devils also believe and tremble* (James 2:19).

To me the closest thing to a biblical explanation of what it means to believe is found in the sixth chapter of the book of Romans: The words used in the King James Version are: know, reckon, yield, and obey. They include the head, will, heart, and body being given over to Jesus Christ. Anything less than that isn't worth the paper to write home about it, and it certainly isn't radical enough to be worthy of the name Christian.

RADICAL LIVING

What does this mean in practical terms? Being a Christian means all our attitudes and values are up for a complete and drastic remodel.

Instead of hating our enemies, we are to learn to love them. Rather than cursing those who curse us and use us wrongly, we are to pray for them. Rather, than seeing how much we can get from others, we are to be in the business of seeing how much we can give.

Our entertainment life must be radically changed. For example, pornography is totally off base for the Christian. There will be movies that are trash where we know Jesus would not go for entertainment, and we dare not go there ourselves. There are books and magazine we will not read because we have invited Christ into the library of our minds and we do not wish to fill them with garbage.

There will be common dating and courtship practices that we simply will not tolerate because we know that Jesus would disapprove. We will not defraud one another sexually or any other way. There will be clothing styles which we will refuse because they are sexually provocative and defraud the opposite sex by offering something we have no intention of giving.

Perhaps you object, "What kind of legalism are you promoting?" Let me ask you what kind of license do you think we have to indulge in any kind of sin we happens to please while thinking that Jesus Christ will tolerate such a life and still own us as his own?

If you think I am legalistic, hear the words of Paul: *But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient* (Ephesians 4:3-6).

Following Christ is radical. Christ calls us to turn away from sin and give ourselves to him. God calls us to himself. He calls us to greatness. He puts within us the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. *He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life* (John 8:12). *I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly* (John 10:10).

RADICAL IMMERSION

He comes to give us abundant life, but the Christian life is not a life to be dabbled in if we want the abundance that Jesus promised. This relationship to God calls for complete immersion. This isn't playing Monopoly; this is investing our fortune. This isn't taking a sliver out of your finger; this is a heart transplant. Lukewarm Christianity will never please God. Revelation 3:16: *I would that you were cold or hot, because you are neither cold or hot I will spit you out of my mouth.*

Christianity is a radical commitment. It's not buying a ticket to New York or New Orleans, it's making the New Jerusalem where Jesus Christ reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords, our destination. It is pleasing him with our time, our energy, our attitudes, and our actions, the goal of our lives, everyday.

Many professing Christians are disillusioned with Christianity because they have never given their all to Christ. They have a cheap imitation rather than the real thing, and it doesn't satisfy either God or them. Someone has described half-hearted Christians as mug-wumps - they have their mug on one side of the fence and their wump on the other and are frustrated because they are not fully in either camp.

DO IT TODAY!

I urge you today to a whole commitment or recommitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of your life. This commitment calls for a sea change in our values and attitudes. As we make this commitment to him:

- Our time will become his time.
- Our car becomes his car.
- Our house becomes his house.
- Our reputation is left in his hands.
- Our money becomes his money.
- Our business becomes his business.
- Our attitudes become his attitudes.
- Our talents belong to Jesus Christ, and we will serve him by serving others.
- We will be sold out to Jesus Christ, so he can use everything we have anyway he wants.

This is wonderful way to live. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in us. We are partakers of the divine nature and when that is really so, we will become more and more like Jesus Christ. We will grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will be radically changed. What tame words can describe such a relationship with the triune God?

Will you hear Jesus calling to you today? “Come follow me. Come follow me to Gethsemane. Come follow me to Calvary, and together we'll rise again to live a life that is super abundant and really and truly worth living.”

Are you willing to make that commitment to him? I hope your answer is a strong YES!

RADICAL REQUIREMENTS

However, responding emotionally to this message or any other message is not all that is required. It may be a match that gets the fire going, but unless you keep piling the wood on, the fire isn't going to keep going. Think with me about what is involved in putting wood on the fire of this commitment to personal spiritual growth and vitality.

• BIBLE STUDY

The first stick that fire needs is personal Bible intake. We simply must feed on the Word of God. In Psalm 1:1-2 we read: *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.* And again from 1 Peter 2:1: *Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.* (KJV). And again in Acts 17:11: *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.* Daily reading of the Bible, daily Bible study, memorization, and review of Scripture—don't expect your spiritual fire to burn brightly without these disciplines.

• PRAYER

A second stick is prayer. Paul urged the Colossian believers: *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful* (Colossians 4:2). Commitment to Jesus as Lord obviously involves us in regular prayer times.

• TIME WITH OTHER BELIEVERS

A third stick to keep our spiritual fire burning brightly is being involved with a small group of other believers who really want to grow in their relationship with the Lord. Jesus spent a great deal of time with his small group of disciples. He further invested his time with Peter, James, and John. He sent them out two by two.

The Old Testament promised the Israelites that one of them would chase a thousand; two of them would put 10,000 to flight. When I build a fire in our wood stove at home I don't even attempt to build a fire with one stick. I need at least two and three, or four is better yet.

Do you really want to grow in your Christian life? Get together with a small group of four to six to a dozen people to study the Bible, to pray, to encourage one another. Make this a priority.

• MINISTRY

A fourth stick is involving yourself in useful ministry for Christ. In Romans 12:6-8 we read: *We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.* What is your gift? Get busy using it for Jesus.

We could add other logs to the fire, but if we use these four consistently, we will have a good foundation for growing in making Christ Lord of our lives. How well is your fire burning? Fires quickly go out unless they are tended. Which of these logs do you need to add to your fire to keep your commitment to Christ strong and vibrant?

DO NO LESS

In the light of the magnificent privilege of walking with the King of kings and Lord of Lord, how can we do less than give him our all and then get involved in the disciplines that will help us carry out that commitment every day? In the light of eternity, when we must stand before him to receive our reward, how can we do less than give him our all? In the light of the waste we will make of our lives lived for self, how can we do less than give him our all, seeking first his kingdom. In the light of all the joy he wishes to give us, how can we do less than give him our all?

PERSONAL STORY

Fifty-five years ago, during my sixteenth summer I went south from northern Minnesota to Iowa to work. A traveling preacher came to the area where I was working near Iowa City to hold evening meetings for several weeks. The family I was boarding with went to most of those meetings and I went with them.

One of the invitations the minister gave was for those of us who believed God was calling us to vocational ministry to come and make a public dedication of our intent. I was greatly moved in my spirit to make that dedication, and I went forward in that large tent to give my life to Christ for him to use it as he saw fit. That commitment has been a primary guiding light in my life.

Twenty-six years ago the house that we had built with our own hands went up in flames one night. When we left for town that evening we had a lovely carpeted house, a library of books, two bathrooms, three bedrooms, a new fireplace made of rocks we had collected, thousands of dollars worth of furniture and pictures and clothing and a few hours later we had to go to the store to buy a toothbrush so we could brush our teeth. In those few hours, months of work were turned into smoldering embers. We stood near the ashes of our house the next day and renewed our commitment to live for the purposes of God.

As I stand near the end of this earthly life, am I glad to have made those commitments? I am. Has it been an abundant life? It has. It is a marvelous privilege to have, even though imperfectly, served the King of kings and Lord of lords.

DAY OF DESTRUCTION

There is one huge fire coming folks. 2 Peter 3:10-12 reads: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.*

Every house, every business will be destroyed, every computer and every cell phone will go up in smoke. The only things we will have left are the people in whom we have invested our lives, the good deeds that we have sent on before. In the light of all of this, let us give ourselves anew to Jesus for his purposes in our lives.

Marriages don't work unless couples are really willing to give themselves to each other in loving service and loyal devotion. Christianity doesn't work unless we are willing to do the same for the one who gave us his all, his very life blood. 2 Corinthians 5:15: *...He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

What is the promise of our God if we give ourselves diligently to him in this kind of commitment and daily seek to grow in him? The promise comes from 2 Peter 1:10-11: *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure, For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

LIFE AND DEATH!

Are you still puzzling about the question of whether Jesus calls us death or to abundant life? The answer of course is both. He calls us to die to ourselves that we might live abundantly with and for him.

Becoming a Christian is opening our lives to the God of the universe, the one who flung the Milky Way into space, who created people from the dust of the earth. It is to have this great God as our Father. It is to have his Son as our Savior and Friend. It is to have the Holy Spirit who inspired this book working in our minds and hearts. Do you think this magnificent God is going to live in you and your life isn't going to rock?

Is this life of commitment to Christ really worth living? It's the only life worth living. He invites us to come and die in order that we might have the only life that is worth the name abundant. What will you do with his invitation?