

The Primary Mark of A Christian

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I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let him be eternally condemned!

-GALATIANS 1:6-9

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

-PHILIPPIANS 3:7-8 ESV

I was born and raised in a community where church-going was the norm, not the exception. My parents made certain that my two brothers, two sisters, and I were in attendance at church every time the doors were opened. We were there Sunday mornings and back for evening service, youth fellowship, choirs, and scouting.

We heard our church's preaching and teaching for each of our first eighteen years. But today none of my brothers and sisters is involved in a committed way with any branch of the Church of Jesus Christ. I believe the reason for this outcome is that we were taught what the apostle Paul terms in Galatians 1:6-7 "another gospel: which is really no gospel at all."

The "gospel" my family was taught was fundamentally a moral code centered on what we had to do in order to obtain the approval and acceptance of God. Many of my peers in school had a similar experience in their churches as well and as a result we seemed on the surface to be a religious, moral group of young people. However, now as I look back on my peers' lives, some thirty years later, I see the effect of the moralism with which we were raised.

I think of one of my best friends who was quite involved in the church. His parents were faithful in taking him there for every activity. He graduated from college, became a CPA, married his high school sweetheart and had two children. But as the normal trials and tribulations of life began to impose themselves upon him, he jettisoned whatever faith he had which, I will reiterate, was centered on what he had to do to gain acceptance with God. He left his wife and children, moved to Las Vegas and is now the number two top sports gambling expert in America. Such a sad outcome for a life that was nurtured with the rest of us in our Bible belt religious community.

I think of another one of my peers, a young woman who was a leader in her high school class and lived a very righteous life. She attended college, was a fine student and became a teacher. She married a physician who grew up in a nearby town. But she was involved in a severe automobile accident and endured several surgeries. Through that difficulty she found that her moralistic man-centered faith would not hold. It did not provide any sustaining power for her. So she left her husband, went to law school and now is one of the leading attorneys in Washington D.C. for a movement that challenges many of the family values that Christians hold dear.

I must confess I get very angry when I think about the religious teaching that was presented to my siblings and peers in our hometown during the fifties and sixties. I look back now and believe we were defrauded because the preachers and teachers proclaimed another gospel which is no gospel at all. The Apostle Paul describes this kind of religion in Philippians chapter 3 beginning at the first verse. He writes, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again and it is a safeguard for you" (Phil. 3:1). He reiterates this same Gospel message time and time again in his thirteen letters, because he is zealous to safeguard the good news of Jesus Christ. He wants this Gospel of grace to be the sustaining center that will hold them during the midst of tribulation.

In the verse immediately following, he expresses intense but righteous anger. He writes, "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (Phil. 3:2). The Apostle Paul calls the proclaimers of this other gospel "dogs"! He is referring here to the Judaizers. This was a "half" Christian religious group that would follow the Apostle Paul into the towns throughout Asia Minor where he had proclaimed the Gospel and planted churches. After he led people to Christ and enfolded them into the newly established church, he would move on to the next town. Then the Judaizers would come into town saying, "Believing in Jesus Christ is good but Christ alone is insufficient. You must add to Christ." The central message of that other gospel is that Christ alone is not sufficient. It is "Christ plus." For the Judaizers it was Christ plus submitting to the Jewish rite of circumcision and their other religious observances such as holy days, festivals and the sacrificial system. They taught that their religious activities were necessary in addition to Christ and Him crucified. But Isaiah 53:11 says that Christ looked upon His own sacrifice on behalf of those who belong to Him and was satisfied that it fully paid the price for our sins and merited for us full justification and acceptance with God. Nevertheless, our temptation still is to look at the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and not believe that the justice of the Holy Righteous Judge is satisfied. (WCF 8-5)

Through their preaching and teaching emphases, the religious leaders in my hometown indicated that Christ's atonement was not enough to establish our righteousness before God. Sadly, they taught us very little about Christ crucified. Instead, they told us what we needed to do in order to reach up to God to take hold of Him. But, our grip was never strong enough to hold on to God, particularly when we grew older and the normal difficulties of life intruded upon us. We could not hold on to God! None of my peers did. My siblings did not. But the religious leaders never taught us God in Christ would hold on to us because of His grace, through His initiative alone, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us.

In Philippians 3:3 and following the Apostle Paul writes, "For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also." In these several verses, Paul presents to us aspects of the identity he possessed as Saul of Tarsus before he met the person of Christ. It is the same type of identity, based in man-centered righteousness that the religious leaders in my hometown put upon us as young people growing up. He says, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews." He is describing his membership in the Old Testament Church.

Membership in the Church was part of our identity too. We were considered to be Christians because we were raised in the Christian church. Saul of Tarsus, had been circumcised – we had been baptized into the church. In our thinking the religious rite of baptism is what saved us. Other friends of mine went through a class sometime between age 8 to 12 and were told that by reciting the salvation formula they became Christians. But that moralistic center did not sustain them.

Paul continues to describe his former life saying, “In regard to the law, a Pharisee.” Paul’s focus here is on his Pharisaism which Jesus addresses in John 5. The Lord had already healed a man on the Sabbath and the Scripture says that the Jews were very upset about this. They confronted Jesus about His statements and He replied, “You diligently study the Scriptures because by them you believe you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life,” (Jn. 5:40). That is the way we were in my hometown. We studied the Scriptures and at least used them as a springboard into our discussions. We memorized passages – the Ten Commandments, Psalm 23, Psalm 100, the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer and other significant portions of God’s Word. But even that was done not so that we would see Christ in these verses, but to enable us to gain approval before God. Later as an adult I learned from the daughter of my childhood hometown pastor that he believed neither in the resurrection nor eternal life. Instead, we were taught a moral code that centered on human relationships – that minimized the eternal perspective – and as a result that ethic veered from Biblical morality on key points.

Verse 6: “As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” We didn’t persecute the church but we did persecute the Jewish people in our town through subtle forms of prejudice. Sadly, we considered ourselves to be faultless in doing so because our standard was not the Bible but our own cultural version of the law.

The apostle continues in Phil. 3:7, 8 writing, “Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” That word “knowing” is important. It is not a reference to intellectual knowledge alone but also refers to an intimate relationship. It is used elsewhere to describe the relationship between a husband and a wife that is very personal, they know one another intimately. That is how Scripture describes our relationship with Christ.

When I left my hometown for college, I endured all the normal trials and tribulations that freshmen experience. And my moralistic center did not hold me. I drifted into despair and spent a significant portion of my freshman year depressed. The academic pressure was intense, and I was far away from the culture in which I had been raised. It was a difficult year. But the Lord used that experience to break me down. Providentially, He led me into a small group of Christian young men, and they led me to Christ. One of them took me to his church in Washington, D.C., Fourth Presbyterian Church. The pastor was Dr. Richard Halverson, one of the great preachers of his generation.

I can remember as clearly as if it were last Sunday, when Halverson preached on Philippians 3:8. He said, “This is my life passage, my life verse. ‘...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.’” Before that summer and specifically before that sermon, I had never heard anyone talk about the Lord Jesus in such personal terms. The Holy Spirit touched my heart deeply that Sunday evening through the preached Word. He placed a desire in my heart to know the Lord Jesus as intimately as Halverson. Philippians 3:8 became my life verse.

It was not until the Lord led me to embrace Reformed theology that I began to understand Paul's next words, "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ" (Phil. 3:8b,9). This is one of 164 times that the Apostle Paul uses this little phrase, "in Christ," or the similar phrases "with Christ," "by Christ," and "through Christ." In most of those verses, he is referring to the doctrine of our union with Christ. Students at Covenant Seminary are taught comprehensively about union with Christ because the Reformed faith believes that it is the centerpiece of all Biblical theology and of the Christian life. All of the other great truths and doctrines – especially regarding sanctification – flow out of our union with Christ.

As we serve in moralistic religious and secular cultures where that other gospel that is no gospel at all is proclaimed, we must proclaim Christ alone. This does not mean that the Christian life is not concerned with morality; it means that our moral acts flow out of our intimate relationship with Christ. Christ's work alone accomplishes our salvation and has made us fully "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6, KJV). We live out of that reality doing unto others even as He has so graciously done unto us in Christ.

I have come back to Philippians 3:8 innumerable times over the last 36 years as my "touchstone" to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to my heart if I am growing in love with and intimate knowledge of Christ. This is a question we all can ask ourselves and others in the church. Are we growing in a heart understanding of our union with Him which He granted to us fully at our salvation? Is our joy being sapped as we try to earn God's acceptance by our own moral deeds – attempting to gain what Christians already possess fully in Christ? Are we assured not only that we love God, but that He loved us first and is holding on to us during times of joy and sorrow? That is the true Gospel that is given to us in the pages of Scripture. And this is what we must proclaim to ourselves and to those whom we love and serve daily so the people in our sphere of influence receive a center that holds during the trials and difficulties of life. With the Apostle Paul, may you and those whom you serve count all things to be loss, in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus your Lord.

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