

12. Real Churches Center on Christ

Are we really centered on Christ as a church?

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing than I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpents cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ/ For if someone comes to you and preaches *a Jesus other* than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive *a different spirit* from the one you received, or *a different gospel* from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:1- 4, emphasis added)

Real churches are centered on Christ. As a new Christian, I sought a simple and sincere devotion to Jesus. I had a poster in my room with the names of Jesus.

In the church, from the beginning to the end, we need to be centered on Christ. We would all agree, but we are prone to wander and we are easily led astray by the evil one. Paul confronted the Corinthians when they were in danger of being deceived by the devil. He signals three red warning lights that flash when we are no longer devoted only to Christ. If something is missing from our church, if something is different in our church, if something is off in our church, here are three areas to examine closely: the real Jesus, the real Spirit, and the real gospel.

Real churches experience the real gospel

For if someone comes to you and preaches *a Jesus* other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive *a different spirit* from the one you received, or *a different gospel* from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:4, emphasis added)

The “someone” who came to Corinth to seduce them was a group. “The Judaizers were nominal Christians who accepted Jesus as their Messiah, but as the Savior of Israel only. They insisted that Christ’s kingdom could be entered only through the gate of Judaism” (Wuest 1977, 20). They brought a different gospel that precipitated the first all-

church council, recorded in Acts 15.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised; according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. (Acts 15:1-2a)

The Judaizers added the law of Moses to the gospel of grace. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from any works and for good works (Ephesians 2:8-10) and any group that adds to this gospel of grace is not a real church. Real churches experience salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord,...’ ” but Jesus will say to them, “ ‘Away from me, you evildoers.’ ” (Matthew 7:22-23). It is an evil work to distort the gospel of grace.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

We cannot skip over the gospel and assume people understand it, especially when there are so many different gospels that people easily put up with. As a child in Sunday school, I was taught this tune: “Love, love, love, love / The gospel in a word is love / Love your neighbor as your brother / For God is love.” But, the words are untrue. The gospel in a word is not love, it is **Jesus**; I grew up believing in God, but not in Jesus Christ. I thought that keeping the Great Commandment made you a Christian, and I did not know the real gospel, the real Jesus, or the real Holy Spirit.

By the time I was a teenager, I thought church was boring, irrelevant, and unnecessary. God, through a home bible study, introduced me to a group of genuine Christians. I began to see my sin and my need for Christ. I came to faith in Jesus Christ at a Billy Graham Crusade. I started attending a dynamic local church that preached Christ. They taught the Bible. They loved one another. They shared their faith. They had a simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ! Does your church really preach the gospel?

The gospel in a word is *Jesus*.

The gospel in two words is *Christ crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The gospel in a phrase is “the declaration of what Jesus Christ has done to save us” (Keller 2012, 33).

The gospel in a verse is John 3:16. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son” (John 3:16a, NASB). “Only begotten” in Greek means “one of a species.” In Jesus Christ, God gave us the gift of his only and unique son, who alone is exactly like him in character and even in essence.

The gospel in a paragraph is 1 Corinthians 15:1-6

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15: 1-6)

Before we believe in Jesus Christ we have some serious baggage:

original sin
slavery to Satan
spiritual death
condemnation
alienation from God
aloneness

When I trust Christ, something wonderful happens. All my baggage becomes his and all his blessings become mine (2 Corinthians 5:20). Jesus takes my sin and death, and gives me His life and righteousness. He takes all my liabilities, and I am a co-heir of all his awesome assets. In Christ, I now have:

the forgiveness of all my sins
submission to Christ and all righteousness
eternal life
justification

adoption as a son of God
the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit
every spiritual blessing in Christ

Real churches experience the real Holy Spirit

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: *Did you receive the Spirit* by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-2, emphasis added)

The Judaizers traveled in the wake of the apostle Paul and tried to bring new Christians under the law of Moses. Paul reminds real Christians that we receive the Holy Spirit when we believe the gospel. The Holy Spirit does not enter our lives through keeping the law. We receive the Spirit by believing the gospel of Christ. In the New Covenant in Christ, the Holy Spirit accomplishes at least six ministries at our conversion to Christ!

1. When I believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit regenerates me (Titus 3:5; John 3:6).
2. When I believe in Christ, the Spirit indwells me (Galatians 3:2; Romans 8:9).
3. When I believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit anoints me (1 John 2:20, 27).
4. When I believe in Christ, the Spirit baptizes me (1 Corinthians 12:13).
5. When I believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives me a gift (Romans 12:3-8).
6. When I believe in Christ, the Spirit seals me (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30).

These ministries of the Holy Spirit at conversion are:

- Once and for all at regeneration
- Eternally valid and never repeated
- Instantaneous and invisible
- Entirely and exclusively by the Holy Spirit

After we trust Christ, six ministries of the Holy Spirit activate in us for the Christian life.

1. The Holy Spirit leads us as we follow (Romans 8:14).
2. The Holy Spirit teaches us the truth as we seek (1 Corinthians 2:12).
3. The Holy Spirit empowers Christian service (1 Corinthians 12).
4. The Holy Spirit produces spiritual fruit as we obey (Galatians 5:22-23).
5. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom as we ask (James 1:5).
6. The Holy Spirit helps us as we pray (Romans 8:16, 26).

These six ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian are:

- Not just at conversion, but throughout our Christian life.
- Not once and for all, but repeatedly.
- Not eternally, but temporarily.
- Not instantaneously, but continuously.
- Not entirely by the Spirit, but in cooperation with us.

There are three central commands for the believer's continuing, daily relationship with the Spirit. The first is "grieve not the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30). We grieve the Holy Spirit by sinning. The second is "quench not the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). We quench the Holy Spirit by refusing to respond (Acts 7:51). The third command is positive: "Be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). We are filled with the Holy Spirit as we breathe out the bad air of sin through confession, and breathe in the good air, following the promptings of the Spirit, rather than resisting.

At any moment we can experience a leading of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14). For example, His prompting can come from the counsel of a Christian friend, a verse of Scripture that comes to our mind, or the opening or closing of doors (Revelation 3:7-8).

The best book I read in 2008 was *Wild Goose Chase* by Mark Batterson. He speaks of the mysterious ways of the Holy Spirit:

Celtic Christians had a name for the Holy Spirit—An Geadh-Glas, or 'the Wild Goose.' The name hints at mystery. Much like a wild goose, the Spirit of God cannot be tracked or tamed. An element of danger, an air of unpredictability surround Him. And while the name may sound a little sacrilegious, I cannot think of a better description of what it's like to follow the Spirit through life. I think the Celtic Christians were on to something... Most of us will have no idea where we are going most of the time. And I know that is unsettling. But circumstantial uncertainty

also goes by another name: Adventure. (Batterson 2008,1)

Like a wild goose, the Holy Spirit cannot be tracked. His movements cannot be put in a box. His timing cannot be predicted. The combination of an open door that no one can shut and a wild goose that no one can shut down makes for an amazing adventure.

Mark Batterson is the pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C. Mark went to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He tried to plant a church in that area. It imploded. Mark moved to D.C. and, after many years, planted a church there. They lost their meeting place in a school, but God opened a door and they followed the Holy Spirit into the movie theaters in Union Station on Capitol Hill. There was a certain property on Capitol Hill that was a crack house. For seven years, they prayed for God to give them that property. God opened that door and they followed the Holy Spirit by establishing Ebenezer's Coffee House, which also serves as the location for Saturday night services.

Now two of their leaders are starting an Ebenezer's Coffee House in Berlin, Germany, where less than two percent of Berliners attend a church. "If you chase the Wild Goose, He will take you places you never could have imagined going by paths you never knew existed" (Batterson 2008, 2). The real Holy Spirit is the person I want to follow into the fulness of God's will.

Real churches experience the real Jesus

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

In John 14:6 we have one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. Jesus uses one of the most precious phrases in the whole Bible to refer to himself, "I AM." This phrase goes back to Moses and the burning bush. When Moses asked God his name, God said, "I AM. That is my name. I AM THAT I AM." *Yahweh* is the Jewish pronunciation. *Jehovah* is the later Latin translation. Seven times in the gospel of John, Jesus uses this unique name of God for himself and fills out some of the meaning:

- I AM the Bread of Life (John 6:35).
- I AM the Light of the World (John 8:12).

- I AM the Door for the Sheep (John 10:7).
- I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:11).
- I AM the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25).
- I AM the Way the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).
- I AM the True Vine (John 15:1).

The teaching of Scripture is that Jesus is Yahweh! God exists eternally as three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The claim of the New Testament is that Jesus is Yahweh! Any person that denies that Jesus is Yahweh is not a real Christian.

I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am (the one I claim to be) [NIV inserts this phrase for clarification, but the literal Greek is simply "I AM"] you will indeed die in your sins. (John 8:24, explanation added)

At a Billy Graham Crusade in Cleveland, Ohio, I saw the banner: "Jesus said, I AM the way, the truth, and the life!" John goes on, "No one comes to the Father except through him." That day in July of 1972, I became a follower of Jesus Christ and began the adventure of the Christian life. Any religion such as Judaism and Islam that says that Jesus was a prophet but deny that Jesus is "I AM" is dead in sin. Any religious group that denies that Jesus is Jehovah God is leading its people to destruction. Do not put up with this easily! We must stay on the narrow road of a pure devotion to Jesus that guards the gospel and follows the Holy Spirit.

When we experience the real Jesus, we are to obey the Great Commission and "go" and tell others about our Lord Jesus Christ. We are simply witnesses called to testify to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. One of my favorite stories of God using us as we go is an amazing true story from *The God Who Hung on the Cross*, by Dois I. Rosser Jr. and Ellen Vaughn.

In September 1999, a Cambodian pastor traveled to northern Cambodia to bring the good news of Jesus to a remote village that had been enslaved by the Khmer Rouge rebels. As far as anyone knew, he was the first person to speak of Jesus in this Buddhist area. When the pastor arrived, the people welcomed him. They could not hear enough about Jesus and most of them rapidly became Christ followers. He asked them why it seemed as if they had been waiting for him to come. An old

woman shuffled forward and told him, "We have been waiting. We have been waiting for you for twenty years." She told this true story.

After the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, they made their way through the countryside, destroying just about anything. The soldiers came to this village in 1979. They emerged from the jungle, strode from hut to hut ordering the villagers out. Those who resisted were killed and many died in front of their homes. The rest were marched into a clearing behind the village. Their own farm tools were thrust into their hands and they were commanded to dig their own grave. Some tried to run, but they were shot and killed. Hours passed as the villagers worked and wept. When the hole was big enough, the masters ordered the villagers to lay down their tools and stand on the edge of the hole.

The villagers began to cry out. Some screamed to Buddha, some to ancestors, some to spirits, some to their mothers. Then, one woman remembered a story her mother told her about The God Who Hung on the Cross. She called out to that God. Surely The God Who Hung on the Cross, who suffered Himself, might have compassion on those about to die. Slowly, everyone in the village took up this cry to The God Who Hung on the Cross.

Then there was silence behind them. One by one they turned around and saw that the jungle was empty and the soldiers were gone. And ever since that day in 1979, the people of that village had been waiting... waiting for someone to come and tell them more ... more about The God Who Hung on the Cross. (Rosser and Vaughn 2003, 35- 37, my summary of the story from these pages)

Nothing is more important in the local church than a simple and pure devotion to Jesus Christ. The *gospel* of grace, the *Spirit* of the Living God, and the Lord *Jesus Christ* who is powerful to save are the most essential elements of a *real church*.