

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #4

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If it is true that the centuries have added numerous innovations to the Christian system, then removing these would reveal the bare essentials of being a Christian. Whatever is presently practiced but is not found in Scripture may certainly be removed without recompense. The elimination of the nonessentials and the erroneous additions should unveil for us the true picture of Christ's church.

Innovations tend to originate from pragmatic concerns. That is, they are implemented because they are perceived as "what works." This has become the guiding standard in most denominations and with some in my own fellowship of believers. Many no longer ask for biblical authority for what is preached and practiced. The primary question now is "will it bring people to our church?" rather than, "is it from heaven or from men?" (Mark 11:30).

The movement away from truth as a standard ushers in human judgment to become the rule of conduct. And, when the divine standard is set aside, then practically anything goes in religion. If we are free to do what is right in our own eyes, then who is to judge us as wrong? The result of this kind of "freedom to decide" attitude may be seen in the varied and strange religious practices that develop with each succeeding generation.

The search for genuine Christianity must somehow wade through all the pragmatic judgments that have arisen in order to discover what is essential. Stripping away the excess baggage that has been added through the years will center in at least five obvious areas of additions to the original. These include: [1] party names; [2] creeds and traditions; [3] additions to the simple biblical message of salvation; [4] extraneous aspects of worship and [5] changes in church organization. While much could be written about each of these areas of departure, we need only brief comments on the first two.

Party Names

Some discussion about names was given in the July issue of *Working in the Word*, but a few additional thoughts may be in order. Names are one of the areas that hinder fellowship and veil the truth from those genuinely seeking Christianity. When folks drive down the street and see our buildings of worship with the name "Church of Christ" on a sign out front, they have certain preconceived notions about what is being taught there. The same is true when you and I drive down similar streets and see similar buildings but with different signs reading, "Baptist," "Methodist," "Catholic," etc. We already have preconceived ideas about what they believe and practice. We have no interest in turning into the parking lots of the various denominations just as they have no interest in coming to investigate us.

Genuine truth seekers have difficulty in searching for biblical Christianity because of the confusion of party names. We all look the same on the outside and the names that denominate us become the first roadblock to finding genuine Christians. Although we have centered on a biblical description of ourselves to paint on the sign out front, it is possible to use even the title of Christ as one of many party names. The apostle Paul opposed this in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 1:12), and perhaps, we should find a better means by which to identify ourselves that would not leave the impression that we are simply one of many diverse denominations.

All such names have developed by means of human judgment. It cannot be argued from the Scriptures that there was a name given to the church. The first Christians were known by many descriptions... "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16); "the way" (Acts 19:9,23); "household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10); "household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15); "church of God" (1Cor. 11:22 or Acts 20:28, though some manuscripts read "church of the Lord"); "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16); "heirs" (Rom. 8:17); "saints" (Rom. 1:7); etc.... but they were never known throughout the world by one distinctive or exclusive name. Therefore, we should conclude that a particular name is not essential to finding genuine Christianity.

Creeds and Traditions

Brief mention of this was given in the August issue of *Working in the Word*, to indicate that only the Scriptures may guide us to the truth of Jesus. "Creeds" are statements of belief and "traditions" are authoritative teachings handed down from one generation to the next. The similarity of the two and the problem with each has to do with their binding nature. Individuals must agree to the denominational creed and follow the denominational traditions in order to be a part of the denomination. Both creeds and traditions invalidate the word of God, being additions to it.

In searching for genuine Christianity, we must strip away all creeds and traditions in order to find truth. The Scriptures must become our only statement of belief and source of authoritative teaching. Creeds and traditions are, again, the result of human judgment. Originally, men thought them to be expedient, but ultimately, they have superseded biblical authority. Many creeds were developed as a protection against error and most traditions grew out of an attempt to put biblical teaching into practice. These were revised and enlarged from generation to generation and became a means of distinguishing the various religious groups.

When the first generation of Christians came together to discuss the first attempts at binding human judgment upon the Gentile brothers, they declared, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication..." (Acts 15:28,29). This decision marked as false teachers those who were attempting to bind circumcision and other Jewish practices. There was no authority from the Holy Spirit to require these Jewish elements. To do so would be going beyond the word from God.

In like manner, Jesus was hard on those who placed themselves above God by binding their human judgment on others. To the Pharisees and scribes, He said, "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men" (Mk. 7:8); and "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (vs. 9); and "invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down" (vs. 13). Jesus' open opposition to binding tradition "offended" those who held on to them (Matt. 15:12). But Jesus noted that such were merely "blind guides of the blind" (Matt. 15:14). They could not see the truth because their traditions got in the way.

We cannot consult the various creeds and traditions of men to find the truth that leads to genuine Christianity. True disciples abide only in the word of Jesus (John 8:31,32). Thus, genuine Christianity is found only by removing creeds and traditions and adhering only to the teaching of Scripture.

The Means To Salvation

One of the great departures from the original Christian teaching is concerned with how one enters into a saved relationship with God. Little research is needed to discover that the various religious sects give a multitude of answers to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Merely asking one's denominational friends will render several different answers like.... "we are saved at the moment we believe;" or "ask Jesus to come into your heart"; or "sprinkle your children"; and other doctrines as baptism for the dead, Holy Spirit experience, and even, "just join the church of your choice." These contradictory answers to the vital question of salvation indicate that they are of human origin.

The means to genuine Christianity may be found in the first gospel sermon delivered by Peter on the Pentecost following Jesus' ascension to heaven. Peter did not represent any denomination, for none existed. Thus, he had no human agenda to promote. He merely spoke as the Holy Spirit gave him utterance (Acts 2:4). His message was from God. His audience did not consist of the "unchurched" but was filled with believers in God. Yet, Peter tells them they are not right with God because they rejected the messenger and message sent by God (vs. 23). Peter was not promoting the church by asking his audience to join his church (as some preachers do today). Rather, he attempted to bring his hearers to faith in Christ. He was interested in their salvation, not in their becoming religious.

Peter's preaching was not an emotional or subjective appeal to interest his audience in joining him in some religious enterprise, but rather he saw them as lost and appealed to them by evidence as to the identity of Jesus. Peter showed them that this man Jesus, whom they rejected and crucified, was in reality the Lord and Christ (vs. 36). He did this by reminding them of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him" (vs. 22); by His resurrection from the dead (vs. 24-32); by the supernatural phenomena they could "see and hear" (vs. 33) at that very moment; and by the Scriptures (see vs. 25-28; 30; 31; and 34).

The message pierced their hearts and led them to respond with the question, "Brethren, what shall we

do?" (vs. 37). Realizing that they had murdered the Son of God, the Messiah, they were asking how they might remove their sin and be right with God. The answer Peter gave was simple, *"Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself"* (vs. 38,39). Luke's record of the event also tells us that, *"And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'"* (vs. 40).

The Holy Spirit, through the words of Peter, declared that salvation comes to those who *"repent"* and who are *"baptized"* into Christ *"for the forgiveness of their sins."* Nothing more was required of them to become attached to Christ as His followers. Luke tells us that *"those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls"* (vs. 41). Those *"added"* were those *"being saved"* (vs. 47) and those *"being saved"* were those who *"received the word"* (vs. 41) to *"repent"* and be *"baptized"* (vs. 38).

Were these three thousand who were baptized saved? The passage plainly teaches that they were. Were they Christians? Luke will later use this term in describing these early disciples (Acts 11:26). Logically, we may conclude that if we believe Peter's message concerning the identity of Jesus and respond by repenting and being baptized, then we too will be numbered among the saved. Here, then, is the biblical means to become genuinely a Christian.

These three thousand were not a part of any church... they became the church. They did not remain in their Jewish religion and they were not told to start up various new religions. They simply came together as a people called of God because of their common faith in Christ. A *"fellowship"* began among them because they shared the same beliefs in Jesus. There were no separations into differing groups with differing beliefs.

All of New Testament Scripture is consistent with the teaching Peter gave on this Pentecost regarding how one may be saved from his sins. Faith, repentance, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins was preached everywhere the first preachers and Christians went. The following is a sampling of evidence to this end.

"Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away..." (Acts 3:19); *"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12); *"Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them... when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike... And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip"* (Acts 8:5,12,13). When Philip preached Christ to the Ethiopian, he asked, *"What prevents me from being baptized?"* (Acts 8:36). And, upon his confession of faith, Philip baptized him (vs. 38). Saul also believed, repented and was baptized (Acts 9) as was Cornelius and his household (Acts 10), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:15) and an unnamed jailer in the city of Philippi (Acts 16:30-33).

The only conclusion to all biblical evidence is that faith, repentance and baptism were essential to one becoming a Christian. Those religious groups who now teach otherwise and those preachers among us who proclaim that baptism is only an option must be rejected as being genuinely Christian. So vital is baptism that Peter later proclaims, *"baptism now saves you"* (1 Peter 3:21). Genuine Christianity will listen to the apostles and not to modern compromises to the truth.

More next month...