

Has the Church Lost the Plot?

by

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An Open Letter to Pastors

Dear Pastor,

I've had an issue on my heart for some time. The issue is fundamental to the purpose of the church, the body of our Lord Jesus. If I am right, we (the church) have lost the plot. If I'm wrong, I desperately need to be straightened out. I sent this letter to several people I regard as trustworthy in the Lord, who know Scripture, who understand the issue, and advised me accordingly. I invite the same response from you, the reader.

Doubtless you are very busy and asking you to respond could be a major imposition. I would not do it if I didn't believe it to be the issue of overwhelming importance in the church today. In the alternative, if it is not and if I have an improper understanding, I must be quickly disabused of my present stance.

The issue: Is the church fulfilling what Jesus told us to do? This issue has become of increasing concern to me and has recently come into greater focus through books I've read recently that provide evidence that corroborate my thinking. As I see it, the church has developed a 20th-century culture of its own that no longer seems to understand or practice Jesus' fundamental command to his church.

Please bear with me while I express my understanding and how I came to this position.

The most complete statement of what Jesus told his church to do in his physical absence is: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

You'll note there is one major command and two subcommands. The major command, "Go and make disciples of all nations." The two subcommands: (1) Baptize them, and (2) Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.

My first concern is that we seem to ignore/disobey the first command. I say this because of my understanding of what it means to be a disciple. The 20th century church's cultural approach to "making disciples of all nations" seems to be to tell people about Jesus and, if possible, get them to the point of praying a prayer of commitment to Christ, usually to "accept him as Savior."

As you may remember from my book, *What the Bible Says About a Saving Faith*, I regard language such as "accept him as Savior" as heresy and fraud. Nowhere in Scripture is anyone called upon to receive or accept Jesus as Savior. He is to be received as Lord. Jesus saves those for whom he is Lord; he is Lord of all those who are saved.

It seems to me – and this may be partly due to my background as an attorney – that our approach to “leading people to Christ” often involves both fraud and deceit. One example of fraud is in telling people to “accept Jesus as Savior” rather than receive him as Lord. I believe the resulting commitments are worlds apart – perhaps as far apart as heaven and hell. A deceit is to tell people they must receive Jesus as Lord but then fail to inform them that they must give up the world and belong to another kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord. The church sometimes deceives people by stressing that salvation is a gift, which it is – the true part, but fail (or refuse) to tell them the cost – that unless they give up everything they have they cannot be Jesus’ disciple. Some churches emphasize there is nothing that can be done to affect or effect salvation, but fail to tell their people that unless their righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law they will not enter the Kingdom of heaven, that unless they do the will of our Father in heaven they will not enter the Kingdom of heaven, that unless they are conformed to the likeness of Christ they cannot be saved, and that they will be judged according to what they have done.

There is further fraud with regard to the Holy Spirit. People are told that everyone immediately receives the Holy Spirit upon becoming a Christian. That is true of the person who becomes a true Christian. But if a person becomes a “Christian” by “accepting Jesus as Savior” only, there is no giving or receiving of the Holy Spirit (according to Scripture). It is only upon committing to obey Jesus as Lord that Jesus asks the Father to give the Holy Spirit and that Jesus then sends the Holy Spirit to his new follower. As a result of false teaching, people believe they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit but instead may have received a deceiving spirit who gives them false assurance of salvation and assures them that living a life pleasing to God is not only unnecessary, it is legalism. That same deceiving spirit may display false manifestations such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, casting out demons, and healing the sick. Scripture says at the judgment the Lord Jesus will plainly tell them, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!”

My major concern is with the second sub-command – teach them to obey all that I have commanded you. The command is simple enough. It’s fulfillment would be two-pronged. First would-be disciples must be taught to obey. Second, they must be taught what they are to obey – the teachings and commands of Christ Jesus our Lord. If that command were obeyed by the church, the other commands would also come to be obeyed.

Does the church teach new (or old) converts to obey all that Jesus commanded? I have been a believer now about 18 years. During that time I’ve been in many different churches throughout the United States, in other countries, and finally in New Zealand. To my knowledge (and in many cases I’ve asked), I’ve never been in a church, nor do I know of a church, that has undertaken to teach new believers to obey all that our Lord Jesus commanded.

As I presently see it, most who come to true faith likely do so in spite of the church. When true believers made their confession of faith, even if they used the language “accept Jesus as Savior,” in their hearts they received Jesus as Lord. They hungered after the Word, devoured the gospels and sought to obey everything Jesus said. That is what happened to me. After having come to know that I must follow and obey Jesus as my Lord, it was in reading and studying the life, teachings, and commands of Jesus that my life was transformed and conformed (to the extent it is) to the likeness of Jesus.

The culturized 20th century church seems to focus on bringing people to a “decision” to accept Christ rather than to make them into disciples. But Jesus said nothing about having people make decisions for him. He talked about making disciples – true followers who would be like him. Naturally there has to be a decision point to follow Jesus as Lord. This must be a thoughtful decision because the commitment is that of a bond-servant – to voluntarily follow Jesus as his slave for the rest of one’s life. A person making that decision must be willing to love the Lord more than his wife, his children, or anyone or anything else. This is not a decision to be made after reading a tiny tract or being hyped with an emotional appeal. Charles Finnie, as I understand it, required people to hear the requirements of the gospel for days on end before he would allow anyone to make a decision for Christ. According to my reading, he was said to have had the highest percentage of converts who persevered as true believers of any known evangelist.

Ray Comfort’s *Bride of Heaven, Pride of Hell* confirmed my suspicions. Ray quotes statistics of a major denomination in the United States which disclosed it obtained an incredible 294,784 decisions for Christ in 1990. Yet, in 1991, it could only find 14,337 in a Christian fellowship. There were 280,447 decisions that couldn’t be accounted for. The leadership had no clue as to why this happened, but could only conclude, “Something is wrong!” The trend continued. In August, 1996 a leading U.S. denomination revealed that during 1995 it secured 384,057 decisions, but retained only 22,983 in fellowship. It couldn’t account for 361,074 supposed conversions. Ray told of another crusade at which 600 decisions were obtained, no doubt with much rejoicing. But 90 days later, follow-up workers couldn’t find even one who was going on in his or her faith. In 1991 in Cleveland, Ohio, 400 decisions were obtained in an Inner City Outreach, but, again, later not one could be found who went on in the faith.

Ray quotes Charles E. Hackett, the Division of Home Missions National Director for the Assemblies of God in the U.S.: “A soul at the altar does not generate much excitement in some circles because we realize approximately 95 out of every 100 will not become integrated into the church. In fact, most of them will not return for a second visit.”

This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S. According to Ray, a pastor in Boulder, Colorado sent a team to Russia in 1991 and secured 2,500 decisions. The next year they found only 30 going on in their faith. In Leeds, England, a visiting U.S. speaker acquired 400 decisions for a local church. However, six weeks later only two were going on, and they eventually fell away. A pastor who traveled to India every year since 1980 told Ray he saw 80,000 decision cards stacked in a hut in the city of Rajamundry, the “results” of past evangelistic crusades. But he maintained that one would be fortunate to find even 80 Christians in the entire city. That is 1/10 of 1%.

Ray also cited statistics of the Barna Research Institute which indicated that 62% of Americans say they have a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. However, a Gallup Poll, taken around the same time, revealed something interesting about a special group of 6-10% of Americans who say they are Christians. Mr. Gallup said of them:

“These people are a breed apart . . . they are more tolerant of people of diverse backgrounds. They are involved in charitable activities. They are involved in practical Christianity. They are absolutely committed to prayer.”

Neil Anderson in *The Bondage Breaker*, page 107, states a similar statistic, saying that “It is my observation that no more than 15 percent of the evangelical Christian community is completely free from Satan’s bondage.” Though Neil generously speaks of the remainder as Christians, from his description of them they have the traits of those described in Galatians, Ephesians and Revelation who (Scripture says) will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Ray Comfort’s emphasis is that we don’t tell the truth – again fraud and deceit – when bringing people to Christ. As a result, the seed is scattered on stony ground and though received with rejoicing the person falls away quickly in times of difficulty and/or persecution. Ray emphasizes to the person his or her violation of God’s commands so that the person can see his or her guilt in God’s eyes and be brought to repentance. I agree with Ray that there must be a 100% honest presentation of the gospel.

My overwhelming personal concern is that the church teach God’s requirements for those who will ultimately enter heaven – e.g., doing the will of God, obeying the teachings and commands of Jesus, and being conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

As I was recently writing a paper on predestination, I spent considerable time on Romans 8:29. There I was astonished to find a predestined criteria for those who would be saved – they must be conformed to the likeness of God’s Son. I had never heard that before, nor been taught it in any church, nor noticed it in my prior reading of that verse. The language clearly defines a necessary criteria for those who will be saved. But I have never heard that taught and/or preached in the church. How important it is to study the teachings and commands of Christ Jesus as well as closely examining his life – imitating how he lived in total submission and obedience to his Father. The narrow gate seems even narrower.

A pastor friend gave me R. Kent Hughes book, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?* I was struck by Kent’s emphasis upon the same theme, though he approached it through the Beatitudes in a manner I had never heard before. He shows that the pronouns in the beatitudes are emphatic – the promises are for those, and those alone, who conform to the first portion of the statement. These statements define Jesus’ life. Kent would say that all true Christians – those really born again – all evidence to some degree each beatitude in his or her life.

Kent Hughes notes the accommodation evangelicalism has made to the culture and to the assimilation of modernity’s self-focus. He observes that “many evangelical pulpits have abandoned biblical exposition for the homiletics of consensus – preaching the bromides of the therapeutic age for ‘felt needs’ as determined by pollsters’ analyses” (p. 13). As a result of evangelicalism’s accommodation to modernity and assimilation of the culture, he says: “Bottom line, this means that becoming an evangelical Christian can bring little or no change in one’s lifestyle.”

Ray Comfort believes there are many false conversions. Kent Hughes sees people masquerading as evangelicals without ever truly committing their lives to Christ and being born again.

My conclusion is similar. I observe scriptures which say that no one will enter the Kingdom of heaven who does not do the will of God (Matt 7:21), that all true believers are predestined to be conformed to the likeness of God’s Son (Rom 8:29), and that the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey (have the heart attitude to obey) Jesus (John 14:15, 21,23, Acts 5:32). I also conclude that the

policy of deceit and fraud, compromise and worldliness, has gained many false converts. Tragically, this does not mean these false converts would not be true believers if they had been presented the true gospel – the whole counsel of God. They are false converts because they were presented a false gospel. Some may simply be pretenders, comfortable in the Christian life-style – as Kent Hughes describes them. Others may have a truly false conversion, believing themselves to be saved, but may be indwelt by a deceiving spirit rather than the Holy Spirit (Matt. 7:23).

I believe the solution is remarkably simply, but apparently rejected out-of-hand by the 20th-century church: Teach the people to obey the teachings and commands of Christ Jesus our Lord, precisely as our Lord commanded us to do. That incorporates Kent Hughes teachings from the Beatitudes and Ray Comfort's teaching of the commands of God which would lead to godly sorrow which brings repentance which leads to salvation.

Teaching the church to obey Christ's commands would do much more. We would learn how to live as members of a different Kingdom, that we are aliens here, that though we live here we belong to another place. Once again the church would be salt and light. The members of Christ's body would be so attractive that people in the world would seek us out because they would know we have something they want to have, exactly as must have happened in the first century church.

As I began, I must end, asking you to confirm what I am saying or rebuke me from Scripture. It seems unlikely that I would have a correct understanding of this issue while so many good, dedicated men apparently think otherwise. I presently believe we (the church and church leaders) have lost the plot. But I may be wrong. I feel much as Paul did when he went to Jerusalem to see the church leaders there to determine whether he was preaching the truth.

Enclosed is an 8-page summary titled "Obedience: the Mark of a (True) Christian" (with citations to scripture) which expresses several of these points in a more organized manner. I urge you to carefully consider that paper as it points to the scriptures on which I rely for the opinions I have expressed here. Please consider those scriptures as you, if you do, rebuke me for an improper understanding of the place and role of the church in Christ's Kingdom.

May the Lord richly bless you, your family, and your work and study. May it be a time of rich harvest and extension of the Kingdom of our Lord.

In Christ's love,

Bernie Koerselman
