

Choose Life

By George Davis and Michael Clark

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I call Heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life, that you may live, you and your seed, to love Jehovah your God, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him. For He is your life. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20 LITV)

It was Sunday morning and the question running through my (George's) mind was, Lord, why have you sent me here? Of all places, why here? I entered to the sound of perfectly played and flawlessly mixed keyboards, drums and guitars, sound that would satisfy the critical ear of any studio technician. Like a well-timed, finely tuned machine, everything was revved to perfection. No detail was left unattended--the overheads, lights, band and choir, all functioning in perfect chorus--a testimony to the hours of practice required to attain such a standard of excellence. Like a well-rehearsed Broadway production, every nuance fell perfectly into its predetermined place.

Then came the time for the announcements. The Pastor and his wife ascended the platform and together informed the congregation of the many activities coming up in the following days and weeks. There were meetings of every sort; including some for the newcomers to get them "knit in." There were potlucks and dinners galore. There were more activities than I can remember. Then they previewed three commercials that would be running on the local cable network, advertising their church as "a place for people just like you." Although these ads targeted diverse ethnic groups, they were all cast in an upper middle class context.

Next they told of an up and coming "crusade," where a team of Christian musclemen renown for their ability to break bricks, bend iron bars, and blow up hot water bottles till they burst would soon be coming to break bricks and bend bars right there on that very platform. Imagine that! But what stirred me most was the film of one of these muscle-bound evangelists giving the philosophy behind their ministry. "People may not come to a church service," he said, "but they will come to see men do feats of strength! And when they come, we can tell them about Jesus."

The following day, as I pondered these things in my heart, the Lord said to me, "Is my Son not enough to attract the lost?" What we witness in today's unique brand of Christianity is the ongoing struggle to offset powerlessness with sensationalism, a sure sign of spiritual decline. When the testimony of life wanes, the great temptation is to seek some other sensational new way to attract converts instead of seeking the Source of All Life. Unwittingly, we trade Life for activity after activity after activity. How we have fallen from that Life that once attracted men: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men; and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." (John 1:4&5 LITV)

If it takes feats of strength to draw people to salvation, what kind of sensationalism will it take to sanctify them? If the drawing force is entertainment, what will happen when the entertainment ceases? Will they go right back to the world where entertainment is acquiring new "heights" daily? What new diversions will be required to keep today's thrill-seeking, activity-driven Christian converts amused and contained? I question the quality of such conversions! Isn't Christ's presence enough? Would churches with such a mentality even recognize Him if He showed up in one of their services?

As Christians, the goal of gathering together should not be a "good service" or to entertain each other. We gather to commune with Christ. If only two people gather in His name, He has promised to be among them! "For where two or three are gathered together in my name," Jesus said, "there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)

These words have lost their meaning today and are often spoken as an excuse for the lack of any evidence of His presence. "Oh, you may rest assured, He is here! Don't let the fact that you cannot see Him fool you! For even though you cannot see or sense Him, He said He would be here, so He is here!" These words are empty when all the while He is left standing outside the door, knocking and asking to be let in. He is scarcely heard above the merriment, the band, the singing and the sermonizing. But in those rare moments of silence, faintly, from without, the sound of knocking can be heard. Like a whisper, a muffled cry comes from beyond the door, "If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will enter to him, and I will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20 LITV)

Few recognize the dire state of today's Christian churches that cloak their nakedness in so much doing that the voice of the Bridegroom is no longer heard in them. Jesus

pleads with them, "Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I counsel you to buy from Me gold purified by fire, so that you may be rich; and white clothing, so that you may be clothed, and so that the shame of your nakedness does not appear. And anoint your eyes with eye salve, so that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; therefore be zealous and repent." (Revelation 3:17-19 MKJV)

The only legitimate reason Christians come together is to share the life and communion of Christ, where His presence in their lives is evident. You cannot see the Wind but you know when it is blowing! If believers gather in His name, for His glory, and are moved solely by His Spirit, then He will be more than evident among them! If a ship is stalled in the doldrums, the crew does not line up behind the sail and start blowing. No! Even heathen sailors know that it will take an outside force to get the ship moving again and back on course.

In the first century, it was the presence of the living Christ in the midst of that rag tag company of believers that drew unbelievers by the thousands. Without the aid of a single potluck or crusade, three thousand were added to the Church in a single day. (See Acts 2:41) No one except God was doing feats of strength.

It was Christ's presence upon unlearned and ignorant men that caused the elders of Israel to marvel. (See Acts 4:13) As Zephaniah said of Zion, "The LORD your God in the midst of you is mighty; he will save." (3:17) He is mightier than prime time commercials, more persuasive than ten thousand bar-binding brick-breaking hulks or all of the chariots of Egypt

The renown of the primitive church was based on something altogether different than what we have today! They were not known for their ornate sanctuaries or flowery sermons, for they had neither. But when the sinner came into the gatherings of these simple people and the gifts of God's Spirit were at work, they fell on their faces and exclaimed, "God is in you of a truth." (1Corinthians 14:25). It was not their human strength that set them apart, but weakness and total dependence on Jesus. Sinners were convinced by the evidence of God among them. The Lord in the midst of them was mighty and all glory was attributed to Him! There is no greater manifestation of pride than preempting His glory, trusting in your own ingenuity and programs, ignoring

the presence and power of the living God. It is the presence of Christ and nothing else that will truly draw the lost!

I, Michael, was raised in the church. I had seen most of what the church had to offer. I even said a sinner's prayer, but I did not see the Life demonstrated in the New Testament. After a Sunday service in 1970, my wife and I noticed a handbill on the windshield as we were getting into the car. It announced a week of Christian meetings to be held in the local parks. It was worded in such a way that I was intrigued enough to go check it out. What I saw first should have scared me off before the first word was spoken. These meetings were held in the local hippie park, which I knew nothing about until I got there, but the Holy Spirit was drawing me so I stayed. Next I saw a group of longhaired young people with tambourines, singing their praises and love for Jesus and sharing their testimonies. It was not their songs that attracted me, but something I had never seen before--the love of the Lord manifest in a body of believers. It was so real and powerful I felt I could reach out and touch it. His love in them reached out to me and revealed the vast emptiness in me that religion could never fill. It created an immense hunger that would not be satisfied until I had THAT same love in me. THEIR gospel was with a demonstration of HIS power and not their own. This was the real thing. Later in that week I emptied myself in an unconditional surrender to Jesus. As one of these young people explained, "No two things can occupy the same place at the same time. If you want all of Jesus, you have to give up all of yourself and ask Him to forgive you all your sins." This was THE turning point of my life. For the first time, I had His life abounding in me with the power of the Holy Spirit that the Bible promised. I had been attending a "Bible church" for two years and heard all the words, but had never seen the "Life that was the Light of men." His Spirit was the force that drew me, and the demonstration of His power to change a heart.

We see an example of this in Jesus' earthly ministry. When it got out that He was in a particular home, soon the crowd was so great there was standing room only. You couldn't even get close to the door to look in. Four men came carrying a paralyzed friend on a cot. Since they couldn't get to Jesus because of the crowd, they tore a hole through the roof over the place where He was. They let the paralyzed man down to Jesus, cot and all. (See Mark 2:1-4)

Where Jesus is there is no need to hold crusades. Where Jesus is you won't need to run prime time commercials. He is His own best advertisement and word of mouth is

enough. If He is in our gatherings, people will be tearing the roof off to get in! He is altogether lovely. He is the drawing force! Didn't He say, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to Myself"? (John 12:32 LITV) Real evangelism is Jesus drawing all to Himself without our earthly help.

A Post-Christian World

Today we are living in a "Post-Christian world." Evangelically at least, today's brand of Christianity has fallen well behind the other religions of the world. In the last five years, 100,000 institutional churches in America alone have closed, while during that same time period the number of mosques has increased from 843 to about 1,300.

If the Christian goal is to evangelize the world and the measure of success is determined by that standard, these words of Juan Carlos Ortiz might give us some indication of how well we are doing. "We are told by computer projections that at the rate we (Christians) are now going it is going to take 19,000 years to evangelize the world."

Why is this? Why is the faith that turned the world upside down in the first century failing today? There has been an apostasy, a falling away from the true faith that once moved in power. Paul foretold this falling away in 2 Thessalonians 2. He could see what was to come. Not a great "end time revival," filling our church buildings, but a decline in the life that empowered the early church until it was reduced to the status of a dead religion. Paul warned Timothy of this, describing the last days condition of the apostate church as "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5). The denial of the power has brought Christianity to its current failed condition. Instead of seeking the Life that was lost, we now continue in our own flesh, creating new forms of sensationalism, hoping to keep our institutions from failing. We effectively deny the Lord access to His own Church.

Christendom today functions by the same energies and is sustained by the same means as the other religions of the world. Degraded to a form of religion, Christianity is so drastically reduced in power and effectiveness that it comes in a distant third or fourth to the other religions of the world. What today's brand of Christianity have that other religions don't? We approach them with the Bible; they point to the Koran or some other holy book. We pray to God, but so do they, only more regularly. We bring them the STORY of Jesus. They counter with the STORY of Mohammed, Buddha,

Confucius, Krishna, and so on. We have zeal! So do they! We would die for our faith. So would they. Book for book, prayer for prayer, story for story, zeal for zeal and human life for human life. What is the difference?

What distinguishes true Christianity from the religions of the world? What is it that raises true Christianity above the religious fray? Nothing except the presence of the dynamic, living Christ! He sanctifies and sets His Church apart! His life-changing, love-emitting presence in His believers IS Christianity. Most religions are built upon dead men! True Christianity is propagated and sustained by the living Lord! What is not birthed and fully supported by His life is as dead and powerless as any other religion. It may bear His name, but if it lacks His life and His power, it is His in name only and is merely a form of godliness.

"Such as I have give I you"

The first century Church did not bring Bibles, Sunday-school materials or Church programs to Asia Minor. They certainly didn't bring strongmen to hold crusades, performing feats of strength! What did they bring? They brought what they had! Do we have what they had?

They had what Peter and John gave to the lame man at the gate Beautiful. Looking steadfastly at the lame man, Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none but such as I have give I you!" Hear these words again, "Such as I HAVE give I you." You cannot give anyone what you do not have. When a salesman spends a lot of time and many words trying to convince me to purchase his wares, I know that what he is selling will not sell itself. It is severely lacking.

The apostles gave what they had! What they had was Jesus in a measure that the twenty-first century Church simply does not have. Then, "all the people ran together unto them in the porch that is called Solomon's, greatly wondering." Why? Peter explains, "And the Author of Life you killed, whom God raised up from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And on the faith of His name, this one whom you see and know was made firm by His name, and the faith which came through Him gave to him this complete soundness before you all." (Act 3:15-16 LITV) Why did the people come running? Jesus was present! The Author of Life was there! The man by the gate had been lying there for many years. He had been passed by many a priest and Jewish leader, but not one of them had the power of Jesus' resurrected life. They could have

told him, "We have no power, because we chose to have gold and silver. Here is an alms." Jesus DID say that you cannot serve both God and mammon. The first century Church did not bring Bibles, Sunday-school materials or Church programs to Asia Minor. They certainly didn't bring strongmen to hold crusades, performing feats of strength! What did they bring? They brought what they had! Do we have what they had?

The early believers had what Paul and Silas demonstrated. After being beaten with many stripes, cast into prison and fastened into stocks, they prayed and sang praises unto God in the midnight hours. "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed." (See Acts 16: 23-26) All shackles fell off and the prison doors flew open. Why? The Author of Life was present!

A New Reformation

Beginning with Luther, the restoration of truths that had been lost for 1400 years began. We have come a long way but we do not yet see the full restoration of the new covenant life. The Author of Life is not seen as He was in the early church. The current church system functions from a deficit of life and tries to drum up it up by degrees. The early church had no crusades. They had no weekly bulletin. Beyond the moment they had no idea what the day would bring, let alone the following weeks. They were without agenda, except to obey the prompting of the Spirit moment by moment. Rather than trying to make things happen, they were forced to explain what was constantly occurring among them. "This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel; the faith which came through Him (Jesus Christ) gave to him (the lame man) this complete soundness before you all." Today's apostate brand of Christianity makes empty promises that if you do all the right things in the right way, life will result. Like a hamster's wheel, round and round it goes, and though the poor hamster sees himself making great progress, he steps out of the wheel looks around and finds himself in that same little cage. All that he gets for his efforts is tired. Where does it all stop? Right where he started. And where is the life and freedom that was promised?

If you question the process you will be told you got weary just before the prize, and if you had just hung on a little longer, you would have most certainly reaped the benefits. I guess it never enters the poor hamster's (Christian's) mind to ask, "Where are all the

others who have attained the promised life?" No, like the elusive carrot dangled before the nose of the donkey, it is always just out of reach.

God intends to restore New Covenant life in its fullness. How else will we ever minister to the Moslems? Will we compete with them in Jihad on the level of "might makes right"? Will we intimidate them into submission by calling for a team of musclemen who bend bars, rip phone books, and break bricks with their foreheads? Maybe if we bomb them enough they will believe that Jesus is the Christ. Will we draw them in with our professionally crafted commercials? Will we impress them with our skilled worship team or carefully arranged stage lighting? Will we dazzle them with our awesome choir? How do you convince any unbeliever that the Christ we say is alive, is indeed alive? Is He alive enough to be evident in His people? Is He in the house?

Once I, Michael, was at a meeting in a brother's home. He had invited an evangelist from India to this meeting. This man told us of all the miracles and demonstrations of power the Lord was doing in their gatherings in his home country. There were glowing reports of demons being cast out, the lame walking, the blind seeing, and the lepers being cured. When he was done I asked him why these same manifestations of the power of God were not happening in America. He then told me a story.

"When I was growing up in India, we lived in a one room house that was about the size of this brother's living room. We never traveled far because we lived in community and met one another's needs as we were able. We had no furniture or cars and mother cooked outside over an open fire. At night we would roll out our grass sleeping mats on dried cow dung, because it was soft and spongy. In India, whether you are Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, the most important thing is to seek the spiritual in your life

"You in America have the highest standard of living in the world. Your middle class lives like our kings. To answer your question why the Lord does not act in power in the American Church, the answer is that you get what you seek after."

We leave you with these words of A. W. Tozer:

"We must have a new reformation. There must come a violent break with the irresponsible, amusement-mad paganized pseudo-religion which passes today for the faith of Christ and which is being spread all over the world by unspiritual men employing unscriptural methods to achieve their ends."

