



“IF” ...the myth of Shangri-La Christianity

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31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." 33 They answered Him, "We are Abraham's

descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 "And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. 37 "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. 38 "I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father." 39 They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. 40 "But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. 41 "You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. 43 "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. 44 "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. 45 "But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me.

Jesus had been going at these boys pretty hard in the 8th chapter of John. It has always been something I am starkly aware of...how He could be such a caring and loving individual, but when need be, He also could unleash some serious storm! It seemed that Jesus was quite passionate about delivering the truth, and sometimes...when readily received, He could and *would* do so with a gentle hand. But when there was a blind rejection of the truth, well...Jesus, if He didn't actually change his voice *level*, certainly changed his *tone*! I have no doubt our Lord was a passionate *man* as well as a holy deity! He clearly understood what was a stake.

In the Bob Dylan song "Isis" there is a line that asks "Are you lookin' for something easy to catch?" And it sometimes seems that he in saying such encompassed the "siren call" of our culture! "Easy" is the seeming mantra of a whole generation: easy girls, easy money, easy jobs, easy food, easy travel, easy clothes, easy *music*. Rare do we see any type of the commitment, the unflinching devotion, the 'long haul' and the "resolute perseverance"...the stuff of history, the stuff of movies! We want it *here* and we want it *now*, and if all possible we want it *cheap*. 'Quality' has been relegated to a mere ancient premise in our world of plastic, styrofoam, and vinyl! A world where Walmart, cheap Chinese imports, and fast food restaurants rule!

Recently I was talking to a guy who told me he was just "tired." Not tired in a way that a short nap would fix in this case! No, his 'tired' was that of the spirit, and he remarked that he could not be a part of us here in this church because frankly he was just looking for something easier. An easier church...along with an apparently easier Christian practice: one that was not so time consuming, not so intense...not such a war all the time. My friend was looking for the magical land of 'Christian Shangri La'...

Ah...wouldn't it be lovely?

I'm afraid that the church world is today inundated with those looking for that easy faith manifest...the painless road, the smooth and uncomplicated Christian life. Such a false premise would have died out a long time ago if it were not for churches that actually do all they can to deliver such to these "seeker" wayfarers, despite scripture's repeated mantra that no such world exists on this side of heaven. Even Christ made that clear, saying in John 16:33 that "...*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.*" Paul said in 1Thessalonians 3:4 "*Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come — and they did, as you well know.*" And in 2 Corinthians 10:3 and 1 Timothy 1:18 he said we are "at war." Even Peter in his first letter said "*Stand firm against him (Satan), and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are.*" (1Peter 5:9)

Such certainly is not a new idea. All the way back in the first few pages of Genesis 3, God Himself spoke saying to the only members of humanity at that time, that He would "*greatly multiply (their) sorrow*"....He spoke of pain, and the 'toil' that would now be a part of their lives...of difficult work and hard living environment. (Gen 3:16-19)

Seldom do we start out this faith walk with such an 'easy-peasy' mindset. We seem to have at that time innately understood that this is a hard road that we had chosen and that God had chosen for us. But somewhere along that road...like this friend of mine....we get "tired" and begin to look for "something easy to catch." A softer bed...an easier schedule...a less confrontational environment. The writer of Hebrews calls us to remember those early days...back when we were passionate, zealous and idealistic about the path of Christ for each of us. "*Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering.*" (Heb 10:32)

I cannot help but wonder what the apostle Paul...or any of the 12 would think about the modern church today? Paul said in 1Timothy 6:12 "*Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you, which you have confessed so well before many witnesses.*" And He never asked us to do what he was unwilling to do himself! Such was not theory or Christian ease...something we recite at church and leave in the pew on our way out. No, this was a "life thing." At the end of Paul's life he said "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful.*" (2Tim 4:7) Repeatedly we are called to 'run'... 'be strong' ... 'remain'... 'abide'... 'fight'... 'stand fast', etc etc. Let's face it...we can put a new coat of paint on it, but all the cleaning up we can ever do herein does not change the reality that the Christian life is often *hard*.

Jesus continues down the path that he began earlier in this chapter. He challenged the religious folks who did the whole church thing but failed to truly 'know Christ.' They were living a perceived "sterilized version" of God where they didn't have to sacrifice too much or get their hands dirty or, *God forbid*, break a sweat in sacrifice for God or His furtherance! When Jesus said "*seek first the kingdom of God*" in Matthew 6, the crowd must have sucked the air out of the room as they all in unison tried to catch their breath! Here Jesus began verse 31 ...speaking now to those who actually believed He was the Messiah, the 'Son of God,' and told them something that would profoundly direct and determine the rest of their lives as it does the rest of ours. "***If*** *you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.*"

IF..."

How could we come to any other conclusion then but to accept that it is therefore plausible to be able and capable of *not* abiding in His word, thus ultimately proving that we are *not* His disciples? He said IF. Except we just don't generally en masse believe that truth because frankly, we simply don't like it! It just *kills* some of us to entertain this premise! Because it doesn't say that we are to abide in church, or abide in 'belief', or abide in moralistic idealism. It says we must "abide in His word." It doesn't even say "read my word on a regular basis." It says *abide IN*... meaning "to endure, to keep and to *continue IN*." The word 'in' additionally meaning "present and a very part of," the Word. Both the *written* and the *living, breathing* manifested "Word" that is Christ!

And herein lays the great spiritual 'fork in the road.' We either hang tough and stay put in the corporate commands of the Bible along with the individual spiritual directives for our personal lives, or we take the fork to the left which leads to OZ and away from the "abiding in His word" and away from being His disciple. Away from "words" like "seek **FIRST** the kingdom of God." Now I don't care how well you can dodge bullets like Keanu Reeves in the Matrix, you will not escape this passage very long. First; *the word is "first."* Again, so many of us did indeed 'put our hand to the plow' but we 'looked back'...we looked back to where we came from...back to where we once were, and to all that we once enjoyed, and now we are 'no longer fit for the kingdom.'

In the 'abiding' we have the truth, and when we fail to do so, it is crazy what we will 'hang our hat on' as to our new mantra and philosophy. Like the belief that because 'God is good' we can live in any way we please and attempt to cheat God in whatever way we please, and it will all be OK because he loves me and will "finish the work that He has begun in me." Hogwash. Oh, don't misunderstand my position. **HE** will, if YOU will. But will *you*? Some people read that as a guaranteed service promise from the cable company, which is fine, but if you don't pay your cable bill you still will get no service!

God will not place you in a realm of blessing if you are openly disobedient to His words. Such rejects all of scripture and the very nature of Christ as well as the reason for the cross. If you think we cannot mess up God's plan for us, then you are running a dangerous game. What about Moses? Did he not get to go into the Promised Land because of disobedience? Because he misrepresented God? And that was MOSES! Cain was never restored to God's plan for him. Ananias and Sapphira *died* for their actions. So did Judas. Many paid dearly for their failure to endure...Jonah, Miriam, Peter, David. It is clearly an unbiblical ideal to think that we can live outside of His directives and plan and that "everything will be ok." **No it won't.**

But our flesh longs to 'be free.' And because we often fail to understand that 'free' in this world means something very different than scriptural 'free', we attempt to manipulate Christianity to force a compromise. We read that freedom is in Christ, but we attempt to *live* a faith free of constraint, another's directions, uncomfortable situations and personal effort, when that IS the attributes of living "in Christ!" Like the issue of love; when we interpret scriptural ideals in a worldly vernacular, we miss the truth.

At times I have found myself in conversations with someone else about a certain distant place and culture that I have visited. And I can always tell if the other person is grasping the nuances of the picture I am describing, and those who are not. Those that don't 'get it' kind of stare off in the distance, and those who do, have this gleam in their eye as in their mind they are back there, and the scene is so real they can almost touch it. What is the difference? **The latter has been there** as I had. They have seen it, touched it, smelled it, heard it and wholly experienced it.

I know more than one person has commented while in India with me that despite all the films, the training and descriptive preparations, they didn't really 'get it' until they were standing on that street in Paharganj Delhi. They 'got it' then, because *they were there*. The same plays out daily in the church. Everyone is 'on stage' together, but

only some abide in the Word and they know the truth and thus know true freedom. While others have yet to make that commitment, and seem to always watch everything transpire with a far-away look in their eyes. How is it that two people can walk and serve side-by-side...doing the same things, and one is energized and thrilled even as the beads of sweat form on their brow, and the other is joyless and feeling enslaved? Is it not because the one 'knows the truth' that comes out of really being a disciple and that truth has "set them free?"

The listeners that day with Christ were indignant. They believed themselves to BE free, and such was a great motivation in their lives to stay that way. But they hadn't yet surrendered to the control of God so they were only free to do what they wanted, not free to live out the created plan that God had for each of them nor did they know the joy and blessing that comes with doing so! They claimed to be children of Abraham... "disciples" if you will, but Jesus said if that was true...*and this is crucial to our understanding herein*, they would actually "**do** the works of Abraham." Not "believe" those works or read about them, but actually *DO* them! The same is with a disciple...a 'son' of Christ! One must actually *DO* the works ...*please note again that word!*

Sadly, the result of this situation is that some eventually venture off looking for that illusive truth, like Pilate who ignorantly stood in the very presence of truth embodied, asking "what is truth?" The warning that Jesus was giving was not an issue of *belief* but of *practice*. They had decided *in their heads*, but had not *surrendered in their hearts*. Their lives were still their own. They had not 'died to themselves.'

Evidence of such is manifested in words like '*I have decided to*' do this thing or that and 'pursue this direction or another.' "*We have decided to...*" etc. For a disciple, there is no longer an "I" or "we." **There is only Christ and his explicit instructions and plan.** It is HERE that the 'truth' lay and HERE that joy resides. The book of Hebrews speaks in length concerning this aspect. The writer speaks of a "rest" that remains for many of us. It is the "rest" that comes with being in that special place and path that is uniquely ours alone. It's not Shangri La, but it sure is an awesome place to live...even with the sweat, the discipline and the time sacrifice! It is a place of "abiding" in his words...those that remain, continue, and endure in their living. Traits and practices that are illusive and seemingly impossible for a person who is "free in this world."

Jesus said to them "*If God were your Father, then you would love me...*" Indeed! REAL love demands sacrifice. There is no other love under the umbrella of Christendom. A real love for God *endures!* Matthew 10:22 says "*He who endures to the end will be saved.*" That fact troubles many of us who adhere to a security of one's redemption! Perhaps it will help to read it this way: "*The one who is saved will endure to the end.*" Endurance requires surrender to Christ and HIS power to hold you up and keep you going every day. Endurance requires character, commitment, and an 'all-in' heart of love.

Those of us that still feel constrained, bound and restricted have never seen this place of God's blessed relationship. They struggle still. They affectively allow Satan to rob them of the peace of God, and they live restless and unsettled. The "grass is greener" always on the other side of the fence, and so they roam through life still *looking* for...*something*. As U2 sang it "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." And I assure you that sooner or later, that something will come and will in fact be a gift from Satan. Some man or woman who makes you feel good for a time, a job that makes you feel important or pays you enough to live as you always wanted, or even a church that tells you that everything is ok when in fact it is clearly, ...*scripturally*, ...**not**.

There is no middle ground. There is no Christian Shangri-La. There is however abiding, discipleship, truth and real freedom. And in that place there is truth. Not just a truth you accept, but a truth you actually embrace! But you have to see it for yourself to know it as fact. In absence of such, I, like Christ, can "*tell the truth*" but you too, will not believe me either...