

Introduction

Bible references have been supplied for those who wish to look them up, but the book has been written so that it can be understood without this. Names of individuals have been changed to preserve identity. Biblical quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated, Copyright 1973, 1978 & 1984.

All the anecdotes involving people are true, and personally known to me rather than second hand. The identities of people have been guarded by name changes.

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"We believe the time has come for doing more fully what the Master commanded us..." J. Hudson Taylor, writing in the first issue of *China's Millions*, 1875.

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The church of Jesus Christ in the western world is going through a period of change and readjustment today. A member of the British government has recently stated that in the past, everybody knew what the Christian church believed and stood for, but now this is no longer clear. There have also been other calls for greater clarity in the church's message.

The situation can perhaps be compared to a cheap portable radio without an Automatic Frequency Control, which may have once tuned in to a station accurately, but has since drifted off the frequency, allowing distortion into the sound. The owner reaches for the tuning dial, and by turning it first one way and then the other, resets it for the best possible reception.

The aim of this book is to look once again at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. There is a recurring need for this to happen, because the church has shown tendencies in the past to drift away from the teaching of Jesus.

To give an example, for a thousand years, the church had used a Latin translation of the text called the Vulgate. In the sixteenth century, earlier Greek texts of the new Testament came to light, and were studied by scholars. It turned out that where the Latin of Mark 1:15 implied "Do penance for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (*penitentia*), the Greek suggested "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (*metanoia*). These two sentences are different; the former suggested acts of contrition, while the latter called for a change of heart.

In this instance, the church lost a grip on the original message because of a faulty understanding of the text. Since the fifteenth century, thousands of portions of New Testament manuscripts have come to light, and extensive research has enormously improved the biblical text that we have. While translations may still occasionally introduce difficulties, we can have confidence in the Greek text that is available to us today.

In our attempt to focus on the core of what it means to follow Jesus, we will look closely at what Jesus taught his first followers, as recorded in the gospels. This approach needs to be explained. Many of us have assumed that broadly speaking, the church has been faithful to the teachings of Jesus. This assumption may need to be re-examined. The example of church tradition on repentance being off frequency given above gives us pause for thought. We notice that God was prepared to allow believers to practise penance for a millennium, when Jesus never actually called for it. Despite the misunderstanding, God appears to have been reluctant to interfere. It seems to have been important to God that the church be allowed to go on its own way. It really has been up to the church whether she carries out the Lord's will for humanity well or badly. Given this freedom and responsibility that believers have, we need to ask how many other areas of accepted Christian teaching there might still be, which are similarly off beam, and also whether there are areas which Jesus emphasised that tend to be ignored today.

To give a more recent example of the tuning being off frequency, it is possible to detect the influence of secular thought on today's church. Our cultural inheritance is affected by rationalism and materialism.

These influences have appeared in the church in the form of what might be called "Sandbank Theology". As some people look at the story of Jesus walking on the water, for instance, they are inclined to say that there must have been an unseen sandbank just below the surface of the sea, because people don't walk on water (Matt 14).

In taking this line, it seems to me, they reject the idea of a miracle in favour of the secular world view that they have inherited in their upbringing. This may have considerable appeal. However, the Bible is so full of miracles that we are in danger of leaving Christianity behind if we take such a view. If we edit out the miraculous, can we say that what is left can still truly be called Christianity?

We may note that such a liberal view of Scripture does not abandon faith; rather, it places faith in something other than the accounts about Jesus. It can tend, for example, to place more faith in the thought and writings of twentieth century theologians than in the writers of the gospel.

This brings us to a key question. If we cannot rely on our cultural mindset to guide us, and if church tradition has not always been helpful, what can we rely on?

It seems to me that the Christian faith springs directly out of the New Testament. For believers to ignore or change the record that they have in the gospels is to cut off the branch on which they are sitting, to use a hackneyed phrase.

There is no other trustworthy source of Christianity than the biblical records. Once we admit the possibility that the accounts are unreliable, for any reason, then we run the risk of denying the possibility of being followers of Jesus, in my opinion. We have no other firm foundation for our faith than the written text. If this is seriously flawed, then we might as well be consistent and give up any attempt at living a Christian life. Some other way of ordering human existence will need to be found that is more coherent.

Not all church people would agree with this. Some might want to argue for Church tradition as being authoritative, despite its more obvious errors. The accumulated wisdom of the church has provided a firm platform to live on. The reply might be that while tradition may be helpful in matters of detail, it hardly seems a safe basis for matters of substance.

Imagine a journey where a minibus sets out to drive from London to Scotland. The style of driving, the kind of music that is played on the journey, and who sits in which seat, are all decisions that do not ultimately affect the journey. Such matters can all be decided on the basis of tradition; the group can follow previous practice, or not, as they choose. However, if some of the passengers become keen that the bus change route to travel via Wales, or even via the South Coast, then something stronger than tradition needs to be cited. Now the whole purpose of the journey is at stake. The aim of getting to Scotland can hardly be altered in the light of opinions expressed along the route. Even if the bus breaks down, and the passengers have to take to the train, the destination is still Scotland. So too with Christianity, although matters of detail can be decided on previous practice, the teachings of its founder ought not to be set aside in the light of church practice and tradition.

Others might want to argue that in our concern and compassion for our needy world, the church should draw its agenda from people's needs today. There is little need to have a clear grasp of our origins, it might be argued, in view of all the need around. Forget the theory, and simply get involved.

There is clearly a helpful emphasis here; we cannot afford to ignore the world we live in. However, such thinking ought not to be the controlling factor regarding the purpose and function of the church. The reason that the church has concern and compassion for the needy at all, is because of Jesus' teaching. Surely it is he who sets the agenda. Believers need to beware of ignoring their roots in their desire to reach out to help others. In practice, as Christians are in close touch with Jesus, their concern for the poor will increase rather than diminish (Matt 25:31-46).

The line taken in this book is that the heart of being a Christian is to be a follower of the way that Jesus showed. This is in fact the original use of the title 'Christian', which was first applied as a nickname to the disciples at Antioch (Acts 11:26, cf 22:4, 24:14). In the gospels, we read that Jesus called people to follow him (Matt 4:19, John 1:43, 14:6, 21:19 & 22). Regarding suffering for the faith, Peter wrote, "It is for you to follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

Our proposal is that the principle of following Jesus' way holds good for every area of Christian faith. The call of the church is to be a company of people following this Christian way.

Our study will focus on Jesus' instructions in the gospels. The rest of the New Testament may be seen as amplifying the content of the gospels, and the Old Testament serves to illuminate the gospels, but the core of being a Christian will be taken as being and doing what Jesus told his followers to be and do.

Some may find our emphasis on the gospels unduly restrictive, since we have a Bible which is many times longer than the few pages taken up by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Our purpose, however, is to retune to the middle of the Christian wavelength, which we have argued focuses on Jesus. What goes on in a court of law is to do with getting to the heart of the matter. Witnesses in a trial are expected to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In our attempt to come to the centre of Christian faith, we will aim to focus on the core of what Jesus taught, the whole of that core, and to omit what Jesus did not teach about.

Yet another objection to our approach might be that some of the instructions Jesus gave were for the apostles only. They were special, it might be said, and it is therefore not right for later generations of Christians to try to follow them. We may reply that when they were chosen, the first disciples were far from special. In fact, they were slow to grasp what Jesus was concerned with (eg. Luke 24:25). Rather, they became special through contact with him, as believers can today. But a greater difficulty with this argument is that it tends to be selective. To give an example, the church has accepted that taking bread and wine in memory of Jesus, which was commanded exclusively to the apostles, is for all Christian believers. In this we follow Paul (1 Cor 11:17-34), and early church practice (Acts 2:42). This seems to be good procedure. If the second generation of believers practised what Jesus commanded the apostles to do, then we can do the same today with confidence. We may note that all the subjects

that we have considered central, and which have chapters in part five, were practised by Christians in the Book of Acts.

Some of us, if we are honest, may find the thought of trying to follow some of Jesus' commands somewhat daunting. It is not easy to feel that maybe we are all called to give up all our possessions and become holy paupers, for example (Luke 14:33). Also, many of us would naturally shrink from any thoughts of trying to raise a person from death (Matt 10:8).

We will attempt to face up to these fears in the course of the book. However, on the issue of whether the commands were to apply indefinitely, our line will be that what the first disciples were told also applied to the disciples they won, and so on down to today. The disciples were to bear fruit that should last (John 15:16). At the creation, the fruit trees were designed to be seed bearing, so that the process of trees bearing fruit would continue, generation after generation (Gen 1:11). We may think of the church as Jesus' new creation in which the same principle applies.

In order to focus our enquiry, we will base our study on the closing words of Matthew, quoted below. Here Jesus appears to summarise the task of his followers in a few sentences. We will attempt to take him at his word in our discussion of what he says. The book will fall into six sections of unequal length, indicated by the underlinings.

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

In our study, we will particularly try to address the instructions that Jesus gave in the gospels, except for some that seem to have been for individuals only, or which appear to have applied only to the events of the moment.