

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Features of Christianity: The Epistles of Christ

The Christians at Corinth were very well known and especially dear to the Apostle Paul. Indeed, we read in Acts 18 that he spent a year and a half there, preaching and teaching the word of God. We know that after his extended visit serious problems had arisen there. This had prompted Paul to deliver to them a very stern rebuke. The sad details are given in 1 Corinthians. Indeed, their conduct had affected him so much, and he felt so strongly about it, that he had not dared to confront them with it in person. He had written to them instead, so that he could moderate his language better than if he was actually with them. Happily, they had responded well. They had put right the matters that needed attention. Because of this, Paul was now able to open his heart to them in a very precious way. He could direct them to some very sweet aspects of the Christian faith that he had not previously been free to introduce. They had first had to face up to the serious difficulties that had arisen amongst them. This they had done. There is a therefore a clear contrast between what He had emphasised in 1 Corinthians and what he felt free to introduce in 2 Corinthians.

To bring about a realisation of the serious local condition of things, in 1 Corinthians he had had to concentrate their attention on fundamental matters of the Christian faith. Matters such as the sufferings of Christ, the gospel of Christ, and the glory of Christ! Since then they had faced up to the issues involved, and taken the necessary remedial action. Because of that, he was now free in 2 Corinthians to speak of the sweet moral virtues that can come out and be displayed in those Christians who are going on well and living in communion with their Lord and Saviour. He could now express his love for them without reserve. He could be free to speak of such sweet qualities as the sweet savour of Christ, the love of Christ, the grace of Christ, the meekness and gentleness of Christ, even the power of Christ. In line with that, he is able to speak to them as epistles of Christ, those whose lives men could read to show them Who and what Christ is.

There is a well known little poem which is often used to make us Christians aware of our responsibility to live, and behave, and act in a way that helps to give other people the right idea about God and Christ. It goes like this:

*'We are writing a gospel
A chapter a day
By the things that we do
And the things that we say.*

*Men read what we are
By the things that we do
So what is the Gospel
According to you?'*

Very telling, I'm sure you will agree! What is the basis and secret of this concept? Surely this! If my life is not consistent with what I say I believe, you will be tempted to say to me, "What you are and what you do speaks so loudly that I cannot possibly hear what you say." I am sure most of us have heard someone refer to someone they know well in these terms. "Him? I can read him like an open book." To use the Lord's own words, recorded in Luke 4:23, "You will say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself." A happier way of expressing the same truth in a positive way would be if those who know us well were able to say, "What you are and what you do proclaims loudly and unmistakably the truth of what you say".

Many people never read the Bible, and, indeed, have no intention of ever doing so. But, and it is a big but, they certainly read the lives of those who claim to be Christians. This is no surprise. Even further! It is, indeed, God's intention that the lives of those who are His children should indeed be held up to constant scrutiny.

From the beginning of time, God has progressively made Himself known to men. In the Person of His Son He finally made Himself fully known (Read Hebrews 1:1-2 and John 1:1-18). Sadly, men did not like what they saw in Jesus. His perfection and holiness spoke to their consciences. They got rid of Him. They crucified Him at Calvary. That was their answer to what they read in the life and heard in the words that Jesus spoke. What was God's response to that? God raised Him from among the dead and gave Him glory (1 Peter 1:21). Jesus rose again, and went back to heaven

where He was before. The Holy Spirit came down to indwell the Christian church on the day of Pentecost. This is described fully in Acts 2. The knowledge of God is gained now, at least in part, by the observation, indeed the scrutiny, of the lives of those who say they are Christians.

This is the point of that statement given in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3, where the Apostle Paul says, "Ye are my epistles, know and read of all men". Paul says, "If you want to know anything about me, look at the results of my work in preaching and teaching the gospel. Put the lives of my converts under the microscope. Subject them to close scrutiny. That will tell you the sort of person that I am." This was a special case of a much more general truth. God wants men to learn about Him by studying the lives of those who have a real spiritual relationship with Him because they believe that Jesus loves them and died for them and rose again. This kind of demonstration was given to perfection in the life of Christ when he lived in the world. He was indeed an 'epistle', or letter, or message, from God. He was scrutinized, known and read by all who met Him. Many of those who knew Him did not like at all what they saw in Him. His intrinsic purity troubled their consciences. The moral perfection they saw in Him made them feel most uncomfortable, when they compared Him with what they knew was true of themselves. The Lord Jesus has gone back to heaven. What was made fully known in Him, in perfection, in His time on earth, is now continued, in the lives of those who know Him as Saviour and Lord.

God continues to say, "Do you want to know me? Look at the lives, and the changed lives produced, revealed and declared in my people by their knowledge of me. Scrutinise them. Read them. Get to know them. In the process you will see something about Me in them." Of course, what they will learn of God will be what has been produced in them. They have grown in their personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ in their own lives, made good in them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Things seen fully, in perfection, in Christ personally, when He was here, can now be seen, if in a more limited degree, in the lives of those in whom these same moral features have been reproduced. This is God's intention. This is God's will.

Terms other than 'epistle' are also used in the Bible to get this idea across. For instance, there is a concept introduced into Paul's First Letter to Timothy that is very illuminating. It is found in 1 Timothy 3:15: "I hope to see you soon but ... if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth."

What did he mean? Let us consider the term 'pillar'. There are two main kinds of pillar in common knowledge. There is the kind that is very strong. It can support great weight without giving way under the strain. A very useful and important kind of pillar! But that is not the kind referred to here. No, what we have here is another kind of pillar! What we might call a monumental pillar! You know the kind of thing. When it is desired to commemorate a great person or event, an imposing pillar is erected. The relevant details are all inscribed on the pillar. The person, the place, the event, the date! It is significant that the most outstanding details are clear from a distance. They are written in large letters, and large numbers where applicable. Then, the closer you get to the pillar, the more readily you are able to read the story in closer, finer detail. Indeed, it's not until you get really close up to the pillar that you are able to read the small print and the story is fully told. This is a wonderful picture of the way God works. He intends that people who know nothing about Him should get to know Him by watching, indeed examining, even scrutinising closely, the lives of Christians of their acquaintance. In other words, the Christian's life should be a living monument to the truth of God.

Paul declares that what he is writing about is beyond dispute. Furthermore, the heart of the matter might be termed the secret spring of right behaviour, the inner source which prompts outwardly correct conduct. He declares this to be the revelation of God in the Person of God's Son. Overall, this means that the knowledge of God has been made plain in the Person of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is the privilege and responsibility of Christians generally to make that revelation of God known in their lives and conduct. Others can then be brought to a knowledge of God through the witness of the Christian's lifestyle, attitude and behaviour.

The other term used in the verse, "base", is not so very far removed from the more usual meaning of the term "pillar". In the Old Testament, we read about the Ark of the Covenant. During the journeys of the people of Israel, the ark was carried through the wilderness on the shoulders of living Levites. No man-made carriage was allowed to support it. Neither was it permissible for the Ark itself to be actually touched. The Ark was carried on wooden staves which were supported by the shoulders of the Levites. No other nation had such an ark. It signified that only Israel, of all the nations of the world, enjoyed the presence of God in their midst. Any knowledge of the true God that other nations gained came to them by their contact with Israel, God's special earthly people. Similarly, at the present time, the Christian witness to God is carried figuratively on the shoulders of living Christians who know Him, love and obey Him.

A similar thought is expressed very graphically in Leviticus 11. We learn there that God classified some animals as clean, good for food, and suitable for making ceremonial sacrifices in the worship of God. Others were declared to be unclean, unsuitable for such purposes. Those beasts which were considered clean, were those which ruminated. They chewed the cud repeatedly, again and again, as part of their digestive process. Also, they had cloven hooves. Their hoof marks on the ground showed a definite split, or cleavage, every step that they took.

The application for the Christian is very clear. Regular, steady, systematic, daily study of the scriptures has a very definite, unmistakable effect on the lives that we live. Note that both features were necessary. It was not good enough to be a ruminant, if there wasn't also the cloven hoof. Similarly, having a cloven hoof without chewing the cud meant that such an animal was not acceptable. The message is plain. The figure of chewing the cud is suggestive of the way in which we are to meditate on the word of God constantly, consistently, on a regular basis. We must not only read it, but chew it, turning it over in our minds again and again till we really understand what it is saying to us. But there must also be the outward evidence that it has produced a suitable answer in our lives. It must affect the way we live towards God, in ourselves and in our relationships with others. This is achieved by being obedient to what we understand the scriptures clearly say. Both features are absolutely necessary. The study of scripture and living a consistent life that pleases God! This encourages other people to notice that our lives are changed for the better because of the effect of the word of God upon us. Study without godly living is not enough. Good living unless it is the result of the word of God being applied in our souls in the power of the Holy Spirit, will not last. The truth of God, properly assimilated, does indeed have a decided, positive, practical effect on the believer's life. The truth we seek to minister to others must first of all make its mark on you and me, ourselves. Otherwise, there is little likelihood that it will affect anyone else to whom we present it

I remember hearing of an occasion when a speaker was describing the sort of person the Lord Jesus is. After a while, a member of the audience who was attending such a lecture for the first time could not refrain from shouting out, "I know him. I know that man. He lives in our street." In other words, there was a man living in his street who was so Christ-like in his manner and life-style that the man listening to the address thought the speaker was referring to that man, his neighbour. What an impression for good, and for God, we Christians would be and give to our neighbours, and, indeed, all we meet, if we were so Christ-like that people who know us well gained such an impression.

This should indeed be the Christian norm. In the Bible, God has given us all we need to know about Himself in the Person of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, He has put His spirit, the Holy Spirit, in our hearts, to make good in our souls all that the scriptures teach. He then gives us, by that selfsame Spirit, the power to live out what we have learned of Christ. By this means, others can then learn, in us and from us, all that God wants them to learn. Via this stepping stone they might then be moved to trust the Lord Jesus as their own personal Saviour, believing that 'Christ died for their sins, according to the scriptures, and was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

As Romans 10:9-10 says: 'if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.'

Those who believe that, and confess their belief, themselves can then take their place amongst those who are 'Epistles of Christ', known and read of all men'.

Now we've thought more about it, let me quote that little poem again, this time putting it into the first person singular, so that I cannot dodge the sharp challenge it brings to you, and to me, as individuals.

*'I am writing a gospel
A chapter a day
By the things that I do
And the things that I say.*

*Men read what I am
By the things that I do
So what is the Gospel
According to me?'*

Again, let me say, a very telling composition! May God help us to face up to the challenge, and live in a way that is consistent with what we say we believe. We shall then, in deep reality, be epistles of Christ, known and read of all men.

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