

October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021 MX sermon by Bradford Stevens

On a university campus the son of a minister, a science major, said “ I have been reared around Christianity all of my life. I have eaten with it three times a day and slept with it at night. It has been crammed down my throat until it made me vomit intellectually. I am here to tell you that I am through with it. God is dead, the Bible is a myth, and Christians are smug hypocrites. The church, the establishment, has nothing to offer.”

His words are not shocking to me. In fact, they express the thinking of most of the postmodern world in which we live. So how does the church answer the charges made? I want to briefly analyze the nature of our contemporary world and its real needs, and see what, if anything, the church has to offer to meet those needs.

We live in a renewed space age where there are no limitations perceived to human potential. Humankind has conquered the atmosphere and is ready to offer trips to outer space. We communicate by satellites in orbit around the earth in the twinkling of an eye. We have developed computers which can do in milliseconds what once required hundreds of skilled people many months to achieve. Science has become a God who provides food, clothing, and shelter, ease, comfort, and recreation. Accordingly, science becomes the object of worship. This is the environment of modern people. These are their discoveries, pursuits, and attainments. That, which belongs to other ages and other days, is fit only for the museum. Religion belongs to yesterday. It has nothing vital left to offer. This is the conclusion of our secular society.

It may seem that those of us who maintain our fidelity to the Christian faith are helpless and naïve. But the whole story has not been told! True we live in a Pagan world, but it was a Pagan world into which Christianity originally entered. Christianity in the first century transformed the world. It offered the world what was needed; although, that world was confused and marching blindly without knowing its own need.

Christianity is related to persons, not to things, and there is something about humankind which things can never satisfy. Jesus declared that a person's life consists not of the abundance of things which he or she possesses. I would suggest that human nature has not really changed. The people who rode in a rocket ship to the edge of space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are no different than those who rode on the back of a plodding donkey in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. They are still one in the same.

The void, the emptiness, the vacuum which can never be filled or satisfied with things creates sleeplessness at night on a bed of luxury. It drives people to despair amid affluence. It creates suicides of those who have the most. It leads to deep depression amid success. The pain and the emptiness cannot be permanently averted or avoided by drink, or narcotics, or sexual indulgence. Always, there is the moment of awakening consciousness, and with it the gnawing of inner loneliness.

People desire rest. And, that rest can only be found in God. Humanity was made for companionship, for fellowship with God; and until we find that we can never be truly at peace. This is what the church has to offer modern humankind. Purposeful living with inner peace as the reward! We look for purpose in a universe writhing in the agonies of war, torn by the fangs of prejudice, and frustrated during a time of plenty.

Those who surrendered to Christ originally were not called Christians. The church was not given a title. God's program was simply called "the Way." Those who accepted it are the people of the Way. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6) He was not the way of life at all. Instead, His was the life of the Way. The church can show people the Way, not by pointing to a book on systematic theology, but by living the Christ- life. And the world needs to know the Way if it is to be rescued from its aimlessness.

So let us inquire what the Way can offer the lonely crowd, the restless ones, and the revolutionaries. There are several things that every human being must have for his or her happiness and wellbeing. One may ignore these needs, scoff at them and ridicule them, but they are needs required in a person's heart that leads to confession.

First, every person must have a solution to the sin problem. Humankind is the only animal which can live in three dimensions; past, present, and future. We are also the only animal with a built-in monitor, called the conscience. Through memory we are aware of our sins of the past and through imagination we can foresee the punishment of the future for we know we are responsible beings. With guilt pressing in on one side and fear of judgment pressing in on the other, there is no present relief. We live alternatively with guilt and fear, and this is what we call "depression."

We cannot undo a single act that we have ever committed. This creates a sense of hopeless futility, but we can be forgiven in Christ" in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:14. This forgiveness removes the guilt of sin and enables one to be justified by God. Justification is simply to declare one free of guilt.

When the past is cleared up there will be no fear in the future! "Therefore, there is now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." (Romans 8: 1) No fear or anxiety need be felt when one is in the Way.

Second, humankind must have a purpose in life. Existence without purpose is like trying to play football without a goal and with no lines or boundaries marked out on the field. But the Way puts us back on track again. It is evident that the accumulation of things is not the real aim of life. Humanity is never satisfied with things. The thrill of the kill craves constant striving for more.

Money multiplies until it becomes a worry; Real estate accumulates until its upkeep becomes a burden; Recreation pails and time grows heavy on one's hands. Humanity was made to glorify God, to seek the divine will for life and to fulfill it. Only when a person opens his or her heart and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit can that person then reach out beyond oneself.

Third, humanity must have a sense of belonging. What we are speaking about is sharing a common life in an elevated supernatural place. We are elevated to a new plane of life and service. We share with the Redeemer and the redeemed in a state which was called "*Koinonia*" by the Greeks.

Koinonia in Christ is the common life of all forgiven ones. The forgiven are also called Saints. These are not the serene paintings of people with Halos, nor the goody goody religious type. These Saints about whom we speak were hardy lot. They were Saints because they had heard the news about Jesus and believed it and responded to it. They were down to earth people who had been caught up to heavenly places by the grace of God.



When Jesus took up his abode in their hearts, they found that life was on a new dimension. They were no longer concerned about living in the rat race. Gone was the hatred, bitterness and animosity which once ate like cancer at their vitals. They were now free... Free to love one another, free to love even their enemies. Here was life – sharing on the highest level in the world.

Modern humans are empty in their loneliness and inner emptiness. They resort to all sorts of addictions to numb one's brain and help them to forget; but it is of no use. The cold, gray dawn comes with its realization of wasted time and powers.

In contrast the Way offers another form of Godly intoxication which exhilarates, thrills, and leaves no aftermath of remorse and no morning after headache. "And be not filled with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Holy Spirit." Ephesians 5:18

Let us be perfectly honest, the modern church, like modern people, has often lost its way. The Church has become preoccupied with structures and organizations, its programs, and performances. I appreciate our Restoration Heritage and motto: Christians only; but not the only Christians!

The Way is not composed of things. It is personal! It is living! It is vibrant and pulsating with joy. It flings wide the door to every sad and sin sick soul. It is not a Country Club for the "in" group, but a hospital and a home for the "out" group. There are no artificial barriers to deprive anyone for whom Jesus has died. There are no color lines, no social castes. Jesus is the Way, the truth, and the life for all. What does the Way have to offer? *It has fellowship for the frustrated, comfort for the concerned, faith for the frightened, and strength for the stumbling.* It offers strong arms of love, reaching out to the lonely, a depth of compassion for the desolate, and hope for the hopeless. This is the fellowship in Christ.

Fourth, people need a savior to overcome death. Death is a universal experience. Death is inescapable. It is inevitable. We shrink from it because of its air of finality. It is an unbearable thought that our most cherished dreams must fade, and our careful plans will never to be brought to fruition. It is here that the Way offers hope which can come from no other source. The Way is not a philosophy based upon human rationalization. It is not a compilation of laws and codes or a system of doctrines and dogmas, it is a faith based upon a real fact in history, a fact substantiated by testimony as any other fact in history. Jesus of Nazareth arose from the dead! He became the first fruits of them that slept. And he brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Life becomes worth living, its sacrifices are given meaning, its sufferings lead to a glory that shall be revealed.

When humanity comes to fear life more than death one does not need death but a new life... the new life which God gives through Christ. When we learn how to live, we will then know how to die. And death will not be the slamming shut of an unwelcome door to an unpleasant experience. It will be the opening of a portal to a more glorious Vista. Only the Way can make death meaningful because it is the Way of life, not of blind extinction of personality. Koinonia with God is not limited to this fear or state. It cannot be severed by death. It is eternal, enduring, and unquenchable. The grave can no more contain it than it could keep its Author. It is here that atheism fails! It never rolled away a stone from a sepulcher. It believes nothing. It can offer nothing.

Lastly, humanity needs fulfillment. Within every individual there is planted the germ of uniqueness which seeks expression. Being made in the image of God, every human is a creature of dreams and visions. Even while one's feet are in the clay; our head is in the clouds. The poem which climbs from the depth of the soul, the song whose melody haunts the mind, the Symphony with strains that waft into rapture, the canvas which catches the colors of the rainbow... all of these are witnesses to the creativity of the human spirit... that spark of the divine which glows within us.

Yet of even greater moment than the song or the Symphony or the painting is the inner being of the heart where these first resided. To take that heart and make of it a vessel fit for the use of God is the work of the divine Potter. When we submit ourselves as clay upon the revolving wheel of life and allow ourselves to be fashioned by the skillful hand of deity, we become a work of divine art and utility. Yet even God will not shape us against our will. For to do so would destroy that which makes us made in his own image and to rob us of our own creativity.

The Way brings us into harmony with the divine. It bridges the chasm which sin carved out. It flings a cable from the human to the infinite which will make communion possible once more. Koinonia, the sharing of common life, the life of the spirit, the life of God ...eternal life... this is the reward now for one who is in the Way. And, in the everlasting Kingdom of God this life will flow on unceasingly, unshackled, uninhibited by time or space, unhindered by limitations of the flesh.

The Way is not a code of laws interpreted and applied by a court of fallible human beings. It is not another *system of religion with its liturgies and rubrics*. It was *the Word made flesh in the babe of Bethlehem*, and it must be the Word made flesh in each one of us today. In him was life and the life was the light of men. And when he dwells in you that life will be in you and that life will be the light of all! You are the light of the world!

Fellowship is simply the sharing in his glad, glorious new life. All who are in Christ are in that fellowship, partakers of that life. What does the Way have to offer the tired and jaded, the sinful and the oppressed? Life and joy, the joy of fellowship that makes life real!