

I Have DECIDED to Follow Jesus...Maybe

As a former youth pastor, I was asked regularly why so many young people eventually leave the church. Why is it that so many of the teenagers who came to Sunday school and youth group, who professed to know Christ, would abandon the faith when they went off to college? Why is it that so many young people who would come to a youth camp and make a decision around a campfire would not be serving Jesus Christ years down the road? Furthermore, why is it that this “falling away” (see Matt 13:20-21) is not limited to youth but extends to many who profess to have made a response at a jail ministry, nursing home outreach, or other evangelistic encounter?

The unfortunate answer is that they were never born again (cf. 1 Jn 2:4-6). Folks proclaim regularly in their testimony of conversion that “I asked Jesus into my heart in grade school, but never got serious about Christianity until twenty years later when I dedicated my life to Him after a serious issue in life.”

The problem with this scenario is that it is not consistent with the Bible’s teaching on salvation being eternal life. Salvation is not momentary, nor is it something that can be broken. Furthermore, the new birth is followed by evidence of new life. God does not save a life which He does not also sanctify. Life is evidenced through bringing forth fruit of regeneration. Though there may be varying degrees of fruit, there is always some fruit (Matt 13:8, 23).

God does more than just improve someone’s life; He makes each believer a new creature (2 Cor 5:17). He takes dead souls who are in rebellion against Him and breathes new life into them (Eph 2:1-7). Furthermore, a person whose life has not changed evidences that he is still the lord of his own life. A Christian is one who has enthroned Jesus as the Lord of his life. One cannot make a supposed decision to follow Jesus and then not follow for the next prolonged number of years. When a person becomes a child of God, his thinking, behavior, and desires begin to revolve around Christ and His requirements. Though the change in life may be gradual (progressive sanctification), there is change. This change that the Spirit of God brings about is the only sure evidence that God has begun a good work in a person (Phil 1:6).

A. W. Pink gives this insightful comment:

The new birth is very much more than simply shedding a few tears due to a temporary remorse over sin. It is far more than changing our course of life, the leaving off of bad habits and the substituting of good ones. It is something different from the mere cherishing and practicing of noble ideals. It goes infinitely deeper than coming forward to take some popular evangelist by the hand, signing a pledge-card, or “joining the church.” The new birth is no mere turning over a new leaf. It is no mere reformation but a complete transformation. In short, the new birth is a

miracle, the result of the supernatural operation of God. It is radical, revolutionary, lasting.¹

The preaching and ministry practices in numerous ministries tend to foster momentary decisions. Yet preaching which does not invoke people to count the cost of following Christ, to forsake all to follow Him, and to surrender to His Lordship with all that it entails (Lk 14:26-33), is not biblical. Many people walk the aisles in an altar-call system, yet they do not understand that Christ demands sacrifice, commitment, and absolute surrender to His Lordship. Jesus was clear when He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Lk 9:23). Altar-call practices that call for human decisions, typically elicited by emotional manipulation, make no moral demands on sinners. Unfortunately, people think they can believe in Christ and not repent.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives an accurate assessment of the pitfalls and dangers of calling for decisions as he encourages preachers not only to preach clearly on the sovereignty of God in salvation but also to allow His Spirit's sovereign work² to control the methods in the evangelistic appeal during preaching. His chapter on "Calling for Decisions" is quite helpful.³ He says:

If they have found salvation and are rejoicing in it, they will want to come to tell you about it. They will do so in their own time; let them do so. Do not force these things. This is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. His work is a thorough work, it is a lasting work; and so we must not yield to this over-anxiety about results. I am not saying it is dishonest, I say it is mistaken. We must learn to trust the Spirit and to rely upon His infallible work.⁴

This practice of not explaining the demands to those who claim that they want to follow Jesus Christ is called easy-believism. This is a gospel presentation that calls people to "ask Jesus into your heart" and recognize Him as Savior without surrendering to Him as Lord.⁵ This error of modern churches has infiltrated the masses of evangelicalism. It is a

¹ Pink, A. W. *The Sovereignty of God*, (Wilder Publications, 2008) 79.

² The Spirit's sovereign working must be depended upon in the issue of assurance as well. Often a well-meaning parent, after becoming convinced that his child is a Christian simply by leading him in the "sinner's prayer," seeks to give his child verbal assurance of salvation. As a direct result of this misguided practice, the local church is filled with people whose hearts are devoid of real love and devotion to Christ. Yet these "converts" think they are genuine Christians because of something they did as a child. May we be convinced, as never before, that assurance of salvation is the Holy Spirit's role and He does a thorough, job (Rom 8:15-16). May we cease contributing to the number of people whose hearts are unmoved and stilted at the things of God yet who believe they are on their way to heaven because they responded positively to an evangelistic invitation. May we uphold God's living and active Word, which exhorts us to examine ourselves (2 Cor 13:5), rather than telling people to "ask Jesus into their hearts" and encouraging them to never entertain any doubts.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972) 265–82.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 282.

downplaying of the call to self-denial (Luke 9:23), repentance (Isa 55:7; Acts 17:30), and forsaking all in order to buy the pearl of great price (Matt 13:44-46). The witness of Scripture testifies that whom God saves, He also sanctifies (1 Cor 6:9-11). This is not the promotion of a type of perfectionism in which the believer ceases to sin but a definite change in the direction of life.

Sinners are in rebellion against God. They love their sin (Jn 3:19-21) and they seek to please only themselves. However, the saint has enthroned Christ in his life and his aim is to please the Lord (2 Cor 5:9, 15). Those who follow Christ are to pursue sanctification, or else they demonstrate that they are not kingdom citizens (Heb 12:14).

There is no such thing as a life of faith that does not demonstrate good works as fruit of new life in Christ (Rom 6-8). James says that a faith that does not manifest itself in works is not saving faith (Jas 2:14-16) but is dead and useless. Paul states that salvation is by grace and through faith, for the purpose of good works (Eph 2:8-10). He also taught that the salvation God brings to man instructs one to deny ungodliness and live righteously and godly in this age (Titus 2:11-14). Furthermore, Christ asserts that he who does the will of the Father will enter His kingdom (Matt 7:21).

Noted Bible expositor John MacArthur has clarified the meaning of true salvation, discipleship, and kingdom living. He says:

The gospel according to Jesus explicitly and unequivocally rules out easy-believism. To make all of our Lord's difficult demands apply only to a higher class of Christians blunts the force of His entire message. It makes room for a cheap and meaningless faith—a faith that has absolutely no effect on the fleshly life of sin. That is not saving faith.⁶

Matthew gives clear instruction of what it means to be a true follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of going through religious ritual but a call to “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8), as John the Baptist told the religious crowd in the wilderness of Judea. Contrary to the “wide way” to heaven that is being promoted in many gospel presentations, Jesus said, “the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and *many* are those who enter by it” (Matt 7:13). Jesus follows that statement by noting there are *few* who find the narrow gate leading to life (Matt 7:14).

In contrast to the masses of people who may be religious or make a religious decision at some time, only a few make it into the kingdom. In other words, there are many who think they are going to heaven but are not. Much confusion exists because *the way* has been muddied by encouraging people to simply pray a prayer based on a minimal presentation of gospel truth. Often left out are important elements such as the holiness

⁵ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 20.

⁶ MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 37.

of God, the reality of sin, and the need for a repentant faith in Christ, letting the Law of God produce proper conviction.

A repentant faith exhibits itself in fruit. It shows evidence of life; otherwise it is thrown into the fire and burned (Matt 7:19). Christ further asserts: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21). An absolute willingness must exist to honor, obey, and submit to Christ as Lord. It is not a matter of *professing* Christ as Lord but in *showing* that He is the new Master in life. This manifestation is shown not only in religious performance (Matt 7:22) but also through hearing and acting upon the words of Christ (Matt 7:24).

Has God been gracious and faithful to reconcile sinners to Himself at evangelistic rallies? Absolutely. Yet it is my contention that He has operated in spite of flawed human methodologies, not necessarily because of them. The Lord of salvation clearly teaches the reality of false professions (Matt 7:21-23). This reality should urge any would-be follower into seeking out a biblical basis for assurance, for evidence that substantiates the profession of faith, showing it to be true saving faith. We should not just get people to "sign on the dotted line" and then give them verses on assurance, teaching them never to question their salvation. Rather, we should maintain a biblical exhortation that calls people to examine their lives and to test the fruit of their salvation (2 Cor 13:5). Peter instructs us to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10). Therefore, we should look at assurance not as a right given to every professor of salvation, but as a gift of confidence bestowed by the Spirit of God upon those walking in obedience and love of their Lord (Jn 15:14; 1 Jn 2:3).

The Bible knows nothing of ex-Christians. Any who fall away, who apostatize to false religious systems or otherwise cease to follow Christ for a prolonged amount of time, prove that they were never Christ's (1 Jn 2:19). They were like Judas who lived around Jesus Christ and His teachings, who professed to be one of Christ's sheep but in reality was a tare in the midst of wheat (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). The Bible clearly teaches that true salvation is forever. It is *eternal* life, not temporary life. God sanctifies those whom He saves, both beginning that work and completing it all the way to the end (Phil 1:6). We are kept by the very power of God (1 Pet 1:5). Let us rejoice together in the Father's abundant mercy in the new birth "...to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet 1:3-4).

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