



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 23: Salvation without Sanctification?

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Evangelical researcher George Barna has documented that 95% of Americans state that they believe in God and 81% believe in an afterlife, but less than 1% believe that they could end up in hell.^[1] He observed that U.S. missionary efforts are difficult because most Americans believe that their salvation is already secure:

"Christians generally believe that non-Christians are interested in talking to us about eternal security. In truth, most non-Christians don't care to discuss this matter because they believe they already have their eternal security sown up. A majority of Americans believe that they are going to heaven after they die; most of the people who are not relying on Christ's atonement for their sins are relying instead on their own good deeds, their good character, or the generosity of God. Research indicates that the evangelistic efforts of Christians are viewed as insensitive and unnecessary."^[3]

Many people believe that they can get to heaven by "by relying on God's boundless and forgiving love... We can choose grace, works, or universalism, but we can rest assured with the false premise that all paths lead to heaven."^[2] If one believes that many paths lead to heaven, the choice is a matter of personal preference or convenience rather than revealed truth. If God's infinite love will redeem unrepentant sinners to the same degree as the faithful, there is no need to seek to know or follow God's will. If the judgment represents a binary sort between heaven and hell, and all but the vilest sinners will go to heaven, then there are no eternal consequences for daily choices. These unscriptural attitudes, which pose a serious barrier to proselytism, arise from the teachings of Christian ministers themselves. Evangelical scholar Ronald Sider noted that "cheap grace" has resulted in "costless faith" without life change:

"In a recent cover story in Christianity Today, George Barna decries our 'costless faith,' concluding that we have made it too easy to be 'born again.'^[4] Slick evangelical marketers have offered eternal salvation as a free gift if you just say yes to a simple formula: "'God loves you, humankind blew the relationship, but He has a plan for your life; just saying the magic words triggers the contract" was what we told the people.' The response? 'Boomers studied the offer and realized it was a no-lose proposition: eternal security at nothing down, no future payments, just simple verbal assent. The deal specified nothing about life change.'^[5] Why not accept a no-cost fire insurance policy? The result, Barna sadly notes, is 'born again' people living just like everybody else."^[6] //

Recognizing that increasingly skeptical parishioners have numerous choices in a competitive religious market, many ministers have chosen to accommodate sinful lifestyles rather than risk alienating their parishioners and losing potential income by teaching scriptural standards on lifestyle or morality. They reason that it is better for sinners to be in church - their church - rather than in a competitor's congregation or not attending church at all. They have taught that God will accept people "just they way they are" without the need for repentance and obedience to divine law. I have heard ministers proclaim that God is so merciful that he forgives us before we even ask him, and that he has already forgiven the sins that we have not yet committed! Jesus' gospel of repentance, obedience, and sanctification is supplanted by messages of convenience and accommodation. This kind of cafeteria Christianity promises extra helpings of grace, forgiveness, and salvation without the spiritual meat and potatoes of service, sacrifice, and repentance.

By accommodating sinful lifestyles rather than teaching the gospel of repentance, sectarian ministers have progressively pulled the rug out from under their own feet and have exacerbated the challenge of declining receptivity. When people started to believe the teachings of ministers and theologians that all that they needed to do to be saved was to "say the magic words" and verbally accept Jesus, they began to realize that the ministers themselves were no longer necessary. Why attend church and pay tithing when you can spend Sundays on the golf course, cut God out of your paycheck, and still go to heaven? Once it is declared that expression of nominal belief represents the only criterion for salvation, all other scriptural mandates are reduced to mere suggestion: wise but optional advice for living. Under such circumstances, there is no impetus for obedience to divine law, no imperative for repentance, and no need to seek or love truth beyond mouthing the "magic words" about Jesus. Rather than being the central pursuit of life, spirituality becomes a value-added proposition of convenience that can be neglected without consequence.

Having reduced the conditions of salvation to nominal belief alone, ministers were left to explain that church attendance is very

important, that all Christians needed to be part of a congregation, and that congregations needed to be financially supported, even through their prior statements had precluded any possible claims that such "works" were essential to salvation. Jesus says that we should go to church, and on Christmas or Easter we can show up to demonstrate that we have not completely forgotten Him. We should show our love for God by trying to obey his other laws as well, so long as they do not interfere with our chosen lifestyle. Some stalwarts persevered, but church attendance continued to decline as theologies drifted further from scripture. Churches then tried to reinvent themselves as social and entertainment hubs of the community to an increasingly skeptical and disengaged public, training pastors as showmen, introducing contemporary music to cloak the absence of the Holy Spirit, replacing spiritual depth with relationship-oriented group activities, and at times removing their denominational labels and proclaiming themselves to be "Bible based non-denominational Christian churches" to avoid negative public perception. These marketing strategies have helped to stabilize attendance, although the faith of attendees has become more superficial. Evangelical researcher George Barna has acknowledged that even the modest rates of religious activity among young people are misleading as the motives for involvement are more relational than spiritual.[7]

The great heresy of modern Christianity, as noted by Evangelical scholar Ronald Sider, is that Jesus is accepted as Savior, but not as Lord. By lowering its standards to those of society instead of advocating a holy lifestyle separate from the world, sectarian Christianity has increasingly lost the power to transform the hearts and minds of its adherents. Sider wondered: "Where are contemporary preachers warning us, as clearly as St. Paul did, about the terrible evil and awful consequences of unholy lifestyles?...We proudly trumpet our orthodox doctrine of Christ as true God and true man and then disobey his teachings." [8] He chided fellow evangelicals: "The same one-sided, reductionist misunderstanding that has distorted our conception of the gospel has led us away from a full-fledged biblical understanding of salvation," [9] and observed: "Discipleship is at the very core of the salvation Jesus commands us to offer the world. And discipleship means turning from sin and following Jesus as absolute, unconditional Lord. Any notion that salvation is just forgiveness or that Christians can have justification without sanctification is as far from New Testament teaching as heaven is from hell." [10]

Barna observed that many Americans recognize God in an abstract philosophical sense as the ruler of the universe, yet fail to enthrone Him as the God of their lives. Salvation is sought without sanctification, and blessings without obedience. He lamented: "Those who have turned to Christianity and to churches seeking truth and meaning have left empty-handed, confused by the apparent inability of Christians themselves to implement the principles they profess." [11] Barna wrote:

"The spirituality of Americans is Christian in name only. We desire experience more than knowledge. We prefer choices to absolutes. We embrace preferences rather than truths. We seek comfort rather than growth. Faith must come on our terms or we reject it. We have enthroned ourselves as the final arbiters of righteousness, the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny. We are the Pharisees of the new millennium."

Contemporary adherents of sectarian denominations are primarily distinguished by dogma rather than lifestyle, and studies demonstrate that American Christians "think and behave no differently from anyone else." [12] Barna observed that many Americans recognize God in an abstract philosophical sense as the ruler of the universe, yet fail to enthrone Him as the God of their lives.

Cheap-grace religion promises salvation without sanctification and blessings without discipleship. This attitude arises from the teaching of Christian ministers themselves, who have attempted to open wider the gates of salvation in order to increase their own market share. They have taught that God will accept people "just they way they are" without the need for repentance and obedience to divine law. They have proclaimed that God is so merciful that he forgives us before we even ask him, and that he has already forgiven the sins that we have not yet committed! Jesus' gospel of repentance, obedience, and sanctification is supplanted by messages of convenience and accommodation. This kind of cafeteria Christianity promises extra helpings of grace, forgiveness, and salvation without the spiritual meat and potatoes of service, sacrifice, and repentance. They have taught that life is not a probationary state in which we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling before God, but that we can live as we please after repeating the magic words to get a one-way ticket to heaven. The idea of looking for a church that represents God's will in order to understand and implement His teachings has become foreign to most Americans, who fail to grasp why their Mormon neighbors -- "nice people with strange beliefs" and guys with suits on bikes are trying to proselytize them when they are already saved.

When asked if Mormons believe in the Bible, Joseph Smith replied: "If we do, we are the only people under heaven that does, for there are none of the religious sects of the day that do." [13] As other Christian faiths have gone further afield in condoning the broad paths of counter-scriptural lifestyles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' uncompromising advocacy of basic scriptural teachings has become increasingly unique. The tares sown by sectarian churches have made a difficult harvest. The idea of looking for a church that represents God's will in order to understand and implement His teachings has become foreign to most Americans, who fail to grasp why their Mormon neighbors - "nice people with strange beliefs" - are trying to proselytize them when they believe themselves to be already "saved." Widespread confidence in ultimate salvation despite sinful lifestyles call to mind Christ's words: "Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?" (John 7:19) ... "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39).

FOOTNOTES

[1] "Most Americans believe in afterlife; few going to hell: Poll." wordnews.org/most_americans_believe_in_after_death.htm. Accessed 16 June 2007.

[2] Barna, George. Boiling Point, p.195-196.

[3] Barna, George. Second Coming of the Church, p. 28.

[4] George Barna, Christianity Today, August 5, 2002, p. 35.

- [5] George Barna, The State of the Church 2002 [Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2002], 126, as quoted by Sider.
- [6] Sider p. 56.
- [7] Barna, George. Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture.
- [8] Sider, Ronald. Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience, 45, 50.
- [9] Sider 64.
- [10] Sider 68-69.
- [11] Barna, George. The Second Coming of the Church, 5.
- [12] Barna, George. Second coming of the Church, 7.
- [13] Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith, p. 119.