

## 20 A FAITHFULNESS & CHRISTIAN IMPERIALISM

(By Bill)

"Don't pick green fruit. If a person is not ready to accept Christ, go on to someone who is."

There is a sense in which this statement conveys a proper view, which is: "I am not the Holy Spirit"; but another statement is sometimes hidden here, which is: "I want to get brownie points in heaven by leading people to Christ, and you are just another statistic. If you're interested in spiritual things, I'm interested in you. If not, I'll go find somebody else."

As I sat in a bus terminal, reading, I noticed a man standing around trying to look nonchalant. His three - piece suit didn't fit the surroundings. Soon he sauntered over, sat down next to me, and tried to strike up a conversation. "Either someone attracted to men or a Christian", I thought to myself, "I wonder which?" When the topic got to spiritual things (quickly, since we both were interested in its going that way), he soon found that I was a believer.

Then the direction of the conversation changed. As I remember, it went like this:

"Well, nice talking to you", he said (Translation: "I want to go").

"Hold on", I said. "Your group does a lot of evangelism around town, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yeah! We baptize umpteen people a week" (he gave a statistic).

"Do you have a follow - up program of some kind? At that rate of conversions, your church must really be growing fast."

"Well, yes, we have a good follow - up program, but you know how it is; a lot of those people just don't want to go on with the Lord. Hey, I need to move on - be seein' ya."

I ignored his attempt to leave, and continued. "Do you have somebody you're following up?

Somebody you get together with regularly, teaching him the Word and how to live the Christian life? Are you being faithful to the new believers?"

He wiggled a bit, gave a funny-looking grin, and said, "Oh sure! We're very interested in getting people into The Word; and I've been trying to work with one guy, but ... you know how it is - you can't make them come to a Bible study. People nowadays don't want to put the Lord first. I guess they're lazy. Too much T.V.. Don't wanna get out and serve the Lord. Well, gotta get busy. Bye."

This (true) incident illustrates a problem that penetrates our whole society, and also our Christian subculture, though it shouldn't. We in the evangelical community are not teaching the concept of faithfulness, either by word or actions. In fact, even our evangelistic methods teach unfaithfulness.

Here's a standard operating procedure: go from door to door; try to get into a conversation about spiritual things (maybe even use a survey form to force the issue, though you're not really taking a survey). As soon as possible, get them to accept Christ as Personal Savior. You have a standard set of things to have them say, and once they've said the magic words, they're in:

"I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior (whatever that means)."

"Sign here."

You then tell them to come to such-and-such a church, or a Bible study, or maybe just "leave them for the Holy Spirit to work on". But be quick. There are more souls to save. The fields are white to harvest. We've got our brownie points in heaven for that one, so let's go get some more!

Maybe we are not quite so overt in our faithlessness; perhaps it's more like this: be a friend to a non-Christian until he becomes a believer; then slowly pull away (it's called "weaning") and move on to a new non-Christian to work on.

We're more faithful to non-Christians (until they've done what we wanted - joined our club) than to our Brothers in Christ. From the new convert's point of view, it's as if he's been enticed into the fold by a big, beautiful apple; but when he bites into it, he finds it's made of wax.

The Bible doesn't give us this picture of evangelism. Paul says "do good to all men, especially to the believers" (Gal. 6:10).

Jesus said, "by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples: if ye have love one for another".

Another word for "faithfulness" is "stick-to-itiveness"; another is "love". Love is primarily a decision, not a feeling; it's the decision to stick by someone no matter what they do to you (therefore it was reasonable for Jesus to command us to love our enemies). The world is desperately looking for love; if they see the people of God manifesting real love, they will be drawn in. This is the Scriptural recipe for evangelism.

Evangelicals are often guilty of imperialism: "I'll be your friend as long as I can get something out of it; when I can't (if you no longer look like a potential convert) the friendship is off". This attitude teaches salvation-by-works, since we are God's representatives; if someone has to earn our friendship, he will assume he has to earn God's, too.

### **Other Names for Faithfulness**

Faith is trusting in evidence, in spite of how you feel, and in spite of circumstance. Faithfulness is the quality of applying this concept consistently; as you apply it in different areas, it has different names. For instance, if you are faithful to your work, you are diligent. If you are faithful in remembering that God is the source of all blessings, & is in control of all situations, you are thankful. When you continue to pursue a goal in the face of danger, you show courage.

I've often wondered why Jephthah & Samson were in the "hall of fame" of Hebrews 11 - but Jephthah stuck to his oath even though it was a rash one, & had horrible consequences, & Samson stuck to his task of killing Philistines, even to his own death.

Faithfulness to a person is love. You decide, based on evidence, to look for the welfare of some person. It could be your wife, or your enemy (remember, Jesus commanded us to love both).

The evidence is that they are people, made by God, and have value, so God wants us to love them. (What's the evidence that God wants us to do that? To find out, we have to study the basis of apologetics - why we know there is a God, and how we know His word, the Bible, is true. That evidence is what we base faithfulness to God on; once we are convinced, we decide to follow Him, and do it independently of circumstances or feelings; that is the definition of "loving God". So we see that faithfulness to a person is based on faithfulness to God.). Once I have established that God wants me to dedicate myself to someone like this, I decide to do it, & then do it. The power, or ability to do it comes from God through the Holy Spirit.

The opposite of faithfulness is fickleness, or the "double mindedness" of James 2:7. I wonder how many missionaries have been unfaithful to their call to the field & attributed it to circumstances, saying, "the Lord closed the door".

### **Six Areas of Faithfulness**

Faithfulness is cultivated in our relationship with people, but the end result should be that we learn faithfulness to God. In fact, there are several areas in which the shallow church has been deficient in teaching faithfulness: first, toward non-Christians (evangelism with impersonal or no follow-up); second, toward Christians (church splits and unresolved interpersonal relationships); third, toward family and spouse (divorce and low priorities for child-rearing); fourth, toward God (the teaching that the ends justify the means, so that we can "sin a little bit in order to, say, win someone to Christ"). Fifth, toward our word (broken promises); and, finally, there is a sixth category of unfaithfulness, in the areas of our work and everyday lives; the Scriptures say "whatsoever you do, do to the glory of God". The shallow church tends to teach a "two-pot system", in which our work and everyday lives are "secular", separate from the "spiritual things" that interest God.

We've already treated the unfaithfulness exemplified by impersonal evangelistic methods. The sum is this: God is interested in individuals, not statistics, so we should be, too.

In the church: this is the area of relationships between Christians. The basic building block of the church is the family, so that the church should be like a big family, pulling together groups of families and individuals. The way one gets into a family is by being born, & it's the same way with the family of God. Since denominations exist now, the picture is more complicated than this, so that there is an element of choice that was probably not originally intended. Under these circumstances, perhaps the best way to demonstrate faithfulness is to "pick & stick"; that is, find some church & stick with it. After a while, though, you may want to go find a new church.

There are about five basic reasons people usually give for leaving a church:

1. They are not being "fed" (the preaching is too elementary).

2. Personal conflicts have developed between them & other members of the congregation (one of whom may be the pastor).
3. They don't agree with the doctrine.
4. They move out of the area & it's too far to commute.
5. They are sent out by the church as apostles, or missionaries.

Of these five reasons, I can only see the last two as valid. Let me explain why the first three don't hold water.

Suppose the preaching is too elementary. What are you there for, anyway - to give, or to get?

Unfortunately, in the shallow church of today, most people think that church is a place to go & soak up knowledge about God. It is not. It's a group of people who interact with one another in order to help each other to grow spiritually. If you are mature enough that you are no longer learning, then it's time to start teaching.

If there are personal conflicts, the Scriptures give us only one alternative - resolve them. If you've sinned against your brother, go to him & ask forgiveness. If your brother sins against you, go to him & get it straightened out. No matter who is at fault, it's the responsibility of the one who realizes that there is a problem to reconcile it. The church is a group of people who have a common base; if they can't get along, how can they expect to reach the outside world?

Personal relationships have a standard cycle - infatuation, disillusionment, & real love. Think of when you were just a kid. You probably had "fad-friendships": you found a friend who liked to play toy trucks like you did, & you played with him every day for maybe a week or two. Then you got tired of him & found a new friend who intrigued you. The same thing happens in a marriage - you see your partner's good qualities, for which you want to marry them, & "love is blind". You can't see their faults. Usually, within the first year of marriage, though, you discover your partner is a real person, with bad breath, stinky armpits, & who squeezes the toothpaste in the middle instead of rolling it up carefully like you do (or vice versa). Real love is the decision to stick by your partner because you promised to, & work out the differences. The same principle applies in a church- when you find a group of new people, they put forth their best side, always smiling, being courteous. Sort of like the "dating" phase before marriage. They overlook your faults & you do the same with them. You're infatuated with them. If you continue in that church for a while, you find they're real people, too. They don't smile all the time any more, they have bad days, & they begin to see your faults, perhaps even mentioning them to you (or gossiping about them to others). There are three directions in which you can proceed at this point: 1. leave & go find a new group. This will produce a repeat performance, & you will hop from one church group to another, never getting past superficial relationships. 2. Pull back emotionally - just decide to keep your distance, so that the relationships stay superficial. You smile & shake hands on Sunday, & that's church - the standard Shallow Church. 3. Plunge in, using scriptural principles, & work through your interpersonal problems. This is obviously the faithful thing to do.

Suppose you choose a church, & after a while you find it to have an unscriptural doctrine. Shouldn't you go & ally yourself with the "true faith"? The problem with this idea is that you'll probably never find a group that agrees with the Scriptures (or, your interpretation of them) perfectly; & even if you did, what could you then teach each other?

Disagreement spurs study, & if they're off on a major doctrine, they need your input all the more (in this latter case, make sure you also are involved with a back-up prayer & fellowship group so that you don't get pulled down with them).

The last two options are the only ones I see as valid for leaving the church group you settle into. In these cases, you are not leaving to escape problems, but to spread the gospel. Be careful, though - don't leave any unfinished business.

People have been known to move out of town to escape problems.

In the family: it's normally easier to be nice to strangers than to those with whom you're familiar. You've got to work consciously at putting your spouse & kids in their proper (high) priority; it doesn't happen automatically. We take the people closest to us for granted. The plumber's house has the leaky faucets.

Being faithful to God has some overtones which may not be obvious at first. It basically means to stick with Him in spite of circumstances or your feelings; it manifests itself in not sinning, no matter what.

How could a person conclude that he could serve God better by "sinning a little"? Maybe it happens more often than you think. Have you ever compromised your principles in order that those with you might think you were "one of the gang", all the time hoping that it would put you in a better position to witness to them?

Today's society thinks nothing of being unfaithful to your word, but it is a strong emphasis in God's word. It can be embarrassing & even dangerous to be truthful, but Jesus never said that following Him would be easy.

Why is it so important to tell the truth? Because God's very name is truth. The word Jehovah means "the One Who is there"; the same name, in another form, is "I am that I am"; this is probably the name used by Jesus at the end of his speech in John 8, after which the Jews took up stones to throw at him. A pretty decent definition of truth is "that which is", so that God's name could roughly be translated "Truth". Jesus called Himself the way, the truth, & the life in Jn. 14:6; and one thing God cannot do is lie (Titus 1:2). Another thing God emphasizes (but we don't in our degenerate society) is the importance of keeping an oath; this is relevant because a broken oath is just a lie told in advance. Jesus emphasized this in the sermon on the mount when He said to let your yes be yes & your no be no; James further states that above all things we should avoid making oaths that we might not be able to keep (Jas. 5:12). Another thing that God cannot do is break His promise.

Our whole faith is based on God's truthfulness, & we are to be like Him.

So, what do we do if we're pressed for an answer?

"How do you like my new hat?"

"I really like the color of the band around it; and the feathers are pretty."

"No, I mean how do you like it on me?" "It's interesting..."

"Do you like it on me?" "It looks atrocious."

Your friend then walks off in a huff. But she got the truth from you, hopefully, in the most loving way you could muster (your tone of voice makes all the difference in the world). Maybe everybody else played along with her (as in "The Emperor's New Clothes"). She found (perhaps painfully) that she could depend on you for truth; & if she wants to find the truth about more important matters, later on (when she cools off), she may come to you. But if you can't even depend on Christians for truth, where can you go? The salt will then have lost its savor.

Notice that you don't always have to answer a question; sometimes you can just change the subject. In fact, some people don't really want their question answered; they're simply making conversation. The truthful answer to "How are you?" when you feel crumby is not "fine", but "Oh, I'll probably live", given with a cheery smile. The proper answer to the ecstatic old lady who asks you how you liked Rev. Longwind's boring sermon is "Hey, I'm glad it inspired you". If the question was not really meant to be answered, & you see that from the context, simply avoid the question & reply to what you perceive the statement to be.

Jesus did it that way: in Jn. 6:25 the people asked, "When did you come here?", and He didn't say "I walked across the lake last night". He avoided the question and said "You just want more bread".

There may be cases in which our lives are threatened if we tell the truth. Doesn't that mean we would be justified to lie in such a case?

This argument has two main fallacies; first, it holds survival too dearly, which is the result of the humanistic brainwashing of our society; but, for a Christian, "for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philip. 1:21). In the Secular Humanist's system, physical life is all you've got; not so for us.

The second fallacy in this argument is that God cannot intervene. There are numerous examples of His deliverance, however, such as in the account of the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3). I also remember the account by Corrie Ten Boom in *The Hiding Place*, in which Nollie's daughter Cocky answered the Nazi police's interrogation concerning the whereabouts of the men: "under the table". They lifted the tablecloth, saw no one, and left, infuriated. They hadn't seen the trap door there. We don't know the future; we dare not sin simply to avoid probable pain, or even death. We must say with Esther, "if I die, I die". This is the focus of Jesus' statement, "if your hand offends you, cut it off". Paraphrased, this says we are expected to go to any extreme to keep from sinning.

Of course, you can find examples in the Scriptures in which the people of God lied, and yet everything seemed to turn out all right anyway.

There were the Hebrews' midwives in Egypt, Rahab, the faithful harlot of Jericho, and more; but since when do the ends justify the means? What if they had told the truth instead? Might things have turned out righter? Or maybe they would have gotten killed. Neither result would have proven that lying was right.

As our society drifts toward a lighter view of the importance of truth, we must fight to keep from drifting with it. I have been embarrassed by having to sit and read a loan agreement in front of a lady, asking her periodic questions, while she fidgeted. When I finally signed it, after the statement "I have read and understand all the above items", she told me "nobody ever did that before". I wondered if I was the first Christian who had ever taken a loan out in her presence, or if the others had just lied, because, as she had told me, "everyone else just signs it - you don't have to read it".

Our truthfulness should not depend on the world's standards; we should set the standards for truth. It's just another aspect of faithfulness.

Finally let's look at the sixth area - that of faithfulness in our everyday lives - if we develop faithfulness, we don't drop a job when it turns out to be inconvenient or distasteful. This is where the "Protestant work-ethic" came from: the Protestant point of view was that whatever you do, you do to the glory of God, so that there is no distinction between "spiritual" and "secular" work.

## **What to Do**

You don't develop faithfulness by reading an article like this. You have to make a change in your behavior. Here's how:

Make a list of your priorities, and pray for people, regularly, in those priorities. Ask God to show you some way to be faithful, or to help you to be (if you already know the way), and wait for ideas. Do this for each person on your list, and write down your ideas. Now, I know that Satan can speak to us, too, but you don't have to take every idea as a word from God; in fact, you'd better not. Check it by Scripture. It takes time to learn the "voice of the Spirit"; I don't claim infallibility, but this practice has made a big difference in my life. The most important ideas I've ever had have occurred to me during my quiet time: research topics, ideas for presents, things to do with the kids during family night, and career directions.

The point is this: faithfulness begins with faithfulness in prayer. As you repeatedly observe the proper priorities in your prayers, these same priorities will ooze out into the rest of your life. As you act according to your priorities, independently of your circumstances, you become faithful.

That's how you can build faithfulness in your own life; how do you promote it in the church?

By being faithful - especially in your interpersonal relationships. This means you decide to be faithful to a few people in the church, and then you do it. It might be best to just choose one person, and avoid making it the opposite sex, to make sure your motives are pure. Pray for them regularly, talk with them often, and do things with them.

You should decide to be their friend for the rest of your lives, even if that person should move, or "lose the faith", or come to hate you sometime in the future.

Be careful not to confuse "being nice" with "being faithful". Sometimes the loving thing is to confront someone about a deficiency in his life; in fact, in Matt. 18:15, Jesus commands us to. Now, you can't rebuke a person effectively if you have a superficial relationship with him; in fact, if you want to, you probably shouldn't.

Open your Bible to any page in the epistles. Chances are, you can find, somewhere on that open page, the word "brethren" or "brother". This is the norm in the New Testament church for relationships. If you have a brother or a sister, you will keep track of him for his whole life, even if he moves away physically. When you were kids together, chances are good that you didn't let him get away with doing you an injustice; you at least told him he was wrong. You probably didn't even worry that he might go and change his name and leave the family because of your disagreement.

Your blood relationship assured you that you could be straightforward without losing him as a brother. Besides, if I'm gonna have to live with you for ten more years, we might as well find out what things irritate one another and try to avoid them. This practical approach to a relationship is what God intends in the church. In the shallow church, our relationships are so superficial that a simple rebuke drives a person off.

I used to think there were two kinds of people - those who had some kind of potential, whether developed or not, and the other kind: those who were hopeless cases. Our job, as evangelists, was to find out which category people were in, get 'em saved if they were in the first category, and drop them if they were in the second. What a fickle view!

Now I see that all people are in one category: Those For Whom Christ Died.