

Ethical Inconsistencies

by Pastor Marty

If you have been a Christian for any time at all, you have probably had an experience of another Christian surprising you with an act of love, compassion, or support. I am intentionally using the qualifier “probably” here because—as extremely distressing as it may be—this is not a certainty; with very few exceptions, most of us have experiences with the Church that differs greatly from what we see in the book of Acts. Nevertheless, most of us have had at least one or two people in our lives who clearly reflected the love of God. Perhaps somebody gave you money when you needed it, or they gave you a gift that truly blessed you, or they were there to support you emotionally when you were in a rough place, or any of 1000 other possibilities. I have had some people like that in my life, and although we may have become separated by life circumstances or geographical distance, the impact they made remains. Sometimes, we will have one person do all these things for us, but at other times, different people fill the specific need sitting their personality. Perhaps it’s God’s way of preventing us from idolizing one person. We are all different, so God works differently in the ways that fit who we are. As I discussed in a previous newsletter, it is vital that we respond to these people and events with gratitude, with appreciation, and with thanks—to God and to the people. As Jesus’ parable implies, the more we individually sow seeds of love, the more we corporately will reap (i.e., experience) His love manifested on this earth through His Church.

Our individual acts of love increase our corporate experiences exponentially.

Before this will happen, we must realize we are not called to love unbelievers the same way we are called to love believers. This is not only unpopular in some denominations but is even taught backwards. If we read the Sermon

on the Mount, we notice we are called to love our enemies. Jesus gave this command to the disciples *prior* to the day of Pentecost—when the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. In other words, it was directed to every person who was following or was considering following Him—including Judas and the crowds, many of whom would later shout, “Crucify Him!” It was an impossible task that can only be accomplished through the power of an impossible God. Jesus calls everyone to a radical love. Jesus tells us that when He returns, everyone would be judged according to His Word. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to be “perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect.” It is the epitome of the Law, which no living person can fulfill. It is why we need a Savior who can fulfill the law for us.

God calls everyone to be perfect, but it is only possible through His Spirit in us.

Surprisingly, we see something different when we look at what Jesus says a bit later. In John’s Gospel, we get unique details about the last supper. Jesus provides possibly His most theological message to the disciples just before He is taken from them. It was a time to share what they needed to hear. Over and over again, He told them they needed to love one another. He describes it as a new commandment, saying it will be the deciding factor in people knowing they are His disciples. He doesn’t spend His last few moments telling them to love unbelievers; He doesn’t depart from them with a command to pray for their enemies; He doesn’t even tell them to be sure to forgive anyone who wrongs them. He tells them that they should love one another—meaning other believers. This wasn’t an oversight on His behalf, for the book of Acts makes special mention of the way believers were treating other believers. Luke doesn’t say anywhere near as much about how loving the

Christians were toward pagans (though they surely were) as he does about the radical love they had for each other. When we read the epistles, Paul (and the others) put significantly more stress on how believers act toward each other than on how they act toward unbelievers. Of course, we do not have to choose between one or the other; we can do both. However, if we read the Bible honestly, we must admit that as far as God is concerned, our love for those in the Church takes priority over love for the lost.

In God's eyes, our love for others in the Church has priority over love for the lost.

This is not a popular teaching, for it goes against a great many evangelistic practices and models. Regrettably, many Churches operate completely opposite of the book of Acts where believers were selling their land and houses to help each other in need. They weren't doing it for evangelistic reasons, either; they did it out of love for their spiritual family. However, if you have been around for very long, you have likely heard about people (or even from a couple of them) who have become disillusioned with the Church precisely for this reason: it seems they were radically loved as unbelievers, but as soon as they became Christians, they were no longer important. Maybe the Church helped pay their bills or mow their grass or bring them food as a sign of God's love. That is good, and we should do such things, but love shouldn't stop because God's love takes over. I'm not saying a person's salvation isn't the most important thing in the eternal scheme of things, for eighty years can't compare to eternity. I am also not saying more personal responsibility shouldn't be required of someone once they know the truth, for Godly love is tough; however, if we love someone just to get them saved, we do not really love them.

Loving someone just so we can get them saved is not really loving them at all.

This newsletter is not about evangelism, however. It is about the way we Christians treat one another. As I mentioned at the beginning, I expect most of us have had at least one or two positive experiences in which another Christian has done something that truly blessed us. I am going to take a risk and declare that everybody reading this newsletter has had the opposite be true—an instance of a Christian doing or saying something hurtful, harmful, or even evil. I have had Christians do some very terrible things, and it has sometimes been in the name of God! I am sure I am not the only one. If I were to just believe what they say, it would mean that God occasionally tells people to break their word, betray a trust, break the law, hate others, commit immorality, lie, steal, cheat, use their position to take advantage of others or to force them to do things against their will, and the list is as long as the Old Testament. I have often heard believers ask if Christians can be involved in something, and it covers a range of topics; for example, "Can Christians drink alcohol?" or "Can Christians be involved in yoga?" or "Can Christians play the lottery?" or "Can Christians watch Game of Thrones?" or "Can Christians have sex outside marriage?" or "Can Christians support murder?" or any one of a thousand possibilities. A common answer says "Christians can do whatever they choose to do." This is true. God does not remove a person's ability to make choices and act on those choices—even if the person is saved. I do not know of any sin an unbeliever can commit but a Christian cannot. Paraphrasing C. S. Lewis, becoming a Christian makes you much better ... or a whole lot worse.

Any sin an unbeliever can commit, a Christian can commit—and do it better.

Why do I say a Christian can surpass an unbeliever in committing sin? It is because the Christian inherently sees spiritual realities with open eyes while an unbeliever is partly blind. As such, Christians can add universes worth of

justifications and nuanced spiritual principles to their sins while unbelievers just act according to their nature. In other words, a Christian has a lot more to draw from in their experience and knowledge. If we add the ability to attribute the sin to God, saying, "God told me to do this," it compounds things by not only doing the sin but also by slandering His nature. In addition, there is even the perspective of some Christians that anything they do is sanctified by prayer. Have you ever had Christians take your hand to pray with you, declare all the unethical, immoral, or dishonest things they are going to do to you, and then end with a prayer of blessing? I had a similar experience three times in the last three weeks alone, and in one case, the wording was so close to James 2:16 that I was speechless. It seems Christians can do whatever they want.

Doing in the Name of Christ what He would never do is truly a dangerous thing.

Now, this newsletter is not addressed to those who claim to be Christians while they are simultaneously acting like nonbelievers. I have addressed many of these prior volumes to the need for us to act with integrity. Instead, I am writing to those of us who have been the victim of unethical or dishonest treatment by those who claim Christianity. First, you may wonder what I mean when I say, "claim Christianity" in this paragraph. Do I mean those who think they are Christians but have never invited Him to be the Lord of their life? No, I am not talking about them, for they are pretty obvious to spot, and it is clear we cannot expect complete holiness in people who don't know God. Instead, I refer to those who are saved—and perhaps even filled with the Holy Spirit—but are doing or saying things directly or indirectly contrary to the very words of Jesus. At that moment we do or say something contrary to His Word, character, or nature, we are not *being* Christian. I am not at all saying we have lost our salvation or stopped

being a child of God, for those are positional truths, and they cannot change with the wind. However, a positional truth of who we are isn't the same as the behavioral truth of how we are choosing to act. In that moment, we are being similar to Peter, denying Jesus by our actions or words. Jesus did not condemn Peter or remove him from the company of the other eleven, but at that moment, he was removing himself from the company, stepping outside of his identity.

When we act or speak contrary to God's Word, we step outside our true identity.

If we return to the original question of whether a Christian can do certain things, I am inclined to say, "Yes and no." Yes, for we have seen that being saved does not override the person's will or immediately remove the sinful nature; we can always act with pride, greed, lust, selfishness, hate, etc. Still, the question is also "no" because a Christian is someone who is associated with being like Christ, identifying with Him, and it is not possible to be like Him at the same time we are being unlike Him. James says a spring cannot give forth both bitter and fresh water at the same time. When we do this, we are choosing to identify and follow the old, sinful, fallen nature instead of choosing to be the new creation we are in Christ. Jesus Himself said we are known by our fruit. However, if you are at all like me, you probably disagree with my statement because you know how easy it is to have ulterior motives, doing something good while doing something bad at the same time. James called this "being double minded." (If he were writing today, he would probably call us schizophrenic Christians). Yes, even believers can act like we have split spiritual personalities. However, if you consider it, to whatever extent we are being unlike Christ, we are not at that moment being like Him. If we hate someone for something they did, to whatever extent we are affirming (giving into) the hate, we are not at that moment being loving. Using an analogy

Jesus often used, to whatever extent there is darkness in us—in our thoughts, our lives, our actions, and our emotions—to that extent we are lacking light in us. We may still have a good amount of light inside, but it isn't filling us. Sin is like turning off a lightbulb in our house; we may still have light in other rooms or even the same room, but while the one light is off, things are not as bright as they could be with it on.

If we turn off God's light in any area of our life, we experience that lack of light.

So, what are we to do when people we consider to be Christians do things that clearly are not Christian? How do we respond when a believer acts in an unethical, dishonest, or even an immoral manner? How do we respond to an act of injustice done by someone who also calls Jesus "Lord" and even prays for God's blessing while doing it? This is not at all an easy topic to address, but it is necessary—and regrettably, it is necessary because it is not uncommon. It is even harder at times to forgive or respond in a good way when the sin is done by someone we view as a brother or sister. Whether the act is done knowingly or in ignorance may help us in some cases, but not always. The truth is that we feel wronged. What should we do? If we have grown enough to know what we feel isn't always the truth, we may evaluate the situation to decide if we really were wronged. There are times we feel wronged when we weren't really wronged. However, humility might be needed before we can deal with the truth. Humility is recognizing our own sins, including bitterness and unforgiveness toward others. Sometimes, we have to remember our own tendency to act unethically toward others before we can clearly see the situation. We may also need to ask God to show us times when we have done things to others and not repented of it. Once we have taken time to remove the sticks from our eyes, we can see a bit clearer to look at the situation. If we have done those things and it still seems

that we are dealing with an actual wrong, what do we do? Of course, there are practical things we can do: speak to the person about it, get Godly counsel, look into appropriate alternative avenues for justice, etc. However, there is one thing we must always do, regardless of all else: we have to forgive the offense from our heart.

Whatever else we do, we absolutely have to forgive the offenses from our hearts.

Forgiveness is not easy. If it were, then we would not talk about it as much as we do. Nevertheless, it is one of the most important things we do. Two of the three steps toward emotional growth are (1) forgiving others and (2) receiving forgiveness. (Self-acceptance, the third, is closely related). In many churches, the *choice* of forgiving is given priority. However, our choosing to forgive does not complete the process; it must be finished in the heart and the mind. We have heard "Love is a choice." There is an error hidden in this statement: that love is not emotional. However, God's love is not just a choice He makes—His love is compassionate and tender, full of mercy and longing toward us. To minimize love to only a willful action is to denigrate God's nature and Jesus' crucifixion. In the same way, forgiveness is not just a choice. It starts there, but it is incomplete until it has reached every part of our heart, driving out all bitterness, anger, and hate. In a very real way, unforgiveness drains away our life and joy. Like a parasite, it destroys its host while doing almost nothing to the object; like a leech, it will drain the blood from our souls, leaving us weak and vulnerable to spiritual attack; like a cancer, it consumes our life and health. Still, the most pernicious aspect of unforgiveness is its ability to hide, submerged like an iceberg in the ocean of our memories or like a crocodile in the rivers of our thoughts, waiting to strike when we do not see it, thinking it is not there. If we want to be children of light, living like Christ and being a true disciple, we must persevere in forgiveness.