

## Injustice and the Church

By David Bisgrove

We've looked previously at topics such as "Aren't all religions the same?" Next I'd like to consider a concern that often comes up when people are wrestling with the credibility of Christianity: "How can I identify with Christians or the church when I see such an apparent track record of hypocrisy and injustice?"

Let me try and show you why this is important to consider. Many of our *rational* objections to something like Christianity have roots in *personal* experiences. That is, there are many people who have been harmed by destructive relationships or religious teaching, and that makes them leery of organized religion. Their wariness makes the empirical or rational arguments against religious faith attractive.

Consequently, if you're going to give something like Christianity a fair hearing, it's only fair to assess Christians' behavior and attitudes *in light of the claims* of Christianity, not as if those Christians themselves are the authoritative word as to whether you should believe in Jesus. The issue isn't whether the claims of Christianity can always be reconciled to the behavior of Christians. The real issue is a matter of wrestling with the truth claims asserted *by* Christians.

**Personal flameouts: hypocrisy.** Oftentimes we know people or hear stories about Christians whose lives fail to live up to their professed beliefs. They're caught in a scandal, a web of lies, or whatever. For people both inside and outside the faith, this type of failure certainly hurts the message of the church. I suggest, however, that it's a bit of a leap to just dismiss Christians or Christianity for that reason alone. Let me show you why.

The first reason is "common grace." This phrase refers to the Christian's belief that God has scattered his wisdom and beauty and goodness across the entire world in a gracious way, irrespective of individuals' beliefs. Because God desires to enrich and preserve the world, we all benefit from God's goodness. Christians aren't (or shouldn't be) surprised when there are "better people" outside the church, because they view it as evidence of God's grace throughout the world.

The second reason is the nature of the church. The Christian church is a community of broken people. As someone who grew up in the church, I remember having a hard time reconciling the apparent contradictions I saw in the biographies of the saints. You have someone like King David – Israel's greatest king and finest poet – who was an adulterer and murderer. You have Peter, who was essentially given the keys of the church and made its leader, lying to protect himself and betraying Jesus at the worst possible time.

On the one hand it's pretty easy to see how Christianity might be confusing, or at least misunderstood, in light of these biographies. For people inside as well as outside the church, that confusion results because they often equate the Christian faith with obeying the rules, being morally superior, and having unshakeable certainty that they're right.

At the heart of Christianity, though, is quite a different operating principle. A Christian is someone who understands and admits how broken he or she is. This recognition is the prerequisite to becoming a Christian. The key to growing as a Christian is actually recognizing just how messed up you are.

This operating principle – that central to Christians' self-understanding is recognizing their weakness and their need for grace and forgiveness – is also helpful when thinking about another objection often raised against Christianity: fanaticism. "All of these 'born again' people who are demonizing Hollywood, politicians, and judges come across as intolerant and self-righteous. We need more *nominal* Christians. It's like wearing makeup – not too heavy but just enough to make a difference. Some Christians just layer it on too thick."

The assumption here is that "To be a Christian is to live on a continuum between nominal and fanatical. What you need is balance." But I submit to you that the problem isn't that those kinds of intolerant Christians are *too* committed; they're not *committed enough* to the teachings of Jesus. They need a deeper grasp that the Christian faith isn't about being "right." It's about being healed and forgiven.

The church is *full* of people who know they have a long way to go, people who know that it's a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints. Most churches I know aren't full of hypocrites but of sinners. A hypocrite is essentially an actor, someone playing a part, and certainly churches have hypocritical people who've become blinded by various things and lost their way. But I don't know *any* people whose lives match their rhetoric. None of us is as kind or patient or generous as we know we should be, or as we want to be. In a way, we all put on an act at some level.

R. C. Sproul elaborates:

The Christian church is one of the few organizations in the world that requires a public acknowledgment of sin as a condition for membership. In one sense the church has fewer hypocrites than any institution because by definition the church is a haven for sinners. If the church claimed to be an organization of perfect people then her claim would be hypocritical. But no such claim is made by the church. There is no slander in the charge

that the church is full of sinners. Such a statement would only compliment the church for fulfilling her divinely appointed task."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that so many people cite hypocrisy as evidence that Christianity isn't true is a function of two things. First, at some level the church hasn't always done a very good job of leading with its primary virtues of humility and weakness, particularly in the West. Secondly, critics are actually doing the very thing they don't like about religious people: they're psychologically feeding off the failures of others to make themselves feel superior.

My last comment on personal hypocrisy is that we all have to be careful when assessing other people's character. The church, because of what it represents, attracts a lot of broken people. Their brokenness may be connected to things like 9/11 or the stock market crisis, or to more personal matters that triggered a "crash and burn" experience. For others, religion and faith in God are simply an unnecessary luxury. When things are going pretty well and suffering is at bay, these people tend to be either disinterested or only marginally religious.

Let's say you meet two men. One is a Christian and one is not. The non-Christian has his act together, while the Christian has lots of flaws. What you don't have, however, is their complete personal history. You don't know how *far* that Christian may have come from his starting point. It's as if you were watching a cross country race and noticed that one runner was a mile in front of the other, but didn't realize that the leader had a two-mile head start. The runner in the rear may actually be closing the lead, even though he's still behind.

The church is full of broken people, so certainly there will be flameouts. We expect them. Certainly there are charlatans, and so on. But just as we wouldn't judge *The New York Times* by the one journalist who "faked" his stories, we have to be careful not to judge the church that way either.

**Corporate flameouts: injustice and violence.** Another narrative out there goes something like this: "Don't orthodox religions like Christianity inevitably lead to violence and oppression? Just look at what has happened everywhere from Bethlehem and Belfast to Baghdad. When communities hold strongly to religious views, it almost seems to multiply violence."

This point is fair, in that people sometimes take transcendent ideas, like cosmic good and evil, and combine those ideas with a feeling that one set of teaching is superior to another. The combination can be explosive.

Of course, one problem with this version of causality is that it's too simplistic. Clearly, the atheistic communist regimes of the twentieth century perpetrated

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, First Zondervan Printing, 1982), 78–79. (Orig. publ. as *Objections Answered*, Gospel Light, 1978.)

horrific acts of violence and injustice in the name of the state. These societies were secular, but they inflicted massive violence against their own people, *without* the influence of religion. Why?

Any community or society has a tendency to make some idea transcendent, to “absolutize” some value so it can claim superior moral ground. For Lenin it was the state. For the Nazis it was race. If we’re to conclude anything, it’s that there is something about the human condition that has a tendency to use ideas or values or race as an excuse to oppress and do violence to others.

The discussion here is hardly an exhaustive look at this objection. There are certainly people *far* more qualified people than I am to look at this issue, but let me just offer this in closing. If you’re going to reject Christianity for some of the reasons mentioned (you’ve had a negative personal experience, witnessed serious hypocrisy, or observed corporate injustice/violence on behalf of the church), then to be fair and objective about it, you shouldn’t make that decision until you’ve looked more closely at the Christian faith’s founder, Jesus.

When you read his teachings, you’ll find Jesus is actually very sympathetic to your concerns. He has a famous sermon that’s a strong rebuke and critique of religion.<sup>2</sup> He criticizes those who pray, give their money to the poor, and obey the rules. Why? It’s not because he’s against those things *per se*, but because he understands that we often do those things to make ourselves feel superior to others. That sense of superiority makes people judgmental and critical.

Jesus is constantly attacking hypocrites, because they act one way while believing something else. He knows how destructive this incongruity is. He understands that perhaps the chief danger of that kind of religious moralism – in which a community of people believes they’ve earned God’s favor by their superiority – is that it leads to their feeling they deserve deference and respect from all other communities. It reminds me of when a football team wins the championship. It gets a huge parade, as if everyone should bow down to their superiority!

At the heart of the Christian faith is something different. Jesus says the last shall be first; you find your life by giving it away; it is more blessed to give than to receive; and no one is good enough to earn God’s favor.<sup>3</sup> Jesus himself lived that out by allowing himself to be killed so that his followers could live. That’s why you’ll find as you go back through history that his followers were at the heart of the Civil Rights movement (the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others) and the abolition of slavery in England (William Wilberforce and others). Longer ago, Jesus’ followers regarded hospitality to be much more than having friends over; it was reaching out to the sick, even to those outside their tribes. These Christians’

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<sup>2</sup> The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7. See also Matthew 23.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 13:30 and Matt. 19:30; Mark 8:35; Acts 20:35; John 3:1–21.

efforts established the forerunners to modern-day hospitals, orphanages and other relief efforts.

All this happened because Christians follow someone who sacrificed everything to redeem and renew the world. It's why the paradoxical symbol at the center of Christianity is not some great throne embossed with gold, but a wooden cross stained with blood. Have you ever thought about how weird it is that people walk around with crosses as jewelry? It's like having electric chair earrings. But it's all because at the heart of the Christian faith is a God who surrendered his power so that others could live.

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