

The Alternative

By

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When one looks down the long road of history, he sees it strewn with the vanquished kingdoms, the frustrated emperors who perished in humiliation and misery after a brief heyday of glory and power, the bloodied fields of battle where the youth were sacrificed for the greed of leaders who waved the flag and spouted clichés of freedom and patriotism, of the broken lives of those who gained pleasure at the price of virtue and traded character for success. This grief-laden road can be traced all the way back to Adam, and it looks the same today. Into this world of failed efforts, broken hearts and wasted lives came Jesus of Nazareth, and he came to offer an alternative.

The message of Jesus began with the word, “repent” (Matt. 4:17). This means not merely to be sorry for sin, but to change one’s mind. It requires a transformed way of behaving. To become a Christian is to turn “from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Paul’s words are, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

If there is anything that Jesus made clear in his preaching for three and a half years, it is this: there can be no compromise, no blending of good and evil; that in life’s journey there are only two roads, and they lead in opposite directions and to opposite destinations. The broad way leads to destruction, while the way to life is narrow. There are two masters: God and Mammon, and one cannot serve both. One either seeks to save his life and ultimately loses it, or he willingly loses it in Christ’s service and finally gains it for eternity.

With Jesus, there was never a moment of compromise with the travelers on the great broad road, so well traveled by the multitude, including the rich, the powerful and influential, and the highly esteemed and worldly famous. He deliberately made his choice with the common people, the people with no power, no wealth, and nothing to commend them to the world. In fact, he made himself of “no reputation,” so much so that he was despised and rejected and finally murdered in the most cruel and disgusting manner possible.

Why is it that the more passionate one becomes in his Christian faith, the less he is impressed by the dignitaries of his denomination? The fact is that the closer one follows Jesus, the more he is able to see the world the way Jesus saw it. Jesus was derided by all the minions of the all-powerful Roman state. Had he been acceptable to them, and had he been held in favor by the likes of Pilate and Herod or the corrupt High Priest, he would never have been crucified, would not have served the purpose of the Father, and we would be without a savior.

How is it that the one perfect man who preached and practiced love was so despised and vilified and shamefully treated? Was he not as wise as modern religious VIPs who are celebrated in the press and entertained by heads of states? It was because, in his wisdom, he spoke the truth, and truth is always unwelcome to evil. In his wisdom Jesus saw the true condition of people and exposed their sins to the light of God's purity and purpose.

The church is continually sidetracked by the illusion of building a better world rather than delivering people from "this present evil world," as Jesus did (Gal. 1:4). Rather than challenging Caesar with the alternative Jesus offered, modern churches seek to erase any line of distinction between God and Caesar. Then there are the inane proposals by some ministers that there is some kind of agreement possible between Christ and Mohammed. The goal of many is to create an environment without any obstacles to overcome, with no foes to threaten, and no persecution to fear. As Malcolm Muggeridge put it, "In a materialistic society, pleasure alone is sacred, and its instruments (money, contraceptives, drugs, etc.) are invested with sanctity and regarded with veneration..."

How unlike the Master, whose disciples we are. When we read the four Gospels, it is like reading of one whose life was one great struggle against the world. His every teaching was contrary to the popular mindset, and his every action was contested or criticized by those who set the social standards in his day. He made no effort to make the world safe for Christianity, but warned that the walk of faith would always incite the world's hatred.

Jesus challenged young people to take up the cross, deny self, to leave the comfortable lifestyle, to give up the fun and games, and to exercise self-control over the body and its lusts in order to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. But the modern church is afraid to challenge the youth, and instead, competes with the secular world to offer them the same fun and games, only baptized in religion.

Many churches have tried selling Christianity as a formula for success and affluence. "Name-it-and-claim-it" promises of health and wealth were never part of the gospel, but rather the practice of pagan religions that believe they can manipulate their gods, something far from the teaching of Christ. Still, such churches continue to grow. In too many instances, were it not for the cross as a symbol, and the garb worn by the clergy, one would never guess that the either in faith or in practice.

The early Christians, including those who had been taught by the apostles themselves, had a different attitude. The world sees affliction as a curse; the saint sees it as a stepping-stone to purity of heart and character. To those on the broad road affliction is an obstacle to pleasure and success; to the saint it is the way to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering that they may attain their own resurrection. (Phil.3:8-11)

In the early years, from Nero to Diocletian, confessing faith in Jesus as the Christ was a statement that labeled a person as one who stood outside of and opposed to the accepted customs and traditions of the society in which he lived and moved every day. For taking this stand Christians were imprisoned, beaten, disemboweled, torn apart by wild beasts

and maltreated in every possible way. Such ill treatment caused their faith to stand out as a challenge to the world, saying, “The way of Christ is the only way to life and reality. It is worth whatever price it costs. Come see the joy we possess in giving our lives to God who has granted us mercy and pardon through Jesus His Son.”

The blessings of life in fellowship with the Father and His son are still the same, and so is the price tag.

In the past four decades there has been a strong “church growth” movement that encourages churches to go with the culture, to reach out to the lost sinner by offering him just what he has been seeking from the gods of this world. As a result, a good church program caters to people's “felt needs,” and sermons address issues of addiction, physical fitness, marital problems and money management. The person and work of Jesus is shoved to the background. It is no wonder that in the United States millions who profess Christ are materially rich, but spiritually impoverished.

In contrast to this popular format Jesus challenges us to lose life for His sake and the gospels, and in return receive peace that passes understanding, a purpose that transcends all other ambitions, and finally, eternal life in the new creation.

The difference between God and Caesar is crystal clear to anyone who takes Jesus and his teaching seriously. And when one views the world in the light of what is revealed about God, His purity, His holiness, and His purpose, he would rather be despised by the world than embraced by it.

The long road of history finally comes down to our time, with our fantastic technology, superior military power, riches undreamed of by generations past, and still the battlefields of blood, the prisons overcrowded, and lives broken by sin.

Jesus gives us the alternative to this present dying society. There is no other help but him. On his last night, before the authorities were to demonstrate secular justice by torturing him to death, he told his disciples, “In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Pilot, Herod, Caiaphas, and the religious hierarchy that demanded his death are all gone in defeat and shame. But Jesus is alive, in power and great glory.

He overcame by sticking to the Father's purpose in complete obedience to Him. This is the alternative to chaos and destruction. His promise still stands: “He that overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

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