

“God Who?”

March 31, 2019

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2 Corinthians 5:13-21 New International Version (NIV)

¹³ If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

When is the last time you had a serious discussion with someone about God? I don't mean to ask if you stopped a perfect stranger on the sidewalk and started waving the bible in his face. That's the last thing I would do. I am asking when have you been challenged by someone as to why you are the way you are? Or better yet, when was the last time you felt the calling to speak up and use God's Word as your basis of argument? If it did happen, what did you say? If it has yet to happen, are you prepared to say something?

People who follow the habits of society know that church attendance is down across the entire spectrum of all denominations. Does that give you cause for concern? Is there something we are supposed to be doing?

Have you tried to ask yourself why this is happening? It's not only a hard question to answer, it's also a hard question to ask.

Is it because the relevance of God has diminished in our society? Is God just old-fashioned today? Has our society outgrown the need for God? We live in a push-button culture where commercialism has taught us that speed is what we want and need, and if the current product doesn't fill our needs, we should find one that does.

Most everything we buy today comes with an owners' manual. Got questions? There's an 800 number for customer service.

Sorry, God doesn't operate that way.

As a do-it-yourself owners' manual, the bible doesn't offer many how-to-do-it details on proclaiming the good news. Face it, the Gospel writers were not composing for folks in the 21st century. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in Heaven." Okay, where do I start?

If I may paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, he said it is one thing to paint a picture or carve a statue and thereby make a beautiful object. But it is something much more glorious to paint or carve the atmosphere in which we live, to have influence on the quality of the day. I think Thoreau is saying the same thing as the writer of Matthew, but the conversational logistics and mechanics of how to do it are left up to those who dare to venture forth and try.

Later in the same gospel, Jesus sends his twelve disciples out to preach the message of the Kingdom of Heaven, heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons. Christians have never doubted that Jesus said these things or that the disciples carried out their commission. But again, scripture leaves the nuts and bolts of it all to our feeble imagination.

Now, in the 21st century, how do we make our light shine? How do we preach the message of Heaven today? Maybe *Preach* is the wrong word. Preaching as we know it happens in the church, directed at people in the pews. That doesn't work well beyond the confines of the church building.

Something has to set the stage first.

In the time of John the Baptist, even though the daily lives of the populace were closely governed by Roman and Jewish law, the Jews were influenced by a rich heritage based on God's relationship with their ancestors. So, when John started preaching about the arrival of a promised Messiah, he wasn't speaking a foreign language or uttering mysterious ideas. He simply reminded them of what they had already been taught or at least had heard somewhere. It was near the top of the wish list for most everyone.

That's probably not true today. I seriously doubt that God's story is at the top of everyone's list of things to talk about. Passing along the story of God's relationship to humankind depends on us first telling the world that there is something we need to be talking about, something that our very lives depend on, like the air we breathe. The responsibility of living out the good news rests clearly on the shoulders of Christians from all walks of life.

There have been and there will be slanted excuses for avoiding church or abstaining altogether from conversations about God in general which often come from experiences with extreme biblical abuses. How many people do you know who avoid church as adults because it was jammed down their throats as children and then there was no follow-up at home? Those of you who are school teachers have probably heard parents that say the teachers should do all the teaching, so they don't have to do it at home. How many people left church because they heard the message of 'my way or the highway'? So, will they lead the next generation to the church doors?

Hypocrisy, condemnation, and exclusivity are at the top of the list of religious extremes that drive people away from God and Christian fellowship and cast a shadow on the future of the church.

Public views and opinions of the church have been a hurdle. When is the last time you heard something good about a church on the news? Maybe you did, but the chances are you can more easily remember when something bad about a church was out in the public domain. And it is repeated over and over again until the news cycle changes. People hear the word 'church' and often have negative reactions to it.

Christian Century magazine quoted a statistic from somewhere stating that almost 30% of adult Americans are planning a non-religious funeral for themselves. I'm not worried about secular funerals, but rather, what led up to that decision? Is it a reflection of how they lived their lives?

So, what about those of us who do attend church? All too often, I discover that someone I know attends church on a regular basis, and yet, they behave as though it is their deep secret; they never mention it. Are they afraid of being stigmatized? I fail to see the reason for that degree of caution. I have heard it said that nowadays people find it easier to talk about sex than about God.

When forming an image or an opinion of what and who God is, people outside the Christian churches look to those of us who are inside church walls to show them and tell them about God. When we act and live in contradiction to what God teaches us, do we appear as hypocrites? Are we projecting an image of God that suits the needs of the seeker or the one who is telling the seeker? Do we paint a picture that presumes to have all the answers? Do we resort to memorized clichés or creeds? Are we afraid to say we don't have all the answers?

If so, it makes us look shallow and non-authentic.

I am sure we all know people who do good things and yet have no Christian basis for what they are doing. Most world religions teach proper behavior in society and do so without a single mention of God's grace. Did Christ die for nothing? When we strive to simply 'do the right thing,' our efforts are often politicized or socialized to the point that spirituality is lost and replaced by things that do not nourish the soul.

To believe that there is God in Christ as a personal Savior, one who calls you by name, that is what nourishes us. As Paul says it in our scripture today, if we appear a bit odd for what we believe, we do it for God's sake. He tells us that Christ's love compels us.

But do people want to hear what you truly believe or something you just memorized? Jesus' life and death represented a sacrifice that was truly divine and, in contrast to our meager efforts, His gift was not of human origin.

In Jesus time, worshippers were only scratching the surface and his gift of grace to us was like a deep cleaning that reached the very depths of the human soul. That human mistake in worship and that divine blessing from God both continue today.

For centuries, we humans were playing the music we thought God wanted to hear and Jesus came, picked up the director's baton, and showed us how it should really sound.

In our social reluctance, we just don't want to be embarrassed. We don't want to be stigmatized as some crazy maniacal zealot who can't carry on a decent conversation without sounding like he's off his rocker.

You'll get no argument from me on that issue. Who wants to listen to a crazy person, anyway? But, Paul said if we are out of our minds, it for God's sake. And if we are in our right minds, it is for you; meaning that the message may sound foreign, but our manner of telling you is solid and sane. Remember, Paul was dealing with a society in Corinth that was the

extreme opposite of the love shown by Jesus. Paul's hurdle in that town would be like someone today saying that all television broadcasts should end at sundown. To them, it sounded ridiculous.

So, our job today is somewhat easier than what Paul had to face. But, in Paul's time, as in our time, I firmly believe that there is a spark of spiritual inquisitiveness that could be fanned into a flame if stoked in just the right way. All too often, that spark had once been a flame that was suppressed by exaggerated social caution or extinguished by some type of church doctrinal handcuffs.

Make no mistake, with regards to the Gospel's message, some people just don't know what they don't know. From all indications, over time, the general population of our country has less and less bible knowledge. At breakfast in a local coffee shop, I recently overheard a conversation about the sign we so often see in the stands during football games. You've seen it; it simply says 'John 3:16'. As I eavesdropped, I realized that none of the people at that table knew the meaning of the sign and so their conversation quickly took a new direction. Not only did they not know, they didn't care. By what stroke of God's grace are we to bring a message of love and faith to such people? It's like trying to sell a car to someone who is not in the market for one.

Back to my original question; what is the right way? There must be some way to bring God into the conversation at street level; that is, unabashed, non-threatening, and with no condescending tones. How can we bring it to the table and make it fit into whatever is going on at that very moment? I don't think this is a new question. I think it's as old as time.

And yet, we still resist. Why are we embarrassed or even get a chuckle when someone writes, "Jesus Saves" on an overpass or on the town water tower? Paraphrasing Buechner, we are embarrassed because we want to be 'okay' and 'on the right track'. These two hand-painted words, "Jesus Saves," written by someone with no apparent sense of civic responsibility, suggests we are not okay and not on the right track.

These two words cut across socioeconomic lines and speaks to us as we all sit in the same boat. It is directed to us as well as to people we thought were, in some way, less deserving than us. It speaks of a need we have, the need for salvation, and yet we thought we were doing a pretty good job without any help. It points out our helplessness, our spiritual nakedness, something we don't want to talk about. Jesus knew he was going to die for the things he was saying. We don't have that worry. So, what's the hesitation about? Just a reminder: in Matthew, chapter 11, Jesus said, "and blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

Our Father's world is all around us and we cannot see it until we cease being embarrassed and look for it through the lens of Jesus' love and sacrifice.

We should live our lives so people see God's grace in us as a hungry man sees food. The value of uneaten food is zero, so don't be an appetite killer.

After we discipline ourselves to act and live as Jesus taught, how hard would it be to add some gentle emphasis to our discipleship?

Words like belief, God, trust, prayers, and so forth. Are we afraid to say those things out loud?

Do you have the courage to try it? Christ can give you that courage.

I was in an airport once waiting for my flight and the agent welcomed all first-class passengers and gold card members, implying that the rest of us should wait. Under my breath, I muttered, "So, I am a second-class citizen." The woman standing next to me heard me and quickly said, "Not in God's eyes, you're not!"

All I could think to say was, "WOW!" She said nothing else. She showed no hesitation. Maybe she read today's scripture!

Mind you, Frederick Buechner warns against being, “A peddler of words.” Nevertheless, words, used sparingly, are part of the task and we should be the best word peddlers in town in terms of diplomacy, syntax, timing, location, imagery and all the other tools of effective verbal communication. And we need to think ahead as to what we might say. We need to be ready. We need to know what we believe. It is your spiritual framework and we must make it known to others.

Or, we could just feel safe in our own private cocoon of satisfaction and say to ourselves, “Let God speak to them; that’s *His* job.”

Who among us could knowingly think such a thing?
But sometimes – perhaps – for just a split second - maybe we do.

God be with us all,

AMEN.