

# Cultural Christianity

By Michael Clark

Americans live in a nation that has been abundantly blessed over the years with material wealth. Many Christians in this nation have grown to believe this wealth in the form of a middle class or better life style is an "inalienable right," owed us because we have "accepted Jesus as our Savior."

With the aid of trips to third world countries over the years, I have been awakened to the fact that we have bought into a great deception. Recently I met with a group of Christians to hear a man speak who is a pastor and teacher from India. He gave the typical missionary presentation about his work among his people. At the conclusion of his talk, I asked him why God was moving in power, signs and wonders in the third world but not in America. We hear a lot of talk about signs and wonders but really see little of the actual thing.



The Indian pastor replied by telling me a little about his own life. When he was a child, his family lived in a one room house. The floor was covered with dried cow dung. There was no furniture other than bamboo mats that were rolled out on the dung floor to sleep on at night. He

claimed his bed was much more comfortable than the padded, carpeted floor under my feet. All of his family lived in that same village and most Indians to this day do not travel more than eight to ten miles from their ancestral home.

What did all of this have to do with my original question? He went on to say in their simple culture, people pursued the spiritual more than the material. In our culture, we pursue the American lifestyle first then the spiritual. He felt this difference made the gospel succeed in his country, with signs and wonders following. We have been very successful in gaining what we have sought. They wanted only enough of the material to keep the body and family together; their greater quest was for spiritual well being. Thus

when the Gospel is preached and taught, the people see the kingdom of God first and desire to attain it. Here in America the Gospel is an add-on to our lives and we expend our resources and energies first to attaining our lifestyle.

This answer reinforced my suspicion that the Gospel of Jesus in its original third world setting -- Israel -- is not what I have heard preached and taught for the most part in America.

Going back through the Gospels with the perspective of a people seeking the spiritual first, I could see the words of Christ were more readily received by hungry hearts than those materially fat. Jesus said, "Blessed are ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20, KJV). "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 19:24, KJV). Or how about, "You say that you are rich and increased with goods... but I say you are poor, miserable, blind, and naked...buy of me..."

We in America have missed it. "Close but no cigar." We seek first the American lifestyle, then expect the spiritual blessings to come pouring in as well. Isn't it interesting that the Hebrews 11 account of great men and women of the faith lists persecution, rejection, and poverty as their normal condition?

Because he [Moses] preferred rather to share the oppression and bear the shame of the people of God than to have the fleeting enjoyment of a sinful life. He considered the contempt and abuse and shame born for the Christ, the Messiah, to be greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt. (Hebrews 11:25-26, Amplified Bible).

Others had to suffer the trial of mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death; they were lured with tempting offers to renounce the faith; they were sawn asunder; they were slaughtered by the sword; [while they were alive] they had to go about wrapped in the skins of sheep and goats, utterly destitute, oppressed and cruelly treated. [Men] of whom of world was not worthy, roaming over the desolate places and the mountains and living in caves and caverns and holes in the earth. (Hebrews 11:36-38, AB)

Does this sound like any Christians you know? Did I hear you say, "well, that was something they went through so we could have the gravy." Jesus said to the Pharisees, the religious people of his day, "Do ye not therefore err, because you know not the scriptures, neither the power of God." (Mark 12:24, KJV).

Paul warned Timothy, "In fact, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim 3:12 NIV). Did Paul say *all*? Judging by our materialistic lifestyles and our pursuit of comfort, many of us have yet to truly "desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus."

We have been so steeped in our pursuit of happiness that we have equated the inalienable right to an American lifestyle with godliness. The Apostle warned us that "men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth" would teach that "gain is godliness." He admonished us "from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain."

Paul's prophecy has been fulfilled. "For the time is coming when [people] will not tolerate (endure) sound and wholesome instruction, but having ears itching [for something pleasing and gratifying] they will gather to themselves one teacher after another to considerable numbers, chosen to satisfy their own liking and to foster the errors that they hold, and will turn aside from hearing the truth and will wander off into myth and manmade fictions. As for you, be calm and cool and steady, accept and suffer unflinchingly every hardship..." "And he who does not take up his cross daily and follow me [that is, cleave steadfastly to Me, conforming wholly to my example in living and if need be dying also] is not worthy of Me." (Matthew 10:38, Amplified). And Jesus said unto him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." (Luke 9:58, KJV) Are we who pursue riches worthy of Jesus?

If we read the lives of the godly in the Bible, and especially the New Testament, we find men and women who lost everything for the Gospel. The cross Jesus urges us to pick up is not the remote control of our TV or VCR we spend hours fondling everyday. Nor is it any other of the creature comforts we pursue continuously. The cross is an instrument of suffering and death that weakens and breaks the control of our self-centered soulfulness on our lives.</P<

We can't have our cake and eat it too. Jesus went on to say, "Whosoever finds his [lower] life will lose [the higher life], and whoever loses his [lower] life on my account will find [the higher life]. (Matt. 10:39, Amplified).

Isn't it obvious that "You cannot serve God and mammon [that is, deceitful riches, money, possessions or what is trusted in]" (Matthew 6:24, Amplified). For years I have

felt called to serve God full time but have had to make excuse. I have to make a living so I can pay for my house and car and taxes and insurance, etc., etc.

It reminds me of the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused. They paid no attention and went off, one to his field, another to his business..." Compare Luke 14:18, "And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first (and the second) said unto him, 'I have bought...I pray thee have me excused (KJV)."

Have we in our cultural Christianity succeeded in fulfilling Jesus' words to the Jews? "So for the sake of your tradition (cultural life style) [the rules handed down by your forefathers] you have set aside the word of God, depriving it of force and authority and making it of no effect." Matthew 15:6 (Amplified).

## **Repent**

We are long overdue for a complete heart change. In Revelation 3:17-19, Jesus addressed the Laodicean church. "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered and grown wealthy and I am in need of nothing;' and do not realize you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to purchase from Me gold refined and tested by fire that you may be truly wealthy, and white clothes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nudity from being seen, and salve to put on your eyes that you may see. Those whom I [dearly and tenderly] love I tell their faults and convict and convince and reprove and chasten [that is] I discipline and instruct them. So be enthusiastic and in earnest and burning with zeal, and repent - changing your mind and attitude." (Amplified).

Jesus not only tells this rich, spiritually complacent church we resemble to repent, but then tells them how. First, purchase from Him gold refined in the fire.

## **Fire**

Refining metals is an exacting business. It must be done just so. Once I had a neighbor who worked in a foundry where iron was refined and cast. I asked him what his job was like and he began to tell me about the process used to cast a manhole cover.

First, they melt down old steam radiators and other recycled iron. While the metal was melted in the cruse, they scraped the impurities off the top. Once is not enough, he assured me. They let the molten iron cool, then reheat it to a molten state and skim off the dross seven times before the iron is pure enough to be a lid on a lowly sewer!

When we come to Christ, we are like an old, crusty, painted up radiator, broken and discarded in the junk heap. Jesus is the salvage man who says, "Don't bury this in the land fill; I can make something useful out of this." We must lose our old form and value to be made useful to the master. It is not a pleasant process. He is after the wheat to gather into his barn, but will burn up the chaff (the hull around each kernel of wheat) with unquenchable fire.

We have been so ingrained with our cultural perceptions of comfort that as soon as the heat is turned up to purify us into His precious gold, we start screaming and pointing our finger at those who we are "getting burned up" at. I write from experience. Often we will blame the devil for what God in his love and mercy is doing.

We glibly say, "I want to see Jesus," but didn't God appear to Moses out of the fire in Exodus 3? We want to serve Him before His altar, but dare we ignore the words of Malachi 3:2-4? God sits as a refiner of silver and gold and he will purify the sons of Levi and purge them that they may offer unto Him an "offering of righteousness."

I Peter 1:3-9 tells us we have been given an inheritance by Christ which can never perish, kept in heaven for us. This gives us reason to rejoice, "though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine....when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Jesus will try our souls with fire to see what manner of building we have erected on His foundation. If it is built with "gold tried in the fire" we will not suffer any loss. But if we have found our life by building selfishly with wood, hay, and stubble, we will suffer great loss (See 1 Cor 3:11-15). Submit to His great and mighty hand and ask Him to purify you in the fire of trials that you may be rich in Christ both now and forever.

Someone once said that those who invest all their energy and life resources into making life comfortable in this world are like a man, who upon hearing that his bank is bankrupt and will close its doors tomorrow morning, runs right down with every asset

he has and invests it in a doomed institution. Shouldn't we instead be making friends with our unrighteous mammon, since we really own nothing anyway, that they may receive us into everlasting habitations?

## **White Clothes**

"I counsel you to buy from me....white clothes to wear so you can cover your shameful nakedness...."

God says in Isaiah 64:6, God says in Malachi 3 that He is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap. The fuller's soap had power to purify and whiten. The key to purity here is to call on God daily to clean our hearts from self-righteousness and give us His righteousness that it might cover our nakedness. If we don't, the results will be disastrous.

We may get into the wedding of the Lamb, but be pitched out on our ear because we had not put on the white wedding garment provided at the door. Alexander MacLaren explains the parable this way:

"Mark that the feast has not begun, though the guests are seated. Judgment stands at the threshold of the heavenly kingdom. The king speaks with a certain coldness, very unlike the welcome fit for a guest; and his question is one of astonishment at the rude boldness of the man who came there, knowing he had not the proper dress. (That knowledge is implied in the form of the sentence in the Greek.) What, then, is the wedding garment? It can be nothing else than righteousness, moral purity, which fits for sitting at His table in His kingdom. And the man who has it not, is the nominal Christian, who says that he has accepted God's invitation, and lives in sin, not putting off 'the old man with his deeds,' nor putting on 'the new man, which is created in righteousness.' How that garment was to be obtained is not part of this parable. We know that it is only received by faith in Jesus Christ, and that if we are to pass the scrutiny of the king, it must be as 'not having our own righteousness,' but His made ours by faith which makes us righteous, and then by all holy effort, and toil in His strength, we must clothe our souls in the dress which befits the banqueting hall; for only they who are washed and clothed in fine linen, clean and white, shall sit there. But Christ's purpose here was not to explain how the robe was to be procured, but to insist that it must be worn."\*

## Eye Salve

"I counsel you to buy from me....salve to put on your eyes that you may see." Salve has an oil base. Remember the foolish virgins that had not bought oil for their lamps (Matthew 25:9)? If their lamps had oil, they too could have seen His return. Jesus told the disciples the people were deaf and blind. "But blessed are your eyes," He continued, "because they see and your ears because they hear." He quoted Isaiah, "Though seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear or understand." (Isaiah 6:9).

Paul wrote in II Timothy 3:1-7, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them...always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth." (NIV)

We need to wake up and smell the coffee! When Paul was positive he knew the scripture and that his godly duty was to persecute the church, Jesus blinded him in an encounter on the way to Damascus. It is very fitting that Paul's first words were, "Who are you, Lord?" That the church would cry out like those Greeks did to Philip, "We would see Jesus!"

\*MacLaren, Alexander. *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 7. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974. pp. 133-134.