



Preference or truth?

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How do you respond when someone says 'Being a Christian is good for you, but I don't need that'? A look at the ramifications our absolute-truth world view has for ministry.

Last week I lectured at a local church on the issue of missions. After the lecture we had a question and answer session. There were two questions from the audience that really got me thinking. The first was from a young man who is studying to be a teacher. He's anticipating being in the classroom and he desperately wants to make an impact for Christ. And he asked, How can I minister in the school when they don't allow ministry? He wanted some suggestions from me on how to work through that. And a few moments later there was another question from a man that said he has difficulty sharing his faith. His friends say, 'That's good for you, but I don't need that.' He wanted to know how to respond to that.

These two questions are linked in a very important way. This isn't something that I've thought deeply about. It actually occurred to me as I was talking with them and the thoughts began to formulate in my mind. The thing that is difficult in talking about this idea is that it requires us to be self-reflective in a way that we're not used to. I mentioned that it's hard for us to be self-reflective about our own culture in the context of missions because we're immersed in our culture and we can't see things in our culture without going outside of it by going to another culture. By the same token, to reflect on our Christianity we run into the same problem. I think it was Francis Schaeffer who used the illustration of what it must be like for a fish to describe what it's like to be wet. A fish is always wet. He knows nothing

else so it's very hard to describe that particular thing. When we reflect on the way we view Christianity in the context of our culture, we can't reflect very effectively because we're in the midst of it. So I'm going to grant that this may be kind of hard to work through, but I'd like you to chew on this idea.

These two questions that were asked are related in a critical way. My first answer went something like this. The question shows some confusion about the way we view our Christian life in that we are Christian people. It shows that we view our Christian lives in rather a narrow fashion. We think, for example, that Christian impact comes from doing ministry rather than from being a Christian. What's the difference? There's a very important difference. Back during the Reformation there was a notion of your life as vocation. Christian vocations were not holy orders. They weren't being a minister or being in full time Christian work, *per se*. Christian vocation was any manner of life that you happened to choose with the idea that your entire life and everything you touched was going to be transformed by your Christian commitment. So ministry wasn't something you do. Ministry was something that you are. You made an impact on people because you were a Christian, but it goes beyond that, of course. It's not simply enough to be a Christian. It's a particular kind of Christian that we have in view here. Here's how it comes together.

We have our greatest impact when we are living a robust, broad based, Biblically informed, thoroughly Christian life, in which our Christian world view informs everything we do and everything we are about: our ethics, our behavior, our view of government, our view of human responsibility, sexuality, art and aesthetics, work, human value, nature, recreation. It deals with everything that we deal with and it ought to be integrated because we understand that Christianity is not just chapter and verse that deal with 'religious' topics. It entails an entire way of looking at the world, such that everything in our world is somehow informed and influenced by this broad based, rigorous, entirely Christian world view. When that happens it overflows into everything we do, whether it's teaching, or being an attorney, or a gardener. If it's your goal to be a Christian like that, you don't have to worry about doing ministry; you are being ministry.

The question that the first individual asked can only be asked because the Christian asking the question doesn't understand the breadth of Christianity. And because we don't understand Christianity, we don't know how to respond to the second question.

If we had an expansive view like that, then we would understand what's behind the unbeliever's remark in the second question. Why was the question so difficult to answer for this other Christian? The problem here is the unbeliever's view of the world. The question is not the real question or problem. The Christian and non-Christian are speaking two different languages. The Christian is either wittingly or unwittingly holding to a particular view of the world and the unbeliever has an entirely differently view. But because the Christian is not self-reflective on his world view and doesn't understand it completely, he doesn't realize that he's speaking a different language. In fact, sometimes I'm not always sure that the Christian understands what he's saying.

What I mean specifically is this. The question is not the real question. The problem is not that the nonbeliever doesn't 'need' Christianity. How do we get them to feel the need for it or change their minds? What's happened is that the non-believer does not have in his perception of reality that there is such a thing as truth. He's a thoroughgoing relativist. To him, Christianity is just a preferred activity of the Christian, or preferred notion or belief. It's simply a preference. He prefers something different. Why would you fault him for his preference? Why does he have to be like you in your preferences?

There's no sense that this is a world filled with both true and false notions and that we have a rational obligation to separate the two and a moral obligation to follow truth. We don't understand that because our own Christian world view is not broad. We don't have a rich understanding of the ramifications of what we hold to be true. Instead, things aren't true or false; they're pleasant or unpleasant, appealing or unappealing, liked or disliked. The fact is that our Christianity is not our preference. It ought not be for you. If your Christianity is what you prefer, you're missing entirely what Christianity is all about. I do not prefer Christianity. I prefer agnosticism. It's

much easier. It's much less troublesome. I could do more of what I want. The fact is, I believe that Christianity is true so I'm rationally and morally obligated to follow it. And because it's true, there is a necessary quality to it. I can say that because I understand about world views. That's why I can approach this issue in this fashion. But if we don't understand that our Christianity is necessary, that it's 'true truth', as Francis Schaeffer used to say, then we are caught up short when we try to talk to someone who doesn't share our preference.

In acquiescing to that, we try to appeal to the false view instead of telling them the truth. We try to make Christianity more likable, more pleasant, more appealing rather than clarifying that it is more true because that's what they're looking for, rather than clarifying that Christianity is more true. And so the trap we fall into is resorting to entertainment rather than advocacy.

Another way of putting it is that the true starting point is not man, ultimately, but God. If in fact man is all there is (the perspective of the person we're often sharing with), then the only place he can start and end is with man. Then preference becomes supreme. But if God is there (which is what the Christian says), it doesn't matter what is preferred. It only matters what is true.

Part of being a Christian involves a change in our world view, not just a change in what turns us on. We adapt our lives to a new, truer view of the world rather than offering a view that is meant to be adapted to our lives. So instead of trying to find a way of making Christianity more pleasant and preferable to the nonbeliever, we explain that his view of the world is wrong and that we cling to Christianity because it's true. We conform our desires to the truth rather than the truth to our desires. Yes, it's important to make truth appealing, but we can't substitute appeal for the truth.

So both of these questions are tied together in a very important way and it says something about our frame of mind, our way of viewing the world as Christians. And what it says is not good. It shows that our world view is not informing all aspects of our lives. Indeed, it shows that we have no Christian world view at all, in any comprehensive sense because we can't even understand the questions that are being asked of us. The

statement that Jesus died for our sins is not a world view. It's a statement of truth that really has very little meaning or makes little sense outside of a broader way of seeing reality. It needs context. When you do that, you're an apologist because you're capable of speaking to any area of life, showing how it relates to a coherent world view. That is, you're a thorough-going Christian and you have a thorough-going Christian world view.