

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Christ is all and in all: Christ, the focal point in Personal Witness in the Business Life - Luke 24:46

Are you a 'Kenwood Chef' Christian? My wife has one of these excellent, multi-purpose food preparation devices. The basic machine is a food mixer, but Cath has any number of 'add ons' that turn the machine into a blender, coffee grinder, dough kneader, or a whole range of essential kitchen appliances. Far too many Christians are the human equivalents of the Kenwood Chef. They have lives very similar to everyone else in the world to which they 'add on' Christianity, rather like Cath bolts the blender onto her Kenwood Chef. The blender on the Kenwood is powered by the motor in the main machine and it doesn't really change what the rest of the machine does, it is just an 'add on'. Is your Christian life like that? You try your best to do some Christian duties, such as Bible reading, prayer and witness, but they are just stuck on top of the rest of your life. They are more or less powered by your own efforts and don't impact radically on the rest of your life.

We are finishing a series today on "Christ the focal point". This implies a very different type of Christianity from the Kenwood Chef kind! My memory of school physics tells me that the focal point of a lens is the point at which all the incoming rays of light are focussed. My glasses are designed to focus incoming light on the retina at the back of my eye. If they don't, everything is a bit blurred. I also remember from childhood days, that a magnifying glass can focus enough light energy from the sun to set fire to a piece of paper. I guess it was one way to determine the focal point of a lens! Wikipedia informs me that in fine art a focal point is "a point of interest which makes a canvas unique." Both of these ideas help to illustrate what "Christ the focal point" means. He is meant to be the very central point of every Christian's life, the absolute focus. He should also make that life unique, quite unlike the life of unbelievers.

Let me give you an illustration of how I used to think this worked. Some years ago, I used to ski fairly regularly. Some time before and after a skiing holiday, I saw everything through 'skiing glasses'. Before the holiday, I would exercise regularly to make sure I was fit enough to ski for as long as possible every day. I made sure I had all my kit ready and checked for use. I checked the weather forecasts regularly to see what the conditions would be like. I watched Ski Sunday to get in the mood. After the holiday, I couldn't walk in the hills near our home without thinking how I would ski down this path, or jump over that little bump. Yes, I know I am a sad obsessive type, I can't help it! I thought living the Christian life was a bit like that. You had to try and look at everything from a Christian point of view, and that would make everything you did spiritual. But that was not entirely successful. Even in my most obsessive moments I couldn't relate **everything** to skiing. Cleaning your teeth and cutting the grass do not have obvious skiing connections! I had the same problem in the Christian arena. It is not immediately apparent how eating a meal, or doing your job, can be looked at from a Christian point of view. You can give thanks for your food and determine to be honest and hard working in your job, and they are good things to do, but it hardly represents a uniquely Christian existence. Lots of non-Christians are honest and hard working. When I tried to be more spiritual, work seemed to be, at best neutral, at worst a hindrance. Come to think of it, work was a particular problem because I spent so long there. A forty hour week, plus travel time, plus extra hours, meant that around 40% of the five working days were used up by work. When I subtracted the 30% spent sleeping, there wasn't much time left for spiritual stuff!

The problem was that I was concentrating on Christian living rather than Christ Himself. The distinction sounds a bit subtle. Let me spell out three important elements.

Dependence

Dependence has mostly negative connotations today. We talk about drug dependency or dependence on overseas aid. Independence is normally positive, dependence is not. At best it is something we are expected to grow out of. For the Christian, dependence is meant to be a lifelong condition. Indeed, we are meant to grow **into** it. Jesus Himself is our example. His dependence on His Father was absolute. "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner." John 5:19. We should not think of this obedience as only extending to Jesus' public ministry. Even while growing as a boy and working as a carpenter, Jesus acted in total dependence on, and obedience to, God. We run our lives ourselves the majority of the time, and only turn to God when we are really stuck. It is one of the reasons we pray so little. Work is an especially bad case, because it is one of the areas we like to think we can handle by ourselves. We all want to think that we are pretty good in our business lives. Perhaps this is especially true of men, for whom the job they do is

an integral part of who they are. Dependence doesn't sound too attractive. But this attitude misses the point in two crucial respects.

1. We actually **are** truly dependent. We need life, health, strength and intellect to do our jobs. Without God we would have none of them, and we need them fresh every day. We all know this as a theory, or a point of doctrine. What we need to do is to let it operate as a reality that shapes how we pray and how we think about everyday things. Those of us who are parents often grumble about how our children do not appreciate the enormous number of opportunities, material things and entertainments that they have. We regard them as ungrateful and unthankful. I wonder how our heavenly Father regards our persistent ingratitude and unthankfulness.
2. Recognising and confessing our dependence allows us to put Christ in the centre, where He belongs. We all know that we pray more when we have problems. When we realise that we are in a situation where we are totally helpless, we come to Christ and tell Him that we really need Him to intervene for us. Maybe a child is 'going off the rails', or an unsaved parent is facing death. We know we can't resolve the problem ourselves, so we pray with genuine feeling. Maybe, at first, we feel Christ is a long way off and not really concerned, but we pursue Him in prayer and, when we see those prayers answered, we feel closer to Him. Sometimes we can feel that closeness even when we don't get the answer we want. We feel we have truly felt what the presence of God is like. We are supposed to have that level of dependence and closeness every day. You might say, "I don't need Jesus in the same way to do my everyday jobs as I do to save a member of my family". That rather depends on what you think the purpose of your work day is. If the purpose is solely to earn a living, develop a career or be appreciated, then you might be able to manage that by yourself. If, however, your principal purpose is to serve Christ, grow closer to Him every day, and live in the way that most pleases your heavenly Father, you are in fact completely dependent on Christ. Do you or I know how to calculate what action, or reaction, will be most honouring to Christ in any possible situation? Do you know how to use the experiences of routine life to get closer to Him? Do you know, in detail, what priorities, decisions and simple deeds would really delight God today? Of course you don't! That's why we are so dependent. In a positive feedback loop, the more we want to put Christ in the middle of our lives the more we will feel dependent on Him, and the more we feel dependent the closer we will draw to Him.

Experience and trials

Don't let me give you the impression that I have got all this worked out in my own working life, and spend every minute of each day feeling completely in the presence of God! These things need working on constantly, and any progress you make can easily slip away. I've been working on this talk for around a week, and have therefore had opportunity to remind myself every morning about using the day to keep close to Christ, and to take a check at lunchtime, and the end of the day, to see how I have been getting on. Suffice it to say, that I have had to preach a sermon to myself on several occasions!

On the positive side, the very fact that we spend so much time at work and experience so many difficulties and challenges there, makes it a great place to grow as a Christian. Let me take you, briefly, through three practical issues in my own life.

Pride

Like many believers I need the constant reminder from Paul, "Not to think of [myself] more highly than [I] ought to think", Romans 12:3. I find it depressingly easy to be impressed with myself! There are plenty of ways this can happen in the world of work. I might solve a knotty problem or be congratulated on a piece of work done, and a reasonable sense of satisfaction will quickly turn into an inflated view of my own abilities and worth. If I have prayed beforehand for the wisdom to do something well, and give thanks afterwards for the help given, it is rather harder to swell up with pride.

Graciousness

I have to confess that I am naturally much less gracious with the failings and imperfections of other people, than Christ is with mine. Working with other people gives me almost endless opportunities to practise graciousness! Of course, when I just keep trying hard to be gracious, I fail regularly. If I ask Christ **each day** to give me opportunities to practise graciousness and to give me the wisdom to recognise them, and the strength to be gracious, I start to make a **little** progress.

Notice the emphasis on repetition and slow progression. Developing some of the personal characteristics of Christ is neither easy nor rapid. Don't despair though! God generously gives countless opportunities for practice, and if you spend hours a day in Christ's company some of His character is bound to start rubbing off on you!

Perseverance

This is not a highly prized virtue in the 21st century. Outside the world of sport, almost nobody seems to want to develop perseverance. The motto of 2012 might be, "If at first you don't succeed, click on another icon"! My teenage son wouldn't mind developing some perseverance, so long as it doesn't take more than five minutes! But perseverance is highly valued in the Bible. "Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ", 2 Timothy 2:3. "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" Galatians 6:9. I could carry on quoting verses for some time. The endurance of Christ Himself is seen throughout His life, and pre-eminently on the cross, and it is one of those things we are meant to learn from Him. Some careers and businesses seem to have been especially designed to teach perseverance! Let's be quite honest; it is not possible to develop endurance without have something to endure, and perseverance implies keeping going when you would much rather give up. It is part of God's kindness that He lets us learn these things in the fairly safe world of work, so that when He gives us bigger tests at home, or in the church, we have already developed some 'spiritual muscle'.

Love and joy

I don't want to give you the impression that making Christ the focal point is all hard slog and tears. At least one element of my earlier skiing analogy was helpful. I saw things as they related to skiing because I really liked skiing. It wasn't an effort, or a chore, it flowed out of pleasure. Living a Christian life can be a chore. If I attempt to do so by my own efforts, I will end up exhausted and discouraged, or a confirmed Pharisee, possibly both! Experiencing Christ's company is always a joy.

"Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" Matthew 11:29-30. How can you find rest while tied to a yoke? Surely a yoke is for working not resting. It is only the company of Jesus Christ that stops these verses being an oxymoron, that is a contradiction in terms. Making Christ the focal point in your business life does not add another piece of work on top of the working life. It allows work to be transformed from a necessary nuisance that is in no way comparable to our obviously Christian activities, into a training ground where we can cooperate with Christ in developing Christian character and, while doing so, deepen our practical relationship with Him.

WITNESS

Making sure that our personal witness is Christ focussed really ought to be very simple. At first glance it is difficult to imagine how witness could **not** be Christ focussed. A little reflection shows that there are several ways to do this. One way is to concentrate on what Christians do and don't do. We might never intend to give the impression that Christianity is all about activities and rules, but it is easy to fall into the trap. We can be so keen to be make it clear that we have different standards and lifestyle to non Christians, that we constantly emphasise the things we do not do and the places we do not go because we are Christians. Trying to be more positive, we might tell people about the church services we attend and how we pray and read the Bible. We might also discuss what the Christian view on current events or moral standards is. None of these things are fundamentally wrong, but they fail to focus directly on Christ Himself. A second way to move Christ out of the centre, is to focus too much on the benefits of salvation. If that sounds silly, ask yourself whether the most important part of Christianity is the salvation, or the Saviour.

It is quite easy to present the Gospel in a way that makes it appear to be a 'get out of hell free card', with a reformed life and a growing relationship with our Creator, as optional extras. Christianity might well have lots of positive effects in our lives. It may reduce our anxiety, make us better citizens, make us fulfilled human beings, and many more things beside. However, these are all more or less side effects from the central blessing, which is knowing Christ.

So we need to check regularly what the chief subject of our personal witness is. Let me frankly confess my own struggles with embarrassment here. As a younger man, I had to take my courage in both hands to confess that I went to church and was a Christian. This was a sufficiently rare thing in the school I went to and the place I worked, to mark me out as different, and what young person really wants to be seen as different? I think this has actually got a little easier in recent years. When I was a young man, studying and working in scientific fields, anything religious was viewed as somewhere between quaint and absurd. Today, being 'spiritual' is much more fashionable, and people are so determined not to be seen as discriminatory, that I find I get a much more positive response. In that sense, witnessing is a bit less scary. I'm still tempted to 'play safe' though, and stick to talking about going to church or 'what Christians believe'. It's hard to shake off the thought that if I start talking about Jesus Christ as somebody that I know personally, and talk to on a regular basis, people will think I'm barmy! But that is what I have been saying Christianity is all about, so I really need to make sure that is how I present it.

I recognised some years ago that I have something of a talent as a salesman. This came as a bit of a surprise to me since I have never had any ambition or enthusiasm for that line of work! It started with tents and then progressed to cycling holidays.

Let me explain... I have mentioned in previous talks that our family go camping regularly. When I am recently returned from one of these trips I can bore people endlessly about the details. Having a variety of tents in our collection means that I can thrill people with the pro and cons of various tent designs and brands for hours! Aren't you glad you only ever hear me on the radio? Colleagues taking up camping have sometimes been brave enough to take my advice on what tent to buy. We also love mountain biking. Singing the praises of a particular part of Scotland inspired another colleague to spend a few days in the area. How does my sales talent manifest itself? It is simply that I am well informed and enthusiastic about my holiday pastimes. I really enjoy my holidays. I know some of you will find that hard to believe, but I come back bubbling over with enthusiasm and that enthusiasm is often infectious. The parallel is obvious. If my enjoyment of Christ's company really is as genuine as I say, I won't be able to help 'bubbling over' about Him.

It helps, of course, if my character and behaviour don't constantly undermine what I say. This is where we link back to our first section on business life. In Acts 4:13 the leaders looked at Peter and John and, "They realised that they had been with Jesus". People are smart enough to detect any inconsistencies between what I say about Christ and how I act. They don't expect me to be flawless, but they do expect some correspondence between my words and my behaviour. We must not be naive enough to think that everyone will be pleased with our witness about Christ. Jesus always provoked sharply divergent responses among those who met Him. Some were warmly attracted, others were violently repelled. If we reflect Jesus at all accurately we can expect the same variety of responses.

In this series we have seen how Christ must be the focal point in: the personal Christian life, the Christian home, the local Christian church and personal witness and business life.

No doubt there are some aspects of human life that we have left out in this short series. The point is, that Christ must be the focal point of every single aspect of our personal, church and public lives. None of this is easy. Ever since the fall, human beings have put God at the periphery of their existence, and themselves at the centre. Reversing that is an ongoing battle, every day of our lives. But it is a battle worth waging. The fall didn't result in human liberation from God; it produced distortion and serious loss in the human will. It deprived us of proper fellowship with God but provided nothing that could fill the huge void this created. God's glory and my reformation and fulfilment depend on a reversal of this process, and my making Christ my all in all.

Let me conclude with two verses of a hymn by an unknown author.

*He is not a disappointment!
Jesus is far more to me
Than in all my glowing daydreams
I had fancied He could be;
And the more I get to know Him,
So the more I find Him true,
And the more I long that others
Should be led to know Him too.*

*He is not a disappointment!
He is all in all to me -
Blessèd Saviour, Sanctifier,
The unchanging Christ is He!
He has won my heart's affections,
And He meets my every need;
He is not a disappointment,
For He satisfies indeed.*

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