

CHRISTIANITY 3D STYLE

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Acts 27:23

There is a question which has been haunting me. I wonder if it has haunted you. As a minister of the Gospel, having committed my life to the cause of Christ, I cannot escape it. It is too fundamental to be ignored.

I have pondered it.

I have wrestled with it.

I have tried to put it out of my mind because it has made me uneasy.

I have sought to suppress it because it stung my very soul.

But it is always there. It calls for an answer and will not be ignored. For it is a desperate, critical question that is basic.

“Why, if all that the Bible says is true, why is
Christianity not accomplishing more?”

How I have wrestled with that question. How often I have been forced to ask:

Why isn't the church making its mark in the world as once it did?

Why does the little progress that we do make come so slowly?

Why is it that there is so little evidence of change in the lives of
those who profess to love Christ?

Is it not true that the Church of Christ is built upon a rock and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it?

Is it not true that Jesus said:

“Fear not, I have overcome the world”(Jn. 16:33).

Is it not true that the Bible says:

“Old things have passed away and all things have
become new?”(II Cor. 5:17).

Why, then, is there such a difference between the church as the Bible says it should be, and the church as it so obviously is?

Last summer, just before leaving on vacation, I happened to drive down the main arteries of the city where we used to live. On one of the busy corners of that thoroughfare I saw a church.

Stately.

Ivy covered.

Beautiful.

An architectural masterpiece.

In front of the church stood a sign:

“Closed For The Summer. Will Open Again September 11th.”

Frankly, I was shocked. But as I thought about it, my shock gave way to a sense of shame as I realized that here at least was a church that dared to be honest.

It freely admitted that the gospel it preached,

and the commitment it required,

was not of sufficient importance to demand the loyalty
of its members twelve months of the year.

Yet, many of us live our lives in precisely the same fashion.

Instead of “Closed For The Summer”, we have hung a neatly lettered

“Do Not Disturb”

sign over the doorway of our hearts. We believe in God, and very much want Him to respond to our slightest beck and call. But except for the times when we need Him, we do not care to be bothered by him.

As a result, we are rich in things, but poor in soul. How unlike the early Christians who conversely were poor in things but rich in soul.

We are obsessed by the visible.

They were possessed by the invisible.

While we grope about in spiritual darkness

bewitched,

bothered and

bewildered—

they set out to win the world, and in one generation well nigh did.

What makes the difference?

Why the striking contrast?

It is not, as we would often rationalize, that they were super human, “Up-On-A-Pedestal Persons”.

It is not that they were some sort of “Other-Worldly Beings” who were far beyond anything we can be.

They were human beings.

They were men and women just like us.

Possessing the same feelings and infirmities.

Nor it is, as we would like to think, that because their world was less complex than ours it was somehow easier for them to be Christian than it is for us. Dare we be honest? Dare we face the facts? If there is any advantage, it is in our favor!

They had no comfortable churches in which to meet.

They had no New Testament to read.

They had no hymnals out of which to sing.

They had no freedom in which to worship.

They were hunted like dogs.

They were persecuted,

tortured,

and slain.

For want of a better place, they often met for fellowship in the catacombs.

A graveyard was their sanctuary.

A tombstone was their altar.

No! The big lie that it was somehow easier for them to be Christian than it is for us, gives way to the big truth. It was not easier. It was much more difficult.

Where then lies the difference?

If it is not that it was easier for them to be Christian,

or that they were somehow something beyond what we can ever be,

why the glaring contrast?

The whole difference lies in the fact that they remembered what we have forgotten.

They remembered who they were and why they were here and, as a result, possessed a depth of commitment that is missing in most of our lives today.

You see, this “Do Not Disturb” sign is simply evidence of the fact that we have forgotten who we are and why we are here.

We have forgotten who Christ is and why He came.

Our weakness lies in the fact that, as a church, we do not know the reason for our own existence, and therefore have no real message for the world in which we live.

Being satisfied with the lowest-common denominator, spiritually speaking, we have come to the intolerable circumstance of merely killing time until we die.

Now, as Dr. Frank Kepner suggests,

“The power of the church lies in her loyalty to the Son of God. Let
there be one uncertain note in her testimony about Him and her
power is gone. But let the church proclaim
 the virgin birth,
 the virtuous life,
 the vicarious death,
 the victorious resurrection,
 and the visible return
of her wonderful Lord, and there is no power on earth or in hell
that can stand in her way.”

And so this morning, I would have you share with me in the act of remembering. Let us
remember our faith in its full dimensions.

Let us remember who Christ is, and thus recover the dimension of height.

Let us remember who we are, and thus recover the dimension of breadth.

Let us remember why we are here, and thus recover the dimension of
depth.

May we say with Paul:

“This very night there stood by my side an angel of God, whose I
am, and whom I serve”(Acts 27:23).

Who He Is

The dimension of height,
 that soaring sense of spiritual uplift,
 becomes ours when we experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

When we discover who Christ is...

 when we remember again the wonder of this One to whom we pay allegiance...
 when we stand in awe before this Sovereign of the Universe...this Son of God...

this Savior of the world...

we find our very beings gasping for breath in the rarified air of such glorious heights.

There is none like Him. Someone has said you can compare every great and good person who has ever lived with another person just as great and just as good until you mention the name of Jesus Christ. Then you discover there is no one in all of history to stand beside Him. No one so great. No one so good. He stands alone.

He is the Sovereign of the Universe.

It is He who made light to shine out of darkness.

It is He who blended time and eternity into one.

It is He who rolled the stars out into space and now holds the course of

It is He who is our timeless Lord and Sovereign Savior.

The one above all others, whose we are and whom we serve.

Charles Lamb has said that if all the illustrious men of all the ages were gathered together in one room and Shakespeare were to come into their midst, they would rise to do Him honor. But if Jesus Christ were to come into their august presence, they would all kneel in humble worship before the Son of God.

But how do we know that Jesus is the Son of God? My own testimony is this:

If the only proof I had that Jesus Christ is God were my own experience with Him, it would be enough! For no one but God could do for me what Jesus Christ has done.

There was a time in my life when, in all the fullest meaning of that great word, I needed to be “saved”. Like a cancer, sin was eating out the very vitals of my soul. Oh, I was not guilty of any of those gross acts that people think of when they mention sin. My sin was the one great damning act of trying to live my life as if there were no God. And *that* sin, promising silk and satin, gave

me nothing but sack cloth and ashes.

I needed a savior. The world had its advisors who tried to point the way. But I needed a savior who could say, “I Am The Way”. I came to Christ, and in this Son of God, this Sovereign of the Universe, I found the Savior of my soul.

The poet put it this way:

“You ask me how I came to Christ?

I do not know.

There simply came a yearning for Him in my heart

So long ago.

I found earth’s flowers would fade and die;

I sought for something that would satisfy,

And then— somehow I seemed

To dare

To lift my broken heart too Him in prayer.

I do not know, I cannot tell you how.

I only know He is my Savior now.

“You ask me when I gave my heart to Christ?

I cannot tell.

The day, or just the hour, I do not now remember
well.

It must have been when I was all alone

The light of His forgiving Spirit shone

Into my heart so clouded o’er with sin.

I think, I think ‘twas then I let Him in.

I do not know, I cannot tell you when.

I only know He’s been so dear to me since then.

“You ask me why I gave my heart to Christ?

I can reply.

It is a wondrous story, listen while I tell you
why.

My heart was drawn at length to seek His face.

I was alone, I had no resting place.

I heard how He loved me, and with a love
Of depth so great, of height so high above

All human ken

I longed such love to share,

And sought it then

Upon my knees in prayer.

“You asked me why I thought this loving

Christ would heed my prayer?

I knew He died upon the cross,

I nailed Him there!

I heard His dying cry.

‘Father, forgive.’

“I saw Him drink death’s cup that I might live.

My head was bowed upon my breast in shame.

He called me, and in penitence I came.

He heard my prayer.

I cannot tell you how, nor when, nor where.

Only that I love Him now.”

There are many artists who have sought to capture on canvas the glory of our Christ. Each one

of you, I’m sure, has one picture of our Lord which you cherish above all others. My favorite hangs in a small chapel in the city of Jerusalem. At one end, from ceiling to floor, the chapel is hung with draperies of richest color and weave. Against this beautiful backdrop hangs a simple picture frame. In the frame, these words:

“Whom having not seen, we love.”

Who is Jesus Christ?

He is the Sovereign of the Universe.

The Son of God.

The Savior of the world.

“Whose we are, and whom we serve.”

Who We Are

The second dimension of this tri-dimensional faith is that of width. We encounter it, when after discovering who Christ is, we are confronted with the knowledge of who we are.

It is not in any sense of boasting or bold arrogance, that through Christ we lay claim to our birthright as children of God. “For not by works of righteousness” are we admitted into this celestial family.

The wonder of wonders to every real, genuine Christian is that he or she, the chief of sinners...
the least deserving...

the prodigal of prodigals...

is loved and wooed and won by God in Christ.

What a glorious gospel. What a momentous discovery: you and I, through Christ, bear this distinction, that we are the children of God. Think of it!

We are the children of God, and therefore there is no hell so deep but that He will enter it for our sakes.

We are the children of God, and therefore there is no dungeon door so massive but that He has the key to turn the lock and set us free.

We are the children of God, and therefore there are no manacles of habit so strong but that he can take them, break them, and set us free.

We are the children of God and therefore:

We have His strength in our weakness.

We have His wisdom in our folly.

We have His comfort in our grief.

We have His forgiveness in our sin.

But God wants more than sons and daughters. He wants saints. One of the staggering discoveries in the Christian life is that not only are we sons and daughters of God in reality, we are saints of God in the making. This is a point that all too many of us miss. As Vance Havner has said:

“Salvation on the installment plan, taking Christ as Saviors now with an option on taking Him as Lord later, is not taught in the New Testament.”

“Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Today our churches are gaining new members by the carload, but the crop of saints is small. To quote Havner again:

“Maybe this is the reason why, with church membership at an all-time high, our nation’s morals are at an all-time low.”

Or, as someone else has observed, not until something happens in us, and to us, will it ever happen through us.

“These Christians must show me they are redeemed,” said
Nietzsche, “before I will believe in their redeemer.”

The world is much more concerned with our demonstration of the Christian life, than with our declaration of the Christian truth. There was a vast difference between possessing Christ and being possessed by Christ. And only as we are possessed by Him will we, like our forefathers in the Faith, “turn the world up-side down.”

You see, sainthood is the norm for all Christians. Most of the time when we think of saints
we mean the very old,
or the very sick,
or the very rich.

But this is a sad deception. Saints need not be either old, sick or rich. And the truth with which many of us need to reckon is the clear biblical teaching that --

Sainthood is not a special state reserved for martyrs.

It is, and must be, the norm for all Christians.

Let me show you what I mean. Suppose, after you go home from church this morning, you look out your front window and see a man walking down the street. You notice that he stops at the corner to watch for approaching cars. He takes care not to stumble over a toy some child left on the sidewalk. Would you call your family together and say:

“Come, look at this! Isn’t this wonderful! That man has the sense to be aware of danger. Look there, he didn’t bump into that tree, he can see. And look there, he’s conversing with a neighbor, he can talk. Isn’t that wonderful?”

No, it’s normal!

And yet, when we see a Christian who loves to witness for his or her Savior, and talk about the things of God; when we see that he or she knows how to pray and has insight into the word of God, we so often say,

“Isn’t it wonderful! He’s a saint. She’s a saint.”

No! It’s normal.

As Christians, we need to remember that as children of God in reality— member of the heavenly family— the normal, the natural, is that we show evidence of being saints in the making, crying out with Paul:

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ”

(Phil. 3:13,14).

And what is that calling? It is the demand that in Christ we are sons and daughters of God and therefore, through Christ, we must become saints of God:

Peoples whose very being makes a difference in the world.

That will not be easy. Great living always comes at a great price. A famous artist once painted a picture of the Archangel Michael overcoming Satan. Michael, clad in gleaming armor and with sword in hand, stands with his foot pressed down on Satan’s neck. Satan is represented as a writhing serpent. Victory is shown on the face of the angel. Defeat, hate, and bitterness are reflected in the serpent’s beady eyes.

The art critics examined the painting and declared it to be a masterpiece. But a Christian minister, who visited the gallery, slowly shook his head. “It isn’t true,” he said. “The struggle has been too easy. Michael’s armor should be dented and covered with dust. Michael’s sword should be stained with blood. There should be the mark of exhaustion, as well as the signs of victory, on his

face. For conquering sin is never easy.”

No, it isn't easy. But this is the victory, that through Christ we are more than conquerors. And in the words of our beloved benediction:

“He is able to keep us from falling, and will present us faultless
before the throne of God with exceeding great joy.”

Not only sons and daughters— but also saints.

“For what we give to Christ, He takes.
What He takes, He cleanses by His blood.
What He cleanses, He fills with His loving Spirit.
What He fills with His Spirit, he uses for His service.”

Why We Are Here

And thus we come to the third dimension of a maturing Christian life.

Having discovered who Christ is,
and having been confronted with who we are,
we begin to understand why we are here.

That because of the height of the glory which is Christ, and the width of wonder of who we are in Christ, we plumb the depth of our possessions and powers, our talents and training, to rise as servants of the King.

For some of you it will mean adding a new dimension to your experience of the Christian life. There are those of you who, in the past, have been content to be Christian coupon clippers, calling upon the spiritual investments of others, both past and present.

There are some of you who either never really knew, or have forgotten, who you are and hence, why you are here. I have a friend, who after years of wandering in the desert places of the world, came to Christ. His conversion was a modern miracle and he used to say, “This is the greatest thing that could ever happen to a person. Why isn't everyone a Christian?”

But instead of setting out to make that dream a reality, as the days went by he found less and less time to serve his Savior. Soon, like so many others, he forgot who he is and thus why he is here. If you were to ask him today, he would be the first to admit his life in Christ is flat. It has no depth. He has lost the third dimension.

The tragedy, however, is that many Christians do not realize their lives are flat. To me the saddest words in all the Bible are those written about Samson who, after he had fallen prey to the wiles of Delilah and his hair was gone, thought life would go on as usual. He honestly believed everything would be the same as it had always been.

“He knew not, “ says the scripture, “that the power had left him.”

What tragic words. The saddest of all words.

“He knew not that the power had left him.”

I wonder, is that true of you? I wonder, have you grown callous to the claims of Christ upon your life?

Have you come to the place where you are satisfied with living up to the average, and not attaining the normal?

Have you come to the place where you do not sense, or better yet will not admit, that you are living in two dimensions, and thus your life with Christ is flat and colorless?

You see, my friends, there is a sense in which your salvation depends upon your service. Now hear this: You are not saved by faith and works, but you are saved by faith that works! The Christian life is something like a telephone pole. Have you ever wondered which holds which in place? Does the pole hold the wire? Or, does the wire hold the pole? It seems to me that both are true. The pole is held because it holds. In fulfilling its task, that is, in lifting up the lines of communication, it finds new and unsuspecting strength for itself in the very wire that it holds.

This is a parable of the Christian life. Our strength comes from service. From this third dimension, when we realize fully and finally why we are here and that like Christ himself,

“We must be about our Father’s business.”

For no Christian who is taking his or her life seriously, can be anything less than a servant of the Savior.

“Oh, you may not sing like angels,
You may not preach like Paul,
But you can tell the love of Jesus,
And say, he died for all.”

Again, that will not be easy, but the spiritual harvest of such service is great.

I like the story of the long distance runner who was doing very well in a five mile race. He was leading the field. But, after many laps, it became quite obvious he was getting tired and it was taking all his strength to put one foot in front of the other. As he passed his trainer for the last lap, he was heard to say, “Lord, you pick ‘em up, and I’ll put ‘em down!”

I like that story, for God has picked us up and set our feet upon the solid rock of His salvation. And now, through His strength manifest in our weakness, we can move out, and on, and up in service for Him. As someone has said:

“Christianity is not going down the street beating on
a big drum. It is going back to Calvary with a big
sob.”

God help us to do just that.

God help us to go back to Calvary with a great sob for our sin in failing to live, each day,
Christianity in its full dimensions.

God help us to go back to Calvary with a great sob of repentance for the way we have failed our
God, our Christ, our church, our world, and ourselves.

And, God help us to return from Calvary with the great sobbing prayer:

“Oh God, revive thy church, beginning with me!”

LAVENDER COMMENTS: There are two approaches to becoming a pastor. One is to take a

honeymoon cruise. The other is to take a shake-down cruise. The latter fit my style, but it also helped me find all the things that needed fixing. A number of people squirmed at hearing such a confrontive teaching from their twenty-nine year old up-start of a pastor. But for most, it was a wake-up call they badly needed and happily heeded.

I also had a lot of fun with the title “Christianity 3-D Style.” For some reason, the newness of 3-D photography provoked a number of ideas for my outline. One person suggested the somber trio: “Danger, Disease and Death and How We Can Conquer Them.” A teenager, in characteristic B-Bop, suggested: “Ding, Dong Daddy!” A retired minister who was a member of our congregation suggested: “The Despair of Difficult Deacons”. I learned later he was like the preacher who bragged of having a membership that was 100% active. When pressed for an explanation, he said, “I have 50 members. All of them active. 25 are for me, and 25 are against me!”