

Why We Can't Afford to Be Normal



Gary Wilkerson April 22, 2013

To some readers, the statement I'm about to make will sound bold. To others it will sound obvious. Either way, it's a commentary on the church I'd rather not have to make. That is, most Christians are powerless.

Consider what "normal" Christianity looks like today in the typical believer. This person is a bit self-seeking, a little materialistic, somewhat consumerist. Most of his daily choices are about improving his life. That includes his spiritual pursuits, from his church groups to the podcasts he downloads to the seminars he attends.

There's nothing wrong with any of these things. Our Lord wants our lives to be blessed. But for some Christians these are nothing more than worldly pursuits. They're about self-improvement, not the kingdom of God. And they can drain a believer of true gospel power.

To me, what passes for normal Christianity today must be an outrage to God. It's not only powerless, it is also passionless, lacking self-sacrifice. In other words, it is cross-less — and therefore Christ-less. Don't misunderstand: I'm all about God's grace, and I wouldn't lay an undue burden on anyone. But it's time for the church to take a spiritual inventory to see whether our "spiritual" pursuits are leading us closer to God's heart or causing us to run in circles.

Let me pose a question. Which do you think would be better for your spiritual health — to attend a church that doesn't preach much gospel, teach much of God's Word or have much passion for his kingdom? A church where no one really lives out his commands? Or would it be better to attend a church that exalts God's Word, proclaims the gospel and has a home group for every type of believer?

I would humbly suggest that the second option might be more dangerous to your spiritual health. Why? Jesus declares that to whom much is given, much is required. For someone whose life doesn't match the biblical truth he's been taught, Judgment Day will be a little scary.

Many of us have to make a tough admission. That is, we want to know God's way — to hear gospel truth — but we can avoid living it. Sadly, church culture today encourages this kind of life. It's acceptable to enjoy sermons and enter into worship — yet go home entirely unchanged.

Whatever happened to a life of total surrender to Jesus? What happened to being willing to lay down our lives for the gospel's sake? Paul said of his own testimony, "My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:4). If we aren't living a life empowered by God, we can't blame the Lord. It isn't because his grace lacks power. The problem is with us.

Lord, make us abnormal with a gospel-powered life!

God didn't stop giving his people power in 100 A.D. or 500 A.D. Jesus never said, "Greater works than these shall you do — until the Reformation." Paul preached a message of gospel power. And he wanted that power for his mentee, Timothy, for a specific reason:

"Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of

money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless...not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people" (2 Timothy 3:1-5, emphasis mine).

Paul is speaking here of dedicated churchgoers but describes them as having only "a form of godliness." These Christians didn't mind going to the synagogue, reading spiritual texts or taking part in religious activities. Yet Paul's advice to Timothy was, "Avoid them." He was saying, "It's dangerous to be around those people. You'll start to think their way is acceptable. They may look godly, but the Lord looks on the heart — and he sees unholiness and conceit."

Paul said these Christians were "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (3:7). In other words, they listened to all gospel teachings but never took them to heart. That made them powerless, Paul said, because they "oppose(d) the truth" (3:8).

Note how Paul begins this passage: "In the last days there will come times of difficulty" (3:1). He makes clear that "normal" Christianity won't be sustainable in the days to come, that perilous times will wither a superficial faith. I'm probably the least prophetic Christian alive, but even I can see bad times on the horizon. When global economies teeter and the average American faces financial disaster and political upheaval heightens, then something has to give.

What will most Christians do when things turn really bad? Are our hearts truly prepared to deal with hard times? I pray we'll react as the church in Acts did when they learned of a coming famine. They didn't stockpile goods against the coming tide. Instead, they took up an offering for other churches whom they knew would suffer.

You may think, "That isn't very responsible." Yet that's exactly what Christians in other countries today are doing. I visited a church in El Salvador where the average income is four dollars a day. I was astonished to learn that the people give two of their earned dollars toward charity. I asked them individually, "Why do you give so much?" Every one of them answered, "Because Jesus told us to give to the poor." I said, "But you are in need." "Oh, no," they responded, "we're blessed. We want to bless in return."

These aren't hearts that are unholy or swollen with conceit. Can we say the same of ourselves? As North American Christians, will we be eager to bless others when we have little in our own accounts? Or will we shrink back when it comes to blessing as we've been blessed?

The coming hard times speak of more than a rough economy: They reveal the condition of our hearts.

For the first time in history, less than 50 percent of Americans identify themselves as believers of any kind. That figure is even lower — 30 percent — for people under thirty. Many of these check "none" as their religious affiliation. It is estimated that within a decade this generation will be lost completely to secularism and godlessness. And tolerance for Christians will only decrease.

What are we to do with this? The writer of Hebrews answers, "Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings" (Hebrews 10:32). God turned those early Christians' sufferings into tools for gospel power:

"Sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction...you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come...but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:33-39).

This is a hard passage, to be sure, but there is good news embedded here. It speaks of a time when things get so bad that believers are tempted to shrink back from their message. Yet "we are not of those who shrink back...but of those who...preserve their souls" (10:39).

God is telling us that in the midst of the growing darkness he is doing something glorious: He's raising up a last-days church as a testimony to his power in hard times. These believers will cry out, "Lord, you are not a respecter of persons. What you did for the first-century church in Acts, do for us also. Give us power as witnesses to your

truth.”

We may never face the same trials that New Testament believers did, but God still gives us New Testament power. We'll surely face trials of our own because we're not immune to what is coming upon the world. But those hardships will produce in us a power we've never seen.

That is why we can't afford to be normal in our faith any longer. Think about the fast-growing numbers of non-believers I mentioned. Each represents a soul headed to hell, someone for whom Jesus died. Those numbers alone call us to rise above “normal” Christianity, to proclaim Christ's gospel without fear or hindrance. That requires his power, which can't be achieved or obtained on our own. It is endowed by grace alone.

I've paraphrased Leonard Ravenhill many times on this subject, but it bears repeating: “Christianity today is so sub-normal that if any Christian began to act like a normal, New Testament Christian, he would be considered abnormal.”

Tell me, are you not only hearing God's Word but doing it? Or is there a disparity between Christ's gospel power and your walk? Pray with me today: “Lord, I'm tired of settling for normal Christianity. Merge my unremarkable life with your heavenly power. I'm an empty vessel — fill me and test me. Whatever it costs, Lord, lead me where you would have me to go.”

Pray this and you will see his power released in your life. Amen.

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