

Basic Christianity

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1 Tim 1:9-10

Introduction

We need to get back to the simplicity of the Gospel and get rid of the many man-made accretions of recent decades.

This is not just a case of reforming the theology of the Gospel, removing the corruption of Arminianism, universalism, Pelagianism, Amyraldism, Socinianism and so forth, but also deleting the accretions of Charismatic and other unorthodox teachers. For example, those who teach that the Gospel includes: prosperity, automatic healing and health, financial success, self-centredness, fleshly emotionalism in worship, mysticism and even occultism.

Thus many supposed converts today fail to behave as God requires and instead spend their lives fruitlessly centring upon all sorts of novelties that actually distract from being a good Christian. Worse, they highlight selfishness; they are religions based upon 'self'; the opposite of godly religion.

When Paul wrote to the young church at Thessalonika, he praised their genuine turning to God and itemised a few things that proved it. This paper studies those things.

Background

Thessalonica / Thessalonika was a large and populous city on the Thermaic bay, a seaport in north-eastern Greece. It was the capital of one of the four Roman districts of Macedonia, and was ruled by a praetor [each of two ancient Roman magistrates ranking below consul].

It was named after Thessalonica, the wife of Cassander [king of Macedon], who built the city in 316 BC. She was so called by her father, Philip, because he first heard of her birth on the day of his gaining a victory over the Thessalians.

On his second missionary journey, Paul preached in the chief synagogue of the Jews in that part of Macedonia, and laid the foundations of a church (Acts 17:1-4; 1 Thess 1:9).

The violence of the Jews drove him from the city, when he fled to Berea (Acts 17:5-10). The rulers of the city, when the Jews arrested Jason with whom Paul and Silas lodged, are in the Greek text called *politarchai*,¹ an unusual word, which was found inscribed on an arch in Thessalonica. This discovery confirms the accuracy of the text.

Paul visited the church here on a subsequent occasion (Acts 20:1-3). This city long retained its importance.

¹ Equivalent to a modern city councillor or magistrate. Literally, 'city-ruler'.

It was later an important city of Byzantium but it fell to the Turks in 1430, remaining a part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912. It was the scene of a joint Anglo-French campaign in support of Serbia during World War I and is now a major port and the second-largest city in Greece. It is also a university city, a NATO base, and a major industrial centre with oil refineries, engineering, and textile plants. Today it is capital of the modern Greek region of Macedonia; pop. (1991) 378,000.

Exegesis and commentary

You turned to God from idols

Turned

Epistrepho: to turn to, to turn to the worship of the true God, to cause to return, to bring back to the love and obedience of God, to turn one's self about, turn back.

While this is not the normal Greek word for 'repent' (i.e. *metanoeo*),² it effectively means the same thing. *Metanoia* means to change one's mind, to initiate a new way of thinking and behaviour; *epistrepho* means to turn oneself around and worship God. The former focuses upon turning away from previous bad behaviour; the latter upon turning towards obedience to God. Both are sides of the same coin.

Repentance

This is the first thing that Paul mentions as a sign of genuine conversion – a person completely changes their behaviour due to a new way of thinking. Before they pleased themselves but now they seek to please God.

Conviction of sin followed by a genuine repentance (which is a gift from God by the way) are the basic building blocks of conversion, followed by faith; belief in Christ as Saviour. However, here Paul does not mention faith since it is implied, as repentance is a corollary of faith in Christ. Often 'repent' is used as shorthand for 'repent and believe in Christ'.³

Modern churches may talk much about 'faith' (which is a term wrongly used to cover all sorts of things other than genuine Biblical faith, which is a gift of God). Indeed, sometimes the word 'faith' is used to merely refer to self-reliance or positive thinking today. But they talk little about repentance; indeed, the word seems to be forbidden in some church circles as implying legalistic self-affliction.

Without true repentance there is no salvation. Conversion is based upon repentance. Faith can be mimicked; anyone can say that they believe in Christ. However, true repentance cannot really be acted out. We can see when someone truly turns from sin and selfishness to obey the living God. Repentance is the key sign that someone is converted and is a true believer.

Thus when I see supposed 'Christians' today that claim to believe in Christ swearing and cussing with a cigarette in their hand, I know that they have not repented and cannot be true Christians.

To God

When you repent you turn towards something. In conversion a person that repents turns to God. What does this mean?

² 'Repentance' = *metanoia*.

³ Matt 4:17, 11:20; Mk 6:12; Lk 13:3; Acts 3:19.

First, it means that once they disobeyed but now they choose to obey God's laws. Their desire is to please God and do his will. They are no longer transgressors; they obey God's commandments.

Keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*. **1 Cor 7:19**

If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. **1 Cor 14:37**

Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. **1 Jn 3:24**

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. **1 Jn 5:3**

Here *are* those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. **Rev 14:12**

Blessed *are* those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life. **Rev 22:14**

The second thing is that they no longer centre upon themselves. The basic feature of sin is pride and selfishness; lawless people focus upon themselves; their life is all about doing what is best for them. Converted people do not seek their own good but seek the will of Him who saved them. They seek the will of God.

This was a major characteristic of Jesus during the incarnation:

Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me'. **Jn 4:34**

I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. **Jn 5:30**

I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. **Jn 6:38**

I do not seek My *own* glory. **Jn 8:50**

Thirdly, it means that they bear spiritual fruit instead of manifesting the seed of wickedness. The genuine convert produces: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.⁴ Lawless, fleshly people produce: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, and revelries (drunken carousing).⁵

Finally, they have a renewed mind (Rm 12:2). They take their thoughts captive and dismiss the temptation of the enemy (2 Cor 10:5) and put on the new nature, which renews their minds (Eph 4:22-24). Those who turn to God think in a new way.

From idols

In turning to God you also turn away from something. We turn away from idols.

Now these Thessalonians literally turned away from physical idols that they worshipped, presumably Greek gods. Today, however, we turn away from all those things which we idolised.

An idol is anything that takes the right place of God in your life, and thus coveting is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5). Modern life is literally stuffed full of things which become idols to

⁴ Gal 5:22-23.

⁵ Gal 5:19-21.

people. The list of such is endless, but it includes: sex, gambling, alcohol, drugs, coveting, celebrity, fame, money, power, greed, and so on. Sometimes the idol is something the world thinks is benevolent, such as: overworking at the office, being totally focused upon a sport (playing or spectating), indolence, gluttony and so on.

Now you cannot turn to God and still keep your idols. Such behaviour simply proves that there has been no repentance. Idols have to be destroyed in the heart.

Thus a man who claims to be a Christian but avoids fellowship on Sunday in order to play golf and go down the pub cannot be a Christian. A man who says that he is saved but fornicates with prostitutes cannot be saved – he has not turned to God. [Sadly many church leaders have fallen into this sin.] A man who says that he is a brother but smokes cigarettes and snorts Cocaine cannot be a disciple.

In turning to God we turn away from idols. We have nothing that stands in the place of God.

To serve the living and true God

Serve

Douleuo: to be a slave, serve, do service, submit to, to yield obedience.

In English ‘serve’ can be a superficial term denoting someone who is not a servant but takes a job involving service, such as a waiter. The Greek word used means much more than this being derived from the word for a slave. It is not a temporary task it is a lifelong calling – to be a slave of, to serve as a slave.

When we become a Christian we become a slave of God. Indeed, in the early church ‘slave of God’ or ‘slave of Christ’ were titles used to declare that you were a Christian.⁶

We do not merely serve God, we are slaves of God. We are God’s slaves 24 hours a day, every day. We don’t just serve God on a Sunday morning or when people are looking, we serve God at all times in thought, word and deed. We are a new creature in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and this is a creation that is enslaved to God.

Yes we are friends of Christ (Jn 15:15); yes we are sons of God (Gal 4:6), but we are also slaves that do God’s will.

The modern teaching that Christians are ‘little gods’ that boss God around, demanding whatever they want, is a wicked lie and a foul heresy.⁷ Far from being little gods, Christians are God’s slaves.

Living

The true God is not merely living but he is self-existent. This is one of the foundational aspects of the attributes of God and it is called by theologians ‘aseity’.

God has life in himself and he is the only one to do so. Every other creature, whether angels, demons, animals or men, have derived life. They are dependent upon God for existence.

The true God has life in himself.

⁶ Rm 1:1; Gal 1:10; Col 4:12; Titus 1:1; Jm 1:1; 2 Pt 1:1; Jude 1:1; Rev 15:3. ‘Servant’ and ‘bondservant’ are the Greek word ‘slave’.

⁷ Found in Word of Faith teaching.

Then there are many that claim to be God but they are dead or inanimate. All idols of men are inanimate and therefore not alive. All historical heads of religion that were subsequently deified are dead and not alive; these include: Nimrod, Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama [c.563–c.460 BC]), Roman emperors, Krishna, ancestors in Shinto, Shri Chimnoy etc. Many worship nature in various forms (Gaia, pantheism, monism, animism) but this is not worshipping a live personality. Many worship the devil in various forms. While he is alive as an immaterial spirit, he is a created being and does not have life in himself; he is not God.

The true God is a living God.

True

Alethinous: that which has not only the name and resemblance, but the real nature corresponding to the name, in every respect corresponding to the idea signified by the name, real, true genuine, opposite to what is fictitious, counterfeit, imaginary, simulated or pretended, true, veracious, sincere.

Christians know the true God.

There are many that claim to be a god and there are many that claim to know the true God but do not. Genuine Christians do know God.

We must also point out that as there are false gods there are false Gospels.⁸ There are many who claim to preach the Gospel yet they preach something utterly false.

Just because a leader says that he is a Christian and claims to preach the Gospel does not mean that he is genuine. Christ warned us of such people, especially at the end. There will be many false prophets, false apostles and false teachers. They are false not because they teach something completely opposite to Christianity (which would be obvious) but they falsify the Gospel just enough to entice people to fall into deception and the snare of the devil.

We cannot list the many current perversions of the Gospel here but there are multiple theological heresies that pervert the truth of the Gospel, both in terms of the doctrinal foundation⁹ and also of the presentation.¹⁰

Genuine Christians turn to the true God, not some false idol.

And to wait for His Son from heaven

Genuine Christians are waiting for the return of their Lord and Saviour to bring about the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) and a new heaven and earth (2 Pt 3:13) where God dwells with men in harmony (Rev 21:3).

Sadly, even this doctrine has been perverted in various ways.

One is a realised eschatology whereby blessings that are promised in the glory are claimed to be available now. This is sometimes called 'Kingdom Now' theology and it is prominent in Charismatic Churches and especially Word of Faith churches.

⁸ Gal 1:6-9.

⁹ Arminianism, universalism, Socinianism, Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, Amyraldism, Deism, Fullerism, Open Theism, Latitudinarianism, Liberation Theology, the Social Gospel, etc.

¹⁰ Decisionism, altar calls, recited prayers, use of emotionalism, mysticism, etc.

While there are many blessings that are part of our salvation now (such as peace, hope, grace, faith, comfort, and strength) there are many material blessings that are not for today (e.g. fully healthy bodies, no tears, no suffering, no wants). Then there is the ever-present old nature, which is not removed until the Second Coming, and this means that we are ever subject to fighting off temptation and sin. Then there is the spiritual warfare that we face daily.

There are many unorthodox groups who deny this and claim that certain things are available now, but only for those with faith: such as constant healing, constant power, constant victory, divine grace to receive riches and so on. They have no patience to wait for God's Son from heaven but seek heavenly blessings now. Of course these blessings are frauds and are merely fleshly emotionalism.

Another heretical variant are the lies in modern Charismaticism, based upon Latter Rain heresies, that saints will become so powerful, in a globally victorious church that rules the earth, that the Lord need not return to earth at all. The victorious church supersedes the reign of the Lord. That anyone could fall for this arrant nonsense is beyond belief since it is pure blasphemy.

Modern triumphal, dominionist Charismatics ridicule traditional Christians as being those who seek '*pie in the sky when you die*'. Despite not liking the metaphors here,¹¹ the reference to salvation fulness residing in the new world is true. Here on earth Christians suffer, are afflicted and require great patience and longsuffering. They expect the consummation of their salvation to bring heavenly fulness after the return of Jesus in glory. The mocking of such Charismatics merely shows that since they cannot wait for the return of the Son from heaven, they cannot be true Christians.

True saints do not presume to have that which God has presently withheld and they wait patiently for the Second Coming.

Whom He raised from the dead

The great fundamental foundation of the Gospel is that Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the dead. This was one of the first fundamental points of early creeds that all were agreed on. Paul explains that if this is not true then we are to be most pitied - but it is true (1 Cor 15).

The resurrection of Jesus is a hugely important doctrine that should be explained and celebrated constantly. It is so important that God instituted the Lord's Supper to remind us every single Sunday that Jesus died and was raised for our sins.

Again, even this doctrine is repudiated in various ways.

There are many churches that do not celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly, neither do they follow the instructions laid down for us in the NT. When they do celebrate it they use multiple cups instead of one cup; they use wafers or multiple rolls instead of one loaf and the women do not cover their heads as prescribed by Paul and as practised by the church for centuries until my lifetime (in fact the cessation of ladies' head coverings only started around the late 1960s to early 1970s as one of the freedoms brought in by the Charismatic Movement).

Then there are those who corrupt the teaching about Jesus' death and resurrection. There are multiple heresies about a proposed descent into hell where Jesus is claimed to have

¹¹ Calling the blessings of God '*pie*' is demeaning; the new earth is not in the sky.

done this or that, none of which has any Scriptural foundation.¹² The worst claims by Word Faith churches is that Jesus fought with the devil and demons and was defeated and was at Satan's mercy.¹³ Others say that Jesus died a second time in hell. Then there are those crazy Charismatics who claim that the church defeats death, not the Lord.¹⁴ Others affirm that Jesus became one with the nature of Satan.¹⁵

All such teachings are blasphemy, pure and simple.

True Christians celebrate the fact that Jesus died for sin and was raised from the dead to ascend to a position of glory and authority in heaven at God's right hand.

Even Jesus

Unnecessarily Paul adds, 'even Jesus' to emphasise the pre-eminence of Jesus, centring on the person of Christ. We focus upon Jesus.

Firstly, this is to affirm that the Son of God is Jesus Christ. There are many that claim to be the son of God¹⁶ but only Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Jesus is the Son from heaven. It is not just that Jesus is currently in heaven having ascended to God after the cross, but Jesus' home is heaven. Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity who was eternally God's son. The Son was the Second Person of the Trinity before time began and became the man Christ Jesus in the incarnation. He was then crucified to suffer for sin, was buried, was raised from the dead and then ascended back to be with his Father. Jesus is a heavenly being and not some glorified man (e.g. Adoptionism) or a created being (as in various heresies like Arianism).

John explains that the doctrine of Christ is crucial to our faith. We must be clear on who Jesus is and how he is part of the Trinity.

Then again Paul is highlighting the need to focus on Christ. More than anything the disciple is to centre himself upon Jesus; the Lord is the pre-eminent person in the church, in our minds, in our teaching and in our hopes.

Sadly many modern churches utterly fail to centre upon Jesus and put something else in his place, which is idolatry. Often we find that church services and teaching rarely even mention Jesus at all. Any church that fails to focus upon Jesus (let alone ignore him) is not a Christian church.

Who delivers us from the wrath to come

Wrath

Orge: anger, wrath, indignation, anger exhibited in punishment, hence used for punishment itself, of punishments inflicted by magistrates. In English 'wrath' is extreme anger.

¹² The words, 'descended into hell' do not exist in the Bible. Eph 4:9-10 ('He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended') is referring to Christ's descent to earth from heaven. Jesus' experience after death before resurrection was one of triumph (Col 2:15).

¹³ Paul Billheimer, *Destined For the Throne*, Bethany House, p83-84.

¹⁴ Earl Paulk, *The Proper Function of the Church*.

¹⁵ Benny Hinn. Compiled from Orlando Christian Center broadcast, Trinity Broadcasting Network; 9.12..90 and sermon late 1988 Quoted in *The Confusing World of Benny Hinn*, p7-8.

¹⁶ This has been so since the dawn of history. Today many Hindu gurus claim to be God's son while many modern Gnostics consider that certain 'angels' (ascended masters) are God's sons.

A true Christian fears God and understands the wrath of God. This is one of the key motivations to worship God – we understand the wrath of God against sin and rejoice that he has delivered us from sin. We therefore thank and praise God for his abundant mercy.

Now very many modern church leaders deny that God has any wrath at all. They focus upon God as a God of love and avoid any idea at all that God hates sin (Ps 5:4; Zech 8:17; Rev 2:6), hates sinners (Ps 5:5, 11:5) and is full of anger against both (Num 11:1; Ps 78:21) and will pour out his wrath on sinners (Isa 13:9; Nah 1:2). This is why some Bible translators use the word ‘expiation’ (to turn away sin) rather than the Greek word properly translated as ‘propitiation’ (to turn away wrath).

The Day of the Lord in the final judgment is a Day of Wrath (Job 20:28, 21:30; Ps 110:5; Prov 11:4; Zeph 1:14-15; Rm 2:5; Rev 6:17).

Those who deny the wrath of God against sinners do so at their own destruction.

The failure to teach and explain the wrath of God and his judgment on sin is a great weakness in the church and at odds with churches in history. It is one of the reasons why Gospel preaching is so weak and why so few conversions are genuine. Modern preachers concentrate upon man, and upon all the blessings people can get if they choose Christ. In fact, the Gospel is a message of salvation from God’s wrath and condemnation. It is about mercy not generosity. It is a message of deliverance for the sinner not a package of presents for the needy. It centres in the role of Jesus as Saviour, not a giver of prizes like Father Christmas.

This is also why modern preachers fail to talk about hell. Indeed very many today deny that hell even exists or that it is a place of eternal punishment. The denial of God’s wrath and the denial of hell go together and both are heresies.

Conclusion

This is basic Christianity according to Paul. The essentials of being a true disciple are:

- Genuinely turning from sin to God.
- Turning away from idols.
- Serving the living and true God as a slave.
- Waiting for the return of Jesus, God’s Son, from heaven.
- Centring upon the supremacy and centrality of Christ as God’s Son.
- Emphasising the resurrection of Christ and its triumph.
- Understanding that salvation is deliverance from the wrath of God.

Those who understand these things won’t go astray.

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