

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
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Series: Exposition of Romans
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James 2:19
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BELIEF & UNBELIEF (Part III)

Evangelicalism's captivity to popular culture continues unabated. A recent example of this appeared in the Christian Post where Christians were told to mimic the lyrics of a hit tune, as a way to do evangelism. "Young actress/songwriter Demi Lovato gives a shout out to the world with her hit song, "This Is Me." This summer, she has been opening for her good friends, the Jonas Brothers, on their 2008 Burning Up Tour. The Tour's broad teen appeal has catapulted her new song to the top of the music charts. . The lyrics to "This Is Me" talk about how she used to be timid and afraid to show her face to the world, but now...all that has changed.

Lavato's song tells a story many of us can identify with. Have you ever been afraid to show your true identity, your true character, because you fear becoming vulnerable and being rejected by this harsh world? Demi recounts how she has always desired to be a shining star, but it seemed so far off and unattainable. She had so many things to say but no courage to say them. We are all that way at times. We hide in our shells and show those around us small pieces of who we are and sometimes even that is a facade.

This song resonates because it speaks to our desire to cast aside our fears and run to the nearest roof top and shout to the world, in complete and bold confidence, that "THIS IS ME!" The amazing truth of the matter is that as followers of Jesus we can and should feel that kind of confidence in who we are! (Well...maybe not the whole rooftop experience, but don't let me stop you.) Through Christ, we have the freeing power of doing just that – being who God created us to be. God has given each of us a purpose in life – to know Him and make Him known. How we fulfill this purpose is unique to each of us, because He designed us uniquely – not one of us is the same! Thankfully so, right? God even promises us through the Psalms that he will not allow His purpose for us to go unfulfilled. Check it out:

Borrow some of Demi's courage and bravery, and use her song as a launch pad to share Christ's love with your friends. Proclaim to them your God given purpose in life and encourage them to seek theirs! Here are a few suggested questions to help you get started:

- Ask your friends if they can identify with the lyrics of Demi Lovato's "This Is Me."
- Ask your friends what they feel their purpose in life is? Listen and then share what you feel your purpose in life is.
- Explain how our Heavenly Father instilled in us a purpose from the moment each of us was conceived.
- Share with them of Christ's ultimate purpose here on this earth – to sacrifice His life so that we may all have life with Him while here on earth and for eternity.

In her lyrics, Demi sings with abandon, "Gonna let the light shine on me!" Step out of your shadow, take Demi's words from her newest song and put them into action, and allow God's light to shine through you!"¹

This is a perfect example of what Michael Horton has dubbed *Christless Christianity*. "Whenever we determine what really matters by looking within ourselves, we always come up with law. Some would object, 'Not law, but love.' However, in the Bible, the Law simply nails down what it means to love God and our neighbor. Long before Jesus summed up the Law in this way (Matt. 22:39), it was delivered by the hand of Moses (Lev. 19:18, 34), and Paul reiterated the point (Rom. 13:8-10). We were created in the image of God, without fault, entirely capable of carrying out God's moral will of making all of creation subservient to God's law of love. The Fall did not eradicate this sense of moral purpose, but turned us inward, so that instead of truly loving God and our neighbor, we suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. The fall did not even mean that people became atheists, but that they became superstitious: using 'God' or 'spirituality' and their neighbors for their own ends. . .

Historians often point out that for all of their differences, pietism and rationalism converged to create the Enlightenment. The heirs of modernity looked inward, to autonomous reason or experience, rather than outward, in faith and repentance toward a God who judges and saves. With Friedrich Schleiermacher, father of modern Protestant liberalism, the emphasis fell on Jesus as the supreme example of the kind of moral existence that we can all have if we share in his 'God-consciousness.' So while Christianity may represent the purest and fullest realization of this principle, other religions in their own ways attempt to put this universal religious and moral experience into words. We just *say* things differently, but we are *experiencing* the same reality. Where Kant located the essence of religion in practical reason (moral duty), Schleiermacher located it in religious experience, but either way the self is made the measure of truth and redemption is something that we find within ourselves, even if it is 'Christ in my heart.' Revivalism, which is the mother of both Protestant liberalism and Evangelicalism, pressed the 'deeds over creeds' and 'experience over doctrine' thesis to its limits."²

It is possible to have a "belief" that is in fact worthless and in the final analysis, no different from "unbelief." *Faith* in the abstract sense is *NOT* what the Bible means by saving faith, Machen correctly noted, "Faith is, indeed, nowadays being exalted to the skies; but the sad fact is that this very exaltation of faith is leading logically and inevitably to a bottomless skepticism which is the precursor of despair. The whole trouble is that faith is being considered merely as a beneficent quality of the soul without respect to the reality or unreality of its object; and the moment faith comes to be considered in that way, in that moment it is destroyed."³ Two specific examples are highlighted in the New Testament to illustrate *worthless faith*.

I. DEMONIC BELIEF (James 2:19)

Jonathan Edwards notes that demonic belief is orthodox in substance. "They believe that there is one God, and that he is a holy, sin-hating God; and that he is a God of truth, and will fulfill his threatenings, by which he has denounced future judgments, and a great increase of misery on them; and that he is an almighty God, and able to execute his threatened vengeance upon them."

A. No Degree of Speculative Knowledge of Spiritual Things Can Be a Sure Sign of Grace

Satan and his demons possess a faculty for understanding the things of God but this does not mean that they are converted. The kind of knowledge the saints possess is different (cf. John 17:3; Matthew 11:27; Psalm 9:10; Philippians 3:8). There is a genuine spiritual conviction of the truth that extends to more than simple assent to certain facts.⁴

B. No Degree of Distress or Fear of God's Judgment Is a Sure Sign of Grace

The text tells us that demons are in terror in their belief about God. Unlike so many professing Christians today, the demons know that God is holy and just. People may experience a fear of the future judgment and not be the least bit inclined to repent (Acts 24:25).

NOTE: In Acts 26:1-28, the Apostle Paul appears before Festus (the Roman governor of the province of Judea) and Agrippa (King Herod II). Festus is an unbelieving pagan and Agrippa is an unbelieving Jew. Paul's preaching prompts Festus to declare that the Apostle is insane (v. 24), but the same sermon, which seemed to be utter foolishness to Festus, carries a strong conviction in Agrippa. He acknowledges that Paul's argument "almost" persuaded him (v. 28). Note also the effect that Paul's preaching on "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" had on Felix (the Roman governor who preceded Festus); he "was afraid" (Acts 24:25)—but that was all that he was. There was no repentance.

II. PRESUMPTUOUS FAITH (Matthew 7:22, 23)

This discourse of Christ is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord's language is very direct. He is speaking of people who, in the words of Clarkson, "bear the name, but express not the thing; such as the apostle speaks of, who profess they know God, and Christ, [Tit. 1:16] profess they love Christ, but in their actions crucify him; live in known sins, in visible wickedness: so as their own consciences may testify to themselves, and their conversations do testify to others, they are not Christians indeed; they have nothing of the reality, and they are a reproach to the name. There is a visible contradiction betwixt the words whereby they profess it, and their actions and practices."⁵

A. Their Presumption

They assume, because of their religious activities that they are going to heaven—something that the vast majority today likewise assume.⁶ Note in the text before us the words, "Lord, Lord," which imply that these people claimed to be believers.

B. Their Plea

In addition to their profession, they point to their zealous efforts. They were involved not only in worship, but in doing spectacular things—and all in the name of Christ!

C. Their Doom

What is Christ's response! "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" "Here are many who had professed Christ, and been zealous professors; who professed him not in word only, but had really worshipped him; had been much in hearing, preaching, praying, praising him. Nor did their religion consist only in outward acts, they had believed on him too; nor was their faith without works, it was accompanied with many works, with many wonderful works; and yet for all this, when they shall come to allege these things at the day of judgment for their admission into heaven, Christ tells us here that he will shut them out, he will disclaim them, and profess to them that he knows them not, i.e., that he never loved them, never approved them; he will command them to depart from him, and give them their portion with the workers of iniquity."⁷

CONCLUSION: A tragic example of this kind of worthless religious faith is seen in the life of Charles Darwin. Albert Mohler recently observed,

"To the end of his life, Darwin identified himself as a "nominal" Anglican, but by that time he had long abandoned theism and any belief in a personal God. The relationship between Darwin's changing religious beliefs and his developing scientific theory can be read either of two ways, and even Darwin appeared to have been unclear in his own mind how the two were related. The two options are these: Either Darwin's theory of natural selection undermined his belief in a personal God who directed creation, or his abandonment of his belief in a personal God as the agent of creation led to his development of the theory of natural selection. Either way, Darwin himself was clear that the belief that God is Creator and the belief that life is evidence of natural selection are incompatible beliefs. Charles Darwin abandoned belief in God, and he himself traced this loss of faith to his theory of natural selection. He believed that his own doctrine of evolution was a direct contradiction to theism in general and to Christianity in particular. Darwin argued that belief in miracles was insane and that the Christian doctrine of hell is immoral. In his *Autobiography* he wrote, 'I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.' There are several points to observe here. First, Darwin clearly expressed confidence that Christianity is not true, and that we should be thankful for this fact. Second, Darwin unlike some modern reformers of hell, understood that 'the plain language of the text,' that is, the Bible, points to hell as everlasting punishment. Third, Darwin simply would not believe in a God who would send his relatives and friends to hell – period. But, by the time Darwin wrote his *Autobiography*, he had already abandoned belief in any personal deity. As Janet Browne of the British Society for the History of Science and University College, London, explains: 'Living out for himself the archetypal Victorian crisis of faith, Darwin perhaps recognized that he had lost the last vestiges of faith when he discovered that biology provided him with the answers he most desired. In the end, in his *Autobiography*, he asserted that religious belief was little more than inherited instinct, akin to a monkey's fear of a snake."⁸

What is also tragic is the way many involved in the "Emergent Church" (Brian McLaren, Spencer Burke, Bart Campolo, Doug Padgett) sound very much like Darwin – in fact, Darwin would fit very nicely into what this band of "believers" are advocating today.

We are admonished by the Apostle Paul with these words, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (2 Corinthians 13:5 KJV). James tells us that there is such a thing as "dead faith" (James 2:26). We are warned about the very real possibility of being "deceived" into thinking that our sins are a matter of indifference (1 Corinthians 6:9). Says Charnock: "Acquaint yourselves with those marks that are proper only to a true Christian. Overlook all those that are common with the hypocrite, such as outward profession, constant attendances, some affections in duties. Let us not judge ourselves by outward acts; a player is not a prince because he acts the part of a prince. But we must judge ourselves by what we are in our retirements, in our hearts."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080913/how-to-share-your-faith-using-this-is-me.htm>. The author appeals to Scripture (naturally) to support this distortion (pp. 138:8) and, misreads the text grossly.

² <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=printfriendly&var1=Print&var2=1>. Horton points out the way the Emergents are front and center in this approach. "Today, partly in response to the appalling lack of genuine discipleship in a post-Christian era, many Protestants like Stanley Hauerwas and Brian McLaren encourage us to recover the Anabaptist legacy, which, as I mentioned, focused on Jesus as moral example. In A Generous Orthodoxy,

Brian McLaren explains, ‘Anabaptists see the Christian faith primarily as a way of life,’ interpreting Paul through the lens of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount rather than vice versa. The emphasis falls on discipleship rather than on doctrine, as if following Jesus’ example could be set against following his teaching. What happens when the Sermon on the Mount is assimilated to a general ethic of love (i.e., pure morality), and doctrine (ecclesiastical faith) is made secondary? Christ himself becomes a mere example to help people become better non-Christians. In fact, McLaren writes, ‘I must add, though, that I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts.’ ‘I don’t hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus.’ It is no wonder, then, that McLaren can say concerning liberal Protestants, ‘I applaud their desire to live out the meaning of the miracle stories even when they don’t believe the stories really happened as written.’ After all, it’s deeds, not creeds that matter. McLaren seems to suggest that following Jesus (pure religion) can exist with or without explicit faith in Christ (ecclesiastical faith). There is nothing especially postmodern about any of this, of course. It is simply the legacy of the Enlightenment and its moralistic antecedents. If following Jesus’ example of love (never mind his exclusive claims, divisive rhetoric, and warning of judgment) is the gospel, then, of course there will be many Buddhists and liberals who are better ‘Christians’ than many of us who profess faith in Christ. As Mark Oestriecher, another Emergent church writer, relates, ‘My Buddhist cousin, except for her unfortunate inability to embrace Jesus, is a better ‘Christian’ (based on Jesus’ description of what a Christian does) than almost every Christian I know. If we were using Matthew 26 as a guide, she’d be a sheep; and almost every Christian I know personally would be a goat.’ Yet at the end of the day, ‘radical disciples’ will burn out, too, and realize that they, like the rest of us, are hypocrites who fall short of God’s glory and need someone outside of them not only to show the way but to be the way of redemption. Although McLaren himself does not deny the Christ confessed in the creeds, he believes that what is most important about Jesus Christ is his call to discipleship, which allows us to participate in his redeeming work, rather than his unique, unrepeatable, completed work for sinners two thousand years ago.”

³ J. G. Machen, What is Faith? (Eerdmans, 1962) p. 174.

⁴ In addition to Edwards (cf. his sermon “True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Demons,” The Works of Jonathan Edwards II [rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974] pp. 41-50), other Puritan writings consulted include: Ezekiel Hopkins, “The Almost-Christian Discovered,” cf. his Works III (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), pp. 3-55; David Clarkson, “The Conviction of Hypocrites,” Works II (rpt. The Banner of Truth trust, 1988), pp. 241-298; Matthew Meade, The Almost Christian: Or the False-Professor Tried and Cast (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995); Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse of Self-Examination,” Works IV (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), pp. 483-493; and William Bridge, “The Carnality of Professors,” Works V (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1989), pp. 117-132.

⁵ Clarkson, p. 241.

⁶ Time magazine (March 24, 1997, pp. 70-78) devoted a cover story to the subject of heaven and reported that its survey revealed that almost 90% of the people that were polled believed that they were going to heaven—and only 34% believed that “faith in God” (in the generic sense) was the grounds for entrance.

⁷ Clarkson, p. 245.

⁸ http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_print.php?id=2459

⁹ Charnock, p. 91. He concludes with this important point: “Let us take heed that, while we examine our graces and find them, our hearts be not carried out to a resting upon them. We may draw some comfort from them, but must check the least inclination of founding our justification upon them. Graces are signs, not causes, of justification. Christ’s righteousness only is our wedding-garment, our graces are but as the fringes of it.” (p. 492)