

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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What Are You Seeking?

Recently, *Christianity Today* had an editorial with the intriguing title "The End of Christianity As We Know It." We were told that, a major motive for being a Christian and participating in its rituals and disciplines is about to collapse. This is going to make a lot of Christians panic, but, said Mark Galli, (he is the author of the piece and one of the Senior editors at CT) he believes the recent development will be all to the good.

The development is the discovery that hallucinogenic drugs can give people an experience seemingly identical to powerful religious experiences. A recent *New York Times* article by John Tierney describes the experience of retired clinical psychologist Clark Martin. Martin had been treated for depression for years, but counseling and antidepressants did nothing to help. At age 65, he enrolled in an experiment at Johns Hopkins medical school that gave people psilocybin, a psychoactive ingredient found in some mushrooms.

When Martin was administered the drug, he says, "All of a sudden, everything familiar started evaporating... Imagine you fall off a boat out in the open ocean, and you turn around, and the boat is gone. And then the water's gone. And then you're gone."

Today, more than a year later, Martin says the six-hour experience helped him defeat depression and deeply transformed his relationships with his daughter and friends. "It was a whole personality shift for me," Martin said. "I wasn't any longer attached to my performance and trying to control things... You have a feeling of attunement with other people."

His experience, writes Tierney, is not all that unusual, and he says, "Scientists are especially intrigued by the similarities between hallucinogenic experiences and the life-changing revelations reported throughout history by religious mystics and those who meditate."

The same connection was made by Barbara Bradley Hagerty in her popular *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* (Riverhead), which I reviewed last year. For example, she describes the experience of Michael Hughes, who had a mystical experience when he ingested some psychedelic mushrooms when he was 22 years old just before he walked into a Catholic church. "It was almost as if I had wandered into the magical place," he said, "I sat down and felt a really strong sense of sacredness." He said he encountered "Something" – "an intelligence to be sure, but it felt like an intelligence that imbues everything."

When the Roman Catholic Hughes was asked to compare a non-drug-induced mystical moment he had with his mushroom-induced one, he said, "They were equally profound. They both changed me dramatically."

From the point of view of experience, it seems it's impossible to tell the difference between drug-induced and "natural" mystical experiences. Both are powerful. Both enable people to enjoy a transcendent moment. Both seem capable of transforming people so that they feel a greater sense of empathy for and unity with other people—what most people would call love.

This sort of thing makes many a Christian nervous, and for good reason. We live in an age in which religious experience is the centerpiece of faith for many, many Christians. We disdain faith that is mere intellectual assent or empty formality. We want a faith that is authentic, that makes us *feel* something—in particular, one that enables us to experience God. When we describe the one time in the week when we put

ourselves in the presence of God, we talk less and less about “worshipping God” and more about “the worship experience.” The charismatic movement, with its emphasis on experiencing the Holy Spirit, has penetrated nearly all churches. This religious mood, which characterizes our era, is epitomized by the title of Henry Blackaby’s continuing best seller, *Experiencing God*.

So, to hear that people can have even more powerful religious experiences without Christian faith gives us pause. It’s a lot of work to fast and pray and worship and deny oneself—and even then, experiencing God is a hit or miss proposition! What’s the fuss if we can pop a mushroom and have a nearly guaranteed religious experience?

It would seem that just as God has given us the ingenuity and resources to heal the body of disease, he seems to have given us the tools to help us have religious experiences. Some Christians balk at the artificiality of drug induced mysticism, but that may merely be an aesthetic distaste. In the long run, it may not end up being any more serious than those who at first thought it unnatural to use penicillin to heal infections.

I am certainly not encouraging readers to go and trip out on psilocybin! The field is still a huge unknown, and there are real dangers involved. Some people have very bad experiences on psychedelic drugs—though researchers seem to be discovering ways to minimize the bad experiences and maximize the good ones. Still, this is not something one does at home.

But the research suggests a number of consequences for the way we do Christianity in our day. If religious experience is something that a drug can induce even more easily than spiritual ritual and disciplines, it may be time, for example, to rethink what many churches are trying to do on Sunday morning: create a memorable “worship experience.”¹

I pointed out last week the many similarities between Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians and his epistle to the Colossians. That the two are kindred epistles is obvious. It is generally held that Colossians was written before Ephesians, though the opposite position has been asserted. Both lay stress upon the terms “fullness” and “mystery.” Wisdom and knowledge play an important part in the unfolding of the thought. Principalities and powers, both good and evil, are introduced. Christ is the unifier and consummator of all things. Yet there are differences. (1) Colossians is special in the sense that it is directed against false teaching in a local situation, whereas Ephesians is applicable anywhere. This leads naturally to the observation that (2) Colossians is polemical, Ephesians is irenic in spirit. The one shows solicitude, the other moves in an atmosphere of calm, of praise and thanksgiving. (3) Whereas Colossians is chiefly concerned with Christ’s headship in the universe, Ephesians magnifies his headship over the church.²

I. PAUL’S GREAT FUNDAMENTAL FACT

The Apostle begins the third chapter by assuming his readers’ knowledge of this great theological truth: Christ died and rose again. Everything that follows is based on this. Note how the Apostle deals with the great truth. It is a historical fact that Jesus Christ died on a Roman cross and that He was buried. Even non-Christian historical sources acknowledge this much.³ The New Testament declares that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Furthermore, the New Testament declares that Christ died for sinners and rose again for their justification. Notice how Paul handles this—if Christ died for our sins, He died to take them away. All those, for whose sins Christ died, died then with Him and they in turn died with Him to sin. These also rose with Him that they might live again to God. “And here now is the great fact in its fullness which Paul assumes and lays at the base of our present passage; the great fact of the participation of Christians in Christ’s death and rising again.”⁴ Do you see Paul’s point? Because Christians have died with Christ and have been raised to the newness of life, we have, in a very real sense, already passed from this earth to heaven. We are called, therefore to *manifest our resurrection* by actions that are suitable to our estate.

II. PAUL’S GREAT EXHORTATION

Christians are called to live according to their new estate. They have passed out of the realm of sin and death, out of a merely earthly orientation, have been made a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom and, therefore, live a life conformable to this great change. How do we do this?

A. Set Your Hearts on Things Above

The ESV better captures Paul’s language, “Seek the things above.” *ZETEO*, to seek, *has particular reference to the orientation of the will*. Paul puts it in the present tense and in the imperative mood (a direct command) to show that this is a continuous effort. Paul employs ZETATE as a

direct command only here (it turns up as an indirect one at 1 Cor. 10:24; cf. 1 Cor. 14:12; 10:33; 13:5; Phil 2:21; 1 Thess. 2:6), so its force may be to provide a positive counterpart to the false teachers' energetic activity in "seeking" visionary experiences (cf. Lincoln, *Dimension*, 202; Grässer, *ZTK* 64 (1967) 141, asserts that both imperatives "seek" and "consider" correspond antithetically to the activities of the false teachers who with their asceticism, visions, and so on, sought to be free from the spiritual powers—activities which Paul calls ZETEIN TA EPI TAS GES, "to seek what is on earth").⁵ Richard Sibbes describes the import of this word, "Seeking implieth, first, *want*; for a man will never seek for that which he hath; secondly, it implieth a *valuation and esteem of the excellency of the thing* that is sought for; thirdly, it implieth *hope to get it*, else none would seek it, but leave it as a thing desperate; fourthly, it doth imply *means and use of means* to attain to that we want, esteem of, and hope to attain; lastly, he that wants a thing which he doth highly esteem and hopes to attain in the use of the means, will by all means *avoid all contraries that may hinder him from attaining thereunto*.⁶ The basic reason for seeking the things above is now stated—that *is where Christ is*, seated at God's right hand.⁷

B. Set Your Minds on Things Above

The verb used here is different (the NIV gives the impression that they are the same). *PHRONEITE* means to think, to give one's mind to, and is always a word that is of governing one's life. Thus, the word expresses not simply an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will and thus carries the connotation "to be of a disposition or mind-set." In other words, this word indicates whole bent of thought and is set forth elsewhere by Paul in Romans 8:5, 6. What are Christians to think about? The things above, i.e., the things that have to do with Christ and His Kingdom. It is a call to engage the mind with those theological truths that address our salvation. "If the heart be filled with the cross of Christ," observed John Owen, "it casts death and undesirableness upon (the things of this world); it leaves no seeming beauty, no appeasing pleasure or comeliness in them."⁸

III. PAUL'S GREAT MOTIVATION

You will note how this seeking and mind-set works itself out in vv. 5-17. The Apostle addresses motives for this heavenly walk (that is produced by a heavenly mindedness). These are drawn from the past, the present and the future.

A. Motive Drawn from the Past

"Since you were raised with Christ." It is a call to gratitude. It is a call to understand what has happened, to remember what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

B. Motive Drawn from the Present

"For Your life *is* hid with Christ in God." This is the *exalted* Christ Paul is speaking of, and believers share in His exaltation—therefore, walk worthy of such a privilege.

C. Motive Drawn from the Future

"When Christ, who is our life, *shall* be manifested, *then shall* we also with Him be manifested in glory." Therefore, do not grow weary or be disheartened. The day is coming when we will behold Him and we shall be like Him (cf. 1 John 3:2).

CONCLUSION: We must keep in mind that Paul's statements are true of all believers. The Bible knows nothing of two classes of Christians (the have's and the have not's). All Christians are imperfect and all must contend with indwelling sin, but a believer in Christ should never be discouraged—the Christian ought to be humble, watchful and, even at times, fearful, but never despondent. Have we been brought to see our guilt before a Holy God and to readily accept Christ as our atoning sacrifice? Are we trusting only in Christ as our righteousness? Then we ought to *cultivate* our faith—which is another way of saying we should manifest our resurrection. This is the meaning of Paul's language when he exhorts believers to "put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge" (3:10). "To *put them on* therefore, is to put them forth; to elicit them; to draw them out from within, and exhibit them in daily life. They are all contained germinally in the regenerate mind, and the particular duty which is devolved upon the believer is that of training them."⁹ What is the major focus of the Apostle's emphasis on setting our minds on Christ? Note he is NOT urging his readers to seek a religious experience (which is exactly what the Colossians were being urged to do by the false teachers, see Col. 2:16-23). Machen captures the essence

of the Apostle's concerns when he writes:

"Let us not deceive ourselves, my friends – Christian experience is necessary to evangelism, but evangelism does not consist merely in the rehearsal or what has happened in the evangelist's own soul. We shall, indeed, be but poor witnesses for Christ if we can tell only what Christ has done for the world or the church and cannot tell what he has done personally for us...

But we shall also be poor witnesses if we recount only the experiences of our own lives. Christian evangelism does not consist merely in a man's going about the word saying, 'Look at me, what a wonderful experience I have, how happy I am, what wonderful Christian virtues I exhibit; you can all be as good and happy as I am if you will just make a complete surrender of your wills in obedience to what I say.' That is what many religious workers seem to think evangelism is. We can preach the gospel, they tell us, by our lives, and do not need to preach it by our words...

But they are wrong. Men are not saved by the exhibition of our glorious Christian virtues; they are not saved by the contagion of our experiences. We cannot be the instruments of God in saving them if we preach to them thus only ourselves. No, we must preach to them the Lord Jesus Christ, for it is only through the gospel which sets him forth that they can be saved...

If you want health for your souls, and if you want to be the instruments of bringing health to others, do not turn your gaze forever within, as though you could find Christ there. No, turn your gaze away from your own miserable experiences, away from your own sin, to the Lord Jesus Christ as he is offered to us in the gospel. 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' Only when we turn away from ourselves to that uplifted Savior shall we have healing for our deadly hurt...

Oh, that men would turn for salvation from their own experience to the cross of Christ; oh, that they would turn from the phenomena of religion to the living God!...Let us above all things know the Word. Let us study it with all our minds and cherish it with all our hearts. Then let us try, very humbly, to bring it to the unsaved. Let us pray that God may honor not the messengers but the message, that despite our unworthiness he may make his Word upon our unworthy lips to be a message of life."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=87431 Galli, astutely went on to observe, The Christian faith is, at its core, not about ethics or religious experience, but a message about a God who has gone to extraordinary lengths to be and remain on our side, to become the-God-with-a-name, Emmanuel, "God with us." Christians are not *primarily* mystics (those who experience God in a special way) or activists (those who live the way of Jesus). We are mostly witnesses of who God is and what he has done and what he will do in Jesus Christ, the God who in Christ has "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). This is not to deny that our faith must be expressed in deeds and empowered by a genuine experience of God. Faith without works, or a genuine encounter with God, is not Christian faith. But after promising the disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus told them what their main mission was: "You will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We are shortchanging our people when we make worship mostly about experience or a pep rally to motivate people to good deeds. We practice religious neglect when we fail to witness to them the saving story of God in Christ and train them to be fellow witnesses of that story, so that they might share that story with a world that does not know its left hand from its right. A world which does not know God as Emmanuel, but merely as "Something." A world that knows transcendence but does not have eyes to see God *with us* even to the end of the age. A world that senses "attunement with other people," but does not recognize the One who holds everyone and everything together by his love. People will never figure this all out—and thus never be able to enjoy a full and saving encounter with God—unless someone *tells* them. And who will tell them if no one's been sent, because we're mostly creating wonderful worship experiences and teaching mere ethics?

² E. F. Harrison, *Introduction To The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1997) p. 326.

³ Graeco-Roman sources include the ancient historians like Thallus and Tacitus. From Jewish sources we have the record of fifth-century Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a) that states that Jesus was hung on the eve of Passover because he led Israel astray. The Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Jesus was put to death under Pilate. Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 1987), pp. 196-202 and Gary Habermar and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. T. L. Meithe (Harper & Row, 1987).

⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 351.

⁵ Cf. P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians: Word Biblical Commentary* (WORD, 1982) P. 160.

⁶ *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes V* (rpt. Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), pp. 199-200.

⁷ "The apostles were aware that they were using figurative language when they spoke of Christ's exaltation to the right hand of God. They no more thought of a literal throne at the literal right hand of God than we do. Ancient Jews and Gentiles alike commonly regarded the right side and a position at the right hand side as symbolic of honor or good fortune." P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), pp. 162-163.

⁸ *The Works of John Owen VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 250.

⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons to The Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 311.

¹⁰ J. Cresham Machen: *Selected Shorter Writings* edited by D. C. Hart (P & R, 2004) taken from the section "Christianity and Evangelism," pp. 135-142.