

Can Christianity Be Credible When Christians Do Bad Things?

"Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother remains in the light, and there is nothing to cause him to fall. Whoever hates his brother is in darkness; he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

-1st Letter of St. John, 2:9-11

In essence, this is the same argument made for wayward clergy. In reality, every Christian, not just the clergy, is an ambassador for Christ. While scandals involving clergy are headlines, they still have a sense of being someone else's problem for most of the people hearing about it. I propose that self-proclaimed Christians who behave in anything but a Christian manner are a more insidious and deadly threat. They are not someone misbehaving in a distant city or country, they could be a co-worker or classmate. No official announcements by the Church condemn them by name. No corrective measures are taken to control the behavior outside of the ignored homily or sermon. Day by day, the credibility of the faith they claim to represent erodes a little more. When the headlines do break out, non-Christians readily believe the whole faith is corrupted because those they know likewise disgrace the faith.

A) Faith is Not Enough:

"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

"Indeed, someone might say, 'you have faith and I have works.' Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called 'the friend of God.' See how a person is justified by works *and not by faith alone*. And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different route? For just as a body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

-James 2:14-26 (italics mine)

It seems that many people, including Christians who should know better, seem to think that becoming a Christian is a magical event where one is automatically transformed into a (permanently) Heaven-worthy being as the result of some ritual: usually a baptism or a declaration of faith. But such a "miracle" is more in line with a pagan idea of a miracle as opposed to a Christian one, and therefore should be automatically suspect. Indeed, the very man who Biblically instituted the sacrament of Baptism denies faith alone, as John the Baptist says: Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (Luke 3:8, notice how he warns against placing faith alone in their lineage of Abraham).

Throughout his public ministry, we see Jesus making miraculous cures and forgiving people of sins, often both at once. We sometimes see Jesus saying a miracle cure was *possible* because of the person's faith. But only twice do we see a declaration of faith guaranteeing salvation: Luke 7:36-50 with the sinful woman anointing the feet of Jesus and Luke 23:39-43 when the criminal defended Jesus with his dying breath. Even these are examples of faith demonstrated by works. In both cases, extreme humility was shown as both came to terms with their sinfulness. Both performed acts of penance: the woman humiliating herself in front of important people and the thief giving up precious breath acquired by painfully pulling himself up for air to do so. In neither case did faith alone guarantee salvation; it took action to complete it. While all true Christians hope to die in Christ, we must still live through many trials that test our faith and we will not pass all of them. We see Jesus pointing this out when He asks, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but not do what I command?" (Luke 6:46) This is followed up by a stern warning in verse 49: "But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed."

We see in Matthew 16:15-18 that Saint Peter was chosen to be the first steward because of his faith, but the Gospels still show him as being very flawed on several occasions. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus says "Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." The implication of this declaration means that Saint John the Baptist was greater than Abraham, Moses and Elijah! Yet, even this was not enough to make him good enough to enter into heaven through faith alone.

B) Actions Can Be Deceiving: I won't go into a discussion of how Christians are supposed to behave. Nearly the entire world knows how Christians are supposed to act. If it were otherwise, then there would be no scandals to grab the headlines. It's not news what horrors some Catholic priests have *done*. These atrocities are repeated in all parts of society and in all professions. It's the fact that they were performed by *Catholic* leaders that is news. The "comeuppance" mentality the media uses in "reporting" is proof enough that expected Catholic behavior is well known.

Dedicated Christians sometimes do unchristian-like things. To discredit Christianity because of occasional human weakness in a professed Christian is actually no different than a Christian thinking he is beyond reproach because he called Jesus "Lord" (**Topic A**). In both cases, it is assumed that some miraculous change has taken place because of a declaration of

faith or ritual, this time on the part of the observer. Furthermore, not everyone who appears to demonstrate these Christian characteristics may be a good Christian.

This is because no two people are exactly the same. Some have advantages others do not while others have handicaps not shared by the rest. Even those of equal starting points may advance at different rates. Jesus addresses these issues in at least three parables: The Parable of the Ten Gold Coins (Luke 19:10-27), The Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) and The Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). A wealthy child giving candy to his classmates may simply be trying to show off his wealth while pretending to be charitable, or he may feel that, since he has been given more than most, he should share with those less fortunate. Likewise, a school bully may enjoy the power he has over weaker children, or he may be struggling to limit his violent outbursts that came from being raised in a violent home. Being a Christian is not a state of being, it is a journey that never ends in this life.

To see how far along the journey a Christian is, one must understand where they came from and their attitude towards bettering themselves. A good Christian may indeed be a disagreeable person. Despite their unfriendly behavior, their journey may involve more struggles, lessons and humility than other people. They may be more aware of the actual state of their soul and more willing to call on Jesus for help than someone comfortable with oneself as a "good person." Actually, an agreeable person would be a horrible example of a Christian if they feel they are so good that they no longer need to improve themselves. Ultimately, we are not to judge others' souls, but if we take the time to really know someone, we may indeed find someone who does a lot bad things but is actually a fantastic example of what Christianity means (see the parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Luke 18:9-14).

C) So What is a True Christian?:

The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us;
so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who
has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him
compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?
-1st Letter of St. John 3:16-17

Up to now, I have been on the defensive in discussing the credibility of the Christian faith. I have been answering challenges to the faith, which necessarily gives a negative overtone. But the Christian faith is really one of joy, and from here on I hope to explain this joy.

The way Christians act is the single most important demonstrative event that can provide credibility to the faith. If it were not for the scandals that range from clergy systematically abusing children to unkempt persons on the streets telling passerby's that they are damned for being non-Christians, then this would be the only topic of the faith I would need to have addressed for Christian credibility. Those who make an honest attempt, no matter how flawed, to follow Christian teachings are the joyful examples of Christian faith.

It's the co-worker gives up a break to help the new guy learn a job related skill. It's the child who knits a scarf to give to the school's crossing guard on a cold, wintry day. It's the

woman who gives a cup of coffee to a homeless person outside her house. I could go on and on. In Christian teaching, the word that sums all this up can also be defined as God's love: "charity." In particular, the same charity that Jesus showed humans when He died an excruciating and humiliating death to save us from ourselves. It is frequently referred to as "dying to yourself." As we are told by Saint John the Beloved above, and as demonstrated by these examples, such sacrifice does not need to be in the literal sense. Anytime we are willing to give up some of ourselves (be it time, money, talent or whatever) to aid another, it is a form of such dying.

Of course, not everyone needs to be a professed Christian to "die to oneself." In 1 John 3:7 we read: Children, let no one deceive you. The *person* who acts in righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. (italic mine) and shortly after that (verse 10) he follows up with: In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain; *no one* who fails to act in righteousness belongs to God, nor *anyone* who does not love his brother. (italics mine) Note that to be a child of God or of the devil does not depend on *membership* of a particular group, it is a personal matter. This is not taken out of context. There is no indication in the entire letter as to who the intended audience was. Whoever the letter originally went to, Saint John clearly wrote it for everyone who read or heard it. Christians are *supposed* to be "children of God" because we know better through teaching, but not all children of God need to be professed Christians. In a similar vein, neither are all professed Christians really children of God.

Saint Paul uses more legalistic terms to arrive at the same conclusion in Romans 2:12-16: All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it. For it is not those who *hear* the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who *observe* the law will be justified. For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus. (italics mine)

The love of dying for a brother in need is rampant throughout Christian history. Early Christians were sentenced to death simply for being Christians, even though their public work consisted mainly of providing for the needs of the widows, orphans and sickly. Saint Thomas Moore suffered torture and ultimately death by the hands of his former pupil and friend (King Henry VIII) because he refused to sign an immoral bill that already had enough signatures to be lawful. Legal persecution, torture and even death exist for Christians in many countries today. There have been more Christian martyrs in the 20th Century than in the previous 1900 years put together (mostly from Socialist Revolutions). But it is also seen outside of the faith.

In the Old Testament, the pagan prostitute Rahab was saved from slaughter for sheltering Hebrew spies. The pagan widow Ruth was greatly rewarded for her obedience to the God of both her former husband and then her adopted home. Both women became ancestors of Jesus. In World War II, people of all backgrounds and beliefs helped to shelter Jews from the Holocaust. Today, there are medical students (and not all are Christian) who give up promising careers as physicians rather than participate in the abortion procedure the school requires for graduating.

Christian ideals are counter-cultural. Not just to this culture but to every culture in the history of the world. Yet there are always those, either properly educated through Christian

teachings or by listening to the calling of God inside of them, who are willing to "die to themselves" in some way for their "brother" by challenging their culture. It is their actions that bear witness to the truth of Christianity regardless of their professed faith, and it is a most powerful witness.

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