

What It Means To Be A Christian

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[0 : 00] That place, show us the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can't see one without being in the place of the other.

So grant that your word may bring us to that place. In Christ's name, amen. Amen. I would like to encourage you, or to remind you, that as Bill Cook said in his talk, this church was built as a war memorial.

And a lot of people who perhaps had no particular interest in the furtherance of the Anglican communion nevertheless contributed to the building of this church as a memorial to those who gave their lives in the Second World War.

And so the church is surrounded by memorials of that war. The windows at the back, the candlesticks at the front, the window up there, the Canterbury glass and the windows.

All these things are particular remembrances. The names of those from the parish who served in the Second World War, and the names at the back of those who died. So I want you to be mindful of this on this Remembrance Day.

[1 : 22] There's a particular poignancy, I'm sure, to the fact that we have a federal election coming up in a few days. And you, if you're like me, have heard so much about it, that if I was to threaten to preach on the subject, I'm sure you'd all walk out.

But I just want to draw one fast analogy. It seems to me that, again, we as a nation are confronted with the essential problem of what does it mean to be a Canadian?

Well, I will leave those eloquent in that debate to tell you, I want you to think this morning of what it means to be a Christian.

Because I think Canadians have problems in both areas. Knowing clearly what it means to be a Canadian, and knowing, I might suggest even more profoundly, what it means to be a Christian. The problem, of course, is that this passage from 1 Corinthians chapter 5 deals with a very difficult topic, the question of immorality among Christians.

[2 : 41] And whenever in the Revised Standard Version it talks about immorality, the root word that it's using is the same word from which we derive the word pornography.

So it's really talking about sexual immorality. Now, in our society, there has been a concerted effort to remove all those standards by which the church and pious and puritanical people like me, or like I suppose you think me to be, stand up and tell you to behave better morally.

And, of course, you don't really have to account to me, because I don't know anything about you in that area of your life. Only you know, and God knows. And we live in urban configurations where we are, for the most part, morally anonymous.

That is, nobody knows who we are or what we do, because in the urban sprawl nobody can really nail anything. We don't live in a close community where we know these things.

Paul's problem in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 was that he did know these things. They did know that there was one person in the congregation, at least, and maybe more, who was practicing gross sexual immorality.

[4 : 13] And they had to deal with it. Now, let me just give you the picture that this passage puts before you. The dominant thing, and those words with which I began the service this morning, was that there is a continuing party going.

A party that knows no end. A festival that goes on and on and on. A festival that we've come here this morning to celebrate. To celebrate that something decisive has happened.

And the course and direction of our life is going to be changed by that. It's something that has happened and it predicates something that will happen.

And because of what has happened and because of what will happen, we are having a party. And therefore, Paul says, let us keep the feast. Let us carry on this perpetual party in celebration of what has been done and in celebration of what will be.

And that's what it means when Paul emerges out of this particular problem with the triumphant cry, which opens our Easter morning services, time immemorial.

[5 : 26] Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let's keep the party going. And that recognition is what our Christian community is all about.

It is a celebration. A celebration led by a celebrant. And we are to continue in that celebration. Now, in order, there used to be a time when, and I heard about this hundreds of times before I ever saw this church.

There used to be a party over in the parish hall that isn't here now, every Saturday night. And it was a party. All the young people who were now relatively mature and senior used to come to it from all over Vancouver to dance in the St. John's Parish Hall.

And I understand that at that particular time, it was the function of the rector. Dr. Larment, whom I gather was fairly short and fairly pugnacious in stature, stood at the door to make sure that undesirables didn't get in.

Well, I feel that that's kind of my function here, to try and weed out the undesirables so they don't mess up the party we're having. And that's what Paul says, that you've got to be careful about this party because you can mess it up.

[6 : 53] Every family here that's had a grad party in their home, and I haven't heard these recently, maybe, but I used to hear when I first got here about how parents barricaded themselves in the basement and let the party go on upstairs in fear of what was taking place.

And the danger of a party is that it will start going, and as the party livens up and as things begin to happen, excesses will come in, and that which was meant to be a joyful and happy time will be destroyed by the excesses of some.

And so this party is going, and it's nicely underway, and what happens? Along comes someone to crash the party. He says, I want to take part in this celebration too.

But he's someone who says he's a member of the party, but his behavior is as though he didn't belong to the party. Someone who, inside the church, behaves like he belongs outside the church. And Paul, in this chapter, chapter 5, as you go on from verse 6 on, 7 on, you find that the kind of people that break up the party are people whose lives are marked by sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, revilers, drunkards, and robbers.

[8 : 22] In this particular case, the guy who came to break up the party in the Corinthian church was a man who was living with his stepmother, contrary, I might say, to the table of kindred affinities found in the prayer book on page 562, and therefore applying to you and me, even as it is also found in the book of Leviticus.

Well, what does the church as a community do with somebody who comes in to break up the party? Now, the Corinthians had figured out a way of handling it.

They knew how to cope with this because they were living in the great joy of the celebration they were having and the great freedom that they had come into. And they said, this is a party.

And they were convinced of it. And when this man came along who was involved in highly or grossly immoral behavior, they said, that's part of the celebration of the freedom that we have. We're no longer subject to those old-fashioned scruples. We're no longer subject to those things because they're just a part of the world. They're a part of our physical life.

[9 : 41] They have nothing to do with the transcendent glory that belongs to us because we are in Christ. We are redeemed. We are on our way to heaven. And those things are of no significance.

Well, it created a mild contradiction, I might say, because it meant that the people outside the church looked at the church and said, we're more moral than they are.

We won't let our people behave like this. And those people who claim to be the people of God, let people behave in a highly immoral way. Well, now, you know that that argument has occurred since.

And that people have looked at the church and seen evidences of immorality in the church, which they point at with scorn and say, I may be a pagan, but I at least know how to behave myself.

And I comply to the rules of our civilization and our culture, and I'm not like those people. Roman law condemned what was happening. The ancient Greek laws condemned what was happening.

[10:47] The Jewish law condemned what was happening. But the Christians had a particular problem that they were having with this because they knew that they were free.

They knew that for me as a Christian, all things are lawful. I can do anything I want because I am no longer under the condemnation of the law.

I am forgiven and I am redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And therefore, let me continue in sin that the grace of God may abound.

And that argument infiltrated the church. And here it was in the church in Corinth. Paul had to deal with it on many occasions.

One in which he said, All things are lawful for me, but all things are not that helpful. Or in Galatians he said, You were called to freedom, brethren.

[11:53] Only, don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. And Paul identifies that great contradiction in the epistle to the Romans when he says, Are you going to say, Let us continue in sin that grace may abound?

That wonderful relationship to God, which we find so congenial to us, which is in fact to say, God, you're good at forgiving and I'm good at sinning, so let's be buddies.

That kind of understanding of what the gospel is all about. It's a peculiar temptation that Christians are subject to because of the radical nature of the forgiveness that God has offered.

After all, it's only this earthly life. It's only this moment in history. It's only our physical bodies which are going to be replaced by a spiritual body.

So why do we have to bother with that? Now, I think the Christians, by that argument, that argument has been taken over by our society, by the great North American society living with the playboy philosophy.

[13:11] And Anthony Bloom, in his book on the closing of the American mind, says, Sexual liberation has presented itself as a bold affirmation of our senses and of undeniable natural impulse against our puritanical heritage, society's conventions, and repressions bolstered by biblical myths about original sin.

We are free. And that argument has been taken up by our society. Anthony Bloom points out where it's run into trouble in our society, quite apart from the church.

And he gives what he calls an amusing picture. I don't know if you'll find it amusing, but I'll pass it on to you anyway. He says, We are presented with this amusing spectacle of pornography clad in armor, borrowed from the heroic struggle for freedom of speech, and using Miltonic or John Milton's rhetoric, doing battle with feminism.

And feminism is newly draped in the robes of community morality, using arguments associated with conservatives who defend traditional sexual roles.

Well, that's the picture he gives. But you see, it's a picture in a sense which Paul identified a lot longer ago than just the 20th century.

[14:54] You see, it's the freedom on the one hand, and Anthony Bloom says, for us, it's freedom and equality.

And if feminism is going to demand equality, and if our society is going to demand freedom, he says those things are going to come into contradiction.

And that's one of the basic contradictions in our society today. But Paul identified this contradiction a long time ago, because he knew that the Christian gospel was declaring a wonderful kind of freedom.

An awesome freedom, which we find in Christ because of what Christ has done for us by his death on the cross. We have freedom from condemnation.

We are forgiven. We have freedom to explore God's creation. Freedom to investigate. Freedom from the fear of death.

[16:00] Freedom from guilt. Freedom to question things. Freedom to experiment. But Paul says, the freedom we don't have is the freedom that we can't tolerate.

Freedom from the fear of death. Freedom from the fear of death. And that's the freedom to go back to slavery. It's the freedom to go back to Egypt once you've left it. Because Paul says, something decisive has happened.

And if you have come to faith in Jesus Christ, you can't go back. You've started out. Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us.

Therefore, the party goes. And it goes towards a particular goal. And there is no turning back. And you have forsaken the leeks and garlic of Egypt.

And you have crossed the Red Sea. And you're heading towards the promised land. And you don't turn back. And if someone among you is living in sexual immorality, then it is plainly obvious, Paul says, that he's turned back.

[17:17] And you want everybody to turn back with him? Paul says, no, that doesn't make sense. If someone is determined to go back, let him go back.

But don't pretend he's still traveling with you. Or she. He says, something decisive has happened. The Passover lamb has been slain. The blood has been painted on the doorposts. The word has gone out.

The exodus begins. We leave Egypt tonight. And we keep going. And we don't look back.

Well, what if somebody does look back? Well, that's what Paul is trying to deal with here. He says, you don't celebrate his freedom to go back.

[18:22] Because he's not going towards freedom anymore. He's going back into slavery. And you're arrogant about this, Paul says. You are arrogant.

You're boasting. You're puffed up. You say, well, we have that kind of freedom. Paul says, you need to mourn. You need in sackcloth and ashes to weep that someone among you who has started out with you in the light of what has been done for him in Christ and in the light of Christ's promises, somebody who has started out with you has turned back.

So Paul says, you should mourn. Not be arrogant that that's happened to somebody. And so Paul says, you have got to act decisively about this.

If you go on to verse 9, he says, I wrote you before and told you that you have to do something about this. Now I'm telling you, you have to do something about it.

And so Paul gives that picture of how the church as a community does something about it.

[19:47] And what they do about it is they get together. As though Paul was with them. As though the power of the Lord Jesus was theirs.

And they are to act decisively. Because the person who's turned back has acted decisively. And he says, you're to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

That his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. They're not denying that he's a Christian. They're not denying that he's saved by the blood of Christ on the cross of Calvary.

All they're saying is that he no longer is obeying. So let him know that you know that that's what he's doing. And we do ourselves an immense amount of harm by hiding that from one another.

By not dealing with that problem. I don't know how we can. We're such a mixed conglomerate of people. But you see, what we're denying people.

[21:01] I mean, when he says, deliver him to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. But, you know, Satan is in charge. And if you're either, I mean, as far as Paul is concerned, you're either with Christ or you're with Satan.

You know, there's no middle ground. And you are part of the kingdoms of this world or part of the kingdom of our God and his Christ. There's no in-between. So you don't deliver him to a neutral state.

You deliver him to Satan. And the impact of sin, death, and evil is destruction. And he needs to experience that that's where it leads him.

That's the end result. That's where he's going. That's the direction he's chosen. And you need to tell him that in order that he might come to the place of repentance.

You see, I know this may be a lousy illustration, but you can adapt it if you want. Ben Johnson. Nobody knows what really happened.

[22:11] Now, if I was Ben Johnson, I would like what really happened to be put on the front page of the paper in detail.

And I would like either to be utterly vindicated or to be condemned and forgiven and restored. And you see, because we're so accommodating and because we're so inviting and because we can handle so much, we don't give people the chance to be condemned, to repent, to be forgiven, and to be restored.

That opportunity is not given to people. We force them into some kind of backwater spiritually where they spend the rest of their lives trying to justify what's happened.

And so there is no place of forgiveness for them when that's what the Christian gospel is about. It's about forgiveness. The Christian gospel doesn't mean that you've made it on your own effort and nobody's caught you.

The Christian gospel is that you have failed and been forgiven. And that gospel needs to apply to people and people need to know that it applies.

[23 : 37] The Christian church is primarily made up of the people whom Paul calls sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, and robbers.

That's who they all are. It was a lovely tribute to the founders of Brass Can yesterday.

And this is not, I'm not saying this, you can read it for yourself in the Globe and Mail, where they said that's who they all are. That's the way our world works. That's where all the Christians come from. But they don't turn back to it.

They don't go back into that slavery because that's not what they're called to. They're called to go on. And they need to find a place of repentance.

You see, the Christian is not stranded on an alien planet. He is moving towards a great and glorious day.

[24 : 39] That was the lovely song that Alan De Noyer sang about that great and glorious day. Christians aren't here sort of biding their time until they're called home.

That's not what Christian life is. Christians are called to see the purpose of God, the ultimate and eternal purpose of God, the eschatological purpose of God.

It's nice to use that word from time to time. And I'll tell you what it means if you want to know. But we're called to that. And that that's where we're traveling to.

And we're on our way. And if somebody turns back, they should at least be told, where are you going?

Why are you going back? What isn't there in the promise that is ours and towards which we're moving? That you lack. Or that you can find somewhere else.

[25 : 45] And so it talks about the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. The festival, not with the malice, not with the food we eat.

The food that's laid out on the table is not an assortment of all the delicacies of evil and malice. On the table is the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

That's what we're to feast on. Not the stuff that's going to rot, but the stuff that's not going to rot. The unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

And that's how we come to that day of the Lord Jesus. The day in which the authority of Christ will be clearly, clearly manifested to us as our judge.

And you see, our prayer for this man is that he might understand that on that day, you can look at it for yourself.

[26 : 48] His spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. So, that's what the goal is. That's the goal towards which we are heading.

And we're not to turn back. And if we are addicted, and if we are compelled, and if we are overcome, and if we are faced with evil that we can't handle, well, there's no use pretending it's part of our liberty or part of our freedom.

It still has to be dealt with. We still have to find a place of repentance and forgiveness. And we know that there is no satisfaction on this day and in this place which will compensate us for standing under God's condemnation on the day of the Lord Jesus.

There is no gratification which will satisfy us because God has called us. The Paschal Lamb has been slain. The party has begun and the promises are before us.

And so, in the freedom that is ours in Christ, we move towards it. May God grant that these words may burn into all our hearts and help us to understand the trials and tribulations of God's call to that freedom in Christ from which we are not to turn back.

[28 : 28] Amen.