

Compromised Christians? Protestant Faith in the Face of Contemporary Culture **Sheona Beaumont**

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Introduction

A question regarding a Christian's integrity in involvement with the world of contemporary culture is itself symptomatic of a culture which has already maligned, in part or in full, the call to discipleship. In terms of the Christian's personal walk with Christ along the narrow way, Jesus' call has never been anything less than total obedience and total commitment – his teaching in the New Testament makes it clear that there is no room for anything else. If at any point a believer complains that they cannot hear his voice above the countless others offering more comfortable ways, more immediately satisfying ways, the answer is simply that they have not fixed their eyes on him. The human person remains wholly available to Christ, to his will, and to his commission to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." (Mark 16:15) What follows in this essay is an attempt to locate (again) a holistically settled faith-filled perspective, to look upon the world and the believer's role in it through attention to Jesus' description of discipleship, and to forfeit a common misunderstanding of worldly compromise in the example of him who took on everything the world could throw at a person.

Single-minded Faith

When asked by the crowd on the shores of Lake Galilee, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus replied "The work of God is this; to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:28,29) What seems to be a profession of availability on the part of the people who had followed Jesus across the Lake, is in fact a question driven by their continued self-interest, even after the miracle of the previous day's free and abundant meal. In fact, it was the satisfaction of the food itself, as Jesus points out in verse 26, that has led them to pursue him. His answer is such that it both shows up the material concerns of the crowd, and rejects any possibility of their commitment to him that might be founded in such concerns.

The question of a Christian commitment today is, similarly, one which benefits from such spiritual discernment over personal motivation and rootedness. On more than one occasion we see Jesus confound and disturb people who came to him in apparent readiness with his answers that, on the face of it, sometimes seem to do more to make them turn away than to follow him (for example, the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22, and the teacher of the law in Matthew 8:19-22). Surely this is not the best way to win over disciples? Yet to ensure that his Word landed in good soil, even before a crop was remotely possible, Jesus confronted the inevitable obstacles that litter individual's hearts (including pride, unrepentance, selfishness etc.), all of which are things that bar the way to an uncompromising single-minded faith in him.

Should a translation of this pre-requisite of single-mindedness change in the face of the world today? Often keen scholarly attempts to provide relevant interpretation and application forget that a believer's life with Christ today is fundamentally about their attitude to Christ (his person is the means *and* the end of our faith), not the cultural context of the believer: to the

extent that it is possible to be single-minded for the Christian Union at university and to have excluded a single-mindedness for Christ. Somewhere along the line the importance of what a believer does takes precedence over their right standing before Jesus, just as the crowd implied in their question of him, “What must we *do*...?”

Indeed, we know how great a value the world places on what we do in life, because it measures achievement by it. Success is monetary, statistical, visible, *material*, and the busyness of contemporary life is testimony to this pressing need for results. But as Paul said to the Ephesians, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8,9) For once the nature of faith has been taken back into the realm of grace rather than that of works, the Christian can get on with the singular task of believing in the one he has sent, of cultivating an ongoing enduring personal allegiance to Christ.

Hence the single-mindedness that I have discussed thus far is not so much an attitude of the believer’s own making or initiative as it is a recognition of the Spirit-filled lives now being led as a result of being born again (John 3:3). “For in him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28). To recognize this is to recognize that the Christian worldview changes everything, for:

Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships nor in the ties with their nation nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves. (Bonhoeffer. 1974, p.86)

It is only once this separation in Christ is understood that we can turn to examine the situations in which believers find themselves today.

Faith Meets Consumer Culture

In considering single-minded Christian discipleship in consumer culture, it can also become a project of Protestant evangelism to sell their ‘product’ of the gospel on the market – where ‘theirs’ is the motivation, theirs the drive, theirs the purpose (since we are talking about a historically local phenomenon that is specific to our 1st World in the 21st century) – whereas in fact this is the language of capitalist enterprise itself. Such terminology can become more indicative of a compromise and a corruption of the message than of a claimed relevance, inasmuch as the church “exploits the doctrine of Christ the Mediator” (Bonhoeffer. 1974, p.87) to justify the continuation of its direct relationship with the world.

Neither Bonhoeffer’s tone nor mine is to suggest that believers (as individuals or as a church communities) completely withdraw from all contact with society, but rather that Christ holds the ties of any such contact, and as such, there is already an ontological separation from society. The emphasis, unlike the market lingo above, is on the sovereignty of Christ (the “head” and “chief cornerstone,” in whom and through whom all things are brought together - Ephesians 1:10,22 and 2:20 respectively) rather than on the sovereignty of man. Likewise the emphasis in addressing some of the issues faced by Christians interested in culture today needs to recreate first this shifted worldview of Christ ‘first’.

It is one of the features of our consumer culture that the customer is always right. The rights of the consumer are top priority not simply in the economic sphere, but in the political, educational and social welfare spheres. Indeed, the word “consumer” and primarily his/her right to choose has come to represent an ideal that forms the basis of the particular democracy in which we now live. Marina LaPalma has historically contextualized this change thus:

15 th and 16 th centuries	the ‘soul’	Christian ideology and the institution of the church
17 th and 18 th centuries	the ‘self’ or ‘subject’	Science and the rational, thinking man. The Enlightenment or the Age of Reason
19 th century	the ‘citizen’	French revolution and the Empires. National identities and universal suffrage
20 th and 21 st centuries	the ‘consumer’	Capitalist economies developing worldwide

(LaPalma, 1988 - my tabulation)

Although obviously a simplification, this progression nevertheless throws some light on the present preoccupation with an identity formed in the culture of the world, in man’s image. In the light of such categorical divisions, the church offers an absolutely radical alternative with an identity shaped not in the world but in Christ. What is understood by a believer’s discipleship or faith is not simply another product for consumption on the world market, nor is it just another culturally-defined ideology – it is instead a *reality* in which everything is included, a story about the whole world, a story that exists outside time.

For all the activities of its characters and the multitude of their stories, the Bible has always only ever proclaimed one – God and his love for the world. This is famously *good* news. Singular and corporate identities as his human creatures give no ground to the hierarchical divisions that arise from comparisons between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘sinner’. Thus evangelical motivation, in love, to tell non-believers of the gospel comes from the sober knowledge that “there is no-one righteous, not even one.” (Romans 3:10) As the story continues, believers remember that they are “only servants.” (1 Corinthians 3:5) The early church leaders knew this humility in their position as kingdom-builders:

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. (1 Corinthians 3:7)

I am reminded here of Jesus’ reference to a grain of wheat that must “fall to the ground and die” if it is to be fruitful (John 12:24). Both passages imply a necessary understanding of first principles, whereby the miracle of life in terms of biological (re)creation occurs outside the realm of man’s engineering altogether. In terms of human involvement in God’s story, it is just when the church gets out its trowels and gardening implements, just when it seeks to reach others with the good news, that Jesus points out the importance of burial with him. This not only smothers a corporate sense of pride in performing a programmed quota of spiritual ‘Miracle-Gro’; but it also shatters personal wilfulness in the degree to which a believer thinks they are implementing/choosing God’s will.

The call to follow Christ as he goes about his reconciling ministry should never be mistaken for a call to ‘follow up’ the work that he started. Again, this implies that the believer has

adopted something of a consumer standpoint in that they have the right to choose what they take on, being as they are at a critical distance from it. As we have previously discussed, Jesus' call goes far beyond, and places a far more total demand on a life than any responsibility subsequently felt to live up to that call. It was never meant to be interpreted as a transcendental call, never meant to take believers out of the world – but instead to *ground* them in it, to hit the dirt and give up all rights for Jesus alone. As he says for all believers:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15-18)

This indeed, is where Jesus is encountered on the cross, for it is on the cross that sin and the degradation of the world are ultimately accounted for. To those in a state of “unbelief”, there is simply no possibility whatsoever of a palatable salvation that bypasses the issue of their ‘fallenness’. It is another feature of consumer culture, a further development of the customers’ rights, that the right to choice (with its intellectual appeal) becomes in turn the right to be satisfied (with its sensory appeal). If the motivation of evangelism is to present to the world at large an attractive and pleasing package of free forgiveness for a state of fallibility treated as spiritually casual erroneousness, then the stark reality of the cross has been forgotten. This would do as much to show up human desires for approval and acceptance, as it would the quick-fix fallibility of those being preached to.

The knowledge of Christians rising up to the Roman Empire with this mangled Messiah and pushing the image of the cross in the face of Rome, in all its ugliness, its shame, its demonstration of the oppression and power and violence of their regime, is enough remind us that Word was never image-conscious or superficial. Furthermore, in their Hellenistic view of deity, of grandiose and supreme gods, the Romans would have been offended at this crushed, appalling, defeated figure that the Jews said had claimed to be God.

We know too, that when the disciples then made the staggering claim that they had seen him, touched him in new life, this also went deeply against the grain. Jews believed resurrection was a corporate event in the future which was to usher in a new Kingdom, a new era, and here the disciples had made the incredible statement that here, now, in reality (not ideality), one man had brought that moment to instantaneous fruition. Even more astonishingly, women were the first witnesses of this (by law, they could not testify in court), and so this also was, in itself, a humble honesty, a radicalism, testifying to the truth of what happened.

Could the facts of the crucifixion and resurrection be any more difficult to digest? Whether to the Roman or Jew, scientist or lawyer, these events were controversial and potentially threatening to a settled and comfortable way of life. It is no different today, no less raw for the distance 2000 years of Christendom has put between us. In fact, many Christians feel there is a renewed sense of urgency for the gospel to interrupt the glazed vision of a media-fed and hype-addicted culture with its own hard-hitting reality. For the Christian belief locates the ideals of objective truth and justice in a physical person. Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), and the New Testament letters insist that Christians understand that the *idealism* of the Old Testament law is made anew (literally dies and rises again) in the *realism* of Jesus’ personhood.

Herein lies an answer to the question of what it means to be “in the world” but not “of the world.” (John 17:15,16) Because the realism of following Christ allows neither for the intellectual authority that would have the believer believe on account of *satisfied* reasoning

(as if they were the subject), nor for the subjective authority that would have a believer believe on account of a *satisfied* authentic experience (both products of a consumer's worldview). Either way is to flirt initially with the idea of a relationship with God, but where faith ends up ultimately remaining within the realms of human strength and understanding. The faith of the Bible, the faith that crackles and leaps from every page, is the faith that continually steps outside those boundaries; the faith that walks on water (Matthew 14:29), or the faith that is ready to take a knife to one's own child (Genesis 22:2,10). This is the faith of a close relationship with God, the close encounters of a life lived in the heart of God, whose heart is in the world.

Concluding Thoughts

Simply due to the nature of essay writing and the form that my thoughts take on the page, it may seem that I am transcribing yet another intellectual observation on the nature of discipleship, which can be catalogued under the relevant heading and from thence is seen to take the form of one of the very things I am trying to leave behind, namely the authority of (human) satisfied reasoning. I cannot argue that this can ever be entirely shaken off – in fact my argument is less to deny our rational thought processes and their conclusions, than it is to shift the emphasis from a Western intellectual understanding, to a Hebraic/Judaic holistic one.

Such a perspective also has scope to embrace the possibility of a 'quiet' evangelism. While I am aware that the angle of this essay could be seen to be singularly uncompromising towards the position and perspective of belief, I am not for one minute seeking to exclude the perspectives brought by, for example, Jesus' parables and sayings. Undoubtedly, these have many lessons for the Christian interested in the presenting gospel truths in today's society, particularly in the abundance of colourful imagery (allegorical, symbolic and aesthetic), and spell-binding narrative structures. A parable, according to Robert Short, "*binds* men". It is "reality's 'soft-sell' that uses this approach precisely because it is confronted with the hard hearts of men." (Short. 1969, p.12) Much more could be said for their effectiveness, but that has not been my concern here.

My focus has instead been on the individual of faith who is aware of the harvest field, but feels that he/she lacks the conviction to challenge a secular society which he/she is already intrinsically part of. My method has not been to outline particular scenarios in which individuals might find themselves, but rather it has been to strip away the clutter of such discussions and get back to the saving (and separating) grace of Jesus Christ. In the state of Jesus' mediation, the 'given' that is a transformed orientation towards the world, believers need not feel despondent, or useless, or unconcerned for the unbeliever. Rather the light of Jesus the Way shines into all creation, penetrating even the comfort-swathed insulation of the consumer, convicting "the world of guilt in regard to sin" (John 16:8, indebted to the Holy Spirit), and catching everyone up in his redemptive plan.

So:

Take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

And:

For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (1 John 5:4,5)

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OTHER RESOURCES

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- www.ctheory.com Database of cultural theorists. My particular interests were Jean Baudrillard, John Berger, Marshall McLuhan.
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All Bible quotations are taken from the New International Version

Protestantism eventually became the majority faith throughout northwestern Europe and in England and English-speaking America. In the 19th century, missionaries from those areas spread Protestantism throughout the world, establishing, with Roman Catholicism, a presence in Asia and Africa and in largely Catholic Latin America. Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians, generally spatially quite separated, have begun to understand each other through agencies and organizations such as the World Council of Churches. This does not mean that Protestants wavered in their faith. Tillich, for one, argued that "the Protestant principle" of prophetic criticism had to be included in any authentic expression of church life and that it was a genuine value in the secular world. Christian Humanism has a long tradition in the Catholic thought. However, a significant number of academics and fellow citizens would either appear perplexed or bluntly confess that they do not understand such a term. Such a response would warn us that this point of view is considered alien to contemporary sensibilities. In order to gain a comprehension of "Christian Humanism" in general, and Catholic humanism in particular, this article will examine the concept within contemporary culture in two stages. First, it will analyze the two cultural trends determining the fundamental attitudes of th