

Are you sure you are following Christ?

By D. L. Stephens

The Bible in the Old Testament book of 1st Kings tells a story about a young man who was about to take on greater responsibility. He spoke first with the older men who had advised his father, and they gave him advice on how he should proceed. He did not like that advice. After that, he spoke with his friends and they gave him their advice. He decided to accept the advice of his friends.

The result was bad. Because of the young man's decision to follow the advice of his friends the greater part of the people rebelled and formed their own kingdom. In the end the young man fell into dishonor and defeat.¹ His name was Rehoboam.

Too many times people decide to accept the advice of friends about their life choices rather than ask for the wisdom of elders, or more importantly, rather than seek God's advice.

Even Solomon, the wisest of kings, was influenced by his wives to abandon his faith in God. He ignored God's advice after God had said concerning the idolatrous people in the neighboring countries, "You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods."²

On the set of a Sci Fi Channel program there was a wall plaque that read: "Faith, family, friends."³ Apparently, the plaque indicates the priorities of the main character in the series. Better if it read: "Jesus, family, friends." Nowadays, people cite as the most important priority in their life their relationship with their family—their wives and children. Family obligations and relations are important, but our relationship with God is more important.

Matthew in his gospel records what Jesus said about devotion to Him,

Matthew 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.
38 "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.

In the gospel of John we read that Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."⁴ People who love Jesus are willing to **confess** him.

The New Testament doctrine of confession carries the idea of declaring allegiance to Christ "...as one's master and Lord, and, on the other hand, of acknowledgement on His part, of the faithful one as being His worshipper and servant, His loyal follower."⁵

No one could be considered a loyal follower of Christ if he is not following the words of Christ. If someone thinks he is a follower of Christ, yet is making important religious and spiritual decisions based on advice from friends and relatives, he is deceiving himself.

John, in his gospel, tells of an incident that happened after Jesus had healed a blind man. The Pharisees called the parents of the man who had been healed, asking how he had been healed.

¹ 1 Kings 12, the story of Rehoboam's foolish decision, and the resulting division of the kingdom of Israel into two warring nations.

² 1 Kings 11.

³ *Flash Gordon*, Sci Fi Channel.

⁴ John 14:15.

⁵ Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Vol. 2, p. 224.

John 9:20 His parents answered them and said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself.” 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

Religious authorities will use intimidation to ensure that people comply with religious doctrine. Family and friends even have been known to use economic, social, or even physical pressure to gain compliance from a nonconformist. John also tells of this type of conflict and the reason it succeeds.

John 12:42 Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

Simply put, there are those who prefer to be approved by men, rather than God. Herein is the test of a saving faith. Are you seeking the approval of your spouse rather than that of God? Are you seeking the approval of your family, or your employer, or your friends rather than that of God?

If you would have a saving faith you would seek the approval of God—first.

Is the church a part of your family heritage, something that you have accepted without question? Many people belong to a church, not because they have studied its doctrines and have become convinced of the truth of them, but because they think to believe otherwise would be to betray their family.

Is the church a national inheritance for you? For example, until 2012 the Evangelical-Lutheran religion was the official religion of Norway.⁶ The Church’s position in a Norwegian’s life was contained in Norway’s basic laws. The problem with this is that a nation’s law cannot make people Christians. The Christian faith comes from hearing the words of Christ; it is not imparted any other way.⁷

Moreover, the admonition from Luther went quite against the Norwegian law. Luther said,

“I pray you leave my name alone and not to call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians. Who is Luther? My doctrine is not mine. I have not been crucified for anyone...How does it then benefit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with all of them; and let us call ourselves only Christians, after Him from whom our doctrine comes.”⁸

Doesn’t this admonition apply to all the other denominational names that people professing Christianity have adopted? Or if you think Luther was the only one to hold that opinion, consider what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

⁶ Associated Press, June 2013.

⁷ Romans 10:17.

⁸ Tomlinson, L. G., *Churches of Today in the Light of Scripture*, p. 38, as quoted in Michelet, *Life of Luther*, p. 262.

1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's *people*, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one would say you were baptized in my name.

The Apostle did not intend that the church of Christ be divided up into separate factions; i.e., denominations. The church is to be united under the doctrine of Christ. Manmade doctrines, confessions, disciplines and catechisms should be abandoned, along with the divisions that come with them. The Holy Scriptures ought to be used to settle all religious issues.

Alfred Edersheim tells how the Jewish rabbis elevated the place of traditions above that of the Scriptures. He writes,

The ... *halakhah* was, so to speak, the Rule of the Spiritual Road, and, when fixed, had even greater authority than the Scriptures of the Old Testament, since it explained and applied them.⁹

The effect of the *halakhah* was to overrule the plain teaching of the Scriptures. Jesus confronted the influential Jews on this issue once. Matthew wrote in his gospel,

Matthew 15:1 Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." 3 And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' 5 "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," 6 he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 8 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' "

In this exchange Jesus expressed His dislike of doctrines that originate with men. He is the one who originates doctrines on religion; no one else has that privilege. Religious teachers should take note, as should the people who accept the teachings and practices that did not originate with Jesus.

Following this exchange with the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew tells us that,

Matthew 15:10 After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, "Hear and understand. 11 "It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man,

⁹ Edersheim, Alfred: *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1896, 2003, S. 1:11

but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” 12 Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” 13 But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. 14 “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

No one will be able to argue that they went wrong spiritually because they depended upon someone else, whether that is a relative, a spouse, a rabbi, a minister, a priest, or a televangelist. No one will be able to claim: “But my church said...” If a belief or practice cannot be traced to a biblical command, or cannot be inferred necessarily from a biblical teaching that is honestly read in full context, or cannot be found in an approved Apostolic example then it should be avoided.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians wrote regarding the divisions that were in that church,

I Corinthians 4:6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

Therefore, in spiritual matters, do not be eager to please a relative, a friend, a minister, a priest or rabbi; be eager to please Christ. The reason for this is—Christ is the one who will judge your performance. Please Him.

Avoid the tendency—a laziness tendency—to allow someone else to do your religious thinking. There are many doctrines in the world put there by people who think they know the truth. The test of truth is to compare the religious doctrine to the biblical doctrine that one learns by reading the Scriptures.

It is like Paul wrote to Timothy in his second letter,

2 Timothy 3:14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

God has gone to great lengths to ensure that through Jesus there is a gospel through which we must be saved. The gospel is not a clever narrative, a tale invented by artful writers to convince people to be better. The gospel is a demonstration of God’s power, a fact of history accomplished by the Son of God, and impressed on the memory of man by the Holy Spirit through inspired words and convincing miracles. It is good to know the doctrine of the New Testament, and to derive one’s faith from that, rather than to depend upon any church council, confession of faith, or wisdom that originates with man; in fact, God has so designed the Scriptures that they need no editing to teach, reprove or correct our beliefs.

The test of truth is whether the doctrine is biblical or not. Consider the Bereans,

Acts 17:10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

Many of the churches of today have adopted the hierarchical structures and the ceremonies of pagan religions. The pomp and ceremony of their worship services bear no resemblance to the simple observances of the New Testament church. Many of the doctrines modern churches teach are pagan in origin and heathen in effect.

Therefore, are you sure you are following Christ? If you were to compare your church to the church of the New Testament, would they be identical, or similar, or would yours bear no resemblance to the church of Christ? If not, then would the Apostle Paul include you in the following admonition?

Philippians 3:17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Love the Lord. Read the Scriptures that tell about Him. Keep His commandments. Become a member of His church.