

“Is Christianity Practical?”

Scripture: “One of the multitude said to him, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?” Luke 12:13

Is Christianity practical? Does the Bible contain the answers to our everyday problems? For example, if you are trying to figure out how to raise your kids to be decent citizens will the Bible give you instructions which if carefully followed will lead to the desired results?

If you have to decide whether to change jobs will the Bible or your Christian faith enable you to make the right choice? If you are in financial trouble and are worried about paying the bills will faith in Christ increase your income or decrease your debts? If you are having marriage problems will prayer and Bible study result in reconciliation and a new life together?

Is Christianity practical? Think of that question in the context of the Presidential candidates. Christianity has played an important part in the lives of nearly all of the presidential candidates this year. Jimmy Carter is the most outspoken of the candidates about his evangelical faith in Christ. Jerry Brown of California was trained to be a Jesuit priest before he entered politics. When he declared himself a presidential candidate and came into Maryland to campaign he quoted the word of Jesus, “The last shall be first.”

Ronald Reagan is a faithful and devout member of La Jolla Presbyterian Church in California. His pastor, Don Moomaw, described him as a man of spiritual depth and a solid grasp of the truth of the Bible. Gerald Ford, an Episcopalian, has often spoken more quietly of his personal faith in Christ and has as one of his closest friends and evangelist who also serves as his spiritual advisor. His son attended the evangelical Gordon-Conwell seminary in preparation of ministry.

All of these have said that they always pray before making important decisions. But the question, I would like to raise is, does that prayer make their decisions any better? Do their prayers have practical results? If a person is a committed Christian who prays regularly and reads the Bible is he better able to solve the practical problems of unemployment, inflation, and national security?

I ask this question because there is a great desire today on the part of more and more people for the church to give answers to practical questions. In seminary the courses sought out most were the courses in practical theology: i.e., in pastoral counseling, social work, psychology, etc.

Many former church members have fallen away from church attendance and activity. Often they say that they found the church irrelevant to their needs and everyday problems. The sermons did not help them with their everyday problems and decisions. They found that other organizations and institutions gave better advice and instructions as to how to raise their children and preserve marital harmony. They found that psychologists could help them overcome their feelings of guilt far better than ministers.

Is Christianity really relevant to these problems? Does it work? Most Americans are pragmatists. By that I mean we ask first, “Does it work?” We are pragmatists. We are interested in things that will get the job done faster and more efficiently. Americans are inventors, not

philosophers. We are technicians rather than abstract thinkers. America has produced 10 great inventors for every great philosopher.

The first question we ask someone we have just met is “What do you do?” We are interested more in what people do than in what they believe or think. If you don’t believe me, the next time you are introduced to someone, instead of asking, “What do you do?” ask, “What do you think...what do you believe?”...and see what kind of reaction you get.

This same characteristic is seen in our attitude towards religion. Most Americans want a religion that works if they want religion at all. They want a religion that has some practical value. We want a religion that will make us happy, help us solve our everyday problems, make us more successful in whatever way we measure success. One of the main attractions of the charismatic movement, i.e., that movement in the Christian church which practices faith healing and prophecy...is that it is a religion that seemingly works...it heals people, it makes them happy.

Having said all of this we have to confess that many of us do not find Christianity as practical as we would like. There are many committed Christians who do not find Christianity helpful in meeting their practical needs.

When the wife of C.S. Lewis died he asked the question “How practical is Christianity?” “Where is God,” he asked. Where are the practical benefits of being a Christian? He writes, “To Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face...and after that silence.” Why is God so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?

For C.S. Lewis, whose Christian commitment no one can doubt, Christianity was not very relevant in the time of his deepest need. Christianity wasn’t practical in his greatest need.

Well, my sermon is aimed at those, who like C.S. Lewis have found that Christianity has not always been that relevant for their everyday needs; who do not find their faith in Christ to have very many practical benefits. I am one of those, who like C.S. Lewis, do not usually find my Christian faith to be all that relevant in answering everyday problems. Over and over again I have gone to pray in time of need asking God for direct help and guidance for a decision that must be made, only to be left to myself, to my own abilities, to my own conscience, to meet those problems and decisions by myself as best I can.

I have found from my own personal experiences that God remains silent in response to most of my practical questions. And at the risk of sounding self-sufficient and arrogant let me say also that I have found that I have been able to cope with these practical everyday problems and decisions by myself, without the direct help of God.

Let me give you a personal illustration of what I’m saying. When I was pondering whether or not to ask Kay to marry me I prayed about it quite a bit. I would ask God to make it absolutely plain to me what I should do...speak to me in some unmistakable way...but he didn’t answer my prayer as I had expected. Rather I had to make the decision all of my own in fear and trembling.

I had a friend in college who was a committed and devout Christian. He became overwhelmed with depression to the point that he was unable to study or eat or do anything. He prayed to be delivered from this oppression but got no answer. His Christian faith seemed not to work. Christianity and the message of the Bible didn't enable him to overcome his depression. Instead he went to a psychologist who, through counseling, enabled my friend to enter in a new life with meaning and freedom from depression.

And so I ask again is Christianity really practical? Is there a Christian solution to all our personal problems? Is there a Christian solution to our economic problems? Is there a Christian solution to our political problems? Is Christianity relevant to the problems we face every day?

When we look to the Bible for an answer to these questions we discover that Jesus hardly ever concerns himself with the solution of everyday problems. In our Scripture Lesson a man has been listening to Jesus preach. What Jesus was saying was not immediately relevant to the man's need. The man is thinking, "Listen, Jesus, that's just not where I'm at. I want you to answer my practical everyday questions." And so he calls out from the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother divide the inheritance with me." That was the man's immediate problem. That was the immediate question he had.

Was Christ relevant to his felt needs? Jesus refuses to answer the man's questions or enter into the quarrel. If he had done so he might have reconciled the two brothers. And we know that Jesus came not only to reconcile men to God but to one another. Why, then, did Jesus refuse to give an answer and stop the quarrel?

First, the Jews thought that the Messiah's kingdom was of this world...and would solve all the problems of this world. Jesus wanted to be careful not to further this error. If they had seen him dividing the inheritance rumors of it would have spread and many people would have flocked to Jesus to have all their personal, financial, and domestic problems solved.

Jesus also wanted to make a distinction between the political powers of this world and the government of his kingdom. Jesus was not a minor court judge to divide inheritances. Nor was Jesus a first century "Rev. Ike" who promised to give everyone personal health and wealth.

It is true that many things that Jesus did and taught have practical everyday value but he didn't come to us to be a divinely sent "Dear Abby" to answer all our personal problems.

Jesus came, not so much to give us answers but to make us face some important questions...questions which we would never ask ourselves because of our preoccupation with the concerns of everyday life. The Word of Christ lifts my heart and mind momentarily away from the practical problems of my everyday existence and causes me to face ultimate questions, "What does it profit if I gain the whole world but lose my soul?" What does it profit if I have all the answers to my everyday problems, if I live a happy well-balanced, socially prominent life only to face the abyss...the void...at the end of my life?

I have found that I can handle most of my practical everyday problems and questions on my own and with the help of friends and professionals. God has created us in his image so that we, with

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the help of others, have the inner resources and intelligence to deal with most of our practical everyday concerns.

I don't usually go to the Bible to find answer to my practical everyday problems. I don't go to the Bible to find the practical answers to lower the unemployment rate although there are certainly principles in the Bible that can help us deal with these problems.

I go to Christ and his word with questions of ultimate significance, "What must I do to be saved? What meaning does my life have...what is its purpose? For what reason am I working?"

These are questions we don't like to face. And for that very reason they are the question which I as your minister feel called to raise in your minds.

Amen.