

P.E.A.R.s™ Periodic Encouragement And Reminders

Ice Cream or Dog Food?©

Over the past six to eight years, my reading and study have drawn me repeatedly to a topic of considerable debate amongst Christian theologians as well as “rank and file” believers. It’s even created a polarization, of sorts, amongst a group of close friends with whom my wife and I have fellowshiped nearly every week since September 2000.

The first clue to what I’m referring to can be found in the old bumper sticker statement: “Christians aren’t perfect – just saved” (which even today is sometimes used to excuse less than Christ-like conduct).

As we dig deeper, however, we find that those somewhat innocuous words tend to gloss over what is truly a serious and fundamental crucial issue.

I believe the following by Dallas Willard in “The Divine Conspiracy” using a “bar code” analogy helps explain what I mean:

Bar-Code Faith

Just forgiven? Is that really all there is to being a Christian? Does the gift of eternal life come down to that? [If it does, it’s] quite a retreat from living an eternal kind of life now!

Christians certainly are not perfect. There will always be need for improvement. But there is a lot of room between being perfect and being “just forgiven” as that is nowadays understood. You could be much more than forgiven and still not be perfect.

Unfortunately, what the slogan really conveys is that forgiveness alone is what Christianity is all about.

It says you can have a faith in Christ that brings forgiveness, while other aspects of your life are no different from that of others who have no faith in Christ at all.

Think of the bar codes now used on goods in most stores. The scanner responds only to the bar code. It makes no difference what is in the bottle or package that bears it, or whether the sticker is on the “right” one or not. If the ice cream sticker is on the dog food, the dog food IS ice cream, so far as the scanner knows or cares.

On a recent radio program, a prominent minister spent fifteen minutes enforcing a point that “justification”, the forgiveness of sins, involves no change at all in the heart or personality of the one forgiven. It is, he insisted, something entirely eternal to you and God. What he was actually saying was that being a Christian has nothing to do with the kind of person you are. Thus, his argument, essentially, is that the substance of being a Christian [and saved for eternity] works like the bar code.

Some ritual, some belief, or some association with a group affects God the way the bar code affects the scanner. An appropriate amount of righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account to our account in the bank of heaven, and all our debts are paid. We are accordingly, “saved”. Our guilt is erased. How could we not be Christians?

For some other Christian groups, the “account” has to be appropriately serviced to keep the debts paid up, because we really are not perfect. But the essential thing in either case is the forgiveness of sins, and the payoff for having faith and being “scanned” comes at death and after.

Life now being lived has no necessary connection to being a Christian as long as the “bar code” does its job.

Many others are angry with such a view of being a Christian because to them it seems irresponsible. They refer to it as “cheap grace”, or “fire insurance”. Some people actually reject Christianity because of it, while others insist that faith in Christ is a matter of righteous living in the social area, standing up against social evils on behalf of love and justice.

But to be quite frank, grace is cheap from the point of view of what it should cost us. To try to rule out unheroic Christianity by making grace expensive will only add to the confusion about matters of vast importance. And, if a fire is likely, would it not be a mark of wisdom not to forgo insurance that really is available.

[However] Can we seriously believe that God would establish a plan for us that essentially bypasses the awesome needs of present human life and leaves human character untouched? Can we really believe that being saved has nothing whatever to do with the kind of persons we are?

Have we somehow developed an understanding of “commitment to Jesus Christ” that does not break through to His living presence in our lives?

Are we to suppose that God gives us nothing that really influences character and spirituality? Are we to suppose that in fact Jesus has no substantial impact on our “real lives”?

Helmut Thielicke [in a study he once made] points out that we often wonder if the celebrities who advertise foods and beverages actually consume what they are selling. He goes on to say that this is the very question most pressing for those of us who speak for Christ. Perhaps we are not eating what we are selling. More likely, I think, what we are “selling” is mistakenly thought by us to be irrelevant to our real existence and without power over our daily lives.

The suggestion is that the change that makes a person Christian, whatever that is, may be totally undetectable from the human point of view. Only God’s “scanner” can detect it. Apparently that is “Christian reality” now.

As a result, Christians are generally indistinguishable from the world.

Even for those who try to make at least an outward appearance of being different, what they basically practice is a “gospel of sin management”. [They focus on outward living and avoidance of “wrong” conduct as best they can – at least while in public view.] [But,] They still live internally as though actual transformation of life and character is no part of the saving message in the Bible.

What is taught [in that instance] is that a saving acceptance of Christ has no natural connection to entering a life of discipleship to Jesus.

[The reality or truth is] Christian tradition certainly deals with guilt and the afterlife, but by no means does it take them to be the only issues involved in salvation.

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It’s important to note, Dallas Willard does not purport to argue that good works are in some way required for salvation, nor does he discount the essence of Grace in the process. What he does

say is that a true relationship with Christ should not only be obvious to the world, but that every recipient of that great gift, likewise, needs to understand and appropriate that truth in every aspect of their lives – now.

If we can understand that orange juice is not just for breakfast any more – surely we can grasp the teaching of the Bible that Christ and salvation are not just for after dying.

Are you ice cream or dog food? Is there “proof in the tasting” (in how you act and live) that will reveal which you are in character and relationship with Christ – or is it hidden only in the “bar code” regardless of the label on your package?

A final word from Dallas Willard is this: *“What the faith is that saves – is a flash point of current controversy. But, [is it really] a totally private act “just between you and the Lord” – a condition only “the scanner” would know?*

I hope not.

Have a great week!

Bob Alderman

(and to my family, Love Dad)