



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#8 – Nurturing Our Relationship with God

With Study Questions

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Nurturing Our Relationship With God

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God

Review

Reviewing our *Remedial Christianity* series, we've discussed: 1) the need to have a starting place for knowledge; 2) that for Christians, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics, and truth; 3) the over-arching message of the Bible – God bringing glory to Himself through the redemptive work of the cross; 4) why we should believe the Bible – that it is self-authenticating; 5) the main topic of the Bible, God – that He is knowable and why we should believe in Him; 6) the means by which the relationship between man and God is to get under way; and, 7) the purpose of our relationship with God – to glorify and enjoy Him. Now we will discuss how the relationship between man and God is to be nurtured.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.² I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust."³ Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler *and* from the perilous pestilence.⁴ He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth *shall be your shield and buckler* (Psalm 91:1-4).

Prone to Wander

So Different Yet So The Same

So you have become a Christian! By the grace of God your eyes have been opened to the truth and glory of Christ and He has rescued you from death and darkness (Ephesians 2:1-5). By the blood of Jesus Christ the Righteous your sins have been pardoned (1 John 2:1), Amen. But lo', your sin remains and is ever before you (Psalm 51:3). You feel quite similar today to the way you felt yesterday. The God who is your refuge and fortress doesn't seem to be protecting you from yourself. You're so different, yet so very much the same.

Oh how we long for that feeling of cleanliness which subdued our souls that hour we first believed – when we felt that that sinful person – that old self – was truly a different person and we were new – a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). How quickly the old man came a knockin'! What are we to do? How do we keep the flame alive? How do we nurture, feed, and keep warm our relationship with our Savior? First, let us keep in mind that it is woven into our nature, even our new nature, to leave the God we love.

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it from Thy courts above.*

Ever at His Feet

Are we to think that the woman of ill repute (Luke 7:36-50) who wept at Jesus' feet and was pardoned by the very words of the Savior (what incomparable absolution—remission of sins) did not shortly, in one way or another sin again? To whom would she flee with her new sin? Did she once again weep at His feet? Would it not seem reasonable that she, that all, have need of taking permanent residence at the feet of Christ—taking residence there for both wisdom and assurance of pardon, for nurturing? How does this take place now that the Christ has ascended to the Father?

Again, how do we nurture, feed and keep warm our relationship with God? How do we dwell in that secret place of the Most High in such a way that sin—that in one sense is ever before us—is not allowed entrance? How do we give our hearts to God that He may seal them from His courts above?

Snake Oil Christianity

Elusive Tranquility

Here we have Remedial Christianity of historic proportions. From the ascetic (self denial) obsessions of the desert fathers in the first few centuries of the church to the monks of Roman Catholicism to the modern emphasis on the disciplines (fasting, solitude, quietude, isolation, meditation) coming from modern pietists, men have been remarkably innovative and novel in seeking to find peace and enjoyment with God. Yet this joy and tranquility is ever so elusive.

There is, in all of us, a discomfort with our behavior which makes us fodder for the litany of disciplines (many of them very good things) which are designed to make us feel better about our Christianity.

I've reached an age where I have become a bit more concerned about health, heart, and longevity. Somehow I was put on a mailing list of people who have the same concern as I and the purveyors of snake oil have begun to lay siege. There seems to be no end to the promises of strength, stamina, vim, vigor, vitality, good looks, etc. Who doesn't want all this? And many are willing to make the necessary investment to see if it truly works.

Similarly, since our sin continually haunts us, all Christians find themselves on the mailing lists of snake oil Christianity. Snake oil may have some very positive results. But it seldom (probably never) produces everything promised. So what kind of snake oil can we expect? Gird yourselves—for snake oil Christianity is closer than a brother. The things of which we need to beware are ever so near and, for the most part, good things in their proper usage. See if you can recognize some of the popular answers to a flat Christian experience.

Try This

Feeling estranged from God? Join a small group at church. Sin got a hold of you? Increase the length of your quiet time. Desire to be more godly? Come to our men's retreat. Learn to fast. Meditate. Discover your purpose. Organize your life more efficiently. Read the *Seven Habits of Highly Successful Cloister Nuns*, etc. etc. etc.

Notice that I didn't list anything evil (except for maybe the cloister nun book). I didn't suggest that you scream at your spouse or children or parents for the positive cathartic effects of releasing your own rage at the expense of your loved ones. Small groups, quiet times with God, retreats, proper fasting and meditation, and good books have their place. But they are nowhere near the top of the list if we're going to Scripture to understand the means by which God has determined the proper nurturing of His children.

Primary Biblical Nurturing

During radio broadcasts it wasn't uncommon for me to hear from callers with serious problems. Many of them had bought all the snake oil yet their sin was like floodwaters and they felt un-anchored. I would often ask a question that most listeners felt was right out of left field – *when was the last time you took communion?* What does that have to do with anything? Well, it has everything to do with everything.

How remedial have we become that we view as expendable that which is instituted by Christ Himself as a perpetual sacrament through which He bestows grace upon His bride! How true, and applicable, to us remedial Christians are the words of John Calvin,

The cure is prevented by no other cause than the length of time during which we have been accustomed to the disease.¹

The notion of the Lord's Table truly having an impact on the lives of Christians has become passé – a truly antiquated notion. We have become so accustomed to its absence (or at least de-emphasis) that it has descended to the level of being dispensable. And the gap has been filled with lesser things.

God has instituted, for the nurturing of His bride, an organism called the church. It would do us well to examine just what the role of the church actually is.

The Marks of the Church

The Belgic Confession states,

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church--and no one ought to be separated from it.²

¹ Calvin, J. 1997. *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: Institutio Christianae religionis.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (vi). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

² Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

In short, the marks of a true church are the pure preaching of the word, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline when necessary. Therefore, we can deduce that the primary biblical method for nurturing our relationship with God is to be a participating listener of the preaching of the word, a participating communicant at the Lord's Table, and a participating member in good standing of God's covenant family.

Time and space prohibit me from demonstrating how truly biblical this statement is, for it is not a matter of merely marching out a few verses. If you read the whole Bible, you will discover some, but very little, space or emphasis devoted to fasting, small groups, retreats and the like. On the other hand a great deal of space and emphasis is devoted to the three marks stated above. This, my friends, is God's method for nurturing and preserving His children.

Preaching

Paul's word to the young pastor, Timothy was,

Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2).

No less than 130 times is the word preach used in the New Testament. God's proclamation (usually through prophets, teachers, apostles, pastors) of His law and gospel floods the pages of Scripture. He doesn't give them "how-to" books. He doesn't send them on retreats. He seldom asks them to increase the length of their quiet times or fast. He does, however, continually call His people to hear His word (law and gospel³) proclaimed in the assembly of the saints.

The law of God is the purest system of ethics. It is what God has determined to be good, right and true. The Apostle Paul states, "**...the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good**" (Roman 7:12). Of course without the gospel the law is merely a minister of death (2 Corinthians 3:6) because no one can obey the law at the sufficient level to save himself.

The gospel is ever beautiful and should be ever before us. The gospel is salvific (the means by which God saves souls) and life changing (Romans 1:16; Galatians 5:22, 23). With the peace of a properly preached monergistic (power of salvation coming from God alone) gospel one can embark upon seeking to obey the law without fear of judgment or banishment.

The gospel is not merely for the unsaved but for the saved as well. It is the great expression of God's love for His children. What is more nurturing than a child coming into a greater and deeper understanding of a parent's love? Pastors who seek to express the depth of God's grace and love will most effectively nurture the flock under their care.

Again, this is done in the context of the visible church--with pastors, elders, deacons, etc. Paul told Timothy, the pastor, to preach. The church is the institution

³ The law is what God demands; the gospel is what God provides. All propositions in Scripture are one of these two things.

created by God for His own glory and the nurturing of His children. It ought not be neglected.

Sacraments

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁰ Likewise He also *took* the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19, 20).

Biblically speaking, you will not find many things more emphasized than the sacraments. This may not be readily apparent in our modern Christian culture with its *de facto* disdain for the Old Testament. But one can hardly read a few chapters in the Old Testament without stumbling upon a sacrifice, an altar, a memorial pillar, a ceremonial washing, and on and on.

The tome of references to all these Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies is squeezed into the simplicity of the cup and the loaf which contain the spiritual presence of Christ. The Apostle Paul calls this a cup of blessing.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ¹⁷ For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

We err when we think that the simplicity of the Lord's Table compared to the Old Covenant sacrifices is a matter of de-emphasis. It should be emphasized all the more (Hebrews 7:22)! If the pure preaching of the gospel is nurturing and life-changing as it reaches our hearts through our ears, the pure participation in the sacraments (both baptism and the Lord's Table) which we see, smell, taste, and touch all the more imparts to us that powerful message of grace which saves souls and redeems lives.

Notice again that this is done in the context of the church. Paul writes, "For we, though many," which implies a congregation, not merely an individual or small gathering.

Church Discipline

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person. ¹² For what *have* I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? ¹³ But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "*put away from yourselves the evil person*" (1 Corinthians 5:11-13).

Accountability is still viewed as important, even among us remedial Christians. Here we have the ultimate in biblical accountability. The covenant member (who is

hearing the preaching and participating in the sacraments) is now in a place where, if he becomes notorious and obstinate in his sin, will find the kingdom of God (the visible church) shut to him.

In short, the process of discipline involves a one on one confrontation of a verifiable sin. If there is no repentance there is a confrontation by two or three witnesses (along the line of Old Testament law). If there is no repentance the matter is taken, again, to the church. Then finally, as Jesus teaches, **“If he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17).**

There are many reasons for the process of church discipline. The confession (clearly backed by the Scriptures) teaches that it is

...necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders (1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 5:20; Matt. 7:6; 1 Tim. 1:20; 1 Cor. 11:27-34; Jude 23)⁴

This much neglected, yet clearly biblical, admonition nurtures the bride of Christ in such a way as to deter others from similar offenses. It purges from the church the notion that certain behavior is acceptable to God. It removes occasion for Christ – and His gospel – to be dishonored (a very common occurrence today in the church). And it prevents the wrath of God from falling upon His church – a wrath which often involves God turning people over to their own sinful hearts (Romans 1:26).

For clarity, discipline is not implemented on those who fight the normal fight with sin before which we are all engaged. If such were the case all churches would be empty. It is the obstinate, stubborn, willful adherence to that which is in clear violation to God’s law.

In today’s remedial Christian culture we obsess with taking normal Christians and turning them into Spirit-filled super-Christians through snake oil Christianity. Yet we neglect the purity of Christ’s church, thus jeopardizing the glory of God and the souls of men. We strain at gnats yet swallow camels. What a wonderful experiment it would be for the church to implement the counsel of God – to test, as it were, the power of His guidance! As He said of the tithe,

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows (Malachi 3:10 NASB).

If this is true of the tithe – being a less weighty matter (Matthew 23:23) – how much greater the blessing when applied to His word, sacraments, and discipline?

⁴ Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC

Questions for Study

1. Is the presence of sin and feeling of estrangement from God something with which Christians shouldn't expect to contend (pages 1, 2)?
2. What are some ways people have sought to overcome these feelings of sin and estrangement (pages 2, 3)?
3. Why do you suppose there is such clamoring for these types of remedies (page 3)?
4. What organism has God instituted for the nurturing of His bride (page 3)?
5. What are the marks of a true church (pages 3, 4)? What implication does this have in the life of a Christian (page 4)?
6. What are the principle elements of preaching? Why (page 4)?
7. In what respect does preaching nurture God's children (page 4)?
8. Who is to preach (page 4)?
9. Why do you suppose the sacraments are so de-emphasized in the church today (page 5)?
10. How are the sacraments a blessing to God's people (page 5)?
11. What are the goals of church discipline (pages 5, 6)?
12. What constitutes a disciplinary offense (page 6)?
13. Discuss the common popular methods of nurturing God's people versus word, sacrament, and discipline. Why are the latter neglected while the former are emphasized?