

Question and Concerns from a New Christian

Reality Check when Nominal Christianity and Normal Christian are not aligned

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Helpful insights regarding questions raised by a relatively new Christian. These questions are from a young man (in his mid-twenties) who had come to know the Lord about two year prior to the time he asked these questions.

GROWING IN OUR CHRISTIAN WALK

The Concerns and Questions posed below are perhaps typical of new Christians who find a misalignment of the normal Christian life (as defined in the Scriptures) and the nominal Christian life we so often see modeled by those who attend our churches. The questions are real and the answers are relevant, only the names have been changed to provide some anonymity to the church involved.

CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS

I. My thoughts are confused. This kind of thing happens with me from time to time, usually before I come into a greater understanding of truth. I certainly hope this is the case now. I have spent some time trying to get to the heart of what is bothering me and have come up with a few ideas. Perhaps the common theme to many of these is this:

II. I am not satisfied. I am not satisfied with my relationship with the Lord. I am not satisfied with my relationships with other Christians. I am not satisfied with the Christian church. I am reminded of the opening line of the last book you gave me: The Normal Christian Life. The author states "What is the normal Christian life? We do well to consider this from the outset." I really laughed when I read that. Also, I am distressed over ritualized and mechanized Christianity. Something seems to be missing. Is it just me?

III. I am also having **difficulty finding direction**. I have participated in various things such as Sunday School, Bible Study Fellowship, visitation and informal witnessing and discipleship but again something seems to be lacking. I feel like nothing I do is enough yet I cannot find the time or energy to do more.

IV. I feel an **obligation to do some of the things** I am involved in, for other's sake.

V. I am **growing weary of the pace**.

VI. I am specifically concerned with **the direction our local church has taken** within the last few months. I understand the importance of having vision regarding church growth but my heart tells me we are not focused on what really counts, that is, the changing of people's lives by the power of Christ. The rhetoric seems appropriate but I do not believe it reflects our hearts. If it did, the oratories would be unnecessary. I believe that if we truly had love and concern for those we visit we would have little trouble introducing them to Christ or, at least, introducing them to our local church's program. I have stood firm at our church mainly because I feel God has led me there for a purpose -- if only I knew clearly what it was.

VII. Is there any **hope for me?**

What follows are thoughts coming out of having wrestled with similar concern for nearly 25 years in my own Christian walk.
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COMMENTS AND ANSWERS

That which you are experiencing is normal and healthy. I will attempt to address each point you have raised in your note.

I. Confusion: Confusion is a normal part of growing. This is typically a result of having a rapid inflow of information and not having developed a “filing system” of where to put all the information. It is not unlike your experience in your new job. At first, you did not know what was important to do your job and you thought you needed to give equal attention to everything. By now, you have been able to categorize the information so that you give an appropriate amount of attention to the various kinds of information. There are many areas for service and you are being exposed to a great variety of opportunities. Look at this as part of your background education into what is happening in the general scope of things. As you see the possibilities, you will value some things more than others. Many things that are being done in “the church” are not needed and are there only because we are trying to operate in our carnal strength rather than letting Christ be Head of the Church. One possible outcome is that you will discover your spiritual gift(s) where God can minister in a mighty way through you.

II. Not Satisfied: I hope you never are fully satisfied with where you are and where the church is. Our only satisfaction can be in the sufficiency that is Christ.

Your Relationship with the Lord: This lack of satisfaction provides a driving force to draw you into a closer relationship with Jesus. If you lose this drive, then you will be experiencing what you see in so many people in the church -- they are blissfully ignorant of the “something more” that God wishes for each of His children.

Relationship with Other Christians: I’ve often said that it is not reasonable to expect true Christian Fellowship unless all the fellows are in the same ship. Not many Christians have experienced the dramatic and radical conversion you had (and are still experiencing). Many need to hear your testimony so that a longing is created within themselves for a deeper walk with Jesus. Sadly to say, many people are nominal Christians and have not experienced the new birth. Others are like the various soils Jesus described in the parable of the sower. They accepted the truth of the gospel but the cares of this world have choked out the growth and they bear no fruit. You may find that your ministry among many of these is to exhort and encourage so that they can become fruitful in the kingdom of God.

The Visible Expression of the Church: There are many congregations around and there are people within these groups who make up the universal church. In the parable of the “wheat and the tares” we find a warning that many people in the various congregations are not true Christians (wheat) but are simply “look-a-likes” or tares. They do not (cannot) bear fruit. The presence of these causes the various local bodies of believers to function in a worldly fashion. There is so little of what we do that really qualifies as “works of faith.” The “power” gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12) are not in operation in most church groups because of unbelief of the nonbeliever. It is said of Jesus when He visited His hometown that “He could do no great work among them because of their unbelief.” There are some church groups who emphasize the gifts of the Spirit. Many of these are plagued with expressions of fleshly behavior that are passed off as acts of the Holy Spirit. (What I have tried to find is a church that preaches/teaches the word with as little error and stretches out into new truth and one in which I can find some areas of ministry and fellowship. I want to avoid churches with a “personality cult” mentality in which the people follow the pastor rather than Jesus as revealed in the Word.)

Ritualized and Mechanized Christianity: Many people want to have a set of rules to follow. (The carnal mind would rather operate under the law than under grace.) Most like a “recipe” that will ensure success. Most are not comfortable with uncertainty. However, in most of the Scripture, we do not find that God repeats the way He interacts with man. What has happened is that one group may have found that they received a great blessing from God. They examined the process they went through and concluded that it was the process that caused the blessing. They then repeated the process in sincere hope that God will bless the same way He did before. Some will even write books about the blessing and others will duplicate the “ritual” so they too may be blessed. It doesn’t work. Because of “fear of failure” (translate that into lack of prayer to find what God wants to do and lack of trust that He will bring victory) we follow the same routine in each worship service. Many in typical congregations like (prefer) this because they know what to expect and they know that if the schedule is followed, they will get out “on time.” Their priority is not what is happening in the church but “what comes next” in the day -- lunch, ball game on TV, etc. Routine, ritualized, mechanized Christianity does not work and people sense that it does not work. Therefore, “eating lunch” becomes higher priority because they know that works!

III. Difficulty in Finding Direction: The secret is not doing more but in discovering the particular area (focus) to which God is calling you. Some of the comments under “confusion” apply here. Consider the variety as an overview. You are still learning and discovering. However, the insights you have as to what you are experiencing are valuable. Use the questions that come to you as points of prayer and meditation. Revisit these and allow God to provide you with “knowledge” (one of the gifts) regarding how He would like to see His children grow. Record the insights and the questions.

IV. Obligation to Do Something: Avoid letting people put feelings of guilt on you. If you are in a daily walk with Jesus and are listening to the voice of God, then He will bring conviction and ability to do the work to which He has called you. The “much activity” of many churches (ours included) is an effort to substitute our work for really seeking to know and do God’s will. I see the activity as a means to discover needs of people and then to minister to them. Just visiting for the sake of visiting (without being watchful for needs and being ready to minister to those needs) is useless. Being involved in the “activities” is a way to “move your ship in the water” so that God can guide you. (It is difficult to change direction of a ship that is sitting still.) Having said that, I would caution that the most important things are praying and daily walking with Jesus.

V. Growing Weary of the Pace: Jesus admonished us to not grow weary in well-doing for we shall reap in due season if we faint not. I think the most important thing for you to do at this time is to discover the few things upon which you should be concentrating to “do well.” If you try to do everything, then you will do nothing well. It is not “unspiritual” to write down the areas of your life that take time and energy. Ask yourself, “which of these contribute to what God is calling me to do?” Some of these will certainly be family matters. Some will be providing for food and shelter. Some will be fellowship -- social activities. Some will be your own spiritual growth. Others will be a ministry to others. You should discover that many of these will fit together in such a way as to synergistically support the others. The fellowship may lead to ministry opportunities. The ministry opportunities can require a closer walk with the Lord and greater trust in order to accomplish them. Involving your family in the ministry provides time together -- this may be combining vacation with seminars that strengthen your

ministry or help your spiritual growth. The area in which you work provides a witnessing opportunity by your actions, attitudes, words, etc. If every area of your life is a separate channel then you will find yourself spread too thin to make a difference anywhere.

VI. Direction Local Church Has Recently Taken: The local congregation may be experiencing the same sort of “confusion” and uncertainty of direction as you are as an individual. For years the ministry has been primarily focused on teaching. We have acted pretty much as sponges by soaking up the truths and feeling good as a result of the times of praise with the excellent music program. However, there has been little fruit bearing in the form of new Christians being born into the Kingdom of God. We have been faithful in our attendance and learning but not fruitful. I see God moving to bring in some fertile Christians so that we might start bearing fruit that is pleasing to God. This may be the reason you are where you are. You are certainly one who can make a difference in whether or not the church bears fruit of new Christians. Much of our efforts (organized, ritualized, routine programmed activities) will not directly result in bearing of fruit -- we plow, plant the seed but God gives the increase. Much of what we intend to happen will not occur and this is likely good, since we do not know what is best. We find that we work at doing something and if we are truly trusting God, then He will bring the right results to pass. We will find dead-ends and roadblocks and may become discouraged, but if we know that a loving Father has created that dead-end and set up that roadblock as a means to guide us to where (what) He is trying to accomplish, then we can look back on the results and see that God was in charge all the way. (See the story of Joseph in Genesis.)

VII. Hope for You: There is a hymn that says, “My hope is build on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.” You have had and will continue to have “mountain top” experiences. These are good and we want to stay on the mountain. However, the work is down in the valley. On our journey with the Good Shepherd, we find that we have to go down into the valley to get to the next mountain peak. We can rejoice that we are living in the “high country” and that we are not on the “plain” where the only change in elevation is a depression and we have to struggle to just get back to ground zero. You are truly blessed and God is working a great work in you and will do great work through you. He has not called you for nothing. In His time He will show you what you are to do. You need to keep your eye on Him, so that when He shows you where He has brought you, you will not be looking in some other direction.

Your questions are all very good. I don’t know that the comments I have given are answers to the questions you have raised. However, you must realize that we are all in a spiritual battle and the Proverbs teach us that we wage war successful with a multitude of counselors.

- Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety. Pr 11:14
- Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counselors they are established. Pr 15:22
- For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counselors there is safety. Pr 24:6

Therefore, I would encourage you to seek input from others, also.