

Are We A Cross-Less Christian?

One of the strangest things in society is cross-less Christianity.

The cross as an ecclesiastical symbol is no cross at all.

The cross of Christ is a place where death reigns.

We need to be sure the cross we carry is indeed the cross that Jesus was referring to.

Matthew 16:24 [NIV] *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

Within the short scripture we find the microcosm of the Christian life.

First we have an invitation from Jesus our Saviour beginning with the small but very significant word “if”.

This confirms the freedom we have been given by our Creator.

Anyone may come to Jesus Christ.

No-one need come to Jesus Christ.

Whoever does come to Jesus Christ comes because they choose to do so.

Everyone holds their future in their own hands.

It is **not** the dominant world leaders who hold our future in their hands, each of us determines our own eternal future.

We decide which path we choose to walk in our lives.

We choose and destiny waits on the decision we make.

We decide and either hell enlarges itself or heaven prepares another “*mansion*,” [John 14:1-3].

God as Sovereign chooses His way of life and the future of His Kingdom. But this Sovereign Creator God has given to the pinnacle of His creation, human beings, a similar choice.

This invitation of salvation was **not** accompanied with a fanfare or the tumult of shouting.

This was the quiet invitation of a kindly stranger walking on this earth, an invitation that is easily lost in the hurly-burly of living life.

This invitation was the last to be given to human beings by their Creator and until we become quiet enough in our busy life to hear it, we will receive no authentic message.

Jesus brought good tidings from afar but does **not** compel anyone to listen.

Our Saviour’s life on earth was short, He conducted Himself in a friendly, courteous and unobtrusive manner.

Yet He is the King of kings.

His Word has divine authority.

His eyes are all seeing.

His face is our last judgement.

Next Jesus invites us to “*follow Him*”

Some people will rise up and go after Jesus, but others give no heed to His voice or give priority to “*earthly*” needs and attractions.

Matthew 19:16-22 [NIV] *“Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” “Which ones?” the man enquired. Jesus replied, “‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbour as yourself.’” “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, **follow me.**” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”*

The attractions of wealth and what it brought with it was too great for this man. The invitation was given and he made his choice.

Our response to this invitation opens up a great gulf between those who will follow Jesus Christ and those who reject His invitation.

Silently but terribly the work of selection goes on, as each person hears the invitation and decides whether they will accept or ignore the voice of their Saviour.

Unknown to the world in general and perhaps unknown to some who hear this invitation the work of separation is continuing.

Each hearer of the message must decide for themselves and they must decide on the full contents of the invitation.

Those who decide to follow Jesus Christ must accept the conditions that He lays down within the invitation He offers.

“*Let Him*”, there is no appeal, no coercion but there is also no compromise.

We cannot make the terms attached to the invitation, we can merely agree with them.

Many reject the invitation because they will not accept the conditions that Jesus Christ lays down.

He watches them turn their backs and leave Him, He still loves them, but He will make no concessions.

To admit one person into the Kingdom of God by compromise and that Kingdom would be no longer secure for eternity.

Jesus will be either our Lord or He will be our Judge.

Everyone who hears and understands this invitation must decide now whether we accept Jesus as our Lord and Master or face Him as a Judge in the future.

Let us examine the conditions that go with this invitation for salvation and eternal life.

Next Jesus said “*Let him deny himself*”

Only a being with perfect knowledge of human nature would dare to make such a demand.

Without our realising the fact the only way to salvation is for us to be saved from our own nature.

Why is this true?

It is the “*self*” which is our slave master and caused all our corruption and evil.

Romans 6:16, 19-23 [NIV] *“Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey, whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” ... “I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

We, without God’s intervention, are slaves to our natural human fleshly desires. Our life centres around satisfying the demands of our physical body.

To feed it, satisfy its sexual desires and pamper the mind’s unquenchable demand for pleasurable feelings, every thought and action is towards self and self satisfaction.

Feeding such demands of our body and mind is bound to be done at the expense of others’ personal desires and this leads to all manner of sins.

Of our own strength it is impossible to break out of the slavery to self.

To deny ourselves is impossible without applying the next condition to our being accepted as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Next Jesus said “*Let him take up his cross*”

What does this mean?

The cross is the symbol of a painful death.

Romans 6:1-7 [NIV] *“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that **our old self was crucified with him** so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin, because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.”*

The old self has to be crucified.

Over the years the cross has been made an object of beauty, decorated with precious stones, made of gold or silver. The cross is worn as a form of decoration, today but the cross of Jesus Christ was very different.

People did not wear a cross, the cross wore people.

People were fastened to an already blood stained cross like a grotesque tie pin on its breast, to writhe and groan until stilled and silenced by death.

That is the cross we are to carry, nothing less.

When the cross is robbed of its tears, blood and pain it is no longer the cross we are to bear.

It is only in the painful death of crucifixion that we can be freed from our selfishness.

We all need to be careful as to which cross we carry, the decorated symbol or the blood stained instrument of death.

The final condition is “*follow me*”

Not until we accept the self-denial and death of self on the cross can we follow Jesus Christ.

The cross ends life but also begins a new life.

“*Follow me*” is an invitation but also a challenge.

Luke 14:26-28, 33 [NIV] *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. **And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.** “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?” ... “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”*

The “*follow me*” also involves pain and cost, for we have to continue to “*deny ourselves*” and continue to carry the symbol of our new life, the cross.

2 Timothy 3:12 [NIV] *“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”*

We will face this trial of persecution because others, not knowing the Love of God, feel a twinge of guilt when they see our transformed lives and hate us because we cause this unpleasant feeling.

How do we survive the life of trial and persecution?

Galatians 5:16, 22-25 [NIV] *“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” ... “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*

It is only through our close fellowship with the Holy Spirit that the developing fruits of the Spirit in our lives allow us to remain faithful to our discipleship.

John 13:34-35 [NIV] *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

We practise our newly received “fruit” of love with our brethren so we can extend this to all other people.

Acts 2:42 [NIV] *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

Gathering together to learn of God’s ways and sharing fellowship meals with each other strengthened the early church in the time of trial and persecution.

Hebrews 10:24-25 [NIV] *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

Physical contact through fellowship can encourage and strengthen us through any trial we face.

What is this day that is approaching?

1 Thessalonians 4:14-18 [NIV] *“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”*

The day of the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58 [NIV] *“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”*

The hope of this resurrection is the power that will allow us to remain faithful and follow Jesus to the end of this physical life.

The invitation is ours to accept but the conditions are not negotiable.

The true Christian is a cross-bearing Christian.