

DISCUSSION 5

Why Is the Church Responsible for So Much Injustice? Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites?

— OPENING THOUGHT —

Read this thought aloud and then pray as you begin.

In this peculiar way, Christianity is internally consistent—the church is full of sinners because in order to be a Christian a person has to admit that he or she is a sinner. In other words, it is not really a surprise that Christians sin, that there is an inconsistency between what they say and what they do, because the Bible explains again and again why people’s hearts are drawn toward selfishness and pride and so on. The Bible says “this is how you should live if you believe this” but it also says “you can’t, and you won’t” and provides a solution to that problem in Jesus. Christianity, unlike other religions or self-help programs, acknowledges it cannot be followed perfectly.

— THE OBJECTION —

People feel that they cannot identify with an institution such as the church or with Christian individuals when they see such an appalling record of injustice and hypocrisy.

These verses are referred to at some point in the DVD.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

[Jesus said] “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. . . .

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Ephesians 2:8–9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Watch the DVD of Discussion 5. Use the space below if you would like to take notes.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

The notes in the gray boxes following the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help guide and direct the discussion.

1. One of the participants on the DVD said,

“I think the objectionable Christians that I’ve seen . . . I see them being judgmental, I see them being extremely self-righteous, and I see them holding people that they deem to be sinners to a different standard than they would themselves, and I find that to be extremely problematic.”

What do you think about this statement? Do you know people who feel this way?

2. How would you answer the charge that the church is judgmental and full of hypocrites?

Acknowledge that this is sometimes the case. Sometimes this is because of a well-intentioned misunderstanding or misapplication of the Bible. Sometimes it is because Christians are sinners and are indeed judgmental and fail to live up to their standards. Sometimes it is through pure thoughtlessness. Even when Christians use phrases like, “Before I was a Christian I used to . . .,” they can come across as judgmental without meaning to come across in that manner.

Dr. Keller on the DVD defined a hypocrite as “an inconsistent person, a person that says one thing; does another, and knows that they are doing something wrong but puts up a front.” Acknowledge that there are people like that in the church, just like there are everywhere else. But, then, there aren’t many people whose lives really match their rhetoric. None of us is as kind or patient or generous as we know we should be, or as we want to be.

R. C. Sproul writes, “The Christian church is one of the few organizations in the world that requires a public acknowledgment of sin as a condition for membership. In one sense the church has fewer hypocrites than any institution because by definition the church is a haven for sinners. If the church claimed to be an organization of perfect people then her claim would be hypocritical. But no such claim is made by the church. There is no slander in the charge that the church is full of sinners. Such a statement would only compliment the church for fulfilling her divinely appointed task.”¹⁷

3. Dr. Keller said on the DVD,

“Why wouldn’t a church be a place where you would find inconsistent, broken people, who don’t always get it right?”

Can you give examples of people from the Bible who are thought of as great or important figures, but who were also broken or flawed in some way? Divide into pairs to do this and then share your answers with the group.

The examples are numerous. Two obvious ones from the Old and New Testaments: King David, who was Israel’s greatest king and greatest poet, was also an adulterer and murderer. Peter, who was one of Jesus’ closest disciples and a leader of the early church, lied to protect himself and betrayed Jesus.

17. R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 78–79.

4. In his book *God Is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens addresses a hypothetical question he was asked on a panel with radio host Dennis Prager: If he were alone in an unfamiliar city at night, and a group of strangers began to approach him, would he feel safer, or less safe, knowing that these men had just come from a prayer meeting? Hitchens answers,

“Just to stay within the letter ‘B’, I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case . . . I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance.”¹⁸

Hitchens then gives detailed descriptions of the tense social and political situations within these cities, which he attributes to religion. Many people believe that religions like Christianity inevitably lead to violence and oppression. How do you respond?

Start by stating that this is a fair point—violence done in the name of Christianity (or any religion or philosophy) is a terrible reality and must be both addressed and redressed. Acknowledge also that any religion can take transcendent ideas like cosmic good and evil, and combine them with feeling like their beliefs are superior to everyone else’s—and that mixture can turn explosive.

However, one problem with the statement that religion leads to violence is that it is too simplistic. The communist regimes of the 20th century (atheistic by design) perpetrated horrific acts of violence and injustice in the name of the state. These societies were rational and secular—yet they inflicted violence against their own people without the influence of religion. It appears that there

is something deep in human nature that leads us to make some idea or value transcendent or absolute (whether an explicitly religious one or not) in order to either claim some superior moral ground or as an excuse to oppress and do violence to others. There are sad and inexcusable examples in which professing Christians have failed to resist this impulse, but the universality of violence means we cannot pin the problem on religion. The problem is within us.

5. One of the participants on the DVD said,

“I thought the point was really compelling—it actually struck me—trying to put yourself in the shoes of the person rather than interpret their actions through your own lens.”

Do people you know generally behave like this? Why or why not? Why might it be important to do this?

6. What do you tend to do when you read a text in the Bible that you do not immediately understand and whose meaning offends and/or upsets you?

18. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007), 18.

7. What advice would you give persons who read a text in the Bible that they do not immediately understand and whose meaning offends and/or upsets them?

Four things to do when you get to a text of the Bible that offends or upsets you.

Consider the possibility that it does not teach what you think it teaches.

In Luke 24:13–32 the Emmaus disciples are upset because they think the Scripture teaches something it does not. Jesus tells them they do not understand.

Be patient with the text. Many of the things people find offensive can be cleared up with a decent commentary that puts the issue into historical context. The text may not be teaching what you think it is.

Consider the possibility that you are misunderstanding what the Bible teaches because of your own cultural blinders or the possibility that you may be offended by certain biblical texts because of an unexamined assumption of the superiority of your own cultural moment.

The Emmaus disciples misunderstood the prophecies about the Messiah because as Jews they were thinking of the redemption of Israel and not the redemption of the world. It is very easy to read a passage through cultural blinders and therefore misunderstand what the text actually teaches.

Moreover, people may say a passage is regressive and offensive because it is a problem for their culture, but other cultures may think the same passage is perfectly acceptable. For example, in some cultures, what the Bible says about sex is a problem, but there are no issues with what it says about forgiveness. In other cultures, they like what the Bible says about sex, but what the Bible says about forgiveness is considered ridiculous. Why should one set of cultural sensibilities trump everybody else's?

If the Bible really is the revelation of God and not the product of any one culture, why wouldn't it offend some cultural sensibilities at some point? Consider that the problem with some texts might be based on an unexamined belief in the superiority of one historical moment over all others.

Distinguish between the major themes and message of the Bible and its less primary teachings.

If people say, "I can't accept what the Bible says about gender roles, or politics," ask them to keep in mind that Christians themselves differ over what some texts mean. However, Christians all agree that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. People do not need to worry about gender roles until they have decided what they think about the central teachings of the faith.

They may appeal, "But I can't accept the Bible if what it says about gender is outmoded." Respond to that with this question—"Are you saying that because you don't like what the Bible says about gender roles that Jesus couldn't have been raised from the dead? If Jesus is the Son of God, then we have to take his teaching seriously. If he is not who he says he is, why should we care what the Bible says about anything else?"

Remember that all of Scripture is about Jesus.

Jesus tells the Emmaus disciples that they misunderstood the Scripture—Christ had to suffer these things. Why did they misunderstand? The key is Luke 24:27—"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Jesus is saying, "Everything in the Bible is about me."

If you think the Bible is all about you—what you must do and how you must live—then you do not need Jesus. All you need are the rules. There are only two ways to read the Bible: you can read the Bible as if it is all about you and what you must do to please God and be a good person, or you can read the Bible as if it is all about Jesus and what he has done for you.

8. Was there anything from the way the DVD discussion was conducted in terms of tone, atmosphere, attitude, mannerisms, expressions, and so on, that you might find helpful to adopt, or not, when you run your own discussion about this objection?

Notice for example how Dr. Keller dealt with criticism of the church and of Christians.

9. On the DVD Dr. Keller quotes Martin Luther who said, “All of life is repentance.”¹⁹ Explain.

Christianity is often equated with obeying the rules; being a morally superior person; having an unshakeable certainty of being right. Actually, most religions operate on this principle: “If I live as I ought, I will be accepted by God.” But Christianity has a completely different operating principle—“If I am accepted by God as a gift through what Christ has done, then I will try to live as I ought.” Christians are people who understand that they will always fail to live as they should, and that therefore they need forgiveness and grace. The prerequisite to becoming a Christian is admitting that you have this problem and that you need God’s help. So continual repentance should be a mark of a Christian’s life. Only people who rely on religious morality for their relationship to God instead of grace can maintain a sense of superiority toward those who do not believe and live as they do. Only people who do not routinely repent can be thoroughgoing hypocrites.

19. Martin Luther, “Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” (1517), Thesis 1: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.”

10. Dr. Keller said on the DVD,

“In the Old Testament and especially in the New Testament with Jesus, there are internal self-critiques by the believing community on . . . religious hypocrisy or in the New Testament ‘pharisaism.’”

What is the difference between “pharisaism” (or moralism) and the gospel?

Dr. Keller continued, “The difference between a Pharisee in the New Testament and a Christ-follower is not that the Pharisee and the Christian aren’t both trying to obey God, they actually are . . . but [the Pharisee] is doing it not only self-righteously and feeling superior to other people but when they do wrong they won’t admit it and so there is not this theme of humble repentance.”

When Jesus preached what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount he gave a strong rebuke of religious hypocrisy or moralism. He criticized those who prayed, who gave their money to the poor, who obeyed the rules. Jesus was clearly not against those things, but he was pointing out that often people do those “religious” things in order to feel superior to others. Jesus understood that perhaps the chief danger of the kind of religious moralism in which a community felt they had earned God’s favor was that it would lead them to feeling that they deserved deference and respect from all other communities.

Instead, Jesus taught that the “last will be first” (Matthew 19:30); that you find your life by giving it away (Mark 8:35); that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35); that no one is good enough to earn God’s favor (Luke 18:18–30).

Jesus himself lived that out by sacrificing his life so that his followers could be reconciled to God. Christians follow someone who sacrificed everything to redeem and renew the world. At the heart of the Christian faith is a man who died a victim of injustice and who called for the forgiveness of his enemies. This is why the paradoxical symbol at the center of Christianity is not a great throne embossed with gold but a wooden cross stained with blood. It is weird that people walk around with crosses as jewelry—it is like having little electric chairs as earrings. But it is because at the center of Christianity is a God who surrendered his power so that others could live.

FINAL THOUGHT

Read this thought aloud.

The effect of the Christian message is that it changes your identity. Your identity becomes defined by what God has done for you in Jesus; in what God thinks of you in Jesus. If that identity is not beginning to show itself in your attitude toward other races and classes, toward the poor and oppressed, toward people who differ from you in their opinions or beliefs, you may say that you have faith but your faith is dead.

PRAYER

Spend time praying about the things you have learned in this study and how you might help people you know with this objection.

ADDITIONAL READING

The Reason for God, Timothy Keller (ch. 4, “The Church Is Responsible for So Much Injustice”)

The Transforming Vision, Brian Walsh, J. R. Middleton

Let Justice Roll Down, John Perkins

Church History in Plain Language, Bruce L. Shelley

Creation Regained, Albert Wolters

Until Justice and Peace Embrace, Nicholas Wolterstorff