

Rebuild



Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations.(Isaiah 61:4)

Bible & Church “In Context”

First, a word from the Bible...

“Do ... what ... you ... like ... Go therefore... and sin.” (Mark 13:2; John 8:32; Matthew 18:3; 28:19; 1 John 3:4)

I bet you did not know that was in the Bible, did you? Well, it is. I have not added one word of my own. I have just quoted pure Bible, and nothing else.

What’s the problem? Although I used Bible *words*, I arranged those words to betray Bible *meanings*. By taking the Bible’s message “out of context”, I actually made the Bible say something that it really opposes.

No genuine lover of God would ever consciously distort the message of the Bible this way. We all know it is immoral to lift out words, make them say what we want, and ignore the fuller meaning of the message they represent. But unfortunately, this is often what we American Christians do when it comes to the Biblical teaching on the Church. We have done a lot of “cutting and pasting,” and our personalized edition makes the Bible say something it does not mean.

For example, this is how we average American Christians read the Bible when it comes to our individuality and the Church:

“Christians don’t need to commit to other Christians ... we all can pursue God on our own, in our way, by ourselves.”

This is how the American culture has chopped, grated, and re-arranged our understanding of the Bible in respect to the Church.

The *cultural context* of the Bible radically opposes this American me-centered understanding of the Church. Here is a contrasting list of how a Christian saw him/herself during New Testament times, and how we American Christians tend to see things today:

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New Testament Context	American Context
<p>Context of Surrounding Culture (One in the Many): Identity in relationship. One’s identity is in context of community: family clan, town of birth, nationality, and religion.</p>	<p>Context of Surrounding Culture (One Alone): Identity is defined, “found” by self– usually through such things as education, career, wealth, tuning in to one’s feelings, and personal achievement.</p>
<p>Conversion (Covenant): One joins him/herself to Christ (accepts God’s Covenant) and is relationally <i>bound/fettered</i> (literal translation for “covenant”) to God, <i>and</i> to His People (the Church).</p>	<p>Conversion (Individualistic): One makes a “decision” for Christ but remains unconnected to other Christians (accepting Covenant with God, but unknowingly ignoring Covenant to fellow believers).</p>
<p>Character of Christian Life: Celebration of Covenant relationships (to God & brethren in Eucharistic worship), ministry in Body, relational interdependence, prayer, interpreting and applying God’s Word as Community.</p>	<p>Character of Christian Life: “Attend” services, give money, (private) prayer and study, “getting ahead” (mostly defined in material terms), maintenance of nuclear family.</p>
<p>Purpose: To reflect God’s Kingdom in life, and Community, living in relationships of true brotherhood-sisterhood, sharing life, and resources in Covenant love.</p>	<p>Purpose: From “Doing something ‘great’ for God!” to “Raising a family and living a moral life.”</p>

The New Testament perspectives about what it means to be a Christian and one's identity with the Christian Community, and the way we see things now, are dramatically different. This is not just altering the translation of the Bible to be contemporary; it is to cut away at the heart of the text.

The first Christians...

were continually devoting themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread [Eucharist/Covenant-Meal] and to prayer ... selling their property... sharing with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:42,44,45).

Devoted to teaching and fellowship. *Selling* property so needs in the Christian Community can be met. Talk about un-American! Check the context. You'll find that this was the people's response to Peter's proclamation of the Gospel - that is, the first Christians saw this kind of commitment as an appropriate response to Peter's "altar call." This is what it meant to enter into Covenant with Christ in the first century - this is the kind of commitment it still requires.

The Significance

What difference does it make if we have distorted what it means to be a Christian and forgotten the meaning of Covenant relationships? It makes a great deal of difference! If we proclaimed the Gospel in its context, and called people to not only acknowledge Christ, but to honor God's Covenant by also committing themselves to God's People, here are two things that would begin to happen:

- The world would finally witness a kind of love that is different from the self-interest, on-again-off-again, feeling-driven impulse that characterizes our culture. In other words, it would see a love that people could honestly term as "other-worldly," a love that can only be of God. What do you think would happen if two unrelated people started to attend to one another as if they were intimate family members? People would begin to ask, "Why are you two relating this way to one another?" That is the kind of question that God would have the world pose again and again to members of the Christian Church. "Why do you act like brethren?" Our answer: "Because *we have been made family* through Christ's Covenant."

- The Christian People would move from defense to offense. The Christian people have been prodded into action by society's corruption. This is too passive a response. The Church is to be a reflection of God and how He lives, an environment of authenticity. If we insist that the Church's might is centered in only opposing evil (through vote, or debate) we have misunderstood both the greatness of her power and the depth of the world's problems. The world cannot be "patched up" through moralisms; it is governed by death, and the ruler of this age. This truth does not mean that we must either give up or try harder. It can be a call to re-discover the meaning of Church, Covenant, and Gospel within the Biblical context. It can be an opportunity where the Christian Church can once again challenge the world by offering *another* "world", an *alternative society* where God's Word is lived in the context of Covenant love.

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