

Introduction:

I must admit I perfected Calvin's "C" mindset in High School. Out of the 275 students in my graduating class, my rank was exactly 137. I was the quintessential "C" student, i.e., I learned just enough to pass but not enough to excel, at least not academically (fav "c"s = class clown).

My desire to be more than a mediocre student changed however when I went off for theological training. This pursuit had led me to four different schools, four different degrees, in four different states, and believe it or not, a few academic awards along the way. But more importantly, rigorous training in such disciplines as hermeneutics, exegesis, church history, biblical languages, homiletics, and apologetics, enables me to accurately, and confidently, teach the "Full council of God" (Acts 20:27). And the ability to detect bad teaching from four continents over. Furthermore, it ensconced in my mind that the most important image of all the pastoral images is that of resident scholar/theologian. Moreover, I gladly pronounce to you that as a "Son of the Reformation," with its primary tenant of "Sola Scriptura" ("Only Scripture") and as such, maintain a high view and deep love for God's Word and an ongoing passion to propagate and defend it.

Although I thank God for these educational opportunities, I tell them to you for one reason this morning to make a confession. That confession is simply that it is far easier for me to pursue the more intellectual aspects of the faith much more than the practical ones. In my defense however, (who loves it when someone rationalizes an apology?), there is no denying that Christianity is the most intellectual/rational of all faiths. The intellectual excellence found in Christianity is fueled by two explicit commands. In Luke 10:27, where Jesus tells us,

Love the Lord God with all your mind.

And in 2 Timothy 2:15, where Paul encourages his young protégé and seminarian Timothy,

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

No other religion has come close to producing such intellectual behemoths like Aquinas, Augustine, Luther, Newton, Galileo, Copernicus, Paschal, or even the more modern ones like Edwards, Leibniz, Lewis, Barth, or even Lane Craig. I could go on, but even the Apostle Paul, before and after his conversion, was considered one of the top minds of his time. With such a rich and robust intellectual history, it's ironic (and quite sad) that the American church has been characterized as, "A mile wide and an inch deep." There are many reasons for this (all disturbing) but if you like your messages like you like your beer, i.e., "lite" I can tell you we don't serve that here. Renowned Catholic Bishop Robert Barron warns, "The church needs to stop dumbing down the Gospel. The younger generation wants depth." Even the greatest evangelist ever, Billy Graham, co-founder of one of my alma maters, lamented how he never took the time to get his "theological ax" sharpened. I can't be too hard on him, however. He's led a few more people to Christ than I have, by about many millions.

Balancing Knowing and Doing

As intellectually impressive the Christian faith is, we need to remember that it is also the most practical of all religions. In essence, it is the best mix of both, a glorious, “Both/And-er.” Therefore, our job is to keep knowing our faith (orthodoxy-correct belief) in balance with doing our faith (orthopraxis-correct practice). If we don’t, it can easily become something we “know” but don’t “do.” Or something we “do” but not “know.” OR worse, something we don’t “know” and don’t “do.” The best example of our faith as something we equally know and do, is our founder, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ

Jesus’ teaching corpus included tons of teaching regarding the practical nature of Christianity. Perhaps the most illustrative is his well-known parable called the “Good Samaritan.” In it, a man gets ambushed, robbed, and beaten within an inch of his life. Two people from the club, “We know our faith but don’t do our faith” ignore him, probably so they wouldn’t be late to the next seminar on practical Christianity. One man, however, from the club, “I know my faith and also do my faith” immediately stops and administers practical help to the victim. Listen to Luke 10:33-35

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Jesus’ other famous teaching on practical faith is called the “The Least of These” in Matthew 25:35-36:

35 For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me.’

Could Christianity be any more practical? See a need, meet a need. See another need and meet that one too. But Jesus himself practiced practical Christianity. He served. He healed. He fed. He was never reluctant to dive in to help alleviate the suffering of humanity. Thus, he defied the old axiom, “Those who can, do.” “Those who can’t, teach.” He did what he taught and taught what he did.

As we well know, the church is the physical embodiment of Jesus. Paul emphatically states this truth in I Corinthians 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Teresa of Avila “fleshes” out this notion:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

If what Teddy Roosevelt said is true, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care” then how will people know we care for them or even if Jesus does? We do practical Christianity or “ministry” which can be defined as “demonstrating the love of God in practical ways.” If we need ministry ideas, we can always start with our founding theological father, John Wesley’s “*Help Manifesto*”:

Help the poor.
Help people find work.
Help promote a living wage.
Help people get an education.
Help people know their value.
Help promote unity.
Help honor women.
Help people trust in God more than riches.
Help end slavery.
Help peace.
Help spread the love of God around the world.
Help care for God’s world.

Conclusion

Hopefully during our new “Practical Christianity” series we will discover that Christianity is both wicked smart and downright gritty, i.e., a muddy-boots, dirty hands, and apron-wearing faith. Each week we will present a practical invitation for each of us to balance out our faith with a simple act of service. For this week’s application, watch this video from our youth ministry (delivering backpacks to those in need).

** You can view the video on Vimeo at this link: <https://vimeo.com/673434833>