

INTENTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

By Rev. Will Nelken

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The Christian church has been a cornerstone of American life for centuries.

According to research by George Barna:

“Most people in this country identify as Christian. Almost three-quarters of Americans (73%) say they are a Christian, while only one-fifth (20%) claim no faith at all (that includes atheists and agnostics). A fraction (6%) identify with faiths like Islam, Buddhism, Judaism or Hinduism, and 1 percent are unsure. Not only do most Americans identify as Christian, but a similar percentage (73%) also agree that religious faith is very important in their life (52% strongly agree + 21% somewhat agree).

“Even though a majority of Americans identify as Christian and say religious faith is very important in their life, these huge proportions belie the much smaller number of Americans who regularly *practice* their faith— around one in three U.S. adults (31%).”

Relevant Magazine published an article in May 2017 that reports:

“A new joint study by Barna and Summit Ministries looks at the worldviews of practicing Christians. The results aren’t flattering.

“Among other things, it found that only 17 percent of Christians have what the researchers consider a biblical worldview. For that definition, Barna provides these markers:

- believing that absolute moral truth exists
- the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches
- Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic
- a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth
- God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.

The percentage being so low means practicing Christians have accepted many more worldviews including ones based on other religions.

“Based on the study, 61 percent of practicing Christians strongly agree with at least one of the ideas of ‘new spirituality’—that everyone is praying to the same god/ultimate being, regardless of the name they use for it (28 percent); that meaning and purpose come from becoming one with all that is (27 percent); and that good deeds are rewarded with good and bad deeds receive bad in turn (32 percent).

“Fifty-four percent agree with one of the study’s statements about postmodernism: that no one can know for certain what meaning and purpose there is to life (19 percent); that morality is subjective (23 percent); and if your beliefs offend someone or hurt their feelings, they are wrong (15 percent).”

If these findings disturb you or challenge you, I urge you to join me this Fall on Sunday evenings for a 12-week study called “The Truth Project,” which will help you to discover and define a genuinely Biblical worldview for yourself and your family. Save the start date: Sunday, September 8.

I believe the sum of all this is that our faith practice, our Christianity, must be intentional. If it is accidental or haphazard it will not be pleasing to God, nor will it be fruitful for us.

You will not *drift* into Heaven! Jesus was very clear:

Matthew 7:13 “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. ¹⁴ But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

Wow! Heaven or Hell. This is ultimate truth.

Jesus said, *“The gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.”* Would you agree that He’s a good authority on this subject?

So, let’s be straight with each other today. This topic is not to be taken lightly, nor can we afford to ignore it. That means we must become “intentional” about our faith journey. If we wander, we will wander into a ditch. If we drift, we will drift away.

Intentional Christianity has two parts: God’s part, and our part.

God’s intent is strategic. He took the initiative to save us when we could not save ourselves. The plan for our salvation, the strategy, is entirely His. He dreamed it up, and He worked it out.

Our intent is responsive. We must individually respond to God’s gracious initiative. We must agree to His plan, and sign on with faith.

Too often people swap these roles; they want to strategize and map out a plan, and then pray that God will respond to their ideas. That is counterfeit Christianity. It’s a recipe for frustration and defeat.

The Letter to the Hebrews says:

Hebrews 2:1 We must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it.

Today, to be sure we will not drift, we're going to anchor our faith to the words of Peter, an apostle of Christ.

God's Intent Is Strategic

Peter expressed God's intent (His strategic idea) clearly and succinctly:

1 Peter 1:3 All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation,⁴ and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.

We have a reason to praise God! We have a reason to worship wholeheartedly: we have been born again! Our new birth is inextricably tied to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Don't ever imagine that the miracle of His rising from the dead is simply icing on the cake; it IS the cake! It is the centerpiece of God's saving work.

"We have been born again, BECAUSE God raised Jesus Christ from the dead."

And the result of this gift from God is that we now live with "great expectation," a hope that reaches beyond this world and its chaos, beyond this life and its pain and uncertainties, into Heaven—God's home—where the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's promises to His children are reserved for us. Of this, the Holy Spirit gives us profound assurance. All praise to God!

1 Peter 1:6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while.⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine.

We have trials here and now, but if we endure them, they will come to an end, for there is "wonderful joy ahead"! Trials are not fun, and they are often painful, and some are long. But when you are tested, and you endure (you don't give up, you don't cave in, you don't turn away from Christ to rely on other things), it shows that your faith is real.

1 Peter 1:9 The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.

So what? What difference does this reality make for you? In light of what we have just read, how will you respond?

Once you were lost, but now you are found. Once you were blind, but now you see. So, how will you live now, differently than you lived before? How will you adjust your way of life? How should you conduct yourself? How will your new birth, your new life be seen by others?

Our Intent Is Responsive

Here is the Holy Spirit's advice for our response to God's great idea:

¹ Peter 1:13 So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. ¹⁴ So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. ¹⁵ But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. ¹⁶ For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy." ¹⁷ And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do.

Let me break that down for you...

Two things are required of each of us: preparation and exercise.

¹ Peter 1:13 So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world.

You need to prepare your minds for action! There is no time for delay. There is no room for inaction. Christianity is forward-moving. And Christianity is now.

Paul wrote:

² Corinthians 6:1 As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. ² For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation.

The right time is now. Today is the day of your salvation. So, prepare your minds for action. What are you doing for Jesus Christ? How are you advancing His Kingdom? Are you telling others about Him?

Here at Trinity Community Church, we aim to do three things persistently: (1) Introduce people to Jesus Christ; (2) Teach people to trust Christ; and (3) Send people to serve Christ.

Everything we do, every program we offer aims to do one or more of these things. These are actions. Actions that express our hope in the gracious salvation of Christ.

Are you prepared to act? It starts with a mental adjustment. None of these three things are part of your natural life. You didn't do any of them before you were born again. You probably didn't even think about them before.

But now we are commanded to think about them, to prepare our minds for action.

That preparation may involve learning why they are important, so you hold them in proper esteem, and give them their due priority. The Bible will inform you of their value. Get into a Bible study group (like our Tuesday night Bible Inquiry).

That preparation may also involve learning associated skills, and being mentored by someone who is already doing the work. Get the training you need. And remember, a lot of it will be on-the-job training, so sign up and get started.

That preparation will surely involve casting out fear and laziness, and developing new, good habits of faithfulness, for we are not simply commanded to prepare our minds, but to prepare them FOR ACTION. Don't let fear rule your life. Let God's love for you through Christ overcome your fears.

Prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control.

A lot of people prepare to exercise, but never get around to it. Thus, the glut of rarely used exercise equipment available at yard sales and Craig's List. Don't practice Christianity like that!

You need to exercise self-control.

But know this: Biblical self-control is not control of your actions by the power of your self; it is control OF your self by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's activity in your life. If you have been born again, the Holy Spirit is in you. But is He active? He is, if you're yielded and responsive to Him.

Is the fruit maturing? It doesn't happen all at once; it's a process. But growth should be evident.

You exercise self-control when you say "no" to your own selfish inclinations and desires. Jesus set the example for this. He said:

⁴⁵ "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Not to be served, but to serve others.

You exercise self-control when you yield to the Holy Spirit's gentle promptings—stay, go, speak, be silent, give, help, listen, show interest, be kind, apologize, forgive, give thanks. The

Holy Spirit always moves along the lines of love—loving God and loving others, especially other Christians—fulfilling Jesus’ command. If you act in love, you will be exercising self-control and following the Spirit of God.

Real Christianity Is Visible Faith

Peter has outlined for us a “visible faith.” My friends, this is what real Christianity—intentional Christianity—looks like:

It’s active and it’s self-controlled.

It’s obedient to the Father.

1 Peter 1:14 So you must live as God’s obedient children. Don’t slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn’t know any better then.

It’s holy in all conduct.

*1 Peter 1:15 But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.
16 For the Scriptures say, “You must be holy because I am holy.”*

It’s accountable to God.

1 Peter 1:17 And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do.

Let’s not be another statistic of lukewarm Christianity.

Revelation 3:15 “I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! 16 But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!

Let’s get the goods and live the life!