

The Question of Hypocrisy in the Church

Between the years of 1940 and 1984 Francis Schaeffer served as a pastor, Christian apologist, and was co-founder in 1955 with his wife Edith of L'Abri, a ministry dedicated to fostering discussions on the religious and cultural ideas of the day. In one of his more popular books, *True Spirituality*, Schaeffer opened by recounting a turning point he experienced in his ministry. He writes,

In 1951 and 1952 I faced a spiritual crisis in my own life. I had become a Christian from agnosticism many years before. After that I had become a pastor for ten years in the United States, and then for several years my wife, Edith, and I had been working in Europe. During this time, I felt a strong burden to stand for the historical Christian position, and for the purity of the visible Church. Gradually, however, a problem came to me—the problem of reality. This had two parts: first, it seemed to me that among many of those who held the orthodox position one saw little reality of the things that the Bible so clearly said should be the result of Christianity. Second, it gradually grew on me that my own reality was less than it had been in the early days after I had become a Christian.

Schaeffer experienced what many believers experience at some point in their lives. That point when the separation between what is known to be right and the extent to which that knowledge is lived out becomes evident. The more we grow spiritually, the more we come to realize that sin is not only expressed through outward actions but in subtle, inward battles such as personal motives, heart attitudes, selfishness, and pride. These inward expressions of sin in our lives demonstrate the separation between who we are called to be as followers of Jesus and how we actually live. It is this difference between what we know to be right and how we live on a daily basis that is called hypocrisy. Simply put, hypocrisy represents the gap between what we say we believe and how we live.

We've all probably heard someone respond to an invitation to attend church by saying, "I don't go to church because there are too many hypocrites there." This is a response that not only rejects attending a church service but often the Christian faith

in general. And, while it is a correct assessment to say that those who attend church are hypocrites, it ignores the reality that every person is a hypocrite to some extent, regardless of whether they attend church or not. Nobody is able to live life without some degree of contradiction between what they say and what they do. This inability to live a perfect life, according to the Bible, represents the fallen nature of humanity and our need of a Savior.

Furthermore, those who reject the Christian faith for this reason do so usually not because there are hypocrites in the church, but because they have been hurt themselves or know of someone who has been hurt by others who claimed to be part of the church. And although it is intellectually recognized that nobody is perfect, people still do not like being hurt by the imperfections of others. As such, when a person is hurt or hears of someone being hurt by an individual or group acting in the name of Christianity, they tend to associate the one(s) who did the hurting and the Christian faith they represent as something to be avoided. This is a psychological phenomenon that is witnessed in various areas of life. For instance, if an individual is bitten by a dog early in life, it is not uncommon for that person to dislike all dogs from that time forward, even though only one dog bit them. The same is true in the case of being hurt by others identified with a particular social or religious affiliation.

According to Clinton and Jeff Arnold, when people attend church there is an unspoken expectation that they won't encounter anything they don't like. It is assumed by many that those who make up the church "have been fixed by Jesus." But it doesn't take long to recognize that those who claim the name of Christ are not fixed but are being fixed. If a person walked into a hospital, they wouldn't be surprised to find sick people being mended, because hospitals were created to help sick people get well. Spiritually speaking, while salvation occurs at a point in time, it is also a point of beginning; the beginning of a process in which believers are molded into the image of Christ upon acknowledging Him as Lord and Savior. Therefore, the church is not a place of perfect people but a place where people recognize their imperfection and need of a Savior.

Gandhi is famously quoted as saying, "I like your Christ, but I don't like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." While a scathing critique of the church in the modern era, Gandhi judged the Christian faith as a whole because of the

actions of a few who acted contrary to how the Bible instructs believers to live.

Several examples in history are mentioned by those outside the faith to illustrate the hypocrisy of Christianity. Three of the most cited are the Crusades, in which thousands of people were killed in the name of Christ for the purpose of reclaiming the Holy Land; the Inquisition, in which many were tortured at the hands of the church itself; and the Salem witch trials, in which a few people died because they were accused of using witchcraft. The one commonality of all these atrocities is that they were committed by those who, though acting in the name of Christ, did in fact act contrary to what the Bible teaches. It is a sad fact that people throughout history have used religion, especially Christianity, to further their own power, affluence, and glory. In doing so, they betrayed the teachings of Jesus and stood in opposition to what the faith proclaims. Nothing done in the Crusades, Inquisition, or Salem witch trials has anything to do with Christianity except that the faith was used for the self-serving purposes of certain individuals. Events like these are in no way related or in accordance with the Bible's instruction on how believers should live and act.

However unfair, when even a few individuals act in a manner that is contrary to the biblical revelation, it affects the witness of all believers. As Os Guinness says,

Hypocrisy is damaging because it squarely undercuts our testimony before we may have said a single word. It is therefore one of the worst charges thrown against us as followers of Jesus. Hypocrisy is second only to the problem of suffering and evil.

Jesus' view on hypocrisy is presented in Matthew 23 when He addressed the religious leaders of His day and pronounced several "woes" upon them. In the encounter He warned the people not to follow the examples of the scribes and Pharisees because they did not practice what they preached but laid heavy burdens on people's shoulders, burdens they themselves were unwilling to carry (vv.3-4). Jesus called the religious leaders "blind guides," "fools," individuals who "strained at a gnat but swallowed a camel," and who did "all their deeds to be seen by others" (vv.5,16-24). Jesus proclaimed that they were not righteous as they supposed themselves to be but merely appeared clean on the outside when in fact they were full of greed, selfish indulgence, hypocrisy, and lawlessness (vv.25-29). He ended with the question, "You serpents,

you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (v.33).

Matthew 23 contains some of the harshest words Jesus spoke during His ministry concerning the issue of hypocrisy. The severity of Jesus’ words can be found in His last two descriptions of the scribes and Pharisees: serpents and vipers. In the Jewish mind, these two words would have immediately been associated with none other than the greatest deceiver of all, the Serpent who appeared in the garden of Eden and led humanity away from God. Jesus condemned those who should have known better. Unfortunately, we all fall into the trap of not living up to what we know to be right and good: to live according to how God has called us to live. Even the apostle Paul admitted that he struggled to live up to the standards of what he understood. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”(Romans 7:18-19).

As believers, we are instructed to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). We are also called to be God’s witnesses to the world around us, living examples of the spiritual transformation He has brought about in our lives through salvation (Acts 1:8). It is only because of the salvation granted us in Jesus that our position before God is made right, and we are continually being molded more and more into the image of Christ. However, even though our position before God has changed, we will still sin; and John gives us hope when we do sin. He writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). John goes on to say that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, who offered Himself as a substitute for our sins. The call to confess our sins does not apply only to those who seek salvation but to those who have already acknowledged Jesus as Savior and Lord (2:1–2).

It’s important to remember that we who follow Christ are not better than anyone else because of our salvation. We are just better than we used to be because we have been transformed and redeemed. We live in a state of being in which we are called to proclaim our faith to the world so that others might experience the same reality.

With the above said, what can be done about hypocrisy in the church today? While several recommendations could be listed, we will address three that can help us respond to those who challenge the faith with this issue.

First, it should be recognized that there are true and false believers in the church today. What does this mean? Simply put, not every person who attends church is a true believer. In any given church there will be those who are Christian in name only. While it is true that some people identify themselves religiously as a Christian, possibly because their parents or friends are Christian, it doesn't mean they are true followers of Jesus. That is, they have not come to the point in their life where they have acknowledged Jesus' death and resurrection as their only hope of having their sins forgiven and receiving the hope of eternal life. Their lives are still in service to their own desires and not submitted to God's will.

The challenge is, nobody can distinguish between a true and false believer in general. There are false believers in the church who act like true believers and there are true believers in the church who act like false believers. The apostle Paul gives multiple examples of the latter in his letters to the church at Corinth.

In what many consider to be the last letter Paul wrote in his life, 2 Timothy, he warned that in the last days there would be those who would merely have the appearance of godliness without the inward spiritual transformation (3:5). It seems we are seeing and experiencing more and more in the world today the reality of what Paul predicted would occur. Therefore, it is incumbent upon true believers to live out their faith before the world in the way they think, act, and communicate to others. Jesus said the world would know His disciples, or followers, by the love they expressed for one another (John 13:35). How Christians treat those both inside and outside the church speaks volumes about the faith they hold.

Second, it should be realized that one of the greatest causes of hypocrisy in the church is people living according to their own agendas rather than God's agenda. Christians are called to be God's ambassadors to the world around them and, as such, live according to His will, not their own. In teaching the disciples, Jesus said that being His followers required taking up their cross, denying themselves, and following His example (Matthew 16:24).

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul writes that he gave everything up for the cause of Christ; that whatever was of earthly

value to him before, he now considered worthless (literally dung) in comparison to knowing Christ and the salvation He offers. Paul goes on to say that the greatest desire in his life was to know Christ, to know the power of His resurrection, to participate in His sufferings, and to become like Him in His death (see Philippians 3:7–10). The more those who identify with Jesus seek to know Him, the less likely they will be to live lives contrary to what He taught. Knowing and imitating Jesus should be the goal of every believer.

Third, believers need to understand that they are called to put away sin and instead live with their minds set on a greater reality. In Colossians 3:1–2 Paul challenges believers that if they have been raised up with Christ (another way of describing salvation), then they should set their minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. This does not mean that believers are to ignore the good things God has created, but that they are to live life with the understanding that they are part of something bigger than what they see around them. The church has been called to a great purpose that extends into eternity.

The passage goes on to list several practices which Christians are called to “put to death” such as sexual immorality, evil desires, covetousness, idolatry, anger, lying, and obscene talk (Colossians 3:5–8). These actions represent the works of the flesh as Paul records in his letter to the Galatians (5:19–21). Instead, believers are to demonstrate through our lives the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv.14–15).

Finally, Paul instructs his readers to “put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:14–15). When these characteristics are operational in a believer’s life, the charge of hypocrisy will be greatly diminished.

Regardless of how well we seek to live our lives, however, Jesus reminds us that the world will hate those who follow Him (see John 15:18–19). As the church, we are called to be faithful in our service to God, in being His witnesses, in living godly lives, and in showing kindness, love, and compassion to those around us. When we fail to live up to the expectations God has for us, we can cast a negative witness on the church as a whole. That said, there is always the promise of forgiveness and restoration. And

we should remember that we are all works in progress and should treat each other as such by encouraging, praying, and holding one another accountable to the biblical standard. By doing so, we will be people who spread more light than heat.