

ARE WE A CHRISTIAN NATION?

By
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Most Americans would say without question that we are a Christian Nation. Christmas is our biggest celebration. Examining the evidence leads to some major insights for the Lord has said: (D&C 93:39-42)

And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience,... and because of the tradition [implying false traditions that creep in] of their fathers. But I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth. But...you have not taught your children light and truth... and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction.

David W. Bercot in his excellent book, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up* outlines the characteristics of the early Christians. He shows that it was when the world accepted Christianity that led to its going into the great apostasy. Out of that world's acceptance have come many distortions, which are still with us and which necessitated the Lord preparing this Nation as a place for the Restoration through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The work of the restoration is the greatest work since the Lord worked out the infinite and perfect atonement that brought perfection to the Father's perfect plan of happiness. How are we doing in living those truths that have been restored? Are we also in trouble because of "disobedience... and [false] tradition[s]" that have crept in over the years?

A summary of the characteristics of the members of the primitive church as outlined by Bercot are:

I. They were not of this world

Jesus taught:

- to the Jews, "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world." (John 8:23)
- to the Twelve, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)
- "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." (Jn 17:15-17)
- to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." (John 18:36-37)

A large percentage of the early Christians lived up to these admonitions from the Savior. A Roman commented, "...they despise honors and purple robes... They are not afraid of present torments... ..they do not fear to die... ..you abstain from... pleasures. You do not attend sporting events. You have no interest in public amusements. You reject the public banquets, and abhor the... games."

A second-century elder exhorted his congregation, "Brothers, let us willingly... do the will of Him who called us. And let us not fear to depart out of this world,... deeming the things of this

world as not belonging to us, and not fixing our desires upon them... The Lord declares, 'No servant can serve two masters,' If we desire to serve both God and Money, it will be unprofitable for us, 'For what will it profit if a man gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?' This world and the next are two enemies... We cannot therefore be the friends of both."

Cyprian, the respected overseer of the church in Carthage wrote in a letter to a Christian friend, "The one peaceful and trustworthy tranquility... is this: for man to withdraw from the distractions of this world, anchor himself to the firm ground of salvation, and lift his eyes from earth to heaven... He who is actually greater than the world can crave nothing, can desire nothing, from this world. How... unshakable is that safeguard, how heavenly is the protection... – to be free from the snares of this entangling world, to be purged from the dregs of earth, and fitted for the light of eternal immortality."

II. They Loved Unconditionally (their friends and their enemies)

Jesus taught:

- In the sermon on the mount, "... Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:44-48) We are perfected in Christ. We cannot perfect ourselves (Moroni 10:32-33).
- In the sermon on the plain, "But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and *to* the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again." (Luke 6:35-38; see also D&C 1:9-10)
- To the Jews regarding which is the greatest commandment, "...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40; see also Abr. 3:25)
- To the Twelve, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all *men* know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-35) "If ye love me, keep my commandments. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me..." (John 14:15, 21) Hence, they obeyed because they loved; their obedience was bathed in love, not just out of duty, which is the lesser law and which is so common in our time. They obeyed because they wanted to and because they loved the Lord and **all** His children. (the good and the bad – enemies and friends)

A primary characteristic of the early Christians was their love for one another and for all mankind: Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!" Justin Martyr sketched Christian love this way, "We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share

it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.”

Clement wrote, describing the person who has come to know God, “He impoverishes himself out of love, so that he is certain he may never overlook a brother in need, especially if he knows he can bear poverty better than his brother. He likewise considers the pain of another as his own pain. And if he suffers any hardship because of having given out of his own poverty, he does not complain.”

When a devastating plague swept the ancient world during the third century, “Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves.”

III. They had great joy in sharing the gospel and rejoiced in the Lord regardless of tribulation

Jesus taught:

- In the sermon on the mount, “Blessed *are* they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute *you*, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (Matt. 5:10-12)
- In the sermon on the plains, “Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you *from their company*, and shall reproach *you*, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward *is* great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23)
- The Seventy returned with joy, and the Savior said, “... rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names [and those you have brought into the fold] are written in heaven. (Luke 10:17-20)
- To the Twelve, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and *that* your joy might be full... Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain: ... If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before *it hated* you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you;” (John 15:10-20.)

Origen told the Romans, “When God gives the Tempter permission to persecute us, we suffer persecution. And when God wishes us to be free from suffering, even though surrounded by a world that hates us, we enjoy a wonderful peace. We trust in the protection of the One who said, ‘Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.’ And truly He has overcome the world. Therefore, the world prevails only as long as it is permitted to by Him who received power from the Father to overcome the world. From His victory we take courage. Even if He should again wish us to suffer and contend for our faith, let the enemy come against us. We will say to them, ‘I can do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord who strengthens me.’”

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote, “Bring on the fire and the cross. Bring on the packs of wild beasts. Let there be the breaking and dislocating of my bones and the severing of my limbs. Bring on the mutilation of my whole body. In fact, bring on all the diabolical tortures of Satan. Only let me attain to Jesus Christ! ...I would rather die for Jesus Christ than to reign over the ends of the entire earth.” Shortly after, he was brought before a screaming mob in the Colosseum and he was torn in pieces by wild animals.

Tertullian reminded the Romans that, “The more you cut us down, the more in number we grow. The blood of Christians is seed... For after thinking about it, who among you is not eager to find out what is really at the bottom of it all? [JOY in Christ and the promise of Eternal Life] And after inquiring, who does not end up embracing our teachings? And when he has embraced them, who does not also willingly suffer so that he may partake fully of God’s grace?”

Well did Paul say: (Rom. 5:3-5)

Great *is* my boldness of speech toward you, great is my glorying of you: I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation. (2 Cor. 7:4) ...we glory in tribulations:... knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost...

As we measure current Christianity against these early Christian Church standards, categorically, we come up way short. We see that the fundamental problem that we have as Americans is that **we are not true Christians**, “and this is the cause of your affliction” as the Lord so said.

In this regard a book that is tell-tell is, *The Ranking of the (100) Most Influential Persons in History*, the author, Michael Hart, has Muhammad first, Isaac Newton second, and Jesus Christ third. To us, that Jesus is not first seems absurd, but when you listen to his reasoning, it gives you significant pause. His ranking is more on how their teachings affected the course of history. For example, to love God and to love your neighbor are not attributed to Jesus as they are Old Testament teachings. Michael Hart ascribes “loving your enemy” as unique to Jesus, and because the Christian world is not living that doctrine for the most part, he gives Jesus third place. We know Michael is wrong in his assessment, because Christ was the God of the Old Testament. But now, we are all greatly concerned because America has turned from the God of this land (Jesus Christ), who gave us our freedom in the first place. Maybe Obama is right; we are not a Christian nation when you look at how well we put Christ’s teachings into practice.

Christmas has become highly commercialized and has lost much of the true Christian perspective – shown us by Bercot’s studies. On the positive side, much of Christian love, caring for the poor and unfortunate, and beautiful Christian music has been preserved over the years. True Christians would live these principles and enjoy this beautiful music all year long, and we would have as our most important focus loving Him with all our hearts, might, minds, and strength and our neighbors (which includes our enemies) as ourselves. Then we would be truly following Him. If we hearken to His Spirit, we will have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to feel, and minds to comprehend, that all things will point us to Him, and not just at Christmas.

It is fascinating that there is a common holiday period for the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim nations, which should be our most important celebration. This is, respectively, Passover, Easter, and *Eid Al-Adha*, which means “The Feast of the Sacrifice.” The Lord orchestrated it to be this way that all may look to the ultimate sacrifice – the atonement of Jesus Christ. Passover celebrates the date when Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt. Jehovah (Jesus Christ) had

them come out of Egypt on exactly the same date that would coincide with Passover to be held with his Twelve Apostles 1524 years later, as He commenced that final and last sacrifice to cover the sins of all mankind and to redeem the world. Four hundred years before that first Passover, Jehovah asked Abraham to offer his son, “Thine only son... whom thou lovest” on the same mountain (Moriah) where Jehovah knew that He would be crucified to perform that final and last sacrifice – serving as the infinite atonement for all mankind. So Abraham’s sacrifice of his son was to be type and shadow of the Father (Eloheim) offering His “Only Begotten Son... whom [He] lovest” for all mankind. Interestingly, this is the first time “love” is mentioned in the Bible. To this day, the Muslims offer for a sacrifice a “ram” – symbolic of the one Abraham found in the thicket to be offered in place of his son. And again, *Eid Al-Adha* is celebrated at the same time of year as the Passover. All three events then for Muslim, Jew, and Christian point to the atonement and freedom (physically and spiritually) through Christ.

As Latter-day saints we know Jesus was born on the 6th of April. The 25th of December goes back to a pagan holiday – commencing about 354 AD. We read www.4reference.net/encyclopedias/wikipedia/Christmas.html: “**Christmas** (i.e. the Mass of **Christ**) is a traditional holiday in the **Christian calendar** which takes place around the end of December and celebrates the nativity of Jesus Christ, which occurred on or around April 6.” We sing, “In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea” – (Spring-time).

Since the Church has chosen to not contradict the traditional date, the best we can do is to bring the true Christian spirit into this celebration and into all that we do all year – that we may rejoice continually in Him who descended below all that we may overcome all through Him and in Him receive perfection and a fullness of JOY.

Now, we see rapidly increasing the signs of the times telling of His Second Coming. The scriptures are clear, the Bridegroom will come when the Bride is ready; He will come to a pure people. While the Bride is being purged and purified and prepared for His coming, the wicked will be destroying the wicked; Babylon the great (the wickedness of the world) will fall and great will be the fall thereof. The righteous will be pulled out to build a Zion society (the Bride).

Christ will then reign as King of kings and Lord of lords during the 7th (Sabbath) millennium of the earth’s sojourn, at the end of which the Savior will present to the Father those who have chosen to follow this great plan of happiness and to partake of the fullness which the Father will give to those who will come unto His Beloved Son, and partake of a full measure of the promises and blessings offered through His infinite and perfect atonement.

When we consider the awesome size and rapid growth of the forces of evil, we may move into fear and doubt that we can do anything, which is exactly what Satan wants. We should never lose hope, as the servant of Elisha asked, when the Syrian hosts were upon them, “How shall we do?” Elisha answered, “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.” (2 Kings 6:16-17.) We can always trust the Lord will be there for us.

In fact, we live in the most exciting time in the history of the earth. All the prophets looked forward to our day as they anticipated the Messiah's glorious return. We will see, after all the purging and purifying is over, how blessed we are to live in this day and time.

A great Christian, **Immaculée Ilibagiza** learned the correct perspective, as shared in her incredible book: http://www.allanstime.com/Spiritual/BookReports/Left_to_Tell.htm as she survived the Rwandan holocaust. She learned to truly love her enemies, which not only allowed her to survive, but to be a great blessing to her nation and to the world as she shares her message.

As we approach His Coming, the most important thing we can do is to come unto Him, hearken to His voice, and help as many of our family and friends to do the same – to be true Christians. Then we will find peace, love, and joy in the midst of the storms as the Bride (Zion) is purged, purified, and prepared for His glorious return (the wedding feast). I love the French translation of Matthew 7:24... 'les met en pratique,' which literally means, "Put these teachings I have given to you into practice." Then we would be true Christians and become a Christian Nation!