

Introduction

The word “classic” according to *Webster’s Dictionary* means ‘excellent; standard; authoritative; established.’ Also among the many connotations of the word are “of or having a style that is balanced, formal, objective, restrained, regular, simple.”

This book is about my search for “Classic Christianity.” Neither God nor His Word has ever diminished in power. The Word of God is no less “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12 NASB) today than in the first century when the followers of Christ turned the world upside down. The problem has always been, and is, with us. It is our human tendency to turn what should be a vibrant personal relationship and an experience of the life of Christ into a religion. We continue to stray away from the basics, to substitute good things for the best things, to become encrusted with the barnacles of tradition, to wander away from our first love. It happened to me, too. This book is about one man’s journey to rediscover “the real thing.”

In that yearning for reality, I am really no different from uncounted other believers through the centuries—from the famous, to the obscure, to the forgotten. From dozens of different backgrounds and cultures, there have always been children of God who have sought out the reality of Christ, and who have been willing to “count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8 NASB). And there usually is a cost. Thousands of believers through the years lost their lives for threatening the establishment. Others endured the milder, but just as painful, costs of rejection, ostracism, and being labeled as oddballs. But they all ultimately found what they were looking for.

A.W. Tozer once wrote of the pitfalls of being “different”:

*Christian literature, to be accepted and approved by the evangelical leaders of our times, must follow very closely the same train of thought, a kind of “party line” from which it is scarcely safe to depart. A half-century of this in America has made us smug and content. We imitate each other with slavish devotion and our most strenuous efforts are put forth to try to say the same thing that everyone around us is saying.**

Although Mr. Tozer wrote these lines back in 1948, things haven't changed much. It is still risky business to challenge people to reconsider long-held beliefs and traditions.

I need to say at the outset that my beliefs are perfectly orthodox and fundamental in all essential doctrines of the faith. Nothing in this book will challenge in the least the foundational issues of being a Christian, such as the deity of Christ, His virgin birth and true humanity, the authority of the Word of God, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, or the Lord's literal Second Coming in glory.

What I will challenge are some of the popular and common conclusions and *applications* of those truths in daily living. Some of the traditional systems and prevailing ways of communicating those applications have become as entrenched and accepted in people's minds as the Word itself, and they

need

to be challenged. We Christians have a consistent tendency to talk in a kind of "spiritual shorthand" where we assume that everyone understands what we mean. Because people are familiar with the phrases and buzz words, they nod with recognition. But unfortunately, I believe that we are merely covering up serious misunderstandings.

As an example, I have stood before many groups and asked them to tell me the first thing that comes to their minds when I say the word "trunk." They answer: "a tree," "an elephant," "baggage," "a car," and "the upper part of your body." If there is someone who has been overseas, they often say that in England it means a long-distance phone call. This is exactly the problem with so much teaching and discussion in Christian circles. We repeat the old familiar phrases and formulas and, as long as the differing hidden connotations are unexposed, there is apparent unity and agreement. But the moment someone begins asking, "What exactly do you

mean

by that?" the trouble begins.

Our counseling ministry is much like an independent auto repair shop. The repair crew sees all kinds of cars come in, and their assessment of various makes and models comes as a result of having to do repair work on them. They learn the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of the different brands. The auto repairman could say, "Watch out for the X. It tends to have transmission trouble." Or, "The Y Company makes a pretty good car, but it has flimsy body work." Or, "I find that Z makes reliable and solid automobiles." He has no vested interest, unlike the local dealer, and he makes his judgments based on his experience in working with cars.

Like the auto repairman, I have no particular bias. I am neither *for* nor *against* any particular denominational group. However, as a counselor I have been *forced*

to ask those uncomfortable questions and uncover the hidden misconceptions that have been hurting people. You can't deal in generalities when you're face-to-face with a counselee whose life is in turmoil and who is looking to you for answers. So if the book seems to "step on toes" at times, it is directed toward error that is harming people, not toward the people themselves.

On the other hand, the wide perspective on the body of Christ taken in this book raises another problem. People find it hard to take seriously misunderstandings and errors that they have never personally encountered. As I point out an error or misconception, many individuals respond, "I've never heard that," or "I've never believed that," or "I've never even run into that kind of teaching." To these well-taught believers I say, "Then give thanks to God for all the good teaching you've received! But rest assured that the teachings I'm talking about *are* out there, and they are causing confusion and problems for thousands of other believers across our country." So in regard to those errors that you haven't come across and which pose no problem for you, my comment is, "If the shoe doesn't fit, don't wear it."

But don't be in too great a hurry to assume that other people around you don't think in these ways. I have talked with many pastors who have boldly stated, "My people don't have a problem with these errors. My people understand sound doctrine." Yet when the people are quizzed in specifics, getting beyond their acquaintance with the familiar phrases, their understanding has been shown to be terribly weak. It's one thing to be well-taught; it's a totally different thing to have understanding. Anybody can be taught to respond with correct answers; that's very different from learning to think for oneself. There is a major difference between knowing what the Bible *says* and knowing what the Bible *means*.

This is a "big picture" book and is meant to be an exhortation to correct certain weaknesses that I believe exist in the body of Christ today. Therefore, *there is no effort made to teach every truth regarding the Christian life* . This book is

not meant to take a believer "from the womb to the tomb." It is intended to promote an examination of the foundations and premises upon which people approach their daily lives. There is no lack of material and teaching available to Christians on specific areas of the Christian life. As I say in the first chapter, with more "how-to" resources at our disposal than we could ever apply, I believe we have forgotten how to *live*

, and we have forgotten the true source of our life—Christ Himself. If we have strayed from our first love—our personal relationship with Christ Himself—then all of our "how-to" applications

are producing only what God will consider to be kindling material: wood, hay, and stubble.

There are many counseling stories in the book, both from personal encounters and from experiences on our call-in radio program. All of the stories are true, and I have used many direct quotations from the real discussions. However, in order to be readable I have made no effort to report those conversations verbatim. These are not transcripts. Real-life counseling discussions are seldom quick or concise enough to make a direct translation to print. But the *sense* of the discussions, the

problems

, and the

resolutions

are absolutely true as recorded here. In most cases, I have changed the names of the persons involved to protect their privacy, but these are real people to whom I can introduce you today.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge two special individuals whom God has used in a significant way in my life through personal friendship and through their teaching ministries. I thank God for Dr. Bill Bright, who led me to Christ, and Major W. Ian Thomas, who taught me the depth of the meaning of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). What I teach today is a product of my personal study and discussion of the Bible, plus the contributions of these and many other of God’s people. The contents of this book are so much a part of me today that, in many cases, I no longer know where I picked up an illustration or phrase to describe a truth. If I have unconsciously quoted from either of these men or from other sources, I ask them to accept it as the most sincere compliment I can offer.

The apostle Paul wrote 1900 years ago: “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). What Paul warned against is the perpetual human tendency to stray. Classic Christianity has been neglected, buried, and rediscovered countless times through the centuries. It has burst forth wherever there have been individuals with a sincere desire to know the reality of God. The deepest prayer of my heart is that God will use this book as part of His movement to call people back to Classic Christianity in our time.

* A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), p. 93.

