

Text: Revelation 2-3
Title: "Christ's Christianity"
Time: 2/26/2017 am
Place: NBBC

Intro - There are many things in the world today that are called *Christian*. There is great confusion in the world today about what Christianity truly is. Much of this confusion is created by false teachers who define *Christianity* in a way that is not biblical.

Pope Francis is one of these false teachers. An article appeared on the website, Catholic Online, that was titled, "Pope Francis says atheists can do good and go to heaven too!" It was a report on a homily the pope had given in 2013, in which he claimed, "Jesus broadens the horizon"; "The root of this possibility of doing good - that we all have - is in creation"; "The Lord created us in His image and likeness, and we are the image of the Lord, and He does good and all of us have this commandment at heart, do good and do not do evil. All of us. 'But, Father, this is not Catholic! He cannot do good.' Yes, he can... The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ, all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone! We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe, Father, I am an atheist!' But do good: we will meet one another there." [<http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=51077>, accessed 2/23/2017]

So according to the pope, by virtue of God's having created him in His own image, the atheist who does good is really a Christian. That is a modern form of a very ancient heresy called *Pelagianism*. It teaches that man was not ruined by the fall, and that he can save himself by doing good. Given

the power and influence of false teachers like this in our world today, it is no wonder so many are confused about what Christianity truly is.

One of the wonderful things about these seven letters to the churches of Asia is that they give us a detailed glimpse of what first century Christianity truly is. We might say that they show us what Christ's Christianity is all about. What better place to find out what Christianity really means than from the letters of Jesus Christ?

In the weeks ahead, we are going to take the time to go through each of these letters, one by one. But before we do that, I thought it would be beneficial to our understanding of Christianity as professing Christians to step back and take a look at the big picture that is presented to us here. I want us to notice three simple things from these letters about the nature of Christ's Christianity.

I. Christ's Christianity is accomplished through local churches (every letter is to a local church).

III: In 2014 the Pew Research Center did a survey they called the "Religious Landscape Study." One of the things they tried to measure was how involved Christians are in local congregations. They had three categories of involvement - high, low, and medium.

"Those who are members of a congregation, attend religious services at least weekly and attend a prayer or scripture group weekly or monthly are categorized as having a 'high' level of congregational involvement, while those who are not members of a congregation and who seldom or never attend religious services and small group prayer or scripture-reading groups are in the 'low' category. All other re-

spondents are categorized as having a 'medium' level of congregational involvement."

For the category they called "Evangelical Protestant" (where they would put our church), they found that only 43% of those surveyed had a high level of congregational involvement. [<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/16/church-involvement-varies-widely-among-u-s-christians/>; accessed 2/23/2017]

Appl: If anything is clear about Christ's Christianity in this passage, it is that not only for believers, but for Christ Himself, there is a very high level of congregational involvement going on here. These are not letters to families, nor are they letters to universities or mission agencies. They are not letters to Christian day schools or denominational headquarters. They are not letters to the campus student fellowship or the ladies' Bible study. They are letters to simple God-designed, God-ordained, local churches. They are what the Spirit says to the churches (plural).

The letters address two poor reasons why so many today have a low level of local church involvement.

1. Christ and first century Christians were highly involved in their local churches even though some were small congregations.

Appl: Small size strikes me as a reason many are not involved in a local church today. There are two churches in this list of seven for whom the Lord offers no correction. They are highly commended by Him and encouraged by Him, but He does not mention that He has anything against them like the other churches. These are the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

One of the things He is proudest of when it come to the church of Philadelphia is that they were faithful in spite of their little strength (Rev. 3:8). Evidently, churches like ours have an opportunity to bring a special joy to the Lord's heart. We have the opportunity to be faithful while being very small in strength.

Ill: God does great things in spite of our small strength. Certainly, the way He faithfully supplies our needs is no small part of that blessing. We did not have in our annual budget all the tree work we are having done this week, but God provided the funds through an anonymous gift anyway. There is something more glorious about that than having so much money that we do not know what to do with it.

2. Christ and first century Christians were highly involved in their local churches even though some were troubled congregations.

Appl: This is another reason for low involvement in local congregations, I believe. The other five churches all have troubles that the Lord writes them to correct. These include: leaving your first love, tolerance for false doctrine, spiritual deadness, lukewarm apathy, and self-sufficiency.

Who wants to be part of a church that has problems like that? Jesus does. The local churches of Christ's Christianity are hospitals full of the sick in need of help. They are not designed as fancy spiritual spas or emotional health clubs. They are congregations of sinners being saved by grace, the shed blood of the Savior, and forgiveness. If you find the perfect church someday, do not join it because then it will not be perfect anymore.

So is our Christianity like Christ's Christianity in this regard - that it is accomplished through a high level of involve-

ment in our local church? If not, we are not practicing this important aspect of biblical Christianity, and we need to make that correction and become more involved in our local church. Christ's Christianity is accomplished through a high level of involvement in local churches.

II. Christ's Christianity is led by Christ (all the *I's*, *me's*, and *my's* of these chapters refer to Christ).

Appl: There is no pope on the pages of Revelation 2 or 3. Christ's Christianity is not led by a pope. It is not led by a pastor either (remember that we said last week that the angels are another metaphor for the local church as a whole, as viewed from heaven). Christ's Christianity is led by Christ.

III: This past week a sister asked me if I would clone myself. She was being encouraging and complimenting me for how I am serving the Lord. I appreciated the encouragement, but I also tried to answer her question that "Yes, of course, I am trying to clone myself." Or better, "Christ is trying to clone Himself in all of us." That is our job as a church. Christ is making us Christ-like. We are to make the nations disciples of Christ. But everything about our work in this regard must be led by Christ. That leadership involves four things in these letters.

1. Christ leads as the glory of local churches. Every letter begins with a different description of the glorified Christ. Our worship should recognize who He is and what He is like. He should get the credit for every miracle of new birth and sanctification we see happen in our midst, for He alone has done it.

2. Christ leads by commending local churches. He encourages us and blesses us when we do the right thing and stay

faithful. We need to listen for His encouragements to finish our work. Rev. 3:8 greatly encouraged me this past week.

3. Christ leads by correcting local churches. He is not satisfied with our lack of Christlikeness, sinfulness, and worldliness. He wants us to be a pure and spotless bride. Eph. 5:25-27. We must be ready and willing to receive this correction.

4. Christ leads by promising rewards to local churches. Each letter includes the promise of reward. That promise is accompanied by the exhortation, "Let him, that has an ear to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Christ will reward in eternity our faithfulness to him as a local church in this life.

So do we understand this morning that our local church is a church that is led by Christ and not man? Do we seek to be like Him and follow Him? Does our ministry glorify Him and reflect His glory to others? Are we encouraged in Him? Are we willing to be corrected by Him? Will we be rewarded by Him? What part do you and I play in answering those questions in behalf of our church this morning?

III. Christ's Christianity requires one to overcome.

Appl: Every one of the letters tells us that Christ's Christianity requires overcoming (2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21). Clearly, Christ's Christianity is not an easy way to live your life. It will require overcoming a lot. John was overcoming a lot as he recorded in these letters what Jesus told him to write as an exile on the island of Patmos.

So we could do a lot worse than hearing the insight of the Apostle John when it comes to better understanding this

need we have as Christians to overcome. Look with me at what he says about overcoming in 1 John 5:4-5.

So to overcome as Christians, we must be born of God by faith. We must believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Faith is the only way we can overcome. It is not by doing good; it is by believing. For that reason, no atheist will ever overcome no matter how much good he tries to do. The one who tells him that he will is lying to him about the most important truth he could ever know.

What we must believe to overcome is that Jesus is the Son of God who overcame for us (Rev. 3:21, 5:5-6). He did that by dying as the Lion who became the Lamb on the cross for our sins and rising again for our eternal life.

Now he stands at the door and knocks (v. 20). Will you open, overcome by faith, and become a Christian? Will you believe that Jesus died and rose to overcome your sin and death and hell? Christ's Christianity requires that you do.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching