

# WHEN CHRISTIANS GET IT RIGHT

Christians have always struggled to “get it right.” Most of the New Testament was written to Christians who were “getting it wrong.” They struggled with self-righteousness, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, spiritual pride, moral compromise, and a host of other issues. The New Testament letters were often aimed at correcting these things.

Underlying all of the other counsel the apostles gave for how Christians can get it right is one common refrain: To get it right is to love. Peter says it this way, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). James writes, “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (James 2:8). John is even bolder in his first epistle, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Among the most dysfunctional churches in the New Testament, where Christians were getting it wrong, was the church at Corinth in Greece. Their church was fractured and filled with Christians who acted in ways that scarcely resembled the Christ they claimed to follow. To these Christians, Paul writes very directly:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

Paul goes on to describe this love that Christians are to live out:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13)

Why does Paul place such strong emphasis on love? Because if you boiled down the gospel to one word, it would be *love*. Jesus commands his disciples to love God with their entire being and to love their neighbors as they love themselves (see Luke 10:27). This is what Scott McKnight calls, “the Jesus Creed.” Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that the world will know that they are his disciples by their love (John 13:34-35). They are to love one another, to love their neighbor, to love those in need, and even to love their enemies.

Even as I write these words, I realize how often I fall short of them.

When Christians get it right, they practice sacrificial love. That is a powerful witness. It has the capacity to change the world.

When John came to me with his frustrations concerning the Christian faith, I did not argue with him. I listened to him and actually agreed with him. Many of the things that frustrated him also frustrated me. Others were things of which I had been guilty.

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As I have addressed these various issues with Christians, some people get defensive. Others nod their heads. Some want to argue theology, while others say, “That’s what I’ve always thought.”

It is important to note that Christians don't have a corner on the market when it comes to getting things wrong. Muslims,

Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists have gotten it wrong. Atheists and agnostics get it wrong in many of the same ways Christians get it wrong. Getting it wrong is not simply a function of theology but of our psychology, our sociology, and ultimately of our human condition. Christians call this condition sin though you may have another name for it. We are all afflicted with the tendency to get it wrong. The seven deadly sins are universal temptations, not unique to Christians—lust, gluttony, greed, indifference, hurting others, envy, and pride—we all struggle with these temptations.

That leads me to another point. Christianity is about forgiveness, not perfection. Jesus was unnerving to the religious elite because he spent most of his time with “sinners.” Of course, both the priests and the prostitutes were sinners. The difference was that the prostitutes knew they were sinners; the priests acted as though they were not. There may even have been some question in Jesus’ mind about which sin was more dangerous—prostitution or religious hypocrisy. What do you think?

It should be no surprise that Christians sometimes get it wrong—Christianity doesn’t invite perfect people to join up. It invites people who are prone to get it wrong and then offers them grace. As one person told me, “If I never got it wrong, I would not need Christianity!”

It’s important, however, for Christians to remember that the Christian spiritual life—the life of discipleship—does not stop at forgiveness. The aim of the Christian life is to get it right. Theologians call this process *sanctification*—a word that means to be made holy. What does holiness look like? It looks like love. Over time, Christians should become more loving if we are growing in our faith. The proof of maturing in the Christian faith is not found in how much of the Bible people have memorized or how systematic their theology is. It is not even how well they avoid the more obvious sins. The proof of spiritual growth is found in the practice of love.

All Christians get it wrong some of the time, but I have had the joy of watching many Christians working to get it right.

Some time ago Vincent began attending our church. He's a gifted vocalist in his thirties, who sang heavy metal and classic rock for years. Vincent is also afflicted with Tourette's syndrome. His form of Tourette's is known as *coprolalia*, and includes the spontaneous utterance of words that most people suppress—swear words. Vincent was diagnosed when he was an adolescent. From that time on he had felt unwelcome in church. We have a large sanctuary, but it was easy to tell when Vincent was present, starting with his first visit. As I was preaching he would blurt out swear words. It was a little unnerving at first. Some with children who did not understand what was happening moved to another part of the sanctuary. But almost instantly some people realized that Vincent had Tourette's. When Vincent showed up for worship, a group of people sat near him and reassured him it was okay. Vincent thought that perhaps it would help if people knew his story, so one weekend we told his story and then invited him to sing. When he was finished singing about his life, the congregation rose to their feet in a standing ovation that lasted for several minutes. What they were saying to Vincent was, "We love you. We want you here. You are a gift from God!"

As they stood applauding I saw the church as it is meant to be, a community of people who welcome others with genuine love. They got it right.

Chuck, one of our members, told me a story about two other congregations who got it right. It was June 18, 1999. Chuck, his wife Angie, and their two little boys were driving down I-24, between Jasper and Pittsburg, Tennessee, on their way to visit Angie's folks. Chuck started to change lanes, noticed a car in his blind spot, and pulled the steering wheel back. As he did he lost control of the car and it spun around several times, then rolled over, crushed Angie's side of the car, and rolled over two more times before stopping. When the car finally came to a standstill, Chuck quickly looked to the back seat. The boys were fine, but crying. Then Chuck looked over at Angie. He could see she was unconscious and bleeding. He struggled to remove her seat belt. Within min-

utes the ambulance arrived. Angie and Chuck were taken in two separate ambulances to the hospital. Sometime later the chaplain from the hospital came to speak with Chuck. He told her that Angie had not survived the accident.

The chaplain had called the pastors of the two Baptists churches nearby—in Jasper and Pittsburg. Soon the pastor from Jasper, the pastor's wife from Pittsburg, and a group of laypeople were there at the hospital. Some had taken off from work to come and help. They went to the store to replace the bloodstained clothes Chuck was wearing and bought an overnight change of clothes for he and the boys. They brought toys and diapers and kept the kids while the pastor and others sought to comfort and care for Chuck. Chuck told me that eleven years later he is still overwhelmed by the generosity and love he felt from these Christians toward a stranger from Kansas. The folks from these two churches in Jasper and Pittsburg got it right that night.

Chris and his wife Tammi, a remarkable young couple I know, moved from the suburbs to one of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in Kansas City. Drive-by shootings, sexual assault, and drug houses are a nearly daily part of life in their community. But they felt called to move there to bring hope to the children and youth who live there. They started the Hope Center, which is seeking to transform the neighborhood and the children there. Today hundreds of people are finding hope through the education programs, medical clinic, and youth groups Chris and Tammi have launched. Chris and Tammi are Christians who get it right.

I have watched as people do the most giving and sacrificial things caring for one another in the church. Lori's church friends watched her children, mowed her yard, put together her children's Christmas presents at midnight on Christmas Eve, and flew 1,000 miles to be with her at M.D. Anderson in Houston where her husband, Jerry, was in treatment for cancer. She told me she did not know how she could have made it without this care. That's what it looks like when Christians get it right.

There was Amy, who saw a young, pregnant teenager leaving McDonald's without a winter coat on a cold Kansas City evening. Amy ran to her car, got her own coat, and gave it to the girl, beginning a relationship with a teenage mother who needed a friend.

There was David who saw a young man in a suit walking home from work in the rain. He stopped to give him a ride and discovered the young man walked two miles each way to work in the only suit he owned. The next morning David dropped off a bicycle and began a relationship with the young man that culminated in the young man receiving a scholarship to go to college.

Greg used the influence of his construction company to help break down racial barriers in Kansas City. Danielle and JT spent the first year of their married life in South Africa seeking to serve people in extreme poverty. Karla leads hundreds of our members to visit the forgotten people—the nursing home residents no one else ever visits at 30 area nursing homes. Hundreds of people in our church volunteer in our Matthew's Ministry, serving more than 100 special-needs children, youth, and adults and providing respite for their parents. They give up their weeknights and weekends to throw parties, lead groups, and to love our special-needs members. These are all Christians who get it right.

I could fill a lengthy book with stories like this. I'm not suggesting that only Christians do these things. I know others who do the same. But in my travels to Honduras and Haiti, to Zambia and South Africa, to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina and to the inner city in Kansas City, nearly all of the people I have met doing humanitarian work are Christians. Christians often get it wrong, but tens of millions of quiet Christians daily seek, without fanfare or accolades, to get it right.

Jesus told his disciples they were to be light for the world, a city upon a hill that could not be hidden. They were to let their light shine by pursuing acts of kindness, mercy, and love. In this way Christ's followers were to incarnate—to embody and make visible—the love of God for humankind. In doing this they would become the evidence of God to the

world. Christians are not meant to repel people from God, but by their very lives to draw people to God.

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And that leads me to one final story. I was driving to church on Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, listening to an interview on NPR with Rev. Billy Kyles. Billy was with Dr. King as he stood on the balcony of the Loraine Motel in Memphis the morning he was killed. The interviewer asked what Rev. Kyles was preaching on that morning. He told the story of Robert Louis Stevenson who, as a boy, was sitting by his window looking intently outside. These were the days of gas street lights and there, at the street, was the town lamplighter. He was carefully putting his lantern up against the lamppost, climbing up the ladder and lighting the lantern. He would take it down, move down the street, and light the next one. Stevenson was asked, "What are you looking at so intently?" To which he replied, "I'm watching that man out there knock holes in the darkness."

This is what Jesus called his followers to do. It is what the church is meant to be about. By our acts of kindness and love we are called to knock holes in the darkness.

What will it take for churches to reach today's young adults? I think young adults need to see Christians get it right. They need to see Christians knocking holes in the darkness. When they do, there's little doubt that they will be interested once again in the gospel that inspires such actions. Christians, it's time to knock some holes in the darkness!