

“... putting on a fair face in the flesh ...”

Flesh is a poor gauge of spiritual accomplishment.

Whoever are wanting to put on a fair face in the flesh, these are compelling you to circumcise ... they want you to be circumcised that they should be boasting in that flesh of yours. —Galatians 6:12-13

Christianity is a religion of outward appearances. People put crèches in their yards and crosses around their necks to show the world they belong to Jesus. Apparently, their behavior is not up to that task.

Paul encountered such “outward appearance” people in the circumcisonists. The Jewish rite of circumcision was an outward sign meant to reflect an inward reality. But if the inward reality lacked, you could just sort of skip that part and make much hoopla over sign.

The Jews wanted Paul’s heathen converts circumcised. Paul saw through the impure motive and called it, “putting on a fair face in the flesh,” and “boasting in that flesh of yours.” The circumcisonists, Paul knew, wanted to boast in how many poor Greeks they could coerce into performing that rite. The Billy Graham group is similarly disposed;



they are proud of how many people have “accepted Jesus” at Billy’s crusades. No one follows up on the inward reality.

All they want is a body count to enhance Billy’s résumé. True spiritual accomplishment is inward, not outward. The world yawns at it, but God is absolutely delighted:

“May it not be mine to be boasting, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” —Galatians 6:14 ■

Martin Zender's Clanging Gong News

“If I know all mysteries and all knowledge, but have no love, I am a clanging gong” —1 Cor. 13:1-2



Two out of three isn't bad.

Out of the manger, off the cross, seated at the right hand of God

This is the season to turn Jesus Christ into a little plastic baby so that Joseph and Mary—themselves plastic—can change His little plastic diapers again and once more dread His coming death. I speak, of course, of the glories of the Christmas season, and the joys associated with having the Son of God back to pooping Himself. This is our special source of December happiness—seeing Jesus as a cute baby and hearing Him gurgle and coo in His perfectly rank swaddling clothes—while thinking of what a fine favor we’re doing *Him*, submitting Him to yet another 33 years of humiliating frustration. And don’t forget the fantabulous crucifixion!

Alas. Jesus Christ keeps trying to grow up, and we keep slapping Him back to Bethlehem and singing songs about His precious crib. He would bring us the spiritual blessings of justification, conciliation, celestial glory, and sonship, but we keep bringing Him gold, frankincense, myrrh, and baby wipes.

It is important to know that the Son of God became flesh and tabernacled among us. But there comes a time when we leave the rudimentary things of childhood and embrace present truth. The writer of Hebrews says:

“Wherefore, leaving the word dealing with the rudiments of Christ, we should be brought on to maturity.” —Hebrews 6:1

This is a verse from the Circumcision writings, but it applies to us as well. Even though the rudiments of Christ are found in the very Word of God—Jesus’ birth is recounted in the gospel of



Luke—we are to read it, digest it, then leave it behind. Go on; walk away from the crèche; Jesus won’t mind. In fact, He wants you to do it. Put away the baby album; your Savior is all grown up.

When Mary went to the tomb early on the Sabbath to anoint His body, the angel said to her, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The Lord *had* been dead, but something new had come. Jesus was now alive, and His sepulcher was not about to become a tourist attraction.

Likewise the nativity. There’s nothing more to see in Bethlehem, folks. The Father has relocated His Son. In case you don’t know where He is, here is His current address. God has:

“... seated Him at His right hand among the celestials, up over every sovereignty and authority and power and lordship, and every name that is named.” —Ephesians 1:20-21

The apostle Paul believes that only by contemplating this glorified Christ (rather than the baby of Bethlehem) can we grasp our latest and greatest spiritual blessing: *We are a new creation in Christ.*

So that we, from now on, are acquainted with no one according to flesh. Yet even if we have known Christ according to flesh, nevertheless now we know Him so no longer. So that, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the primitive passed by. Lo! There has come new! —2 Corinthians 5:16-17

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In addition, Paul insists that all those “in Christ” have necessarily unhanded Him as the ex-carpenter from Nazareth. The corollary may upset some, but here it is: Those who can *only* see Him as sanding window frames and, later, strolling the streets of Jerusalem, are manifestly not “in Christ,” that is, they are not members of His glorified body. Rather, they are guests of Israel’s covenants (Eph. 2:12), embracing the calling of God’s earthly people, to whom the message of 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 never came.



HIGH PRIEST OF ISRAEL

Even in the kingdom, Israel will be a people “according to flesh.” To qualify as a ruler in that kingdom, one *must* be of the seed of Israel according to flesh. With the patriarchs, Jesus will yet break bread—and actually eat it—in the 1,000-year kingdom.

This is not Paul’s message.

Are your future blessings on earth or in heaven? Are you a guest of Israel’s earthly promises, or a member of the body of Christ? How you perceive Jesus Christ is a fair indicator. Is He the Messiah of Israel to you, the despised Man of Sorrows, or is He the One Paul saw on the Damascus road, Whose glories outshone the noonday sun?

Raise your vision; embrace the latest and greatest truth. If the call of a celestial destiny calls to *your* spirit, then read the writings of the apostle Paul and imbibe of the glories of Christ ascended. ■

Religion: A backhanded form of self-occupation

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 does away with the galling task of self-occupation:

For the love of Christ is constraining us, judging this, that, if One died for the sake of all, consequently all died. And He died for the sake of all that those who are living should by no means still be living to themselves, but to the One dying and being roused for their sakes.

In this context, “living to themselves” refers to people polishing their flesh. Earlier, in verse 12, Paul speaks of those who are “boasting in personal appearance and not in the heart.” Boasting in personal appearance is the essence of religion. In any religion, one has to conform oneself to decrees. This requires such ceaseless self-analysis that God Himself takes a back seat to it; there is no time for a heart appreciation of Him when one is ceaselessly trying to please Him.

God graces humanity with sweet deliverance via the pen of Paul. Through the cross, God eliminated flesh and its last hopes of impressing Him. This is good news. What is left, then, for humans to do? They are to “live to the One dying and being roused for their sakes.” This is an attitude of thanks and praise, not work.

“Live!” ■

FACT!



Because of Christ’s work on the cross and the new humanity, God is now at peace with the world. This is why today is an ideal time for evangelism. When the terrors of the book of Revelation break out, God will still be conciliated to the world, but the world—and Israel specifically—will require an epic shock to rouse it from its stupor and acquaint it with truth.

Q&A

Q: Why does Paul say in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that we are a new creation? I feel old. And yet, I am a believer in Christ Jesus. Shouldn’t I be feeling differently? What am I doing wrong?

—Mary L.

A: Dear Mary, Thanks for writing. I am happy to tell you that the new creation has to do with your humanity, not your age. Whether one is 22 or 92, it is our flesh that makes us unable to please God.

“Now those who are in flesh are not able to please God.” —Romans 8:7

The way God looks at things, there is one humanity before the cross, and one humanity after it. It’s the same humanity, but I’m talking about how *God* sees things.



God could never point to the pre-cross humanity and say, “That is righteous.” He couldn’t, because it wasn’t. It was primitive. But 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that, “The primitive passed by. Lo! There has come new!” What was new? 2 Corinthians 5:14—

“One died for the sake of all, consequently all died.”

Jesus Christ took upon Himself the failures of the entire race. Paul refers to this sin-condemned race as the old humanity. When Jesus Christ rose from the dead, He left that old humanity in the tomb. Because of this, God now sees humanity as a new race. Paul calls this “the new humanity.” I know we don’t often feel like a new humanity, but we have to believe God that it’s true. Because of this great work, we can now live to God, guilt-free, instead of living to ourselves with unending religious exercises. The work is done, Mary! All you have to do now is thank Him. ■

Rants & Stuff

The Apostle Paul says we should not murmur (Philippians 2:14).
Therefore, I shall rant.

We are spiritual people having earthly experiences.

I have a recurring dream. I am on a large passenger airliner, and the flight is ready to depart. The plane taxis to the runway. And taxis. And taxis. And taxis. Where is the runway? There it is. But instead of stopping and turning to take off, we keep rolling and rolling. To our astonishment, we are now no longer at the airport at all—we are at a stoplight. Then it hits us: *Dear God, we are obeying traffic laws. We are on the road.*



We are *driving* from Cleveland to Sacramento—in a 737.

If you have ever flown commercial airliners, you know how inelegantly these behemoths rumble and grind and bump and squeak their way down taxiways. This is

because they are flying machines, not driving machines. The taxiway is not their realm; they are out of their element; they are fish out of water. But once they reach take-off speed and the asphalt drops away from the wheels, these airplanes do magnificently what their creators have designed them to do: fly.

It is just this way with us. As members of the body of Christ, we are out of our element here on earth. We are misfits here; we don't fit in; we feel awkward and out of place among those who love this world. People don't understand us. We tell them of the glories of God, and they stare at us as if we've just crawled from the Black Lagoon. I know why this is.

Our realm is inherent in the heavens, out of which we are awaiting a Savior also, the Lord, Jesus



Christ, Who will transfigure the body of our humiliation, to conform it to the body of His glory. —Philippians 3:20-21

We are meant to fly, not drive. We are meant to be among the celestials. We are out of our element breathing terrestrial air.

But, oh! Just wait until our “wheels” leave the asphalt of this dying earth to enter into that sphere for which we were created—the celestial one. There will be no more bumping and squeaking then; no longer will anyone laugh at us.

We are not earthly people having heavenly experiences. Rather, we are heavenly people having earthly experiences. And we are about to reclaim our homeland. ■

Want to go crazy? Then consider yourself according to flesh.

LET US LIVE *OUR* LIVES BEFORE GOD, NOT SOMEONE ELSE'S.

So that we, from now on, are acquainted with no one according to flesh. Yet even if we have known Christ according to flesh, nevertheless now we know Him so no longer.
—2 Corinthians 5:16

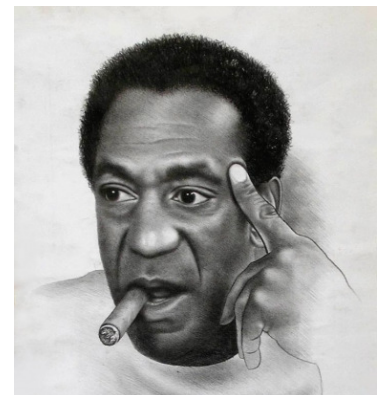
Because One died for the sake of all, all died. And because all died, we can now look beyond flesh to the One Who died for our sakes. Anyone grasping this truth will be troubled less and less by flesh in general, but specifically by his or her own successes or failures. If we are not to know anyone now according to flesh, then surely this must include ourselves.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:3—

Now to me it is the least trifle that I may be being examined by you or by human's day. But neither am I examining myself.

The context here is Paul's work as an administrator of God's secrets (4:1). As a Pharisee, Saul must have been a champion self-examiner. Now, however, he could not care less what either the Corinthians or the day of humanity thought of his work; he did his work unto the Lord, and left the matter with Him.

What a lesson for us all. Bill Cosby once said, “The key to not pleasing anybody is to try to please everybody.” God is at peace with us (Romans 5:1). If our consciences are clear, then let us live *our* lives before God,



not someone else's.

His opinion of us is the only one that matters, and He has declared us righteous (Romans 3:21-22). ■