



Countercultural Christians-Part 5

Realities Instead of Rituals

Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, Happy New Year to you. I missed being able to say that last weekend. I was away for a couple days, some of you know, just trying to catch my breath a little bit. We were getting away for just a few days to get some refreshment. And as things would go, my family, like a lot of yours, got sick. Yeah, it was bad. Three of the five Fabarez's came down with it, and it was not a pretty sight. But since I've read that in flu outbreaks, only up to about 50% of the population get it, I figured since my family has already reached the 60% threshold, that I'm not going to get it this year. Kind of what I'm thinking. I have to ask my doctor if that's the way it works.

But the flu, you have that experience with your family. There's so much empathy. There's so much hurt. You're feeling terrible. You're here to get away, to have a little break for a couple days. And my son threw up 15 times in one day, my fourth grader. Yeah, yeah. And all those parental lectures about keeping your hands clean, that occasionally they love to roll their eyes at you. Wash your hands a little bit. There's a little vindication, you know, just a sense of, you know, kid, that's why I'm telling you to keep your hands washed, especially in the wintertime. You know, keep your hands off your face, all this stuff. And I know they don't like the instructions, but there's that sense when they're kind of hugging the porcelain throne there all night long. Sorry. That, you know, dad's not crazy. This is important.

You know, I wonder, as I studied and was studying while I was gone, Hebrews chapter 13, if the original recipients of the book of Hebrews didn't feel a little bit like a kid hearing a parent over and over again lecture them about clean hands. It's almost like you've got to think the first-century recipients of this book had to think, come on, this is over the top, a lot of drama, a lot of harsh exhortation here. If you've been with us through the study of Hebrews for the last couple of years, you know it is filled with some pretty strong language. And I'm thinking that you've got to sit there going, wow, why is this author just so intense about all of this?

But of course, as time would tell, the first-century churches that were established by the apostles didn't all make it. As a matter of fact, this infection that the writer of Hebrews is so concerned about, called heresy or false doctrine, crept into a lot of these first-century churches and just devastated them, obliterated them. They went from churches that seemed to be places where you could find a good spiritual meal every week to this distorted church that ended up actually deteriorating under its own weight because of the infection of what the Bible calls false doctrine.

And the writer of Hebrews, as God's instrument, was warning that first-century church, don't let that happen to you. And it starts on an individual level. A church never finds its way into the straying path of apostasy unless the individuals first go there. And so the writer of Hebrews, as he sums up the book after 70, what is it, one messages now in the book of Hebrews, he gets to a place of summary. And in Hebrews chapter 13, verses 8 through 16, he gives us really the book in a microcosm, and he says, you know what, I just got to remind you, this is all important stuff.



And after some stern and harsh warnings in the book, he says you've got to make sure you do not leave this place of biblical orthodoxy, sound doctrine. Don't let anybody carry you away into something else.

Now, verse number 8, as you open your Bibles, and I hope that you would, to verse number 8, that's where we begin. You notice that the translators, depending on your Bible translation, had problems figuring out where to put this verse. Some people put it at the end of the paragraph above it, and some people start the paragraph with it. And commentators, you can read 20 commentators, and they all are kind of wondering, and they have to make choices, which does this go with? It seems almost out of place, but it's not, because it really segues both paragraphs.

Look at verse number 7, for instance. It reminded us of our leaders who taught the word of God to us in this historic first-century context. He says, remember them, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. And then he starts with this word that is usually just quoted, just extracted from the context. And we know it well. There are songs sung about it. There are pictures maybe at the Christian bookstore that inscribe these words. And it says, Jesus Christ, verse number 8, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And while we love to look at that verse as an ontological statement about the deity of Christ or something, that's really not the context here.

The context is coming off of the heels of teachers that they knew who hung to this faith in Christ. They held to it. And he's saying it's immutable, it's unchanging. That Christ is the target of this whole book. And then he says this, don't let, verse 9, anything carry you away. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. There is the immutable focus on Christ. That's what the book of Hebrews is all about. And as he starts this summary statement, he says, remember that and don't let anything take you away from that. Don't stray from it. Don't be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.

And then, because this is what the book was all about, the historic context was a bunch of people trying to kind of reassess where they were. They grew up as good Jewish boys and girls, adhering to the ceremonial Levitical laws of the Old Testament. And now they were embracing Christ by faith, and all the ceremony was supposed to be set aside, and they were struggling with all that. And he says, listen, guys, it's good for your hearts, middle of verse 9, to be strengthened by grace and not by ceremonial foods, which, by the way, don't even work. They have no value to those that eat them. They really don't strengthen your heart. They might strengthen your body, but they're not helpful in the real issues that God is concerned about.

Verse 10, then he speaks figuratively of an altar. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. Oh, it's not a physical altar. It's figurative. It's symbolic of a relationship with Christ. And it's a kind of altar that they don't even understand. They don't connect with.

And then he gets back to what we've already covered at length, the Day of Atonement. And he talks in verse 11 about the high priest who carries the blood of the animals into the Most Holy Place, the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant is. And they sprinkle this blood in there as a sin offering. And that happens once a year, Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. It's called still on your Hallmark calendars. But the bodies are burned outside the camp. That's why we know it's the Day of Atonement. It's the one sacrifice where you didn't sacrifice it there in the courtyard on the altar. You



took the blood of the animal that was slain as a sacrifice. You brought it into the Holy of Holies, but you took the carcass of the animal outside the gate, and that's what it says. It's got to be burned outside the camp. That's not the normal sacrifice. That's the Day of Atonement sacrifice.

And so Jesus, making a parallel now, verse number 12, suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. And if that confuses you, if you've been to Israel with us, you've been to Jerusalem, and you think, well, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is inside the city walls. It's really not. The modern city walls include that place, if that indeed is the place where Christ was crucified. But it was outside the ancient gates, and Christ was crucified, whether it's at Gordon's Calvary, a Garden Tomb area, or whether it was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre site. Nevertheless, Christ was crucified outside the city gate. The Bible is clear on that.

And he says it's kind of like those animals' carcasses that were taken outside and burned up in a very strange sacrifice. Because usually that barbecue, if you will, that religious barbecue was used to nourish the people. They ate the sacrifices. But not this one. This one was consumed wholly by God, symbolically in the old covenant on the Day of Atonement. And so it was that Christ went outside the gate, and he was consumed, so to speak, wholly by God, but the people were made holy through his blood. All symbolic in the old covenant, as we've learned through the book of Hebrews, but not for Christ. Christ and his people are truly cleansed. They're really made right before a holy God.

Now look at this figurative statement in verse 13. Let us then go to him outside the camp. Obviously symbolic, right? Christ is not waiting outside the city of Jerusalem. We're not taking pilgrimages there to find him. This is a figurative statement about us going out there to him because people who were in the positions of power and influence in their day, they didn't care for this whole Christianity thing. The Way was not the way for them. And so if you're going to go and hang with Christ and hold tightly to this immutable message of Jesus, you were going to have to, bottom of verse number 13, you're going to have to bear some disgrace, but go outside bearing the disgrace that he bore.

And if that torques you, verse 14, just remember, if you realize that holding to Christ is going to cost you something in terms of coolness in this world, just remember that this is not our world. We're not really interested in this one. For here we don't have an enduring city. We're just passing through. We're aliens and strangers, as Paul put it. But we're looking for the city that is to come.

And that has been a big theme in the book of Hebrews. Through Jesus, therefore, look at the symbolism here, let us continually offer to God a, quote-unquote, sacrifice of praise. You're being maligned because you're not sacrificing anymore. And the writer of Hebrews says, oh, you are. You have a sacrifice. It's not physical and literal. You're not killing animals in a symbol or a ceremony before God. But you have a sacrifice of praise that you can continually give to God through Christ. And it's the fruit of the lips that, here's an important word, confess his name. We talk about confession usually in relationship to 1 John 1:9, *homologia*, to agree with God, to say what God would say, and you to stand with Christ, the immutable message, the new covenant message of Christ. He says, that's your sacrifice.

Don't be carried away by strange teachings. And don't forget, by the way, to live a good life. It says, verse 16, to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. That's your



sacrifice. You've cast off the ceremony of the old covenant because it was nothing but a schoolmaster leading you to Christ. Does that sound familiar, the book of Romans? That's what the old covenant was all about. The fruition of the old covenant was the realities of the new. As the writer of Hebrews says, the Old Testament law and ceremonies was nothing more, not the moral law, the ceremonial law was nothing more than a shadow of the things that were to come and the realities in Christ.

Now, they were taking heat for that, but he says, don't move from that. Stay there. Now, after several, five, very stern warnings throughout the book, he leaves this message kind of resonating in their mind in the last chapter. Don't be carried away by false or strange teachings. Teaching in the Scripture, that word is often translated doctrine, depending on your translation. And I know people don't like that. They don't go to church. They're not hoping for a message on doctrine, but that's what the Bible is. It is doctrine. It is teaching. It is a body or corpus of information that is true, God's truth.

And the Bible, just to kind of step out for a minute and look back, is all about us holding on to that message. Just like the writer of Hebrews is saying to his audience, hold to that message. Hang on to it. The problem is, though, like in their day, we've got an issue going on, and that is that we are tempted to stray from that course. Here's another word we don't like, but that's all it means. The word heresy. Do you know the word heresy simply means the root of that Greek word is choice. When people choose to step off the path and they don't hold the immutable message of Christ, when they choose to twist it into some kind of strange teaching and they choose to follow that path, they're in what we call heresy. They're choosing the wrong path doctrinally.

And the Bible says that's of utmost importance. And the writer of Hebrews would know, and historically we observe, that when you let that wrong thinking about God enter into your life, it's like a virus that will devastate your church, it'll devastate your family, it will devastate your life. And we're tempted today to take our teaching about God in our culture and say, well, it's not all that important. We don't need to be so exacting. We don't have to be so particular. Do we need to really be so narrow-minded?

Take, for instance, an ad in a national magazine that I read just this week that said, listen, this is an ad for a church. Listen, if you want an open-minded spiritual community where people respect each other's beliefs, sounds good, sounds very American, very pluralistic, where no one's idea of God is better than anyone else's, then welcome to our church. The world loves that stuff. That gets big ads in national magazines. Christians say, well, that's fantastic. We like that. Non-condemning, non-judgmental, non-narrow, very open. But as Granny used to say, you can be so open-minded that your brain falls out, right? Did your grandma used to say that?

There comes a place in our lives where we've got to realize that has nothing to do with biblical Christianity. There is a view of God that is better than your view of God. It's the biblical view of God. And we better adopt that or we'll be in big trouble, the Bible says. Anything but biblical teaching about the immutable message of Christ, the unchanging message of Christ, the Bible says is strange teaching. Don't go there, the writer of Hebrews says.

Paul said, you know, if it was needed in the first century, it will be so much more of a necessity in future generations. Here's what he says, 2 Timothy chapter 4. You familiar with this verse? Just listen



to it. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. What is that? Teaching. Right? Accurate, biblical, truth-laden teaching. But instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. You ever heard that?

If it was true in the first century that we need a stern warning to keep our doctrinal hands clean, if they needed it, then boy, do we need it now. We're living in a day where sound doctrine is increasingly hard to find. And we need to know that just like the first-century people, we are susceptible to it as well. There are more temptations to false doctrine and heresy today than there's ever been. And we need to know that if we think we stand, we better take heed lest we fall.

The reality is we need to know that because we are human, we are susceptible to heresy. Let's put it this way in your outline. That's the whole message of the book of Hebrews, by the way. Be careful.

Number one on your outline, if you found that in your worship packet, and I hope that you did, you need to beware of our weakness for false teaching. Beware of our weakness for false doctrines. There are so many things out there that you and I are susceptible to because of a basic human proclivity, a propensity, a pattern of our lives that makes it a natural temptation for us.

Let's take a look at the first two verses, verses 8 and 9. Look at the implied concern here. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It's immutable. It's unchanging. It doesn't change. You want sound doctrine? There it is. It is, as Jude put it, once for all delivered to the saints. It's where the book of Hebrews started: "Oh, he spoke in a lot of ways in various manners through the prophets in old times, but now he has spoken to us." In these last days, the finality of God's revelation is in Christ.

See, the problem is we're kind of open to, verse number 9, strange teachings. Now, that's a pejorative word. It's a negative word, but we kind of like hearing kind of a new take on things. That's really what the word is. "Strange" is the translation, but all it means is it's different. It's a different kind of teaching. Now, Christ is unchanging, but there's different teachings about Christ that are kind of appealing to us.

Why? Letter A, pointy finger number one, because we like innovation. We like new stuff. We want the new and improved. We want the novel idea. Our hearts in our humanity are drawn to that. I mean, we want the upgrade. We want the next thing. We want the new thing.

And if right now, and I hope some of you are thinking, now wait a minute, this doesn't seem fair, because the whole point in the book of Hebrews is the new covenant, and that's new, and you're telling me to leave the old and embrace the new? I mean, I don't get it. That seems like a contradiction.

Please understand this: everything in the book of Hebrews about the new covenant is nothing more than pointing to the old covenant that looked to, predicted, and is nothing more than a portent to the new covenant. The new covenant is simply the resolve of the old. We call it the new covenant, but it is the old covenant reaching maturity. That's all it is.



And I know that may sound like double talk, but let's put it this way. You remember a couple weeks back we looked at Paul's response to Herod Agrippa II. And he said in Acts 25–26, as he gives his defense to Felix and Agrippa, he says, listen, what I'm saying to you is nothing novel, nothing new, nothing innovative. He says, I'm not saying anything more than the prophets have said would be true. In other words, this is simply the complement to the old covenant. It is what the old covenant was all about.

The new covenant is not some new novel idea. He says, this is what the old covenant said. Now, that is the newness of the new covenant. What people want to present to us today is kind of a new novel idea about the new covenant.

We love to add another layer of innovation to that. I mean, if you want to put it in terms of the cult groups, we would like to add another testament to Jesus Christ. We would like to—I know that was offensive to some, but that's the reality, right? That's the new, strange, foreign, extra teaching. The finality of Christ cannot be added to. There's not another prophet that comes after that one-ups the New Testament. The New Testament could be called the final testament, right? Old Testament and Final Testament. It didn't sound as good as Old Testament, New Testament, I realize, but that's the idea.

Today, though, we like to listen to people that have brand-new ideas about God, brand-new ideas about Christ. Look at how many movements within evangelicalism are based on, "Listen, I know you've never heard this before, but here's a new way to look at God." That should be, in our ears, strange teaching.

Because we don't look forward and futurize about God; we're just supposed to look back at the immutable message of the eternal Christ. That's the point of biblical New Testament doctrine. And we're supposed to see it in context of the old covenant that led to it.

And yet how many people say, from cult leaders to the fringe movements of evangelicalism that really have become the central movement of evangelicalism, "Hey, we got something brand new for you"? The whole emerging church movement, if you want to look at it that way. The leaders of the cults that say every creed and church denomination is an abomination to God—"I got something new for you."

Beware. If it's new, novel, and innovative, it's not sound doctrine, okay? Like the Athenians in Acts 17—remember how Luke adds one little commentary on that culture? They loved to do nothing more than give themselves to discussing the newest and latest ideas. "I just want to talk about the new stuff."

Be careful. The movements that are now prominently displayed in magazines like Christianity Today and whatever modern Christian periodical that you read, so often it is birthed from this attitude of the old is bad, and I'm going to give you a new perspective on this that you've never heard before. Trouble. Problem.

We should be concerned about, in the periodicals that represent Christianity, the historic doctrine of the New Testament. That should be our concern. Let's grapple again with the book of Hebrews or Romans chapter 6. Let's not say, "Well, let's just sit there on a rock and kind of understand how God might be



evolving in our brains.” It’s not the idea of Scripture. God doesn’t ask us to do that. He asks us to go back to the once-for-all-delivered message in Scripture.

Be careful, because there’s a contrarian spirit. Look at the emerging church, for instance. Are you familiar with that? Some of you, some of you don’t. Look it up. Don’t look it up. Whatever. Bottom line is this: it is so often led by, “Well, I’ve been there and I’ve done that. Now what’s next?” I grew up in the church and they taught the Bible and all that, but come on, let’s just rethink this whole thing.

How about we continue to reexamine this thing and master this thing and become rooted and grounded in sound doctrine? That’s the goal of the Christian church, not to sit around and go, “Well, let’s just think about new ways to figure this out.”

Be careful, he says, that you’re not carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. Because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And be careful for the contrarian spirit that so often leads the way for these folks. Or as I often quote, C.S. Lewis liked to call it chronological snobbery. There is this sense that we’ve got it figured out.

Which today, here’s the paradox of it all: the new cool thing is to say, we can’t figure it out—and we’re really cool to figure out that we can’t figure it out. Some of you know exactly what I’m talking about. We’re going from one new theological trend to the next. Paul said in Ephesians 4, the goal is to no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of doctrine, every wind of teaching that is really delivered by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Middle of verse number 9: it’s good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those that eat them. Here’s the issue: in most heretical teachings, there is this attraction, this affinity to a focus on forms. And we as human beings like that. Let’s put it down that way. Letter B, we focus on forms. We start to think there’s power in those forms. And our participation in those forms somehow derives us benefit. The truth of Scripture is just the opposite. There is no power in the form.

Circumcision was an external sign of an internal reality. Baptism is an external expression of an internal reality. The Lord’s Supper—same thing. No power in the form itself. And yet people trust in forms. “I go to church. I give money. I do religious things.” And we begin to assign value to the form itself. The Bible says that’s not it. Your heart needs to be strengthened by grace.

Verse 13: let us go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. A lot of the book of Hebrews is about peer pressure. They were being pressured to adopt false doctrine, to go back to ceremonial law. And he’s saying, you’re going to have to bear the disgrace.

Letter C, we prefer to fit in, don’t we? You like to fit in? Of course you do. Unless you’re really weird. But here’s the problem: if you’re going to hold the immutable message once for all delivered to the saints, you’re not going to fit into a lot of modern Christianity either. Even Peter fell into this in Galatians 2. Paul had to rebuke him because he gave in to doctrinal peer pressure. We all want to fit in. But if you stand for truth, you’re going to bear some disgrace.



Verses 15 and 16 remind us that real faith works itself out in action. Letter D, we like to avoid hard work. We prefer the path of least resistance. But Christianity requires speaking up, stepping out, living it out. You can't just quietly hold sound doctrine and never express it. You're going to have to confess Christ. You're going to have to say things people don't want to hear.

Now that's the defensive side. But here's the positive. Number two: work hard to hold on to sound doctrine. If the world is chasing innovation, we need to master inscripturated truth. Truth doesn't change. The Word of God endures forever. We need to know it, study it, master it. "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again," Paul said, "and it is a safeguard for you." Same message. Same truth. That's the point.

Whatever you do in the Christian life, engage your brain. Don't go through forms mindlessly. Worship in spirit and in truth. Think. Understand. Participate with faith. Otherwise, you'll start assigning power to the form.

We don't have an enduring city here. We're looking for the one to come. If you're going to stand for truth, you need to live for the future. "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

Faith without works is dead. We must speak it. Live it. Proclaim it. Not arrogantly, not harshly, but faithfully.

I'm not trying to cause problems. I just want to say what Scripture says. And Scripture says: don't be carried away by strange teaching. We live in a world full of people who gather teachers to tell them what they want to hear. I don't want to do that. I don't want you to do that. Christ is immutable—ontologically and doctrinally. He doesn't change.

God, help us through this in a day where the ultimate value politically, sociologically, philosophically is this message of let's affirm everybody's belief in everything, and everyone has equal value, and everybody's opinion is equally correct. I pray that we would be willing to say, when our Larry King moment arrives, that while we want to love people, we want to love them enough to say what is true. And the Scripture is your mind in print that makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him. And that our eternal destiny hangs on our doctrine. God, the difference between your blessing and full-blown apostasy is whether or not we're willing to keep our doctrine clean and pure and accurate. Help us in this regard, I pray, knowing and recognizing that all other ground is sinking sand. Not being arrogant, not being conceited, not being pejorative, not being bombastic, not being argumentative—just being people that say we want to stand with Christ. And if that isn't popular, I don't know what to say other than this world is not our home. We're looking forward to the next one. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.