

Complete in Christ

The true story is told of a man who traveled on an ocean liner from London to New York in order to visit friends and family whom he had not seen in a long time. In order to save money on the voyage, he took with him enough food to last for the trip. Day after day, as he sat in his cabin eating bread, cheese, olives and cucumber, he thought of his fellow-passengers who could afford to sit in the ship's restaurants and eat nice meals prepared by the team of chefs. One day he decided he had had enough. Bored with the meager diet that had been his staple for most of the trip he decided to lash out at least once and buy a meal in the dining room "At least", he thought to himself, "I have not paid as much as the other passengers". Imagine his consternation when he asked for the bill and was told there was no charge. His ticket included all meals on board. His economizing had been in vain. In an effort to be thrifty he had forfeited what was legally his to enjoy.

The futility of life

The account of this poor man is an anecdote of the human condition. Modern man thinks he has provided all he needs for the journey of life. He has "got it all together" in his own way. He believes he understands his circumstances and is adequately equipped to meet his physical, social and psychological needs. But while he munches away on emotional bread and cheese, he does not realize he is missing out on the life, direction, joy and fulfillment that God has already made available and included in the "ticket". He convinces himself that that he is full, satiated with his own supply and the fruits of his efforts, but he is spiritually empty, living second best, forfeiting what is legally his to enjoy. Like the self-satisfied producer in Jesus' parable who boasted about a bumper harvest and proposed to pull down his barns and built bigger ones to cope with the surplus, but neglected his spiritual condition and was labeled a "fool" by God for leaving himself exposed, rich in material terms, but poor toward his maker at the door of eternity (Luke 12:20). We can be materially rich but spiritually bankrupt.

Jesus Christ came to change all that, to open the door to relationship with God, so that we can experience His love, His life, His provision and be whole again, lacking nothing of eternal worth. He paid the price, provided the ticket.

With all of his knowledge and impressive gadgetry modern man is nevertheless incomplete. The tragedy is that he usually does not understand why this is the case. We are more than blood and bones, mere physical beings, combinations of genomes, accidents of history and the vicissitudes of evolutionary human development. The Bible says that that we have been created in the image of God, designed for relationship with Him, engineered to know and love and worship Him. Until we manage to do so, we will exist in a spiritual vacuum, with a feeling of ennui, searching for meaning and fulfillment, but never finding it.

More than a circle

Consider the poignancy expressed in the following lyric:

Impaled upon my wall, my eyes dimly see
The pattern of my life and the puzzle that is me.
From the moment of my birth
Till the instant of my death
There are patterns that I must follow
Just as I breathe each breath,
Like a rat in a maze, the path before me lies
And the pattern never alters, until the rat dies”.

For millions of people, life seems to be nothing more than circle, a confusing maze, a repetitive journey around the same unresolved empty issues. A life of felt futility, with no satisfactory end until death. How depressing! Surely, we exclaim, there is “something more”. We are not meant to live out this existence devoid of meaning and identity, like hapless rodents, with a prevailing sense of doom. Is life so pointless? Tragically, for some people, the feeling never resolves itself.

When I first met Carl he struck me as a serious man with some real issues. He had previously worked as a grave-digger but quit his job when he realized he was becoming hard and cynical about other peoples’ sufferings. He related how he would laugh at mourners at the grave-sides of loved ones. Carl never seemed to find satisfaction. Having earlier rejected a form of Christianity he did not understand and considered outdated, he drifted from one self-help group and cult to another. In frustration he resigned from our workplace, purchased a chicken farm and attempted to live off the land. When this failed, he turned back to religion, ultimately embracing Hinduism and going overseas to live and pursue his quest for a personal, vital, satisfying life. The last I saw of Carl was a photograph in the local newspaper, depicting him with iron hooks through his flesh, climbing a mountain path in Malaysia in the company of fellow-pilgrims in a Hindu festival. Carl never realized that the answer to his quest for fulfillment was not in cults or Hinduism, not overseas somewhere in the company of people who accepted him because he embraced their belief system, but a relationship with the living God that would have made a dynamic Christian out of him.

I often meet people like Carl. Citizens of affluent Western societies, they don’t appear to lack much. They are well educated and believe they have all the answers. But without God they are spiritually poor and incomplete. Something is missing. They are full of good food and drink, but their spirits remain thirsty. Flourishing on the outside, they wither internally. Only personal crises allow others to look into their souls and see the hole, before they pull down the shutters. The fact is that, without Christ, we are all incomplete. Religion, rituals,

traditions, personal achievements and mind disciplines cannot satisfy this need, because it is not humanly possible to do so. Only God can fill that part of us that He made for Himself. Traditional values and belief systems are too meaningless and trite to meet the inner needs of men and women in our society. A colleague who tried a "Reincarnation church" told me he felt more depressed and worried about the future after going to one of its services than he did before doing so. The answer is not in religion.

Nor does the answer lie in drugs, sexual experimentation, extreme sport or suicide pacts. When a group of nine Japanese young people recently took their lives, their parents told police they hadn't suspected anything was wrong. All assumed their children were well-adjusted young adults. But they ended it all, in clouds of carbon monoxide, unable to find in the fast life they had chosen for themselves any cure for the aches they felt. Millions of people in our society are looking in thousands of wrong places for something or someone who can answer their questions, set them free from the hang-ups that bind them and give them hope for the future; someone who can give them lasting peace and security. God says, "I can give you all of that, and more. I can make you complete". The word "complete" is so inviting, because it implies satisfaction, dreams realized, hopes achieved, emptiness filled.

God in Christ + Christ in us = completeness

The Bible says that all the fullness of the Deity lived in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 1:19). It goes on to say that He was present on earth reconciling the world to himself in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). When God visited our planet, he was embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. He did so to make us complete. He was not a god-like person, an avatar, but the true and living Creator. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9). He is the beginning and the end. "By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones of powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He was before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Col 1:16-18).

The ministry of Jesus is often misunderstood. He was more than a prophet, a good man, a rabbi, an example of moral living. Christians believe Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and that it is only possible to have a relationship with God through Him. There is no other. When He comes to live inside, he gives peace, power, strength and capacity to face any situation. Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

What has all this got to do with filling the void, giving completeness to people who know there is a whole. Everything. The Scripture says that that we are “complete in him,”. “Christ in you (is) the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). He lives in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:16). He is the one we are looking for. When people like Carl connect with him they experience the sense of fulfillment that no other person or system is capable of offering.

The irony is that, for some people, the spiritual search is hard to define. They know something is there, but they just can’t put their finger on it. God remains one of the great “unknowns”.

God’s address: your life

In the mountains high above the village of Faraiya in Lebanon, a rugged and beautiful area that is covered by snow in the heart of winter, Roman administrators under orders of the Emperor Claudius constructed a temple in 43 AD to the Very High God. Originally capped with a pyramid, the temple is 15 metres square and is within walking distance of shrines dedicated to Astarte, Venus and El. When it was first built, those who dedicated it declared that, above the panoply of gods and images that ruled the cosmos there must be One who is in charge of everything. He was the “unknown God”. A similar shrine existed in ancient Athens. When Paul visited the city at roughly the same time, he found the streets and market places littered with shrines to every known deity, including one to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Paul’s message to his audience was that the unknown God was indeed the creator of all, that he had revealed himself in Christ. He had overlooked men’s’ ignorance up to this point, but now commanded all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ.

The amazing thing that comes out of all this is that the Bible goes on to say that we, as Christians, are the real temples, or shrines, of the living God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19) Instead of inhabiting edifices of bricks and mortar, he dwells in human hearts through faith. All of us are shaped to be shrines to the Almighty. This is the reason why people who don’t know God sense a gap, a void that only He can fill. This is why the Christian can confidently affirm that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). He takes away emptiness and makes us whole. He is interested in every part of us. The change He produces is His work, not ours.

The problem with the Colossian Christians was that they were trying to add form, ritual, legalistic obligations, traditions, human philosophy, rules and regulations to the simple faith dimension that made them believers in the first place. Human religion does just that. If we want to be complete, filled by God, we don’t need more religion, meditation, contemplation or a deeper philosophy, but a person. Christ is the missing link, the missing piece of the jigsaw. To people like Carl, who ultimately become disillusioned with possessions, status, power,

achievements and popularity, only Christ has power to provide true fulfillment and give them the capacity to build their lives

We are “complete” in Him. He causes our cup to overflow (Psalm 23:5) Instead of living on the strength of what we can do, we draw on all that he has provided. Christ gives us personal fulfillment in a way that no one else can.